Transgressive Positivity in Four Online Multiplayer Games

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Abstract

Transgressive Positivity in Four Online Multiplayer Games

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Online games have a reputation for toxicity. Forms of play that have been theorized as transgressive from the perspective of idealized play have become highly normalized within the toxic space of online gaming. In this context, positivity in online gaming takes on a transgressive quality that challenges the common behaviours, the norms of communication, and their underlying ideologies found within online gaming communities. Through an ethnography of four massively multiplayer online game spaces - *DOTA 2, Lost Ark, Destiny 2,* and *World of Warcraft* - this project examines the effects of positivity in play on others who share these game worlds to consider ways that positivity might be leveraged to impact gaming's toxic culture. Positivity is approached through different scales, from smaller individual actions like friendly greetings and helpful gestures not often seen in these particular games, to larger community formations that promote positivity and inclusivity within these gaming communities.

This study finds that positivity across these scales produces substantial and proportional resistance to positive deviations from the toxic norms within these games and their linked community sites. Players actively trying to resist toxicity through positivity add varying levels of labor to their leisure and are frequent targets for harassment, leading to burnout or self-exclusion from these online games. Transgressive positivity in online play can produce alternatives to self-exclusion from gaming by producing ephemeral connections and networks of support between players. Enclaves built on positivity can form, but they are always under threat when they intersect with the mainstream culture across each of these four games. Ultimately, there are severe systemic issues within these communities - reinforced by trends within the games industry and in online game design - that undercut player-led positivity initiatives. While positivity can be a useful strategy for some to connect with others and to persist in spite of these toxic environments, positivity's transgressive quality in online play produces substantial vulnerability for those who actively pursue it as a strategy of resistance or cultural intervention.

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Glossary

Alt - A player character in an online game that is not a player's primary - or 'main' - character. Short for 'alternate character.'

Bus/Bussing - In *Lost Ark*, the act of paying in-game currency to have stronger characters or more skilled players run players through content to receive the rewards without having to learn game mechanics. This term developed in *Lost Ark* because it is the word Korean players use in place of the more common North American analog, 'carry/carrying.'

Carry - See 'Bus/Bussing.' More common in North American games.

DOTA 2 - Short for '*Defense of the Ancients 2.*'

Dungeons - Group content commonly found in multiplayer online games. Usually designed for smaller group numbers between 3-5 players, though the number of players varies between games.

FPS - Short for 'first-person shooter,' a popular game type in the first-person perspective, usually involving the use of guns.

LoL - Short for *League of Legends*, *DOTA 2*'s primary competitor.

Main - Short for 'main character.' Refers to a player's primary character/avatar in an online game that supports multiple characters.

MMO - Short for 'massively multiplayer online.' Often used in place of the more specific term MMORPG.

MMORPG - Short for ‘massively multiplayer online roleplaying game.’ This describes games with a persistent online game world and high levels of player connectivity with roleplaying elements - such as embodying a character or avatar.

MOBA - Short for ‘multiplayer online battle arena.’ This describes a multiplayer online game where two teams of five players choose unique heroes and attempt to destroy the others’ base. *DOTA 2* is one of the two most popular games in this genre.

PVE - Short for ‘player versus environment.’ Typically used to describe activities where players group together to complete cooperative challenges like dungeons or raids.

PVP - Short for ‘player versus player,’ a game mode where players compete against each other for in-game prestige or rewards.

Pug/Pugs - ‘Pug’ is short for ‘pick-up group,’ which describes a group of randomly matchmade players that come together through in-game matching systems in order to complete group activities. ‘Pugs’ is the common term used to refer to matchmade players. This is often used in a derogatory way.

Raids - Group content commonly found in multiplayer online games. Usually designed for a larger group between ten and forty players, though the number of players varies between games.

WoW - Short for *World of Warcraft*.

Introduction - Coming to that Lingering Question

In 2016 I was fortunate enough to be living and working in Japan as a teacher with the JET Programme, which hires young folks from outside of Japan to teach English and provide a cultural exchange experience for students and teachers alike in Japanese schools. I would consider it a once in a lifetime opportunity and I felt I was creating connections with a lot of people whose lives were vastly different from my own. Together, my Japanese colleagues and I were breaking down language and cultural barriers to get to know each other and often, to become friends. It wasn't always perfect, it didn't have a 100% success rate, but there was something that was working to produce a meaningful experience on both sides of the equation through these interactions.

In what little free time I had, as I had been doing for the prior twenty years of my life, I was also playing online games. I remember sitting on my tatami floor playing the first *Destiny*,[1] a space-themed first-person shooter, and a prequel to one of the games featured in this study. I played the game solo, but there were activities where you would be placed with other players. In one such activity I was a total beginner and I felt I was holding my team back. I was prepared to be criticized or flamed for my lack of knowledge and skill. Even if they were going to say nothing, in my mind I was imagining them talking about how bad I was at the activity. But then one of the other players began directing me to the correct objectives, not by speaking or using text chat, but by moving their avatar close to mine and looking at me, then looking at what I'm supposed to be doing, creating a kind of sign language with the limited range of movements that the *Destiny* avatars possessed. This player was helping me and it felt so out of place compared to what I was used to.

In a vacuum one player helping another doesn't seem like a big deal, but those twenty years of online game playing had prepared me to expect something else entirely. I started to think about how rare it was to be helped or encouraged in the online games I played. I also began to think that this player could be from anywhere in the world. Because I was playing in Japan there was a good chance it was someone from that region, as the original *Destiny* grouped players roughly by geographical location. But

[1] Bungie, 2014

really, this player could have been from anywhere. Online games with millions of players can see players from all over the world interacting in various capacities. Even with this impressive connection of people through play, it nonetheless felt like an exception to be helped, encouraged, or reacted to in a positive way. I had become conditioned over time to expect confrontation and bad feelings in my interactions with other players.

I couldn't help but compare my own long-term experiences with online games to the few years I spent on the JET Programme. While it is only a small percentage of people lucky enough to travel to other countries on these sorts of exchange programs, there are millions of players interacting cross-culturally in online games every day. The interactions though, as the journalistic and academic coverage in this thesis will point to, are often associated with antagonistic and discriminatory actions. The situation developing in my mind was that the internet gave us the opportunity to play and interact together across various geographical and lingual boundaries through online games in a way that could bring people together, but the default mode of social interaction in online games has become largely negative or toxic.

The toxicity and negativity often attributed to online games can't be without some impact on the players. Katherine Isbister in her book *How Games Move Us: Emotion by Design* opens a discussion on the social elements of multiplayer games with the following:

> "Game designers set up situations aimed at bringing certain kinds of actions and impulses to the fore, thus creating the emotional and social responses that they would like people to experience together. Some game designers take an active ethical stance toward cultivating certain kinds of social situations and desired outcomes for players that reflect their values."[2]

[2] Katherine Isbister, *How Games Move Us: Emotion by Design* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016), 64.

Isbister's discussion quickly turns to the topic of transgression, where she emphasizes that players can alter the designed experiences meant for themselves and others in online play because "programmed boundaries can be warped and even actively transgressed."[3] My earlier research experience with the game *DOTA 2*[4] indicated that the boundaries of many popular online games support negative feelings and hostile modes of interaction, and gaming culture has developed a reputation for extremely hateful and harmful social environments and behaviours.[5] I encountered these consistently as I researched *DOTA 2* over many years across multiple projects, and in other online games during my leisure time.[6]

Throughout all of this, my experience playing *Destiny* in Japan never left the back of my mind: there is a way that the gaming culture I came to know could be different than it is, but outside of that exact environment it felt so rare to see that kind of helpful gameplay. For my *Destiny* experience to feel so uniquely positive, something had to be happening not just with the game's design, but between the players who populate that online game space. On a prior project researching monetization in *DOTA 2*, I was randomly placed with another player in a match who had connected a digital piano to his in-game voice chat, and he encouraged his teammates with words of support and a musical accompaniment - and I had seen nothing like it before across thousands of hours playing and researching *DOTA 2*. I began to wonder why we don't see more of this kind of helpful spirit in online play in general and if there were particular social, cultural, and designed obstacles to this kind of interplayer engagement in online games, particularly those with a reputation for toxicity. I was left with a lingering question that propelled this project forward and began my inquiry into positivity within online gameplay:

'What happens when people are *nice* to each other in toxic online games?'

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[3] Ibid, 67.
[4] Valve, 2013.
[5] Lajeunesse, Marc. "'It Taught Me to Hate Them All': Toxicity Through DOTA 2's Players, Systems, and Media Dispositive," (Masters Thesis, Concordia University, 2017).
[6] See Harper, 2014; Paul, 2018; Gray, 2020.

I didn't see people being nice to each other a lot in online play, and the more I was aware of it the more glaring its absence became. It wasn't something that was readily observable in my experience, and so I conceived of a project where I would immerse myself within multiple online games and communities, and to search out positivity - at times trying to produce it through various means - and seeing what might happen when online gaming's toxic culture and a generally positive approach to playing with others cross paths.

Theoretically, I approached this project by drawing from multiple spheres of research. Various approaches to game studies are the most consistent throughline across this project and are present in each chapter alongside a range of other theoretical perspectives. Literature on transgression and toxicity through a combination of labour, platform, and fandom studies in conjunction with game studies serve as the theoretical foundations. Additionally I draw upon some work on affect and feeling, as well as semiotics and communication studies throughout.

In the Coming Pages

To search for positivity and the effect that it could have on reconfiguring gaming culture, I embedded myself within four different online multiplayer games: *DOTA 2*,[7] *Lost Ark*,[8] *Destiny 2*,[9] and *World of Warcraft*.[10] In this text, each of the games is approached from multiple angles, but centers around a primary theme that developed through the research. *DOTA 2* reveals positivity as transgressive within gaming culture, as even simple acts of friendliness produce hostility in game, revealing the boundaries of the culture. *Lost Ark* considers positivity in the context of extreme instrumentalization of other players through game systems that promote excessive in-game grind and the cultural reinforcement of this practice. *Destiny 2* shows positivity in relation to toxicity in an environment of seemingly low communication within the MMO genre. Through *Destiny 2* I also examine a 'positivity community' built around a popular live streamer to see how increased publicity impacts a collective movement towards more positive play.

[7] Valve, 2013.
[8] Smilegate, 2019.
[9] Bungie, 2016.
[10] Blizzard, 2004.

Finally, in *World of Warcraft* I examine the unofficial LGBTQIA+ server 'Proudmoore,' to understand what that designation even means within gaming culture, especially in relation to a company like Blizzard Entertainment which has been the subject of multiple scandals over the last 6 years.

Rather than each game being its own individual case study, all 4 games in this study are considered across each of the main chapters, which are themselves distinguished by a different theoretical commitment. Each game has its own thread that runs the length of this dissertation, but the four games are always kept in close proximity to one another for any comparative analyses that emerge. Chapter 1 is an exception, as it focuses entirely on the concept of transgression and how it has been taken up within gaming to foreground the rest of the project, and does not engage with the games of this study directly. Chapter 2 outlines the methodology for the project, while chapters 3, 4 and 5 follow a similar structure to one another, wherein each game is presented in the sequence that they were studied: *DOTA 2, Lost Ark, Destiny 2,* and finally *World of Warcraft*. This study is not so much about the games themselves, but about what the games say about communication and expression in online play, resistance to gaming's toxic culture, and forms of positive play that transgress against those norms. Addressing these four games across multiple chapters encapsulates my journey through these spaces and better reflects how I interpreted that experience as informed by my theoretical perspectives than if I had approached them as discrete cases. Additionally, as we will come to see in the following chapters, these games and their cultures, ideologies, and players are not totally separate from one another.

Chapter 1 takes up the concept of transgression. It begins by bridging traditional theories and modern takes on transgression online in the digital age. This portion explores the way boundaries are formed and broken through transgressive acts, and how transgression can play a role in revealing and reshaping social boundaries and one's own identity in relation to those boundaries. The chapter then moves into a discussion of transgression and gaming beginning with the concept of 'the magic circle,' the socially constructed boundary between play and non-play. Next, I conduct a theoretical literature review on transgression in games following the work of Jaakko

Stenros[11] on categories of transgression and play. Following this I contend that a framework of idealized play built on the work of early play scholars[12] is insufficient for understanding modern forms of common play as transgressive, as seemingly transgressive acts in online play reflect the normalized socio-cultural dimensions of these games. The chapter ends with a discussion of positivity itself, and countercultural and transgressive strategy that positivity affords within the context of these game worlds.

Chapter 2 outlines this project's methodological approach. Here I consider foundational virtual worlds research and ethnographic strategies for the study of online gaming. I detail how I employed these ethnographic tools as an adaptive methodology that developed over the course of the study in response to encounters, interventions, and findings in these gaming spaces. I also outline complementary methods such as discourse analysis and platform walkthrough to situate community trends and design features of the games of this study and associated platforms to better contextualize what I encountered in-game.

Chapter 3 is split into two complementary parts: 3A and 3B. 3A unpacks the origins of the term toxicity across three spheres: toxic masculinity, toxic work culture, and toxic fandoms. I examine the history of the term from these different perspectives while situating these approaches as they have been applied to games culture. I then introduce Sara Ahmed's concept of affective economies[13] and outline how negativity - supported by an ecosystem of toxicity - circulates as a cultural commodity within online gaming spaces. In 3B I introduce each of the games featured in this study in detail, identifying their traits, characteristics, and gameplay elements, while considering how the prior exploration of toxicity helps us understand these games. Each game discussion is also accompanied by a game-centered literature review. This section closes by explaining the role of second-layer platforms like Twitch and Discord in relation to online games, and revisits Celia Pearce's concept of videogame diaspora for

[11] Jaakko Stenros, "Guided by Transgression: Defying Norms as an Integral Part of Play." *Transgression in Games and Play*. Edited by Kristine Jorgensen and Faltin Karlsen (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2018), 13-25.
[12] See Caillois, 1958; Huizinga, 1962.
[13] Sara Ahmed, "Affective Economies." *Social Text* 79, vol 22, no. 2 (2004): 117-139.

