



**FACULTY OF HUMANITIES, DEVELOPMENT AND SOCIAL SCIENCES**

**Masters Dissertation**

**Life in the game: Identity in the age of online  
computer games.**

**To be or not to be Digital...**

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## **Declaration**

I, Chanel French, declare this as my own work and that all acknowledgements have been properly made.

Signed:

Chanel French

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to express thanks to those who agreed to be interviewed for this study and, in some cases, who provided access into their inner thoughts and feelings. I give my thanks to Prof Ruth Teer-Tomaselli for her guidance, encouragement, and her helpful advice as my supervisor. I am eternally grateful for the support and love of my family.

## **Abstract**

Whether virtual reality will have positive or negative implications on the social structure is debatable, but one thing is certain- virtual reality will play an increasingly important role in public and private life as we move toward the future<sup>1</sup>.

Over the years there has been a notable increase in the amount of people playing online virtual reality games. *World of Warcraft (WoW)* alone has an estimated eight million account holders, making it the largest Massive Multi-player Online Role-playing Game (MMORPG) in the world. Although the Internet has been appropriated by social practice, it does have specific affects on the social practice itself. Role-playing and identity building form the basis of online interaction (Castells, 2001:118), which suggests that social patterns of communication are starting to change.

This study starts with the basic explanation of the Internet and Globalization which lends a hand to those wanting to escape into parallel online worlds, where they are able to reinvent themselves. This will lead into a discussion on how virtual reality online gaming can aid in the erosion of social communication as well as enhance it, through communities, the identity, and addiction. Theorists such as Rheingold (1994), Turkle (1998), Robins (1998) and Yee (2006) discuss how virtual reality gaming provides a window to a different world, where players can experiment with their identities as well as interact with people from around the world; all of which aid in the shift of normal social patterns and self construction. Finally a close look is taken on why these virtual reality online games hold such an allure to its players, turning them into gaming addicts, or is it an online communication addiction.

During this dissertation a preliminary case study was under taken with a collected group of the Durban youth, regarding *WoW* and their online interactions with people abroad.

It is evident that further research needs to be conducted in order to fully understand the extent of virtual reality online games and their effect on social behaviours and communication patterns. As a transformation in the relationship between the self and the social outside worlds, tends to blur when gamers enter into their fantasy society.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.bilawchuk.com](http://www.bilawchuk.com)

## **Keywords**

Virtual reality

Social communication patterns

*World of Warcraft*

Virtual communities

Identity

Addiction

Global communication

Internet

MUDs/ MMORPGs



## List of Acronyms

WOW	World of Warcraft
MMORPGs	Massive Multi online role-playing games
MUDs	Multi user dungeons
UNESCO	United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization
ICTs	Information Communication Technologies
PLATO	Programmed Logic for Automated Teaching Operations
MUSHes	Multi User Shared Habitat
MOOs	Multi User Object Orientated
OGL	Open Gaming Licence
CD-ROMS	Compact Disk- Read Only Memory
DVDs	Digital Versatile Disc
RPGs	Role Playing Games
DPS	Damage per second
TANK	- A player is able to take hits and get aggro of mobs.

# Chapter One

## **Introduction**

Over the years there has been a huge increase in the amount of people playing online virtual reality games. *World of Warcraft (WoW)* alone has an estimated eight million account holders, making it the largest massive multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) in the world. Although the Internet has been appropriated by social practice, it does have specific effects on social practice itself. Role-playing and identity-building form the basis of online interaction (Manuel Castells, 2001:118), which suggests that social patterns of communication are starting to change.

This dissertation will offer a basic explanation of the Internet and globalization which enables those wanting to escape into parallel online worlds, where they are able to reinvent themselves digitally. This will lead into a discussion of whether, and if so how, virtual reality online gaming influences identity transformation. Theorists such as Howard Rheingold (1994), Sherry Turkle (2001), Kevin Robins (1998) and Nick Yee (2008) discuss how virtual reality gaming provides a window to a different world, where players can experiment with their identities, as well as interact other gamers around the world; all of which aid in the shift of normal social and communication patterns.

The computer and the Internet are tools which offer both new models of mind and a new medium on which to project our ideas and fantasies (Holeton 1998). However, Holeton (1998) believes that it has become more than a tool and mirror as now we can step through the looking glass, and live in virtual worlds. Technology is leading us into a hybrid world, where we are learning to 'technologise' our ethnic and individual identities (David Tomas, 1989).

Globalisation is a key element in this hybrid world. There would be no globalisation without media and communication (Rantanen, 2005: 4), resulting in the ability for people to communicate across continents. Moreover, through the use of the Internet and online interactive games social arrangements have become global, reshaping modern societies and world order (Rantanen, 2005: 7). This hybrid environment is changing our patterns of

communication and social interaction, as well as the youth's notion of world citizenship and what it means to them; as they become a part of a global online community.

Manuel Castells' theory regarding the manifestation of identity in modern societies gives rise to the idea that in the 'Information Age' with the emergence of a 'network society', and its electronic flows, identities have become flexible. 'Timeless time' and 'placeless space' can be said to be challenging both individualism and cultural singularity (Castells, 1996). Many of the young people of today are engrossed in an online virtual world, where they are able to be who ever and whatever they wish - with no restrictions. This type of virtual reality allows them to become their alter-ego, giving them a feeling of control and power, which in turn can be very attractive and dependable; leading to a very addictive environment (Yee, 2008). Role-playing and identity-building form the basis of online interaction, as a form of Internet based sociability, mostly concentrated among teenagers (Castells 2001). *World of Warcraft* (WoW) is one such game, providing escapism to whomever plays it, allowing them to enter into a world of fantasy and fun; "thus the Internet has been accused of gradually enticing people to live their own online fantasies, escaping the real world, leading to a culture increasingly dominated by virtual reality" (Castells, 2001: 117). A related motivation for playing these online games, is social role playing, whereby the gamer will share the story of their character with the stories of others in a structured way (Yee, 2008: 28).

The research undertaken in this dissertation will add to the already extensive list of enquiries into the world of cyberspace and online gaming by theorists such as Manuel Castells (2001), Nick Yee (2008), Sherry Turkle (2001), and Marko Siitonen (2007). By examining the space where people can interact and explore their identities through different channels of experience, this dissertation aims to illustrate some of the reasons as to why it is so easy for people, especially teenagers, to become so involved in online virtual reality gaming.

**My hypothesis is that these behaviours, activities and practices are starting to become everyday occurrences in our ever changing global 'digital' world, as virtual**

**reality computer games start to seem more inviting than the everyday world of family, school and work<sup>2</sup>. Online international friendships start to replace real-world local friends as the gamers play compulsively, isolating themselves from social contact, and focusing almost entirely on in-game achievements rather than real life events<sup>3</sup>.** The research hopes to discover whether these online gamers are merely attracted to the game as a relaxing activity or does it go deeper, towards global online communication, due to the fact that these games hold no restrictions with regards to gender, race, or age, enabling them to be whomever they wish- an alter-ego who can communicate with anyone.

### **Research objectives**

This research paper proposes to address the issues surrounding identity, virtual reality and the virtual community, through which I will explore the attraction of online gaming. The following key-questions are essential for the consideration of this main topic:

- 1) What is a virtual reality online gaming community?
- 2) How do these communities constitute themselves?
- 3) What are the types of identities students are creating for themselves online?
- 4) What can be observed when analysing a virtual community?

In a networked society meaning is organised around a primary identity (that is an identity that frames the ‘others’), which is self-sustaining across time and space (Castells, 1997: 7). Identities are constructed - the only thing which differs is the material young people use to construct their individual or “collective identity” (Lasch, 1980: 7). Much research has been conducted in attempts to understand the meaning and influence of cyberspace on the identity and the communities within them. Castells (2001) suggests that the emergence of the Internet as a new communication medium has been associated with conflicting claims about the rise of the new patterns of social interaction. The Internet might be leading to a type of social isolation, to a breakdown of social communication and family life, as faceless individuals practice random sociability, while abandoning face-to-face interaction in real settings, social exchanges based solely on fake identities and role-playing”

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<sup>2</sup> [www.mediafamily.org](http://www.mediafamily.org)

<sup>3</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org>

(Castells, 2001: 116). To what extent do these observations apply in my study on a group of Durban youth?

### **Literature/ theories**

The main theories that will form the focus of this empirical study are theories on the virtual community, identity and communication shifts. The theories and research will be separated into different sections which will illustrate the concept of the virtual community, identity shifts and construction, as well as the transformation of communication.

Virtual communities, says Rheingold (1993), are social aggregations that emerge from the Internet when enough people carry on (electronically- mediated) public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace. “Members of these online communities typically share an interest in online gaming and a great deal of the interaction between them is technologically mediated” (Siitonen, 2007). *WoW* is one such community, where people/ players have discussions and help each other with different tasks and levels in order to reach their goals; becoming a global interactive virtual community. These online virtual gaming communities, which are commonly known as MMORPG’s (Massive multi-player online role playing game) have become more about socialising with other gamers who share common interests, for some the fun lies in being able to log in to a world where there’s always someone to chat with (Yee, 2008: 19). These virtual communities are unbiased, since in cyberspace there are no overt race, age or gender issues, and these types of conflicts have no ground. Castells’ (2001) theory surrounding the idea of the ‘Networked Society’ postulates, that a networked society is a society where the key social structures and activities are organised around electronically processed information networks, whereby it has formed the new techno-economic system which is then programmed and networked on a social and cultural level by the people who use it. These communities are about being a part of something, a type of club where they can be the person they want to be/feel. “People who live parallel lives on the screen are nevertheless bound by the desires, pain, and mortality of their physical selves, virtual communities offer dramatic new context in which to think about human identity in the age of the Internet” (Turkle, 1995: 267). This leads to the idea of the digital being, posthuman if you will.

In his book *“The Power of Identity”*, Castells (1997) states that our identities are established in and by relationships of similarity and difference. We no longer passively accept identities from traditional sources of meaning and identity, but reflectively develop our own self identity, an insight he shares with Anthony Giddens (1991). Often, identity exploration and role playing are seen as the same thing, but they are in fact different phenomena with some overlap. Role-players are focused on stories and becoming a part of the virtual world. Players who use the game as a tool for identity exploration are less concerned with stories and more interested in trying out different personality traits as a means of introspection (Yee, 2008: 29). Castells (2001) argues that the Internet has been an appropriate medium for social practice. Through specific programmes and networks, role-playing and identity-building have begun to form the basis of online interaction which has become increasingly popular with teenagers. This is due to the fact that teenagers are the ones who are in the process of discovering their identity, as well as experimenting with it in order to understand ‘who they really are’ (Castells, 2001). Ferguson (2004) speculates on whether identity has really been enriched and liberated or possibly constrained, emasculated and subjected to delusions through the coming of cyberspace. The fact that it is possible to adopt different identities has been celebrated by optimists. However, it is also criticised for allowing people to mask themselves as something else for their own sadistic purposes. Turkle (2001) suggests that post-modern identity is artificial, fluid and multifaceted- a lot like a network, highlighting the symmetry between digital networks and post-modern identities and the multiplicity of online images of the self.

Through cyberspace culture and identity has become fluid and changeable, virtual communities are changing our experience of the real world as individuals and as communities (Rheingold, 1994). Rheingold (2007) examines the idea of whether this type of medium could have a profound effect on the people who spend most of their waking lives in cyberspace- especially children. Although children are not the focus of my research this insight has a bearing on my project. Castells (2001) theory adds to this thought as he believes that the youth are more susceptible to online influences as they are in the process of discovering their identity. Online socializing between gamers has shifted in to meaningful and personal relationships, as the gamers feel as if they can relate to them more (Yee, 2008:14). Turkle (1995) as well as Robins (1998), argue that there might be a danger of cyber-activities becoming a **substitute** for activity in the material world. Thus players could

lose their real-world identities and morph into their cyber identity, as well as communicating only through the Web and not face-to-face. Computer mediated communication may offer liberating potentials or there could be severe pitfalls of mixing technology and human relationships, states Rheingold (1994).

There are many facets to the human identity and the manner in which we communicate with each other, and these online virtual reality games and networks seem to provide yet another new dimension to the way we go about it (Rheingold, 2007: 4). Michael Heim (1995) suggests that this type of shift could indeed transpire when the user starts to identify more and more with the virtual world; it then becomes an existential reality even if it is only virtual reality.

It is against this backdrop that I wish to explore what it means to be a gamer and how the gamer feels about being part of a virtual community. As well as, the concept of ‘the player’ being part of a global medium which allows them to explore different channels which are about more than the game.

### **Research methodology and methods:**

The media and communication channels throughout virtual reality games will be explored and the effects it is having on the “changing concept of time and space” (Rantanen, 2004:14), as well as how the youth are expressing themselves through this mediated global medium.

An empirical study will be conducted, one that analyses existing textual data on the various relevant theories on the concept of identity, virtual reality and the virtual community. Primary data will be collected by means of interviews, focus groups and personal learning logs. This dissertation will follow a thematic analysis methodology, qualitative research techniques will be used as it focuses on descriptions of people’s representations of what is occurring in their world. This research method will include descriptive material- such as extracts from interviews and focus groups.

### Interviews:

Twenty interviews<sup>4</sup> will be conducted which consisted of a snowball sample group of Durban teenagers, ages 15 to 18. Ten teenagers will be interviewed who play virtual reality online computer games and the other ten interviews comprised those who do not play online games but knows someone who does. The interviews will take place in the form of face-to-face discussions with the participants. They will be asked a series of open ended questions, which in turn will hopefully give me a broader idea about their ideas and feelings towards the online game and other issues. The point of these interviews will be to enable the teenagers to think and talk for longer than they would with a structured survey, as well as, show their feelings and views more fully without the influence of others (Wisker, 2001: 140). With the permission of the interviewees, the conversation will be recorded.

The only problem with face-to-face interviews is that the researcher has the ability to lead the discussion in the direction they wish. Whereby participants may be inclined to want to please the researcher by providing answers they think the researcher might want to hear. This is why I have decided to include a focus group as well, in the hope that if the participants where in a casual group they would be more relaxed and open.

### Focus Groups:

The focus group will be a small group of five teenagers from the interviewed group, no non-gamer will be present in the focus group. The focus group will enable close scrutiny and lengthy discussion. This will be done in the hope to generate debate and different opinions from all the participants. It will also be taken into consideration that due to the presence of other people the teenager's responses and feelings may change- reshaping their answers as others speak (Wisker, 2001: 141). The focus group questions will be the same as the interview questions- but will allow for a greater debate among the teenagers. This will enable me to examine if certain people's opinions change due to the fact that other people will be present. Notes will be taken throughout the focus group.

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<sup>4</sup> Interview example sheet under appendix one.



# **Chapter Two**

## **Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

This chapter explores the implications that cyberspace (the Internet, Virtual communities, and online games) is having on the way the youth construct and deconstruct their identities; as in the ways they consider who they are or want to be. I will highlight key arguments about certain aspects of cyberspace which aid in the attraction of online games, steering the user/gamer towards having a virtual identity.

“If you follow the news as reported by mainstream media, you’re probably tired of hearing that technology is taking over our lives, through an information overload, as the Internet is growing exponentially faster than any other communication medium in history” (Holeton, 1998: 4). After reading this statement it seems that an addiction to online life is inevitable. It is also a bottomless well of experience waiting to be explored and supplies people with a research database of phenomenal proportions (Ferguson, 2004: 157).

The online world of computer networks refers to the conceptual space where computer networking hardware, network software and users converge, explains David Gauntlett (2000). Holeton (1998) discusses the idea that the computer and the Internet are tool; and offers both new models of mind and a new medium on which to project our ideas and fantasies. However Holeton (1998) believes that it has become more than a tool and mirror as now we can step through the looking glass and learn to live in virtual worlds. David Tomas (1989) states that all this new technology is leading us into a hybrid world, we are learning to ‘technologise’ our ethnic and individual identities.

Globalization is a key element in this hybrid world, and there would be no globalization without media and communication (Rantanen, 2005: 4), resulting in the need for people to communicate across continents. Moreover through the use of the Internet and online interactive games social arrangements have become global, reshaping modern societies and world order (Rantanen, 2005: 7), consequently changing our patterns of communication and social interaction, and identity construction.

## Cyberspace

*Fin-de-siecle* hubristic mania...for perfect knowledge and total power...the power to remake humanity, earth, and the universe at large. If you're tired of the ills of the flesh, then *get rid of the flesh*: we can *do* that now. If the universe isn't good enough for you, then *remake it*, from the ground up. (Regis, 1990: 7 original emphasis)

Cyberspace: A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation... A graphic representation of data abstracted from banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity: lines of light ranged in the non-space of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding... (Gibson, 1984)

The word cyberspace literally means “navigable space” and it is derived from the Greek word *kyber* (to navigate), notes Dr Mladen Milicevic (2008). The word cyberspace was coined by William Gibson in his 1984 novel, ‘The Neuromancer’, where it meant a consensual hallucination<sup>5</sup>. The original source of the term, cyberspace, refers to a navigable, digital space of networked computers accessible from computer consoles; a visual, colourful electronic datascape, where companies and individuals interact with, and trade in information (Milicevic, 2008). From that time the term cyberspace seems to have become a household word. However cyberspace is a slippery term, which is somewhat hard to define: there have been many interpretations of what cyberspace means for different people. Dr Mladen Milicevic (2008) explains that over the years cyberspace has been re-appropriated, adapted and used in a variety of ways that all refer to the computer-based conceptual space within information and communication technologies.

David Bell (2001) believes it is the combining of three things: material, symbolic and experiential dimensions. It is machines, wires, electricity, programmes, screens, connections, and it is modes of information and communication: email, websites, chat rooms, Multi user dimension's (MUDs). It is also images and ideas: cyberspace exists on film, in fiction, and in our imagination as much as on our desktops or in the space between our screens. Moreover,

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<sup>5</sup> <http://findarticles.com>

we experience cyberspace in all its spectacular and mundane manifestations by mediating the material and the symbolic. (Bell, 2001: 2)

Bell (2001) further states that it involves its own hypertextuality, as we mingle and merge the hardware, software and wetware<sup>6</sup>, our emotions combine and cyberspace then becomes something to be understood as it is lived. As a result, Bell (2001) says that all maps and statistics are inadequate when it comes to capturing the thoughts and feelings people receive from this virtual world. Theorists such as Soja Edwards (1996), Christine Hine (2000) and David Bell (2001) believe that cyberspace is a cultural artefact, whereby it is a lived culture made from people, machines and everyday life. These theorists see cyberspace as an 'organism' that's creations ongoing as it gets re-shaped and moulded every day by different attributes. Cyberspace specifically denotes the real and imagined space in which individuals meet in electronically mediated and simulated space, where the element of community becomes critical, as a single person does not exist in cyberspace (Benedikt, 1992). Cyberspace can be seen as hardware, as it is connecting the global networks of the world, but Bell (2001) states that there is an even deeper symbolic side to it, as it is an imagined space between computers in which people might build new selves and new worlds. The two however, are inseparable.

Mark Nunes (1997) sees the Internet as a technological artefact as well as popular image, providing a site for exploring 'the world' and the position of such systems of totality in post-modernity. The Internet quickly created its own world, commonly referred to as cyberspace. Cyberspace abandons the 'real' for the hyper-real by presenting an increasingly real simulation of a comprehensive and comprehensible world (Nunes, 1997; 163). Many of these theorists argue that the Internet (and cyberspace) is challenging or replacing the one world with the promise of other possible worlds, as a result 'cyberspace', as a space presents an instance of both seduction and subductions of a postmodern 'world' (Nunes, 1997: 164). Benedikt (1992), states that cyberspace is a new universe; a parallel universe created and sustained by the worlds computers and communication lines. A world in which the global traffic and knowledge, secrets, measurements, indicators, entertainments, and altered human agency takes form: sight, sounds, and presences never seen on the surface of the earth blossoming in a vast electronic light.

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<sup>6</sup> Wetware is a reference to the human brain.

In a sense cyberspace has become the shifting space of interaction among knowledge and knower's in deterritorialized intelligent communities (Levy, 1997: 15). Additionally, Peter Levy (1997) argues that cyberspace has become a perfectly integrated medium within a community for problem analysis, group discussion, the development and awareness of complex processes, collective decision-making, and evaluation.

### **Virtual reality**

Virtual reality: Jaron Lanier coined the phrase in 1986, which has stuck to the new technology ever since. Researchers at [MIT] shunned the phrase in the early 1990's, instead of virtual reality, they suggested that this new technology should be known as 'virtual environments'. Others argued that artificial intelligence was better suited or even a synthetic environment or a virtual world. Yet virtual reality stuck in an almost poetic sense. (Heim, 1995: 65)

Micheal Heim (1995) believes that the philosophical echoes in the term 'virtual reality' serve perfectly well to suggest today's ambiguous merger of life with computers. Furthermore the oxymoron 'virtual reality' with its semantic twist of the phrase tells us as much about our tenuous grasp on reality as it does about the computerization of everything we know and experience (Heim, 1995: 65). Virtual reality is easier to define than cyberspace, says Ferguson (2004), as it involves the simulation of an environment to which we respond in such a way that we (almost) believe we are having a specific experience rather than a virtual one. "Virtual implies the computer storage model of life, software tricks, and the switch from industrial physics to information symbolics. Software now belongs to the substance of life, and life's body is becoming indistinguishable from its computer prosthesis" (Heim, 1995: 65).

Even though new software may be making the real world and the virtual world indistinguishable, William Gibson (1995) maintains that cyberspace is a consensual hallucination. This leads to the idea that people are able to enter and exit this virtual world of make-believe whenever they want; however is it really that easy? Kevin Robins (1995) believes this could occur as there is a common vision for the future which is different from the present, of a space or a reality that is more desirable than the mundane one that presently surrounds and contains us. In their account of virtual reality, Barrie Sherman and Phil

Judkins (1992) describe virtual reality as a technology of dreams and miracles, as virtual reality literary allows one to play God- creating one's own world. Robins (1995) adds to this by saying that humans are extremely limited, however when they enter into a virtual world the imagination knows no bounds and they are able to experience an internal feeling of infinite possibility, escaping into another world where in theory they can become God. Anything you can think of, dream of, and hallucinate about, can be created or communicated electronically says Timothy Leary (1995).

This new technology promises to deliver us from the constraints and defeats of physical reality and our physical bodies (Robins, 1995: 139). This notion, of the possibility of transcending the physical body in cyberspace (Bell, 2001), opens up arguments in social and cultural theory about the body, the move into cyberspace, and debates of disembodiment, through the concept of the *posthuman* and the *cyborg*. The gamer relishes' the concept of being a cyborg, by leaving the body behind the gamer can experience a type of life extension and enhancement through their reconstruct digital self, allowing them to do and be whatever they wish to be.

Bell (2001) talks about the experience of 'leaving the meat behind' whereby gamers become cyber-bodies and remake themselves in the non-material realm of bits and bytes. This potentially symbolizes a mind-body split, with the 'meat' discarded and the unconstrained consciousness flowing free in (and as) data. Translating this idea into practice, moreover, appears to require a working version of Gibson's 'consensual hallucination', not just because of the direct interfacing of the mind and machine, which has yet to become a reality, but also because the 'meat' is not that readily discarded- it is the 'meat' sitting at the screen, typing and reading (Bell, 2001). This leads Anne Balsamo (2000) to recast the idea of disembodiment in terms of repression: 'the phenomenological experience of cyberspace depends upon and in fact requires the wilful repression of the material body'. Even though these concepts of forgetting the body are something to consider in future sciences and technology, many commentators remind us that this is an impossible task; the meat can never be left behind:

Cyberspace developers foresee a time when they will be able to forget about the body. But it is important to remember that virtual community originates in, and must return to, the physical... even in the age of the techno-social subject, life is lived through bodies. (A.R. Stone, 1995)

Deborah Lupton's (1999) central focus is on experiences of/in cyberspace, rather than the impression of losing one's self to technology, by reminding us that the user is able successfully to pretend and reconstruct themselves in cyberspace, but he or she will always have to return to the embodied reality of being human. Margaret Morse (1994) believes that the travellers on the virtual highways keep coming back and become engrossed in these online worlds because they offer a different type of body separate from their real life body which suffers hunger, illness, old age, and ultimately death, whereas their chosen virtual body is immortal and capable of enduring endless deaths.

Posthumanism is a concept which both evokes terror and excites pleasure, then again Katherine Hayles (1999) believes that it partly depends on which version of Posthumanism you look at. The first take on Posthumanism is that it will mark the end of everything we know as human and pave the ways for the antihuman, where we are nothing more than a artificial being held together by a virtual imprint of what it means to be human. Whereas the second stance of Posthumanism is positive as researchers believe that it could have potentially productive outcomes. On this side of the debate theorists, such as Hayles (1999), state that this view of Posthumanism is not about separating the mind from the body, but bringing together of the disembodied subject and the virtual realm through technological augmentation- prosthetics. By contrast, in this Posthuman model, human functionality expands because the parameters of the cognitive system it inhabits expand (Hayles, 1999). Hans Moravec (1998) believes this to be the next step in evolution, as even though the mind keeps on expanding the body is left behind, therefore he proposes that intelligent machines will then step in and allow for a new posthuman age. This creates a paradox as to the different ways in which we think about Posthumanism.

Non-the-less, the idea of becoming Posthuman does not need to sound like we are heading into a "Terminator"<sup>7</sup> type future, it is a lot simpler. In essence we are all posthuman- the moment we turn on a Television or drive a car, or use a computer- these are all acts by which man and machine combine/interact in order to achieve an outcome. For the purpose of this dissertation, this concept of the posthuman holds more acclaim than the other more robotic views. The key to this posthuman practice is the ability fluidly to change perspectives and manifest oneself through different identities. In a sense the players of online virtual reality games have become posthuman, in the way in which they see and interact with the

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<sup>7</sup> This idea refers to human as being half man and half machine.

world around them. The posthuman is not a singular, defined individual, but rather one who can ‘become’ or embody different identities and understand the world from multiple heterogeneous perspectives (Seidel, 2008).

