Wall-Walking and Other Bannable Offenses: Discipline and Deviant Play in World of Warcraft

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Abstract

As in most games, *World of Warcraft*'s player characters' virtual bodies are designed and built to comply with, and be acted upon by, the governing systems of the gameworld they inhabit. The technical equations that determine how a body walks, the rules that define what walking is and what bodies are, are co-developed with a specific definition of a world in mind, and vice versa—both the player character's body and the terrain on which it stands are constructed in order to more effectively reinforce the functions and norms of the other. What can we discover by looking at the way these creations interact with and influence each other? What room is there in the space between what a virtual world and body can do, and what they shouldn't do, and how can players make use of it?

This thesis closely reads *World of Warcraft*'s formal elements, its mechanics and its aesthetic grammar, in order to argue that the game's virtual bodies and environments are embedded with ideologies and norms designed to reinforce its developer's financial and political governance over their virtual world. By better understanding the methods by which these norms shape the world in *World of Warcraft*, players can experiment and co-create new forms of play that complicate, break, and perhaps even overturn the rules that seek to mark their play as deviant.

For Hava.

Table of Contents

Introduction: A Clever Use of Game Mechanics

There is a colloquialism amongst *World of Warcraft* players that is so old and so ubiquitous that it is nearly impossible to trace back to its original source. It is invoked when a player, or group of players, has performed a feat so impressive or unexpected that it seems impossible within the normative methods of play. This phrase, "a clever use of game mechanics," is meant to distinguish the right kind of deviant play from the wrong kind of deviant play. More specifically, it distinguishes a legitimate, albeit unusual, playstyle from cheating. But what does this difference look like? Where can we find it? And who is watching us look? Often, the deciding factor is situated within the player character's virtual body, periodically manifesting as an ability to move, gesture, speak, and behave in capacities that are *allowed*, but unanticipated, by the nesting sets of rules that discipline it.

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over their virtual world. By better understanding the methods by which these norms shape the world of *WoW*, players can experiment and co-create new forms of play that complicate, break, and perhaps even overturn the rules that seek to mark their play as deviant.

Methodology

One way that scholarship might attempt to answer these questions is to simply chart Blizzard's changing policies regarding what constitutes acceptable, normative, deviant, and/or prohibited play within their gameworld. Another might be to conduct an ethnographic study of players–perhaps a combination of those who perform exploits and deviant play and those who don't, paying special mind to the attitudes and beliefs of players who choose to monitor and report prohibited activities, similar to the work performed in Mia Consalvo's *Cheating*. While I do incorporate elements of these methods into my thesis, they are used sparingly, and largely only to provide necessary context to my main method of inquiry which is a formal analysis of two of the game's central problems: the construction, implementation, and maintenance of *WoW*'s virtual world, and of the construction, implementation, and management of its virtual bodies. Throughout this thesis, I will be alternating between the three following methodological moves: close reading of the game text for broad theoretical problems of orientation, embodiment, and power; a close analysis of how these concepts specifically function within the game; and a factual account of *WoW*'s history and development. In doing so, I believe that we can find a different account of power than the one revealed through close reading, ethnography, or historical critique alone.

Player Agency and Orientation

There is a substantial body of games studies scholarship debating the merits of competing models of player subjectivity and agency, and I want to be careful in how I articulate mine.

Expounding on Seth Giddings and Helen Kennedy's conceptualization of players and games coming together as a kind of cybernetic circuit (4), Brendan Keogh argues for the necessity of a model that recognizes that "both the player and the game share an active agency in the way they each afford, translate, and mediate the actions of the other" that "cannot be tracked back to either the game itself or the player themselves" (14). This is the approach that I feel lends itself best to questions that specifically interrogate how *WoW*'s systems of governance and surveillance exercise power over player characters' virtual bodies. When I say power, I am referring to Michel Foucault's idea of power not as a coercive force possessed by a ruling entity, but as a pervasive series of interconnected networks (307). The virtual body of the player character is constructed, both literally, in the sense that it is an assemblage of code and art, and in the Foucaldian sense that bodies are culturally and historically constructed, malleable, and can be conditioned to self-surveil and self-regulate (136).

What I am not arguing, however, is that players simply uncritically submit to the game's dominant hegemonic code, nor am I claiming that they are necessarily ignorant or naive about how its concealed systems of control and discipline operate, regardless of whether and how they choose to participate in them. To that end, I feel that Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model of communication provides a very useful way of tracking how the ideologies and systems of governance Blizzard embeds in *WoW* are interpreted by its players, a savvy community that is increasingly aware of the frameworks of knowledge, relations of production, and technical infrastructure that inform Blizzard's design choices (Hall 509). Players are not merely recipients of *WoW*'s message(s)–they are its coauthors. Referring to *Everquest*, one of *WoW*'s MMORPG predecessors, T.L. Taylor argues that the game is "not only constantly changing but contextually rendered by different actors," as players with a "diverse set of histories and practices" endlessly

"(re)produce" *Everquest* along with its developers (*Play Between Worlds* 162). Even at the level of form, the world of *WoW* does not fully exist on a player's computer, nor does it fully exist on a server farm at Blizzard's headquarters, nor does it fully exist in an ephemeral, mediated space between those two nodes—*WoW* is shared across the computers, networks, and internet connections of millions of people at once, and is therefore created, and re-created, each time it is accessed. In a very literal, technical sense, there is no *WoW* outside of this network of co-authors; it is, as Taylor says of *Everquest*, not "easily contained within the object that came off the shelf" (*Play Between Worlds* 162).

In some ways, this makes it difficult for me to argue that a networked, constantly changing game contains any one specific ideology. But although there are a number of different ways to play, read, and interpret *WoW*, there are also mainstream, hegemonic playstyles that are developed through the game's dominant cultural order. And while I have just stipulated that *WoW* is a co-created world, with co-developed norms and practices, there is no doubt that Blizzard is its primary governing body, and attempts, as I will argue throughout this thesis, to maintain control over their world through the development and dissemination of ideology. This is why I claim that a multidisciplinary approach that includes close formal analysis is integral to my project. Take, for example, my interest in *WoW*'s implementation of its virtual characters' animated gestures. Where, within that constellation of actors, hardware, servers, authors, and co-authors, does the virtual body lie? Where, within the virtual body, an amalgam of code, polygons, textures, and affordances, does the *meaning* of a gesture emanate? The answer is, muchlike Foucault's concepts of power and resistance, is that it "comes from everywhere" (*The History of Sexuality* 93). The question that formal analysis helps us to answer is, "Where is it visible?"

The power exercised in *WoW* is relational, dispersed across its networks, and embedded in the form of algorithms that determine movement, chat mechanics, virtual currencies, the shape of one's body, etc. By taking a very close look at how these elements are constructed, scholars can not only uncover which specific ideologies reside within *WoW*'s virtual world, but how virtual worlds' ideologies are formed in the first place. The goal of my project is not to make a claim about whether or not *WoW*'s players are coerced by the mechanics I am uncovering and critiquing, nor is it to merely uncover and critique them—my hope is that my thesis can help provide a framework for better understanding how players and scholars subvert *WoW*'s governing systems through developing their own creative and politically compelling methods of deviant play.

So what might this play look like? I am interested in the norms and ideologies embedded in *WoW*'s bodies, systems, and worlds not merely for their capacity to constrain the player, but for the player's capacity to repurpose and reorient them for their own purposes. To that end, my thesis relies very heavily on queer theorists like Sara Ahmed and Jack Halberstam when considering the ways that the deviant play might transform and reimagine a gameworld. In Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology,* she contends that "queer" is, in part, a spatial term, creating "wonky" (562) moments when things appear to come out of alignment with the straight axes along which the normative (cis, white, hetereosexual) dimension is oriented. Queering a gameworld might then involve exposing the artificial nature of the lines and grids that govern its three dimensional environments. It might also, as Halberstam argues, mean "embracing the glitch" ("Queer Gaming" 197) as a means of revealing what lies outside the rigid structures that serve as a game's scaffolding, and "hacking straight narratives" (187) in order to insert one's

own. Radical, resistive play is disruptive and glitchy, therefore allowing players to expose the malleability of *WoW*'s normative ideologies, making space to create new worlds of their own.

World of Warcraft

World of Warcraft (*WoW*) is a game released by Blizzard Entertainment in 2004. It remains one of the most successful and influential games in the "massive multiplayer online role-playing game" (or MMORPG) genre, where millions of people play alongside each other in the same virtual fantasy world. *WoW* has been regularly updated since its release, with Blizzard releasing new "zones" (virtual continents, planets, cities, etc. for people to explore) and "classes" (types of jobs and powers that players can perform) once every couple of years.

The game itself works like this: players create a character, choose a class (warrior, mage, hunter, rogue, etc.) that determines their role and abilities within the gameworld, and a fantasy "race" (orcs, dwarves, humans, elves, etc.) that aligns the character with one of two warring factions. When players connect to the game, they can see other characters in their virtual area, regardless of how far apart their players are in the real world. All player characters can communicate through animated gestures and body language, however, only player characters of the same faction can "speak" to each other via text. As they venture out through the massive gameworld, characters become stronger and participate in larger and more important stories. While taking part in these stories, players may choose to socialize, fight members of the opposing faction, and perform jobs like tailoring, cooking, harvesting herbs, and fishing, either for fun or for virtual currency.

My thesis primarily focuses on a specific era in the game's history, namely, the first few years of its lifespan, an era alternatively known as "classic *WoW*" or "vanilla *WoW*," the latter specifically referring to the version(s) of the game that existed before the 2007 release of its first

expansion, *The Burning Crusade.* I made this choice for the following reasons. First, this is a period of time that I believe was instrumental in developing the norms and practices that shaped not only the future of *WoW*'s gameplay, but that of its genre ("World of Warcraft | Make Software, Change the World!"). Second, it is an era in which any changes to the virtual gameworld were relatively small compared to subsequent additions and overhauls—for example, 2010's *Cataclysm* expansion depicted an apocalyptic event that permanently reconfigured Azeroth's landscape, flooding valleys and ripping continents in half. Third, classic, and particularly vanilla, *WoW* represents a form of the game that has consistently been reimagined and reappropriated by players in the form of illegal private servers (discrete copies of the gameworld that other people can visit and play on) and, ultimately, by Blizzard itself. In 2019, the company released *WoW Classic* (not to be confused with classic *WoW*), which is a recreation of the game as it existed in 2004, including deliberately reimplementing some of its original bugs (Gravelle). While these official and unofficial versions of early *WoW* are not central focal points in my thesis, I make references to them when I believe that they can provide additional insight or new ways of framing elements of the game as it was first designed and constructed, highlighting instances where norms, ideologies, and practices may have shifted over time.

While writing this thesis, I spent a considerable amount of time poring over the same resources that I originally employed as a player. One of these is the website OwnedCore, a forum dedicated to hacks, exploits, and guides to MMOs like *WoW*. There is no more robust archive of creatively sourced and technically specific information on the game's underlying systems, and I would not have been able to critique *WoW*'s movement and environment mechanics nearly so thoroughly without them. However, due to the sensitive and often illegal nature of some of its users' activities, this thesis does not directly cite any posts that discuss methods of engaging with

the game in a way that could result in punitive action taken against their accounts. This is partly due to the fact that I am uncomfortable violating OwnedCore users' reasonable expectation of privacy in service of a thesis that critiques *WoW*'s surveillance and disciplinary practices, and partly because, as I will discuss in more detail in chapter one, the game is constantly being rewritten in order to combat any newly discovered tactics of deviant play, and users are therefore discouraged from drawing outside attention to the details of one's methods. Although it is highly unlikely that anyone at Blizzard Entertainment will read my masters thesis, and even less likely that it will reference information that they have not already discovered themselves, I am unwilling to contribute to this corrective cycle. For these reasons, when referencing information found on OwnedCore, I chose to summarize rather than include direct quotes, anonymize users rather than provide their real screennames, and omit direct citations to specific threads or posts.

Chapter Structures

The first chapter of my thesis is chiefly concerned with the exploration of *WoW*'s environments, starting with a close formal analysis of the ways that players experiment with non-normative movement mechanics in order to discover and access prohibited parts of the gameworld. Using key concepts from Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology*, I uncover and draw lines between *WoW*'s inescapable, but invisible, movement mechanics that facilitate player character embodiment, perception, and orientation, and the three-dimensional artificial environments perpetually shaping (and being shaped by) these interactions. Then, I carefully outline the various ways that time shapes the player's experience of both their virtual body and the world it inhabits, revealing how *WoW*'s emphasis on linear progression and (ingame) efficiency at the expense of real world time has been appropriated by players in order to justify their own deviant practices of temporal resistance. Next, I examine how *WoW* uses time to

discipline player character's virtual bodies, revealing ways that players can employ deviant temporal practices like idleness, slowness, non-linearity, and disconnection in order to reclaim fragments of the gameworld for themselves. In doing so, I argue that *WoW* designates deviant spatiotemporal movements as "exploits" in order to protect the integrity of the game's normative, capitalistic values that reinforce Blizzard's position as its governing body.

The second chapter of my thesis outlines deviant forms of embodiment and gesture, taking a careful inventory of whose body is permitted to communicate with whom, in what capacity, and under what circumstances. First, I perform an extended close reading of the player character's corpse in an attempt to determine how *WoW*'s representation of death as a punitive, corrective force shapes the gestural language and affordances given to spirits and dead bodies. Next, I explain the process by which a player can transform a corpse into a communication device, highlighting the places where its capacity for gesture and expression exceed those afforded to its productive, animated, and normative counterpart, particularly when transmitting prohibited messages. Then, I argue that *WoW's* mechanics of embodiment combine with its hierarchy of communication channels to teach players to be suspicious of the virtual bodies they consider deviant—in this case, players deemed as "illegitimate" by virtue of their not producing a profit for Blizzard—by framing certain gestures, behaviors, and cultural/racial identities as threats to the game's economic integrity. This is followed by a critique of the ways that *WoW*'s implementation of race and language have codified its two ingame factions as familiar and other, deliberately obfuscating any attempts at peaceful, cooperative communication in order to trap players in a cycle of aggression. Finally, I discuss how these limitations can be repurposed to facilitate a means of cross-faction communication that allows for greater, more complex interactions across enemy lines.

Chapter One: Exploration

The world of *WoW* is enormous, with over one hundred discrete zones, each with their own ecologies (deserts, beaches, jungles, plague-infested ruins) and cultures. This rich and beautifully rendered virtual planet is considered one of the game's largest attractions, even as its graphics begin to show their age. From its inception, *WoW* has been marketed, in part, as open for exploration, and former Vice President of Creative Development Chris Metzen once referred to the world itself as "probably the most key character [in the game]" (Konwiser). Players who visit every (legal, open) corner of the globe receive an in-game achievement, title, and tabard that mark them as "Explorers," and the land is peppered with easter eggs and random mini-events that reward frequent trips around the world.

However, beyond the aforementioned eighty-three "open" zones are islands, mountains, crypts, and caves which are specifically demarcated as "closed," and any explorer who visits them risks either temporary or permanent banishment from *WoW*. These prohibited areas are most often abandoned, unfinished zones that never made it into the final game (see fig. 1), such as the glitch-ridden extraplanetary world colloquially referred to as "Old Outland," whose entrance is hidden within the narrow northern wall of a cave. Other closed zones were designed specifically for testing and/or computational convenience, such as Programmer Isle, a small, virtually inaccessible island covered in a hodgepodge of buildings and lumpy polygonal hills, presumably for experimenting with the game's environmental features.

Figure 1. "Doodad cube, used as a placeholder for objects." Blizzard Entertainment, 2017.

Author's screenshot.

It's common for players to experience intense feelings of nostalgia, ownership, and even homesickness for the virtual world of *WoW*, and this feeling of "belongingness" is echoed on the game's 2017 landing page for new subscribers, where clips of sweeping vistas and leaping players loop beneath the text: "You were meant for this world" ("Getting Started - WoW"). But what does it mean to be "meant for" a world that prohibits exploration? Given that Azeroth is an artificial, completely constructed planet, the continued existence and accessibility of closed zones begs the question: if these areas are not intended to be seen by players, why do they still exist? Several closed zones contain construction equipment and bright yellow caution barriers (see fig. 2) to jokingly indicate that the area is unfinished, but if seeing these artifacts is forbidden, then why, and for whom, were they designed? Why does a game that prides itself on

its open, fully realized world reward some forms of exploration and punish others? To whom does the *World of Warcraft* actually belong?

Figure 2. "Mount Hyjal." Blizzard Entertainment, 2010. Author's screenshot.

Wall-Walking

To answer this question, we must start by looking at the mechanics of exploration. If there are mountains that a player is intended to see but not climb, the game code must have a specific definition of both seeing and climbing (ie: walking, rotating, and jumping), all of which are deliberately invisible to the player. If players want to climb the mountain, they must first figure out how these invisible systems of constraints affect/discipline their virtual bodies within a world designed to obscure how these systems operate. Of course, players are not entirely left to their own devices here. *WoW*, like most modern video games produced by experienced

developers, employs a specific aesthetic grammar to signal to players (if only subconsciously) where and how they are intended to move.

On its surface, this visual grammar is intended to reduce player frustration. For example, in the video game series *Uncharted*, developed by Naughty Dog, players must quickly navigate a crowded, asset-heavy, three dimensional world, often while being chased by enemies. They are expected to make split second decisions about where to climb or jump next, or else their character will die. Of course, if the correct path forward is too obvious, the player might become bored or frustrated that the illusion of player choice has been shattered, revealing that this dazzling world is actually quite linear, with the correct (or rather, only) path forward dictated for them by the game. Naughty Dog's solution is to subtly signpost the correct route by incorporating the colors yellow and white into the game environment—if a player is meant to jump from a ledge onto a nearby crate, that crate may have a yellow label (Iyer). If the player needs to be able to distinguish between a usable ladder and one that is just intended to provide environmental flavor/blend in with the background, the interactable ladder may have a smear of white paint on the bottom rung. The player is never told the significance of these colors, and indeed, most players are never fully aware that this visual trick is taking place—they merely, instinctually, "know" which way to go.