2023, ultimately finding that players' fluid movement across various games through second-layer platforms complicates our prior understanding of online games as sites of discrete communities.[14]

Chapter 4 examines the communication mechanisms within each of the four online games, and brings in semiotic and mass communication theories to propose the concept of the 'play act.' Inspired by John Searle's *Speech Acts*,[15] I present the 'play act' as a basic communicative unit that is produced within online play spaces through the many intended and unintended ways players convey meaning to one another. This includes more standard modes of in-game communication like text and voice chat, to lesser-considered expressions through simple gestures that develop shared meanings over time in the precise contexts of these games and their cultures. To illustrate the various shapes of play acts and how players rely on them to communicate with each other, I draw on examples from group play across all four games. I close the chapter by exploring how the dominant toxic cultural norms of the space influence the way communicative game affordances are taken up by players to become what Judith Butler calls "ritualized practice," where hostile, aggressive, and hurtful acts lay the foundation for future acts in the same mode. This produces an inertia of negativity through player actions that have become embedded within the communicative framework of play.

Chapter 5 tells the tale of my ethnographic journey - what I'm calling a quest for positivity - as I move between the four games. My ethnography and its transgressive pushes towards positive play are supported by interviews with twelve participants, each of whom played multiple games from this project. The first half of the chapter covers *DOTA 2* and *Lost Ark*, and focuses on my own small interventions towards more positive play, and how players respond to these kinds of play acts with aggressive resistance. This portion also attends to the design features and community elements that make different forms of positive intervention more or less possible for a lone player. I then provide a brief intermission that reflects on these first positive interventions

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[14] Celia Pearce, *Communities of Play: Emergent Cultures in Multiplayer Games and Virtual Worlds* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2011).
[15] John R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

through the work of Judith Butler[16] and Nancy Fraser.[17] Through this reflection I approach the subsequent games with greater attention to presence and scale, seeking out larger groups attempting to play positively as collective formations. The next section examines positivity communities in *Destiny 2* and *World of Warcraft*, and compares the experience of a lone player to that of a group, finding that the resistance faced by a lone player scales up to meet larger communities as well. I end this chapter by drawing on the work of Lauren Berlant to consider the cruel optimism of positive play, and the heavy toll that trying to play differently took on myself and my participants.

To conclude, I end the project with a brief discussion on what positivity could and could not do, and propose a need for collective commitment between players and industry to support grassroots positivity initiatives if toxicity is indeed a real concern as many within the industry have claimed it to be. While there are many groups and individual players putting various forms of positivity into action on the ground, they are mired in an environment so filled with negativity, aggression, conflict, and hate that institutional actors need to both platform and protect these individuals lest they burnout and self-exclude from online gaming environments altogether. Without a proper network of promotion and support, the deep-seated toxicity within these spaces will continue to win out because positive play has become transgressive within these toxic online communities, and players will push back against movements to reconfigure the culture towards inclusion, charity, care, and friendliness. Thinking of the communicative roots of the 'play acts' concept, the very structures and norms of our most basic expression in these online games, designed and curated as they are, leave little space for positive or affirming resistance within the public channels of these game worlds.

---

[16] Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015).

[17] Nancy Fraser, *Scales of Justice: Reimagining Political Space in a Globalizing World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

<u>Chapter 1 - Theories of Transgression and Transgressive Play</u>

This chapter outlines ‘transgression,’ the primary concept of this study. Rather than starting at a chronological beginning, I ground the first portion of this chapter closer to our present understanding of transgression with Chris Jenks 2003 work, *Transgression,* Julian Wolfreys’ text of the same name, and Gunkel and Gournelos’ introduction to *Transgression 2.0*. Jenks’ text offers insight to the broad conceptualization of the term transgression, while Wolfreys is concerned primarily with identity and transgressive expression. Gunkel and Gournelos are informed by the pervasive online ecosystems of Web 2.0, with which our present lives have since become intertwined, and provide a solid foundation for the concept of transgression in the digital age. I then follow along with Jenks’ and Gunkel and Gournelos’ historical trajectory of transgression theorists to understand how we’ve arrived at this version of ‘transgression,’ the stakes of rules, their enforcement, and pushing back against them in various social, political, and historical contexts.

In the second section, I examine transgression in the context of games and play. First I examine the magic circle as a second-layer delineator of moral lines in play spaces and consider how the support and denial of the magic circle impact how we understand transgression when norms are hazy. Following this, I highlight Jaakko Stenros’ categories of transgressive play, and push back against “idealized play” as the most useful way of understanding transgression in online games and game culture. I then conduct a literature review that examines transgression in games alongside the concept of ‘dark play,’ a somewhat distinct but convergent paradigm of playing and designing games against norms and conventions. This section highlights an emphasis on aesthetic, narrative, representation, and single-player experiences within studies on play and transgression.

The chapter closes with the presentation of two concepts: Transgressive Positivity, and Positive Transgression. These two concepts test the limits of a particular kind of transgressive action that push back against the norms of online game spaces (examined in detail in chapter 3) and are the primary theoretical commitment for this project. Together the terms will be used to answer the question of whether acts of

positivity which are transgressive in toxic online spaces are themselves in some way positive for game culture.

Theories of Transgression

Pointing directly at the tip of this iceberg, Chris Jenks presents transgression in its simplest terms as "...conduct which breaks rules or exceeds boundaries."[18] While the core of transgression is simple enough, it is in the uncertain terrain of our changing societies where the challenge of pinning down the boundaries of transgression reveals itself. For Jenks, the post-modern landscape and the rise of identity politics have created a terrain where the norms are constantly shaken-up and redefined and where boundaries are frequently challenged and remade. According to Jenks, "This present state of uncertainty and flux within our culture raises fundamental questions concerning the categories of the normal and the pathological when applied to action or social institutions. Such periods of instability, as we are now experiencing, tend to test and force issues of authority and tradition - truth and surety are up for question."[19]

Within this flux, the challenge to the rules or boundaries of social order produces further resistance and support for implied, defined, or explicit limits. Laws and the institutions that uphold them are the most vestigial image of that which exists to be followed or transgressed, but the agents of enforcement and where the boundaries lay have become increasingly muddied by connectivity. While the internet has produced a range of possibilities for transgression against oppressive boundaries, it also produced new sites to be cordoned by boundaries, and further tools to maintain the status quo. Borrowing the language of Web 2.0, Gournelos and Gunkel dub this the '*Transgression 2.0 era,*' stating "Transgression 2.0 does not describe merely a new era of organization, of protest, and of rapid change made easier through new developments in the creation, distribution, and the circulation of media; it also describes a new era of surveillance, of censorship, or monopolistic consolidation, and of the foreclosure of discourse."[20]

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[18]Chris Jenks. *Transgression* (London: Routledge, 2003), 3.
[19] Ibid., 5.
[20] Ted Gournelos and David J. Gunkel. "Transgression Today," *Transgression 2.0: Media, Culture, and the Politics of the Digital Age*. Edited by David J. Gunkel and Ted Gournelos (New York: Continuum, 2012), 2.

Thinking of ‘transgression’ in this sense paints a familiar picture of an oppressed rebel force against an evil empire, where acts or simply states of being brush up “against power and corruption, whether national or transnational.”[21] The would-be rebels are far from the only transgressors in these spaces, as even those bent on maintaining or enforcing this order use transgressive means in service of highly normative social movements.[22]

Gournelos and Gunkel gesture towards the challenging space of the virtual - where power is differentially manifested not only by governmental actors or the most explicitly sanctioned guardians of socio-political hegemony like the police or the military, but by those who lurk in the liminal online spaces where power and control are diffuse and cultural layers are worked out and transgressed against by actors with differential levels of investment in the breaking or maintenance of the political order.[23] The transgressive realm consists of enforcers of- and challengers to- a status quo, or proponents of the potential post-status quo world that may come to be in the breaking and remaking of a present socio-political configuration. Drawing from pornography studies, Gournelos and Gunkel caution that even the most apparently transgressive formats can be vessels for disseminating norms and reinforcing limits.[24] According to Laura Kipnis, while pornography is “...a very precise map of a culture’s borders,” it is also “...a form of political theater.”[25] Indeed, even transgressive media forms serve as vessels for the maintenance of a social order by presenting audiences with what cannot be plainly said within the mainstream or polite society, and in ways that aggressively or violently reaffirm an already-established order (in this case gender norms, sexualization of women, abusive sexual norms, and more). Critically, the implication for transgression as a concept is that it is not by default resistant or rebellious, and has been a method of sporing the fungus of hegemonic or mainstream ideology into countercultural cracks where they have struggled to proliferate.

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[21] Ibid., 1.
[22] Angela Nagle. *Kill All Normies: The Online Culture Wars from Tumblr and 4chan to the Alt-Right and Trump* (Winchester and Washington: Zero Books, 2017).
[23] Gournelos and Gunkel, “Transgression Today,” 8-10.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Laura Kipnis. *Bound and Gagged: Pornography and the Politics of Fantasy in America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996).

It is worth briefly pausing here to consider the concept of hegemony as it is being operationalized in this project, as it appears several times throughout this chapter in relation to transgression. Building on Gramsci, Lears describes hegemony as the dominance of one culture or set of cultural values over another through a coerced consent - a kind of implicit but subtly forced agreement - that occurs at the level of ideology.[26] In more practical terms, hegemony or the hegemonic has come to describe the cultural values and the social processes that are most prevalent throughout society, upheld by institutions of power like government, laws, policing, education, and how those values are internalized and actualized in the beliefs and actions of everyday people.

While transgression is a prerequisite of reforming the world by pushing against boundaries to either reinforce or disrupt the culture, it is not the sole, or even primary function it holds for individuals. Transgression is often not operationalized as a revolutionary force by transgressors, but is instead a key component in identity building and both self- and collective - identification. Julian Wolfreys considers transgression "... the very pulse that constitutes our identities, and we would have no sense of our own subjectivity were it not for a constant, if discontinuous negotiation with the transgressive otherness by which we are formed and informed."[27] Here, Wolfreys is channeling "Lordship and Bondage" from Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, where many genealogies of transgression begin.

The key piece of Hegel for contextualizing modern thinking on transgression is in the conflictual relationship between lord and bondsman that is a precondition for 'self-realization.'[28] To put it as plainly as possible, Hegel believed that a true and independent consciousness was achieved through the struggle for freedom between a dominant master or lord, and a subservient bondsman.[29] The master's own consciousness is one that is dependent upon the bondsman and therefore not fully

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[26] Jackson, T.J. Lears. "The Concept of Cultural Hegemony: Problems and Possibilities," *The American Historical Review* 90, no. 3 (1985): 568.
[27] Julian, Wolfreys. *Transgression: Identity, Space, Time* (Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008, 1).
[28] Jenks, *Transgression*, 60.
[29] G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit (1807)*. Translated by A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 115-116.

realized or true.[30] Meanwhile, the bondsman "...uses the conditions of his oppressive relation to the master as the grounds for change, growth, becoming."[31] In such a fearful and subservient existence the bondsman turns inwards from a relief in an external God, which produces a 're-discovery of himself by himself,' thereby achieving a truly independent self-consciousness.[32]

Re-historicizing Hegel, Jenks considers this framework of "binary oppression" as foundational for "Marxist movements, Black power movements, feminist movements, existentialism, surrealism, deconstructionism, and postmodern dissatisfaction with the truths and planetary politics of late-modernity."[33] Whether master, lord, or governmental body, institutions of power and the oppressive nature of rules recreate preconditions for this struggle at various scales, and between Jenks and Hegel we see the dual nature of transgression as constitutive of the self while simultaneously being central to rebellion, social upheaval, and change. Again, however, that rebellious characteristic of transgression is not immune to co-optation.

French philosopher Alexandre Kojève expanded on Hegel by emphasizing human desire. Within the Hegelian struggle there is already a human impulse towards sociality as driven by desire - not simply what Kojève calls animal desires (survival in the form of sustenance and rest), but desire for other human desires.[34] This includes desire for the kind of recognition that comes from being loved, but also the kind of trespassing and violent recognition at the center of the Hegelian conflict. As an example of human desire, Kojève states "...an object perfectly useless from the biological point of view (such as a medal, or the enemy's flag) can be desired because it is the object of another desire."[35] It is in the risk of one's life in pursuit of such human desires, whether they are material, abstract, external, or internal, that imbues us with our humanity.[36] Kojève's risk-inflected desire takes place not in a vacuum but in our material world of

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[30] Ibid.
[31] Jenks, *Transgression,* 60.
[32] Hegel, *Phenomenology,*117-119.
[33] Jenks, *Transgression*, 60.
[34] Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*. Edited by Allan Bloom. Translated by James H. Nichols, Jr. (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1969), 6.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid.

mass produced goods and services, wherein objects and individuals are assigned values. The systems of production, relationships of service, and value allocation are governed by systems and structures. Gournelos and Gunkel point out that "...any attempt at transgression is always and inescapably contextualized and regulated by the very system or structures from which one endeavors to break away."[37] Taken together, it would seem that our humanity and very consciousness depends upon transgression that can only come to pass in the presence of that which our transgression surpasses and alters.

Before examining transgression as it relates to rules and structures, we take a quick stop at Georges Bataille, the unconventional theorist of eroticism, taboo, and transgression. In addition to his theoretical contributions, Bataille was the author of several works of unconventional speculative writing, such as "The Solar Anus," wherein the infinitesimal meaning of a human life in the solar system is contrasted with the cycles of the earth and stars, as both are rendered in a language of sexual excess, grotesque decay, and bodily expulsion.[38] Although I will not be probing this body of work here, Bataille's commitment was not solely theoretical, as his writing pushed the limits of presentation of work on the taboo and transgression. Importantly, for understanding transgressions relationship to selfhood and identity, Susan Suleiman notes that "For Bataille, transgression was an 'inner experience' in which an individual […] or a community exceeds the bounds of rational, everyday behavior, which is constrained by the considerations of profits, productivity, or self-preservation."[39] The key is that Bataille's transgression is both simultaneously personal and internalized while being communal and shared. The taboo - the thing that should not be done or the words not spoken - are communal boundaries but may require no enforcement except for that which has already been instilled within one's own body. The transgression, when it occurs, is not at the societal level even when it is carried out against a rule or norm that society enforces, rather it is carried out inside oneself against a rule or norm that has

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[37] Gournelos and Gunkel, "Transgression Today," 5.
[38] Georges Bataille, "The Solar Anus," *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings*, *1927-1939*. Translated by Allan Stoekl, Carl R. Lovitt, and Donald M. Leslie Jr. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 5-9.
[39] Susan Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 75.

been internalized to one's core. Even moreso, the limit of the taboo "carries with it an intense relationship with the desire to transgress that limit."[40] Beyond rationality or sensible purpose within the system that produces a taboo or limitation, there are drives to push beyond the limits for some internal or communal purpose.