The posthuman is roughly synonymous with the cyborg suggests Donna Haraway (1999), as a cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction (Haraway, 1999). Tony Fitzpatrick (1999) states that a cyborg is the product of the daily interaction of perception/cognition with the screen, where the body melts into the electronic images that it receives, reflects and transmits. Moreover, David Hess (1995) argues that most people are low-tech cyborgs, since our existence is shaped and sustained by computers. Therefore it is possible to argue that everyone who interacts with machines is a cyborg.

Virtual reality is the combination of the physical world with the unlimitedness and the uncensored content normally associated with dreams or imagination (Lanier, 1990: 188). Heim (1995) believes that it was entertainment which showed us the first merger of computers and reality, through arcade games, CD-ROM fantasies and location-based theme parks which beguile our human sense of presence. Through which we find ourselves visiting our imagination more and more each time we engage in the use of these new technologies. It is suggested that now we are able to hold a mirror to our deeper selves and become whatever our imagination holds, which in turn is posthuman- whereby an embodied medium is accessed through which critical consciousness is manifested.

## **Communities**

“Words on a screen are quite capable of... creating a community from a collection of strangers.” (Rheingold, 1994)

When looking at the debates about online or virtual communities it is clear that there are two opposing standpoints. The first point argues that cyberspace holds endless possibilities and promises to those who use it, and the other point argues that there are limitations and even consequences to it. David Bell (2001) asks that question, “Have broader

social, political, economical and cultural transformations altered our sense of membership and belonging in communities?” In asking such a question, Bell (2001) looks at the changes brought about by processes such as detraditionalisation, globalisation and postmodernisation: and how they relate to real-life and online community.

Barry Wellman and Milena Gulia (1999) comment that much of the debate on virtual community has been split between those who argue that cyberspace re-enchants community (perceived as eroded in ‘real life’) on the one hand, and on the other those who argue that online community is damaging real-life community, by encouraging a withdrawal from real-life. James Slevin (2000) writes that the study of online community needs to be set in a broader context of a ‘critical approach to the concept of “community” in late modernity’. Therefore you should first understand what the concept of community means today, in order to understand that arguments about online community.

Bell (1997) explains community as a word which we all use, it suggests a sense of belonging and exclusion, the ‘us’ and ‘them’, as well as being a part of everyday discussions and associations. Many of us can say we belong to one community or another; “the term community is not only descriptive, but also normative and ideological, as it carries a lot of baggage with it” (Bell, 1997). The argument situated around the concept of a community has turned into a complex study of what makes a community and what its members get from belonging to it. Bell (2001) states that one or more of the transformations brought about by modernisation (and subsequently post-modernisation), are perceived to be a threat to the idea of ‘community’. Among the best known examples of this type of community thinking come from urban sociology- from the work and legacy of people like Ferdinand Tonnies and Louis Wirth from a century ago. Both argued that mass urbanisation was transforming community- and transforming it for the worse (see Bell, 2001; 94).

Tonnies’ (1955) *Community and Association*, originally published in 1887, outlined two types of ‘community’, named *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. The former is characterised as a ‘total community’: as fully integrated vertically and horizontally, as stable and long-lasting, as comprised of a dense web of social interaction supported by commonality and mutuality, manifest in shared rituals and symbols- as a local social contract embedded in place and made durable by face-to-face interactions. This is the ‘traditional’ community, where everyone knows everyone, everyone helps everyone, and the bonds between people are



tight and multiple (Bell, 2001; 94). Set against this, and ushered in by urbanisation, is the social arrangement Tonnies names *Gesellschaft* (association or society). This stance argues that people who live in cities are removed from *Gemeinschaft*-like situations, and thrown together in a dense heterogeneity of the city. In these environments, their long-established bonds and norms are lost, and the social fabric is radically transformed. People's relationships become shallow and instrumental; because the city is so huge, *Gesellschaft*-like communities can never grow; people are too busy, always on the move. This disembedding impoverishes communities, even as it broadens the social sphere: we might meet more people, but our relationships with them are partial and transitory (cited in Bell, 2001; 94). Bell (2001) explains that the problems of urbanisation identified in Tonnies' formulation have been deepened by transformations brought about by post-modernisation, which has radically reshaped the contemporary cityscape. Bell (2001) believes that even though the 'ideal' of community enshrined in *Gemeinschaft* has an enduring legacy in the popular imagination it is cloaked with nostalgia. Moreover, the romantic *Gemeinschaft*-like views of what a community should embody, has in fact been the victim of loss, decline and erosion through the imminent growth of urbanisation, modernisation and globalisation. It would seem that a *Gemeinschaft*-like community is no longer contemporaneous as modern social, political, economic and cultural transformations are today implicated in the 'death' of this kind of community (Bell, 2001; 95).

Benedict Anderson (1983) suggested that nations are imagined communities. What this means is that the work of making a nation as a community depends on the use of symbolic resources and devices: because we can never know or interact with all those others with whom we share national identification, we need 'things' to coalesce a shared sense of identity around- a flag, a national anthem, a set of customs and rituals (sometimes referred to as invented traditions). These communities only exist because their members believe in them, and maintain them through shared cultural practices (Edensor, 2001). Through this deduction, it is evident that all communities are imagined and held together by shared cultural practice (rather than just face-to-face interaction).

Many of the ideas which are said to be threatening the concept of community (or transforming communities), are conceived as symbolic or symptomatic of late-modern (or post-modern) society (Giddens, 1991). The first concept is detraditionalisation, or the shift towards a 'post-traditional' society, says Bell (2001). The erosion of tradition is itself

associated with another key transformation, disembedding- in turn linked with the third process, globalisation. These concepts are centrally implicated in the changes to ideas of community (Bell, 2001; 95).

Globalisation can be thought of as the sum of a series of processes that have forged a sense of increasing connectedness between people and places dispersed around the world, explains Bell (2001). Malcolm Waters (1995) describes it as a social process in which the constraints of geography on social and cultural arrangements recede and in which people become increasingly aware that they are receding. Roland Robertson (1992) was another early pioneer, shares this view with Waters (1995) expressing the idea that globalisation as a concept refers both to the compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole. It is clear that both Robertson (1992) and Waters (1995) believe that people are aware and conscious of globalisation. Martin Albrow (1990) concludes that people around the world have become incorporated into a single world society, a global society. Thus to what extent will people and cultures around the world relate to one another in their differences (Rantanen, 2005; 6).

Due to globalisation the world is reshaping and shrinking into a global village where everyone can communicate. Giddens (1991) argues that late-modernity is marked by heightened reflexivity; by a kind of self-scrutiny and self consciousness, by which we rework our sense of who we are in the face of the global flows we come into contact with. Bell (2001) adds to this argument, saying that part of this reflexivity involves making choices about our identities and our politics; since we are disembedded, and able to access global flows of ideas and information, we can choose who we want to be. This disembeddedness and reflexivity enables us to question and transform the taken-for-granted, leading to detraditionalisation; a chance to make over the social fabric anew and, in terms of our focus here, to imagine new forms of community (Bell, 2001; 96).

Critics, like Fredric Jameson (1991), argue that all this is having a negative effect on us, giving us a sort of 'depthless' existence. Additionally, these processes may have transformed the forms and functions of community, but they have not led to an erosion of the ideal of community- in fact some have argued that the 'uncertainisation' of late-modern societies actually strengthens our need to 'belong', suggests James Slevin (2000). Bell (2001) writes that 'community' is seen as a natural manifestation of an innate human desire

for association and identification, and this motif resurfaces in online communities too. As real-life communities crumble and shift around us, it clearly has implications for how we think about community. The notion of imagined community means that we can rethink how we can rethink how we conceptualise (and create) communities- and the Internet is an imaginative space to do this. Bell (2001) states that globalisation can be argued to open up the whole world as a potential source of community- and the Internet has been seen as key to this.

Disembedding allows us to choose our communities- and the Internet gives us a vast reservoir of choices. Reflexivity allows us to think about who we are and who we want to be- and the Internet is the ideal site to ‘play’ with our identities. Detraditionalisation frees us from old obligations, and lets us give community a post-modern make-over- and again the Internet offers possibilities to substantially re-imagine the very notion of community (Bell, 2001; 97).

It is clear, from what many theorists write, that while the our real-life communities grow and become more fractured and impersonal, the Internet is now offering a safe space to build new communities and connections with others, as people search new ways to belong. Cyberspace, and the virtual communities within it, offer people a sense of belonging and security in a way that real-life communities are not able to do so anymore, which can be seen to be “intensifying the transformations in late-modern (or post-modern) conceptions and uses of community” (Bell, 2001; 97).

Innovations in transport and communications have effectively shrunk the world- a process that David Harvey dubbed ‘time-space compression’ (Harvey, 1989). All kinds of things now move speedily around the world, criss-crossing it in complex, disjunctive ways: people, ideas, images, commodities, technologies, money (Appadurai, 1996). All of these things, and our experience of them, are thus disembedded, no longer rooted in place, but characterised as global flows. Giddens (1995) says that globalisation refers to the growing interconnectedness of different parts of the world, a process which gives rise to complex forms of interaction and interdependency. This interconnectedness is cyberspace: a place and home to thousands of groups and people, who meet and share information, discuss mutual interests, play games, and carry out business, explains Bell (2001). These groups vary in size and advancement, enabling the user to find their perfect niche in the virtual realm. However, critics argue that these groups are not equivalent to ‘real’ communities, as they lack the conventional face-to-face communication process, which is said to provide greater

connectivity. Other critics say that virtual communities may have the ability to hold real-life communities together (Bell, 2001).

Howard Rheingold (2007)<sup>8</sup> believes that a more accurate title for a virtual community might be: ‘People who use computers to communicate, form friendships that sometimes form the basis of communities, but you have to be careful to not mistake the tool for the task and think that just writing words on a screen is the same thing as real community.’ Virtual communities, says Rheingold (1994), are social aggregations that emerge from the net when enough people carry on (electronically-mediated) public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace.

The massive multi-player online role player game (MMORPG) *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*) is one such community, where gamers meet on a day-to-day basis, completing tasks and challenges as well just chatting to friends. “Members of these online communities typically share an interest in online gaming and a great deal of the interaction between them is technologically mediated” (Marko Siitonen, 2007). As stated above, the online computer game *World of Warcraft* provides a community which works together, where people/ players have discussions and help each other with different tasks and levels in order to reach their goals; making it a global interactive virtual community. These virtual communities, or MMORPG’S (MMORPG= massive multi-player online role player game) have become more about socialising with other gamers who share common interests, for some the fun lies in being able to log in to a world where there’s always someone to chat with (Yee, 2008: 19). These virtual communities are unbiased, since in cyberspace there are no race, age or gender issues, these types of conflicts have no ground. Castells (2001) theory surrounding the idea of “The Networked Society” states, that a network society is a society where the key social structures and activities are organised around electronically processed information networks, whereby it has formed the new techno-economic system which is then programmed and networked on a social and cultural level by the people who use it. “People who live parallel lives on the screen are nevertheless bound by the desires, pain, and mortality of their physical selves; virtual communities offer dramatic new context in which to think about human identity in the age of the Internet” (Turkle, 1995: 267).

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<sup>8</sup> [www.rheingold.com/vc/books](http://www.rheingold.com/vc/books)

Rheingold (1999) suggests that these interactive virtual communities are somewhat inevitable, due to the fact that people are going to do what people always do with a new communication technology: use it in ways never intended or foreseen by its inventors, to turn old social codes inside out and make new kinds of communities possible. Another reason is that virtual communities are a natural response to the ‘hunger for community that has followed the disintegration of traditional communities around the world’ (Rheingold, 1999; 418). Real-life can be empty, lonely, and isolated in the fast paced communities of today, many people often ‘hunger’ to belong to something a little more established (like the persistent<sup>9</sup> worlds of online games), a place they understand and can participate in, where common interests are shared- hence communities in cyberspace are born. Rheingold (1999) thinks of cyberspace as a ‘social Petri dish’ (as a kind of growth medium): “whenever CMC technology becomes available to people anywhere, they inevitably build virtual communities with it, just as microorganisms inevitably create colonies”. These online communities become ‘customized neighbourhoods’ to the people who visit them often (Rheingold, 1993). Again *WoW* becomes a place of neighbours and friends for the gamers. It is a place where the users share part of their identity with others. It is something they have in common, along with knowledge about their surroundings and shared social codes.

However Cornelius Castoriadis (1991) argues that living and partaking in this different vertex, may cause the erosion of the social fabric of the real world. Many people who use virtual reality online games have faith in this medium that this new technology will deliver us from the limitations and the frustrations of this imperfect world (Robins, 1995: 136), yet it is often said that new technology and virtual online gaming is merely a door to just another set of frustrations and limitations, creating a flawed cycle- producing no real community at all. Bell (2001) writes that Nancy Baym (1998) gets around this issue arguing that an online community is a community if participants imagine themselves as a community. Thus patterns of social meaning are manifested through a group’s on-going discourse, enabling participants to imagine themselves part of a community; talk-and-text form the foundation of online communication.

Like real-life communities, online communities have social codes and rule systems which help establish group norms. These social codes reflect the virtual world created. In this sense, *WoW* is both a social and an adventure MMORPG. Such games allow the user to

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<sup>9</sup> Persistent worlds in online games, is a world which exists independently of the user.

behave in ways they would not normally in real-life; however there is a type of social control. Social control in the sense that there is a hierarchy to each guild<sup>10</sup>, through which rules are put in place in order to prevent chaos- in this manner the guild can achieve a greater success. Bell (2001) states that this notion of social control is at odds with the supposed 'freedom' that cyberspace is said to offer. However, in the MMORPG *WoW* the rules and social control are consensual discourses, and the players believe in it, in order to sustain their community. The gamers talk to each other online via text based communication as well as voice over's/online chat (players have to have a microphone), dealing with in game issues as well as their own real life issues.

Ziauddin Sardar (1996), Arthur Kroker and Marilouise Kronker (1987) are other theorists who argue against online communities; they believe that 'the sense of virtual reality is an alternative reality in a world gone wrong'. They are of the opinion that virtual communities should not be seen as alternative societies, but an alternative to society. The space of online community is rather, a 'domain of order, refuge and withdrawal' (Robins, 1999). Sardar (1996) also writes that 'virtual culture is a culture of retreat from the world. Online communities are elective and selective, as is withdrawal, cyberspace community is self-selecting, says Sardar (1996). Bell (2001) critiques work written by Steve Jones (1995), in which he argues that we always experience something lacking in the online simulacra of face-to-face interaction- and it might be that this gap or lack itself feeds the yearning for community: we are looking for that lost object, and will it into being on our screens. Moreover, these small, tight-knit communities are fine if you fit in, but are incredibly exclusive and uncomfortable places if you do not; as you are only able to be a part of certain online communities if you are similar to those who dwell there (as in have similar interests and knowledge of the 'game' or 'site'). Therefore it seems that there is no real freedom to these communities, just a sense of belonging to a place which the members understand.

### *Whose online community?*

This is all well and good, that people have a place to escape to a virtual reality/community where they can feel like they belong, but there is the possibility that the

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<sup>10</sup> A guild is a group formed of skilled or high level players, the gamers come together voluntarily. Forming a community- whereby they all work together in achieving higher levels.

Internet and cyberspace may be creating new forms of suppression (Slevin, 2000). There are many obstacles to belonging to online communities- other than understanding the content. This is where the issues of information inequality (the digital divide) arise.

The information and ICT systems that support knowledge are very important. This is why digitization is viewed closely related to knowledge. If scientists agree that there is a digital divide, recently different reports showed the existence of knowledge divide (Information Society Commission, 2002; UNESCO, 2005).

In the world of today it is evident, to some, that we are in the midst of a technological revolution, which happens to be centred around information and communication technologies (Castells, 2001: 152). The key player at the head of this revolution is the Internet, which has become a powerful force along with other new technologies, reshaping the old into 'flexible forms of organization and management' where by now we are witnessing the dawn of a new economy, 'characterized by rising productivity growth and global competition' (Castells, 2001: 152). Castells (2001) states that even though this new economy is creating productivity and prosperity, it is happening in a rather uneven pattern. This uneven pattern is now referred to as the digital divide. "The term digital divide entered the American vocabulary in the mid- 1990's to refer to unequal access to information technology" (Light, 2005: 225). In some instances governments are trying to close the gap of the digital divide, by providing information technology to developing countries in order to start a leapfrog (UNESCO, 2005) ripple effect, whereby the community could start at a point which provides grounds for a stronger infrastructure for growth and productivity. Jennifer Light (2005) argues that technology may not solve any problems; if anything they might increase the digital divide in these developing countries. This brings as to another dilemma; that it might not be a digital divide but an information divide or even worse a knowledge divide. James Deane (2005) suggests that technology may not be the best route for development, as it would seem that governments and investors focus more on "what technology can do rather than with what people actually need" (Deane, 2005).

The term digital divide refers to the people in society who are able to benefit from technology and those who don't. This can also be viewed in the relationships of the rich and poor, and the educated and uneducated. Castells (2001) regards the global economy as being highly segmented, stating that not everyone is included, but everyone is affected. In the developed world new technologies are more often than not widely rejoiced and praised as they are seen to improve the lifestyles and even the survival of the human race (Ferguson,

2004: 151). Ferguson (2004) stipulates, however, that if you live in such areas of the world there is a certain economic status that envelops these 'new technologies'. The poor also feel the impact of the new technologies and there is no escape. Deane (2005) also focuses on the notion that in developing parts of the world these new information and communication technologies have not necessarily led to more effective development, as does Light (2005). The key reason for this is that the focus seems to be more on what the technology can do rather than with what people actually need (Deane, 2005). Light (2005) adds to this concept by stipulating that:

Making computers and computer instructions widely available remains a useful effort. Yet simultaneously, going beyond an understanding of education and social inequality that hinges on a 'technological fix', it quickly becomes apparent that public leaders seeking to end current-and future -divide's must embrace a different understanding of technology. Technology is not a neutral tool, with universal effects, but rather a medium with consequences that are significantly shaped by the historical, social and cultural context of its use (Light, 2005: 256).

Deane (2005) adds to this notion by arguing that the problem is not merely a lack of technology, as on a broader analysis, it can actually be seen as an information problem. Deane (2005) argues that there is a series of huge growing information divides, 'between rich and poor people within poor countries, urban and rural, literate and illiterate, young and old and so on'. Even though digital technologies are extremely important for bridging the divide, they are not the only one, and Deane (2005) elaborates on the paradigm, that when trying to enhance development programmes, the fascination for technology should not get in the way when trying to overcome this so called digital divide. In recent years it has come to light that it is more of an information divide, not simply a technology one (Deane, 2005). In this instance least developed countries with neither an information infrastructure nor digital technologies to aid in their development, can be seen to be divided by a lack of knowledge.

In addition if developing countries were excluded from this 'new world', of Internet access, there could be serious effects on the communication and learning of the people, as it is clear that places which do not have access to the Internet are going to fall behind in the research and education stakes (Holderness, 1993).

Telecommunications has made it possible to develop global markets for goods, services, money and information. The rise of the global information economy in turn is transforming human life, nationally, regionally, locally, and within the family. Today everything is changing because of telecommunications- the nature of work, relationships with people, media, messages, and patterns of political life. The talk is



of information superhighways and global information infrastructures, with the potential to improve the 'human capital' - the health, education and skills of everyone. (Dr Pekka Tarjanne, Secretary- General, International Telecommunications Union)<sup>11</sup>

However telecommunication infrastructures are expensive and thus not the first item on the to-do list; as a result the Internet seems to remain a phenomenon characteristic of rich countries, "clearly the global village and the electronic village do not coincide", states Mayor and Binde (2001).

Physical access is very important however it is not the only dilemma when it comes to the divide. Firstly people need the knowledge of how to use the technology effectively, before they can benefit from the access they have. If a person has never used a computer before, there are many skills they still need to develop, including how to type, how to use the mouse, how to open and run programmes, what a file is and how to access one, etc (Cooper, 2004). Nevertheless, even if all of the above obstacles were resolved there would still be the issue of availability of content and what language it would be in.

It is apparent that we do not live in a global information society, as only a select few are able to constructively use the information provided. There again, online communities then transform into 'private societies' where only certain people can participate. As only those with the appropriate information and knowledge infrastructures about a specific online community can have full access to the benefits the virtual world has to offer. This then leaves most, if not all, virtual online communities only available to not only the 'technology-rich' but also to the 'information-rich'.

It is evident that ICTs have an enormously important role to play in building the social capability to generate information and to apply knowledge for sustainable development (Mansell & Wehn, 1998: 10). Nevertheless the generation and application of knowledge depends upon much more than the access to global information infrastructures through ICTs. The digital divide goes far beyond that of technology; it includes access issues, not merely the lack of access to technology but also the lack of access to a basic telecommunication infrastructure- in some cases beyond that still, to the absence of electricity, in some countries. Further still, are the implications of irrelevant content and language barriers, which hinder the user in more of a cultural aspect. It is recorded that "ICT applications are being developed that will help to improve information access and interchange across language barriers; so

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<sup>11</sup> In Holderness, M. 1993.

called language engineering innovation” (Mansell & Wehn, 1998: 91). This is a huge step in the right direction, yet when all the access, language, and content dilemmas are dealt with it may all become irrelevant if the people in question lack the capabilities to use the information technology provided. It is self-evident that ‘those with access to innovations, and those who have the capacity to absorb them and use them will have opportunities to reap social and economic advantages; however those without access and the appropriate capabilities risk being marginalized in the knowledge societies of the future’ (Mansell & Wehn, 1998: 10). Thus as appealing as these virtual communities may be, offering people users and gamers an escape and personalised community space, many people worldwide do not have the physical or the educational abilities to join one of these online communities. You could even say they are almost communities for the elite, as the few who participate in these online communities and games can afford the monthly payments and are able to understand the ‘virtual language’. Evidently before developing countries are able to assemble their own ‘knowledge societies’ which would enable them to partake in a global economy- which offers niche online communities and virtual games; the necessities of life first have to be laid in place- education and an understanding of the infrastructures to come. Yes, before electricity, telecommunication, and ICTs, education has to be the first commodity; as without the knowledge and capabilities to master such information technologies, it would be irrelevant if developing countries had digital technology. Evidently it is not merely a digital divide, but something much deeper- a knowledge divide.

Even though the above research does go a bit off topic with regards to the questions posed in this dissertation, it is a necessary detour in order to better understand how those who are apart of online communities and virtual worlds, may belong to an elite class of “technology and information rich” members. Online virtual worlds and communities may provide a wonderful escape into a parallel universe, where ones’ identity can be explored and changed, where time and space have no meaning- even providing a means for development and training. However, evidently it is only accessible to those with the means to get to it. I am not talking about some futuristic high-tech space craft or time machine; I am talking about something we take for granted every day- a computer and the Internet. However these aspects are only the foundation, information about different communities is the next step. Information is now a commodity (Beniger, 2005), and if someone wants to belong to a specific community or play a certain game online, they first need to know everything relating to it;

and to those who cannot access the information, the possibilities of that community remains undefined data.

These online worlds should not be ignored as they have great potential for development and transformation (which will be spoken about in later chapters). With the development and implementation of ICTs it would bring with it the ability to facilitate identity construction and exploration as well as global communication through a variety of channels- opening up world of possibilities for those who take part. It would seem that those who engage in technology are becoming digital beings, where their online identity can be seen by more people, every day then their real life identity. This can be due to the fact that most of our everyday activities take part digitally and through some form of online communication, making us almost post-human. Hence those who are not a part of this digital realm will undeniably and irrevocably be left in the dust as these new communities move into the future.

### *The Game- World of Warcraft*

Holeton (1998) states that in cyberspace virtual worlds were described and thus grew out of science fiction, releasing the imagination, now they are merely part of our everyday routines. There is a huge opportunity to build new kinds of communities, global as well as virtual communities, in which we participate with people from all over the world, often developing intimate relationships, however never physically meeting (Holeton, 1998: 6). Could it be said that this type of virtual environment is connecting people around the world, adding to the notion of the 'global village'?

Many of these online virtual games are interactive, and thousands of players can spend up to eighty hours a week participating in these inter-world exploration and wars with fellow players from different countries. Through typed descriptions and commands, they create characters who have encounters, attend rituals and raid along with wars and group gatherings. These games can sometimes be more real, to players, then real life as in the game the self is constructed and the rules of social interaction are build, not received (Holeton, 1998: 6). Howard Rheingold (1993) argues that for the birth of a new form of community, which brings people together online around shared values and interests, thereby creating ties

of support and friendship that could also extend into face-to-face interaction. Holeyton (1998) states that in real time communities of cyberspace, we are merely dwellers on the threshold between the real and the virtual, unsure of our footing, inventing ourselves as we go along. However does this not imply that the nature of communication is changing? Globalization is connecting people, through a new experience of communication, although globalization may result in experiences that are not as real or as good as normal interactive experiences (Rantanen, 2005: 11).

World of Warcraft (*WoW*) is a play-to-play massive multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG), which was meticulously crafted by Blizzard Entertainment, making it a huge global entity. Blizzard developed a Warcraft series in which *WoW* is the fourth game in the series, set in the fantasy Warcraft Universe. It was initially introduced by *Warcraft: Orcs and Humans* in 1994. *WoW* takes place within the world of Azeroth, four years after the events at the conclusion of Blizzard's previous release, *Warcraft III: The Frozen Throne*. *World of Warcraft's* release celebrated the tenth anniversary of the Warcraft franchise. The first official expansion pack of the game, *The Burning Crusade*, was released on January 16, 2007<sup>12</sup>. Over the years *WoW* has become a huge financial success, and is now the world's leading subscription-based MMORPG, with an estimated 8.5 million players worldwide. There are more than 2 million players in North America, 1.5 million players in Europe, and 3.5 million players in China. *WoW* has become a global village all of its own; these players from around the world are incorporated into a single world society, a global society, a *WoW* society.