By contrast, *WoW* is not nearly so consistent in its sign-posting, either by virtue of it being a much older game, the fact that it offers a more open and sprawling gameworld than *Uncharted* with far more accessible places than inaccessible ones, or the fact that it does not anticipate that players will need to make as many split second navigational decisions within its virtual environments. *WoW*'s geography employs repeatable, two dimensional surface textures that are stretched over the three dimensional contours of the ground. These two dimensional tiles

are designed so that, when placed alongside each other, their edges are concealed, resulting in a smooth, seamless expanse of land, regardless of how the square, gridlike tiles have been warped and distorted by the three dimensional objects they are covering. This, in and of itself, is not unique, and certainly the three dimensional modeling in games like *Uncharted* functions much the same way. What separates the virtual world of *WoW* from the virtual world of a single-player roleplaying game like *Uncharted*, is a matter of perception.

In a single-player roleplaying game, developers employ a number of lighting, motion, color, and sonic devices to coax the player down a predetermined path while maintaining the illusion that there is always a fully-realized, cohesive world perpetually just out of the player character's reach, relegated to the background. In a hypothetical example that is typical of the genre, players may approach a city through an alleyway, flanked by unscalable brick walls. The alleyway "happens" to be situated on top of a steep hill, which both allows the player an unobstructed vantage point from which to make out dozens of buildings, cars, trees, and streetways stretching out before them, and provides an unnoticed but logically sound justification for their not being able to access them—a hill this steep is dangerous, and approaching it could result in the player character's death. In games like these, if a player is not meant to visit an off-limits area, the area does not exist. Perhaps what appears to be a fully-realized three dimensional city is merely a flat image floating just out of reach, like a digital matte painting. Perhaps some portion of the building models do actually exist in the gameworld as three dimensional objects, but they are blocked by an invisible wall, which is, itself, obscured by a brick one, so that the player is not given the opportunity to encounter an obstacle that doesn't have a narrative or environmental justification for being there. However, this is not always possible—if a player insists on testing these boundaries, they will eventually come to the hard

stop of an invisible wall. Attempting to walk through this wall slowly forces a player character's body to rotate until it and the wall are parallel, and the player can move forward (or, from the wall's perspective, "sideways,") without resistance. Encountering invisible walls in a linear game like *Uncharted* can be frustrating, but they are an expected, and therefore accepted, limitation of virtual spaces designed to facilitate a linear path (Breda).

WoW, by contrast, is an "open world," nonlinear game, and its appeal lies largely in its enormous, living environment with its capacity for exploration. In this world, very little terrain can be relegated to the background without breaking this illusion. Invisible walls, although they do exist, stick out like sore thumbs, and are therefore used sparingly. Not only must the player always feel capable of going anywhere, the game's methods of thwarting them should never fall out of alignment with the (perceived) material reality of the virtual environment. In other words, in an ideal world, any constraints on the player character's body and its capacity for movement and exploration must at least *appear* to be naturally shaped by the terrain and environments which contain them, and not by conscious decisions made by developers and informed by histories of game design, computer graphics, and labor practices. A "misaligned" or visually jarring movement mechanic can make the artificial nature of the relationship between the player character's body and its surroundings all the more conspicuous.

When *WoW* players approach the foot of a mountain and look up, they see a combination of repeating, overlapping textures. These textures not only repeat themselves across the surface of the mountain, they appear again and again on mountains all over the world, often with identical patterns of pebbles, cracks, and groundcover merely recolored in order to blend in with the game's various climates (a light brown palette for mountains in the desert, white for snowy peaks, green and dark brown for the jungles, etc). Reusing and/or recoloring textures is a

common way to save money and artistic labor, and can help establish a consistent visual style. In the case of *WoW*, the result is that, over time, the player is trained to approach and navigate all mountains the same way. The visual grammar is as follows: darker, more heavily textured, and sparsely used ground terrain attracts the eye and suggests a sort of "grippiness" or "stickiness," and indeed, if a player walks over it, their character is less likely to slide down the mountainside, sometimes even regardless of how steep the path's contour appears to be in three dimensional space. By contrast, lighter, smoother, and more frequently applied terrain is nearly impossible to stand on without slipping erratically, sometimes to one's death.

As the player travels the world and comes across these repeated patterns of terrain, they learn, whether consciously or unconsciously, which avenues of movement are meant to feel more "natural." If a player follows the demarcated mountain path, they will have an easy, uninterrupted, and smoothly animated journey to the top. One could read the existence of both grippy and slippy textures as an appeal to fun and verisimilitude—for most players, a mountain that feels no different to walk on than flat earth would be unsatisfying to climb. At the same time, it is not fun to slip and fall, not because falling is difficult to avoid, but, in part, because of how the game defines and illustrates the act of falling as unnatural or deviant. Due to the fact that the developers have not included "slipping" or "scrabbling" animations in the game, characters that lose their step on a mountainside experience something that looks more like a glitch than a natural body movement. As their feet connect and disconnect from the surface below them, their virtual body erratically oscillates between "falling" and "standing" animations until it either dies or lands safely on what the game defines as stable ground.

Any time a player character's body is not considered to be touching a surface, it falls. Its arms rise, its legs dangle and, if the character has hair, it is animated as if it's floating. Unlike all

other looping movement animations (walking, running, swimming, etc.) this falling animation is only implemented in instances where the player has lost control over their character's body, and aside from the use of a small number of magical spells and items, they will remain stuck in this looping pattern, at the mercy of the game's geography, unable to alter or influence their trajectory in any way, save one. Falling characters still possess the ability to rotate on a single axis, free to repeatedly turn towards or away from the mountain even as their limbs are frozen helplessly midair. Aside from this ability to orient and reorient themselves horizontally, players will only regain the ability to move their characters if the game believes their characters' bodies are touching a flat surface.

The sudden inability to control one's virtual body is jarring, and can result in a feeling of panic—falling players sometimes instinctually smash the movement keys in a futile attempt to reconnect with the mountainside, resulting in the impromptu discovery of one's ability to rotate while falling. Over time, some players took this seemingly inconsequential quirk of virtual embodiment and turned it into a form of geographical resistance. They discovered that, from the years 2004 to 2006, if a player character moved while orienting themselves towards the mountain, which is to say, facing it head-on as one "naturally" would while walking up its surface, they would be subject to its slippy geography. But if a player character moved while orienting their body parallel to the mountain, which is to say, facing alongside it (see fig. 3), they had a much larger possible range of motion, including temporary feats of levitation. It's possible that this was because Blizzard constructed the underlying geometry of their mountains with the assumption that players would only ever approach them head-on. At this point in time, the primary (but far from only, as I will explain later) determining factor in whether a player character's body remains stable or slips, was the degree to which the horizontal and vertical

planes it's touching are slanted. What this formula did not seem to account for were players who opted not to climb along the vertical path as intended, but instead, turned towards this slantedness and, as Sara Ahmed says, "allow[ed] the oblique to open another angle on the world" (172). In *WoW*, the process of discovering and exploiting the game's underlying geometry and movement mechanics in order to travel to unexpected or forbidden locations is known as "wall-walking," or "wall-jumping," and has consistently served as a site of deviant, punishable, and heavily policed play since the game began.

Figure 3. "The author oriented parallel with a mountain." Blizzard Entertainment, 2022. Author's screenshot.

However, slantedness alone cannot fully account for the mechanics of wall-walking. The algorithms of player character movement are subject to so many invisible (and proprietary) considerations that they almost seem fluid—did a player briefly step off the path, or did they jump? Were they facing towards the mountain when they began the jump, or only when they

landed? Are the adjacent tiles walkable? Does the underlying 3D geometry of this fixed point extend far enough away from the wall that, when stepped on from a specific angle and with a certain velocity, it slows or stops the player character's fall? If their fall has been successfully stopped on one of these "off-limits" points, does the player character now have access to further, previously inaccessible points, given that they will now be approaching them from a location and spatial orientation that the game did not anticipate? Regardless of a player's ability to know for certain the precise calculations that govern their movement through space, wall-walking demonstrates how even something as "simple" as taking a single step forward contains countless potential permutations, each with their own unique possibilities for unexpected and experimental play.

The wall-walking method described above was quietly removed from the game in 2006. Various methods of wall-walking have been in use for much longer than this, but because each subsequent game update (or "patch") overrides the one that preceded it, the exact methods and dates are currently unverifiable. It is generally believed that Patch 1.9.0 dealt the largest blow to wall-walking, as its notes contain the cryptically phrased update, "Players should no longer be able to walk on steep terrain ("Patch 1.9.0")." In practice, this meant that player characters' bodies no longer "stuck" to surfaces while performing unexpected, deviant movements.

To the average player, wall-walking may appear like a magic trick. Wall-walkers move along the cliffside as if occasionally suspended on an invisible bridge, their bodies coming in and out of contact with the mountain's surface in patterns that don't appear to line up with the terrain. However, this misalignment is nothing more than a matter of perception. In truth, the only parts of the mountain that player characters aren't perpetually touching are also the only parts visible to the player, namely its slippy and grippy terrain textures. Underneath and alongside the

mountain as seen by the player is the mountain as "seen" by the game itself. From the program's

perspective, the mountain is not a naturally occurring stretch of terrain but a mathematical

construct, defined by whether the invisible coordinates that make up the terrain's geometry

intersect with the coordinates of the player character's invisible "hitbox," or the geometric shape

that surrounds each object for the purposes of collision detection. When a player is wall-walking,

they are not stepping out of alignment with the mountain, they are stepping out of alignment with

the ways players have been conditioned, by both virtual and physical worlds, to interpret their

relationship with their surroundings. This discrepancy between the lines of our normative

understanding of physics (and mountains and footsteps and pathways) and the game's

understanding of physics (and polygons and algorithms and conditional logic statements) is

disorienting. Ahmed describes the normative as "an effect of repeating bodily actions over time"

("Orientations" 561), eventually producing a "bodily horizon" whose line marks the edge of

what can and cannot be reached (*Queer Phenomenology* 55). But this bodily horizon does not

necessarily line up with the axes that the normative dimension sees as "straight":

> Things seem straight (on the vertical axis) when they are in line, which means when they
>
> are aligned with other lines. Rather than presuming the vertical line is simply given, we
>
> would see the vertical line as an effect of this process of alignment. Think of tracing
>
> paper. Its lines disappear when they are aligned with the lines of the paper that has been
>
> traced: you simply see one set of lines. If all lines are traces of other lines, then this
>
> alignment depends on straightening devices, which keep things in line, in part by holding
>
> things in place. Lines disappear through such alignments, so when things come out of line
>
> with each other the effect is "wonky." ("Orientations" 562)

Not only was Patch 1.9.0 a straightening device to help correct the "wonky," slanted, and deviant paths laid out via wall-walking, it ensured that the invisible rules which dictate how and when the player character's virtual body can move are held securely in alignment with their (or rather the developer's) preferred norms of video game locomotion.

As mentioned previously, wall-walking breaks immersion, making the artificiality (and malleability) of the gameworld conspicuous not just to the wall-walker but to any nearby players who witness their exploits. This also has the effect of counterprogramming Blizzard's efforts to instruct players on how to navigate the world by normalizing movements that the game's environmental cues attempt to frame as deviant, making witnesses less likely to notice or report such behavior to the authorities.

Second, wall-walking can unwittingly expose bugs or holes in the game (sometimes literally, as players have occasionally stepped somewhere unexpected only to fall through a hole in the world and die in empty blue space). And finally, wall-walking can be used to access those areas that are supposed to be off-limits to the player population. In truth, it is unlikely that players were ever banned exclusively for wall-walking to a location that is otherwise accessible by normative movement (ie: a mountain with a usable path). Instead, Blizzard typically bans players for being physically present in places that are only accessible by making "exploitative" movements such as wall-walking—in other words, wall-walking is regarded as "illegal" because its use is the sole criteria of what constitutes an "illegal" area, even if the practice itself is not explicitly listed as illegal in the Code of Conduct (save for the catchall of forbidding "exploiting bugs" ("Blizzard's In-Game Code of Conduct"). I believe this recursive logic has shielded Blizzard from widespread criticism about classifying as simple as moving in an unorthodox way as an exploit.

Wall-walking is not simply presented as deviant and malicious because it could be used to commit malicious acts, such as cheating. I use "cheating" here as it is specifically characterized by J. Barton Bowyer, in that it is "the advantageous [emphasis mine] distortion of perceived reality" (47). While attempting to catalog the different ways that players define and understand cheating, Mia Consalvo found that some players believed that this distortion of reality could only be considered cheating if it negatively impacted the experience of another human being, arguing that, "you can't cheat a GameCube, you can only cheat another player" (91). There are certainly instances in which wall-walking could meet this definition of advantageous cheating—players may use it to evade enemy players, or to beat their allies to a goal. But one cannot argue that a player traveling to an isolated, unfinished, glitch-ridden mountaintop provides them with a material advantage over another player—if anything, it may be characterized as a disadvantage, as explorers risk "losing" the game forever through permanent banishment. Instead, I believe that wall-walking is prohibited because deviance itself is a threat to the normative values *WoW*'s developers have instilled in their game, values like the sanctity of private property, the criminality of trespassing, and the importance of defending intellectual property from copyright infringement—concepts that bolster whatever invisible steps Blizzard may take to insure their continued financial, legal, and political dominance over their game and its players. By making the game's invisible systems of governance (more) visible to the playerbase, wall-walkers knock the world out of alignment, exposing the fact that its lines and pathways are not "simply given" or inevitable, but are merely the result of "straight tendencies" (Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* 91).

When you combine this ambiguity with the fact that any patches that alter player movement mechanics never explicitly state which elements they are altering and/or removing, it

is not always possible for players to determine whether they are breaking the rules. This "wiggle room," both in the mechanics that comprise the player character's capacity for movement, and the legality of deviant movement to begin with, has created a perpetually disorienting effect for those who experiment with the game environment. And yet, there is immense pleasure to be found in this state of uncertainty. Furthering Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner's claim that the queer world is full of "incommensurate geographies" (*Queer Phenomenology* 198), Ahmed insists that because the normative dimension "shapes the contours of inhabitable or livable space . . . queer moments, where things come out of line, are fleeting. Our response need not be to search for permanence but to listen to the sound of the 'what' that fleets. The 'what' that fleets is the very point of disorientation" ("Orientations" 565). By never knowing what is possible for the player character to reach, do, alter, or experience in *WoW*, wall-walking players may continuously experiment and attempt to find new, wonky angles not yet straightened by the powers that be, even while knowing that their ability to reach these angles is fleeting, as forging an oblique path may draw Blizzard's attention to that which remains out of line, putting these paths at risk of being straightened as soon as they have been discovered. Because Blizzard has the ability to quickly and invisibly make changes to the game without forcing players to log out or restart their clients (a practice known as "hotfixing"), the time between discovering a novel path or mechanic and its being patched out of existence is sometimes a matter of minutes.

A prime example of both the prohibition of wall-walking and the inscrutability of Blizzard's everchanging disciplinary practices is the highly controversial, and now believed-to-be impossible, feat of visiting "GM Island." Since *WoW*'s inception, Blizzard has employed in-game customer service representatives known as Game Masters—the "GM's" of GM Island—who are responsible for everything from addressing bugs to restoring lost or stolen

items to investigating and adjudicating player infractions. For many years, whenever a GM

entered the game as a physical entity (an increasingly rare phenomenon [Xandamere]), they did

so via GM Island, a mysterious patch of land off the coast of *WoW*'s western continent, so far out

to sea that any player who attempted to swim there would drown long before reaching its shores.

Of course, intrepid wall-walkers, armed with items that temporarily increased their swimming

speed, soon discovered it was possible to outswim the game's drowning mechanic, and managed
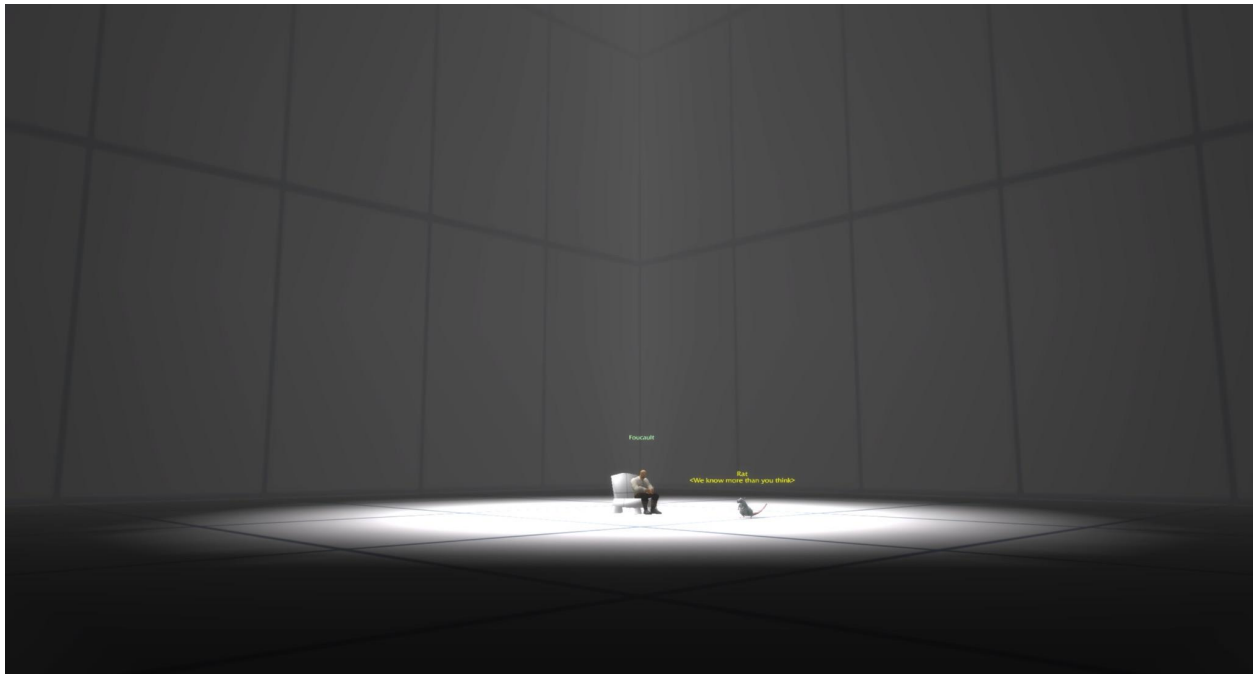
to access the island without dying.