Bataille strangely aligns with sociologist Émile Durkheim to consider one such purpose: That transgression is both a revealing and testing of the rules and limits of a moral society. Durkheim considers this in the context of social breakdown, or anomie.[41] Effectively, in an industrial society, shifts in the economic conditions lead to a greater inability to produce or acquire that which is expected within that social context. This can create a discrepancy between what one believes should be achieved and what is achievable and produces social malaise and disorder visible through higher instances of crime and suicide.[42] For Bataille, transgressions come long before this Durkheimian crisis-point as part of a functional society, but similarly make visible the importance of social structures, or what Durkheim would call 'forces'. Trespassing the boundaries or witnessing the transgressive act attunes us to the world that exists outside of the rules. Transgression reveals the luxury and excess reserved for only a select few or for a sacred occasion, and also illuminates the danger and chaos possible when certain rules or norms are stripped away.[43] A key distinction between Durkheim and Bataille is that transgression, while revealing the chaos, is not itself disorder: it is the lens through which we see rules of the world as they truly are.

Foucault too examines transgression in the context of sexuality and eroticism. Before diving into Foucault, it is worth briefly engaging in the move away from God and spirit towards a societal accountability that is visible across Durkheim, Bataille, and Foucault alike. This move towards secularity is most exemplified by Nietzsche's famous statement "God is Dead,"[44] which is built upon by Foucault who states in *A Preface to*

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[40] Jenks, *Transgression*, 7.
[41] Fatih Irmak and Taner Cam, "An Overview of Durkheim and Merton's Social Anomie," *International Journal of Human Sciences 11*, no 2 (2014): 1297-1301.
[42] Émile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology* (1897). Translated by George Simpson (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 201-240.
[43] Georges Bataille, *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality.* Translated by Mary Dalwood (San Francisco: City Lights Books,1986), 63-70.
[44] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*. Edited by Bernard Williams. Translated by Josefine Nauckhoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 108.

Transgression, that "The death of God does not restore us to a limited and positivistic world, but to a world exposed by the experience of its limits, made and unmade by that excess which transgresses it."[45] A common thread across these concurrent and post-Nietzsche social theorists is the wrangling between a world continuously upheld by rules informed by a divine morality espoused through religion (primarily Christianity in the context of their writing), and an intellectual trajectory that attempts to trudge out of this divine mire. What this means practically, is that studies of transgression, even if not explicitly engaging with these questions, are still reckoning with the embedded forms of religious morality that are woven into legal systems and codes of conduct that become internalized limitations. Importantly, the schism between religious and social morality, unresolved as it may be, opens discussion about transgression to a world beyond a good versus evil binary. As Jenks puts it, "This does not make all transgressions either 'good' or 'bad', it renders them purposive. In the same way, all rules are neither 'good' nor 'bad' and their sanctity no longer resides in the judgment of God!"[46] Without God as a given phenomenon, there is no absolute rule or line, but an array of contextual and dependent lines. This allows for further exploration into the question of transgressive purpose, and where and when rules can be broken for particular effect, whether social or internal.

Foucault also reflects on the nature of transgression in relation to the limits they reveal and surpass. For Foucault the limit and the transgression are dependent upon each other: the shape of the limit revealed only as in a "flash of lightning" when a line is crossed.[47] Additionally, a line is not crossed only once in isolation - the limits and boundaries are constantly crossed in numerous small flashes, where each small flash not only illuminates the shape of the line or boundary, but alters them in subtle ways.[48] According to Foucault, "Transgression, then, is not related to the limit as black to white, the prohibited to the lawful, the outside to the inside, or as the open area of a building to its enclosed spaces. Rather, their relationship takes the form of a spiral which no simple

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[45] Michel Foucault, "A Preface to Transgression," *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews.* Edited by Donald F. Bouchard. Translated by Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), 32.
[46] Jenks, *Transgression*, 81.
[47] Foucault, "A Preface," 34.
[48] Ibid.

infraction can exhaust."[49] The implication for Foucault is the ungraspable nature of limits and that which transgresses them, as their shape changes in relation to each other in what Gournelos and Gunkel call "a state of continual revolution."[50]

The second key element of Foucault's examination of transgression builds from both this spiral of constant reshaping and the 'death of God.' In and of itself, transgression is neither positive nor negative; neither good nor evil. According to Foucault "Transgression is neither violence in a divided world (in an ethical world) nor a victory over limits…".[51] Transgression for Foucault is exclusively a revealer and a measure of the limits, it merely "announces limitation and its obverse."[52] For Foucault, transgression also 'affirms division' and reveals 'difference,' which Michael Clifford characterizes as a "violence against violence" precisely because the affirmation and reaffirmation of difference through transgression upends the limit.[53] Circuitously however, the limit is reinforced and never truly reaches its violent potential, relegating the realm of a truly radical transgression to a future that may never come.[54]

Foucault presents a theoretical challenge for a project that positions 'positive' and 'transgression' in such close proximity. In practice, transgression is rarely so abstractly separate from pursuits of internal or social change, and Christina Foust interprets Foucault's perspective more as a warning to either celebrate or dismiss transgression as radical or political. For Foust, any value to transgression is highly contextual, and depends on the internal and social situation in which transgression occurs, and what form transgression takes.[55] Julie Allan also critiques Foucault's avoidance of "practical pursuits of transgression."[56] Allan situates the transgressive acts of disabled students within the context of their peers, teachers, and administrators, and argues that those transgressive acts do have positive impacts on the students' own

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[49] Ibid., 35.
[50] Gournelos and Gunkel, "Transgression Today," 7.
[51] Foucault, "A Preface," 35.
[52] Jenks *Transgression*, 92.
[53] Michael R Clifford, "Crossing (out) the Boundary: Foucault and Derrida on Transgressing Transgression." *Philosophy Today 31* no 3 (1987): 228.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Christina R Foust, *Transgression as a Mode of Resistance: Rethinking Social Movement in an Era of Corporate Globalization* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2010), 23.
[56] Julie Allan, "Foucault and the Art of Transgression," *Rethinking Inclusive Education: The Philosophers of Difference in Practice* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007), 85-97.

subjectivity, and on transforming "...the micro-regime of governmentality within the school…".[57] While the transgressions of Allan's students do not overturn the state apparatus, they do allow the students to positively impact the social environment on a smaller scale in ways that do have a positive impact on their lives.

Stallybrass and White, through a reading of Bakhtin's concept of the carnival, continue the trend of denying the inherent values within transgression, but do situate transgression as exemplified by the carnival as a phenomenon that "... may often act as catalyst and site of actual and symbolic struggle."[58] Bakhtin's carnival is based on medieval European celebrations that combine feast, clowns, and parody, wherein rank and status were equalized among members of society and people were liberated "from norms of etiquette and decency imposed at other times."[59] The carnival is a sanctioned period where rules are inverted, where a celebration of the grotesque and the monstrous allows for commentary and ridicule of established rules, norms, and beliefs.[60] As Stallybrass and White see it, transgression may often fall within the stable frameworks of society and in many cases have no "politically transformative effects," and there may be instances when transgression is encouraged to release the pent-up energy of a discontented society, thus serving the purpose of maintaining order through tension release.[61] This does not preclude the transgressive mode of the carnivalesque from meaningful or lasting impact, though it does attune us to its appropriation within the order it ridicules and critiques.

Erin Fitz-Henry presents this dualism in contemporary political struggles, citing the tactics of the 'Occupy Wall Street' and 'Billionaires for Bush' movements as effective mobilizations of carnivalesque tactics that simultaneously "enact, though through an altered valence, the significations, logos, and images with which we are continuously bombarded."[62] The bombastic form of carnival and of carnivalesque protest lose their

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[57] Ibid, 97.
[58] Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1986), 14.
[59] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, Translated by Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 10.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Stallybrass and White, *Poetics*, 14.
[62] Erin Fitz-Henry, "Limits of the Carnivalesque," *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies 12*, no. 3 (2016): 3.

edge when life, particularly as it is presented to us through maximal media channels, is already itself the carnival and the grotesque. These social movements not only lose their power in the noise, but are co-opted and marketed back to the public as a kind of fashionable cultural aesthetic that undercuts the integrity of the protest or social movement while putting money in the hands of those being protested.[63] In this instance the transgressive form is sold back to the transgressor as commodity, and the branded transgressive movement becomes an extension of hegemony.

As an alternative mode of transgressive political engagement, Fitz-Henry considers Lauren Berlant's "performative silence," to counter the "habitual rhythms" of the social political order that has relieved the carnivalesque of its potency.[64] In the current socio-political ecosystem silence becomes noise: "that circulating, transpersonal, permeating, viscerally connective affective atmosphere that feels as though it has escaped 'the filter…'".[65] Berlant points to silent anti-lynching protests and marches of 1916 and 1917. According to Berlant,

> "...ten thousand African Americans marched against lynching in silent protest in New York City, an act of discipline so astonishing that the spectating crowds, too, organized to contribute absolute silence. In both cases the silence was broken by the police, who, one imagines, could not bear confronting such fully organized political will."[66]

Berlant's example highlights three main points of this inversion of the carnivalesque. First, that silence should not be mistaken for absence. Second, that silence, in changing the atmosphere, has a contagious effect on bystanders or witnesses. Third, that the transgression itself is met with its own inverse on behalf of the enforcers of the status quo. Returning briefly to Foucault, it is not that the line simply closes behind the

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[63] Ibid.
[64] Ibid, 14.
[65] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 231.
[66] Ibid., 229.

transgression once it has occurred, rather the line is forcibly closed by those with an active investment in its closing.

In a more general sense, in this tension between the Carnivalesque and silence, there is an indicator of a need for flexibility when interpreting the transgressive act within a particular context. The transgressive act is not the obvious one, and the socio-political ramifications of a particular form of transgression may not be easy to anticipate. From a practical point of view, it may be that what one anticipates as an act of transgression with political ramifications is in fact completely normal for the environment in which it is carried out. Transgression requires not just an attenuation of the act, but awareness of the environment in which it is carried out. It is in this relationship between action and environments where previously unthought-of possibilities for transgressive intervention may emerge.

Returning to Gournelos and Gunkel, they summarize this lineage of transgression theory into four key points:

> "First, transgression is a social fact that is not completely contained within, and not completely apart from, the social; second, transgression is anomalous but necessary to the functioning of the norm, [...]; third, transgression works beyond mere opposition and resistance to an inhabited Other; fourth, transgression embraces desire and play in order to self-consciously question the stasis and seriousness of the status quo, and thus while its politics are ambivalent, its power is both unquestionable and necessary."[67]

Incorporating Hegel, Jenks, Wolfreys, and Bataille I would add a fifth point: that transgression plays some small part in the development of our identities, both through a self-positioning relative to norms, and as an enactment of our desires.

To close this section I consider the impulse to transgress and the collateral damage done. Transgression is part of the human experience, fundamental to social

[67] Gournelos and Gunkel, "Transgression Today," 8.

change and for building our identities. Jenks considers that in the process of transgressing for identification in a rule-bound world, that transgression functions as a release valve. According to Jenks:

> "The irreversible pressure is to more and more extreme action. If the key to human incompetence is freedom or plasticity then the essence of human performance is that it must demonstrate lack of limit. The rationale of the serial killer need be no more coherent than Sir John Hunt's response when asked why he sought to conquer Everest - 'Because it's there' he replied."[68]

We transgress in part because there is a building pressure, but we also transgress *just because we can*. A limitation on our selfhood necessitates the pursuit of breaking the limitation, and while the bill of certain transgressions may never come due for the transgressor, there is always a cost paid somewhere. Importantly for this study, Sir John Hunt's Everest is now full of trash and bodies, and obviously Jenks' serial killer isn't transgressing against a mountain, free of the havoc that ensues in a world where impulses of desire go unchecked and are pursued without clear and enforced boundaries. Releasing the pressure valve collectively or individually has consequences, but what exactly happens and in what context when lines are broken is unclear. Do the faultlines of society shift as lines close around new norms, or are those lines violently closed? This question becomes even more complex as we approach transgression and its intersection with play.

The Boundaries of Transgression in Play and Dark Play

Norm-breaking play has been considered in two primary modes: 'transgression' and 'dark play.' While not completely synonymous with each other, there are substantial overlaps in the way these forms of play have been theorized. Additionally, the nature of play and its relationship to society invites fundamental questions about the built-in

[68] Jenks, *Transgression*, 13.

transgressive elements of play and its role in our lives. This section first briefly examines the magic circle as a delineated play space, followed by an examination of recent research on transgression in play and dark play. Linderoth and Mortensen define dark play in simple terms, stating, “By ‘dark’ we thus refer to content, themes, or actions that occur within games that in some contexts would be problematic, subversive, controversial, deviant, or tasteless. ‘Play’ simply refers to the fact that these matters occur in a game…”.[69] Dark play’s ‘darkness’ depends on an ‘outside’ context to play activities, or at the very least an idea of play that has social value or positive qualities. It is worth mentioning that ‘toxicity’ is also a related framework for understanding transgressive and dark play, though while toxic play can occur in game, ‘toxicity’ is predominantly a label applied at the level of game culture, based *partially* on acts of transgressive and dark play. Some of the work explored below brushes up against toxicity conceptually but is important to include in this section for their implications for transgression. This project will examine toxicity in greater detail in Chapter 3 to better contextualize gaming culture and the games examined later in this study.