Since *WoW* is a MMORPG players control a character avatar within a persistent game-world, exploring, fighting monsters, and performing quests on behalf of computer-controlled characters. This type of game rewards the player through money, items, and experience, which in turn allows players to improve in skill and power. Moreover players are able to take part in battles against other players of an enemy faction, including both duels and fights<sup>13</sup>. The quests played during the early and middle stages of the game can often be accomplished without the help of the other players, particularly if the player is a higher level than what the quest requires. On other sections of the game such as 'instances', which are in theory dungeons where larger quests and fights take place, other players are needed for

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<sup>12</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/worldofwarcraft>

<sup>13</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/worldofwarcraft> (game play)

success. In this case guilds are formed, which are groups of many players ranging from five to a hundred depending on the how many is needed (the players come from all over the globe, making the guilds multi-cultural) different guilds have different requirement of each player, as well as they all have to be of a certain level, furthermore if they are not able to commit to the guild and fight when needed they will be replace by another player. This in turn makes the game and its instances quite serious, as it becomes a game about strategy and dedication. In these instances the guilds do what is called ‘raiding’, where they fight and kill higher characters or bosses in order to attain better items and goods. The highest level, most complex dungeons and encounters are designed to take raiding guilds a lot more time (sometimes even months) and many attempts before they are able to succeed<sup>14</sup>.

### What are MMORPGs and MUDs

The beginning of the MMORPG genre can be traced back to non-graphical online multi-user Dungeon (MUD) games such as MUD developed by Richard Bartle and Roy Trubshaw in 1978, and similar games developed around the same time for the PLATO systems. MUDs (and later descendants such as MUSHes and MOOs) were wildly different in implementation from one another, but shared many basic interface elements such as using a telnet client to connect to a shared computer system (usually hosted by a university, sometimes without the administrators knowing) and play online games usually, but not always involving some sort of dungeons crawl similar to Dungeons and Dragons, cooperatively or competitively with or against dozens of other players simultaneously.<sup>15</sup>

*Dungeons & Dragons* (abbreviated as *D&D*, *DnD*, or *AD&D* for the advanced edition) is a fantasy tabletop role-playing game (RPG) published by Wizards of the Coast. The original *Dungeons & Dragons*, designed by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson, was first published in January 1974 by Gygax's company, Tactical Studies Rules (TSR). Originally derived from tabletop war-games, this publication is generally regarded as the beginning of modern role-playing games and, by extension, the role-playing game industry. The game also achieved minor notoriety, particularly in the 1980s, when some of its imagery was used by

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<sup>14</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/worldofwarcraft>

<sup>15</sup> [www.experiencefestival.com/a.dungeons](http://www.experiencefestival.com/a.dungeons)

many fundamentalists for the purpose of scaring parents of players; they alleged that the game promoted, among other things, devil worship, witchcraft, suicide, and murder.

Not long after its inception, *Dungeons and Dragons* saw its market share challenged by the proliferation of many other gaming companies, including Judges Guild, Tunnels and Trolls, and the multiple Arduin works of author David A. Hargrave. AD&D, however, dominated the RPG genre of that period, enjoying an impenetrable market position.

Players of *D&D* invent fictitious characters that embark upon imaginary adventures in which they battle many kinds of fictional monsters, gather treasure, and earn experience points as the game progresses. The game departed from traditional war-gaming by assigning each player a specific character to play, as opposed to legions and armies. It also developed the concept of a Dungeon Master (DM) or Game-master (GM), the storyteller and referee responsible for creating the fictional setting of the game, moderating the actions of the players' characters, and playing the supporting cast of non-player characters.

In 1977, a second edition of the game, *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* (abbreviated as *AD&D*) was introduced. In 2000, the simplified version of the game was discontinued and the 3rd Edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* was released as a major revision of the *AD&D* game. The current version of the game, released in July 2003 is *Dungeons & Dragons v.3.5* (also known as the Revised 3rd Edition or *D&D3.5*). As of 2004, *Dungeons & Dragons* remains the best-known and best-selling role-playing game. Products branded *Dungeons & Dragons* made up over fifty percent of the RPG products sold in 2000. Outside of the gaming community, *Dungeons & Dragons* has become a metonym used to refer to role-playing games in general.

*Dungeons & Dragons* was the first modern role-playing game, establishing many of the conventions which have dominated the genre. Particularly notable are the use of dice as a resolution mechanic, character record sheets, progressive character development, and game-master-centred group dynamics.

The elements which made up *Dungeons & Dragons* can be seen in many hobbies of the time, though they had existed previously. Character-based role-playing, for example, can be seen in historical re-enactment and improvisational theatre. Game world simulations had been well-

developed in war-gaming. Fantasy milieus specifically designed for gaming could be seen in Glorantha's board games and M.A.R. Barker's Tekumel, among others. Ultimately, however, *Dungeons & Dragons* represented a unique blending of these elements, creating its own niche and leading to the development of a multitude of role-playing games. Science fiction, horror, superheroes, cartoons, westerns, spies and espionage, and many other fictional settings were adapted to role-playing games.

As the popularity of *D&D* grew throughout the late-'70s and '80s, references to the game often began to appear in popular culture. There were board games, comics, novels and video games all representing *D&D*, transforming the game into a cultural phenomenon. From there the rest of the industry grew and laid way for MMORPGs.

*World of Warcraft* is commonly known as a MMORPG (MMORPG= massive multi-player online role player game) or a MUD, multi-user domain/dungeons<sup>16</sup>, with in which many players can all play at the same time as well as interact with each other.

Holeton (1998) explains that MUD's put you into a virtual space in which you are able to navigate, converse and build anything you desire. *WoW* is one such online game; a new kind of virtual parlor game and a new form of community (Holeton, 1998: 7).

MUD's are living laboratories for studying the first-level impacts of virtual communities- the impacts on our psyches, on our thoughts and feelings as individuals. And our attempts to analyze the second level impacts of phenomena like MUD's on our real-life relationships and communities lead to fundamental questions about social values in an age when so many of our human relationships are mediated by communications technology (Rheingold, 1994: 2).

Furthermore MUD's provide worlds for anonymous social interaction in which one can play a role as close to or as far away from one's 'real self' as one chooses. Holeton (1998) says that some people feel that a part of them only exists inside the virtual reality online game. Robert Ferguson (2004) questions MUD's ability to allow players to practice and adopt new identities, in these online role playing environments.

Holeton (1998) argues that "MUD's make possible the creation of an identity so fluid and multiple that it strains the limits of notion. Identity after all refers to the sameness between two qualities, in this case between a person and his or her persona; but in MUD's

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<sup>16</sup> Was called 'dungeons' because of its genealogy from "Dungeons and Dragons".

one can be many". For many, explains Rheingold (1994), a MUD is a place where they feel more comfortable in some ways than they do in the real world. The communities that have arisen in MUD worlds are distinctly different from other places where communication can be found, because in a MUD you are communicating with other people elsewhere on the Internet, via your characters, but you are also playing a role and learning your way around a particular world where knowledge of how that world works can translate into power over the other inhabitants (Rheingold, 1994:5).

Thus MUDs are dramatic examples of how computer mediated communication can serve as a place for the construction and reconstruction of identity. This is clear in *WoW*, as players are able to have as many characters as they wish and can be of any gender. Dale Spender (1998) explains that, the way you speak to a man or a woman is different, from where to look to how to stand- all of which aids in the communication process. Everything alters, from terms of tone, posture, demeanour and eye contact. As humans we mould and modify our behaviour on the basis of gender, and our behaviour changes on what is the right response to different genders; it is a sort of code imprinted on our psyches (Spender, 1998: 70). However even though some gamers play different gender characters for laughs or out of interest there are other people who are searching for their identity and are able to experience different genders online in a safe environment. The fact that electronic networks are theoretically gender, race and class blind has certainly been put forward as a positive feature by those who want to encourage new net users (Spender, 1998: 72).

In these MUDs a player's identity is the first thing that is created, then the player gives a name to the alternate identity, and by creating an identity the gamer helps create a world (Rheingold, 1994: 3). Furthermore the role of each user's characters are part of the architecture of belief that upholds the illusion for everybody in the MUD; these roles give people new stages on which to exercise new identities, and their new identities affirm the reality of the scenario, stipulates Rheingold (1994).

Due to the increasing development of greater high-speed Internet connections and powerful computer processors, with a steady decrease in cost, the paradigm of computer gaming has changed dramatically. MMORPGs have become the vanguard of a new generation of computer games that take advantage of the accessibility of the Internet and the graphical processing capability of standard computer systems (Yee, 2006; 4). A MMORPG



makes use of the high speed Internet connections and powerful computers which allow for online gaming, unlike its pre-assessors, like *Dungeons & Dragons*, which were bought on CD-ROMs and DVDs and played directly on the computer. The paradigm shift referred to above is about this shift, the shift to online interactive gaming. It is this shift that enables the development of gaming communities. Earlier gaming communities were premised on swapping ideas, short cuts, cheats etc., via chat rooms and email, yet not in real time. The developments in technology in the areas of graphics and Internet connection speed as paved the way for a new type of gaming, one that operates in real time. Economic developments, such as registration fees and monthly subscription payments, have also had a hand in the size and scope of MMORPGs. Without these contributing factors the development of the online community (i.e. consequently the potential for identity shifts and construction) would not be possible.

Yee (2006) explains that MMORPG users are part of a persistent world of up to 2000 users. A persistent world is a world that exists independent of the users. In stand-alone games and local network games, the world only exists when the game is started by the user, and thus is dependent on the user 'activating' it. In a MMORPG, the world exists before the user logs on, and continues to exist when the user logs off- *WoW* is one such game which continues in spite of the user. More importantly, events and interactions occur in the world (driven by other users) even when the user is not logged on to the persistent world (Yee, 2006; 5). The worlds in MMORPGs are vast and varied, in terms of terrain, flora, fauna, and local inhabitants, in order to accommodate the sheer number of users. In contrast, the worlds of most stand-alone and local network games are simplistic and can only accommodate fewer than 16 concurrent players in a space that can be traversed in a few minutes, explains Yee (2006).

Yee (2006) argues that on a simplistic level, MMORPGs could be thought of as a scenic chat room with a variety of interactive tasks. Where users experience cities, jungles, and even the falling rain or snow in rich real time 3D graphics, and communicate with each other using typed chat and template gestures and expressions. "They interact with the world through a combination of mouse-driven interfaces and typed commands, and partake of a large number of varied activities that increase in complexity, reward and time involvement which typically operate on a random-ratio reinforcement schedule" (Yee, 2006; 6). Most of the activities which the users take part in will revolve around their characters advancement,

which in turn translates into a functional advantage in terms of the mechanics of the world. This could be in terms of the users/avatars social status, combat capability, avatar appearance, geographic knowledge, equipment quality or even cooking skills.

The first few MMORPGs focused heavily on combat-orientated advancement, recent MMORPGs have offered more diverse forms of advancement (Yee, 2006). For example in *WoW*, the user can gain other skills, such as tailoring, mining, blacksmithing, cooking, healing, fishing and so on. Players improve their skills through usage- and class skills automatically increase when a character levels (which means to advance to a higher level/social status).<sup>17</sup> In MMORPGs most forms of a user's advancement comes from increasing cooperation or dependency on other users, which is often mutually beneficial. In *WoW* different class characters will have different skills, and secondary skills, for example a 'Paladin' is a healer, who can make spells and potions. Paladins are ideal for groups due to the Paladins' healing, blessing and other abilities, which aim at protecting their friends from harm and to defend their powers.<sup>18</sup> Most combat professions need the complementary support of each other as they tackle more and more difficult creatures or enemies that in turn hold larger rewards (Yee, 2006; 6). But ultimately, each user decides which form of advancement they will pursue, and richness and complexity of the environment eliminates the need for super-ordinate goals or storylines. Yee (2006) explains that every user is motivated by a combination of the possible rewards- the result is that adventures, stories, and meaningful relationships between users emerge during interaction. Functional constructs within the environment facilitate these social networks, such as combat groups (temporary collaboration between a few users), guilds (persistent user-created membership organizations), and ideological alliances (agreements between guilds or racial groups).

Multi-User Domains (MUDs) are the textual predecessor of MMORPGs. MMORPGs are different from role-playing games (RPGs) in that RPGs do not occur in persistent game worlds. Events only occur in the RPG (Role-playing game) world when the player has convened in a physical location. Due to the physical constraint, of not being able to convincingly change one's representation in an RPG the way it is possible in a MMORPG- especially in terms of gender and race (Yee, 2006). Making a MMORPG, like *WoW* a more conducive medium in which to explore the identity. Furthermore, the physical constraints of

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<sup>17</sup> [www.worldofwarcraft.com](http://www.worldofwarcraft.com)

<sup>18</sup> [www.worldofwarcraft.com](http://www.worldofwarcraft.com)

RPGs makes it more likely that RPG players know each other when compared with MMORPG players. MMORPGs are in fact much more similar to MUDs than other genres of video games in that both have persistent game worlds where players can interact using avatars (Yee, 2006; 7).

The research which has been done on MMORPGs and MUDs has been more qualitative than quantitative. Researchers such as Turkle (1995) and Amy Bruckham (1993 & 1995) have contributed a great deal to the understanding of MUD users- their approaches being of a qualitative nature. Turkle (1995) illustrated how digital self-representation in MUDs allowed users to understand the fluid, dynamic and post-modern nature of their identities. Almost no quantitative studies of MUDs exist. Existing research on MMORPGs has mostly relied on analysis of publicly available data. One of the few is a study by Axelsson & Regan (2002) that explored the impact of group affiliation on social behaviour in the MMORPG *Asheron's call*. The study found that group affiliation makes people more social both online and offline (Cited in Yee, 2006).

Yee (2004) undertook a study using data collected from online surveys from 30,000 MMORPG players. Preliminary qualitative data from open-ended questions were used to form theoretical questions about the motivations and relationship formation of MMORPG users among other issues. He argues that the architecture of these environments facilitate relationship formation, and are windows into and catalysts in existing relationships in the material world. The goal of Yee's 2006 work, which was a rigorous quantitative analysis on who uses MMORPGs, what motivates their use, and the salience and impact of the experiences that emerge in these environments; this work provides a channel in which to study social identity, social interaction, and relationship formation in these environments.

The research done in this dissertation is similar to that done by Yee in 2004. My research looks for the connections between what motivates the gamers to play and quality of the relationship which the players build in these online worlds. This research takes a closer look at the emotions of the players and of those around them, whereas Yee (2004) takes a more fact numbers based look.

### The user, motivations, and experiences-

Much of the existing video game research seems to only have been done on adolescent users which in turn leads to the misconception that video game players are solely a youth based subculture, with the games represented as being no more than a pastime for teenagers, with no important consequence apart from their ability to increase real-life aggression (Yee, 2004). Studies done by psychologists such as Douglas Gentile, PhD, and Craig Anderson, PhD, indicated that it is likely that violent video games may have stronger effects on children's aggression because (1) the games are highly engaging and interactive, (2) the games reward violent behaviour, and because (3) children repeat these behaviours over and over as they play (Gentile & Anderson, 2003).

Many studies have only focused on the assumption that adolescents are the primary consumers of video games, or that video games somehow impact adults in an entirely different way that isn't worth mentioning or studying (Yee, 2004). This stereotype is also described by other researchers, for example, Griffiths, Davies and Chappell (2003) note that "the image of a typical gamer is seen as socially negative and remains firmly within the youth subculture" (Cited in Yee, 2006). Yee (2006) states that this is not the case, as the average age of the computer video game player is 30, in other more recent studies this stereotype was challenged, whereby the demographics and usage patterns of MMORPG users were explored by analyzing online polls data which showed that a game like *WoW* had a clientele which consisted of a higher adult profile (Yee, 2006; 10).

It is evident that a greater study analysis needs to be done in order to explore age and gender differences in usage patterns when it comes to the MMORPGs user, however in the case of the research done in this dissertation, only young adolescents will be a part of the study.

Yee (2006) notes that it is important to articulate the motivational differences among different users as it is a precursor to understanding the emergence of more complex behaviours and interactions which take place in these environments as well as providing a framework to differentiate one user from another. He believes that to ignore these individual motivational differences is to claim that all MMORPG users are motivated by the exact same reasons. Richard Bartle (1996) states that there are different player types in MMORPGs, as every gamer is motivated by different things. He identifies the player types as consisting of-

achievers, socialisers, explorers and killers, each of which have different in-game preferences and motivations for using the environment (Bartle, 1996). Bartle (1996) further explains that explorers are users who are interested in understanding the mechanics and rules of the system, as well as mapping out the world, while socialisers are users who enjoy chatting, interacting and role-playing with other users.

Yee (2006) built on to Bartle's (1996) 'motivational framework for MMORPG users' by creating an empirical framework for understanding individual motivational differences among MMORPG users. He believes that complex social interactions and social phenomena emerge in these online environments. Turkle's (1995) work on MUDs documented that intimate relationships and emotional experiences can derive from these online worlds. For example, romantic relationships, supportive friendships and even wedding ceremonies have been documented in MUDs, which in turn sparked the question of exactly how much emotional investment are the users placing in these worlds (Turkle, 1995). MMORPGs are MUDs on a massive scale with outstanding visual and behavioural richness, therefore MMORPGs should foster complex social phenomena and interactions among its users (Yee, 2006; 12). Joseph Walther (1996) believes this to be a reality, as hyper-personal interactions become more intermittent and intense because of the communication channel which is in use. Walther (1996) states that computer-mediated communication (CMC) allows for the participant to relocate cognitive resources typically used to make socially acceptable non-verbal gestures in face-to-face interaction, and focus on the structure and content of the message itself. The message is then able to come across as more personal and articulate. Walther (1996) also suggests that CMC partners get to know and come to relate to each other through CMC, as participants respond to personal messages with equally personal and intimate messages, the interactions intensify through reciprocity. His research showed that CMC groups achieve more positive levels on several dimensions of interpersonal communication than did face-to-face groups, revealing that CMC can promote positive and rational effects superior to more traditional media. "This electrification of communication channels not only extends interpersonal communication by helping overcome limitation of time and space, but also alters the ways in which people interact with each other" (Walther, 1995).

Katelyn McKenna and John Bargh's more recent work (2000) builds on Walther's (1995) positive-feedback research, suggesting four factors that enable positive social

interactions online. First, people have greater anonymity online. Second, the importance of physical appearance is greatly reduced. Third, the Internet transcends the problems of physical space and wide dispersion. Finally, users have greater control over the time and pace of their interactions. These four factors which are present in MMORPG's, suggest why enhanced social interactions occur in these online environments (Yee, 2006).

Yee (2006) states that MMORPGs have a strong multi-faceted appeal, bringing together a diverse demographic by which individual users are motivated in different ways. Some users participate in the environment to make friends and form supportive social networks while others use the environment to become powerful through achievement of goals. An extensive portion of the users are emotionally invested in these online environments, moreover they also derive salient experiences from them, and the relationships they form in these environments are comparable to their real-life relationships (Yee, 2006).

Research done by Yee (2006) on what motivates people to play MMORPGs reveals that men and women are motivated for different reasons, introduced to the game through different for different purposes can carry on interaction online for diverse experiences. Female players are typically introduced to the environment by a romantic partner and are older than the male players in MMORPGs. This means that female players are typically interaction with male players significantly younger than them, he believes that this should be taken into account when examining how male and female players perceive social interaction in the environment differently. Yee (2006) argues that female players are more inclined to participate in MMORPG's in order to build supportive social networks, escape from real life stress and to be immersed in a fantasy world. Thus these female players form stronger friendships than the males, but are not significantly more emotionally invested in the environment than male players.

Yee's (2006) data on motivations showed that users under the age of 18 are almost all male, and these male players tend to objectify the environment and others users for their own personal gain. Furthermore, users under the age of 18 are more likely to feel that the friendships they have formed online are comparable or better than their real-life friendships, and were also most likely to self-report that the most positive or negative emotionally salient experiences they had had in the past month had occurred in the MMORPG environment rather than in real-life (Yee, 2006). Another factor to be considered is the idea that user's

feel that they learn leadership skills from MMORPG environments (Yee, 2006). This brings about the notion that MMORPGs could play an important role as a learning tool for children as well as for people who need a self-esteem boost or need to learn how to lead, online experience could lead to better real-life experiences and skills.

### *The video game learning theory*

Computer games have become a big business, the current economic impacts of the computer gaming industry is commonly the reason given for studying computer games (Williams, 2006). Computer games have become hardcore commercial products that are related to and/or integrated into more traditional media and cultural arenas in society (Aarsand, 2007; 47). Aarsand's (2007) research focuses on how children consume computer games, and he found that when the relation between children and computer games are discussed two main constructions arise. The first idea is that children's consumption of computer games will enable them to meet the demands of postmodern society. Aarsand (2007) states that this idea rests on technological optimism- a utopian idea implying that the child will become digitally literate just by consuming computer games, an idea shared with Seymour Papert (1993), Don Tapscott (1998), and James Gee (2003). The second idea revolves around the belief that consuming computer games will have negative influence on children; this can be seen as the dystopian reverse image of the first idea (Aarsand, 2007). According to the latter idea, the consumption of computer games is seen as producing an unhealthy child, who is, presumably both fat and criminal (Ellneby, 2005). Aarsand (2007) explains that the latter view has been called 'moral panic', and has been observed in the past when new media (e.g., motion pictures, TV) were introduced into people's everyday lives. Both these ideas rest on the perception that children are shaped by their surroundings, and that technology works in the same way in all settings (Aarsand, 2007; 47).

Information and communication technology is often something that promotes consumers' independence and freedom (Aarsand, 2007; 48), Aarsand (2007) states that this can be seen in the light of notions of interactivity where the users are seen as actors in a digital landscape. Gaming as a social activity makes relevant a focus on the relation between the participants and the game, with the consequences that the researcher needs to understand the gamers' status in relation to the activity. With respect to relations between participants,

this can be understood in terms of positioning, which highlights how participants continually position themselves and others in the ongoing activity (Aarsand, 2007; 48), as people 'produce' one another and themselves as social beings (Bamberg, 1997). Therefore playing computer games can be seen as an activity in a social-cultural network: when positioned in the right situation the games could be used as a learning tool for not only children but adolescents and adults too. Lev Vygotsky (1992) argued that three different lines of development interact in cultural historical evolution. In addition to the evolution of species, culture accumulates concepts and practices, which are in turn appropriated by an individual during his or her individual development.

At the present time, children's popular culture is more complex than ever before (Johnson, 2005). Games such as *WoW* involve complex languages, vocabulary, and thinking skills we associate with the advanced grades in school (Gee, 2008; 196). Henry Jenkins (2006) argues the children of today multi-task across multiple modalities, playing a computer game, reading and writing about it as well as researching it on the Internet, and, maybe even contributing to websites devoted to the game. Gee (2008) adds to this, suggesting that children today often engage in cutting edge learning in their popular cultural practices, learning of a sort that fits well with what the Learning Sciences have discovered about optimal human learning, but not necessarily well with how current schools operate. Good video games are able to help challenge us to truly integrate cognition, language, literacy, affect and social interaction in their ideas about learning and the organisation of learning inside and outside of the school environment creating a new and fun way form children to learn. However, even if a computer game can aid a child with learning different skills the media's discussion of computer games often seems to focus on the content of the game rather than the help effects its able to have, especially if that content is violent (Gee, 2008; 197). Gee (2008) also points out that non-gamers tend to view computer games in the same way in which they view films and novels: content is what determines the nature and value of the work, which is why many non-games may not understand the benefit or pull of playing such games. However, Gee (2008) states that, unlike novels and movies, the computer games content should be separated from the game play. The two are connected, but to gamers, game play is the primary feature of computer games; it is essentially what makes them good or bad. Games like *WoW* involve solving problems strategically. Critics of games need to realise that players, especially strategic and mature players, often focus on game play more than on



content *per se* (Gee, 2008). Content in a game sets up, but does not fully determine, game play. It also determines the basic themes, metaphors, and emotional valences of the game, beyond the emotions of challenge, frustration, competition, and accomplishment that are determined by game play (Gee, 2008; 197). However, he believes that the two interrelate in complex ways; for example in role-playing games one's pride in accomplishment or regret for poor decisions can easily be projected onto the character the player is playing in the game. Equivalently, the power, problems, or fascinating features and accomplishments of a character in a game can be transferred as emotions to the player (e.g. the player will feel important when he/she has placed high in *WoW* and is then able to elicit orders). Video games, like most popular culture media, reflects back to us, in part, the basic themes and even prejudices of our own society. It could even be said that these role-playing computer games are more powerful/have a greater affect than other media, because the player acts in the game. But the fact is that while humans react emotionally to images (TV, films, games, even pictures) in much the way they do to real life, this does not mean they are tempted to act on these emotions in real life: people do after all have higher thought processes in terms of which they make decisions and decide what is and is not real (Reeves and Nass, 1999). Gee (2008) states that we also need to realise that computer games involve content in a broad sense. Computer games have turned out (despite early predictions to the contrary) to be a deeply social enterprise. Even single-player gaming often involves young people in joint play, collaboration, competition, sharing and myriad of Web sites, chat rooms, and game guides, many of them produced by players themselves (Gee, 2008; 197). But the social nature of gaming goes much further. Gee (2008) speculates that multi-player gaming (i.e. games where small teams play against each other) is very popular among many young people, and massively multi-player games (i.e. games where thousands or millions of people play the same game) have recently (thanks, in part, to the tremendous success of *WoW*) become mainstream forms of social interaction across the globe. Such games are introducing new 'states' or communities into the world in order to cope with the amount of players online (Gee, 2008; 197). Constance Steinkuehler (2006) and T.L. Taylor (2006) argue that in games such as *WoW*, people are learning new identities, new forms of social interaction, and even new values, which is a broad form of 'content' indeed. Gee (2008) points out that the media often discuss computer games as if they are inherently good for people or bad for them. This is a form of technological determinism. Patricia Greenfield (1984), as well as, Karen Sternheimer (2003) believes that technologies (including TV, computers, and books, as well

as games) are neither good nor bad and have no effects all by themselves, though, like all tools they have certain affordances. Rather they have different effects, some good, some bad, some neutral, depending on how they are used and the contexts in which they are used (Gee, 2008; 198). One important aspect of use is the way in which the player engages with the game's game play as opposed to its content or graphics. Players can be more or less reflective, strategic, and focused on game play rather than content or graphics. Critics should therefore consider how games are 'consumed' by different people in different contexts; general claims are henceforth close to useless. Consequently computer games have the power and potential to recruit learning as a form of pleasure, and as they spread into new contexts and design new types of games with diverse arrays of new technologies, designs, playing and learning situations; forming a new form of popular culture which should not be discarded as a mere child's toy (Gee, 2008).