Figure 4. "The prison of GM Island." Blizzard Entertainment, 2022. Author's screenshot.

There is not much of note on GM Island, being that it's merely a place to store Blizzard

employee's virtual bodies out of player's prying eyes, aside from its interrogation room. Located

beneath the center of the island and only accessible through (hacked) teleportation methods or by

sitting in a trick chair, this room looks jarringly unlike anything else in the game. The player

character is surrounded by four white grids that seem to stretch up into infinity (and perhaps they

do). The room is completely empty save for a single chair (see fig. 4), and sitting in this chair

29

locks the player character's body in place—once you sit, you can never get up again unless you are moved by a GM, die, or manage to teleport away with the aid of friends.

Throughout the course of my time in *WoW*, I have heard countless stories about this room and what used to happen in it. Some players, whose names I have long forgotten, insisted that they had been brought there by a GM who interrogated them about their misdeeds while looming over their frozen body. I have been unable to determine how frequently this happened, whether this practice was the preferred company policy, or whether it was just something a few rogue GMs did for kicks. Regardless, these stories were familiar to just about everyone who played *WoW*, as was the knowledge that, if players managed to get to GM Island undetected, they could see this mythical room for themselves. Of course, there's always a chance you could get caught. What, players might wonder, happens then?

Aside from Blizzard's publicly available Code of Conduct, the specifics of *WoW*'s behavioral policies (including GM protocol and recommended punishments) are largely unknown. The systems, rules, and practices that comprise Blizzard's disciplinary power, and as I have demonstrated, its basic environment and movement mechanics, are very carefully concealed. As a researcher, there is only so much that I can derive from invisible, fluctuating rulesets alone. However, in the case of Blizzard's surveillance methods, I believe it may matter less what the game's code actually does than what the players believe it can do, and whether, how, and where their assumptions are adopted or challenged by the community. The code and mechanics of a game are not merely concealed, they are, as Consalvo argues, relatively static and fixed when compared to the "easier to change, amend, update, or retract" norms communicated by a game's paratext and discourse (21). The paratext produced by Blizzard is in constant conversation with the paratext produced by *WoW*'s players and fans, whether it be through patch

notes, forum posts, fan conventions, leaked memos, shareholder calls, or press releases. Because these official and unofficial discourses are endlessly re-informing each other, it can be difficult to follow an idea back to its origin point and determine its veracity. However, I maintain that when critiquing systems that derive their power from their invisibility, there is much to learn by paying close attention to those elements allowed (or forced, in the case of the playerbase) to remain visible. It is also worth considering how this selective visibility may have shaped players' relationship not only with *WoW*, but with the communities they created around it. For years, players have disseminated reports of virtual crime and punishment amongst each other as (often contradictory) rumors, and these have occasionally led to paranoid and inaccurate assumptions about Blizzard's ability to monitor players and catch transgressions in real time (Lax).

The truth is that, even now, no one knows exactly how deviant exploration is detected. We can, however, take a few facts for granted: first, that off-limits zones exist, and players are generally in consensus about which zones qualify as off-limits. Second, that explorers can be reported by any player who witnesses their activity, and that these reports may result in their punishment. Third, that Blizzard has some way of knowing whether a player is somewhere they should not be, whether it's by happenstance (such as a player unwittingly running by an invisible GM), or through some kind of automated surveillance system, the details of which are almost completely unknown to the player community ("Warden [software]").

This juxtaposition of an invisible (and therefore unknowable) disciplinary force and a perpetually visible subject calls to mind Michel Foucault's principle of "compulsory visibility," in which the fact that the subject is always able to be seen, even when they are not seen, is what sustains their subjugation (*Discipline and Punish* 187). One could not ask for a more clear-cut implementation of a panopticon than this, an entire world artificially constructed in order to

teach players that they are always, possibly, being watched, either by other players, Blizzard employees, or surveillance software. In one of the most bewildering examples of this deliberate ambiguity, players who enter off-limits areas receive a "debuff" (or a temporary injury, typically in the form of a curse or disease that saps the player's health and/or power) entitled, "No Man's Land." Mousing over the debuff reveals the text, "You are where you should not be…" and the player is instantly teleported to an approved location. The existence of this debuff is verifiable, although most screenshots have since succumbed to data rot and can no longer be found. I have also verified the fact that it seems to automatically appear the moment a player enters a specific zone. However, "No Man's Land" is not universally applied, and many off-limits zones do not appear to trigger it at all—at least not in a way that is visible to the player. More importantly, there are conflicting reports about whether the debuff also notifies Blizzard that a player has broken a rule and is eligible for punishment, with some players insisting that "No Man's Land" is proof that Blizzard has installed auto-reporting surveillance traps, while others believe it is just a deterrent tactic, a reminder that even if Blizzard is not watching the player at this moment, the player's actions are always, deliberately, visible.

Time is Money, Friend

As in many games, *WoW* player characters enter the world with virtually nothing, and are asked to complete a series of tasks in order to gain access to new items and abilities. At its most basic, mechanical level, "progression" is represented by the way the game quantifies a player character's overall power (or "level"), strength, reputation, wealth, and role within the game's ongoing narrative. Every element of one's character is measured and labeled by a number, sometimes visually represented as blocks of color slowly filling a progress bar along the bottom of the screen.

The primary goal of *WoW*, in as much as an open, massively populated world can have a primary goal, is to achieve "max level," or the point where a player character's experience bar disappears and they cannot become anymore innately powerful without the enhancing effects of weapons and gear. However, the game does not end once a character reaches max level, nor does play shift away from the primary goal of progression. Instead, it enters a new period, known as the "endgame," in which players have the opportunity to take part in a series of "raids," or large, difficult collections of player-versus-environment (PVE) combat challenges that reward some of the best items and gear in the game. Guilds that are on the cutting edge of this content perform what is referred to as "progression raiding," in which they attempt to be one of, if not the first, groups in the world to kill a particular raid boss.

In his essay, "Corporate Ideology in World of Warcraft," Scott Rettberg argues that *WoW* is not only a game, but a simulation that trains players to become "good corporate citizens," valorizing certain types of work and offering "a capitalist fairytale in which anyone who works hard and strives enough can rise through society's ranks and acquire great wealth" (20). Indeed, the leveling process can easily be read as a regimented training program (plausibly modeled, as Rettberg argues, on real world educational systems [25]) that teaches players not just the skills and abilities required for a successful raid, but consistently reinforces the fact that raiding and, I would argue, progression, is the primary, if not only, *legitimate* occupation for a max level character. However, in the early years of the game, the vast majority of the player base did not have the opportunity to see raid content at all, and it is reported that by the time that *WoW*'s first expansion was released, less than a thousand players had ever killed the game's then-highest level raid boss (Cëll). This is, in part, due to its extreme difficulty, but the largest obstacle to progression raiding is not a player's individual skill level—it

is the fact that vanilla raiding required as much as a twenty or thirty hour a week commitment, something perpetually out of reach for those without the financial and domestic support necessary for significant leisure time.

While *WoW* positions itself as a game in which non-raiding characters have a number of alternative endgame activities to complete, such as fighting in player-versus-player (PVP) scenarios, earning gold from (optional) professions such as blacksmithing or potion making, or even just following the game's ongoing, multiyear storyline, these playstyles are implicitly designed to either support, or benefit from, raiding. For years, PVP did not reward its own high level gear, and players who focused solely on PVP content routinely found themselves losing to any raiders who showed up to a match in full raid regalia. Any armor created through blacksmithing paled in comparison to the kind found in raids, and the profession became, at best, a way to temporarily outfit player characters only while they progressed through the leveling process. And while exploration and completing quests may provide anything from story breadcrumbs to substantial plot information, the largest and most narratively important storylines in the game, those that defined the theme and stakes of each expansion, are exclusively resolved within each expansions' final raid. So while it is true that raiding is only one of many possible ways of spending time in the virtual world of *WoW*, those who choose to step out of the progression pipeline are repeatedly confronted with scenarios, game mechanics, and obstacles designed to direct them back towards normative, legitimate play: namely, that which advances the player, and therefore the community, "forward."

In an attempt to ensure that more players have the ability and means to receive the powerful items mainly found in raid content (often referred to as "epics"), Blizzard created alternative avenues to accessing endgame gear, and soon, players could earn epics comparable to

raiders' by completing PVP content instead. Shortly after the PVP reward system was launched, *WoW*'s then-Lead Content Designer Jeff Kaplan took the stage at a convention for Blizzard games and referred to this gear as "welfare epics," a phrase that was seized upon by the community and remains in wide use to this day (Paul 2). It is curious that Kaplan used this loaded term while speaking in an official capacity at an official Blizzard event, referring to a loot system created and launched by Blizzard itself in order to address what it regarded as a problem in their own game. It is unclear whether everyone at Blizzard shared Kaplan's disdain for players who do not "earn" their gear, but his remarks did more than just discredit those who did not have the time or financial and logistical means to raid—instead, it cast all other methods of play, regardless of how strenuous, as without value. PVP largely takes place in battlegrounds: isolated, transitory play spaces that exist for predetermined amounts of time before they are erased at the end of each match. This type of play could be contrasted with raiding as not so much progressive but lateral—unlike raiding, there is no story to advance, no new content to contend with, no long term commitment, and no new ground to break. Each time a player re-enters a battleground, they are matched with a group of randomly selected players, the majority of whom are strangers, and any novelty found in subsequent matches does not come from the battleground environment itself, but from the actions and decisions performed by the players currently, and temporarily, populating it. PVP is difficult, dynamic, and exists outside of *WoW*'s larger, plot-focused progression timeline. The message sent by Kaplan, and therefore Blizzard, was that regardless of how skilled one became, the players who devote time to the ephemeral and fleeting world of PVP were not working, but wasting time.

It must also be said that Kaplan's emphasis on "earned" rewards is not merely a rhetorical tool to influence normative playstyle—it is the political and moral scaffolding for *WoW*'s core

business model. In addition to purchasing a copy of the base game and its expansion packs, *WoW* requires that players pay a subscription fee of roughly fifteen dollars a month. As Christopher A. Paul argues through his rhetorical analysis of the phrase "welfare epics," Blizzard's decision to create additional avenues through which players can earn gear does not just accommodate alternative playstyles, it creates more docile bodies to accept that rewards are something that can only *be* earned, all while "assimilat[ing] more players into never-ending treadmills to keep subscription dollars rolling" (16). Aside from signifying a player's elite status as a powerful and competent gamer, raiding gear serves no ingame purpose beyond better equipping players to meet the challenges found in the *next* raid, which will, in turn, award better gear to sufficiently equip them for the raid released after that, and so on. When there is no end to the endgame, the work becomes its own reward, provided any "work" performed aligns with the values and expectations of the people who made, and govern, the gameworld.

It is, of course, in Blizzard's financial interest to keep players returning to *WoW* for as many real world hours as possible so that they can collect the maximum number of recurring charges. Faltin Karlsen argues that this player retention is largely achieved, in part, due to a combination of *WoW's* "loyalty programs," or systems that reward consistent engagement with the game, motivating subscribers to play more than they otherwise would, and "hurdles," or means of slowing players' progress enough that they do not "exhaust the game content" too early (5). However, I would like to examine an additional facet of the way these mechanics function—by imposing values of productivity, progression, and efficiency onto the player base while carefully regulating the rate at which they can complete tasks, *WoW* shapes players' experiences of ingame and real world time in order to limit their ability to resist the systems that perform that regulation.

To illustrate what I mean by this, I will briefly describe the process of increasing one's reputation with one of *WoW*'s numerous ingame factions, highlighting the ways in which the system rewards real world time investments, which extract the maximum amount of profit for Blizzard, over ingame time investments, which do not. If a player wishes to receive the items and rewards reserved only for those who have earned "Exalted" level reputation with a certain faction, they must first earn as many as twenty-one thousand reputation points. These points are typically received from either killing the faction's enemies one at a time, a tedious process that rewards only a handful of points per kill, or from completing discrete tasks such as quests, dungeons, or raids for significantly larger rewards. Completing a dungeon typically takes anywhere from twenty minutes to an hour, while killing enough mobs to earn the equivalent number of reputation points could take dozens of hours more. However, in order to prevent players from simply repeating a dungeon ad nauseum, earning reputation points too quickly and potentially reaching Exalted level before their next payment is due, *WoW* throttles the amount of reputation earned after the first completed dungeon of the day. If a player wants to receive the maximum amount of reputation points from a dungeon, they are encouraged to stop after the first run and wait until the following morning before completing it again. In other words, the dungeon and reputation reward systems motivate players to save ingame time on tedious tasks by working more efficiently. However, as player efficiency decreases the amount of *ingame* time it takes to complete a given task, its *real world* cost only increases, widening the discrepancy between real world and ingame time to the point where an action that takes seven hours of ingame time simultaneously takes seven days in the real world.

Each subsequent expansion has created more and more game elements governed by these time discrepancies—players earn everything from experience points to reputation to gold to epics

through a combination of game mechanics that operate according to a tightly regulated schedule. The world of *WoW* is becoming increasingly partitioned, as Foucault would say, "according to an absolutely strict time-table, under constant supervision" (*Discipline and Punish* 124) and designed to discourage if not outright eradicate the "moral offense" (*Discipline and Punish* 154) of wasting ingame time by systematizing ingame efficiency through mechanics that obscure its real world cost, as Blizzard's profits are entirely dependent on extracting as much real world time as possible from those who live, and work, within their virtual world.

Outside of the real world economics of progression, *WoW*'s influence over a player's experience of time dramatically influences the methods by which they determine their role and purpose in the game. One of the most effective and time efficient methods of leveling is to complete dungeons, or scaled down versions of the same group mechanics and dynamics that make up a raid. In an attempt to save players the time-consuming frustration of finding other people to complete a dungeon with, Blizzard introduced the Dungeon Finder tool, a kind of matchmaking service that automatically groups player characters with complementary, optimal allies: the ideal (normative) *WoW* dungeon group contains one tank, one healer, and three damage dealers (referred to as "DPS," short for damage per second). An unintended consequence of this system is that the more uncommon class roles, such as healers and tanks, experience much shorter queue times than damage dealers.

Shortly after the Dungeon Finder tool was launched, it became common wisdom that when players create new characters with their friends, someone must volunteer to be a tank in order to make the leveling process as fast as possible for the rest of the group. Even if a tank and a DPS spend identical real world time leveling their characters, the DPS character's experience of progression is dramatically slower than their peers', and offers far fewer opportunities for

rewards. Dungeons themselves can also be considerably less fun for a solo DPS character, as they may be less willing to abandon a dysfunctional group for fear of not being able to find a new one in a timely manner. Prematurely leaving a group found via Dungeon Finder causes a player to receive the "Dungeon Deserter" debuff, preventing them from queueing to find another group for thirty minutes. For a DPS without an inordinate amount of time to spend ingame, this may result in not being able to complete a single dungeon in a given play session. Meanwhile, because tanks and healers can find new groups very quickly, they are more likely to abandon DPSers who are struggling to learn or complete new challenges, as a thirty minute debuff followed by an instantaneous match with a new group will cost them less time than finishing a dungeon while slowed down by players who are less "progressed" than they are. Players are consequently, and quickly, trained to create and level characters not based on how much they enjoy a given playstyle, or their preferred role in the larger gameworld, but rather their utility in dungeon (and therefore raid) environments.

The Dungeon Deserter debuff is just one of *WoW*'s many mechanics that use the threat of lost time as a means of preventing nonnormative, nonprogression-oriented play. Even aside from the time-based bans issued to those who explore off-limits areas, *WoW* indirectly regulates the order and rate at which players can visit new, perfectly legal and "open" zones. Each time a player character dies, their spirit is moved to the closest graveyard, where the player is given a choice: they can either take the time to walk all the way back to their corpse as a ghost, at which point they are allowed to rejoin the land of the living, or they can instantly return to life right there at the graveyard but suffer a ten minute penalty of a seventy-five percent reduction in attributes and ability. If a player decides to experience the world out of order, visiting areas that contain higher level enemies than they are currently capable of defeating, they may find

themselves trapped in a never ending cycle of dying, running to their corpse, resurrecting, and

dying again, until they have slowly, painstakingly managed to navigate out of the dangerous area

by degrees, taking only one or two living steps for every hundred steps made as a ghost (a

pattern that Lisbeth Klastrup refers to as a "death loop" [156]). The result is a system that very

effectively discourages players from attempting to navigate Azeroth according to their own

schedule or interest, normalizing a playstyle that adheres to *WoW*'s direct mapping of the game's

environment to its preferred model of linear progression, and from which any deviation is paid

for in lost time. How then might a player resist linear progression and steal their time back?

On November 6th, 2006, Blizzard permanently banned the entire forty-person raiding

team of Overrated, the only guild in the United States that had managed to clear Naxxramas,

WoW's then-highest level raiding content. Overrated's fame, combined with the fact that this

mass permanent ban was one of the first of its kind, ensured that the incident received

widespread attention, not only on the official *WoW* forums and in-game chat channels, but from

popular gaming media (Nelson). The guild was accused of using an environmental exploit in

order to skip the majority of The Temple of Ahn-Qiraj (AQ), a difficult raid that most guilds

struggled to qualify for, let alone finish, and travel straight to its final boss, C'thun.