One of the challenges for understanding transgression in play comes from the controversial nature of play itself, as games and playfulness have long standing associations with time wasting, idleness, childishness, and being unserious.[70]These lines of thinking still persist today in spite of the massive success of the videogame industry worldwide.[71] In *Homo Ludens*, Johan Huizinga explicated the foundational role of play across human pursuits in modern societies, as legal systems, education, the arts, war, and business all incorporate playfulness in the way they are constructed and conducted.[72] Human beings play and our society is built by players, but for many, including Huizinga himself for a time, play remained a realm apart from serious or

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[69] Jonas Linderoth and Torill Elvira Mortensen, “Dark Play: The Aesthetics of Controversial Playfulness,” *The Dark Side of Game Play: Controversial Issues in Playful Environments.* Edited by Torill Elvira Mortensen, Jonas Linderoth, and Ashley ML Brown (New York: Routledge, 2015), 5.
[70] Patricia M. Greenfield, “Videogames Revisited.” *Gaming and Cognition: Theories and Practice from the Learning Sciences* (Hershey and New York: Information Science Reference, 2010), 1-21.
[71] James Newman, *Videogames* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012).
[72] Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1962).

important life.[73] Within this ongoing debate about the value of games and play, play oscillates between several frames: as 'a magic circle' with temporary rules and an ephemeral permissibility for expressions and activities that would otherwise be unacceptable (not unlike Bakhtin's carnival); as a permissible and idealized social function for a select few like children or athletes; and as a social phenomenon that shirks the 'serious' elements of adult life in a post-industrial society. In the latter sense we can think of play as pure excess, already transgressing beyond the limit of social activity.

The magic circle bears a strong resemblance to how transgression has been expressed as it has been drawn as a line or delineation between play and non-play. The concept of the magic circle was popularized by Huizinga and describes the 'temporary worlds within the ordinary world dedicated to an act apart,' or more simply, the place and time where a game is played, whether an 'arena, sandbox, temple or the screen.'[74] This magic circle is a space produced not only of the edifice that contains it, but of the agreement that there are new rules within the space, and that those new rules are adhered to not only to preserve the integrity of the activity, but to even make the activity possible in the first place.[75] For Huizinga, "the player who trespasses against the rules or ignores them is a 'spoil-sport,'" an infraction Huizinga considers to be even worse than cheating for the way it breaks the illusion of the "play-world" that is bound within the magic circle.[76]

Mia Consalvo pushes back against the concept of the magic circle, directing us to Huizinga's pre-digital context that can't account for the convergence of our personal, social, and leisure activities, and also highlights contextual aspects of online play.[77] Specifically, players of multiplayer games bring outside knowledge to their games, challenge developers inside and outside the game world, and bring their "real lives, with real commitments, expectations, hopes, and desires," into the game world.[78] Virtual

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[73] Alexander Lambrow, "The Seriousness of Play: Johan Huizinga and Carl Schmitt on Play and the Political," *Games and Culture* 16, no 7 (2021): 820-834.
[74] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 10.
[75] Bernard Suits, "What is a Game?" *Philosophy of Science 34*, no. 2 (1967): 148-156.
[76] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 11.
[77] Mia Consalvo, "There is No Magic Circle," *Games and Culture 4,* no. 4 (2009): 408-417.
[78] Ibid., 415.

worlds or online games may be culturally sanctioned sites for play, but their play is not exclusive to the laws of the world outside, nor does crossing the line into a virtual world cause players to shed their life outside of the game.

Consalvo offers Erving Goffman's work on keys and frames as applied by Gary Allan Fine to Role Playing Games as an alternative to the magic circle.[79] Briefly, Goffman's frame concept is a social principle of organization where one's actions in a social activity and the understanding of those actions in relation to the events "...are sustained in the mind and in the activity."[80] The frame is a way of socially interpreting what is being done in the context of its doing. Anders Persson describes the Frame as:

> "...a context that can be something else depending on how we define what is included in this context. Most obviously, what is seemingly one and the same thing can be different depending on whether what happens is [...] in earnest or for fun, 'for real' or make-believe, if it happens when awake or in a dream, or if it is experienced in one's memory or at the current point in time."[81]

Keys are another layer to a frame, an effective transformation of the meaning of an activity by adding a new element to an already meaningful and patterned activity.[82] Consalvo uses the example of a wedding rehearsal, which appears to be a wedding ceremony but does not have the same social valence and consequences.[83]

Through Fine's work, Consalvo highlights that "...we can have multiple frames, and we can switch among them fairly rapidly."[84] Fine and Consalvo direct us to the point that the line between game and real life is frequently crossed by players in rapid

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[79] Consalvo, "Magic Circle," 413-415.
[80] Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis*: *An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1974), 247.
[81] Anders Persson, *Framing Social Interaction: Continuities and Cracks in Goffman's Frame Analysis* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), 50.
[82] Ibid, 52.
[83] Consalvo, "Magic Circle," 414.
[84] Ibid.

succession throughout the playing of a game. Consalvo interprets Fine's work as a rethinking of Goffman's keys - rather than attributing a frame with a different nuance, keying moves players between frames, from real to play, to back again.[85] Importantly for the magic circle, there is no clear 'inside' or 'outside,' but a rapid shifting of frames and meanings.

Jaakko Stenros, in the appropriately titled "In Defence of a Magic Circle," comes to the defense of the magic circle.[86] Drawing on Markus Montola, Stenros positions the magic circle as a metaphor for a kind of contract that players uphold, stating that "while all human activities are equally real, the events taking place within the contract are given special social meanings."[87] Strenros presents three sets of borders that delimit play from non-play: the psychological bubble, the social contract, and the arena of play.[88] According to Stenros, "The psychological bubble is personal, a phenomenological experience of safety in a playful (paratelic/autotelic) state of mind. [...] A player needs to feel safe in order to be playful, though it is not necessary to actually be safe."[89] This has strong implications for multiplayer contexts wherein the interaction can burst this psychological bubble. In smaller multiplayer situations it is no doubt easier to maintain the safety that contributes to a stronger border around this controversial magic circle, particularly when the danger (if not to one's life, than to one's sense of self, or the right to play or be present in a virtual world) seems like it's lurking behind so many avatars.

The magic circle for Stenros is the social contract of this triad, upheld by groups of different sizes and possibly recognized by other social frameworks. According to Stenros, the magic circle "is created when there is more than one person engaged in playful activity, though once established it is no longer necessary for everyone to constantly remain in a playful mindset."[90] Interestingly, if the circle was for play *once*, it

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[85] Ibid, 415.
[86] Jaakko Stenros, "In Defence of a Magic Circle: The Social and Mental Boundaries of Play," *Proceedings of the 2012 International DiGRA Nordic Conference* (2012): 1-19.
[87] Markus Montola, Jaakko Stenros, and Annika Waern, *Pervasive Games: Theory and Design* (Amsterdam: Morgan Kaufman Publishers, 2009).
[88] Stenros, "In Defence," 14-15.
[89] Ibid.
[90] Ibid.

maintains this play aura even if many of the players engaged in the contract have ceased *playing*, and remain in the circle for some other purpose. This becomes even more complicated when we add Stenros' third border, the arena, which is the site of play. This can include a physical structure as Huizinga envisioned it, but it can also include "an inert ludic product" like a videogame, which "...are recognized as structures that foster play even when empty (and they can be constructed in ways that seek to foster playfulness)...".[91] Stenros paints a picture that is extremely relevant for understanding the current situation in (massively) multiplayer gaming - where the "arenas" or games are constructed to foster playfulness: to direct players towards the idea that these games are playful spaces, while in the rules of the social contract, players may have given up on the playful frame long ago, while nevertheless defaulting to the idea that what occurs within the game is 'play.' Within this are players who, internally, no longer feel safe, but they do not necessarily leave the arena or abscond from the social contract when the psychological bubble breaks. They persist, and this presents a challenge for the negotiation of the space, and the greater meanings of what happens within it. Critically for Stenros, "the border is porous and allows for traffic in and out," and as the border is crossed there are new meanings created on both sides of the border, and "it is also possible for the barrier to collapse due to pressure from the inside or out."[92] Stenros and Consalvo both present a magic circle, or a configuration of a play space apart that is imperfectly delineated from non-play, and that is contingent upon personal and collective negotiation and understanding of the meanings being produced outside, within, and carried across its flimsy borders.

Both of these approaches to the magic circle present a challenge for thinking about transgressive acts in a playful space, where the rules are already bending and are being constantly reinterpreted, recontextualized, and re-experienced relative to non-play frames by players as they play. Based on this formulation of the magic circle or play frame, it is less useful to think of transgression in play abstractly, or relative to a non-play moral line *exclusively*. Acts that have the potential for transgression should be read as much as possible against multiple potential boundaries: the non-play space, the

[91] Ibid., 14-15.
[92] Ibid., 15.

border space, the play space, and also the interior space of the player. There is no doubt a link between a transgressive act in the context of play that breaks the safety that Stenros positions as so important for maintaining a playful frame. Regardless, the metaphor of the magic circle allows play to be thought of as at least *partially* a realm apart from non-play - it is a partial carnival where it is not always obvious which rules apply and what lines are being crossed within the play frame.

This is visible in Marcus Carter's work on treachery in *EVE Online.*[93] In *EVE Online* betrayal and scamming players is a supported element of the game world, both by the terms of service and by the community. Being subject to betrayal is perfectly ethical, social, and done by good people in the context of the game, with an appeal for some precisely because of the negative feelings it creates in others, as bound by the playful frame of the world.[94] Not every victim of betrayal is fully inside that frame however, and this aspect of the game produces a general environment that shapes the game. According to Carter:

> "To play treacherously is to play in a way that - consciously or not - hones the community of players into one constructed to accept and expect treacherous play, and the hypercompetitive, 'cruel but fair' masculine 'bro' player culture that exists alongside it. As a result, anyone left playing has consented to this form of competition."[95]

Carter's statement introduces a dilemma for online games: that to log into a game is to consent to playing it, and that in consenting to playing the game at all is to consent to the game culture as produced by the players. This idea certainly runs through game communities, but this again reveals the challenge of thinking of play spaces purely through this playful frame. When a player queues up for a competitive player-versus-player match they consent to many aspects of the activity, but they do not consent to

[93] CCP Games, 2003.
[94] Marcus Carter, *Treacherous Play* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2022).
[95] Ibid., 31.

being called a homophobic slur, for example, even though it may be common in that activity and a part of the 'bro' player culture that emerged in tandem with the gameplay. It is in this way that the movement between frames, or the inability to leave aspects of one, or both, behind, create the grounds for transgressive contestation of the cultural space.

There is a trend in the way the play frame is presented that undercuts the two-way nature of the flimsy border. The focus is largely on the way the real world alters the play space, but we struggle to keep in mind that because 'real life'[96] is also only partially separate from play, what happens in a game world can also alter 'real life.' Players obviously don't bring every aspect of the games they play into their non-play lives, although with the focus of studies on transgression and dark play being focused on representation, depiction, and narrative elements rather than social interaction and culture, the connection between virtual worlds and what happens inside them and their effect on 'real life' have been mostly overlooked. #Gamergate provides a clear case study for how the norms of the play spaces press against non-play, and how beyond this event, play has contributed to a cultural shake-up with extreme long-term effects for non-play spaces.

Briefly, #gamergate was a movement from 2014-2015, in which independent game creator Zoe Quinn, media critic Anita Sarkeesian and a number of prominent women in gaming and games research were systematically targeted by gamers. While there are claims the movement began in response to breach of ethical integrity in games journalism, and this line was repeated throughout the event, it escalated into a generally anti-woman, anti-feminist, and anti-left movement. The tactics deployed by #gamergaters included calling people's homes and workplaces with death threats and threats of sexual violence, bomb threats at speaking events, and "posting home addresses, phone numbers, social security numbers, and credit card numbers of their victims."[97] While #gamergate ostensibly grew out of a movement demanding journalistic

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[96] I use the term 'real life' to describe the world of non-play, even though I take for granted that all play is part of real life.

[97] Jennifer deWinter and Carly A. Kocurek, "Aw Fuck, I Got a Bitch on my Team!": Women and the Exclusionary Cultures of the Computer Game Complex," *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games*. Edited by Jennifer Malkowski and Treaandrea M. Russworm (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2017), 68.

integrity for games, the way the movement emerged through the sexualization, humiliation, and public shaming of women in the industry was completely in line with a larger strategy of violently excluding women from participating.[98] Christopher Paul and Torill Mortensen both remarked that #gamergaters did not appear to act in any collective manner with clear goals tied to the original premise of integrity in games journalism. Paul found that discourse within the movement operated without a clear message tied to journalistic integrity, but did find that the harassment of women along with lack of control was a consistent theme and strategy in #gamergate forums.[99] Mortensen also found that #gamergaters behaved like a swarm or football hooligans; detached from whatever cause may have precipitated the collective gathering of women-hating gamers, they were nonetheless willing to participate in the havok to reinforce the boundaries of gaming.[100] Here we see two examples of a contextual sanctioning of player behaviours within forums and these haphazard hooligan-like groups, that are otherwise highly transgressive outside of these contexts.

#Gamergate has proven to have a long tail. The strategies of online collective formation, mobilization, and the emotional language of the rhetoric used throughout #gamergate have been models for subsequent alt-right mobilization tactics.[101] Similarly, alt-right recruiters have targeted former #gamergaters and adopted the use of memetic forms that developed in and alongside gaming culture in order to build up alt-right networks.[102] While #gamergate was not play, aspects of it were certainly playful for its participants, and both #gamergate and its fallout can't be divorced from play and gaming culture.[103] Our view of the boundaries between play and non-play need to adjust to reflect that for all the ways that games (particularly online spaces) are not the real world, they also *are* the real world. This is not to say that 'videogames cause violence'

[98] Ibid., 61.
[99] Christopher A. Paul, *The Toxic Meritocracy of Videogames: Why Gaming Culture is the Worst* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 82.
[100] Torill Elvira Mortensen, "Anger, Fear, and Games: The Long Event of #GamerGate," *Games and Culture* 13, no 8 (2016): 788.
[101] Kristin M.S. Bezio, "Ctrl-Alt-Del: GamerGate as a Precursor to the Rise of the Alt-right." *Leadership* 14, no 5 (2018): 556-566.
[102] Edwin Hodge and Helga Hallgrimsdottir, "Networks of Hate: The Alt-right, 'Troll Culture,' and the Cultural Geography of Social Movement Spaces Online," *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 35, no 4 (2020): 571-572.
[103] Mortensen, "Anger, Fear."

in the media effects sense, but that what happens in these games can very much impact the culture, the thinking, and the feelings of those who play them and absorb the social worlds therein. This is especially true in online games, as they can be sites of belonging and group identification for players.[104]

Categories of Transgressive Play

Stenros reveals another layer to thinking about transgressive play in his work on the "idealization of play."[105] Stenros highlights that the positive aspects of play have gotten far more recognition within play theory, and there is a strong cultural discourse about the beneficial aspects of play wherein legitimate but transgressive or 'dark' forms of play go unrecognized.[106] Stenros provides a thorough list of transgressive categories, each of which relates to other research on transgression and dark play, so it is worth thoroughly examining each of these categories in detail. Moving through the categories, I will be using them as a stem to bring in related concepts or research on those forms of play before returning to Stenros' list as an anchor point that connects these perspectives. For each category, I focus on work that challenges the interpretation of transgression primarily through the idealized norm.