Gee (2008) argues that computer games are good for learning, in the sense that good commercial computer games build in good learning principles and learning devices. Of course how these learning principles are picked up will vary across users and contexts. This claim does not just mean that computer games/video games<sup>19</sup> should be used for learning in and out of schools; it also means that we should use the learning principles built into good video games in and out of schools even if games are not being used. Further, these learning principles can be built into many different curricula. However, Gee (2008) specifies that computer/video games are not good merely because they are games, as well as the fact that different games have different effects on the people who use them. For example, puzzle games may very well exercise pattern recognition capacities, other games may make learning facts fun- but these are not the games that Gee considers the most valuable in regard to learning while you play. His own research centred on simulation games (games which take the form of virtual worlds with communities). These simulations can be used (by scientists) to examine systems that are so complex that it is hard to make specific predictions about outcomes ahead of time. In this case, they design these simulations (virtual worlds), run them (i.e. let the many variables interact across time), and see what happens (Gee, 2008; 198). These simulations are not computer/video games, but are similar in that they are worlds in which variables interact through time, what makes these computer games interestingly

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<sup>19</sup> Computer games and video games differ in the sense that, computer games can only be played with the use of computers, but video games can use computers, TV's, hand-held consuls- any piece of technology which a screen.

different from the scientific simulations is that the player is not outside, but, rather inside the simulation (the virtual world) (Gee, 2008;199).

The player has a surrogate in the simulation (game), namely the virtual character or characters the player controls in the virtual world (e.g. *WoW*). Through this character or characters the player acts and interacts within and on the simulation. The player discovers or forms goals within the simulation, goals that the player attributes to their surrogate in the world. In order to reach these goals, the player must recognize problems and solve them from within the inside of the simulated world. This essentially means that the player must figure out the rule systems (patterns) that constitutes the simulations (the rules that the simulation follows thanks to how it is designed). The player must discover what is possible and impossible within the simulation in order to solve problems and carry out goals. Achieving these goals constitutes the win state for the player. (Gee, 2008; 199).

Gee's (2008) research was centred around these type of computer/video games (games like *WoW*). He believes that these games are the most interesting for learning, as these digital worlds are played in the sense that a player has a surrogate or surrogates through which the player can act within and on the simulation, reaching goals and working together with other players in order to reach a higher level or obtain specific objects. For example in *WoW*, the player can only be a solo player up until a certain point, but if he/she wants to achieve a higher status in the game the gamer has to join forces with other player or join a guild (a guild is a group of players who bond together in order to defeat harder obstacles and challenges- however the player has to audition before he/she is invited to join by the guild). This almost forces the players to be social within the game, teaching them to communicate and interact with other within their respective guilds in order to reach the end game<sup>20</sup>. As a learning theorist Gee is interested in this type of game, not because it is a game, but because it has the capability to teach the people who play it. When playing a game such as *WoW* Gee (2008) suggests that the player is able to gain a deeper feel for how variables are interacting within the system. As the player moves his body (i.e. their virtual body) inside the complex virtual system he/she will in turn and learning how to participate within certain environments, therefore under the right circumstances the game encourages the player to enact different attitudes and stances. This 'stance' involves a sort of 'embodied empathy for a complex system' where a person seeks to participate in and within a system, all the while seeing and thinking of it as a system and not just local or random events (Gee, 2008; 199). The theory

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<sup>20</sup> The 'end game' is when the player has reached the highest level of the game, and now has to work within his/her guild in order to acquire better weapons or armour or mounts etc. This is when the status can grow.

behind this is that young learners can enter a computer game as a complex system and learn deep conceptual principles about history and social sciences.

Richard Halverson (2005) is designing a video game in which adult educational leaders can use the game to understand modern principles of school leadership within a framework that sees schools as complex systems interacting with a variety of other complex system. In turn these virtual simulation or virtual worlds can help the youth of today better understand and cope with the complex systems of modern society- where communication and challenges form the foundation of the working and social world. Gee (2008) believes that these types of games have the potential to actually externalise the way in which the human mind works and thinks in a better fashion than any other technology that is around. He argues that the mind works by storing records of actual experiences and constructing intricate patterns of connection among them, seeing the mind as a network of connection. As human understanding is not primarily a matter of storing general concepts in the head or applying abstract rules to experience. Rather humans think and understand best when they can imagine (simulate) an experience in such a way that the simulation prepares them for actions they need and want to take in order to accomplish their goals (Clark, 1997). Moreover Gee (2008) adds that gamers build on their simulations in order to understand and make sense of things, but also to help them prepare for action in the world. In these role-playing games the gamer is able to role-play another person/avatar, where they can play out different situations and scenarios and test what the consequences may be, before acting out in the real world.

Taking the above into account Gee (2008) is arguing that the mind is a simulator, but one that builds simulations to prepare purposely for specific actions and to achieve specific goals (i.e. they are built around win states). Thus Gee (2008) states that computer/video games turn out to be the perfect metaphor to view the mind, as these games usually involve a visual and auditory world in which the player manipulates a virtual character (or characters). Playing these games with goals in mind, the achievement of which accounts to their 'win state', carefully considering the design of the world and considering how it will or will not facilitate specific actions they want to take in order to reach their goals.

One technical way that psychologists have talked about this sort of situation is through the notions of 'affordances' (Gibson, 1979). An affordance is a feature of the world (real or virtual) that will allow for a certain action to be taken, but only if it is matched by an

ability in an actor who has the wherewithal to carry out such an action (Gee, 2008; 202). In *WoW* for example, stags can be killed and skinned (for making leather), but only if the character has learned the skinning skill. So a stag is an affordance for skinning for such a player, but not for a player who has no such skill in this sense “affordances are relationships between the world and the actor/gamer” (Gee, 2008; 202).

Playing *WoW*, or any other computer game, is all about such affordances. The player must learn to see the game world, designed by the developers but set in motion by the players, and thus, co-designed by them, in terms of such affordances (Gee, 2008; 203). Players must think in terms of ‘what are the features of this world that can enable the actions I am capable of carrying out and that I want out in order to achieve my goals?’, reflects Gee (2008). He states that for humans, effective thinking is more like running a simulation in our heads within which we have a surrogate actor rather than it is about forming abstract generalisation cut off from experiential realities. Effective thinking is about perceiving the world in a way that the human actor sees how the world, at a specific time and place (as it is given, but also modifiable), can afford the opportunity for actions that will lead to a successful accomplishment of the actors goals. Generalisations are formed; when they are, bottom-up from experiences and imagination of experience; computer games externalise the search for affordances, for a match between the character/gamer and the world, but this is just the heart and soul of effective human thinking and learning in any situation. Thus Gee (2008) believes that computer games are a natural tool for teaching and learning, as the gamer learns to see the world through different games in a different way, learning to accomplish goals through certain tasks; as well as building confidence while doing them- providing features to improve human thinking and learning.

### Community affiliation

As in a community every person/player plays their part. Every guild is made up of a group of different characters; the group guild will have characters such as hunters, warriors, druids, mages, Priests and so on. Each of these types of characters has quite different skills and plays the game in different ways. Each gamer learns to be good at their specific skill and also learns to integrate these skills as a team member within the guild as a whole. Each team member must also share some common knowledge about the game and game play with all

the other members of the guild - including some understanding of the specialist skills of other player types - in order to achieve a successful integration (Gee, 2008; 204). So each member of the guild must have specialist knowledge (intensive knowledge) and general common knowledge (extensive knowledge), including knowledge of the other players functions.

The players interact with each other in the game via a chat system. This basic system allows them to familiarise themselves with each other, but not in terms of their real-world race, class, culture, or gender (these may very well be unknown or, if communicated, made up as fictions) (Gee, 2008; 204). Players must orient to each other, first and foremost, through their identities as game players and players of *WoW* in particular. As a result, they can in turn use their real-world race, class, culture, and gender as strategic resources if and when they please, and the group can draw on the differential real world resources of each player, but in ways that do not force anyone into preset racial, gender, cultural, or class categories. Gee (2008) calls this type of affiliation, 'cross-functional affiliation' - which has been argued to be crucial for the workplace teams in modern new capitalist workplaces, as well as in contemporary forms of social activism. "People specialise, but integrate and share, organised around a primary affiliation to their common goals and using their cultural and social differences as strategic resources, not as barriers" (Gee, 2008; 204). As a result, MMORPG's, such as *WoW*, are important in the ways in which, sometimes for the better and sometimes for worse, people are creating new ways to build and share knowledge. They are also forming new forms of learning communities. Gee (2008) and Steinkuehler (2006) both believes that there is much to learn from these games about new ways to organise learning socially in tomorrow's classrooms, libraries, workplaces and communities.

### **Identity:**

To begin this section, we need to first discuss the idea and theory of identity. The question of identity has been debated in social theory for decades. These first concepts of the identity, from a range of intellectual perspectives, came with the notion of integral, originary and unified identity- a conception of identity know as essentialism (Hall, 2000). This kind of identity, inherited from the Enlightenments figuring of the 'Cartesian' subject, has endured in

western thought for hundreds of years and still has a lot of common-sense currency, suggests Bell (2001). Cartesianism is the idea that we are born the way we are, that there is a real me, that our identities are fixed and stable, and so on; these manifestations of Cartesianism can all be described as forms of essentialism (Hall, 2000). However, states over the years there has been a progressive eroding of this stable unified, essential view of the self, whereby the process of change has brought about a new perception of identity:

The question of identity is being vigorously debated in social theory. In essence, the argument is that the old identities which stabilized the social world for so long are in decline, giving rise to new identities and fragmenting the modern individual as a unified subject. This so-called 'crisis of identity' is seen as part of a wider process of change which is dislocating the central structures and processes of modern societies and undermining the frameworks which gave individuals stable anchorage in the social world. (Hall 1995: 596)

In his later work, Stuart Hall (2000) refines this point to argue that it is the way we 'think with' concepts of identity that have been most radically transformed. Theoretical moves associated with postmodernism and poststructuralism have been signalled as reshaping the ways we think about who we are. A social constructionist view of identity, *contra* essentialism, stresses the temporal and spatial locatedness of identity, as well as identity as a process (Bell, 2001). Hall (2000) argues for a shift from the term 'identity', which he sees as being loaded with the 'old' concepts to using the notion of 'identification' instead- which signals process, multiplicity, construction: our identifications are made, are mobile, and are multiplex.

Theorist Jeffrey Weeks (1995) provocatively suggests that, these new ways of thinking about the identity creates the need to consider identities as 'necessary fictions'. This statement did however get Weeks in to trouble with gay activists, for implying that the site of their political struggle as being named as fiction. The belief here is that identity is constructed rather than essential. In particular, since Weeks' focus on sexual identities, Michel Foucault's work on the 'invention of homosexuality' (and more generally on the relationship between discourse, power/knowledge and identity) figures prominently, as he suggested that the identity 'homosexual' came into being at a particular time, as a consequence of a particular set of discourses. In other words, it was 'talked into being', a label given to a particular group to define the identities of the group in question. This type of 'construction' can also be said for the concepts of madness, criminality and even the posthuman.

This explanation does seem slightly off the topic, but it feeds directly into the key question of this dissertation. Weeks (1995) explains that such a view of identity does two things. First of all it offers a critical view of all identities, demonstrating their historicity and arbitrariness. It denaturalizes them, revealing the coils of power that entangle them. It returns identities to the world of human beings, revealing their openness and contingency. Second, because of this, it makes human agency not only possible, but also essential. For if identities are made in history and in relations of power, they can also be remade. Thus identities are sites of contestation: is it not possible for one's identity to be remade and reconstructed in the virtual world of these online games?

In summary Hall's (2000) view on identity accepts that identities are never unified and are becoming increasingly fragmented and fractured; then never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions; and are constantly in the process of change and transformation. Hall views identification as 'points of temporary attachment to the subject position which discursive practices construct for us'- those 'discursive practices' construct the possible modes of identity that are legible in culture.

Anthony Giddens (1991) is another theorist who believes in the reflexivity of the self, regarding identity as a lifelong project to be worked on, an idea that feeds back to Weeks' argument that identity is a 'necessary fiction'. Giddens (1991) argues that the structural transformations of the contemporary period- globalisation, disembedding, detraditionalisation- have unshackled the subject, enabling a reconstruction of individual and collective life-stories and identities. In today's society the self is fluid and fragmented and has a new capacity to make itself over, to reshape and restyle elements of identity- or at least to make choices about which aspects of its self to privilege at any point (Giddens, 1991). Bell (2000) agrees with Giddens on this thought, however he points out that even though this may imply a sort of freedom of choice; which it does, it is more like constrained choice. As Hall (2000) highlighted, discursive practices set out the limits within which elements of choice can only operate. This point has been hotly debated in the context of the use of ideas of 'performance' and 'performativity' in theorising of identity, the linking the 'project' of the self with the 'projection' of the self. This theory links to the idea that when the youth play online their identity is based on both their performance and projection of their online image.



In the context of online-life these ideas have become paramount, since the (mainly) text based mode of communication means that participants do have reflexivity and choice in terms of their self-presentations (Slater, 1998). This has become one of the core issues debated on the context of cyber-culture, as no-one really knows who you are in cyberspace. When a gamer is online they can make and remake themselves, liberated from the 'meat' of their real life (RL) bodies and all the identity-makers they carry (Bell, 2001). Gamers are able to liberate themselves as well as hide from the real world, producing a generation caught between a harsher real life and a more appealing virtual reality. Even though the latter may seem safer and more alluring, the gamer is living in an artificial world filled with users who do not always show their true self.

David Gauntlett (2000) suggests that the relationship between representation and identity needs to be considered, as do the implications for rendering the self in text only media. This then leads to another issue about the way in which identities are being encoded and decoded in text. Another point to Hall's (2000) argument is that identification is the role of difference in constituting identity- as all identities depend on exclusion, on 'otherness'- *who we are is defined by who we are not*, and the practices of exclusion that define identity have to be recognised. Now the problem come when dealing with difference, as this idea ushers in- the so-called 'violence of the hierarchy' established between the included and the excluded. It certainly structures the ways in which identities work in cyberspace: for some critics, cyberspace abolishes the hierarchy, invisibilizing difference, while for others it restates difference even as it fetishists it (Bell, 2001).

### ***Self-identity in cyberspace:***

When looking at the issues surrounding the self in cyberspace one should first consider the 'projection' or 'presentation' of the self that is reflexively enacted through a cultural construction in cyberspace. When a gamer enters a game such as *WoW* they will have total control over the production of their personal character (within the structural confines of the medium). Charles Cheung (2000) argues that games which offer a personal homepage and character construction, offer their creators the chance to reveal previously hidden aspects of their identities; in this way it could be suggested that it is the 'real me' presented on the site (even though many admit to self- censoring and to tailoring the presented self). As a self

conscious articulation of self-identity, avatars open up questions of identity in cyberspace, bringing with it issues such as author and audience, truth and deception, fluidity and authenticity.

What constitutes someone's individuality? What makes them who they are, and how is their identity shaped? In truth there can never be one answer, human beings are affected by what is around them; societies, family, friends, advertising, the status quo fashion, and the list goes on. People, especially the youth of today, move with new ideals and practices all of which add to the continuous shifting and changing of their identities. In a sense we are 'shape shifters', changing, evolving and adapting to new surroundings whether this is in the real world or cyberspace. For this reason we are never one identity, we live in a constant state of flux- never achieving one stable identity. Today identity has become a networked culture, whereby the youth are engrossed by online virtual communication. An online identity, Internet identity, or Internet persona is a social identity that an Internet user/gamer establishes in online communities and gaming websites, such as *WoW*. On some sites people use their real names, but most of the times they prefer give themselves pseudonyms, which reveal varying amounts of personally identifiable information. In *WoW*, gamers present themselves visually by choosing an avatar- an icon sized graphic image. Through this avatar they will then interact with others online, establishing their unique online identity and acquire a reputation. The concept of the personal self, and how this is influenced by emerging technologies, is a subject of research in fields such as psychology and sociology. The online disinhibition effect is a notable example, referring to a concept of unwise and uninhibited behaviour on the Internet, arising as a result of anonymity and audience gratification. In psychology, the online disinhibition effect refers to the way people behave on the Internet with less restraint than in real-world situations. The concept is related to the concept of the online identity, which will play a key role in this dissertation, as related to the gamers of *WoW*.

The cyberspace culture has become a place "where magic is real and identity is now fluid" (Rheingold, 2007: 1). Such a world provides the users the ability to create new identities, have false ones, multiple identities and hence enact ones inner most fantasy.

In his book "*The Power of Identity*" Castells (1997) states that our identities are established in and by relationships of similarity and difference. We no longer passively

accept identities from traditional sources of meaning and identity, but reflectively develop our own self identity, an insight he shares with Anthony Giddens (1991). Often, identity exploration and role-playing are seen as the same thing, but they are in fact different phenomena with an overlap. Role-players are focused on stories and becoming a part of the virtual world. Players who use the game as a tool for identity exploration are less concerned with stories and more interested in trying out different personality traits as a means of introspection (Yee, 2008: 29).

Manuel Castells (2001) discusses the fact that the Internet has been an appropriate medium for social practice. Through specific programmes/ networks, role playing and identity building have begun to form the basis of online interaction which has become increasingly popular with teenagers. Castells (2001) speculates that this is due to the fact that teenagers are the ones who are in the process of discovering their identity, as well as experimenting with it in order to figure out who they really are. This leads to an interesting question of how we construct our identities. Ferguson (2004) speculates on whether identity has really been enriched and liberated (or possibly constrained, emasculated and subjected to delusions) through the coming of cyberspace. The fact that it is possible to adopt different identities has been celebrated by optimists, although it may allow people to mask themselves as something else for their own sadistic purposes, such as paedophiles talking to children while pretending to be another child (Krueger, 1991). Rheingold (1994) adds to this, suggesting that this type of online telecommunication provides access to the means of influencing other people's thoughts and perceptions.

On another level, Turkle (1995) as well as Robins (1998) believe that there might be a danger of cyber-activities becoming a substitute for activity in the material world. Thus players could lose their real world identities and morph into their cyber identity, as well as communicating only through the web and not face-to-face. Rheingold (1994) adds to this by saying that virtual communities are likely to change our experience of the real world, as individuals and communities. Computer mediated communication may have a liberating potentials or there could be severe pitfalls of mixing technology and human relationships, states Rheingold (1994).

All of these online virtual reality games and networks seem to add a new dimension to the way people communicate with each other (Rheingold, 2007: 4). This raises the question

of whether cyberspace could also add new dimensions to our personalities and eventually cause a shift the users' identities'. Michael Heim (1995) says that this type of shift could indeed transpire when the user starts to identify more and more with the virtual world; it then becomes an existential reality even if it is only virtual reality. When it comes to cyberspace and our self-identity, Heim adds that in this new techno-reality identity has become a matter of freedom and choice. He explains that this is due to the fact that in artificial reality the physical appearance is completely composable, as one's now changed physical attributes alter their interactions with others. Krueger (1991) explains that not only might people treat you differently, you find yourself treating them differently. Castells (2001) debates the notion that the Internet, as well as virtual reality gaming, has become a privileged terrain for social practices and personal fantasies. In addition these virtual reality games such as *WoW* become, in all their dimensions and with all their modalities, an extension of life (Castells, 2001: 118). Moreover the fact that even in role-playing and informal chat rooms, real lives (including real lives online) seem to shape the interaction on line. Thus Sherry Turkle (1995) observes the notion of the real fights back: "People who live in parallel lives on the screen are nevertheless bound by the desires, pain, and morality of their physical selves; virtual communities offer dramatic new context in which to think about human identity in the age of the Internet" (Turkle, 1995: 267). Thus in the virtual environment identities have become composable, as they are overcome in the artificial domain of cyberspace, allowing the users to be exhilarated, experience transcendence and feel the liberation of being who you want (Robins, 1995: 138).

Theorists such as Hayles (1993) argue that the cyberspace body and the cyberspace landscape become so appealing and liberating to those who use them because this type of environment or world is immune to blight and corruption. Or is it? Online communities are leading to a type of social isolation, to a breakdown of social communication and family life, as faceless individuals practice random sociability, while abandoning face-to-face interaction. Furthermore in cyberspace, "subjectivity is dispersed throughout the cybernetic circuit and the boundaries of the 'self' are defined less by skin than by the feedback loops connecting body and stimulation in a techno-bio-integrated circuit" (Hayles, 1993: 72). Robins (1995) adds that in this accommodating reality, the self is reconstituted as a fluid and polymorphous entity; due to the users having the ability of selecting and discarding identities at will, as in a game or fiction. This could be one of the reasons that people find virtual reality so appealing,

especially virtual reality gaming such as *WoW*. In the world of online identity, one's own body is represented by one's own textual description, says Holeyton (1998), hence the reason why MUD's are become laboratories for experimenting with one's identity. We are in a new world of fantasy and imagination explains Robins (1995), in virtual reality we can choose to represent ourselves as anything we wish. Rheingold (1994) adds to this as he believes that electronic networks dissolve boundaries of identity. Now in this virtual playground of make-believe, ones identity can be anything; nothing is surprising or unbelievable anymore. Michael Benedikt (1991) and Rheingold (1994) both developed similar points, as they believe that identity experimentation has a deep root in the human nature which delights in storytelling and pretend, as it is a gateway to another plain where fiction dwells and the imagination knows no ends. Thus these virtual reality games such as *WoW* provide an 'imaginative space in which we can occupy new identities and create new experiences to transcend the limitations of our mundane lives' (Robins, 1995: 139).

The cyborg identity<sup>21</sup> has begun to represent an imaginative recourse, as it involves "transforming the self into something entirely new, combining technological with human identity, as virtual reality allows the user to choose their disguise and assume alternative identities" (Robins, 1995: 141). In addition Turkle (1998) states that the use of computers and the virtual realities they enter into are causing them to re-evaluate their identities. Turkle (1998) explains that this is due to way people begin to see themselves differently, as the computer is now seen as a second self. This rapidly expanding system of networks collectively known as the Internet, links millions of people in new spaces that are changing the way we think, the nature of our sexuality, the form of our communities and our very identities (Turkle, 1998: 5). Cyberspace is imagined as a zone of unlimited freedom, 'a grid reference for free experimentation, an atmosphere in which there are no barriers and no restrictions on how far it is possible to go' (Robins, 1995: 141). Turkle (1998) argues that this type of virtual freedom is often the cause of the fundamental shifts in the way we create and experience human identity. Thus Robins (1995) states that identity may start becoming problematical as an 'ego-image' may develop. Furthermore this loss of coherence and continuity in identity is associated with the loss of control over reality.

Many players of the virtual reality games, like *WoW*, start to develop an addiction for the game, where individuals give up the unity and coherence of their own identity, both on

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<sup>21</sup> The cyborg identity is the consummate postmodern concept.

the psychological level and social level (Robins, 1995: 142). Every player can have different identities/characters in several different kinds of places. Giving people the chance to express multiple and often unexplored aspects of the self, to play with their identity and to try out new ones (Holeton, 1998: 8)

# **Chapter Three**

## **Research methods and methodology**

### **Introduction**

The research done on MMORPGs in this dissertation seeks to discover and better understand the reasons behind the appeal of the game, and in doing so discover if MMORPGs have a hand in identity construction and new communication patterns for those who ‘play’ these games. Research done on the motivations and experiences of playing such a game will provide a window into the complex world of identity online and the effect online communities are having on the youth who are a part them. Such as, are these online communities leading to a type of social isolation, to a breakdown of social communication and family life, as faceless individuals practice random sociability, while abandoning face-to-face interaction?

The media and communication channels throughout virtual reality games will be explored and the effects it is having on the “changing concept of time and space” (Rantanen, 2004:14), as well as how the youth are expressing themselves through this mediated global medium. Since the area of virtual gaming is large, I have chosen to concentrate on one MMORPG for the case study- *World of Warcraft (WoW)*.