Some accounts claim that the exploit was achieved by editing the gameworld in order to

delete an enormous platform, thereby allowing the raiding party to simply drop through the

newly created hole in the floor and land directly inside C'thun's underground chamber

(Omniety). Others say that the guild took advantage of an unfinished, hidden hallway that

Blizzard had decided to scrap and seal away rather than delete (drysart). The rumor was that

Overrated had somehow discovered this hallway and replaced its concealed door with a tiny,

easily dispatched chicken. The specifics are unclear, but it is certain that the guild was banned

for adding an ".mpq" file, one of Blizzard's proprietary archiving file formats used for storing information such as ingame objects and environmental data, to each member's data folder. We know this because, in what would eventually prove to be an atypical response from a banned, public facing guild, multiple members of Overrated not only publicly confessed to the exploit, they explained how they did it. Here is a post from Pantaloons, a guild member who avoided the ban by not being online the night the raid was caught:

> The patch we used was called 'Patch 5.mpq' not Patch 3, but nevertheless the outcome was basically the same. We used this cheat two or three times to make the headache of C'thun trash go away. And we only began using it after we had already "beaten the game." While most of us were aware of the possible consequences, we basically had to do it. Let me explain . . . With this cheat, we could basically eliminate the repair bills, the gueling [sic] 4++ hour clear, and actually have the required raid online to kill C'Thun before people started getting sandy and logging out. So we hacked. We lost. Game over. It was a good run. (Nelson)

The response is remarkable in its brazenness, as well as the fact that Pantaloons attempts to justify Overrated's illegal activity while simultaneously defending Blizzard's disciplinary response, adding in a later post that "we know we deserve it" (Boyes). If we take Pantaloons at their word, Overrated did not cheat in order to access items that they were otherwise incapable of earning. As one of the top guilds in the world, they had the necessary gear and skill level for AQ, and they had already killed C'thun a number of times—this was not an instance that their peers could dismiss as an attempt to grab "welfare epics." Instead, they argue, the guild was merely unwilling to commit to the many tedious hours of killing "trash," or numerous but easily dispatched enemies that offer little reward. Killing trash is often likened to busy work, a

monotonous, repetitive, and occasionally mindless activity that players must devote several hours to in order to reach the next challenge. Overrated did not exploit the game in order to steal items or gold, but time.

It's important to note that the raid members of Overrated did not want to spend *less* time playing *WoW*—they wanted *more* time to spend on a different, newer raid. The guild was so committed to progression that they broke the rules they felt no longer reflected the values they were written to enforce. Their dedication, knowledge, and deep understanding of *WoW*'s technical structures calls to mind T.L. Taylor's analysis of "powergamers," or those players who are so efficient and skilled at a game that their accomplishments often appear to be the result of cheating (Taylor, "Power gamers just want to have fun?" 301). While this is an instance where even Overrated themselves refer to their mpq edit as a cheat, their explanation simultaneously reframes this strategy as the logical, inevitable conclusion of a progression system that requires powergamers demonstrate as much efficiency and mastery over the content as possible in order to move on. Overrated's insistence that they "had no choice" and that they "only began using [the cheat] after [they] had 'beaten the game'" are easily interpreted as appeals not only to Blizzard, but to the players who looked to the guild as one of the *WoW* community's primary instruments of progression, a source of vicarious experience for those who could not, and may never, access AQ themselves. As the only guild in the United States to successfully beat all of *WoW*'s available raids, thus arguably reaching the (temporary) end of the game, there was nowhere left for Overrated to progress *to*. With nothing ahead of them, the guild felt they had earned the right to continue by doubling back and restructuring the physical environment of AQ so that its space could be navigated in the same nonlinear manner through which the guild was progressing along the game's intended timeline—namely, a route that disrupted the imposed

sequence and pace of events in favor of one that better reflected their subjective experience, and personal definition of "progression." Just as the way that game punishes nonlinear exploration by repeatedly killing and slowing the explorer's player character's movement through space, Blizzard's response to this deviation not only served to restore their position as the ruling authority and architect of the gameworld, it reinforced the community's understanding of player progression as something exclusively determined by the company, and not the powergamer's, norms.

The Second World

I would like to turn now to the formal ways that time is experienced in *WoW*'s gameworld, as well as the specific mechanics that facilitate these experiences. Save for the occasional planned server maintenance or unexpected, but typically brief, outages, the world of *WoW* has been online and accessible to players twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, since November 2004. As has become a staple of MMORPGs, *WoW* employs a day-night cycle that loosely matches the real world counterpart of each server's local timezone. On Azeroth, the sun rises at exactly 5:30 AM every morning, and sets at 9:00 PM every night. The night sky is significantly brighter now than it was at the game's launch, in part due to complaints from players who were only able to log on after work and real world obligations had been completed, and had therefore only experienced Azeroth in total darkness (jormugandr). The planet's weather, which includes rain, snow, dust storms, sand storms and, in one frightening location, blood rain, is not governed by the planet's tides, sun, or atmospheric pressure. Instead, it is governed by randomly generated cycles based on a number of variables, chief among which is time: players want to see rain, but they don't want to see it rain too often or for too long (Totilo). In an interview promoting the game's new weather system, Blizzard developers explained that their

algorithm was designed in order to disguise the role that time plays in random number generation, adding enough weighted variables that players would be unable to accurately predict the weather, with one designer saying that they "didn't want it to be such a mathematical formula that somebody could literally sit with a stopwatch, log in, go to a zone and go, 'OK in two, one, go — it's going to rain'" (Totilo).

In *WoW*, time is a tricky thing to keep track of. Player's local time as read by the game will always be very slightly out of step with the time as determined by the server, and this discrepancy (known as "latency" or "lag") depends on a number of factors outside a player's control: the performance of their computer hardware, their internet connection, their distance from the game server's location, how many applications their computer is running, their computer monitor's refresh rate, etc. Depending on the severity of one's latency, spells cast and messages sent between players can take anywhere from milliseconds up to (in the case of particularly bad lag) half a minute to arrive on another person's screen. Players with poor internet connections are often forced to compensate for their temporal inconsistency by altering their playstyle; because flashy spell effects and detailed environments can slow a computer down, laggy players are encouraged to turn off visual elements of the gameworld such as shadows, patches of grass, reflections in the water, and their ability to see objects and terrain in distance, in order to experience a smaller world, faster. In some cases, raiders attempt to remain in temporal sync with the game by rushing their characters into corners, pressing their faces into the wall, and casting spells solely based on ingame text and verbal cues from their friends. Certain areas of the gameworld are jokingly referred to as "lag shelters," or cramped places without a lot of objects to render, where players can sit and talk to their friends with minimal temporal disruption.

The visual experience of being out of sync with the server's time is jarring. What appears as a seamless, consistent motion performed on one's character screen appears disjointed to everyone else—laggy player characters may teleport two steps backwards for every step forward, repeating actions and movements on a loop in jagged flashes until they appear to "catch up" with the moment in time before the discrepancy began. Meanwhile, the experience of the player with lag is supremely frustrating, particularly when it occurs in stops and starts. Their body may walk and jump and move in a way that appears and feels normal, smooth, and natural, while the entirety of the world and its inhabitants freeze and jerk around them. When a player's connection with the server improves, rather than experiencing their return to temporal sync as a "fast forwarding," in which they see a compressed version of reality without actually *leaving* it, the world simply snaps forward to the present moment, as if the player has lost and regained consciousness. Any characters walking alongside them suddenly appear fifteen yards away, and in spite of what appeared, from the player's perspective, to have been several seconds of their character walking forward, its body has instantly teleported all the way back to where they started.

While this glitchy-looking, odd interaction with the environment calls to mind the experience of falling down the slippery mountain tiles, the sensation it produces is far more disorienting. Because the player's experience of their own locomotion was uninterrupted, their character correctly moving in the direction and velocity they anticipated with the expected responsiveness and "feel," the resulting disorientation feels like something happening *to* the player character, rather than a consequence of either their virtual body or the surrounding environment. And while there can be a sense of disappointment or even surprise when one's character slips and falls off of a steep mountain, it is rarely accompanied by a feeling of

confusion—the player did not expect to slip, but now that they have, the fact that they've slipped makes sense. Meanwhile, when slipping through time, the player is consumed by an overwhelming feeling of powerlessness, as there is no way to predict exactly when or why their character will fall out of sync with the world, let alone how long. But it is there, in the space between connection and disconnection, when a player character's body is still present in the virtual world as experienced by their personal machine but without the systemic interventions of the server, that holds the most exciting possibility for environmental, and temporal, resistance.

Figure 5. "Screenshot of a YouTube video demonstrating S's discovery." *5.1 HACK Macro WoW.* Dante Larka, 2012. *YouTube,* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TCx2LMKc99o.

In December of 2012, a user of OwnedCore whom I will call S shared their discovery of a system of blue boxes that overlay nearly every building, non-interactable object, and structure

in the gameworld. These boxes, which appear to be made of the same swirling, semi-transparent

texture as the walls that stand at the outermost boundaries of the game's oceans, demarcating the

edges of the planet, are only visible while the player is experiencing extreme conditions of lag or

other temporal/environmental dissonance, such as attempting to play before the gameworld has

finished downloading. While experimenting with macros designed to rapidly increase and

decrease a player's view distance, overloading the players' graphics card and turning the

gameworld into a kind of reverse lag shelter, S realized that they could slow their perception of

the environment to such a degree that not only could they now *see* these otherwise invisible blue

boxes, they could actually stand and walk on them (see fig. 5).

What's more, S's macro had the power to make ingame objects temporarily disappear

while their computer struggled to keep up, producing a kind of "no clip" effect in which players

become immune to the game's collision detection and gain the ability to pass through objects as

if they were air. Timing is, of course, important here, as it seems that players can only move

through (or inside) an object as long as it remains unloaded/invisible to them. What this reveals

is that *WoW* recognizes a codified, direct correlation between temporality, physicality, and

visibility. Alongside the always-visible world of *WoW*, depicted via polygons and textures and

regulated by the rate and consistency with which the players' computer can remain in sync with

the game server, is an always-invisible world that, in spite of that invisibility, also contains its

own visible textures and polygons in the form of blue walls and boxes that exist solely within the

moments of time in which the player is so deeply out of temporal sync with the primary,

always-visible world that they briefly transcend its physical environment. In other words, the

world's physicality, its ability to put up boundaries that the player character can touch and collide

with, is predicated on its being perceived by an individual player. This perception is, in turn,

entirely dependent on the player's subjective experience of time, and how closely that experience aligns with the one maintained by the governing server.

Willful and strategic disconnection from the game server affords more than just the ability to alter one's perception of the environment, however. For example, some off-limits areas require players to cross enormous oceans—even though the player character's virtual body remains tireless on land, able to walk or run for an infinite amount of time without slowing or resting, if the server detects that a player character has swum too far out to sea, the character begins suffering from a mechanic known as "fatigue." If the character's virtual body remains fatigued for too long, they drown to death. Fatigue and other physically limiting mechanics like fall damage and drowning are "server-side" operations, or mechanics that are performed exclusively on Blizzard's server and then sent back to the player's computer. These can be contrasted with "client-side" operations and information, such as the game's environments, the player character's body and associated animations, and the basic navigational mechanics of the game, which are primarily stored on the player's computer. Often, when a player has the experience of being temporally and spatially out of sync with the game's environment, they are not experiencing lag, but rather short, temporary disconnections from the server. During this time, their instantiation of the gameworld relies entirely on client-side operations, and without intervention or correction from the server, their character can move through the world undetected, unfatigued, and immune to damage taken from the environment.

It is worth noting that fatigue is not determined by the amount of time or effort that a player character has spent swimming, nor is it technically determined by distance alone. Instead, fatigue's one minute countdown is triggered the moment a player character's body enters a pre-designated fatigue zone (colloquially referred to by players as "fatigue water.") Much as how

WoW telegraphs the correct path up a mountain by employing darker, grippier textures, fatigue water is represented both in the environment and on a player's minimap as darker than its safe counterpart, and players quickly learn to visually read the oceans in terms of safe (approved) and unsafe (approaching off limits) areas, habitually avoiding the patches of ocean that conceal Blizzard's secrets.

Counterintuitively, players cannot overcome fatigue through rest—instead, swimming out of and away from the fatigue zone will rapidly turn back the clock until the debuff disappears altogether, and their characters can once again swim forever without exhausting themselves. In spite of the fact that this limitation is presented to the player in the context of fatigue, a consequence of their character's virtual body, the condition is entirely unrelated to any affiliated attributes of strength, mobility, effort, or stamina. Instead, fatigue is an embodied manifestation of the player's inability to overcome *WoW*'s systems of surveillance that govern and protect its property. Compliant bodies are given the (illusion of) infinite strength and freedom to move, while those that attempt to resist suddenly find themselves incapacitated by the strain of deviant navigation.

Early in the game's history, a player whom I will call A discovered that deliberately disrupting one's connection to the *WoW* server altogether could provide unfettered access to a version of the world that exists entirely on the player's computer. This disconnected version of *WoW* is referred to as "second world," and appears identical to the live version of the game, save for the presence of any other players or non player characters (NPCs). Because there is no way for Blizzard to tell the difference between a shoddy internet connection and deliberate disconnection, even after several years of hotfixes attempting to prevent wall-walking and exploration, this practice is one of the few that remain undetected and untouched.

Temporarily unencumbered by the limitations placed on their virtual bodies, players are afforded opportunities to glimpse places and pathways that are otherwise obscured by the mechanics found in the online version of the game, allowing for a much more thorough and intimate understanding of its environment. For example, those who have visited second world report that Azeroth is hollow, save for its waters that extend infinitely downward, and that by dropping beneath the world's surface, player characters can circumvent the mountain ranges and chasms that Blizzard has installed to keep them out of certain areas, so long as they approach their destination from the one direction that the world was not built to accommodate: below. Because there are no longer any eyes on the player, they can comfortably explore second world without fear of being surveilled, caught, or punished. Additionally, environmental security features such as walls or thresholds that auto-disconnect any players who attempt to cross them are rendered useless, as the player is already disconnected, albeit in a way that allows the elements of the world that reside solely within their computer to remain visible, and therefore accessible, to the player alone.

It is fair to say that visiting second world is about as far away from progression gaming one can get. While explorers are constantly pioneering new ways of accessing and navigating out-of-bounds areas, their methods require them to continuously move inward, backward, and alongside ingame content, rather than forward through, say, the latest raid. What's more, some of exploration's most prized and revelatory discoveries are spaces that exist entirely outside of the game's narrative timeline altogether—abandoned rough drafts of entire continents, empty plains dedicated to developer testing, and glitchy replicas of existing locales that serve as temporary placeholders for quests and cinematics that take place out of temporal step with the rest of the world, such as cutscenes or playable flashbacks.

Often, when Blizzard is required to scrap a city or landmass that they have already implemented into the gameworld, they do not delete it, but conceal it. For example, *WoW*'s *Cataclysm* expansion introduced the island of Tol'Barad, a prison that resides on its own separate server, completely untouched by the rest of the gameworld. At the same time, far below Azeroth's "death line," or the vertical coordinate at which a trespassing player character is automatically killed, lies another version of Tol'Barad, empty of NPCs and drowned at the bottom of the ocean. This abandoned cluster of buildings contains none of the quests, combat, or rewards found in its topside counterpart, and reaching it does not progress the game's narrative forward. Instead, visiting the failed Tol'Barad reveals a glimpse backwards and into a parallel timeline that was interrupted by either an inability to meet the developer's content standards, a change in design philosophy, or a missed deadline, possibly the result of the economic structures that facilitate the game's production cycle.

Blizzard designers and developers are notoriously underpaid (Schreier) and work in conditions so deplorable that the company is currently being sued by the California Department of Fair Employment and Housing for committing acts of abuse and discrimination that are "a violation of [its employees'] state civil rights" (Plunkett). Concealing this version of Tol'Barad does more than conceal an unfinished location, it conceals the labor, and labor conditions, that produce the environment in which it exists. We might think of *WoW*'s off limits areas as being what Ahmed calls, "'dimly perceived' . . . relegated to the background in order to sustain a certain direction; in other words, in order to keep attention on what is faced"—in this case, the commercially viable surface of a world whose governance requires its population to constantly be looking and moving forward, not within (*Queer Phenomenology*, 31).

In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Jack Halberstam argues that "heteronormative common sense leads to the equation of success with advancement . . . Other subordinate, queer, or counterhegemonic modes of common sense lead to the association of failure with nonconformity, anticapitalist practices, nonreproductive life styles, negativity, and critique" (89). Deviant exploration rejects the notion of a single, cohesive, linear world designed to replicate and justify the logic of capitalism, in favor of a world composed of schisms, holes, missteps, and fragmented, overlapping timelines (see fig. 6).

Figure 6. "A glitchy area of Silverpine Forest." Blizzard Entertainment, 2016. Author's screenshot.

Explorers' time in *WoW* does not build towards, or even imagine, the world's future, and actively resists the game's dominant system of progression rooted in capitalist ideology. In fact, if one is willing to play as a much slower, more vulnerable character, most exploration can be

performed on a *WoW* trial account, for free. Because characters made on trial accounts cannot grow past level ten, normative progression is impossible. Trial account characters are also forbidden from joining groups or communicating with other players in public channels—they exist within, but completely separate from, the normative flow of the world. This has the additional benefit of protecting one's real, paid account (if a player has one) from being implicated in and banished for the player's transgressions, and if a player loses one trial account, they can quickly make another. The idleness and unproductiveness of playing on a trial account, much like deviant exploration, can, as Halberstam puts it, become a weapon of resistance, "[recategorizing] what looks like inaction, passivity, and lack of resistance in terms of the practice of stalling the business of the dominant" (*Queer Art of Failure* 88). By circumventing the environmental and temporal restrictions designed to both extract capital and indoctrinate players into a narrow but endless path of progression, players can do more than refuse to play—they can develop strategies of resistance that allow them to perceive a world beyond that which is afforded to them by its governing body, experienced in stolen, fleeting fragments that belong to them and them alone.

Chapter Two: Makes Some Strange Gestures

To be present in Azeroth is to make oneself visible—to the developer, to the game's security software, to the server, to nearby players, to one's internet service provider. And while players can forge oblique paths through the environment in order to access or see previously unseen areas of the gameworld, they cannot alter it or leave any part of themselves behind there. This is not to say that players have no impact on the world—their interpretations of the game and its underlying mechanics help influence subsequent updates, and what begins as emergent play is often taken up by the community at large, resulting in practices that are passed down to new generations of players, sometimes even codified and absorbed by the game itself (Sacco).