For Stenros, the "celebrated forms of 'good play' are currently hegemonic."[107] To what hegemony do these celebrated play acts belong, however? Stenros categorizes these transgressive play acts relative to an idealized moral line from an imagined hegemonic society, one that is moral, upright, and ethically good. But virtual worlds themselves are subcultures nested within larger cultures that are not so idyllic. The game spaces can be counter cultural or subcultural spaces that deny aspects of the dominant cultural practices or assumptions. Fron, Fullerton, Morie, and Pearce provide the 'Hegemony of Play,' stating:

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[104] Constance Steinkuehler and Dmitri Williams, "Where Everybody Knows Your (Screen) Name: Online Games as 'Third Places,'" *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication* 11 (2006): 885-909.
[105] Jaakko Stenros, "Guided by Transgression: Defying Norms as an Integral Part of Play," *Transgression in Games and Play*. Edited by Kristine Jorgensen and Faltin Karlsen (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2018), 15.
[106] Ibid., 13.
[107] Ibid., 14.

> "Today's hegemonic game industry has infused both individuals' and societies' experiences of games with values and norms that reinforce the industry's technological, commercial and cultural investments in a particular definition of games and play, creating a cyclical system of supply and demand in which alternate products of play are marginalized and devalued."[108]

The kinds of games being made and played in the gaming hegemony are games that often appear controversial from outside of this hegemonic layer, but are completely acceptable, ordinary, even banal within it.

Mortensen and Jørgensen, in their study on transgression, examine multiple games as transgressive texts including *Alien: Isolation,*[109] *Bloodborne,*[110] and *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar North, 2013).[111] Each of these games has their share of violence and gore that transgress this imagined milquetoast representative of the non-gaming public, but if we take these games within the industry or player layers of the gaming hegemony, these games fit right into the mainstream of mass-marketed games. If we take *Grand Theft Auto V* in this way I can't help but think of Andres Serrano's art piece *Immersion*, better known as "Piss Christ," which is also used as an example of transgressive art by Mortensen and Jørgensen. "Piss Christ" depicts Christ on a cross in a vat of Serrano's urine. The image was first displayed at the STUX fine art gallery in New York to moderate fanfare, but eventually became controversial within a fragment of society (particularly to Christian influenced members of the general public and associated policy makers), precisely because of its transgressing of the assumed moral lines of society.[112] To the dominant gaming culture, as it has been formed over time, a game like *Grand Theft Auto V* is not 'Piss Christ' on display at the Vatican - or even at a

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[108] Janine Fron, Tracy Fullerton, Jacqueline Ford Morie, and Celia Pearce, "The Hegemony of Play," *Proceedings of the 2007 DiGRA International Conference: Situated Play* (Tokyo, Japan, 2007), 309.
[109] Creative Assembly, 2014.
[110] FromSoftware, 2015.
[111] Torill Elvira Mortensen, and Kristine Jørgensen, *The Paradox of Transgression in Games* (London and New York: Routledge, 2020), 13.
[112] Damien Casey, "Sacrifice, *Piss Christ*, and Liberal Excess," *Law, Text, Culture 5,* no 1 (2000-2001): 19-34.

fine art gallery - it is ‘Piss Christ’ hanging in a ‘Piss Christ’ museum. Within the deeper layers of gaming culture its features are so normalized as to be commonplace: an artifact of total hegemony. In this context, like the majority of transgression and dark play scholars, Mortensen and Jørgensen are talking primarily about representation or the formal elements of games as experienced by individual players. Even within their own study, players did not share the same opinion on whether the games were actually transgressive, satirical, or representative of hegemony.[113] As we move into Stenros' categories we focus on possibilities for understanding the transgressive relationship *between* players, not as formal elements or representational or aesthetic design choices, but as acts that occur between players who share the same spaces.

One-Sided Social Play, Dangerous Play, and Violent Play

The first three of Stenros' transgressive categories are “One-Sided Social Play,” “Dangerous Play,” and “Violent Play.”[114] One-sided social play describes any social play activity where one or more participants do not find the activity to be play. Stenros cites bullying, griefing and trolling, predatory play in animals, and instances of guards mistreating prisoners as examples of one-sided social play.[115] The transgression here is against the ideals of ‘good play,’ namely that play is voluntary and that it is shared. Transgression does not emerge from a breach of another’s autonomy or safety, but out of how those breaches do not correspond to an ideal of play. In ‘dangerous play’ Stenros draws from the sociological theory of *edgework* to highlight risk to a player’s life as the transgressive element, and includes “extreme sports, high risk gambling or illegal playful activism or trolling.”[116] Violent play builds on both prior categories to include the infliction of real damage or pain on oneself or another with or without consent.

These forms of transgression put players, willing or otherwise, at risk. These become transgressive in some combination of their breach of how we think of play, and of their breach of normative values. For forms of play that are enacted upon other humans, there is no account of how transgression might derive from a breach of one's

[113] Mortensen and Jørgensen, *The Paradox,* 66-81.
[114] Ibid., 17-19.
[115] Ibid., 17.
[116] Ibid., 18.

own right to not ‘play,’ if the levels of violence Stenros posits as play can even be considered play at all. These forms of transgression also emerge from the denial of another’s humanity and a restriction of agency - a right to choose ‘if’ and ‘how’ to participate.

Marcus Carter and Fraser Allison’s account of player guilt in *DayZ* allows us to expand this frame to include the players *committing* transgressive acts, as even in a space of play, players exhibited guilt and went through moral disengagement strategies in order to justify acts that felt morally wrong.[117] Carter and Allison found that player killing in the multiplayer game *DayZ*, in which killing other players is a feature, was a source of moral concern and guilt for many players. This is a shift in our understanding of player killing in competitive multiplayer games which had previously been found by Christophe Klimmt to not elicit feelings of guilt. This was because the moral code of multiplayer games was based on a competitive ethic in which team victory was the core principle.[118]

Carter and Allison attribute the prevalence of guilt in *DayZ* to two things. First, the game is “unusually real.”[119] Carter and Allison are not referring to graphical fidelity which is often associated with ‘realness’ in games, but the link between the meritocratic game mechanisms of long-term effort, high-risk commodity acquisition, and increased pleasure in the game that comes with success from those ventures, coupled with the severity of loss when a player is killed. The realness comes from the consequence of taking a player’s life, knowing that all the time and effort a player put into the game is rendered meaningless in a gunshot, and that this loss will no doubt negatively impact the killed player. The second cause of guilt emerges from the possibility for players to not kill. Unlike many competitive multiplayer games that require players to kill others in order to win, *DayZ* has no win state, and it is possible to acquire the goods needed to advance and survive in the game without killing another player.[120] This possibility renders killing another player a moral choice within the game, rather than a rote or

[117] Marcus Carter and Fraser Allison. “Guilt in *DayZ*,” *Transgression in Games and Play.* Edited by Kristine Jørgensen and Faltin Karlsen (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2018), 133-136.
[118] Ibid., 134.
[119] Ibid., 136.
[120] Ibid., 137.

expected mechanical action. The act of killing as a moral possibility renders the act transgressive at the level of feeling through the guilt of the transgressor.

Carter and Allison interpret this guilt as a possibility for games to work as moral reflection, stating, “The results described in this chapter are significant because they demonstrate the potential for online games to employ transgressive play such as consequential player killing as an opportunity for ethical lessons and growth. Ultimately providing players the freedom to choose which actions are ‘wrong’ and which actions are ‘right’ opens them up to making the ‘wrong’ decision - a choice they can feel bad about and regret.”[121] This is an optimistic reading of their own data set, as Carter and Allison highlight multiple strategies (euphemistic labeling, displacement and diffusion of responsibility, disregard or distortion of consequences, dehumanization, victim blaming, and the game as brink play) that players use to disengage with the guilt they feel.[122] While there could be possibilities for moral reflection, Carter and Allison describe a process by which guilty players shed the guilt that could be used to that end. The player-killing that is being interpreted as transgressive by the players doing the killing is not being *confronted* as much as it is being *normalized* through the aforementioned strategies. Rather than a possibility for moral engagement, we have players learning to mitigate the sting of acts that negatively impact others. This is concerning when the language Carter and Allison highlight is rooted in Americanized notions of justified self-defense as an excuse for the harmful acts. This means that acts that appear transgressive within games can actually be a way of habituating oneself to a normative set of implicit cultural values.

Parapathic, Sensation-Centric Locomotor, and Context-Insensitive Play

Stenros’ following categories are “Parapathic Play” and “Sensation-centric Locomotor Play.”[123] Parapathic play refers to meaningful play that isn’t designed to make the player feel good, while sensation-centric locomotor play aims to create a pleasurable sensation, but through thrill-seeking or ‘bodily’ play. Sensation-centric

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[121] Ibid., 151.
[122] Ibid., 140-149.
[123] Stenros, “Guided by Transgression,” 18-19.

locomotor play is transgression because it is "...too childish, too uncultured. It is transgression against play as play and against culture as cultured."[124] In the case of parapathic play it is because 'play' trivializes the activity, and constricts the emotional experience that one is supposed to have during play. Related to this is context-insensitive play, which refers to an act that would be play if the place or time was different. This also includes "playing the wrong way within a game."[125] It is a broad category, and Stenros notes that "most transgressive play could be called 'context insensitive' by someone."[126] Compared to the other categories, context-insensitive play is less idealized, and more "against the social contract that is in place in the situation."[127]

Bonnie Ruberg expands on the emotional constriction of parapathic play through an exploration of 'fun' as the limited emotional experience of videogames. For Ruberg there is a dominant assumption in design and consumption that games are 'fun' and this fun-ness is reductive of the broader range of emotional experiences that players can have. Ruberg notes:

> "As a blanket concept for making sense of the (often arguably queer) pleasure of playing video games, fun is insufficient at best. It obscures all the moments that 'fun' fails to capture. Disappointment at an accidental fall from a treacherous platform, distress at the sight of an approaching enemy, a flash of bile when an opponent meets a player in combat and wins."[128]

For Ruberg, the dominance of fun creates an oppressive environment that replicates normative, particularly heteronormative, modes of play such that a broader, queer range

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[124] Ibid., 19.
[125] Ibid., 19-20.
[126] Ibid., 20.
[127] Ibid., 20.
[128] Bonnie Ruberg, "No Fun: Queer Affect and the Disruptive Potential of Video Games that Disappoint, Sadden, and Hurt," *Video Games Have Always Been Queer* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 167.

of emotions and experiences is pushed out of game design and gameplay.[129] Experiencing other emotions through play is a transgressive and counterhegemonic act, and she proposes a project of 'no fun' in gameplay and games discourse wherein 'fun' is denied in favor of other emotional possibilities. Ruberg states:

> "A refusal to have fun while playing represents [...] a rejection of the heteronormative status quo that takes place on the level of the body. In this way, no-fun game-play experiences form a system of disruptive counter-affects that can productively bring into question the traditional goals of video games, those who play them, and the relationship between games and pleasure more broadly."[130]

Here transgression occurs between the bodily space and the abstract space of culture. In Ruberg's counter-hegemonic 'no fun' project, transgression is liberating and takes on a deliberately disruptive role relative to what Stenros and Ruberg both identify as a limiting and narrow cultural view of the emotional range that games are 'supposed' to have. Here transgression disrupts the cultural norms by making way for more emotional possibilities.

Taboo, Brink, and Player-Inappropriate Play

The next transgressive categories are "Taboo Play," and "Brink Play."[131] According to Stenros, Taboo Play includes "actions that are not acceptable even when marked as play [...] such as racism, rape, and incest."[132] This categorization is problematic because when considering racism in games, it is often completely permissible in the social environment, and as Kishonna Gray's work highlights, it is experienced as the norm for many black players:

[129] Ibid., 158-162.
[130] Ibid., 166.
[131] Stenros, "Guided by Transgression," 21-22.
[132] Ibid, 21.

> "Stigmatized individuals are not considered to be legitimate participants, but instead are considered deviants. Most often, blackness and any association with blackness are punished the most violently within social spaces. As a result of this deviant status, Black users have employed the private spaces within gaming communities to develop their digital identities, create connections, and sustain communities."[133]

Gray directs us to the disconnect between the ideal and theoretical forms of play, and actual experience of play, particularly for marginalized groups. Aaron Trammel boldly expands on this work by challenging the definition of play that the idealized frame is built upon, as it doesn't account for the violence, pain, and trauma present in the Black relationship to play.[134] Through Trammel we must rethink racism and other oppressive factors within play not as aberrations, but as a feature of the phenomenon of play itself.

Brink play occurs when a game becomes the basis for 'merely' doing something. It renders certain transgressive acts permissible under the guise of its being a game. Stenros cites Twister as a game that breaks the intimacy barrier in ways that would be unacceptable outside of play contexts. For Stenros, norms in brink play are "...played with, but not broken."[135] As we've already seen, brink play occurred in the #gamergate movement as a strategy for justifying violence against women. This dovetails with "player-inappropriate play."[136] According to Stenros, "Certain types of play may be deemed unfitting for people of a particular age, class, ethnicity, gender, profession, religion, background, or other personal quality."[137] Player-inappropriate play is fundamental to many disputes and outright exclusions within games culture, and extends beyond play into the game industry itself, as we will examine more in Chapter 3.

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[133] Kishonna Gray, *Intersectional Tech: Black Users in Digital Gaming* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2020), 14.
[134] Aaron Trammel, *Repairing Play: A Black Phenomenology* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2023).
[135] Ibid., 21.
[136] Stenros, "Guided by Transgression," 20-21.
[137] Ibid., 20.