Due to the fact that most of the information which will be used in this dissertation is in the form of verbal and other symbolic behaviour (the verbal data gathered through questionnaires, observation or interviews) my study will be qualitative not quantitative by nature. Qualitative and quantitative research methodologies differ in the philosophy that underpins their mode of inquiry as well as, to some extent, in methods, models and procedures used. Though the research process is broadly the same in both, quantitative and qualitative research are differentiated in terms of the method of data collection, the procedures adopted for data processing and analysis, and the style of communication of the findings. If a research problem lends itself to a qualitative mode of inquiry, the researchers are more likely to use the unstructured interview or observation as their method of data collection. When analysing data in qualitative research the researcher will go through the process of identifying themes and describing what has been found out during your interviews

or observation rather than subjecting your data to statistical procedures<sup>22</sup>. In the present research, the qualitative research methodology was implemented in a thematic analysis, which is a method which stems from a content analysis. This is a more open methodology, which is flexible and unstructured, allowing for the exploration of the participants experiences, meanings, perceptions and feeling. This methodology uses few cases, but allows the researcher to get a more in-depth feel and understanding.

An empirical study was conducted, one that analyses existing textual data on the various relevant theories on the concept of identity, virtual reality and the virtual community. The research method used was “thematic analysis”. Primary data was collected by means of interviews, focus groups and personal learning logs. This dissertation is informed by qualitative research techniques as it focuses on descriptions of people’s representations of what is occurring in their world. This research method includes descriptive, as well as analytical material- such as extracts from interviews, focus groups and personal learning logs.

The research carried out in this dissertation was not restricted to written material; the research also looked at the avatars (art) which the players use to represent themselves (their identities) in the game. Signs and symbols were also taken into account: how the player associates with them. Sound was another important aspect of the study particularly in the manner in which the players communicate with each other, either through a voice-over or in game sounds and the avatars’ gestures.

To conduct a thematic analysis on any such ‘text’, the text is coded or broken down into manageable categories on a variety of levels: word, word sentence, phrase, themes and then examined using one of content analysis basic method, conceptual analysis or relational analysis (Jacob, 2006). This then helps to reduce the data into manageable categories on information explains Jacob (2006). Klause Krippendorff (2004) notes that techniques are expected to be reliable. More specifically research techniques should result in findings that are replicable. That is, researchers working at different points in time and perhaps under different circumstances should get the same results when applying the same technique to the same data. Krippendorff (2004) states that replicability is the most important form of reliability.

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<sup>22</sup> [www.statpac.com](http://www.statpac.com)



Thematic analysis focuses on looking at the occurrence of selected items within a text or texts although the terms may be implicit as well as explicit (Jacob, 2006). Being similar to interpretive content analysis<sup>23</sup>, the qualitative thematic analysis is an analysis based on the identification of themes in qualitative material, often identified by means of a coding scheme. It is a widely used approach within qualitative analysis, generally treating accounts as a resource to finding out about the reality or experiences to which they refer.

The analysis of something which is based in fantasy can sometimes pose a problem when it comes to the interpretation stage. Most of the statements and comments collected from the interviews are organized by the intellect but take their meaning from emotions (Henry, 1956; 3). Thus the researcher needs to understand that when engaging in this type of online fantasy that the individual respondent may lessening his own burden by expressing his feelings, through disguising then for himself and others by using an avatar.

When engaging in the thematic approach, it is important to take note of the fact that the personality plays a big part in the expression of these constructed worlds. Henry (1956) believes that the thematic approach will take place within these overlapping frameworks-derived from past life experiences, private life, public life and social frameworks of convention. Furthermore, he argues that the distinctions between the personal and the social are artificial; and that a person manipulates the symbols of conventional communication, which are used as a structure to one's individual fantasy, and are in themselves deeply rooted in their personal motive.

### **Thematic Analysis**

Richard E. Boyatzis (1998) explains thematic analysis as a process to be used with qualitative information. It is not another qualitative method but a process that can be used with most, if not all, and allows for the translation of qualitative information into quantitative data, if this is desired by the researcher. David Winter (1992) believes that the thematic analysis allows the researcher to use a wide variety of information, such as behaviour samples, interviews, videotaped encounters, simulations, transcripts of speeches, personal diaries and so on. Thematic analysis is a process for encoding qualitative information. The

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<sup>23</sup> <http://people-brunel.ac.uk>

encoding requires an explicit 'code', (Boyatzis, 1998; 4). This may be a list of themes, a complex model with themes, indicators, and qualifications that are casually related, or something in between these two forms. Boyatzis (1998) defines a theme as a pattern found in the information that at minimum describes and organizes the possible observations and at maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon. A theme may be identified at the manifest level (directly observable in the information) or at the latent level (underlying the phenomenon) (Boyatzis, 1998; 5). He explains that the themes may be initially generated inductively from the raw information or generated deductively from theory or prior research. The compilation or integration of a number of codes in a study is often called a codebook. However the thematic analysis has a number of overlapping or alternate purposes. It can be used as...

1. A way of seeing.
2. A way of making sense out of seemingly unrelated material.
3. A way of analysing qualitative information.
4. A way of systematically observing a person, an interaction, a group, a situation, an organisation or a culture.
5. A way of converting qualitative information into quantitative data.

Boyatzis (1998) believes that the thematic analysis enables scholars, observers, or practitioners to use a wide variety of types of information in a systematic manner that increases their accuracy or sensitivity in understanding and interpreting observations about people, events, situations and organizations. Coffey and Atkinson (1996) state that, 'Coding can be thought about as a way of relating our data to our ideas about these data'. They emphasize that coding provides many benefits in the organization, processing and analysis of qualitative information. A code is not necessarily, in their view, a conceptual scheme. The interpretation phase of research follows development and use of a thematic code (Boyatzis, 1998, 6). Although researchers find the thematic analysis to be of most use in the early stages of the research inquiry process, such as the pilot stage, it can be useful at all stages. Boyatzis (1998) says that during the pre-discovery or formulation of a research agenda, thematic analysis enables the researcher to access a wide variety of phenomenological information as an inductive beginning of the inquiry. Due to the reality that every day we encounter, observe, and then pass by numerous sources of information or data useful in gaining insight about phenomena of interest to us in the world. The anticipation of the

frustration of not knowing how to access the information often limits observers or scholars from further exploration. Thematic analysis opens the doors to many of these forms of information and guides the observer or scholar to their possible use (Boyatzis, 1998; 6). For the scholar, thematic analysis allows the collection or use of qualitative information in a manner facilitating communication with a broad audience of other scholars or researchers, says Boyatzis (1998). Thematic analysis offers a vehicle for increasing communication in ways that researchers using various methods can appreciate.

In most cases the thematic analysis is used without being specifically described, Boyatzis (1998) says, scholars often use thematic analysis to identify verbal or visual patterns and develop appropriate codes.

### **The ability to see**

Boyatzis (1998) argues that the ability to use the thematic analysis appears to involve a number of underlying abilities, or competencies. One competency can be called 'pattern recognition'. It is the ability to see patterns in seemingly random information. As Strauss and Corbin (1990) indicated, the researcher must also have an openness and flexibility (i.e. conceptual flexibility) to perceive the patterns. Typically, research using qualitative methods requires long hours of immersion in information collection and even more hours in information processing and analysis before interpretation. Planning and system thinking is one such process which enables the researcher to organize his observations and identified patterns into a usable system for observation. The researcher will need to have a clear knowledge about the subject they are researching, in order to have a lens through which to view the codes and patterns. Boyatzis (1998) argues that other abilities or competencies may be relevant and necessary to using thematic analysis with specific types of information, such as aural skills to perceive patterns in symphonies. With certain sources of information, other competencies, such as empathy and social objectivity, may be crucial and are relevant to perceiving patterns in a person's life.

Using this method the researcher will need to have a certain degree of perception and analytic reasoning throughout the length of the study- and it should be taken into consideration that these degrees may differ from person to person. Cognitive complexity

appears to be the only prerequisite for using the thematic analysis. Boyatzis (1998) explains that the cognitive complexity involves perceiving multiple causality and multiple variables over time and other variations, as well as the ability to conceptualize a system of relationships. When the researcher has developed their own unique set of codes, the process by which they will capture and analyze the essence of their observations will yield qualitative information which will offer a greater insight. The information will then be developed and interpreted into themes in a way that contributes to the development of knowledge (Boyatzis, 1998; 10). This stage will require some theory or conceptual framework which will stem from the literature review. In using the thematic analysis the researcher will need to be aware of all four stages:

1. Sensing themes- that is recognising the 'codable' moment.
2. Doing it reliably- that is, recognizing the 'codable' moment and encoding it consistently.
3. Developing codes.
4. Interpreting the information and themes in the context of a theory or conceptual framework- that is, contributing to the development of knowledge.

Boyatzis (1998) argues that even though the thematic analysis is a helpful method when executed properly, there are three major obstacles or threats to using the thematic analysis effectively in research. They are the researchers projection, sampling and, mood and style.

### *Projection*

Projection can be explained as the reading into or the attributing to another person, something that is your own characteristic, emotion, value, attitude or such. This comes with ambiguous qualitative information. Boyatzis (1998) believes that the stronger the researcher's theory, the more they will be tempted to enforce their own values onto the information. In order to try and prevent this Boyatzis (1998) states that certain steps should be taken, such as...

1. Developing an explicit code.
2. Establishing consistency of judgment- that is reliability.

3. Using several people to encode the information and a diversity of perspectives- perhaps even by having participants examine the raw information themselves.
4. Sticking close to the raw information in the development of the themes and codes.

The challenge to the qualitative researcher is to use thematic analysis to draw the richness of the themes for the raw information without reducing the insights to a trivial level for the sake of consistency of judgment.

### *Sampling*

Sampling needs to be treated as a type of garbage in, garbage out approach (Boyatzis, 1998; 14). Preventing or lessening the obstacles and confusions of sampling is helped by...

1. Reviewing the unit of analysis versus the unit of coding: who or what am I, observing/ analysing, how do I want to encode it.
2. Clarifying the unit of analysis and the unit of coding.
3. Examining the sampling of units of analysis and units of coding from multiple perspectives and possibly asking a number of colleagues to review and ‘reality-test’ the appropriateness and adequacy of your sampling plan.
4. Establishing a protocol or guide for information collection.

When in doubt about the raw information, increasing the sampling group aids the researcher in obtaining a more accurate reading. The snowball sampling method will be used in the research of this dissertation. This chain referral sampling method is a special non-probability method used when the desired sample characteristic is rare. Snowball sampling relies on referrals from initial subjects to generate additional subjects<sup>24</sup>. The down-side to using this method is that it can introduce biased outcomes, because the technique itself reduces the likelihood that the sample will represent a good cross selection from the population.

The research done in this dissertation started with interviewing the participants and then leads into a focus group. This helped by giving each participant the chance to answer

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<sup>24</sup> [www.statpac.com](http://www.statpac.com)

individually without being influenced by the group. The focus group will just help to reinforce the initial data and expel the “garbage”.

### *Mood and style*

Qualitative research is subjective, which leads to the fact that there are many factors that will threaten the quality of the information, processing and analysis. These factors are related and linked to the researcher’s mood and decoding style, therefore when using this method it’s a necessity to have an open mind (Boyatzis, 1998).

## **Method**

### *MMORPG selection*

In 2008 Blizzard Entertainment announced that World of Warcraft, its subscription-based massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG), was being played by more than 11 million gamers around the world. That is a full one million more than the number of monthly players *WoW* had back in January 2008 ten months before. Furthermore these numbers were recorded before the release of the World of Warcraft: “Wrath of the Lich King” expansion pack worldwide on November 13th, 2008, which in turn increased the number of new and returning subscribers. On a gaming blog it was noted that if the World of Warcraft were a nation, CIA’s World Fact book says that out of 239 listed countries it would be the 75th most populated country on Earth ahead of Greece, but behind Zimbabwe.

Since debuting in North America on November 23, 2004, World of Warcraft has become the most popular MMORPG around the world. It was the bestselling PC game of 2005 and 2006 worldwide, and finished behind only World of Warcraft: The Burning Crusade, the first expansion pack for the game, in 2007.<sup>1</sup> In addition to being the bestselling PC game of 2007 in both North America and Europe, The Burning Crusade holds the record for fastest-selling PC game of all time, with nearly 2.4 million copies sold in its first 24 hours of availability and approximately 3.5 million in its first month. Due to the fact that South African gamers belong to either European or American servers, it is difficult to pin down the number of how many play *WoW*.

### Participant Recruitment

The *WoW* users will be recruited by using the snowball sampling method. In this approach two or three people are told about the interviews and are asked to invite friends or others they know. Snowball sampling is an approach for locating information-rich key informants (Patton, 1990). Using this approach, a few potential respondents are contacted and asked whether they know of anybody with the characteristics that you are looking for in your research. For example, if you wanted to interview a sample of vegetarians/cyclists/people with a particular disability/people who support a particular political party etc., your initial contacts may well have knowledge (e.g. through a support group) of others<sup>25</sup>.

Snowball sampling is not a stand-alone tool; the tool is a way of selecting participants and then using other tools, such as interviews or surveys (Patton, 1990). Having identified those with the skills and/or knowledge or characteristics I would require for the *WOW* case study, I approached these people to participate in an interview and focus group process. Snowball sampling is designed to identify people with particular knowledge, skills or characteristics that are needed as part of a research process. Snowball sampling uses recommendations to find people with the specific range of skills that has been determined as being useful, as such, snowball sampling aims to make use of community knowledge about those who have skills or information in particular areas (Patton, 1990). Allowing the researcher to identify key resources within a community and to select those people best suited for the needs of a project or process. This sampling technique allows you to increase the number of participants in the process, by building on the resources of existing networks. The downside to this technique, as stated in the above section, is that it may not produce a big enough of a variety, whereby all the participants will have similar views towards the game. In order to try counter act this from happening, three different people were approached, all with different group of friends, who attend different schools, with different backgrounds, and different social standings. These three were then commissioned with the task of starting the snowball method, and to my delight three completely diverse groups of gamers were formed, allowing for mixture of thoughts, feelings and emotions towards the game.

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<sup>25</sup> [www.dse.vic.gov](http://www.dse.vic.gov)

## Procedure

### Interviews

Twenty interviews<sup>26</sup> were conducted which consisted of a snowball sample group of Durban residents. Ten of the interviewees were teenagers, between 15 to 18 years of age, who play virtual reality online computer games- *WoW* specifically (known as the gamers). The other ten interviewees comprised of teenagers as well as adults who do not play online games but know someone who does (they are known as the non-gamers). The interviews conducted on the non-gamers were done in the hope to acquire a separate view into the way in which a gamer acts when immersed in their online identity.

The interviews took the form of face-to-face discussions with the teenagers. Open questions were asked, which in turn gave me a broader idea about their ideas and feelings towards the online game and other issues. The point of these interviews was to enable the teenagers to think and talk for longer than they would with a structured survey, as well as, show their feelings and views more fully without the influence of others (Wisker, 2001: 140). With the permission of the interviewees, the conversation was recorded.

The only problem with these face-to-face interviews was that it became obvious that I could lead the discussion in the direction I wished. I found that even though the participants were answering the questions, some felt hesitant, as if they were worried they might say something wrong. This is why I decided to include a focus group as well, in the hope that if the participants were in a casual group they would be more relaxed and open.

### Focus Groups

The focus group was a smaller group of five teenagers randomly selected from the interviewed group. The focus group was assembled in the hope to add greater support to the interview answers, as well as to enable closer scrutiny and lengthy discussion. It was done in the hope that it would generate a debate among the players, allowing different opinions to surface maybe even altering some of their original statements. It was also taken into consideration that due to the presence of other people the teenager's responses and feelings may change, reshaping their answers as others speak (Wisker, 2001: 141). The focus group

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<sup>26</sup> Interview example sheet under appendix one.



questions were the same as the interview questions, but allowed for a greater debate among the teenagers. Notes were taken throughout the focus group.

By using this type of method/procedure comparative expositions and points of difference can be explored gamers and non-gamers. After the interviews and focus groups were conducted, the next step was to reduce the raw information. Which in turn helped better understand the information and internalize as much of it as possible- reducing it to a manageable size and outline form making it easier for comparison. The steps for a thematic analysis (as discussed above) were be done- whereby key activities, affects, thoughts and emotions were all considered. I also had to take my own mood and emotions into account, keeping an open mind and being objective rather than subjective was my key focus when it came time to decode the raw information. Many factors threaten the quality of the research this is why it is important for the researcher to try distance themselves from the data.

### *The Code*

When using thematic analysis each researcher has to develop their own unique set of codes. This code or set of codes provides the researcher with a way of seeing, to make sense out of the seemingly unrelated material, which helps the researcher to increase the accuracy and sensitivity when it comes to understanding the raw information. The code is set up in order to assist the researcher when looking for a pattern in the random information, in order for this system to work the researcher needs to be open and flexible.

The raw data collected for this dissertation was decoded with a set of codes which consisted of six themes- achievement, relationships, immersion, escapism, manipulation and identity. The first five themes can be seen in Yee's (2006) theory on the 'Five factor model'- explaining that a users motivations for playing a MMORPG can be broken up into five themes, illustrating the multi-faceted appeal of these online environments. I added the sixth theme of identity, in order to get a better idea on how the gamer constructs their online identities through their online avatars.

Yee (2006) states that his factor model forms a framework in which a researcher can examine the users motivation and experiences; what makes MMORPGs so appealing and why do gamers stay in these worlds for, on average more than half a work week? The ‘achievement’ factor measures the desire to become powerful in the context of the virtual environment through the achievement of goals and accumulation of items that confer power. The ‘relationship’ factor measures the desire of the users to interact with other users, and their willingness to form meaningful relationships that are supportive in nature, and which include a certain degree of disclosure of the real-life problems and issues. The ‘immersion’ factor discerns if the gamer enjoys being in a fantasy world as well as being someone else. ‘Escapism’ is the factor used to measure how much a gamer is using the virtual world to temporarily avoid, forget about and escape from real-life stress and problems. The ‘manipulation’ factor is used to gauge to what extent the player enjoys deceiving, scamming, taunting and dominating other users (Yee, 2006; 22). The six factor which I added to this research was ‘identity’. This was used to measure how involved the gamers are in their avatars; furthermore to question whether they spend their time playing with many different characters or are they predominantly invested in one character. Yee (2006) describes these analysis points as ‘factors’; however in this dissertation they will be known as the themes; this is due to the fact these themes were not set in stone but acted more as guide lines by which the subject matter could be argued and discussed.

The six themes act as markers or starting points for discussion, areas which would indeed be part of one’s identity. While discussing the themes I used codes such as perception, reaction, conveying content and consequences. When decoding what the participants had told me I used ‘perception’ as a code to distinguish if the participants have a clear perception of the topic, as well as their feelings towards it. ‘Reaction’ was used, for example, in gauging what are the participant’s reactions to the questions discussed, and whether their answers changed due to outside influences. The ‘conveying content’ code was used to decipher if the participants were conveying content honestly, in other words were they honest about their feelings and reasons for playing the game. The final code, ‘consequence’, was applied in order to distinguish if the players knew what the consequences were when playing *WoW*, as well as what they thought they were. All these codes were used in the hope to discover a pattern in their behaviour and therefore in their identity, through the observable actions the subjects exposed.

The unprocessed information gathered from the interviews and focus groups were placed into these six themes, by means of motivations, emotions, impact and the gamers shifting opinion from the interview to the focus group. The codes helped facilitate in drawing out the richness of the themes, in order to find a system of relationships within the information gathered.

Through this coded system I was able to ascertain whether or not a MMORPG, such as *WoW*, has an effect on identity as well as social practice. For instance, are these online games changing the way the youth communicate to each other; are they able to reinvent themselves online and if so can these MMORPG's influence identity transformation. The codes and themes also aided my research in perceiving patterns in a person's life, with regards to what type of identity they are creating for themselves online- what are the reasons for those particular identities, and whether being immersed in ones' online identity rather than their real life identity is leading or paving the way to a type of social isolation.

# **Chapter Four**

## **Data Section**

The research done in this dissertation was collected through the means of face-to-face interviews, focus groups and a log book exercises. These were conducted in the hope that it would provide a small window into the gamers' virtual world, specifically what draws them to it, whereby they keep going back for more. Through the interviews, focus groups and log books exercise, the gamers' feelings, motivations and experiences are decoded and looked at in order to better understand the reason behind the way in which a gamer constructs his/her identity in an online game, such as *WoW*.

### **Interviews**

The "gamers" questioners and focus group questions were divided into two sections, the first section consisted of some standard issue question about them self and their online character. The second section was broken up into a series of six themes- achievement, relationships, immersion, identity, escapism, manipulation. These six themes were later used as the 'codes' when looking for patterns the common themes in the information gathered. The "non-gamers" questioners was compiled of a few questions; asking about their opinion to certain things. (See appendix C and D)

### **The Gamer- section one**

When answering the first section of the questioner, the gamers were confronted with basic demographic questions, regarding gender, age occupational status, hours of usage per week, hobbies, sport, what online games they play, and the identity of their avatars and so on. These questions were set with open-ended text fields, whereas all the other questions were implemented with set response choices.

The data was collected over a three month period and will be presented in thematic order. The questioner data was collected from users who were active in the *WoW* MMORPG,

the focus of this research is to discover whether or not playing a MMORPG like *WoW* could have an effect on the identity of the gamer. The majority of the participants were male. The average age of the participants was 18, with a range from 13-22. The age was kept within these age boundaries as I was not looking for the cross-generational appeal of MMORPGs but rather the participants' concept of community and their primary identity.

When asked if they played any sport at school, many of them said yes. Most of the participants seemed to be avid sportsmen, playing sports such as rugby, cricket, soccer, athletics, swimming and squash. Their hobbies involved some sport again, also reading and music came up, but the most common hobby listed was *WoW*. All the participants stated that in order to be able to participate in the online game of *WoW* they have to subscribe Blizzard in which they pay approximately R30 a month in order to gain access to the online server. Most of the gamers said that they play and take part in the online community for an average of six hours a day. When asked if they ever feel obligated to play, 90% of them said yes. They stated that when you are part of a guild you have to take part in things such as raids (which need a few members in order to complete tasks). If they miss out on too many raids and group exercises they can be kicked out of the guild. This is something every gamer lives in fear of, since if a gamer wants to achieve a higher level or gain better armour and weapons a guild is crucial. All of the participants stated that the appeal of the game lies in the fact that it is interactive, making *WoW* have a greater appeal than other online games. 70% of the participants stated that it is more entertaining to play an online game where you are interacting with other people, not just the computer, creating an almost real experience. When confronted with the question of whether or not they thought that a game like *WoW* could have an addictive quality, 60% said yes, 30% said no and 10% were undecided. There was an even divide between yes and no, when asked if their friends and family complain about the amount of time they spend online. The participants were then asked to describe their main avatar (online identity); below is a short description of some of the identities the gamers use when playing *WoW*-

- Dartharm- Human Paladin, level 80, DPS (Damage Per Second)
- Seerdomin- Human Death Knight, level 80, DPS
- Luminium- Human paladin, level 80, DPS

- Hokage- Human Warrior, level 80, DPS
- Shiver Peak- Night Elf Hunter, level 80, DPS
- Lorenita- Human Rogue, level 80, DPS
- Osperand- Night Elf Druid, level 80, HPS/Healing
- Koladrin- Human Paladin, level 80, TANK
- Mullknox- Human Warrior, level 80, DPS
- Hodgesargh- Draenai Shaman, level 80, HPS

### Section two

This part of the questioner was broken up into a series of six themes- achievement, relationships, immersion, identity, escapism, manipulation. Some of the questions were multiple choice and others were open ended.