But when it comes to the *world* of *WoW* and its virtual deserts, cities, and oceans, the environment is unmarked by the bodies of its inhabitants. Player characters' footprints evaporate moments after they appear. Swimmers create ripples which stop and fade only a few feet away from their bodies. Players may set certain items, toys, or magical effects on the ground that remain in place after they walk away, but these never last longer than five minutes, and never after the player disconnects from the server by either traveling to another continent or instanced area, or by logging out of the game. No matter how much of the world players are able to perceive, no matter how much time they spend exploring its surface, it retains no memory of their (virtual) physical forms. As Espen Aarseth describes it, "Azeroth has been constructed to withstand the pressure and tampering of millions of visiting players, who are allowed to see, but not touch—let alone build or destroy" (122).

And yet, something of the player character's physical presence *must* be remembered by the game, if not its environment, or else their avatars would not be able to return to it intact. The server stores elements of the player character and their history in the abstract, strictly

informational sense, such as what gear they possess, whether their name is listed in a guild roster, or how much of their world maps have been filled in. But when players log out, their virtual body does not remain standing where they left it, patiently waiting to be reanimated. Instead, the player character's last known location is stored on the server in the form of x, y, and z coordinates, and reconnecting with *WoW* generates and drops a new instantiation of their body where its previous self last stood. In the interim, all *visible* traces of player characters' avatars, any evidence of embodiment that could be reflected in the environment and/or perceived by other players, vanish the moment their connection to the server is severed. Disconnection is, in a sense, a kind of death, albeit one without a corpse.

As I analyzed in the previous chapter, carefully orchestrated disconnection allows the player to circumvent the limitations the game places on their avatars in order to control and shape their navigation of the environment, not only protecting them from server-side surveillance systems but increasing their virtual body's capacity for movement. So what affordances, if any, can be found in a *motionless* body? At the end of the last chapter, I invoked Jack Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* to argue that idleness and unproductiveness can function as strategies of resistance in a game that valorizes progression. In this chapter, I argue that the constraints *WoW* places on dead, othered, and disconnected virtual bodies in order to maintain control of the economic and social integrity of its gameworld not only reveal opportunities for players to resist by "stalling the business of the dominant" (Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* 88), but through developing deviant methods of embodiment and communication with capacities for gesture and expression not afforded to living, productive, animated, and normative bodies.

As this section of my thesis requires me to critique the mechanics that facilitate communication between players, I would like to pause for a moment to establish a taxonomy of

WoW's ingame chat system. For the purposes of my argument, I will divide *WoW*'s avenues for text-based chat into *embodied* and *disembodied channels*. By disembodied channels, I am referring to communication that does not generate from a player character's body, and is not dependent on that body's corporeal status and/or its proximity to others. These include, but are not limited to, bounded channels such as "party chat," which allows users to exchange messages with those whom they are completing a PVE dungeon; "guild chat," which facilitates communication between members of a guild; and "whispers," or "tells," which are private messages exchanged between individual players. The ability to send and receive messages across these channels is determined by the player's social connections and/or playstyle—in the case of both party and guild chat, players must first be invited to, and then consent to join, a group, and once joined, they can communicate directly with that group regardless of where their virtual bodies are located ingame. By contrast, embodied channels make direct use of, and have functionality dictated by the state of the player character's body and its relationship with the world/others. Within this is a category that I call *semi-embodied chat*, in which player characters are given access to public chat channels that are confined to their current environmental area. However, these operate more or less like disembodied channels, in that players can choose to join or leave at any time, and their use is not tied to their character's body's status or ability to execute gestures.

When a player character performs embodied chat, their virtual body is animated as if speaking, and whatever messages they send appear as white text in speech bubbles emanating from their avatar's head. When players "say" something (by typing /say and then their message), their avatar gesticulates calmly and casually, and their text can be read by any player within sixty yards. When a player "yells" something (by typing /yell and then their message), their avatar

cups its hands in front of its mouth and appears to shout. Yelled messages also appear in speech

bubbles, but their text is colored bright red, and is readable by all players within four hundred

yards.

While each channel has its own specific functions and norms, some of which I will

describe in more detail later on, I introduce the distinction of embodied and disembodied chat

now in order to quickly highlight the fact that *WoW* contains a hierarchy of communication

methods, some of which rely on, and others which completely ignore, the player character's

virtual body, but all of which are predicated on the player character meeting one or more

conditions as determined necessary by the game. For example, in an attempt to curtail spam,

players on free trial accounts are permitted to speak with /say, but their words can only be read

by players within ten levels of their own ("World of Warcraft Starter Edition Limitations"). They

also cannot yell, cannot participate in semi-disembodied chat channels, and may only whisper

when directly addressed by another player ("World of Warcraft Starter Edition Limitations"). In

this context, the ability to communicate is not merely predicated on the status of the player

character's virtual body or its relationships with others, but on whether the game recognizes the

player as a "real" or "legitimate" participant in the world. My intention with this chapter is, in

part, to make a case for how the game determines who these legitimate players are in the first

place.

Leave a Legible Corpse

The dead play a peculiar but significant role in *WoW*. As in many games, and particularly

in the MMORPG genre, death and dying are inevitable and carefully designed mechanics that

attempt to appropriately balance fun and difficulty, ideally resulting in a game that is challenging

without being overly frustrating. The philosophy behind, and implementation of, games'

so-called "death penalty" varies across genre, titles, and design teams, and *WoW*'s choices were regarded as relatively lenient at the time of its release (Frostyjawn). As opposed to games like *Everquest*, dead characters do not lose any experience points, gear, or items, and often have a much shorter geographical path to resurrection (Winfield). Still, death is a frequent and often frustrating consequence of everyday play in *WoW*, and, as I discussed in chapter one, a major impediment to exploration.

In an archived forum post from early in *WoW*'s beta testing period, designer Rob Pardo explained that, in spite of the fact that players dislike negative consequences for dying, "we need to have a death penalty of some sort, otherwise death itself becomes meaningless" (Silvertree). But is that really true? What would be gained, lost, or altered if a player's virtual death was "meaningless?" And what meaning, if any, might a player find in death outside of its capacity to signify and punish failure?

As Halberstem points out in "Queer Gaming: Gaming, Hacking, and Going Turbo," games that de-emphasize competition and combat and immerse players in affects likes "wonder" and "a queer sense of time and space" are often criticized for being "too easy" (198). And while *WoW*'s death penalty is on the "softer" side, Lisbeth Klastrup proposes that efforts to reduce player frustration "might be done in the name of making a good game, but in a market situation where several MMOG producers are fighting for a share of the subscriber market, it is becoming increasingly important to make the experience of entering the world as successful as possible" (147). In this sense, the "meaning" of a player character's death is, in part, an economic concern, a mechanic rooted in the ideals of progression and efficiency, similar to the "hurdles" that slow players' progress in order to prolong their active subscription period (Karlsen 5). But Klastrup also argues that the *WoW*'s aesthetics of death function as storytelling devices, helping players

craft and interpret narratives "about what may have happened and will happen to us if we undertake certain difficult tasks; this creates a shared feeling of existing in a world where the border between life and death is fairly fluid" (152). I would also argue that, in a world where player characters' bodies explore, speak, fight, and then vanish without a trace, perhaps one's ability to die, be reborn, and die and be reborn again also offers players a more fluid, wonky way to conceptualize their place within a world that, at times, presents very stark boundaries between what is or isn't possible for a player character's body to do.

A player character dies when their health points drop to zero, after which two things happen at once. The first is that the player immediately loses control of their virtual body. Dead player characters cannot move, use embodied speech, or perform actions, and any attempts to do so will generate an error message.[1] The second is that the virtual body performs a death animation. As is the case with all of *WoW*'s characters' animated gestures, each race and gender is assigned its own distinct depiction of dying, but, in general terms, death animations consist of the player character crying out (accompanied by a sound file) and falling to the ground. At this point, the player character's body is classified as a corpse, and is one of the only instances in the game in which it is completely motionless. Even when sitting, lying prone, or standing at rest, the living virtual body is constantly in motion, cycling through a series of looping "idle" animations; shifting its weight from side to side, sighing, breathing, and, save for female trolls, who were hastily implemented without eyelids, blinking. Dead player characters are not simply "unanimated," however. The very last frame of their death animation, which is to say the very last frame of their fall towards the ground, depicts a horizontal body, limbs akimbo, and (again, with the exception of female trolls) eyes closed. The corpse is not represented by a discrete

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[1] With the occasional exception for shaman and warlocks who possess the ability to immediately reincarnate themselves through magical items ("Soulstone,"; "Ankh.")

animation file, but merely a single frame of the player character's animated gesture of dying, eternally suspended in time.

But this eternally suspended moment/frame does not actually correspond with the player character's time of death. After all, the actual time of death, the moment that the player cedes control of their character, occurs not at the end of their fall/death animation, but at the beginning. In her close reading of how the bodies in Homeric poetry create structures of meaning through gesture, Alex Purves argues that the experience of falling not only "sweeps the body up into its own sense of time" (38), it subjects it to two kinds of time at once:

> The first is the speed at which one falls, which is determined by the weight of one's body as it moves through space. The second, and the one that is most readily apparent, given the subject of the poem, is the time of death. In tracing a path from vertical to horizontal, falling takes the body from a firm, rooted position on the earth to one where it mixes in with the ground's physical matter, as the dust soaks up the blood of a fallen warrior or as his teeth bite into the earth at the moment of death. (38)

Before looking further at the death animation's path from vertical to horizontal, I would like to briefly recall the mechanics of exploration, as Purves' description of falling provides us with another opportunity to consider the functions of verticality and orientation in the deviant movements of wall-walking. Just as when a player cedes control of their body during the fall of a death animation, falling off a mountain renders them incapable of performing any movements beyond horizontal rotation (or re-orientation). However, as discussed in chapter one, merely adjusting the player character's horizontal orientation can be enough to stop their terminal, vertical descent. In this sense, wall-walking is not only deviant because it allows the player to reach places otherwise inaccessible by their bodily horizon, but because it allows them to stop

their inevitable "path from the vertical to the horizontal" before they reach the horizontal "geography of death" (Purves 40).

Returning to Purves' characterization of the "two kinds of time" experienced by a falling (dying) body, although *WoW* employs a physics engine, the act of falling, whether while dying or merely by walking off of a cliff, is not bound to any real world physics. The game does not calculate any wind resistance, and player characters' falls do not accelerate after the first ten to twenty yards. That being said, I argue that, even in the virtual world of *WoW*, the dying player character's experience of the fall *is*, from a certain angle, still subject to the speed or rate of its descent, not due to any gravitational forces of acceleration, but because its descent is never totally finished. The player character's path from vertical to horizontal begins with the moment of death, and "ends" by locking the player into a (potentially infinite) moment within the unlooped animated gesture of falling. In other words, the prostrate corpse is always falling, never fallen, and already dead. This is, of course, further temporally complicated by the fact that the death of the player character's body has no bearing on the life, death, or verticality of the player who, as I will now explain, dictates the duration of their own virtual death. As soon as a character dies, the player is given the option to "release" its spirit from its corpse. This teleports a ghostly, translucent version of their avatar to the nearest graveyard, which the player must then pilot back to its corpse in order to be resurrected. Not only is the player character's body subject to two kinds of time during the duration of its fall, in death, it exists as two concurrently occurring selves; the horizontal, frozen body, and the vertical, mobile spirit, for however long the player chooses to keep them apart.

The death described in the *Iliad* and as interpreted by Purves ends with the corpse becoming a part of the ground on which it fell, "mix[ing] in with the ground's physical matter"

(38), and at first glance, this finality, a permanent merger with the environment, seems incompatible with *WoW*'s representation of death as a temporary, corrective phase between failure and resurrection. But what if a player simply chooses not to rejoin their spirit with their body? Rather than accept the game's suggestion that death derives meaning from its function as an instructive, punitive force, a player might instead choose to turn further in towards their failure and simply play dead, repositioning their character's fall not as an ending nor even a transitory state, but a new angle.
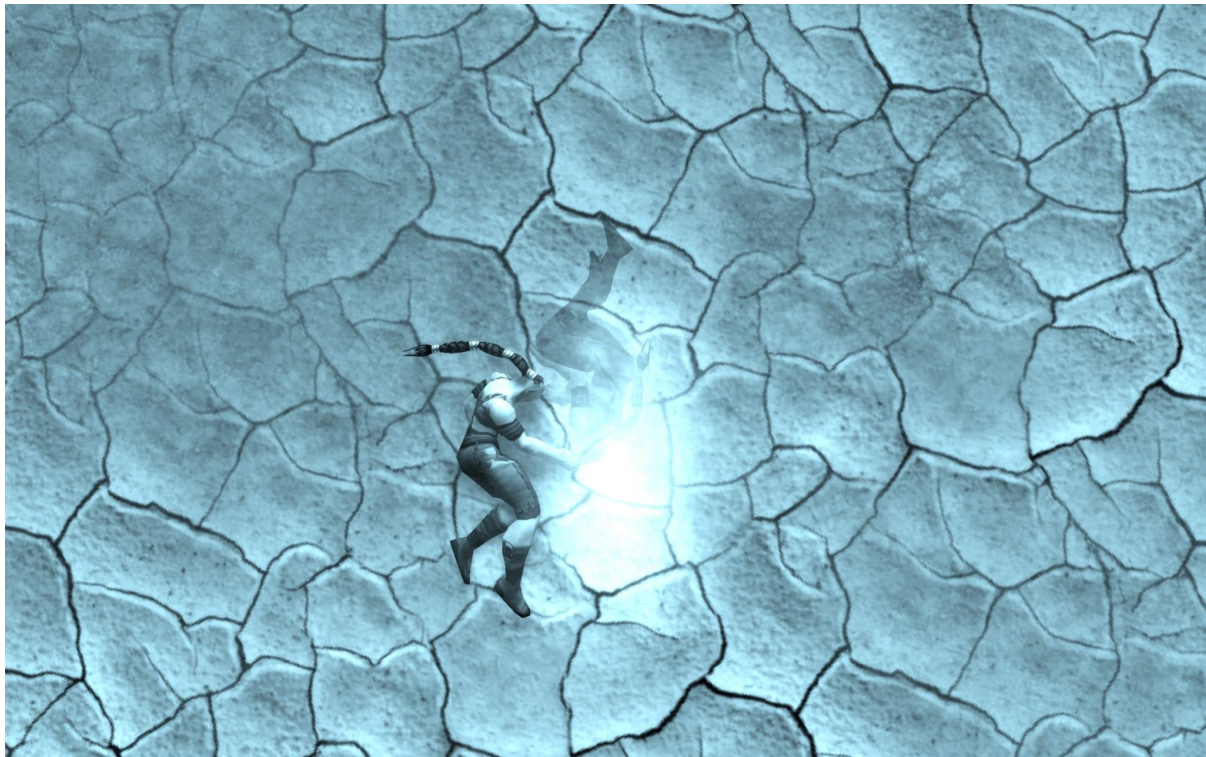
Figure 7. "The author's spirit laying beside her corpse." Blizzard Entertainment, 2022. Author's screenshot.

While wandering the world in spirit form, dead players can see any living players or enemies within a short radius of their body, albeit through a hazy gray mist (see fig. 7), thus allowing them to strategically delay their resurrection until any nearby threats have passed, or perhaps until back-up has arrived. Spirits are are bound to the same environmental physics and

collision detection as their corporeal forms (ie: no floating or walking through walls), cannot be

targeted by other players, and can perform no actions other than walking, running, jumping,

sitting, or lying down; attempting to perform any other gestures (smiling, dancing, waving, etc.)

is futile, as the typed command simply disappears from the screen and the player character

continues to cycle through its idle animations. Similarly, while spirits are allowed to speak in

disembodied chat channels, any messages typed and submitted as embodied chat simply vanish

without any acknowledgement from the game. It's worth noting that this differs from

unsuccessful attempts to move or speak as a corpse that has not yet released its spirit—instead,

the game reacts to these aborted gestures with the explanation (or perhaps admonishment) that,

"You are dead." By contrast, the spirit who attempts to communicate without a "real" or

legitimate body, is met with their own silence. Without an error message or reaction from one's

user interface, it's as if the game itself did not hear you, and by not retaining or offering any kind

of record of the player's unheard message, it's as if the player never attempted to speak at all.

Interestingly enough, attempting to initiate combat as a spirit does successfully generate the "You

are dead," error message, suggesting that the game anticipated one deviant move and not the

other—a player treating their character's incorporeal spirit as a living body with a capacity for

embodied communication and expression is far enough outside the game's encoded norms that it

has not even prepared a straightening device to correct it. But because the point of death is to

correct and improve a player's ability to successfully participate in combat, the game is ready

and willing to point out the player's tactical errors whenever possible.

Spirits have proven themselves quite effective at performing at least one manner of

deviant play, however: wall-walking. While they are, as I wrote, bound by the same collision

detection as living bodies, spirits move twenty-five percent faster, allowing them to make jumps

that corporeal player character bodies can't. What's more, after *WoW*'s infamous Patch 1.9.0 made it significantly harder to wall-walk, some players noticed that their spirits could still perform many of the same deviant maneuvers that their living bodies were no longer capable of executing, theorizing that when Blizzard modified the "normal" player hitbox, they either forgot or did not bother to modify the hitboxes of the dead (Bloody Rayne).