Kelly Boudreau looks at the boundary keeping in games that emerges as a result of player-inappropriate play. Boudreau focuses on expert use of game mechanics by players in order to determine who belongs in the game space. According to Boudreau, some players use disruptive play techniques such as a mob-training, ninja looting, and kill stealing in MMOs as an 'insider-test.' Boudreau found that these techniques are used by players on others because the ability to deal with these forms of play indicates a level of expertise regarding game mechanics on the part of the targeted player.[138] This kind of transgressive play is motivated by a subcultural affiliation to particular games or the 'gamer' label, where players who now possess a degree of skill and expertise in a particular game or in games generally wish to deny the access or enjoyment of newer players or players who don't have the skill to be 'gamers.'[139] This emerges out of the subcultural origins of gaming. Boudreau notes that the transition of gaming from a subcultural to more mainstream activity has resulted in players who strongly identify with the gamer label pursuing these modes of boundary keeping as a form of sub-cultural survival.[140] These subcultural boundaries are also commonly reinforced by players against people of color,[141] women,[142] and queer folks;[143] anyone who is perceived as an outsider may be 'played' against.

As we've seen, Stenros' transgressive categories actually describe completely normative acts within play worlds and the broader games culture. Through the categories provided, the very presence of perceived 'outsiders' is transgressive against dominant cultural values, while violence against women in and beyond the playful frame is committed partially to police the social order, but also because in the context of the game space *it is just a normal thing to do*. Violence and harassment in games when

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[138] Kelly Boudreau, "Beyond Fun: Transgressive Gameplay - Toxic and Problematic Player Behavior as Boundary Keeping," *Transgression in Games and Play.* Edited by Kristine Jorgensen and Faltin Karlsen (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2018), 270.
[139] Ibid.
[140] Ibid., 258-261, 270.
[141] Stephanie M. Ortiz, "'You Can Say I Got Desensitized to It': How Men of Color Cope with Everyday Racism in Online Gaming," *Sociological Perspectives* 64, no 2 (2019): 572-588.
[142] Kishonna L Gray, Bertan Buyukozturk and Zachary G. Hill, "Blurring the Boundaries: Using Gamergate to Examine 'Real' and Symbolic Violence against Women in Contemporary Gaming Culture," *Sociology Compass 11*, no 3 (2015): 1-8.
[143] Katherine Angel Cross, "Ethics for Cyborgs: On Real Harassment in an "Unreal Place." *Loading…* 8, no. 13 (2014): 4-21.

committed in order to forcefully exclude identities deemed as unfit for participation are, in a sense, normative transgressions: normative in their relationship to culture but personally transgressive in their violence against others. The transgressiveness of these acts depends upon the relationship between transgressor and transgressed, how the potentially transgressed is affected by the transgression, and this is in-turn affected by the relationship each party has to hegemonic values.

Holger Pötzsch proposes the term 'transgressivity' to explain this contextualized reading of transgression, moving away from the formal and abstract approach of early transgression theorists to account for "perceptions and experiences in context."[144] For Pötzsch, understanding transgression is contingent on a holistic observation of the "...historical, cultural, political, economic, and epistemological situatedness…" that prefigure the possibility for transgression, coupled with the personal, experiential response to transgression as it occurs.[145] The vantage point of transgressor and the transgressed (and ambivalent witnesses to the transgression) are in a subjective relationship with each other, and that relationship is itself influenced by the aforementioned forces that help shape it. Transgressivity also describes an attentiveness to the longform and momentary changes that occur in these contexts, wherein transgression cannot be measured in a static way against a single moral line, but must be understood through the "...experiences and practices within various life worlds. As such, transgressivity enables a processual understanding of boundary-breaching-as-lived that remains open to constant changes and adaptations."[146] 'Transgressivity' is becoming a more appropriate approach than 'transgression' as the categories continue to describe forms of play that literature situates as more commonplace than rare in the context of videogames.

John Sageng offers an approach to considering transgression from the perspective of moral philosophy, specifically Kantian ethics in which all individuals are to

[144] Holger Pötzsch, "Forms and Practices of Transgressivity in Videogames: Aesthetics, Play, and Politics," *Transgression in Games and Play*. Edited by Kristine Jorgensen and Faltin Karlsen (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2018), 47.
[145] Ibid.
[146] Ibid., 49.

be treated as “ends-in-themselves.”[147] Sageng contends that despite the layers and mechanisms within video games that allow moral norms to be bracketed during play, the objects, avatars, NPCs and player characters in a game that are often stripped of their out-of-game relation do in fact possess a moral connection to their out-of-game correlates. While the in-game objects and acts (intraludic) do not always correspond directly to out-of-game objects and acts (extraludic), there are instances where the boundaries of the magic circle no longer hold because the consequences of play exist outside of the boundaries of the game or outside of the game’s fiction.[148] Sageng is inconclusive on the link between virtuality and extraludic consequences, but holds that virtuality should not be considered morally distinct or rendered into ‘mere’ play without knowing “what this virtual mode of existence amounts to.”[149] Sageng implies that transgression in play cannot simply be a categorical relation to an idealized version of play derived from a set of normalized cultural values. Transgression and morality are linked not at the level of cultural value, but in the moral relationship between individuals as ends-in-themselves.[150] When Sageng and Pötzsch are taken together, an individual who is rendered into ‘mere means’ through another’s play can themselves become a transgression detector as they feel the crossing of the line against themselves.

Repetitive and Instrumentalized Play

The next categories are “Repetitive Play” and “Instrumentalized Play.”[151] Repetitive play refers to tasks in games that are play at some point, but lose their playful qualities through repetition. Stenros emphasizes grinding, work-like gameplay, and addictive and compulsive relationships to play, found in games like Candy Crush.[152] These types of play are transgressive because they go “against the idea that play is creative, spontaneous, and liberating.”[153] Instrumentalized play is similar but focuses

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[147] John R. Sageng, “The Bracketing of Moral Norms in Videogames,” In *Transgression in Games and Play.* Edited by Kristine Jorgensen and Faltin Karlsen (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2018), 80.
[148] Ibid., 69-71.
[149] Ibid., 71.
[150] Ibid., 80.
[151] Stenros, “Guided by Transgression,” 22-23.
[152] Ibid., 22.
[153] Ibid.

instead on the motivation of play rather than on the characteristics of the tasks in play. Instrumentalized play is “play in service of external goals.”[154] In videogames, this includes things like gold farming, where play is a source of income for players and the playful aspects of the game are instrumental to the work being done.

These transgressive aspects also reflect norms in mobile and online game design, game distribution, and in motivations for play. Nieborg and Poell highlight that the game industry and audience has grown exponentially through platformization, and design strategies for mobile games that generate revenue based on long-term play rather than upfront sales rely on “player acquisition and retention” mechanisms.[155] In addition to the social systems and network effects that keep players playing, Faltin Karlsen notes that repetitive and grindy gameplay is part of the broader strategy that emerged out of mobile games and MMOs.[156] Designers now implement grindy and repetitive tasks like daily quests, perpetual but gated leveling-up systems, and ‘gear-treadmills’ which enforce consistent and repetitive play.[157]

Christopher Paul notes that the meritocratic design elements of gameplay are precisely what draw many players to games in the first place. Popular contemporary game design emerged from meritocratic notions that permeate everyday life: the idea that if you work hard, you’ll get what you deserve. Many players are actively using games as a means of attaining a connection with ‘the good life’ through their meritocratic systems at a time when the structures that support ‘the good life’ outside of gaming are dissolving.[158] Paul notes that game designer and theorist Richard Bartle’s earliest games were explicitly meant to create functional meritocratic systems as a direct response to Bartle’s own realization that real-world meritocracy didn’t work.[159] The most popular games today are loaded with meritocratic systems, from *League of*

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[154] Ibid.
[155] David Nieborg and Thomas Poell, “The Platformization of Cultural Production: Theorizing the Contingent Cultural Commodity,” *New Media and Society* 20, no 11 (2018): 4284.
[156] Faltin Karlsen, “Exploited or Engaged? Dark Game Design Patterns in *Clicker Heroes*, *FarmVille 2*, and *World of Warcraft*,” *Transgression in Games and Play* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2018), 219-233.
[157] Christopher A. Paul, *The Toxic Meritocracy of Videogames: Why Gaming Culture is the Worst* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 111.
[158] Lisa Nakamura, “Afterword: Racism, Sexism, and Gaming’s Cruel Optimism.” In *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games*. Edited by Jennifer Malkowski and Treaandrea M. Russworm (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2017), 247.
[159] Paul, *Toxic Meritocracy*, 3.

Legends and the hierarchical tier-system that assigns a visible value to players based on their 'skill,' to the career modes in the *NBA 2K* and *FIFA* series that narratively and mechanically simulate a player-avatar's rise through professional sports organizations.[160] Paul elaborates, "Career modes celebrate skill and achievement, depicting success in virtual life as simply a matter of showing up and playing."[161] These and other meritocratic and addictive forms of game design are precisely what many players find appealing in the games they play and support, along with the industry that monetizes them. This is not to say that these elements aren't bad. Paul's entire project is about highlighting how these meritocratic ideals in games are detrimental or 'toxic.' He states:

> "The meritocratic focus of games is self-insulating and self-replicating. Those who are successful believe they have attained their status through the quality of their effort, a compelling ground on which to build the impression that they are simply better than others are. The prevalence of meritocratic myths in games also encourages players to want more meritocratic games and deride video games that do not fit that template as lesser, bad games, and sometimes even to contest whether non-meritocratic efforts are even proper games at all," (7).[162]

However, if we consider Paul's account of meritocracy in games relative to Stenros' transgressive categories, their transgressiveness becomes suspect. Instead of transgression, instrumentalized play and repetitive play are representative of the hegemony of play in contemporary games, while the transgressive game is the one that eschews these meritocratic design conventions.

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[160] Ibid., 117-123.
[161] Ibid., 115.
[162] Ibid., 7.

Adding another layer to this, loot boxes,[163] battle passes,[164] and microtransactions have become standard fare in games.[165] These systems are not always beloved by players at the gameplay level, but these elements are culturally permissible as the way game developers make money off of their games. Players respond differently to these systems depending on the game and how these monetization systems fit into the game and the game culture. Importantly, they can challenge the integrity of the game world and the fantasy of play, allowing players to bypass the in-game meritocracy by opening their wallet. As Meades notes with 'boosting' - an act where players cooperate to exploit the game mechanics to make faster progress, these acts are transgressive against the game system and against players.[166] Boosters transgress against the game environment as they attempt to circumvent the repetitive tasks that have been put there by designers, but they also transgress against other players as they unlock more powerful rewards sooner, thereby giving them a distinct advantage against players who don't boost. The very environment of mass marketed play (including the micro-environments of shared online games) is built on some implementation of repetitive or instrumentalizing tasks coupled with another layer of monetization. The exact configuration of these elements and how they figure into the culture and transgressive possibilities of a game needs to be considered on a game-by-game basis, as their transgressive potential depends on the relationship between the community, their practices, and how these systems coalesce in any given game.

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[163] Joseph Macey and Mila Bujić, "The Talk of the Town: Community Perspectives on Loot Boxes," *Modes of Esports Engagement in Overwatch*. Edited by Maria Ruotsalainen, Maria Törhönen, and Veli-Matti Karhulahti (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 199-223.

[164] Daniel Joseph, "Battle Pass Capitalism," *Journal of Consumer Culture 21*, no 1 (2021): 68-83.

[165] Jan Švelch, "Playing with and Against Microtransactions," *The Evolution and Social Impact of Video Game Economics*. Edited by Casey B. Hart (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2017), 101-120.

[166] Alan Meades, "Boosting, Glitching, and Modding *Call of Duty*: Assertive Dark-Play Manifestations, Communities, Pleasures, and Organic Resilience," *The Dark Side of Play: Controversial Issues in Playful Environments*. Edited by Torill Elvira Mortensen, Jonas Linderoth, and Ashley ML Brown (New York: Routledge, 2015), 252-253.

Additional Literature on Transgression and Dark Play

There are a number of studies that focus on transgressive representation, depictions, or narratives in game. These studies position transgression largely in the sense of games' aesthetic qualities and player responses to form, content, and gameplay, similar to the way a viewer would interpret and react to a controversial film or television show (although not identical, as games are consumed differently). One of the largest studies is the previously mentioned work by Mortensen and Jørgensen, which examines groups of players playing through several apparently transgressive games. Mortensen and Jørgensen present a "Paradox of Transgression," stating that "when something is experienced as an absolute transgression, it cannot be engaged with and that if we are able to engage with it, it cannot be a transgression."[167] Effectively, a game with boundary pushing violence in this context does not offend such that they cannot be engaged with, or to use Mortensen and Jørgensen's terminology, it is not a "*profound transgression,"* for if it was it would "disturb the user to the extent that they no longer wish to engage with it."[168] Instead this kind of game is an "*aesthetic transgression,"* played in a context (local, emotional, cultural) that allows the transgressive content to be interpreted and enjoyed.[169] Mortensen and Jørgensen only briefly mention transgression in online play, once in reference to Jenny Sundén's work with breaking the social frames in *World of Warcraft* through queer play (examined in chapter 5), and again to consider 'player vs player' activities like 'griefing and ganking,' which they then apply to single player experiences.[170] This framing of transgression mainly as a discursive artistic practice overlooks the complexities of the social make-up of online game worlds and the possibility for players to experience 'profound transgression' at the hands of other players, and for players to persist in spite of (and *because* of) these profound transgressions.