### Achievement

1. Is it important to you to obtain the best gear available in the game?

- Yes 100%
- No 0%

2. Do you try to gain as much as possible on each level?

- Yes 30%
- No 70%

3. Do you like to feel powerful in the game?

- Yes 60%
- No 40%

4. Are you a group leader?

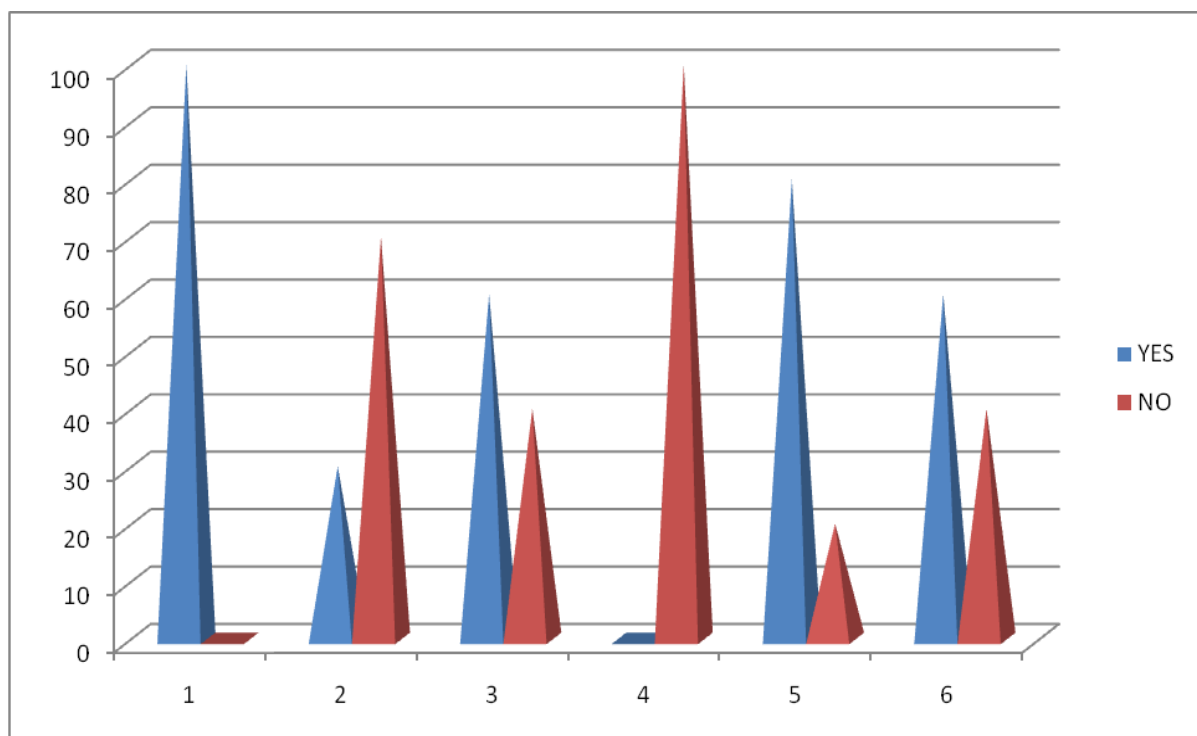
- Yes 0%
- No 100%

5. Have you learnt anything about yourself from playing the game?

- Yes 80%
- No 20%

6. Are you able to better understand group dynamics after playing the game?

- Yes 60%
- No 40%

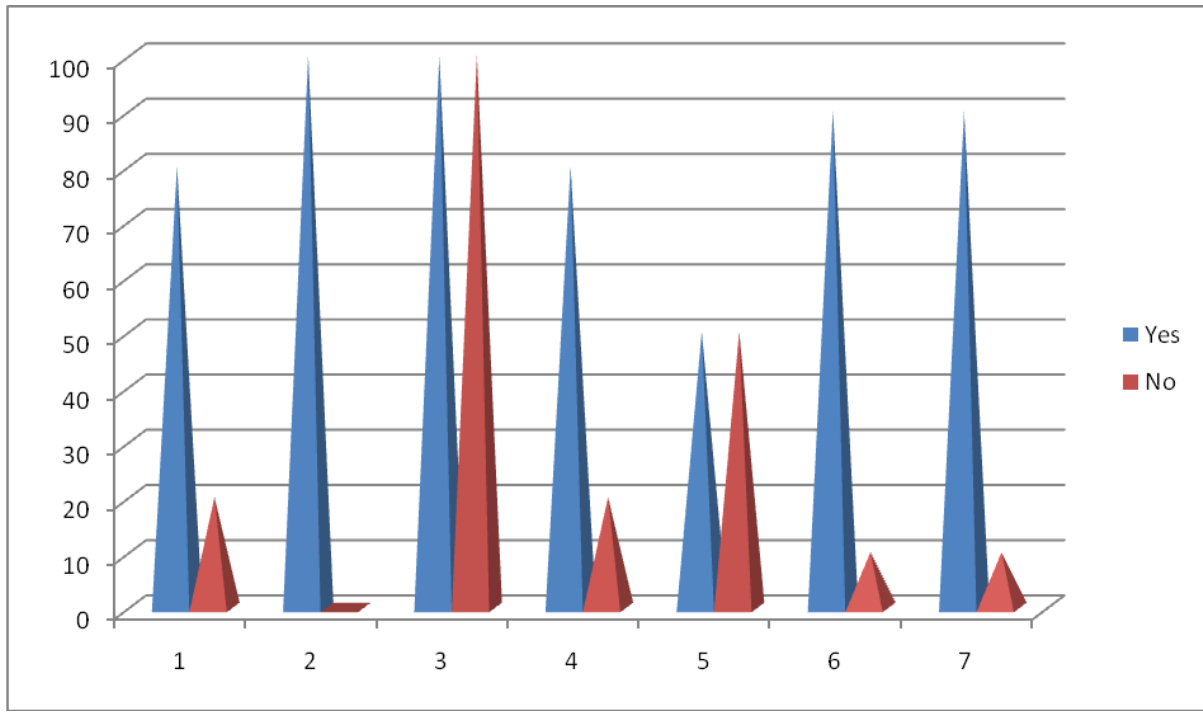


## **Relationships**

1. Do you find it easier to communicate with other gamers online?
  - Yes 80%
  - No 20%
  
2. Do you have friends in other countries due to your interaction with this game?
  - Yes 100%
  - No 0%
  
3. Are your chats with other gamers text based or verbal?
  - text
  - verbal
  - both 100%
  
4. Do you have meaningful conversations online with fellow gamers?
  - Yes 80%
  - No 20%
  
5. Do you talk to other gamers about personal issues?
  - Yes 50%
  - No 50%
  
6. Do in game friends offer support, whether game related or personal?
  - Yes 90%
  - No 10%
  
7. Do you sometimes prefer your online friends to real-life ones?
  - Yes 90%



- No 10%



### **Immersion**

What is your cyberspace identity? (Name & Race) - *The participants avatars were recorded in section one.*

How many online identities do you have? – *Most of the participants said that they have an average of five-six meaningful high level avatars (online identities).*

Do you prefer your online identity? - *50% said no, 30% said yes, and 20% were undecided.*

Do you belong to a guild? (If so which one) – *All of the participants said that they belong to a guild; this is how they were able to reach such a high level in the game.*

1. Do you like to try out new roles and personalities in the game?

- Yes 70%

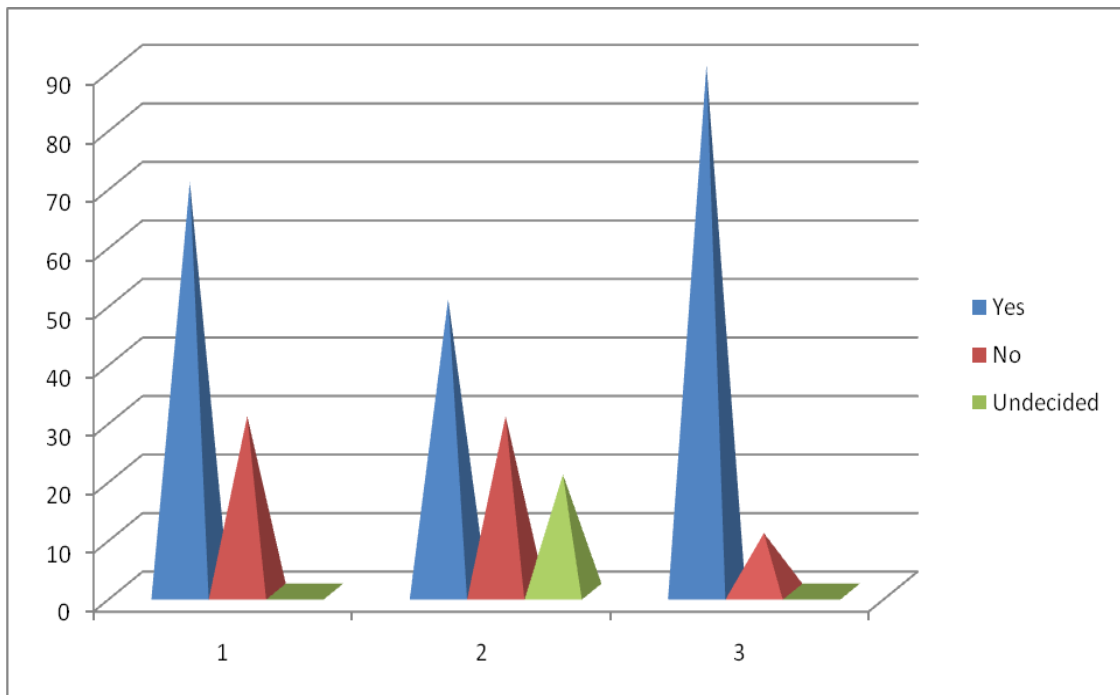
- No 30%

2. Do you like to role-play (become immersed in the character)?

- Yes 50%
- No 30%
- *The other 20% were unsure how to answer.*

3. Do you like feeling a part of this world?

- Yes 90%
- No 10% (*they said no because they don't care about the community side of the game*).



## Identity

Do you act differently online? (E.g. are you more aggressive, more of a leader etc)

- *This question generated a mixed response, most of the participants said that when playing the game they felt more confident and sure of their actions. Others said that they did feel emotions such as aggression, anger, happiness, confidence and so on, this however was subject to the situation they were in.*

Do you ever play as a different gender? (If so why)

- *60% said that they did not have an avatar of the opposite sex nor did they really want one. The other 40% said that they do have or have had an avatar of the opposite sex. Some of the reasons behind this are mostly game related, for example a female avatar has different abilities than a male avatar, with different armour and attack animations.*

Do you act differently when using different avatars?

- *80% said no to acting differently when engaging in different characters, and 20% said yes.*

Do you like the concept of being able to transform?

- *All of the participants were unanimous on the concept of being able to transform in the game- saying that this was one of the best qualities of the game.*

What is your avatar dressed like?

- *Most of the avatars discussed were clad in protective armour and held large weapons.*

When applying different sets of armour or dress to your character, does it change the way you feel and play in any way?

- *80% of the participants said that the way their avatar was dressed did have an effect on the way they were able to play the game. Some said that when obtaining different armour it allows for different upgrades that support different play styles, similar to a soldier in an army. Others said that when achieving different mounts in the game or*

*specialised weapons and armour it makes them feel good and 'cool'- providing a greater recognition among their peers.*

*The other 20% said that the way their avatar looks has no effect on the way they feel and play the game.*

### **Escapism**

Which character/ identity do you use the most? (And why?)

- *All of the participants stated that they use their main higher level character more often if not all the time. Reasons for this varied form, the fact that because it was their first avatar in the game it holds a great sentimental pull then the other characters, as well as the fact that as a level 80 character greater game play is available to this character. There is also the idea that their main character is acknowledged before their lower level characters are- the concept of 'creating a name for themselves'.*

Why do you enjoy this type of game?

- *Some of the participants said that they enjoy the interaction part of the game, as they are able to have real time conversations with other gamers, make new friends with the same interests all the while feeling confident and secure. Others stated that they enjoy the fantasy aspect of the game- "it's like reading a book, it's full of adventure, and you are the author the hero and the reader". Another reason cited was that it provides an escapism for the gamer, a place where they can go and forget their real-life problems for a while. Some said that it helps them to relax and distress after a busy day.*

Do you just play the game or are you apart of the games online community?

- *All of the participants said that they are a part of the WoW online community.*

What do you experience whilst being a part of the virtual community?

- *Most of the participants stated that they enjoy the feeling of camaraderie, which comes from belonging to the online community. It provides a place where they can share information and exchanging tips. A place where friends with similar interests convene.*

Do you find this medium provides a freedom of expression, more so than that of face-to-face communication? Why?

- *Most of the participants said that this type of medium provides them with a freedom of expression, which they sometimes do not experience with face-to-face communication. These are some of the general comments:*

1. *“With face-to-face communication I am a lot more aware of people’s feelings, whereas online it is all business- I have the confidence to say what I want/feel”.*
2. *“I think online communication does allow for freedom of expression, but not always. The people who hide behind the screen, only communicating through their character are pathetic”.*
3. *“I sometimes prefer to communicate online, not necessarily through my character but through the medium. I find it easier to be myself, and not have to worry what others think of me.”*
4. *“I find that I am more confident online, I can give orders and be my own boss.”*
5. *“No, I am the same person when I play as I am in real life”.*

### **Manipulation**

1. Do you like to taunt and annoy other players?

○ Yes 10%

○ No 90%

2. Do you often ask other players for help?

○ Yes 60%

○ No 40%

3. Do you like to dominate over other players?

○ Yes 80%

○ No 20%

4. Do you ever manipulate other players in to doing what you want them to do?

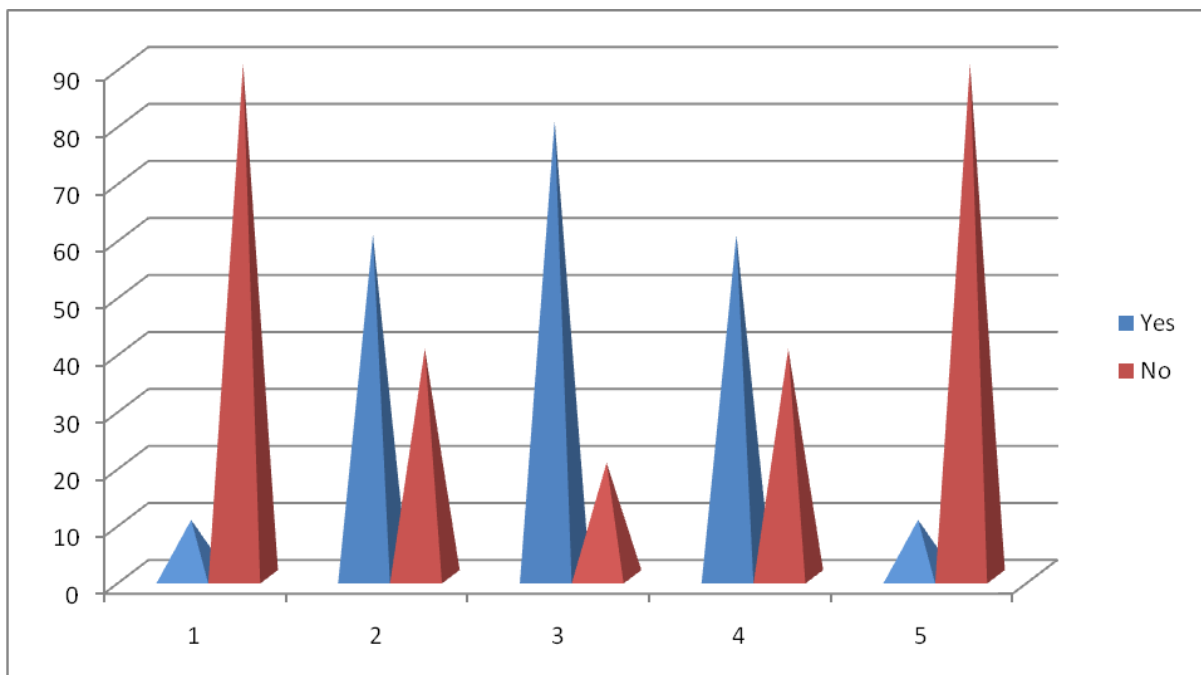
○ Yes 60%

○ No 40%

5. Do you ever take all the gear or prizes for yourself?

○ Yes 10%

○ No 90%



### The Non-Gamer

The 'non-gamer' interviewees comprised of teenagers as well as adults who do not play online games but know someone who does. The interviews conducted on the non-gamers were done in the hope to acquire a separate view into the way in which a gamer acts when immersed in their online identity. It is sometimes easier to note the difference in one's behaviour when it is seen from another's perspective. The non-gamers questioner consisted of open ended questions. The first few questions were simple questions, asking them about what hobbies they did and if they belonged to an online community or not. The rest of the questions were based on what they thought of online games and the people that play them.

#### The teenage non-gamers:

The teenage non-gamers were made up of a group of five students, three males and two females, age 14-18. The first question asked the participants if they played sport at school or not. Two of the male participants said yes- the sport they played is rugby. The other male participant said he did not play a contact sport at school. Both female participants stated that they did not play any sport at school. The next question asked them about their hobbies. The two male participants' said they did sport, and also put sport down as their hobbies as well as going out with friends. The other male participant put reading and spending time with friends. The two female participants put reading, shopping, drawing and drama as their hobbies.

#### The adult non-gamers:

Four adults (two mothers and two fathers) participated in the non-gamers survey, all of whom are parents and have a child who plays *WoW*. The non-gamer questionnaire was the same for both the teenagers and the adults. The first question asked the participants if they played any sport at school- this question was not applicable to parents. The next question asked if they made use of any hobbies. Both mothers answered reading. One father put mountain biking and road cycling and the other father put rugby, cooking and travel as his hobbies.

The next set of questions asked the participants about online communities, *WoW*, and what they have observed about the people around them that play the game.

- Do you play or make use of any virtual reality desktop games, if so which one and why?

Teenager's response:

*All the participants stated that they did not play any online game.*

Adult's response:

*Two of the participants said no to playing a virtual reality online game. One father said he played a game called 'Red Alert'. One of the mothers said she did not play a virtual reality online game, but did enjoy playing on Facebooks' 'Farmville', stating that she plays it just for a bit of fun.*

- If not, have you ever thought of joining an online gaming community? (Give reason for answer).

Teenager's response:

*The female participants said that they have no desire to join an online gaming community such as *WoW*. They do however belong to the online community known as 'Facebook'. Facebook is an interactive online community where people can communicate with each other, it is not like the *WoW* community which has a story line and avatars. The reason being, that they prefer to talk to people face-to-face. Another reason is that being a part of an online gaming community would vary in time consuming. As in order to be a part of the online community they would have to play the game in order to communicate with the other members in the community.*



*The male participants said they play computer games but do not play online computer games or belong to an online gaming community. The reasons ranged from the fact that they would have to pay to play the game and hence pay to be a part of the online community. Another reason being that it is too time consuming. One participant said that they do not trust the safety of online games.*

*Adults' response:*

*One of the mothers stated, "It never entered my mind before, I thought it was all rubbish. Then someone sent me a request on Facebook to join 'Farmville', which is similar to the game Sims. You get to design your own avatar and then you start to build a farm, getting help from neighbour and planting things. You ask others to be your neighbours and you can help each other out. It's like a little online farming community".*

*The one father said no to joining an online gaming community, as he prefers to play as an individual rather than as a team.*

➤ What is your opinion towards online games?

*Teenager's response:*

*Both female participants had negative feelings towards online games. One participant stated that they felt that it could cause some people to become anti-social.*

*The one of the male's feelings towards online games were indifferent. The other two participants felt that playing online games could have a negative effect on those who*

*play them. One participant stated, "Sometimes my friend would rather stay at home and play WoW, then come out and party with us".*

*Adult's response:*

*The first mother stated that it can become very addictive and costly. The second mother said, "If it keeps my son at home and safe from the dangers that can occur when out with friends then I happily support them."*

*The first father said, "A home environment is safer than clubbing, and it is a cheap form of entertainment". The second father stated, "This type of gaming can become addictive, it reduces socializing skills where eye to eye contact and verbal skills are needed in everyday life, as well as adding to the deterioration in physical fitness".*

- Do you have a friend or family member who plays an online game? How does this make you feel?

*Teenager's response:*

*One of the female participants stated that her boyfriend plays WoW, "It does not bother me too much, as long as he does not play it or talk about it when he is around me". The other female said that she has a brother who plays WoW. She said, "Every free moment my brother has he plays WoW. As soon as he gets home from school he logs on to see what's happening, to chat and to play. Sometimes he will even miss dinner in order to raid with his guild. I have even noticed that he often leaves his school work to the last minute because he is too engrossed in his online world".*

*One of the male participants said that he has friends who play online games, WoW in particular, "It does not bother me, if they want to play WoW they must play- it makes them happy and they enjoy it". Another participant said, "I have a younger brother who plays, and it may seem anti-social but at least he is not getting into trouble with his friends". The last male participant states, "I have a younger brother who plays and sometimes it irritates me because he won't talk to you while he is playing, he get really involved. I can sometimes hear him shouting and laughing with others online. And when he is at home he spends most of his time in his room playing WoW".*

*Adult's response:*

*The first mother said, "Yes my son- I get annoyed when he is anti-social and if his studies suffer due to spending too much time playing". The second mother said, "I have a daughter who plays WoW, her boyfriend introduced her to the game. I don't mind her play as long as there is a balance between the other things in her life. It also keeps her away from clubs".*

*The first father said, "I have a son who plays WoW, I am fine with it. He is a shy guy, but when he plays he seems to be more confident and happy, so if it builds his confidence levels then I'm happy for him to play". The second father stated, "My son plays WoW, and I think its fine as long as it does not affect his general life- he seems to have a balance between playing the game and sport, relationships and school work."*

- Do you think this is a healthy hobby or potentially destructive? (Give reason)

Teenager's response:

*One female participant stated, "I think it depends on the person, if someone takes the online friends they make too seriously it could become a problem". Another comment was, "It can be a healthy hobby if there is balance".*

*One of the male participants said, "In order for it to be a healthy hobby the gamer has to have a balance between friends, work and the game". Another male participant said, "I think it could turn into a destructive hobby, because it keeps my brother holed up in his room with his online friends- and he feels like he has to play in order to advance in the game. His however is alienating his real-life friends".*

Adult's response:

*The first mother said, "I think it could be potentially destructive, but on the flipside he is not out drinking/clubbing, he is at home and socializing with his online friends".*

*The second mother stated, "It only becomes a destructive hobby when there is no balance".*

*The first father said, "It can be a healthy hobby but must be part of a balanced life".*

*The second father said, "It can be both a healthy, but also destructive hobby if the gamer takes the game more seriously than it should be taken".*

- If you are a parent to someone who plays WoW do you pay for them to play every month?

*All the participants stated yes.*

- Have you ever witnessed a change in the gamer during or after playing the game? (Give example)

Teenager's response:

*The female participant with the boyfriend who plays WoW stated, "During the game, it seems like he tries to show off to his online friends and he gets excited very easily".*

*The other participant said, "When my brother plays he seems happier and more confident".*

*One of the male participants said, "Just that it excites them when they advance in the game or get a better weapon or something". The male participant with the younger brother said, "I have noticed that while playing WoW he will either be happy about something or sometimes he can get angry when things don't go his way". The last male participant said, "It seems that sometimes his mood is affected by what happens in the game."*

Adults' response:

*The first mother said no. The second mother stated, "Not really, he can seem to be a bit obsessed sometimes, he really loves the game. But I have not seen any real mood swings".*

*Both fathers stated that they had not noticed any behavioural change in their children.*

- Have you noticed a shift in their personality? (Give example)

Teenager's response:

*The first female participant said no. The second female said, "My brother used to be a shy reserved kid, now he seems to have come out of his shell and is more confident- I am not sure if this is due to playing the game though".*

*The first male participant said that he had not noticed any shift in his friend's personalities. The second male participant said, "There is no major shift in my brothers' personality- maybe a little more confident". The last participant stated, "I don't think my brother's personality has changed in any way due to playing the game. I think he is a little more confident when talking to people and he speaks his mind which he never did before".*

Adult's response:

*The first mother said no. The second mother stated, "He seems to be more self assured and willing to participate and talk openly with others, but I can't say that there has been a change to his personality".*

*Both fathers said that they did not notice a shift in their personality.*

- Do you think this type of game has had any type of affect on the gamers' real-life work/focus friendships/relationships etc?

Teenager's response:

*The participant with the boyfriend said, "I don't think that WoW has had any effect on my boyfriend's social life". The other female participant stated, "I think that it has had an effect on one or two things in this life. For example his school work is left to*

*the last minute, it is like he would rather focus on in game achievements than real life ones”.*

*The first male participant said, “This type of game could have an effect on the relationships of those who play it- as the gamer tends to alienate real-life friends for the comfort of their in-game ones”. The second male participant stated, “My brother is sometimes very anti-social, he will sit in his room for hours and play WoW, talking to only his in-game friends.” The last participant said, “I believe that this type of gaming could only have an effect on the gamer if he/she lives more in the game than in real-life, by this I mean mainly socialising and communicating with the friends he has online”.*

*Adult’s response:*

*The first mother stated, “Not if my child has a balance, but I don’t think she is too obsessed with the game anyway”. The second mother stated, “He has a lot of friends who play and they all have a good time interacting. When they get together to play, they can go on all night if necessary. But as long as the violence of these games stays in the games I have no problem with online gaming. Also everything in moderation- time for work- study- sleep-relationships is also very important. I think if not carefully monitored it could have a negative impact on the gamer”.*

*The first father said, “Not WoW specifically, but a lack of ‘real-world’ socializing is a problem if the game is played in excess as well as a reduction in physical activities”.*

*The second father stated, "I think it has had a mild effect on my son, as he sometimes lets his studies slip, because he would rather get further in the game and communicate with others online".*

### Focus Groups

The focus group was a smaller group of five teenagers randomly selected from the interviewed group, these five all play *WoW*. No non-gamers were present in the focus group. The focus group was assembled in the hope to add greater support to the interview answers, as well as to enable closer scrutiny and lengthy discussion. It was done in the hope that it would generate debate and different opinions from those who play the online game *WoW*. It was also taken into consideration that due to the presence of other people the teenagers' responses and feelings may change- reshaping their answers as others speak (Gina Wisker, 2001: 141). The focus group questions were the same as the interview questions- but allowed for a greater debate among the teenagers. Throughout this study I had to consider that certain individuals' opinions change due to the fact that other people were present, and even influencing the discussion. Notes were taken throughout the focus group.

When discussing the game with the boys and their average playing time, the majority of them agreed that they played on average five to six hours a day. A few of them revealed that they often play through the night, finishing at around 4am. It was obvious that they get tired as they then have to either get up early for school or for university. Most of them said that they log into the *WoW* community at every opportunity, playing the rest of the day and night- which often get them into trouble. A few boys suggested that playing *WoW* is like an addiction; as they would rather play the game then do school work- some stated that they have even left studying for exams to the night before.

The boys stipulated that play the game is not about feeling obliged to play, but more to the point of you need to play in order to advance in the game as well as stay securely rooted in your guild. If they are able to get into a good/high ranked guild, they will do everything possible to stay in it. This is because the better the guild the better your chance is of getting higher in the game, as well as gathering better weapons and armour. The group



explained that you have to be invited to join a guild by another member, and then audition of a place. If you do not live up to their expectation they kick you out, this is why they play a lot. Furthermore in order to raid a full team is needed. Some joked that they had to often miss dinner in order to take part.

When the discussion turned to the idea of the game being addictive some of the participants opinions seemed to be swayed by other members' comments. The interviews revealed that 60% thought it was addictive and 30% said not. But during the focus group session, many of their answers seem to change. The participants, who had previously said no, now admitted that they were actually addicted to playing the game. Stating that, they log into the game as soon as they can. But logging on is not merely to play but to chat to the many other players online. During the day the players tend to do solo play, and at night they play as a team. However even when they play a solo game, they have a constant line of communication with their friends and team mates- chatting and taking part in playful banter. They all agreed that the online communication is a big part of playing the game; they talk about random things, compare notes, and help each other out when someone is trying to get through a difficult sequence. Most of them admitted that it would not be the same if there was no communication channel.