Later on in his explanation of Blizzard's developing implementation of, and the reasons behind, their game's death penalty, Rob Pardo explained that the team had abandoned an earlier form of resurrection in which players merely regained consciousness at the inn to which they'd bound their hearthstone[2] because it had motivated players to see death as a means of quickly and easily navigating the gameworld, noting that "it operated as a free teleport. Once someone wanted to go back to town, you would find the nearest monster or lake and promtly [sic] die in it" (Silvertree). According to Pardo, not only did this run counter to Blizzard's philosophy that the death penalty should punish, or at the very least discourage, dying, it lead to an unacceptable amount of "bizarre behavior in regards to transportation in the world." It is unclear whether "bizarre behavior" refers to players embracing death as a deviant navigational mechanic, or perhaps to bugs in teleportation or flight paths. Regardless, it's clear that certain aspects of the game's evolving death penalty systems were meant to, at least in part, curtail emergent navigational techniques, further reinforced by Pardo's assurances that their beta's death penalties discourage "scouting" (ie: exploration) while dead, as Blizzard "plan[s] to make the world look somewhat different when you are a ghost that will furthur de-emphasize any scouting you can do as a ghost."

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[2] A hearthstone is a magical rock that allows players to teleport to any inn that they have designated as their home.

Once the player finally reaches their corpse, they are asked whether they are ready to accept a resurrection. If the player clicks, "Accept," the gray fog clears and their fleshy corpse fades away, leaving a skeleton in its place. In the early days of *WoW*, these skeletons remained visible for several hours, and players who died multiple times in the same area left an additional skeleton at each place their body fell (timmy_cj). Unlike corpses, which are essentially motionless versions of the player character's body with its name, gear, and physical features intact (see fig. 8), skeletons provide next to no personally identifying information aside from the player character's race and gender, as these are the two determining factors in a skeleton's size, shape, and pose.

Figure 8. "The author laying beside her corpse and her skeleton." Blizzard Entertainment, 2022.

Author's screenshot.

That being said, there is plenty that can be "read" in the bones of one's neighbors. If a player happens upon a pile of skeletons of a mix of genders and races, particularly those of the

opposite faction, it's likely that a PVP battle took place, and thus members of the enemy faction

may be hiding in the area (see fig. 9). If the skeletons are all of the same race and gender, it's

reasonable to assume that the same player character has died here over and over again, and that

there may be a powerful enemy patrolling nearby. This, in turn, allows players to better read the

land and environment surrounding the skeletons, helping them learn what sorts of terrain would

make a successful hiding place, or how to gauge the habits, regeneration ("respawn") rate, and

pathing patterns of enemies. It's worth noting that any increased depth and familiarity with the

gameworld found via these discoveries largely concerns how to view the environment as it

relates to and facilitates combat. It is also a minor, but telling, example of one of the many ways

that *WoW* positions the player character's racial characteristics as essential, indelible components

in whether, when, and how they can read or be read by others, a concept that I will discuss in

greater detail below.

Figure 9. timmy_cj. "Posted on Reddit with the comment, 'Scenes like this in STV are some of

the most memorable and exhilarating views a player can come across in their time in the World

of Warcraft.'" *Reddit*, 2020,

https://www.reddit.com/r/classicwow/comments/ct7ytz/from_the_ama_each_player_can_only_le ave_a_single/.

Similar to non-player character enemies, any natural, non-combat related resources (flowers, herbs, and ore) that can be found in the area regenerate shortly after they've been gathered. Rain falls but nothing is ever eroded, and the grasses never grow more lush. The environment, while interactable, inhabitable, and legible, is unchanging, and aside from the preservation of their abandoned skeletons, immune to player intervention.

But between the living player character's body, its spirit, and the skeleton it leaves behind, is the immobile, perpetually suspended corpse. If a player chooses not to resurrect, opting, instead, to play dead for as long as possible, their corpse simply remains where it fell. In fact, while disconnecting from the game erases all physical evidence of one's *living* virtual body, logging out without releasing one's spirit does what is otherwise impossible—it leaves the player character's corpse behind, remaining visible to anyone who comes across it.

An offline player's corpse cannot be interacted with by other players, but highlighting it with one's mouse reveals the character's name. Much as piles of skeletons merge with the environment in order to send messages of warning to the player characters who pass them, the preserved corpse, too, has the power to communicate with the living, and offer new insights into the structures and norms that prop up the world upon which it rests. Although it is unable to speak, move, or react, the corpse has four key affordances: it can be placed, it can be seen, it can operate outside of the restrictions placed on the online, connected, and living player character's body, and, under the right circumstances, its form and name can persist through time. If a player character leaves their corpse in the game world shortly before their subscription expires, it's possible that their character may even outlive their account.

WoW is a game that penalizes stillness—if a player character goes too long without moving, speaking, or otherwise interacting with the game, they are designated as "Away From Keyboard," (AFK) and eventually forcibly booted offline. After Blizzard began banning accounts that employed third party software to automatically move player characters' bodies frequently enough to prevent their expulsion, players posted videos showing off their ingenious, undetectable "anti-AFK systems," such as a screwdriver tied to an oscillating fan positioned against a keyboard, or a rudimentary homemade machine that periodically presses a spacebar to make the character jump (bauke123; Totally Unreal). Corpses are unable to, and are therefore under no obligation to, move, and therefore remain in the game undisturbed until the server finally resets. With these affordances at their disposal, what messages can players send with their bodies, and what lasting impression, if any, can a corpse make on an otherwise "unmarked" world?

One of *WoW*'s most prominent methods of deviant communication via the virtual body is known as "corpse graffiti." The earliest forms of corpse graffiti involved creating a character with a specific name, and finding a way to kill that character in a place that would either be contextually meaningful and/or have the largest amount of foot traffic, then allowing players to stumble upon their body. In a blog post titled, "'Warcraft' Corpses Speak," Tony Walsh remarked that this form of play was most often intended to be humorous, albeit often in incredibly poor taste, such as the "regularly spotted . . . corpse named Jeff Buckley floating face-down in a pool of water in the dwarven city of Ironforge" or the fairly straightforward graffiti of a gnome named "Mailbox" lying on top of a mailbox (Walsh). These names, admittedly, do not make for particularly compelling messages, but we can at least appreciate the message sent by using corpse graffiti as one's medium. There is no body less productive than a corpse, and given that

WoW only offers players a certain number of character slots per server, devoting one or more of these potential lifetimes to an absurdist joke is, in itself, nearly totally defying any normative means of playing the game. What's more, the practice of corpse graffiti requires that the character remain logged out of the gameworld— in other words, that it not be played at all. While discussing the ways in which gaming and queer theory can benefit from, and contribute to, each other, Halberstam argues that queer theory offers games "a critique of the normative, the predictable, the stable, and the thinkable, and an embrace of the ludic and the loopy" ("Queer Gaming" 190), perhaps, I would argue, even when the jokes aren't particularly good.

Successfully pulling off the trick of corpse graffiti is harder than it might initially appear—players need to orchestrate their deaths in such a way that their bodies fall in a specific, contextually appropriate location, and large areas of *WoW*, such as capital cities, do not contain any items or enemies that could kill you. What's more, killing one's own character is technically against the Terms of Service, as Blizzard has banned "intentionally dying" in order to prevent players from throwing PVP matches or sabotaging their allies during a fight (chickn_butt).

But the main trouble with this form of corpse graffiti is that non-normative, joke-y names, themselves, are also technically against the Terms of Service. In 2006, players were forbidden from creating names that consisted of gibberish, slang, pop culture references, references to real world persons or events, references to religion, partial or complete sentences, or references to copyrighted material ("Terms of Service (WoW)"). In practice, these restrictions were mainly only enforced on servers that had been designated specifically for roleplaying in an attempt to preserve the immersion of Blizzard's fantasy world (Xandamere). This norm appears to have been enthusiastically upheld by at least some segments of the roleplaying population, as GMs have complained about enterprising players who take it upon themselves to submit reports

containing hundreds of inappropriate names at a time (Xandamere). The banishment of

non-normative names was also, sometimes, weaponized by players who wished to remove their

rivals from the game. One person that I spoke with claims that his arena team's ranking suffered

after his teammate's name, which referenced copyrighted material, was reported by a member of

the opposing team, leading to their suspension in the middle of an important match. Of course, as

is consistently true for corrective action in *WoW*, there is no way to prove who reported his

transgression, or whether it was even manually reported by another player at all.

That being said, when asked on the official *WoW* forums whether the community found

corpse graffiti to be "funny or rude," a Blizzard-employed community manager responded by

saying that the practice was, "Neat :-D," and even pointed out that some images of corpse graffiti

had been featured on the company's website (Vaneras). Virtually every example of corpse graffiti

referenced in the above thread is some form of joke, many of which consist of names that violate

the game's Terms of Service (Gelfin). It is possible that, by and large, a sufficient number of

Blizzard employees found the practice "neat" enough not to intervene—that is, until the

messages being transmitted became a threat to the game's values—specifically, the norms

surrounding the accumulation, and control of, the capital generated by play.

Bodies, Bots, Gold

Before I critique the more complex, emergent forms of corpse graffiti, I must briefly

describe the deviant practice that led to both their creation and eventual abolishment. Although I

have argued that many of Blizzard's policies regarding what behavior and play is considered

punishable and whether and how often these rules are actually enforced have varied over time,

the most consistently, heavily, and vociferously policed method of deviant play is known as gold

farming.

Gold, *WoW*'s virtual currency, is earned by killing enemies, completing quests, or selling ingame goods or services either directly to another player, or through one of the game's in-world auction houses. Broadly speaking, "gold farming" and "gold selling" both refer to the sale of these virtual currencies, items, or services for real world money. Although inextricably related, I want to make a distinction between the practices of gold farming and gold selling, as they largely take place in separate spheres, operate under different systems of control, and are performed by very different bodies.

For this thesis, I will use the term gold farming to refer exclusively to in-game techniques and play that are designed to cultivate the largest amount of gold (or valuable items that can be converted to gold) as possible. Gold selling, by contrast, is the process of exchanging that gold for real world funds, and largely occurs outside of the bounds of the gameworld, on third party websites or internet auction services (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 139). Although both terms are often used interchangeably, it's technically only gold selling, and not gold farming, that is against the game's Terms of Service ("Trading Items and Services for Real Money").

While there is a substantial amount of scholarship that addresses the ways that players attempt to identify gold farmers by scrutinizing their virtual body language (Taylor; Mortensen; Nakamura), I argue that this practice is increasingly informed by which virtual bodies, gestures, and playstyles are marked as deviant by *WoW*'s mechanics of embodiment and communication, and that, from the very moment that a player character first enters the gameworld, *WoW* both reads, and instructs players on how to read, others' virtual bodies with suspicion by framing certain gestures, languages, and identities as threats.

Much has been written about the complex and incredibly profitable industry of gold selling, particularly its abominable labor practices (Dibbell; Nakamura; Dyer-Witheford and de

Peuter). The gold farmers who work for gold sellers typically work in long, often twelve-hour shifts, sleeping at their desks or in dorms with other farmers, and there are even reports of gold farming being performed as mandated labor in prisons (Vincent). Although the landscape has changed over time, during the first several years of *WoW*'s history, the majority of farms operated out of China (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 142), a fact that the MMO community at large seized upon to create and perpetuate the pervasive and racist caricature of "the Chinese gold farmer," allowing, as Lisa Nakamura explains, "specific forms of gamic labor, such as gold farming and selling, as well as specific styles of play [to] become racialized as Chinese, producing new forms of networked racism that are particularly easy for players to disavow" by virtue of the fact that "players cannot see each others' bodies while playing" (130). The result is a culture in which players obsessively monitor the virtual body of their neighbor, reading its behavior and gestures for evidence that the orc or elf or troll playing alongside them is a "gold farmer," or a "bot," both terms that, as Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter point out, the *WoW* community often "almost automatically render[s] with an addition: 'Chinese'" (142). This means that, in North American *WoW* communities, not only are gold farmers frequently racialized as Chinese, Chinese players are frequently assumed to be gold farmers, in spite of the fact that, throughout most of the game's history, over half of all *WoW* players are located in China (Langer 89).

What are bots, and how are they related to gold farmers? In the simplest terms, bots are programs that play the game on behalf of a human being, autonomously performing the necessary movements and actions in order to earn experience points, acquire items, and, of course, farm gold. But given that these are all tasks that are commonly performed by human players as well, regardless of whether or not they are employed by a gold selling company, bots

can be, as Torill Elvira Mortensen puts it, "hard to reveal," as the repetitive movements of farming leads "most players settle into comfortable, efficient routines that take little effort—an almost meditative state where multitasking is common" (217)—in other words, the gestures and movements of gold farming appear automated by their very nature. While Blizzard's support articles and ingame reporting systems encourage players to watch for, and report, player characters that they suspect of being bots, the company does not directly disclose what criteria to look for, as "describing [their] sources and methods can make it easier for malicious actors to work around them" (Kaivax). Players, instead, develop and enforce their own norms, some arguing that "Blizzard doesn't actually care about botters" and that it is up to players to hunt and kill farmers on their own, as they make "easy PVP targets" (Ithutar). In a thread titled, "How do you all detect a bot?" *WoW* players claim that names with "Chinese characters" or that don't include letters from "the Latin alphabet," are a "sure sign," as are "robotic and jerky movements," and, interestingly, a refusal to acknowledge the person interrogating them (Absentiá). This last criteria is, apparently, made all the more suspicious when the player character they are accusing is a member of the opposite faction:

> Tagging the mob they have targeted prior to them getting an attack off is a particularly solid clue. They will continue to attack it. If they are the opposite faction, they and their pet will never deviate from attacking the mob even when you are wailing on the character. (Crassus)

As this chapter is largely concerned with the interpretation of bodies and gestures and the ambiguity of expression performed within the constraints placed on a virtual body, I argue that what makes this poster's reading of his fellow player's gestures particularly fascinating is that the encounter he describes could just as easily be read as an act of altruism—the player character

who "tags" an enemy, or strikes the first blow, is the only one who receives any loot or rewards earned from its death. Often, when a player continues to attack an enemy tagged by someone else, it is because they are being helpful, or at the very least, ensuring that the tagged enemy dies more quickly so that a new copy, one that the player can then tag themselves, will replace it. Multiple posters went on to say that a sure sign of a bot is that "they usually don't fight back when you attack them," implying that any play that displays passivity, helpfulness, or an aversion to fighting or killing other players, is so deviant that the very act of doing nothing is reason enough to mark a character as threat to the game's norms.

Above, I wrote how the ability to communicate through any given embodied or disembodied chat channel is predicated on the player character meeting certain sets of requirements, and that characters created on free trial accounts are subject to significant limitations on where, when, and how they are allowed to speak. These restrictions were implemented in response to the proliferation of ingame gold selling advertisements, particularly in the widest-reaching semi-disembodied channels, such as "trade chat," *WoW*'s designated channel for buying and selling virtual goods, which is shared by all player characters currently within the borders of any of the world's capital cities. By enacting a policy that forbids certain characters from openly participating in its communities, including those that help facilitate the game's economic system, *WoW* casts "free" player characters' bodies, that is, any body whose existence does not directly generate a profit for Blizzard, as interlopers, a threat not only to the "legitimate" (ie: paying) player community, but to the developer's monopoly over the game's "value-creating capacity that publishers privatize and fence around with intellectual property rights" (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 149). This, in turn, may cause new players to appear more suspicious, botlike, or deviant, especially to their own faction, as they are unable to invite other

players to disembodied channels such as party chat, and cannot reach out to them with a whisper to ask for help. Free trial characters are also forbidden from using nonverbal gestures known as "emotes," which are, as I will discuss at length in the final section of this chapter, one of the sole means of cross-faction communication. Without the ability to speak or even perform emotive gestures, *WoW*'s communication hierarchy prevents non-paying player characters from expressing themselves in any capacity other than wordlessly killing enemies and collecting items—in other words, the very gestures and behaviors that signify gold farming.

In addition to limiting some player characters' access to chat channels, *WoW* automatically censors any use of the names of gold selling companies, even within private messages, going so far as to ban any word that contains letters from banned names. For example, the word "Bukowski" is blocked because it contains "UKOW," the name of a major gold seller, as is UKOW's homonym, "you kow." Unlike cursing, which the game's filter automatically translates into grawlix ("#$@!") while leaving the rest of the message intact, messages that include the names of gold sellers (or words that share elements of those names), much like messages transmitted through embodied channels while dead, simply disappear from the player character's screen. This reportedly resulted in significant headaches for Polish players, as the letters "ukow" are found in a number of commonly used Polish words ("Reserved Words").

Although Blizzard is a U.S.-based company, *WoW* maintains servers all over the world. The decision to not make an exception for servers with significant Polish populations, or to alter the filter to allow for the continued use of common Polish words, was almost certainly an economical one. But it does suggest that the game operates as if English was its normative language, even in an international market, and that ensuring that non-English speakers continue

to have free use of *WoW*'s communication systems is less of a priority than the banishment of a single word.

However, these extreme measures did eventually impact gold sellers' strategies. Unable to speak, unable to gesture, and unable to speak their own names, gold sellers now had to develop a new method of communication if they wanted to advertise their services within the bounds of the gameworld. And now we can return, at last, to the practice of corpse graffiti.

Once Blizzard began automatically blocking any player character names that include reserved words, the traditional methods (ie: leaving a corpse named "Buygoldukow" outside the auction house) were no longer sufficient. Instead, using an exploit that allows a player to instantly move their character to a specific set of coordinates, gold sellers began teleporting player characters into the air en masse, hundreds of yards above a heavily populated city, and then dropping them into a freefall. From the perspective of the players on the ground, gnomes and orcs appeared to rain from the sky, trajectories carefully arranged in such a way that, after simultaneously dying on impact, their corpses formed the shapes of letters that spell out a gold seller's web address (see fig. 10).

Figure 10. Corti, Sascha. "Deadly marketing: People in WoW use corpses to spell out URLs of gold-selling sites." *TechPreacher*, 2009, https://techpreacher.corti.com/2009/09/10/deadly-marketing-people-in-wow-use-corpses-to-spell-out-urls-of-gold-selling-sites/.