Related work by Jørgensen examines morality and how dark play is designed into the game world of *Dishonored,*[171] and how dark play has consequences that are

[167]Mortensen and Jørgensen, *The Paradox*, 3-4.
[168] Ibid., 4.
[169] Ibid.
[170] Ibid., 8, 57.
[171] Bethesda Softworks, 2012.

visible in the game world. Mortensen also examined morality meters in the MMO *Star Wars: The Old Republic,*[172] with emphasis on the story choices and character building options of the game as designed. René Glas examines the prevalence of murder in single player experiences as the mass death of expendable units is a common practice in game design and play with ethical implications,[173] while Björn Sjöblöm explored the diegetic murder of NPC children as a taboo in games that is often designed *against*, but then accessed by players through a combination of game modification and transgressive gameplay.[174]

Ashley Brown and Jennifer deWinter each point out normalized depictions of extreme acts of sexual violence in different game contexts. Brown's work reinforces the play frame, as tabletop RPG players justified roleplaying "necrophilia and sexual violence" as in-line with the adult-oriented themes of their roleplaying game, so long as these acts are "within the rules and moral order of the game world."[175] DeWinter's work focuses on the third-party distribution of Japanese *eroge* games that depict sexual assault of minors as part of gameplay, and the challenge of regulating these products across a networked global industry.[176] As this kind of game shifts across cultural borders its regulation is challenged by industry and cultural stakeholders as both taboo and cultural product.[177] Not unrelated is Julian Dibbell's piece on sexual violence in the LambdaMOO MUD found their characters involuntarily part of a sexual assault roleplay on the part a single avatar, 'Mr. Bungle': an event which galvanized the community to self-regulate and form a tribunal against the assailant, and caused the community of

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[172] Electronic Arts, 2011.
[173] René Glas, "Of Heroes and Henchmen: The Conventions of Killing Generic Expendables in Digital Games." *The Dark Side of Game Play: Controversial Issues in Playful Environments.* Edited by Torill Elvira Mortensen, Jonas Linderoth, and Ashley ML Brown (New York: Routledge, 2015), 33-49.
[174] Björn Sjöblöm, "Killing Digital Children: Design, Discourse, and Player Agency," *The Dark Side of Game Play: Controversial Issues in Playful Environments.* Edited by Torill Elvira Mortensen, Jonas Linderoth, and Ashley ML Brown, (New York: Routledge, 2015).
[175] Ashley M.L. Brown, "Three Defenses for the Fourteen-Inch Barbed Penis: Darkly Playing with Morals, Ethics, and Sexual Violence," *The Dark Side of Game Play: Controversial Issues in Playful Environments.* Edited by Torill Elvira Mortensen, Jonas Linderoth, and Ashley ML Brown (New York: Routledge, 2015), 133.
[176] Jennifer deWinter, "Regulating Rape: The case of RapeLay, Domestic Markets, International Outrage, and Cultural Imperialism," *The Right to Play in the Digital Era*. Edited by Tom Apperly (New York and London: Routledge), 2015.
[177] Ibid.

LambdaMOO to enter into an ideological battle about the culture of this particular MUD.[178]

Through *This War of Mine,*[179] Kristian Bjørkelo considers the emotional impact of games on their players as transgressive realism, when “real negative or painful feelings make something *feel* more truthful and real. To put it simply, if the feelings are real, what evoked them must also be real(istic).”[180] This reinforces the transgressive impact of the single player experience upon a person, but also leaves open the possibility for strong emotional responses to transgression in multiplayer settings, particularly if we consider the violation felt by those affected by Mr. Bungle's actions in Dibbell’s piece. In each of these examples when the line is pushed, contrary to Foucault, it does not close up neatly again behind it - rather it is contested and debated. Ragnild Tronstad considers transgressive gameplay from the perspective of psychoanalysis, whereby consuming transgressive representation is a confrontation with “the abject,” which is the “perception of the repulsive with which we resist identification.”[181] This repulsive part exists somewhere within ourselves, though we may wish it not to, and thus from this perspective the transgression is not felt only as an offense to our sensibilities or tastes, but as a confrontation with ourselves as the transgressions “...threaten to invade, infect, and assimilate us.”[182]

This has implications when thinking of Chapman and Linderoth’s work on the depiction of Nazis in videogames when they are playable, as is common in many single-player and multi-player WWII-themed shooters. The authors found that political symbols as well as context was stripped away, thus producing a “trivializing” element to playing

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[178] Julian Dibbell, “A Rape in Cyberspace or How an Evil Clown, a Haitian Trickster Spirit, Two Wizards, and a Cast of Dozens Turned a Database into a Society,” *Annual Survey of American Law* 4 (1994): 471-490.
[179] 11 Bit Studios, 2014.
[180] Kristian A. Bjørkelo, “‘It Feels Real to Me:’” Transgressive Realism in *This War of Mine.*” *Transgression in Games and Play.* Edited by Kristine Jørgensen and Faltin Karlsen (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2018), 185.
[181] Ragnnild Tronstad, “Destruction, Abjection, and Desire: Aesthetics of Transgression in Two Adaptation of ‘Little Red Riding Hood.’” *Transgression in Games and Play.* Edited by Kristine Jørgensen and Faltin Karlsen (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2018), 214.
[182] Ibid.

as the German side in these games.[183] The stripping away of meaning, symbols, and context produces a marketable product but allows players to play as German soldiers within a surprisingly neutral frame.[184] While this example is largely representational, it may help contextualize some observations later in this study where *players* themselves reference Nazi images and ideology.

Some games are transgressive by design. Miguel Sicart points to a human relationship within transgressive gameplay, but explains this relationship as one that occurs between designer and player. Once again the focus is on an aesthetic experience akin to performance art as a player navigates what Sicart calls "abusive game design."[185] For Sicart this is "a creative strategy that creates a dark-play experience by setting up a conversational space that resists typical playful appropriation."[186] A game with some moral lesson that is so rigid as to not be played with, is for Sicart a transgressive experience forced on the player by the designer. Staffan Björk similarly calls these "Feel-Bad Games," as they trick a player into participating in something that is going to make them feel bad about themselves.[187] This is not always tied to a moral lesson or aesthetic choice. Zagal, Björk, and Lewis point to common 'dark' patterns in digital game design like grinding, playing by appointment, and 'social pyramid schemes' as examples of design choices that also make players feel bad, though they are not always obvious parts of the game.[188] These are highly relevant for MMO design, as these systems are often obfuscated by the fantastical presentation of the game worlds, even though the systems resemble those indicated by Zagal and others.

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[183] Adam Chapman, and Jonas Linderoth, "Exploring the Limits of Play: A Case Study of Representations of Naziism in Games," *The Dark Side of Game Play: Controversial Issues in Playful Environments.* Edited by Torill Elvira Mortensen, Jonas Linderoth, and Ashley ML Brown (New York: Routledge, 2015), 149.
[184] Ibid.
[185] Miguel Sicart, "Darkly Playing Others," *The Dark Side of Game Play: Controversial Issues in Playful Environments.* Edited by Torill Elvira Mortensen, Jonas Linderoth, and Ashley ML Brown (New York: Routledge, 2015), 100.
[186] Ibid., 106.
[187] Staffan Björk, "Fabricated Innocence: How People Can be Lured into Feel-Bad Games." *The Dark Side of Game Play: Controversial Issues in Playful Environments.* Edited by Torill Elvira Mortensen, Jonas Linderoth, and Ashley ML Brown (New York: Routledge, 2015).
[188] José Zagal, Staffan Björk, and Chris Lewis, "Dark Patterns in the Design of Games," *Proceedings of the 8th International Conference on the Foundation of Digital Games* (Chania, Greece, 2013).

Another body of work on transgressive play revolves around the performance of play. Wirman and Jones examine 'Let's Play' YouTube videos of *The Sims 3*,[189] where the game is played as a performance for an audience, with the game serving as a stage for introducing taboo topics, characters, and jokes through the performance of play.[190] Wirman and Jones found that both amateur and expert players were able to produce this kind of transgression. For amateur players the inability to play 'correctly' or 'effectively' is a transgression against the game system through a disregard of 'the implied player.'[191] Drawing on Espen Aarseth, the implied player is the assumptive 'who' that games are made for as designers anticipate behaviours, gameplay choices, and the psychology of the player.[192] In contrast, the expert player is able to modify the game using downloadable mods which creates possibilities for transgressive character representations that were never intended to be in the game, let alone experienced second-hand by the YouTube audience. This is consistent with Richard L. Edward's writing on transgressive remixes and mash-ups, which "flip the script" on the intended meaning of the media object through modern affordances of media production and co-optation, allowing users to "trespass into media territories that have traditionally been off limits to them for cultural, political, technological, or legal reasons."[193] Similarly, Consalvo examines transgressive resistance on Twitch through the streamer Kaceytron. Kaceytron presents as a "girl gamer" who leans into the stereotypes and hypersexualization of women of Twitch, effectively drawing in an audience of young men who she griefs through the performativity of her stream.[194] Through her persona, she disorientingly oscillates within Wirman and Jones' amateur and expert binary, disrupting and confusing viewers who critique her play or view her only as a sexual

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[189] Maxis, 2009.
[190] Hanna Wirman, and Rhys Jones, "Let's Play Performance as Transgressive Play," *Transgression in Games and Play*. Edited by Kristine Jørgensen and Faltin Karlsen (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2022), 113.
[191] Ibid, 113.
[192] Espen Aarseth, "I Fought the Law: Transgressive Play and the Implied Player," *Proceedings of the 2007 DiGRA International Conference: Situated Play* (Tokyo, 2007), 130-133.
[193] Richard L. Edwards, "Flip the Script: Political Mashups as Transgressive Texts," *Transgression 2.0: Media, Culture, and the Politics of the Digital Age*. Edited by David J. Gunkel and Ted Gournelos (New York: Continuum, 2012), 26-28, 40.
[194] Mia Consalvo, "Kaceytron and Transgressive Play on Twitch.tv," *Transgression in Games and Play*. Edited by Kristine Jørgensen and Faltin Karlsen (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2018), 83-98.

object.[195] In these examples we see how a second layer of witnessing transgression in games can produce acts of resistance that change the meaning of games and challenge viewers.

Moral panic and its relationship to gaming is one final element of transgressive play theory that brings us back to the cultural and societal layer. Through David Garland, the moral panic is defined by two key features: First, there is a "moral problem" wherein transgressive or deviant phenomena challenge or threaten an established value system that upholds a version of society.[196] Second, these transgressive and deviant phenomena are "symptomatic," in that they are pervasive and uphold other related threats to an idealized moral society.[197] Faltin Karlsen situates games within the related "media panic" framework, describing them as "cyclical, arising whenever new media or media phenomena are introduced to society."[198] For games, this has been most prominently seen with *Dungeons and Dragons* and the satanic panic of the 1980s,[199] a frequent blaming of videogames for increased societal violence,[200] and more recently with videogames and addiction.[201]

Moral panic is most closely related to the field of media effects, a subfield of psychology that primarily aims to prove links between media consumption and behaviour, with much of the work in this area described by Nicolas Bowman as "well-meaning researchers less committed to understanding a phenomenon and more committed to stopping it before it is understood."[202] In this sense media effects as a school as it relates to moral panic is already on the side of an idealized society, not

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[195] Ibid.
[196] David Garland, "On the Concept of Moral Panic," *Crime, Media, Culture 4*, no 1 (2008): 11.
[197] Ibid.
[198] Faltin Karlsen, "Analyzing Game Controversies: A Historical Approach to Moral Panics and Digital Games," *The Dark Side of Game Play: Controversial Issues in Playful Environments.* Edited by Torill Elvira Mortensen, Jonas Linderoth, and Ashley ML Brown (New York: Routledge, 2015), 16.
[199] Joseph P. Laycock, *Dangerous Games: What Moral Panic over Role-Playing Games Says about Play, Religion, and Imagined Worlds* (Oakland: University of California Press).
[200] Carly Kocurek, "The Agony and the Exidy: A History of Video Game Violence and the Legacy of Death Race," *Game Studies 12*, no 1 (2012): 1-12.
[201] Christopher Ferguson and J. Coldwell, "Lack of Consensus Among Scholars on the Issue of Video Game 'Addiction,'" *Psychology of Popular Media 9,* no. 3 (2020): 359-366.
[202] Nicolas D. Bowman, "The Rise (and Refinement) of Moral Panic," *The Video Game Debate: Unraveling the Physical, Social, and Psychological Effects of Digital Games.* Edited by Rachel Kowert and Thorsten Quandt (New York and London: Routledge, 2016), 34-35.

attuned to the cultural implications of transgressive environments or acts, but more focused on how the act of play in various contexts leads to violence or aggression that impacts the functioning of society. Alan Meades highlights the British game arcades of the 1980s as one focus of this kind of moral panic and media effects scrutiny. Critically for Meades, the complex inner workings of the arcade subculture more appropriately reflects the depth of experience and interaction that communal game spaces, either virtual or physical, can provide. Meades states:

> "Playing in an arcade became about navigating a complex ecosystem of rules, regulations, and etiquette as well as identities, groups, and power relations, always contextualized by tensions between appropriate and transgressive play. Arcade ecosystems supported many players and many ways of playing: appropriate play - the rapid spending of money in machines in exchange for thrill, challenge and fun - but also transgressive play - loitering, scuffles, fights, and gangs; opportunities for gambling; the tipping, pushing, or exploitation of machines; and association with patrons who traded in all kinds of contraband."[203]

Both the appropriate and transgressive play that Meades describes are transgressive as we move outside of the arcade walls, and the arcades themselves are pushing against the norms of a society in the midst of its own arcade-focused public concern.[204]

Meades' portrait of the arcade reveals layers of transgression and contestation where a media effects-style causal link between participation and aggression is insufficient for understanding the relationship between play and society. Crucially, Meades' work emphasizes the importance of a situated understanding of transgressive dynamics in play through his own awareness and experience of the layers of the British

[203] Alan Meades. "The American Arcade Sanitization Crusade and the Amusement Arcade Action Group," *Transgression in Games and Play.* Edited by Kristine Jørgensen and Faltin Karlsen (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2018), 250-251.
[204] Ibid., 244-248.

arcades: an approach that will be key for effectively examining transgression in present-day shared gaming spaces online. When thinking about virtual worlds, they are situated in a similar cultural position and are made up of a more complex social world than Meades' arcades. Finally, Meades' work emphasizes once again a disconnect between societies' *ideal* of play, and the culture within the playful environment.

Situating this Study Within the Literature

When thinking about virtual worlds, we aren't only focusing on depictions, representations, or designed simulations. Instead we are talking about people acting with, and upon, other people. This occurs as the fractured boundaries of the magic circle produce virtual play spaces with varying player attachments and investments to the worlds, their play potentials, and their cultural forms. Play and non-play are always pressing upon each other, but their borders are not clearly defined, and the borders that *feel* defined are actually porous and contested. As seen with #gamergate, the culture flows both ways. These playful worlds are part of a 'hegemony of play,' but they may also be their own micro-hegemonies, or in the parlance of Holger Pötzsch, contextual "life-worlds."[205] They are not insular from the norms of the game industry or the global socio-economic order, but when thinking about how play is idealized *within* these spaces through the actions of players rather than *about* these spaces through formal or aesthetic qualities, we open up a different view about what constitutes transgression.