Most of the boys start to laugh when asked if they have anyone who complains about them playing all the time. Many said yes, explaining that when they have to raid at night it normally falls over the dinner time period. The leaders of the guild expect you to be there and play your part in the team, as every team member has a different purpose and task. Depending on what their characters are depends on what they have to do- and the success of the group relies on all the members playing their part. One participant said, "I get flack from my mom, she likes me to sit at the dinner table with the family- but I can't I have to play". Another boy said, "When I am at home I spend most of my time in my room playing and communicating with friends online. My parents moan that I am anti-social (laughs)".

During the focus group they explained their characters to me, stating why they have chosen to play with that specific character. The answers range from, "I like the story behind this character and lore that goes with it", another explained that he feels that his character mimics himself/ what he wants to portray.

*Nick\** is a level 80 character, which is the highest level in the game, and his main character is a ‘Human Paladin’<sup>27</sup> named ‘Dartharm’, he also has seven other characters on his account. When creating a character the player has the option of choosing from ten different races and nine different character classes, which are of course split into their different factions, the Alliance and the Horde. In the Alliance a player can choose from Humans, Night Elves, Dwarves, Gnomes and Draenei. The Horde consists of Orcs, Tauren (also known as the forsaken), Trolls and Blood Elves. Then there are also the nine available classes<sup>28</sup>, which are, Druids, Hunter, Mage, Paladin, Priest, Rogue, Shaman, Warlock and Warrior<sup>29</sup>.

*Dane\**, a seventeen year old student, uses a Night Elf as his main character who is classed as a Warrior<sup>30</sup>. His avatar's name is ‘Thorfax’ and is on level 80. ‘*Dane*’ says, “I enjoy playing as a Night Elf as I am able to do certain things that other characters cannot”. All the characters have different professions, primary and secondary; along with being able to acquire particular items, equipment and mounts (flying mounts are only available to characters on level 70).

Clearly the game is achievement based, but the participants were clear on the fact that it is not about gaining as much as possible, but more about being part of a team. After a raid the leaders share the wealth among the members. In the solo interviews some of the boys had mixed feelings about the concept of feeling powerful in the game. However during the discussion, most were more inclined to agree with fellow gamers that it is always nice to feel powerful and in control in the game. Some explained that it is like an ego boost, “When I get something that no one else could get or achieve higher, I feel good and happy- there is respect that comes with being a good gamer”. All of them stated that they do not lead the guild or the raid because there are already leaders who assign tasks. But they did mention that they offer their opinion about certain things. Some said that they would like to lead a raid or be a leader of a guild but, said that it is extremely time consuming and requires constant game time. A few participants said that they feel like leaders in the game- more confident and in control of the situation. One boy said, “I feel more like myself in the game”, this was discussed further and it was revealed that it's more about who they would like to be, for

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<sup>27</sup> Go to appendices, and on the WOW disc provided, look in file 7 & 8 to see an example of a Paladin.

<sup>28</sup> Go to appendices, and on the WOW disc provided, look in file 12 in order to see six different types of classes.

<sup>29</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/worldofwarcraft>

<sup>30</sup> Go to appendices, and on the WOW disc provided, look in file 9 to see an example of a Warrior.

example their characters are strong and powerful, able to undertake any task. Therefore their digital avatar becomes a digital image of what they would want to be. Opinions changed throughout the group when asked if they had learnt anything from playing the game. Some said that they have learnt to be more confident and to communicate with others in order to achieve your goals, as well as being more self assured.

All the boys agreed that it is easier to communicate with others online, as you are safe behind your avatar- you can be yourself as well as someone else. The participants explained that communication is text-based but they also talk to each other online, this is called vent. It is an open channel where you can hear all your team mates in your guild talking to each other. All said that they really enjoy talking to others online, "It's fun and seems normal practice now, like you chatting with a bunch of your mates". One participant said, "It is a great way of keeping in touch with your friends, as well as by making new friends overseas, it's similar to having a phone conversation except we are playing and interacting with each other all at once". Another stated, "We talk about everything and anything, sometimes it is easier to talk to your friends online than face-to-face". Other players laugh saying that they often prefer their online friends to their real life ones, or have more to talk about online than face-to-face.

In the solo interviews 50% of the participants put no to preferring their online identity, but after an involved discussion answers began to shift and change. "I don't prefer my online identity to my real life identity, but I do love to play my main character", explained one gamer. Another gamer added, "Ja, your main character/avatar is really a part of you, like an extended version". "It's like you put all your energy into one main character, and that is who everyone on your server (in your guild) knows you as- you don't get spoken to as your real life identity/name you get spoken to as if you are the character. Which of course you are because it's your character", says a participant. Another gamer explains, "I play with my other characters, when in solo play, but when I raid and part of my guild I always return to my main character, it is basically who I am in the game". When asked why this was the case all agreed that it was because you invest a lot in a specific character, it is normally the avatar they first started playing with, explaining that you become known as that character throughout the world. Some said it is almost like growing up with your character, advancing and achieving new things, the character develops as you do. Another gamer stated that his main avatar is kind of a digital version of what he would like to be or look like in a world like

WoW- his character represents what he wants others to see of him in the game. When talking about role-playing it was clear some participants were uncertain about what it meant. After a discussion, the participants were more inclined to say that they enjoy the role-playing aspect of the game as it offered a type of escape from reality. They all agreed that every time they play they are immersed in the character, as they are known as their characters not as their real-life selves. The role-playing concept also offers a channel of different experiences, where the gamer can challenge and experience new things in this digital universe through their character, for example- different group dynamics and how to communicate with team member as well as how to solve certain problems when in a particular situation. "The role-playing aspect allows you to play someone else or a different character in a safe environment without directly harming/influencing your real identity", adds a participant. All the gamers said that they love being part of the WoW community/world. For them it is a place to go to have fun and meet friends, "It is not just a game- it is another world which exists whether you are playing or not".

All the participants agreed that to some extent they act differently online than they do in real situations. One participant said, "I can say things online which I would never say to someone's face". When asked about playing different genders some of the participants said that they would never play a female gender on WoW because the female character seems weak and their armour is 'lame' and not appealing. When asked if this may be due to the concept of masculinity they all laughed, one gamer said, "Maybe, I just think the male characters' costumes look cooler". Another participant stated, "Probably, as during fight sequences you want to look strong and imposing". Then another gamer said, "I sometimes play a different gender character, my main character is male, but the female avatars have different qualities to their male opposite, which sometimes make things a little more interesting. Plus that game is not all about strength and power; it is also about technique and strategy". This was one aspect the whole group agreed upon. All like the theory of being able to transform, "it's epic". It is a way of freeing the imagination and the mind to new things, explained the participants.

This idea, of freeing the mind, leads the discussion into escapism. All the participants said that they use their main character the most, if not most of the time. Reasons for enjoying the game varied, "I enjoy the fantasy aspect of the game, it's like reading a book but you are the author". Another commented that, "I like the escapism the game offers, I am able to de-stress and not worry about my other problems". All stated that they are an active part of the

games online community, explaining that it is a place where they can read up about things get tips and comment on game issues. They explained that it is great being part of a community where they fit in, everyone has the same things in common and speak the language of the game.

When discussing the idea of annoying others in the game while playing one participant said he would not recommend it, “I used to ‘chirp’ (make annoying comments) while playing with my old guild, then the guild disbanded- this was not the problem. I soon joined a new guild- however one of the leaders was from my old guild and he is not too fond of me- due to my mouth. So whenever I have the chance to get an item out of the raid loot he turns me down and gives it to another player. But I suppose that is life, it is not what you know it is who you know”. They all agreed that they ask each other for help and advice, “We a family and a community, we help each other out”. Some of the players admitted to getting others to help them out or give them the loot. But when in a guild everyone normally get a turn to claim the loot.

One of the most dominant emotions I observed during the focus group was excitement. When talking about *WoW*, their characters, and friends online all of the boys in the focus group spoke with animated expressions and jesters. Revealing that *WoW* is their ‘happy place’, a place where they share fond memories and common interests.

# Chapter Five

## Discussion

Since the beginning of all things man has feared what they do not understand or cannot fully comprehend, this just so happens to be how we are wired. Mankind relishes the idea of change but also has major reservations about the implication of this evolution. This can be seen with the coming of the radio, then the TV and finally with the Internet. Then just as the dust began to settle MMORPGs became a reality; an online game which is able to offer the gamer so much more than just a tactical gaming experience. Players are now able to interact with other gamers around the world, be part of an online community, learn lessons, make friends and dabble in the concept of identity construction.

Everyday more and more virtual communities are formed and joined, it is no wonder that some theorists deem the Internet as having an affect on social practices. Role-playing and identity building form the basis of online interaction, which suggests that social patterns and communication channels are starting to shift- or have done so already. The people who use these online games are able to reinvent themselves digitally, projecting their ideas and fantasies online, living and existing on a digital plain. This brings us to the question of whether or not online games are indeed influencing the users' identity.

With the help of globalisation and the Internet, communities are now global as well as being digital, people who are members of online communities are able to attain a sense of being a world citizen. These hybrid environments change the patterns for social interaction. A user now no longer has to be face-to-face to communicate with someone, nor do they have to be in the same country or even show their real face for that matter. Identities become flexible and interchangeable, where anyone can live on a plain which has timeless time and placeless space (Rantanen, 2005). As these online communities offer no real restrictions they start to become very attractive and dependable even addictive. The research showed that the gamers were aware that the online game *WoW* was addictive; most of the participants had an average playing time of five to six hours per day if not more. A few of them revealed that they often play through the night, finishing at around 4am. It was obvious that it is sometimes a tiring hobby as they then have to either get up early for school or for university. Most of them said

that they log into the *WoW* community at every opportunity, playing the rest of the day and night- which often get them into trouble. A few boys stated that playing *WoW* is like an addiction; as they would rather play the game then do school work- some even admitted that they have even left studying for exams to the night before. It was evident that all the gamers are in fact aware that they are addicted. Some gamers even say that they feel obliged to play, but more to the point of needing to play in order to advance in the game as well as stay securely rooted in their guild. It is clear to see that most of the gamers also use the online community of *WoW* to stay in contact with friends, whether they be in the same town or on a different continent, socialising online is becoming a dominant form of communication.

Internet based sociability is leading to a culture which is increasingly dominated by virtual reality (Castells, 2001). *WoW* is only one such game that offers escapism, role-playing, identity experimentation, as well as an interactive social part. Online friendships replace real world friends as the gamer plays compulsively, isolating themselves from social contact and focusing almost entirely on in game achievements. Some of the data collected from the non-gamers showed that they felt that sometimes the gamer can be very anti-social, isolating themselves in their room for hours while playing *WoW*, talking only to in-game friends. MMORPGs have a strong multi-faceted appeal to a diverse demographic motivating individual user's in different ways (Yee, 2008). Some gamers participate in online games to make friends and form supportive social networks while others use the environment to become powerful through the achievement goals- providing them with a self validating community. Research done by Yee (2006) showed that female players form stronger friendships than male players, but female players are not significantly more emotionally invested in the environment than male players. Yet the data collected from the small case study done in this dissertation revealed that the male player sometimes form stronger bond/ friendships with other gamers than the female players do, and on top of this the male players are more emotionally invested in the environment and the achievements which come with the territory. Most of the gamers are emotionally invested in these online environments because they are able to derive salient experiences from them, and the relationships they form in these online games are comparable to their real-life relationships (Yee, 2008). Some participant even went so far as to say that they could relate better to their online friends as well as tell them more intermit details about their lives.

The research done in this dissertation offers only a small insight into the world of online communities and how the gamers feel about them. For example we know that most if not all online games are achievement based, but the participants were clear on the fact that it is not about gaining as much as possible, but more about being part of a team. However on the other hand some players felt that it was the achievement system that kept them interested in the game, “It provides extra features and challenges to the game”. Players gain achievement points for doing a variety of tasks that range from completing quests to exploring the environment. A gamer stated, “With my busy timetable I find it hard to raid at night. I had to quit my guild as they did hardcore raids three nights a week, and I was not able to put the necessary play time in. Now I just do the solo achievements side of *WoW* as I can only play for three to four hours a day”. Many of the players of these online games get hooked on in-game achievement, which results in them wanting more and more, consequentially upping their play time and dedication to the game. Dr. Kouros Dini (2008) elucidates that,

“We do have a need for feelings of success. Achievements are unique and difficult enough that most players will only choose a small handful and distinguish themselves that way. This is the same sort of process that happens in deciding who we want to be as we grow”.

This can be seen when the player chooses what race and class their avatar will be, will it be a warrior or a healer for example- then the gamer will concentrate wholly on those characteristics, becoming the master of their characters set skills. This then grants them respect from their gamer peers.

All the gamers agree that it is always nice to feel powerful and in control in the game. Some explained that it is like an ego boost, “When I get something that no one else could get or achieve higher, I feel good and happy- there is respect that comes with being a good gamer”. A few participants said that they feel like leaders in the game- more confident and in control of the situation. This type of game can offer the player more than just a fun experience, but a place where they can feel good about themselves, increasing their own self worth by impressing others who play the same game. On the other hand, these types of achievements can be seen as offering the user a false sense of accomplishment. What help could in-game achievements possibly have in real-life? Such accomplishments may seem frivolous and intangible to outsiders, but to the gamer they are meaningful and fulfilling.



While decoding the data collected during the interviews and focus group, it was clear that the gamers are highly invested in the game to the point where their behaviour and mood even change when talking about the game and their experiences in it. Most of the gamers showed signs of heightened emotion when talking to each other about their characters and achievements, excitement and happiness being the two key emotions. Online games may give the impression that they offer an empty sense of accomplishments, where the gamer is actually achieving nothing of importance, yet these online games could aid the user in other areas of their life. For example, one of the non-gamers said, "My brother used to be a shy reserved kid, now he seems to have come out of his shell and is more confident". Another participant talks about his brother saying, "He seems to be more self assured and willing to participate and talk openly with others". People work for intangible rewards all the time, it makes them happy. Why then is it so unbelievable that a game cannot aid a user in real life. One boy said, "I feel more like myself in the game", this was discussed further in the focus group and it was revealed that it is more about who they would like to be, for example their characters are strong and powerful, able to undertake any task. Therefore their digital avatar becomes a digital image of what they would want to be.

The research showed that the gamers felt as though the game taught them things, like how to be more confident as well as how to communicate with others in order to achieve their goals, as well as being more self assured. Dr. Dini (2008) adds that essentially online games are entertaining brain exercises. The game teaches each user lessons, like how to communicate with teammates, being empathic with other players and trying to understand their next moves, exercising logic skills to solve puzzles. Good learning requires that learners feel like active agents (producers) not just passive recipients (consumers) says Gee (2008). This is probably why the game *WoW* is so popular, as the players make things happen, the players do not just consume what the author (game designer) has placed before them. Computer/video games are interactive. The player does something and the game does something back that encourages the player to act again. Gee (2008) states that in good games, players feel that their actions and decisions - not just the designers' actions and decisions - are co-creating the world they are in and the experiences they are having. What the player does matters, and each player, based on their own decisions and actions, takes a different trajectory through the game. Like in the game of *WoW* the players can take different routes and make his own decisions in the game.

Gee (2008) believes that people cannot be agents of their own learning if they cannot make decisions about how their learning will work. At the same time, they should be able (and encouraged) to try new styles. Good games achieve this goal in one (or both) of two ways. In some games, players are able to customise the game play to fit their learning and playing styles. In others, the game is designed to allow different styles of learning and playing to work, states Gee (2008). In *WoW* for example, players can customise avatars to their own interests and desires, thus learning to achieve what they want through different strategies. Deep learning requires an extended commitment, and such a commitment is powerfully recruited when people take on a new identity they value and in which they become heavily invested, good games are able to offer a player identities that trigger a deep investment on the part of the player. They achieve this goal in one of two ways. Some games offer a character so intriguing that players want to inhabit the character and can readily project their own fantasies, desires and pleasures onto the character (Gee, 2008; 207). Other games offer a relatively empty character whose traits the player must determine, but such a way that the player can create a deep and consequential life history in the game world for the character (Gee, 2008; 207). *WoW* is one such game which offers blank slate characters for which the player can build a deeply involving life and history, other players are able to recognise other players through their unique avatars.

The frameworks which give individuals stable anchorage in the social world are changing; the way we think about the concept of identity paves the way to how we think about whom we are (Hall, 1995). Bell (2001) describes identity as being a process, which I am inclined to agree with, as a child could be pushed into a particular identity by something that may have transpired in his childhood. Perhaps then a game like *WoW* could help restructure his identity into something the child wants to be or sees himself as. Weeks (1995) also wrote about identity being constructed rather than essential, which leave the identity to be made and remade as often as the user wants. Hall's (2000) later position was that identity can be multiply constructed across different discourses, making everyone's identity in a constant state of change and transformation. Hall (2000) believes that people form temporary attachments to a subject position which causes a shift in one's identity. Giddens (1991) adds to this by stating that identity is a lifelong project to be worked on. In today's society the self is fluid and fragmented and has a new capacity to make itself over, to reshape and restyle elements of identity. Hall (2000) agrees, however he links it to the idea that when the youth

play online games their identity is based on their performance and projection of their online image. Which also be seen in *WoW*, as achievement is a rather powerful element throughout the game, the gamer feels elated when achieving higher than another player. The player is then even praised and given higher recognition for the in-game performance.

Gauntlett (2000) reflects that the relationship between representation and identity needs to be considered as do the implications for rendering the self in text only media. The youth is now in total control over the production of their personal character. People are affected by what is around them making identity a networked culture which acts with a lot less restraint than before. Castells (1997) adds to this by pointing out that the youth no longer passively accept traditional ways of identity construction, but reflectively develop their own self identity- this is more popular with teenagers as they are at the exploring phase in their lives. On the other hand Turkle (1995) and Robins (1998) believe that there is the possible danger of cyber activities becoming a substitute for real life. Furthermore this type of online social interaction could cause serious pitfalls of mixing technology and human relationships, states Rheingold (1994). Even though this techno-reality is offering identity freedom and choice the user is still interacting in an artificial domain. A concerned parent felt, "If a game like *WoW* causes a lack of 'real-world' socializing as well as a reduction in physical activities it could lead to a real problem". Yet another parent stated that if her child has a clear balance between the game and his real life she sees no issues with allowing him to experiment with identity construction and communicate to others online. On the up side virtual reality is causing users to re-evaluate their identities, they are now able to see themselves differently through their second self-on the computer (Turkle, 1998).

Given human creativity, if learners face problems early on that are too free-form or too complex, they often form creative hypotheses about how to solve these problems, but hypotheses that do not work well for later problems, even for simpler ones, let alone harder ones (Gee, 2004). Therefore problems in good games are well ordered- in particular, early problems are designed to lead players to form good guesses about how to proceed when they face harder problems later on in the game (Gee, 2008; 207). Andrea diSessa (2000) states that learning works best when new challenges are pleasantly frustrating in the sense of being felt by learners to be at the outer edge of, but within, their regime of competence. The challenges will feel hard but doable, allowing the gamer to feel that their efforts are paying off in the sense that they can see, even when they fail, how and if they are making progress

(Gee, 2008). One of the players explained, “When you go into a raid and fail, the team will then regroup and discuss a better strategy in order to achieve the end goal. Sometime you can talk to other guild members and get advice and help when doing a solo challenge, it is all about helping each other out and learning from others as well as your own mistakes”. Expertise is formed in any area by repeated cycles of learners practicing skills until they are nearly automatic, then having those skills fail in ways that causes the learners to have to think again and learn anew (Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1993). Then they practice this new skill set to an automatic level of mastery only to see it, too, eventually be challenged (Gee, 2008: 207), in fact this is the whole point of levels and bosses. Each level exposes the player to new challenges and allows them to get good at solving them. Gee (2008) says that only then are they able to move to the next level when they are then confronted by a boss that makes them use these skills together with new ones they have to learn, and integrate with the old ones to beat the boss. Failure works very differently in good computer games then it does in school, for example. Gee (2008) believes that in good computer games, players are encouraged to take risks, explore, and try new things, because the price of failure is not terribly high. If the player fails, then they can start back at the checkpoint. Furthermore, failure in games is seen by players as crucial learning; no player expects or even wants to beat a boss on the first try. Rather, the player expects to learn from failing to kill the boss initially what patterns to look for and how to do it better on the next chance (Gee, 2008; 207).

Virtual communities are social aggregations that emerge from web based sociability. A game like *WoW* has the potential of allowing the user to form webs of personal relationships. Members of these online communities normally share interests and common knowledge about the game and characters. These online communities, like *WoW*, offers the user a sense of belonging where as real-life communities have become somewhat of a relic, so people find themselves looking for an alternate form of a community, and most of the time they find them in cyberspace. All these communities are imagined and held together by the members who believe in them. Virtual communities are interactive and are more about socialising than anything else and as they are globally interactive it is easier for those who belong to them, to count themselves part of a global society (Slevin, 2000). In a real community every player plays their part. Each guild is made up of a group of different characters, as each character has a unique set of skills. Without all the different characters’ elements a guild would be less successful during a raid (Gee, 2008; 204). This allows each

gamer to feel needed and part of something- part of a community, a community with a common goal and interest. In their online community they ask each other for help and advice, “We a family and a community, we help each other out”. After a raid the loot is shared around the group, everyone gets a turn to claim something new. The gamers integrate and share, organised around a primary affiliation to their common goals and using their cultural and social differences as strategic recourses, not as barriers (Gee, 2008).

For the most part gamers find it is easier to communicate with others online, as they feel safe behind their avatar, “You can be yourself as well as someone else”, explained a *WoW* gamer. It is an enjoyed practice to communicate online to their friends in all parts of the world- not just through text based communication but also via voice communication software like Ventrilo and Skype which allows for real time voice chats when communicating in a group, “It’s fun and seems normal practice now, like you chatting with a bunch of your mates”. One participant said, “It is a great way of keeping in touch with your friends, as well as by making new friends overseas, it’s similar to having a phone conversation except we are playing and interacting with each other all at once”. Another gamer stated, “We talk about everything and anything, sometimes it is easier to talk to your friends online then face-to-face”. It went so far as one player laughed, saying that he often prefers speaking to his online friends to his real life ones, or has more to talk about online then face-to-face. *WoW* offers each player the chance to form real world friendships, international real world friendships.

A seventeen year old student living in South Africa explains that since he started playing *WoW* his online circle of friends has expanded; he now has friends from the UK, Iceland and even Demark. He says, “Even though we talk most of the time about the game we also talk about our lives and who we are and the places we live in, it is interesting discovering how other people live in different countries across the globe”. Evidently these online communities are global villages offering users more than just a game. Gamers in the *WoW* community have common interests and share knowledge of the game, which they share and swop with each other. Producing a community of people who want to be there, interacting with people who like the same things they enjoy, and letting the user feel secure, respected and comfortable in his or her surroundings- even though it is only a digital experience.

However magical this may sound Rheingold (2007) believes that each player needs to be careful not to feel that it is the same as a real community. Castoriadis (1991) adds to this by suggesting that this type of online community with its digital communication could cause the erosion of face-to-face interaction. A non-gamer participant felt that, this type of game could have an effect on the relationships of those who play it- as the gamer tends to alienate real-life friends for the comfort of their in-game ones. Another participant stated, “My brother is sometimes very anti-social, he will sit in his room for hours playing *WoW*, talking to only his in-game friends”. A gamers parent said, “I believe that this type of gaming could only have an effect on the gamer if he lives more in the game then in real-life, by this I mean mainly socialising and communicating with the friends he has online”. It is clear that onlookers of those who play the game feel as though an over indulgence in a game such as *WoW* could have some serious consequences in what happens out of the game. One non-gamer even stated that she had noticed a steady decrease in her brothers’ interest in his studies to the point where his grades went down. It appears that in game achievements and friendships start to become more appealing than real world ones. Turkle (1995) explains that this allows for new ways to look at identity as new social codes are made. A hunger for community and the sense of belonging has lead to customized neighbourhoods, where the user or gamers share cultural practices, even though it is a digital community it is still a ‘real’ community. All the members of these communities share part of their identity with others, having something in common with each other. These new digital communities possibly could cause erosion of the already existent social codes and systems, as the users retreat into a fantasy world (Robins, 1999), but then again a whole new system of social codes is appearing. We have moved into a digital age where the computer and technology is king, and those who criticise it are the ones who are not a part of it or do not understand what it could offer.

In cyberspace, we chat and argue, engage in intellectual intercourse, perform acts of commerce, exchange knowledge, share emotional support, make plans, brainstorm, gossip, feud, fall in love, find friends and lose them, play games and mega-games, flirt, create a little high art and lot of idle talk. We do everything people do when they get together, but we do it with words on computer screens, leaving our bodies behind, millions of us have already built communities where our identities commingle and interact electronically independent of local time or location (Rheingold, 1999; 414).

*WoW* is a virtual community, in addition to playing the game itself and conversing on discussion forums provided by Blizzard, players are able to send in artwork and comic strips.