These mesmerizing displays never failed to attract not only attention, but discussion, even arguments, amongst player witnesses, not to mention the ire and discipline of GMs, who stepped in to remove the corpses as quickly as possible (Kaostick). If GMs were slow to intervene, however, some players took it upon themselves to censor the message by committing organized suicide on top of the gold seller's bodies, blurring and obscuring the message with their own corpses as a kind of counter-graffiti (aggressiv). Finally, in an act of retaliation against players' retaliation against them, gold sellers began dropping their bodies into capital cities as before, only this time, they halted their vertical descent shortly before they reached the ground (see fig. 11). The resulting effect resembled a kind of gruesome skywriting, with bodies hovering above players' heads forming not only the shape of letters, but hearts, stars, and a thumbs up (see fig. 12). Because the hack that allowed the gold sellers to hover was illegal, detectable by Warden, and tended to attract enough attention that a player would likely be unable to use it without being reported by player witnesses, those who had previously thrown their bodies on top of the gold sellers' messages could no longer perform their counter-graffiti without breaking the very rules they were helping to enforce, not to mention risking punishment themselves.

Figure 11. Jonshock. "Back when gold sellers tried." *Reddit*, 29 Jan 2017,

https://www.reddit.com/r/wow/comments/5qriim/back_when_gold_sellers_tried/.

Figure 12. Jonshock. "Back when gold sellers tried." *Reddit*, 29 Jan 2017,

https://www.reddit.com/r/wow/comments/5qriim/back_when_gold_sellers_tried/.

When planning and executing the sort of corpse graffiti described above, it's far more

economical to hire one person to program a bot that can be replicated dozens of times than it is to

hire thirty employees to manually control the thirty player characters necessary to spell out a

complete URL. What's more, the level of precision and speed required to successfully mold a

group of bodies into letters and shapes before they are detected and banned is, for all intents and

purposes, impossible without automated assistance. Therefore, it is extremely unlikely that any

of the virtual bodies used in gold sellers' corpse graffiti are piloted by actual human beings. The

result is that, in a world where the ability to speak and perform gestures is limited to those who

generate capital for Blizzard, the only remaining communication method afforded to gold sellers

is one that positions the farmers it exploits as automatons and expendable, digital commodities,

all while ensuring that the virtual bodies of the human laborers that the graffiti "speaks" for

remain conspicuously silent.

Throughout this thesis, I have argued that deviant play and so-called exploits are methods

of resistance, in part because of what these practices can reveal about the invisible systems of

governance and codified norms embedded in the virtual worlds that facilitate them. And while

gold selling could certainly be read as a subversive reclamation of the capital generated by play

that is typically only reserved for games' corporate developers, it is, of course, profoundly and

directly exploitative of its gold farming laborers. In their thorough and expansive critique of

video games' and the video games industry's role in creating and perpetuating capitalistic

systems, Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter devote a chapter to *World of Warcraft* and its

relationship with gold sellers. They argue that *WoW* and gold farms exert digital and material

biopower, respectively, to control and exploit both paid and unpaid labor for profit, claiming that

even though gold farming "subverts [the] corporate control of player time," it is not "a

revolutionary repudiation of ludocapitalism but itself a capitalist venture" (Dyer-Witheford and

de Peuter 149). In this venture, those who Lisa Nakamura calls "player workers" labor in

sweatshops to generate virtual items that help "legitimate leisure players" (133) circumvent the

game mechanics that they wish to avoid—namely, the mechanics that cost them time. The same

desires that led Overrated to edit the gameworld in order to bypass repetitive, monotonous

gameplay in favor of progression and fun are the same that motivate wealthy leisure players to

pay gold farmers real world currency to make their virtual characters rich. As Nakamura argues:

> "the characterization of American *WoW* player behavior as self-sufficient, law-abiding,
>
> non-commercial, and properly social is belied by their role as gold buyers within *WoW*'s
>
> server economy: the purchasing of virtual property lies within the bounds of 'American'
>
> gaming behavior while selling it does not" (139).

In a forum post that I feel is representative of the general tenor of anti-gold farmer rhetoric, a

player named Kickpoly claimed that the abundance of "Indonesian gold farmers" and bots in

WoW Classic have prevented him from affording the items his class requires him to possess

(Kickpoly). What I find interesting is that Kickpoly's justification for his concern is *not* that he is

ideologically opposed to gold farming. In fact, his anger stems from the fact that the

"self-admittedly Indonesian" gold farmers and botters are hurting *his own* efforts to farm gold for

himself, defensively framing his interest in gold farming within the "legitimate" terms of

"self-sufficient, law-abiding" play as described by Nakamura. His proposed solution is for

Blizzard to "legalize [gold selling]" so that farmed gold and items become more affordable to

him, or "ban indonesia and china from the [North American] servers somehow." Kickpoly sees Indonesian and Chinese gold farmers as deviant threats to the marketplace not because gold farming is a threat to the economic integrity of the gameworld, but because the farmers in question are supposedly Indonesian and Chinese. The behaviors, body language, and class/combat choices made by these players that signify that they are somehow both foreign human beings *and* bots, are the very same behaviors and gestures that Kickpoly would like to perform, but can't, because "our" gold farms, those belonging to "legitimate" players, have all been "taken" (Kickpoly).

This is, in part, why I believe that the practices of gold farming and gold selling should be critiqued as distinct, but co-dependent, entities. The "play" of gold farming, alone, does not deviate from the norms of the game, as the accumulation of gold and power are core tenets of *WoW*'s normative ideology of progression, as is the maximization of game knowledge, skill, and efficiency—provided these actions are performed by a player who is able to successfully prove their "legitimacy" by speaking English, never failing to confront their enemies with violence, and aggressively retaliating against the suspected deviant play of others. Aside from the corpse graffiti and text-based spam directing players to third party gold selling websites, there are comparatively few opportunities to witness acts of gold selling in the gameworld itself. Gold farming, on the other hand, is "detectable" ingame because it is performed by virtual bodies who are perpetually visible not only to Blizzard and Warden, but to other players, who, as Nakamura argues, "constantly produce a taxonomy of behaviors that create new racializations of avatar bodies in digital space," even though they have no way of "detect[ing] other players' races by looking at their physical bodies" (133). The racialized behaviors and gestures that mark a virtual body as deviant (and/or a bot, and/or a gold farmer, and/or Chinese) are partially imposed by the

very game mechanics designed to keep "illegitimate" player workers out; namely, a perceived inability or unwillingness to communicate through normative methods or channels.

Much as with wall-walking, gold selling practices have led to a number of changes to the game's code and rule sets over time. After years of combating gold sellers, Blizzard finally seems to have found a way to definitively maintain control over any capital generated by play—they now sell gold directly to players themselves, at fluctuating prices determined by their own algorithms (Newman). It appears that this is also the moment in *WoW*'s history that corpse graffiti stopped being regarded as "neat"—during a Q&A about the development of *WoW Classic*, the game's senior test lead announced that:

> While we understand that [corpse graffiti] was a flavorful part of Original WoW and the earlier expansions, individual players leaving multiple player corpses and skeletons throughout the game world can lead to behavior such as spelling out advertisements, hate speech, and other negative messages. As such, this will not be a part of WoW Classic.
> (timmy_cj)

Blizzard's recreation of classic *WoW* now functions more similarly to the current, live version of the game, in which player characters' corpses disappear as soon as the player logs out, and bodies cannot leave more than one skeleton on the ground at a time, regardless of how many times they die. Although I cannot speculate as to the intent behind *WoW*'s original corpse and skeleton mechanics, those systems certainly tell a story: that "the point" of death is to experience a penalty, that player characters' bodies can merge with the environment in order to communicate information, and that players can find new, counterhegemonic ways of orienting their virtual bodies in order to send messages that the game's systems of governance would otherwise disallow. In the aftermath of corpse graffiti being adapted into a tool for

ludocapitalistic gold selling companies and subsequently banished by their corporate competitor, players' bodies now have one less "loopy, ludic" gesture with which to send a message to the world. That being said, as I will discuss in the final section of this chapter, the strangest gestures still remain possible.

Goibon Uden Lo!

World of Warcraft is a game about a war between two enemy factions: the Horde and the Alliance. At the time of *WoW*'s launch, each faction was composed of four fantasy races[3] with their own territories and iconographies. Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter argue that MMOs like *WoW* are a "conceptual match" (126) with Foucault's concept of biopower in that "managing an MMO is an exercise in administering 'life itself,'" not only through the "panoptic surveillance and disallowing, by account suspension, the life of insubordinate subjects," but through the "regulation of populations" (126). They invoke Foucault's claim that "factors of segregation and hierarchization" (*The History of Sexuality* 141) are essential to the exercise of biopower, and that:

> Azeroth's perpetual antagonism between Alliance and Horde corresponds to Foucault's
>
> suggestion that sovereign biopower depends on war: "It divides the entire social body,
>
> and it does so on a permanent basis; it puts all of us on one side or the other." (Foucault,
>
> qtd. in Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 129)

I would like to synthesize this point with Jessica Langer's argument that "the Alliance and Horde are divided along racial lines . . . into familiar and other" (88), in order to make a case that, much

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[3] Like many fantasy properties, *WoW* uses the term "race" not to refer to a socially constructed category, but to a biologically determined category that could more accurately be described as a separate species, a practice that can be traced back at least as far as J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Fellowship of the Ring*, from which the fantasy genre's long history of racial essentialism derives (Rees).

like *WoW*'s communication mechanics limit the gestures and speech of players it perceives as threats to their financial interest, Blizzard has encoded what Foucault calls the "general process of war" (*Society Must Be Defended* 266) into the mechanics that facilitate cross-faction communication and embodiment in order to prevent players from either cooperating with those encoded as Other, or from opting out of the game's cycle(s) of violence. Finally, I will discuss what opportunities *WoW*'s general process of war creates for deviant practices such as mutual aid and acts of mercy across enemy lines.

For the majority of its history, *WoW*'s Terms of Service stated that players are forbidden from "communicating directly with players who are playing characters aligned with the opposite faction (e.g. Horde communicating with Alliance or vice versa)" (Clopert). This rule is largely enforced by two different game mechanics. The first is a faction-specific language barrier that automatically scrambles one faction's chat messages so that they appear as gibberish when viewed by the other. The second is that players are only permitted to make characters from one faction per PVP server, meaning that if someone makes an Alliance character on the PVP server Blackrock, they cannot also make a Horde character, fluent in Horde languages, in order to transmit messages between factions on their Alliance character's behalf.

This faction-specific language barrier works as follows. After a player sends a message through embodied chat channels, an in-game language parser counts the number of letters in each word, then substitutes those words with ones drawn from a word bank, replacing each individual word with one with an equivalent letter count. For example, if a Horde player says, "Hi," the language filter substitutes it with one of the ten possible two-letter replacements from the Alliance's word bank. This makes it next to impossible to translate the other faction's messages with any degree of accuracy, as the Orcish "word" "kek" could refer to one of any

number of three letter words in the original speaker's language. That being said, the replacements used for each word are consistent, and every time a Horde player types "lol," it is only ever scrambled into "kek." This has resulted in the meme-fication of commonly used faction-scrambled words, to the extent that Horde players will regularly use the word "kek" instead of "lol" even when talking amongst each other ("Kek"). Attempts to backwards engineer the language barrier have resulted in sporadic breakthroughs in communication, such as when it was discovered that if a member of the Alliance shouts, "D a p aa SS pp" to a member of the Horde, it will be (un)scrambled into "Y o u re Me an." Players who are reported for using these legible phrases, however, are typically banned (Nekrage).

Although every member of a faction shares a common language ("Orcish" for the Horde and "Common" for the Alliance), most player characters are polylingual, and can speak and/or understand languages specific to their race, and, in the case of warlocks, class ("Curse of Tongues"). Although all player characters speak either Orcish or Common by default, players can adjust their chat settings to automatically translate their character's messages into their race-specific language instead. This functions similarly to the Horde/Alliance language barrier, allowing a Horde Tauren to send messages to other Tauren that appear scrambled to the rest of their allies. Racial languages can only be spoken in embodied chat channels—in other words, only amongst characters within one's immediate vicinity, making the presence and use of a player characters' racialized body an essential element of speaking its racial language. Ingame languages are further affirmed as an inseparable and intrinsic part of one's racial identity through the fact that player characters cannot learn to speak any language other than the one assigned to them by the game, encoding both language and racial identity as rigid, boolean categories.

Practically speaking, *WoW*'s racial and faction languages are not languages, they are merely nonsense filters applied to text by a program that categorizes player characters as either fluent or not fluent. If a player character cannot speak Taurahe, Taurahe is represented by gibberish, and if they *can* speak Taurahe, Taurahe is not represented at all, or rather, it is represented by whatever real world language the text was originally written in. In other words, Taurahe, like all of *WoW*'s race-based languages, does not actually exist in any capacity *other* than its illegible, unknowable form.

That racial languages cannot be used in disembodied channels also forces the large groups of players that occupy them to speak the same fictional language in public, which is to say, no fictional language at all. Of course, players come from all over the world, and player populations speak a number of different real world languages both within and outside the game. But, as T.L. Taylor detailed in her 2006 article, "Does WoW Change Everything? How a PvP Server, Multinational Player Base, and Surveillance Mod Scene Caused Me Pause," there is a long history of players enforcing the exclusive use of English in public chat channels, some under the impression that speaking English is not just a norm, but a rule enforced by Blizzard, although the company has explicitly stated that this is not the case (320). This has recently come to a head in *WoW Classic* after Blizzard merged a handful of smaller, lower-populated servers with one that is largely populated by Polish players, leading some English-speaking players to revolt. One player, Thessaria, described the use of Polish in public channels as "spam," perpetrated by "a horde of Polish Speaking People who apparently dont know there are other options for chatting such as -Forming a Party, or Raid-"—in other words, smaller chat channels where English-speaking players cannot see them—and that "perhaps everyone who doesnt use a common language (on [European] servers this would be english) should be banned from using

the trade channel for some time" (Thessaria). When other players suggested that she learn Polish, Thessaria responded that she does not pay a subscription to the game just to be "left out," and that "even if it were the last option left to choose, I am NOT learning polish. (frankly i'ld [sic] rather die)".

I chose to quote Thessaria's thread because both her objections and proposed solutions are illustrative of the ways that the game's specific implementation of language and chat mechanics help to establish norms regarding the use of both fictional and real world languages within *WoW*. One, she is arguing that the use of a language other than English is not only deviant, but that this deviance should be punished. Two, she is recommending that those who speak a language she does not understand make use of the hierarchy of chat channels to limit who is exposed to their speech, just as the game limits the use of its fictional languages in public chat. And finally, she refers not only to Polish people, but all those who speak and understand Polish, as "a horde," a dehumanizing term that also happens to be the name of one of the game's two major factions—specifically the faction that, as Langer argues, is encoded as "foreign" through the game's use of racial stereotypes of various real world marginalized groups (90). Although, as Taylor demonstrated, Blizzard long ago clarified that speaking non-English languages in public is *not* a bannable offense, multiple players in a 2012 thread on MMO-Champion, a popular *WoW* fansite, responded to the question of, "Foreign language, is it suspendable?" by suggesting that players report people who speak non-English languages by using *WoW*'s "Report Language" feature, despite the fact that this feature is only intended to give players a way to alert Blizzard to offensive or abusive language, leading one person to retort, "It means swearing not French ffs" (Zantos).

As previously mentioned, *WoW does* ban players who attempt to circumvent the game's forced faction language barrier, and I will describe the emergent deviant methods for doing so below. But first, I would like to clarify that the game does offer one very narrow, legal possibility for cross-faction communication. Warlocks have an ability called "Curse of Tongues," a magic spell that performs two feats at once: the first is that it increases the amount of time it takes an enemy to cast spells, and the second is temporarily granting its target with the ability to speak Demonic ("Curse of Tongues"). In the very specific situation in which two warlocks have decided to duel each other and both happen to simultaneously cast Curse of Tongues, they will have twelve seconds in which they will be able both speak and comprehend each other's messages.

Twelve seconds is not a tremendous amount of time—if a warlock has any important messages to get across, they must either type them out in advance, or possibly program macros to queue up common responses and phrases to send as necessary. This requires at least some element of pre-planning, as does the fact that *both* warlocks must time their Curse of Tongues so that all parties are fluent in Demonic at the same time. This is, of course, assuming that the warlocks have successfully managed to use nonverbal gestures in order to indicate to the other their willingness to communicate in the first place. That it is the dark and sinister warlocks who have this power, and not, say, the pious and noble priests, serves only to reinforce cross-faction cooperation's inherent deviance, as does the fact that this ability is encoded as a "curse" which is only transmissible during mutual combat, and cannot be granted without simultaneously causing injury to its target. Most telling of all is that, in a fantasy world that contains over a dozen languages, the only language that is possible to share between factions is "demonic" in nature.

Earlier in this chapter, I argued that the game's implementation of corpses and skeletons served to teach players how to read the environment in terms of its viability for combat, particularly for the purposes of PVP. I would now like to expand on that idea by examining the particular ways that *living* virtual bodies, both those belonging to player characters and computer-controlled non-player characters (NPCs), are manipulated in order to punish players who attempt to resist interpreting the opposite faction's gestures as threats of violence.

Although the faction war is largely staged within the context of PVP combat, *WoW* does occasionally place NPCs along its frontlines. Faction-aligned locations such as cities, quest hubs, and even roads are protected by NPC guards, particularly if the area is intended to be inhabited by low level characters. Their presence is especially critical in the very earliest zones of the game, where new player characters are at their weakest, and perhaps still learning how to fight, communicate, and navigate their surroundings. For this reason, guards are usually designed to be more powerful than the average players within their designated zone ("Guard").

All guards automatically attack members of the opposite faction on sight, regardless of whether or not the player character has currently opened themselves up to potential attack from the opposite faction by toggling their PVP status to "on," a process referred to as "flagging" oneself. Merely being struck by a guard, regardless of whether or not the player fights back, flags their character for PVP. Therefore, once a player character enters enemy territory, it does not matter whether or not they intend to fight—the guard, an avatar of the game's embedded faction conflict, leaps into action as a correcting force, not only by attempting to kill every enemy player character it sees, but by forcibly conscripting them into the faction war. Being flagged for PVP does not only make a player more vulnerable, it recolors their character's name to be bright red, and places a miniature version of their faction's symbol on their health bar,

making their status as an "enemy" player character all the more visually conspicuous. In this way, being flagged acts as a more abstract version of the faction language scrambler, translating any gesture of curiosity or diplomacy, such as approaching one of the other faction's cities, into an act of war.

Like many of *WoW*'s governing systems, guards discipline player character's behavior even when they're not seen. If a Horde player character gets too close to an Alliance civilian NPC, or vice versa, the civilian yells, "Guards, help me!" (or, from the Horde player's perspective, "Goibon Uden Lo!") and the game instantly spawns a group of maximum level guards to attack the player character on the civilian's behalf. Just as before, the guards' aggression is not triggered by whether or not the player character has actually attacked a member of the opposite faction. The game does not check whether the player character is targeting an NPC, whether they are flagged for PVP, or even their relative threat level compared to the NPCs in the area, merely their faction/race and proximity to someone whose faction/race does not align with theirs. The result is that player characters who decide *not* to attack or kill civilians on sight are actually more likely to be punished by the game, as it is far safer to quickly execute nearby NPCs before they have a chance to call for help than it is to attempt to peacefully navigate around them.

That being said, the cross-faction language barrier is inconsistently applied across NPCs—major characters and/or characters who provide essential story information speak to the player character in the official real world language of the player's realm, and their dialogue is not filtered through any ingame scrambling mechanics. But minor characters such as nameless guards, fruit vendors, and blacksmiths, only speak the forms of Orcish or Common that cannot be understood by the opposite faction. Often, these characters are also the ones who can be more

easily killed by players, and are thus more likely to spawn guards, therefore making them, in turn, more likely to be killed by players, establishing a perpetual cycle of aggression, rooted in faction/racial difference and the illegibility of the Other's gestures. Given that striking (or even just being struck by) an NPC also automatically alerts the entire zone to the player character's presence via the disembodied "local defense" channel, this PVP cycle can be very difficult for a player to break from, particularly if it was never their intent to PVP in the first place. By codifying the violent faction divide into the very fabric of the gameworld, *WoW* not only makes it impossible for a player character to speak to or understand the opposite faction's languages, it makes it difficult to read each other's body language and gestures outside of the context of PVP, and, through the auto-flagging abilities of its auto-spawning guards, forcing the player character to perform a systematically imposed gesture that indicates a willingness to fight.

Luckily, it is far easier for players on opposite factions to interpret the gestures that are codified as "emotes." In addition to the ability to run, walk, sit, swim, jump, or lie down, *WoW* players can perform a number of pre-written gestures, or emotes, as a way of displaying affect. Nearly all of these emotes are represented, at least in part, as text transmitted via the ingame chat window and are, like messages communicated with the /say command, visible to any player characters within sixty yards of their body, regardless of faction. That is unless, as previously established, that character is playing on a free trial account.

Some emotes are solely represented by text, such as /smile, which generates the message "[Character Name] smiles." Other emotes are accompanied by an animation, such as /nod, which, in addition to displaying the text, "[Character Name] nods in agreement," causes the player character's avatar to visibly nod its head and/or give a thumbs up. Some of these animated emotes are further accompanied by audio clips, often including dialogue, such as /thanks, which

causes the player character to perform the animated gesture for /nod while saying some variation

of, "Thank you!" Most emotes can be modified to incorporate the name of whatever player

character is targeted by the emoter—as an example, typing /hug without a target generates the

text, "[Character Name] needs a hug!" while typing /hug while targeting a character named

Thrall generates, instead, "[Character Name] hugs Thrall."

  I go to the trouble of describing all the permutations above because, much as is there is a

hierarchy of chat channels afforded to different sorts of characters under the guise of limiting

deviant play such as spamming or gold selling, emote gestures are broken down into multiple

categories that appear in different forms depending on the status of the person perceiving them.

While members of the opposite faction can see all of these stock gestures, both in the form of

text and their accompanying animations, and they can hear any nonverbal noises such as laughter

or crying, they cannot hear any audio files that contain dialogue. Because this dialogue is

pre-recorded, its omission cannot be justified by the argument that cross-faction communication

can be used to harass and threaten other players—it does, however, serve to preserve the fiction

that narratively justifies the existence of a cross-faction language barrier. It also further serves to

encode *any* form of cross-faction communication as deviant—just as when spirits attempt

embodied speech, or when players use words that share letters with forbidden gold selling terms,

any of the spoken words that accompany a player character's gesture simply vanish as if they

never existed at all.

  Gestures are a particularly potent site of cross-faction communication, however, as stock

emotes are the only game mechanics that produces any kind of text or message that enemy

players can legibly read. In addition to the aforementioned pre-programmed selection of possible

emotes, player characters have the ability to create (strictly text-based) emotes of their own by

typing /e or /me before a description of their gesture. For instance, "/me stares at the horizon" will generate text that reads, "[Character Name] stares at the horizon," to any nearby members of the player character's faction. But to enemy players, any and all custom emotes read exactly the same: "[Character Name] makes some strange gestures."

This is, of course, to prevent players from using the custom emote feature to transmit messages that their characters are forbidden from speaking out loud. But the use of the word "strange" is transparently alienating, transmitting absolutely no information other than the fact that the person attempting to communicate with you is an Other and, because of this Otherness, unintelligible. By forbidding *all* custom emotes, not just those that include, say, curses or offensive language, *WoW* is signifying that the content of one's gesture is immaterial, and that the very act of moving one's body in an unexpected manner that is legible to one's enemy is deviant enough, as any thought or feeling or gesture that has not already been officially programmed into the game is forbidden, strange, and ultimately invisible.

Is this to say that cross-faction communication is impossible? Absolutely not. As with all norms in this game, there is pleasure to be found in subverting them. Turning to Edmond Y. Chang's proposal that games should turn away from "'pwning' (owning, topping, defeating, humiliating) other players," in favor of "game play and end states that invite exploration, cooperation, complexity, meditation, ambivalence, alternative spaces, even failure" (19), I would like to emphasize that cross-faction communication can be a form of deviance that, in addition to inviting cooperation and complexity, can function as a form of exploration—a kind of *social wall-walking* to discover new horizons of gesture and play.

The best example that I can provide for this subversion is an account from my own experiences as a *WoW* player. One morning, I came across a gnome mage on the road between

Southshore and Tarren Mill. This sentence alone will speak volumes to *WoW* players who have

spent considerable time in the gameworld, especially throughout its early years, when this stretch

of land was perpetually covered in the corpses and skeletons of an all-out PVP war. As the

gnome ran towards me, I noticed that his health bar was dangerously low, and that he was being

chased by three angry, disease-ridden bears. As both of us were flagged for PVP, the gnome took

one look at me and veered right, slowing the trajectory of his escape just enough that the bears

were able to catch up to him and move in for the kill. I panicked and blinked (teleported)

forward, forcing myself between his body and the bears', and cast Arcane Explosion, a spell that

instantaneously damages all enemies within ten yards, not only failing to kill the bears but, to my

complete embarrassment, successfully killing the gnome. I managed to use the /sorry emote once

before he released his spirit and teleported away, but I knew that, given my actions and the area,

that apology would read as sarcasm. Therefore, I decided to sit beside his corpse and wait for

him to return.

Typically, this would signify that I was "camping," or hanging around to kill a player the

moment they resurrected, a common but much maligned form of PVP. My plan was to quickly

use the /sorry and /cry emotes multiple times in a row in an effort to convey my sincerity. I could

not see his spirit, so I had no way of knowing when he would be within the sixty yards necessary

to see these gestures. However, I was familiar enough with the environment that I could guess

about how long it would take for him to travel from the Alliance graveyard to where his body

fell. Sure enough, I watched his corpse melt away into a skeleton, and to my delight, the gnome's

newly formed body appeared a few yards away from me, waving.

Now it was his turn to "talk." He used a /slap emote to chastise me, then /laughed and

/pointed to a nearby bear. I /nodded, /pointed at the bear myself, and motioned that I was /ready.

The gnome tagged the bear, and we killed it together. This went on for a while, the gnome pointing out the mobs he needed to kill, tagging them, and then letting me help finish them off, periodically taking breaks to /thank me. Finally, he motioned for me to /wait, /waved, immediately used the /wait emote again, /waved, and then, very slowly and, to my mind, purposefully, jumped three times in evenly spaced intervals. As if wanting to make sure I had understood him correctly, he repeated the entire cycle again, this time prolonging the space between his jumps a little more. Then he logged out.

I, frankly, had no idea what he was talking about. After describing his gestures to my guildmates, however, something clicked. At three o'clock server time, I returned to the road outside Tarren Mill and found him there waiting for me, waving. I pointed at a bear, he nodded, I tagged it, and he helped me finish it off, over and over again, until his debt was repaid.

The Horde/Alliance faction conflict is reinforced by virtually every element of *WoW*'s gameplay—its avatars, its combat mechanics, its environments, its communication systems—and rejecting, or even complicating, those systems requires one to break the rules. Although my new friend and I did not exchange any actual words or unapproved gestures, I would argue that our play session certainly qualified as "direct" communication as forbidden by the letter of the game's law.

Each element of our interaction was facilitated by a *WoW* mechanic and informed by the norms of both the game and the community—I knew that my behavior would normally be read as camping and antagonistic, just as the gnome knew that my unintuitive choices of sitting instead of standing, thereby increasing the likelihood that he could land a critical blow if he chose to attack, spamming conciliatory emotes, refusing to take the bait of his playful slap, and killing bears that had already been tagged by someone else, indicated that I was making

conscious choices to resist those norms. After all, we were literally surrounded by the bones and bodies of our allies who had met and killed each other where we now stood. I am not suggesting, by any means, that this gnome and I are any nobler or more high-minded than our fellow players—I, myself, have fought and killed dozens of gnomes and elves and humans at Southshore—merely that deviant interactions like the one I described above are the moments in which the world of *WoW* felt the most open and alive to new possibilities of play. These moments, much like wall-walking, delight the deviant player by knocking the world out of alignment, revealing any gaps in its systems that might be repurposed to accommodate newer and more complex interpretations of what a world and a body can do.

Conclusion: You Were Meant for This World

Throughout the course of this thesis, I have paid particular attention to the things that a body is not meant to do in the world of *Warcraft*. Players' virtual bodies, as constructed by *WoW*'s game mechanics and shaped by its norms, are designed for combat. They are encouraged to surveil, to report, and to follow rules, but the extent to which they are surveilled, and the rules by which they are governed, are never fully known to them. They are encouraged to explore but not to discover, to recognize that there are areas of the world that do not belong to them, and they are discouraged from seeing them. They are encouraged to mistrust, discouraged from lingering, from being still or idle, and encouraged to become more efficient and more powerful, to earn more, work more, do more, be better. And throughout all of this, they are told that they are "meant for this world" ("Getting Started - WoW").

As this thesis demonstrates, however, there is a world of difference between what is discouraged or prohibited and what is impossible, and that, if one looks closely enough, the form(s) that prohibition takes also serve as clues as to how prohibited means of playing, being, or doing might be more effectively accomplished. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari wrote that, "We know nothing about a body until we know what it can do" (257). It is my hope that my work has shown that the limitations *WoW* places, or at least claims to place, on player characters' virtual bodies do not demarcate the outer bounds of what those bodies can do or reach—only the boundaries of governance and its ability to enforce those limitations. Games like *WoW* serve as frameworks for how we might develop strategies of resistance through unexpected, experimental play, testing the limits of what our bodies can do, and discovering the places where it is not just our bodies, but power and governance itself, that is malleable.

One of the forms these strategies of resistance might take is collective action. T.L. Taylor's article, "Beyond Management: Considering Participatory Design and Governance in Player Culture," describes a 2005 ingame protest in which large groups of player characters gathered in order to demonstrate their frustrations with changes to the game's warrior class. Blizzard responded to these protests with censure and threats of account suspension (Taylor), and one player reported that they received a three hour ban merely for being in the area while the protest was taking place (Abalieno).

In 2021, the *WoW* community was horrified to learn that Blizzard was being sued by the California Department of Fair Employment and Housing over widespread gender-based discrimination and "constant sexual harassment" against its employees, leading a number of players to quit the game in protest (Carpenter). Because *WoW* runs on a subscription model, some players who would otherwise choose to boycott or quit the game found themselves in the uncomfortable position of being "sublocked," or having already paid for future game time that could not be refunded. In response, a roleplaying guild called Fence Macabre, who specializes in telling "faction neutral" stories that require coordination between Horde and Alliance characters, organized an ingame protest for sublocked players with the goal of "using the remaining game time to take up server space" (Messner). In order to combat *WoW*'s phasing mechanics, which limit the amount of visible players in any given area in an attempt to reduce strain on its servers, some members of Fence Macabre volunteered to serve as "anchors," tethering together raid groups of forty player characters at a time so that they could continue to see each other's virtual bodies regardless of how the server attempted to re-organize them (Fence Macabre Caravan). The protest attracted hundreds of people across multiple realms, and, by its end, attendees had raised over $13,000 for Black Girls CODE ("Oribos Sit-In").

This remarkable act is worthy of serious consideration not merely for what it teaches us about the values and practices of *WoW*'s communities, nor for the insight it can give us and/or future scholars into a tumultuous turning point in Blizzard's, and perhaps even the industry's, history. I argue, as I have throughout this thesis, that a close reading of the game mechanics that facilitated this protest provides an additional, invaluable account of power and resistance in *WoW*. Fence Macabre's intimate familiarity with the game's subscription model, the financial and logistical burden caused by "taking up space" on a server, the limitations imposed on cross-faction coordination and communication, and the intimacy and solidarity afforded by shared, perpetual visibility in a gameworld, allowed them to organize an event whose form was, itself, an act of resistance. Their protest was not only successful by virtue of the number of attendees or the amount of money raised—it was a thorough and well-executed subversion of the game mechanics that limit player characters' capacity for expression in service of profit, stability, spatiotemporal control, and the prevention of unauthorized communication. I hope that it serves as a model not only for future *WoW* activists and players, but for scholars who wish to study how the formal design of gameworlds shape player possibilities of resistance through deviant play.

While I have primarily confined my critique to the early years of *WoW*, the mechanics and systems discussed in this thesis are always changing. For example, on January 31st, 2022, Blizzard announced that they plan to allow certain forms of cross-faction cooperative play, starting with instanced PVE content such as raids and dungeons (Hazzikostas). One caveat, however, is that players must either have a pre-existing, codified friendship through Blizzard's BattleTag or Real ID features, or both be members of a group formed through *WoW*'s recently implemented community system, thus still curtailing the potential for spontaneous cooperation

between strangers. This may very well change, however, as *WoW*'s game director, Ion

Hazzikostas, has indicated that these are the first of many incremental steps towards more total

cross-faction collaboration, although Blizzard does not plan to do away with factions altogether,

as it would "undermine Azeroth's shared reality" (Valentine). I find it interesting that the

maintenance of two discrete, racially-aligned political factions is considered essential not only to

WoW's gameplay, but to the continued plausibility of its world—Hazzikostas also reveals how

deeply the faction divide has been encoded in the game, "touching on [every] system from how

quest credits are shared to trading items to simple communication between players." Can the

"shared reality" of a world be altered without altering the systems that facilitate it, however

indirectly, in ways that are invisible and therefore unknown to the player? I am very interested to

see how these shifting, interlocking systems might be untangled and reimagined by players, and

scholars, going forward.

I have played *WoW* off and on for sixteen years, and first became interested in the topic of

deviant play as someone who was both fanatically obsessed with breaking the rules of the

gameworld and constantly afraid of being caught doing so. In an effort to determine what wiggle

room there was, if any, between a creative use of game mechanics and a punishable offense, I

sought out and consumed every possible bit of information that I could about how the things I

liked to do were detected, whether and how detection could be avoided, and what the punishment

for detection might be. What I found was a strange, imprecise, and constantly changing body of

knowledge that did not so much answer my questions as it did inform my understanding of how

these bodies of knowledge were shaped to begin with. Even now, as someone whose relationship

with the game is almost exclusively academic, I argue that the seemingly endless pleasures of

discovering secret locations, broken code, and possible surveillance traps is, in part, produced by

the accompanying realization that no matter how hard one looks, and no matter how much one learns, there will always be elements and systems that elude you. As a player, I was humbled by my perception that the world of the game, and the capacity of my virtual body within it, would always extend further than I could reach. As a scholar, I recognize that the world beyond that point, the one that beckons us forward into new, unexpected, and revolutionary methods of embodiment and playful practice, is formed and reformed by every act of deviance that presses against, complicates, and penetrates its boundaries. If we truly are "meant" for any world, perhaps it is that one.

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List of Figures

Figure 1. "Doodad cube, used as a placeholder for objects." Blizzard Entertainment, 2017. Author's screenshot.

Figure 2. "Mount Hyjal." Blizzard Entertainment, 2010. Author's screenshot.

Figure 3. "The author oriented parallel with a mountain." Blizzard Entertainment, 2022. Author's screenshot.

Figure 4. "The prison of GM Island" Blizzard Entertainment, 2022. Author's screenshot.

Figure 5. "Screenshot of a YouTube video demonstrating S's discovery." *5.1 HACK Macro WoW.* Dante Larka, 2012. *YouTube*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TCx2LMKc99o.

Figure 6. "A glitchy area of Silverpine Forest." Blizzard Entertainment, 2016. Author's screenshot.

Figure 7. "The author's spirit laying beside her corpse." Blizzard Entertainment, 2022. Author's screenshot.

Figure 8. "The author laying beside her corpse and her skeleton." Blizzard Entertainment, 2022. Author's screenshot.

Figure 9. timmy_cj. "Posted on Reddit with the comment, 'Scenes like this in STV are some of the most memorable and exhilarating views a player can come across in their time in the World of Warcraft.'" *Reddit*, 2020,

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Figure 11. Jonshock. "Back when gold sellers tried." *Reddit*, 29 Jan 2017,

https://www.reddit.com/r/wow/comments/5qriim/back_when_gold_sellers_tried/

Figure 12. Jonshock. "Back when gold sellers tried." *Reddit*, 29 Jan 2017,

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