Moreover Blizzard encourages this online community by offering in-game and out-of-game prizes, as well as highlighting community events and occurrences. Blizzard has also provided incentives for introducing new members to *WoW*<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>31</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/worldofwarcraft>

# Chapter 6

## **Conclusion**

It is clear that the ‘computer geek’ stereotype is now null and void. This is due to the fact that most of the players of *WoW* (in this research group) are athletes who play copious sports, with the exception of two who do not play sport but enjoy reading and creative writing. A few out of the group also have healthy relationships away from the game-revealing that the game is not all consuming. Each player pays a fee once a month in order to be part of the online community of *WoW*, this brings us back to the notion that belonging to an online community and playing the game for whatever reasons is an elite activity. Not everyone has the luxury of being able to pay a fee in order to play a game/belong to the community. This is not the idea behind this dissertation, but it does give a small insight to the fact that there is a digital divide, as not everyone is able to access this type of technology. This adds yet another layer of unattainable desires to cover the already considerable material deprivation many already have to endure. This factor is like an ‘iceberg’ to effective development, as it creates many inequalities, and information divides. With no access to these online communities many less fortunate will never have the ability to be a global citizen in an information society (Light, 2005) - even if some only see it as a game. *WoW* really is a global village, a persistent world which exists without the gamer, and most of the users spend more than 30 hours a week in these games interacting with the other gamers. In these MMORPGs the first thing which is created is the user’s identity- first they decide on a name, what their avatar will look like and what it will be able to do. These roles give the users new stages on which to exercise new identities, and their identities affirm the scenario and illusion of the game (Rheingold, 1994).

From the research gathered it was evident the participants felt it is simpler to communicate with others online, as one is safe behind the avatar- as a player, you can be yourself as well as someone else. The participants explained that communication is text based but they also talk to each other online, this is called vent. It is an open channel where you can hear all your team mates in your guild talking to each other. All said that they really enjoy talking to others online, “It’s fun and seems normal practice now, like you chatting with a bunch of your mate”. One participant said, “It is a great way of keeping in touch with



your friends, as well as by making new friends overseas, it's similar to having a phone conversation except we are playing and interacting with each other all at once". Another stated, "We talk about everything and anything, sometimes it is easier to talk to your friends online then face-to-face". Other players laugh saying that they often prefer their online friends to their real life ones, or have more to talk about online than face-to-face. Thompson (1995) refers to the globalization of communication by pointing out that one of the salient features of communication in the modern world is that it takes place on a scale that is increasingly global. It is apparent that *WoW* is a global communication entity, as people who would never have the chance to interact are now able to; which in turn may be aiding in the development of media and communication affecting traditional patterns of social interaction (Thompson, 1995).

With this research I set out to discover if a gamers' identity can change or be constructed online, after looking at the research done one can say that these online games act as a tool which is able to enhance the users' identity rather than hinder it. Every user has already formulated a constant identity; however these identities can often be guarded and held back. Many people get scared about showing others their true self for fear of being ostracised or ridiculed, people want to fit in, as being different is sometimes frowned upon by peers when in your teenage years. An online game, such as *WoW*, can offer the user the ability to be comfortable with being who they are, permitting their real identity to thrive, even if it is only in a digital world. Although these digital worlds are not 'real' in all sense of the word they are not non-existent. This means that they are places which exist, people interact with others everyday in these virtual communities- persistent worlds which act not only as a gaming environment but a place where the user can comfortably be who they are without the constrains of societal norms. The avatar is one of the most important aspects of the virtual community. The gamer is invested emotionally in their character; this is because in all intensive purposes the avatar is a digital creation of the gamer. Each gamer gets to choose what they want their characters' race to be and what class they will belong to, this can be from a priest to a warrior. In the game, through their avatar they get to choose who they actually want to be, and seen as. Most of the participants in the study explained that they have on average of up to five different characters, but always come back to or have the most game play with their main character- the character they began with. One of the gamers explained that he is a level 80 character, which is the highest level in the game and his main

character is a 'Human Paladin' named 'Dartharm', he also has seven other characters on his account. When creating a character the player has the option of choosing from ten different races and nine different character classes, in choosing what they want to be and look like the gamer is provide the freedom to be exactly what they want- even though it may only be a digital representation. This gamer explains that his 'Paladin' avatar is a healer who helps other players when they have been injured, "I think my character is a kind of mimic of myself in a way, I guess. I have never really been a fighter (Warrior) I'm more of a protector". Most participants elucidated that they did not really have a hard time deciding what their character would be; they explained it as being an easy decision, "You kind of go in knowing what you are or are going to be". Another participant, a seventeen year old student, says that he has a Night Elf as his main character who is classed as a Warrior. His avatars name is 'Thorfax' and is on level 80, "I enjoy playing as a Night Elf as I am able to do certain things that other characters cannot. Thorfax is my main character and I am known as Thorfax to the other gamers".

Playing these online games allows the user to be who they really are and who they want others to see them as. Their online identity/avatar is an amalgamation of all their strongest qualities which come together to form a character (digital representation of themselves) who they are proud of and enjoy being immersed in. In a virtual community a follower can be a leader, a victim can be a bully, a cripple can be an athlete, a geek can be the jock, etc. - their earth bound bodies have no place on the digital plain, it is a place where they can reinvent themselves or simply be who they truly are without feeling shy or embarrassed. If anything, online virtual games enhance a user's identity, allowing it to thrive in a community where they will not be judged and criticised for being who they are. These games could even act as a tool to placate teenagers who are having a hard time.

Evidently a game like *WoW* does become an addiction, an addiction of being able to talk and behave as they want. It also becomes a comfort zone and a place where they can feel safe. The non-gamers even stipulated that they had noticed that the gamers they knew all seemed to have gained in confidence. If they are persistent enough sometimes that digital identity spills over into real-life, not in the sense that they are living as their online character, but in the sense that they are letting themselves be more confident in their own skin. It would seem that a game like *WoW* can be used as a teaching tool for teenagers who are introverts, providing a non-threatening out let for them to blossom. The user learns to co-exist with

others, work as a team while bonding over shared experiences- all the time showing their real personalities to others through their avatar. By building a character it allows the user to open up to the world around them, learning to be confident and interactive- used as a type of therapy tool. More often than not a gamer's online digital identity is in fact their real life identity just enhanced. There is a very social nature to this environment and the players are drawn to it to socialise and interact with others who accept them for who they are.

In the end a game like *WoW* can teach the user a lot about what it means to be part of a community as well as themselves. These social environments provide a safe place for not just teenagers but users of all ages to experiment with different sides of their personality. A game like *WoW* can also teach the user life lessons like how to work as a team and understand different levels of respect which come from hard work and achievement as well as teach them something about themselves and what they want to be. Enhancing their identity rather than holding it back, this type of game is about letting the user discover themselves through strategies and friendships. Used in the correct manner a game like *WoW* can be an asset to the user, providing a network of culture, friendship, exploration, experimentation and global citizenship. One of the most dominant emotions I observed during the focus group was excitement. When talking about *WoW*, their characters, and friends online all of the boys in the focus group spoke with animated expressions and jesters. Revealing that *WoW* is their 'happy place', a place where they share fond memories and common interests.

We live in a society where concepts of the self, community and "what is right and wrong" are constantly changing. This makes it particularly challenging for young people to construct a sense of self and to identify their most cherished values. Online games and virtual communities do have their pros and cons and can be argued both ways, but in the end if the gamer has a healthy balance between their real life and their online life being part of such an environment will not damage the user. Social patterns of communication will inevitably change, and those who embrace it may be the better for it.

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UNIVERSITY OF KWAZULU-NATAL

**ETHICAL CLEARANCE APPLICATION FORM  
(SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES)**

**Inquiries:**

**Ms Phumelele Ximba**

**Tel: 260 3587**

**Email: [ximbap@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:ximbap@ukzn.ac.za)**

**PLEASE NOTE THAT THE FORM MUST BE COMPLETED IN TYPED SCRIPT; HANDWRITTEN APPLICATIONS WILL NOT BE CONSIDERED**

**SECTION 1: PERSONAL DETAILS**

**1.1 Full Name & Surname of Applicant :** Chanel French

**1.2 Title (Ms/ Mr/ Mrs/ Dr/ Professor etc) :** Ms

**1.3 Student Number :** 204510560

**Staff Number :** NA

**1.4 Discipline :** Media and Communication

**1.5 School :** Culture, communication and Media Studies

**1.6 Faculty :** Humanities

**1.7 Campus :** Howard College

**1.8 Existing Qualifications :** BA Honours

**1.9 Proposed Qualification for Project :** MA



## 2. Contact Details

Tel. No. : 031 767 0037

Cell. No. : 083 731 1065

e-mail : 204510560 ukzn.ac.za

## 3. SUPERVISOR/ PROJECT LEADER DETAILS

NAME	EL. & FAX	MAIL	DEPARTMENT / INSTITUTION	QUALIFICATIONS
3.1 Prof. R.E. Teer-Tomaselli	031 260 2505	teertoma@ukzn.ac.za	CCMS	PHD

## SECTION 2: PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Please do *not* provide your full research proposal here: what is required is a short project description of not more than two pages that gives, under the following headings, a brief overview spelling out the background to the study, the key questions to be addressed, the participants (or subjects) and research site, including a full description of the sample, and the research approach/ methods

### 2.1 Project title

Life in the game: Identity in the age of online computer games.

Fun and games: a case study of virtual reality, identity and the virtual community.

### 2.2 Location of the study (where will the study be conducted)

Howard College

### 2.3 Objectives of and need for the study

(Set out the major objectives and the theoretical approach of the research, indicating briefly, why you believe the study is needed.)

This dissertation will offer a basic explanation of the Internet and globalization which lends a hand to those wanting to escape into parallel online worlds, where they are able to reinvent themselves digitally. This will lead into a discussion whether, and if so, how virtual reality online gaming influences identity transformation. Theorists such as Howard Rheingold (1994), Sherry Turkle (2001), Kevin Robins (1998) and Nick Yee (2008) discuss how virtual reality gaming provides a window to a different world, where players can experiment with their identities, as well as interact other gamers around the world; all of which aid in the shift of normal social and communication patterns.

### 2.4 Questions to be answered in the research

(Set out the critical questions which you intend to answer by undertaking this research.)

This research problem proposes to address the issues surrounding identity, virtual reality and the virtual community. The following key-questions are essential for the consideration of this main topic:

- 5) What is a virtual reality online gaming community?
- 6) How do these communities constitute themselves?
- 7) What are the types of identities students are creating for themselves online?
- 8) What can be observed when analysing a virtual community?

## **2.5 Research approach/ methods**

(This section should explain how you will go about answering the critical questions which you have identified in Section 4. Set out the approach within which you will work, and indicate in step-by-step point form the methods you will use in this research in order to answer the critical questions.

For a study that involves surveys, please append a provisional copy of the questionnaire to be used. The questionnaire should show how informed consent is to be achieved as well as indicate to respondents that they may withdraw their participation at any time, should they so wish.)

An empirical study will be conducted, one that analyses existing textual data on the various relevant theories on the concept of identity, virtual reality and the virtual community. Primary data will be collected by means of interviews, focus groups and personal learning logs. This dissertation will be informed by qualitative research and techniques as it focuses on descriptions of people's representations of what is occurring in their world. This research method will include descriptive material- such as extracts from interviews and focus groups.

### Interviews:

Twenty interviews<sup>32</sup> will be conducted which will consist of a snowball sample group of Durban teenagers, ages 15 to 18. Ten teenagers will be interviewed who play virtual reality online computer games and the other ten interviews will be from those who do not play online games but knows someone who does. The interviews will enable for a personal face-to-face discussion with the

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<sup>32</sup> Interview example sheet under appendix one.

teenagers. Open questions will be asked, which in turn will give me a broader idea about their ideas and feelings towards the online game and other issues. The point of these interviews will enable the teenagers to think and talk for longer and so show their feelings and views more fully (Wisker, 2001: 140) without the influence of others. Notes will be taken throughout the interview.

Focus Groups:

The focus group will be a small group of ten teenagers from the interviewed group, five who play the online game and five who do not. The focus group will enable close scrutiny and lengthy discussion. This will be done in the hope to generate debate and different opinions from those who play the online games and those who do not. It will also be taken into consideration that due to the presence of other people the teenager’s responses and feelings may change- reshaping their answers as others speak (Gina Wisker, 2001: 141). The focus group questions will be the same as the interview questions- but will allow for a greater debate among the teenagers. This will enable me to examine if certain people’s opinions change due to the fact that other people will be present. Notes will be taken throughout the focus group.

**2.6 Proposed work plan**

Set out your intended plan of work for the research, indicating important target dates necessary to meet your proposed deadline.

STEPS	DATES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Hand in proposal, research ethics application form and supervisor contract.</b></li> <li>• <b>Read up further for literature review.</b></li> <li>• <b>Read up further on theoretical frameworks.</b></li> <li>• <b>Gather, collate and organise all</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• September 2008</li> <li>• October- November 2008</li> <li>• December 2008- January 2009</li> </ul>



Persons who are intellectually or mentally impaired		X
Persons who have experienced traumatic or stressful life circumstances		X
Persons who are HIV positive		X
Persons highly dependent on medical care		X
Persons in dependent or unequal relationships		X
Persons in captivity		X
Persons living in particularly vulnerable life circumstances		X

### QUESTION 2.

<b>Will data collection involve any of the following:</b>	<b>YES</b>	<b>NO</b>
Access to confidential information without prior consent of participants		X
Participants being required to commit an act which might diminish self-respect or cause them to experience shame, embarrassment, or regret		X
Participants being exposed to questions which may be experienced as stressful or upsetting, or to procedures which may have unpleasant or harmful side effects		X
The use of stimuli, tasks or procedures which may be experienced as stressful, noxious, or unpleasant		X
Any form of deception		X

### QUESTION 3.

<b>Will any of the following instruments be used for purposes of data collection:</b>	<b>YES</b>	<b>NO</b>
Questionnaire		X

Survey schedule		X
Interview schedule	X	
Psychometric test		X
Other/ equivalent assessment instrument	X	

- See appendix 1 for an outline of the interview.

#### QUESTION 4.

<b>Will the autonomy of participants be protected through the use of an informed consent form, which specifies (in language that respondents will understand):</b>	<b>YES</b>	<b>NO</b>
The nature and purpose/s of the research	X	
The identity and institutional association of the researcher and supervisor/project leader and their contact details	X	
The fact that participation is voluntary	X	
That responses will be treated in a confidential manner		
Any limits on confidentiality which may apply	X	
That anonymity will be ensured where appropriate (e.g. coded/ disguised names of participants/ respondents/ institutions)	X	
The fact that participants are free to withdraw from the research at any time without any negative or undesirable consequences to themselves	X	
The nature and limits of any benefits participants may receive as a result of their participation in the research	X	
Is a copy of the informed consent form attached?	X	

- See appendix 3 for the informed consent form.

**QUESTION 5.**

Have efforts been made to obtain informed permission for the research from appropriate authorities and gate-keepers (including caretakers or legal guardians in the case of minor children)?	YES  X	NO
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**QUESTION 6.**

<p><b>How will the research data be secured, stored and/or disposed of?</b></p> <p>The research leader ( Prof. R.E. Teer-Tomaselli) undertakes to store the research data securely for a period of five years after completion of the project.</p>
----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

**QUESTION 7.**

<p><b>In the subsequent dissemination of your research findings – in the form of the finished thesis, oral presentations, publication etc. – how will anonymity/ confidentiality be protected?</b></p> <p>No names required, anonymity guaranteed.</p>
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#### SECTION 4: FORMALISATION OF THE APPLICATION

I have familiarised myself with the University's Code of Conduct for Research and undertake to comply with it. The information supplied above is correct to the best of my knowledge.

.....

.....

**SIGNATURE OF APPLICANT**

**DATE**

DATE: .....

**SIGNATURE OF SUPERVISOR/ PROJECT LEADER :** \_\_\_\_\_

#### RECOMMENDATION OF FACULTY RESEARCH COMMITTEE

**FULL NAME :** \_\_\_\_\_ **(CHAIRPERSON)**

**DATE :**

.....

**SIGNATURE :** \_\_\_\_\_

#### RECOMMENDATION OF UNIVERSITY RESEARCH ETHICS SUB-COMMITTEE (HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES)

**FULL NAME :** \_\_\_\_\_ **(CHAIRPERSON)**

**DATE :**

.....

**SIGNATURE :** \_\_\_\_\_

Appendix One

**Gamers Questioner:**

Name:

Age:

Gender:

Occupational status:

Do you/did you play any sport at school? (If so which one)

---

What are some of your hobbies?

---

Do you play or make use of any virtual reality desktop games, if so which one?

---

Do you have to subscribe every month in order to play the game, if so how much?

---

On average how much time to you spend playing this online game each day?

---

Do you ever feel obligated to play? (Give example)

---

Do you find this type of virtual gaming addictive or is it more the interaction with other gamers which holds the appeal?

---

Do your friends and family complain about the amount of time you spend online?

---

Give a short description of your online identity/character. (Class, race, level, rank etc)

---

---

---

Is there any specific reason behind the creation/ appearance of this character/virtual identity?

---

---

---

### **Achievement**

Is it important to you to obtain the best gear available in the game?

- Yes
- No

Do you try to gain as much as possible on each level?

- Yes
- No

Do you like to feel powerful in the game?

- Yes
- No

Are you a group leader?

- Yes
- No

Have you learnt anything about yourself from playing the game?

- Yes
- No

Are you able to better understand group dynamics after playing the game?

- Yes
- No

### **Relationships**

Do you find it easier to communicate with other gamers online?

- Yes
- No

Do you have friends in other countries due to your interaction with this game?

- Yes
- No

Are your chats with other gamers text based or verbal?

- text
- verbal
- both

Do you have meaningful conversations online with fellow gamers?

- Yes
- No

Do you talk to other gamers about personal issues?

- Yes
- No

Do in game friends offer support, whether game related or personal?

- Yes
- No

Do you sometimes prefer your online friends to real-life ones?

- Yes
- No

**Immersion**

What is your cyberspace identity? (Name & Race) \_\_\_\_\_

How many online identities do you have? \_\_\_\_\_

Do you prefer your online identity? If so why? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Do you belong to a guild? (If so which one)

\_\_\_\_\_

Do you like to try out new roles and personalities in the game?

- Yes
- No

Do you like to role-play (become immersed in the character)?

- Yes
- No

Do you like feeling apart of this world?

- Yes
- No

### **Identity**

Do you act differently online? (E.g. are you more aggressive, more of a leader etc)

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Do you ever play as a different gender? (If so why)

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Do you act differently when using different avatars?

---

---

Do you like the concept of being able to transform?

---

---

What is your avatar dressed like? \_\_\_\_\_

---

When applying different sets of armor or dress to your character, does it change the way you feel and play in any way?

---

---

---

**Escapism**

Which character/ identity do you use the most? (And why?)

---

---

Why do you enjoy this type of game?

---

- I like the escapism aspect of the game.



- Playing lets me forget my real life problems.
- Helps me to de- stress and relax.

Do you just play the game or are you apart of the games online community?

---

What do you experience whilst being a part of the virtual community?

---

---

---

Do you find this medium provides a freedom of expression, more so then that of face to face communication? Why?

---

---

**Manipulation**

Do you like to taunt and annoy other players?

- Yes
- No

Do you often ask other players for help?

- Yes

- No

Do you like to dominate over other players?

- Yes
- No

Do you ever manipulate other players to doing what you want them to do?

- Yes
- No

Do you ever take all the gear or prizes for yourself?

- Yes
- No

**Non-gamer questioner**

Name:

Age:

Gender:

Occupational status:

Do you/did you play any sport at school? (If so which one) (Do not fill in if you are a parent)

---

What are some of your hobbies?

---

Do you play or make use of any virtual reality desktop games, if so which one and why?

---

---

If not, have you ever thought of joining an online gaming community? (Give reason for answer).

---

---

What is your opinion towards online games?

---

---

Do you have a friend or family member who plays an online game? How does this make you feel?

---

---

---

Do you think this is a healthy hobby or potentially destructive? (Give reason)

---

---

If you are a parent to someone who plays WoW do you pay for them to play every month?

---

Have you ever witnessed a change in the gamer during or after playing the game? (Give example)

---

---

---

Have you noticed a shift in their personality? (Give example)

---

---

Do you think this type of game has had any type of affect on the gamer's real-life work/focus friendships/relationships etc?

---

---

## Informed Consent Form

*(To be read out by researcher before the beginning of the interview/Focus Group Discussion/Questionnaire. One copy of the form to be left with the respondent; one copy to be signed by the respondent and kept by the researcher.)*

I will be doing research on a project entitled: **To investigate whether virtual reality gaming promotes a healthy escape from real life or does it eventually lead to the dissemination of the erosion of the social fabric we call communication?** The aim of this project is to discover whether these virtual reality games/cultures lead to a loss of communication and relationship skills in the real world through the form of addiction and the loss of one's own identity to that of the cyber identity or character.

I Chanel French (Student No: 204510560) will be in charge this project and I will oversee all the research collected during this period. This project is supervised by Professor Ruth Teer-Tomaselli at the School of Culture, Communication and Media Studies, University of KwaZulu-Natal. Should you have any questions my contact details are:

Culture, Communication and Media Studies,

University of KwaZulu-Natal,

Howard College Campus

Durban, 4041.

Tel: 27 031 260 2505.

Cell Number and Email:

Chanel: 083 731 1065 email: [204510560@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:204510560@ukzn.ac.za)

Thank you for agreeing to take part in the project. Before we start I would like to emphasize that:

- your participation is entirely voluntary;
- you are free to refuse to answer any question;
- you are free to withdraw at any time.
- your decision not to participate will not result in any form of disadvantage.

The information you provide in the questionnaire/Interview/Focus Group Discussion (researcher to tick where necessary) will be kept strictly confidential and will only be available to members of the research team. Excerpts from the Interview/Focus group discussions may be made part of the final research report but your identity will not be reflected in the report. The research leader (Prof. R.E. Teer-Tomaselli) will undertake to store the research data securely for a period of five years after completion of the projects.

You are also requested to respect the confidentiality of all discussions.

If you give consent to participate in the study, please sign this form to show that you have read the contents

I.....(Full names) hereby confirm that I understand the contents of this document and the nature of the research project, and I consent to participating in the research project.

I understand that I am at liberty to withdraw from the project at any time should I so desire.

Signature of the Participant.....Date.....

Appendix C

**Gamers Questioner:**

Name:

Age:

Gender:

Occupational status:

Do you/did you play any sport at school? (If so which one)

---

What are some of your hobbies?

---

Do you play or make use of any virtual reality desktop games, if so which one?

---

Do you have to subscribe every month in order to play the game, if so how much?

---



On average how much time to you spend playing this online game each day?

---

Do you ever feel obligated to play? (Give example)

---

Do you find this type of virtual gaming addictive or is it more the interaction with other gamers which holds the appeal?

---

Do your friends and family complain about the amount of time you spend online?

---

Give a short description of your online identity/character. (Class, race, level, rank etc)

---

---

---

Is there any specific reason behind the creation/ appearance of this character/virtual identity?

---

---

---

### **Achievement**

Is it important to you to obtain the best gear available in the game?

- Yes
- No

Do you try to gain as much as possible on each level?

- Yes
- No

Do you like to feel powerful in the game?

- Yes
- No

Are you a group leader?

- Yes
- No

Have you learnt anything about yourself from playing the game?

- Yes
- No

Are you able to better understand group dynamics after playing the game?

- Yes
- No

### **Relationships**

Do you find it easier to communicate with other gamers online?

- Yes
- No

Do you have friends in other countries due to your interaction with this game?

- Yes
- No

Are your chats with other gamers text based or verbal?

- text
- verbal
- both

Do you have meaningful conversations online with fellow gamers?

- Yes
- No

Do you talk to other gamers about personal issues?

- Yes
- No

Do in game friends offer support, whether game related or personal?

- Yes
- No

Do you sometimes prefer your online friends to real-life ones?

- Yes
- No

**Immersion**

What is your cyberspace identity? (Name & Race) \_\_\_\_\_

How many online identities do you have? \_\_\_\_\_

Do you prefer your online identity? If so why? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Do you belong to a guild? (If so which one)

\_\_\_\_\_

Do you like to try out new roles and personalities in the game?

- Yes
- No

Do you like to role-play (become immersed in the character)?

- Yes
- No

Do you like feeling apart of this world?

- Yes
- No

### **Identity**

Do you act differently online? (E.g. are you more aggressive, more of a leader etc)

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Do you ever play as a different gender? (If so why)

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Do you act differently when using different avatars?

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Do you like the concept of being able to transform?

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What is your avatar dressed like? \_\_\_\_\_

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When applying different sets of armour or dress to your character, does it change the way you feel and play in any way?

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**Escapism**

Which character/ identity do you use the most? (And why?)

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Why do you enjoy this type of game?

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- I like the escapism aspect of the game.
- Playing lets me forget my real life problems.

- Helps me to de- stress and relax.

Do you just play the game or are you apart of the games online community?

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What do you experience whilst being a part of the virtual community?

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Do you find this medium provides a freedom of expression, more so then that of face to face communication? Why?

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### **Manipulation**

Do you like to taunt and annoy other players?

- Yes
- No

Do you often ask other players for help?

- Yes
- No

Do you like to dominate over other players?

- Yes
- No

Do you ever manipulate other players to doing what you want them to do?

- Yes
- No

Do you ever take all the gear or prizes for yourself?

- Yes
- No

Appendix D

**Non-gamer questioner**

Name:

Age:

Gender:

Occupational status:

Do you/did you play any sport at school? (If so which one) (Do not fill in if you are a parent)

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What are some of your hobbies?

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Do you play or make use of any virtual reality desktop games, if so which one and why?

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If not, have you ever thought of joining an online gaming community? (Give reason for answer).



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What is your opinion towards online games?

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Do you have a friend or family member who plays an online game? How does this make you feel?

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Do you think this is a healthy hobby or potentially destructive? (Give reason)

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If you are a parent to someone who plays WoW do you pay for them to play every month?

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Have you ever witnessed a change in the gamer during or after playing the game? (Give example)

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Have you noticed a shift in their personality? (Give example)

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Do you think this type of game has had any type of affect on the gamer's real-life work/focus friendships/relationships etc?

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