Stenros' categories provide a substantial framework for approaching the transgressive phenomena observed in games from an ideal perspective. They work as an anchor not just for transgressive concepts, but for practical exploration of transgression by being able to understand player practices and game spaces on their own terms, and with attention to the broader culture in which games and play are situated. While I have pushed back against the categories as defining transgressive acts in the context of videogame culture, this is to focus the primary lens of this study on the 'inside' of select games and to work outwards from the cultural logics of game worlds. This is to better understand how transgression is interpreted from *inside* these spaces by players. The categories are not themselves an issue, but they are indicative

[205] Pötzsch, "Forms and Practices," 49.

of the majority of work on transgression in play and dark play being thought through the idealized paradigm, which undervalues what players actually think and feel, the legacy of play and oppression and boundary keeping, and the investments players make into the game worlds which are at times taken as seriously as anything 'real.' Indeed, participation within these game worlds may change one's perception about what is or is not transgressive in any sphere of belonging, not in a simple relationship of cause and effect, but through deep cultural commitments, conflicts, and identifications with these game worlds and the people who share them.

Towards Transgressive Positivity and Positive Transgression

We've established that games that appear transgressive when viewed from the outside or in relation to hegemonic cultural layers may not be transgressive when taken on their own terms. Foucault would call this an 'inversion' of the ideal play paradigm, where transgression against society from within select games has already changed the norms within the bounds of those games. An inverted reading shifts our expectations about the spaces, to understand that pervasive activities, events, or trends that occur in multiplayer environments are indicative of *norms* in the context of these worlds, regardless of their transgressive status to the outermost cultural layer of society. Wolfreys, channeling Roland Barthes, emphasizes that 'to transgress is both *to recognize and to reverse*.'[206] At its core, this project is about digging into this recognition and reversal. A recognition of the game worlds and culture as they *are* rather than how they are *idealized* requires research that will come in the latter half of this study, but already throughout this chapter we have seen a range of transgressive activities across different spheres of play, and gaming's associated sites, many of which make players feel bad, and/or contribute to the toxic culture of gaming. This leaves open the question of how players respond to acts intended to make players feel *good* within these play spaces? What do idealized versions of seemingly positive actions do to players?

I would like to return to Bonnie Ruberg's project of 'no fun,' which could be helpful for thinking through how to make positivity work as a way of understanding the culture. For Ruberg, 'no fun' emerges out what she outlines as the ubiquity of 'fun' as a

[206] Julian Wolfreys, *Transgression: Identity, Space, Time* (Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), 12.

heteronormative, all-encompassing but emotionally wrung-out term that permeates games, games discourse, and game design.[207] For Ruberg, ‘fun’ is the limiting standard of normative emotional connection to games and play.[208] What Ruburg describes is less an emotional, and more a cultural short-hand for the wide range of normalized experiences that players and designers are already engaging in. For players, ‘fun’ is a go-to, culturally acceptable response to ‘why do you play,’ when the *actual* response could actually have more to do with a player feeling valued through their engagement with a meritocratic simulation, being part of a community, or because games as an art form once moved them, or because they can harass people in play spaces. As the work on #gamergate showed, the stakes of play and game design even for the most normative players are tied to their identities and relational senses of self-worth such that ‘fun’ can’t begin to account for what games and play are really about. What’s more, through brink play, ‘fun’ and ‘play’ both operate as rhetorical devices that downplay the harm in some transgressive acts, and ultimately downplay the intersecting oppressions at both the levels of structure and player.

In terms of design, Ruberg notes that ‘fun’ is a guiding principle for what games should first and foremost be.[209] Again, this is a shorthand that includes repetitive or instrumental play mechanisms, and a general arrangement of design elements that attract and retain players. In both play and design, the ‘fun’ that Ruberg is referring to isn’t a joyful or frolicking ‘fun,’ which embodies many of the positive associations with play and fun that Huizinga and Caillois imagined, and that Stenros channels as idealized play. This ‘fun’ instead represents what has been identified as a normalized experience of present-day play that has already been shaped by a transgressive position towards non-gaming culture. This is most exemplified by Aaron Trammell’s argument that the phenomenology of play built out of the white European tradition fails to account for the way play is a power relationship with violent, traumatic, and oppressive features.[210] Much of the literature on gaming, particularly on transgression,

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[207] Bonnie Ruberg, “No Fun: Queer Affect and the Disruptive Potential of Video Games that Disappoint, Sadden, and Hurt,” *Video Games Have Always Been Queer* (New York: New York University Press, 2019).
[208] Ibid., 160.
[209] Ibid., 162.
[210] Trammel, *Repairing Play*, 11.

dark play, and (as we will see) toxicity, indicates that 'no fun' is already happening, and that players continue to play regardless. As such, a possible strategy for disruption in game spaces and game design isn't about 'no fun,' as much as it is about a *re-emergence* of fun: returning to a sense of feeling good through play in toxic game spaces through a disavowal of the norms that have come to define them. Through this, there may be some greater implications for affecting pockets of toxic game culture, a communal project between academics and the industry that has been struggling to succeed.

I propose two related terms that will carry through this project: "Transgressive Positivity," and "Positive Transgression." First, 'Transgressive Positivity' builds off of what Mortensen and Navarro-Remesal call "Positive Tone Transgressions," a phenomenon they observed from one user through Nintendo's StreetPass feature. This user would send uplifting positive messages to users to "'brighten someone's day."[211] Once again, thinking in terms of aesthetics and immersion Mortensen and Navarro-Remesal note that "Positive tone transgressions are only rarely a transgressive act - unlike hate speech - but they break the illusion of being in a different world."[212] While these acts are certainly rare, I question the notion that they are rarely transgressive. This may be the case in Nintendo's social features, but it remains to be seen how positivity, such as optimism, kindness, or acts of giving, are received in many online games. Transgressive positivity is the primary mode through which I will be engaging with the games of this study.

As this project is foremost motivated by working towards better, more inclusive and equitable conditions in online games, positive transgression leaves the door open for considering any transgressive strategy that can be mobilized to move the needle of gaming culture, or the smaller sites within it. Going forward, transgressive positivity as a strategy may or may not fail to bring change, but in this search there may be other kinds of transgressive action that is not so wholesome, but nevertheless has a positive impact on players, the community, and the culture. Kishonna Gray found this with the *Call of*

[211] Torill Elvira Mortensen and Victor Navarro-Remesal, "Asynchronous Transgressions: Suffering, Relief, and Invasions in Nintendo's Miiverse and StreetPass," *Transgression in Games and Play*. Edited by Kristine Jørgensen and Faltin Karlsen (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2018), 38.
[212] Ibid.

Duty Modern Warfare II (Activision, 2009) clan Puerto Reekan Killaz, a group of queer women of colour who used griefing tactics as a resistance strategy to the discrimination they faced in the game.[213] Through these kinds of actions and the context in which they are conducted, there may be positive outcomes for the players or the culture. This 'positivity' also draws on the positive affects such as joy and excitement that may emerge from these forms of play. Through the term 'positive transgression' I leave open the possibility that meaningful and impactful transgressions may not themselves be so sweet, but may nonetheless make players feel good, even joyful, while impacting these game spaces for the better.

[213] Kishonna Gray, "Collective Organizing, Individual Resistance, or Asshole Griefers? An Ethnographic Analysis of Women of Color in Xbox Live," *ada, A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology* no. 2 (2013).

Chapter 2 - Research Methodology

Before detailing the methodology of this project, it may first be useful to restate its goals, and revisit what this project aims to accomplish in a general sense. This project is examining positive acts that may or may not be transgressive in game spaces that are considered toxic. It also accounts for the affordances for positivity within different game communities, and through different game systems. This is done to trace the possibilities of transgression for cultural change in the game space and the culture, to consider the effect that ‘positivity’ has on the players who both perform and experience it, and to understand why positivity is more or less common (and possibly more or less transgressive) across multiple games. Drawing again on Holger Pötzsch's trangressivity’ concept, this requires a thorough examination of the histories, cultures and politics of the games in question before beginning to analyze the games and their players for positivity and its transgressive potential.[214]

I describe this project primarily as an (auto)ethnography as the core research requires a deep investigation into the play practices of each game, but context is just as critical for understanding what happens through play. A great deal of this project requires an immersion into each game. In truth, a lot of time is spent waiting for things to happen within the everyday occurrences of play and occasionally (within reasonable limits), making things happen. But a game’s culture, systems, and design inform and are informed by the play that occurs therein, and discussions and events that happen outside. As such, this project relies on an array of qualitative methodologies that vary during each step of the research to support and contextualize the primary ethnographic work that drives the research.

I feel it's best to start simple, so below is a brief statement - an honest interpretation of how I would explain what this project is to folks less acquainted with the layers of academic jargon that sauce-up our methodological language - that encapsulates doing this work. Following this is a short outline of the various research components of this project, coupled with the methodological approaches used during each step. I then list the four games featured in this study with basic details about each. The history and form of these games are examined in more detail in chapter 3, but this

[214] Pötzsch, “Forms and Practices,” 47.

section may serve as a useful reference. In the subsequent sections of this chapter I will detail each of these research strategies and situate them within relevant literature on virtual worlds, video games, ethnography, and communication studies methodologies. I conclude with a practical accounting of my approach, explaining how and why I organized these methods and allocated time to the research activities as I did.

My Approach in Simple Terms

I played 4 online games, each over an extended period of time, and watched what people did: especially what they did around - and to - each other. This included ways of playing with and against others, and communicating with others through chat, voice, and through playful communicative actions. I spent a lot of time in these games observing and reflecting on those observations. I followed each game to where it seemed they were taking me until I was confident in characterizing my 'average' experience in each game: what was the mood of the environment, what kinds of comments and gameplay actions did I see repeatedly, and how did I *feel* at different stages of play, in different activities, and in response to various players. Once I had a sense of how players played with and talked to one another, I would just try to be *slightly* more positive - friendly, helpful, charitable - than what I regularly saw in social situations to see what happened, and I would look for other players who were already doing this. I reflected on how people reacted to my positivity, and the positivity of those other players. I also talked to players about how they felt when they played and if they experienced toxicity or positivity in the games.

To better make sense of these games and the players, I kept up to date on community spaces of each game, like forums, subreddits, popular YouTube and Twitch channels, and Discord servers. I made sure to be aware of community issues, frequent topics of discussion, and controversies among players or the game developers. Then I compared what happened across each game and thought about how each game and each community presented different challenges for positivity, and how positivity impacted those who came in contact with it. Finally, I reflected on the possibilities and pitfalls of positivity as an anti-toxicity strategy.

An Outline of the Methodologies

1. Within the online games:
    a. Primary Methodologies: Ethnography, which includes participant observation and interviews
    b. Secondary Methodologies: 'Breaching,' discourse analysis, and platform walkthrough.

2. In game-adjacent sites (forums, Discord servers, Twitch).
    a. Primary Methodologies: Discourse analysis.
    b. Secondary Methodologies: Participant observation (In Discord chats, for example).

The Four Games of this Study

DOTA 2 (Defense of the Ancients 2)

Publisher: Valve Corporation

Release Year: 2013

Platform: PC

Genre(s): MOBA (Multiplayer Online Battle Arena)

Average Active Monthly Players (excluding China) in 2022: ~466,134[215]

Peak Players (excluding China) in 2022: ~1,038,848.[216]

Lost Ark

Publishers: Smilegate and Amazon Games

Release Year: 2019 (Korea), 2022 (Western Regions)

Platform: PC

Genre(s): MMORPG (Massively Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Game); Isometric Action-RPG

Average Active Players (Western Regions) in 2022: ~300,039.[217]

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[215] Based on SteamCharts data. https://steamcharts.com/app/570. Accessed February 14th, 2023.
[216] Ibid.
[217] Based on SteamCharts data. https://steamcharts.com/app/1599340. Accessed February 14th, 2023.

Peak Players (Western Regions) in 2022: ~1,324,761.[218]

Destiny 2
Publisher: Bungie Inc.
Release Year: 2017
Platform: PC, PS4, PS5, XBox, (Cross-platform - players on all platforms play with one another)
Genre(s): MMORPG, FPS (First-person shooter).
Average Active Players: 1,538,134[219]
Peak Players: Data Unavailable

World of Warcraft
Publisher: Blizzard Entertainment
Release Year: 2004
Platform: PC
Genre(s): MMORPG
Average Active Players: ~7,295,568[220]
Peak Players: Data Unavailable

Virtual Worlds, Online Games, and MMO Research

On 'Online Games' vs 'Virtual Worlds'

I begin with a general overview of approaches to studying online gaming and virtual worlds. These terms are often deployed interchangeably across literature, and I make reference to both within this study so it will be useful to define and clarify my application of these terms. Tom Boellstorf, while writing about *Second Life* (Linden Lab, 2003), offered a simple definition by pointing to three features of virtual worlds: "they are

[218] Ibid.
[219] Calculated based on *MMO Populations* website available data. https://mmo-population.com/r/destiny2/stats. Accessed February 14th, 2023.
[220] Calculated based on *MMO Populations* website available data. https://mmo-population.com/r/wow/stats. Accessed February 14th, 2023.

(1) places, (2) inhabited by persons, and (3) enabled by online technologies."[221] Boellstorf's definition is broad enough to describe the everyday world as I know it, but does reflect the wide range of inhabited online place that have been called virtual worlds, including chat rooms,[222] military network architectures,[223] and of course online games.

Carina Girvan, concerned with a present understanding of virtual worlds that is too broad to be useful, rummages through a stack of virtual world literature and comes to the following definition of virtual worlds:

> "Shared, simulated spaces which are inhabited and shaped by their inhabitants who are represented as avatars. These avatars mediate our experience of this space as we move, interact with objects and interact with others, with whom we construct a shared understanding of the world at that time."[224]

The avatar has been a focus of games research, but the strong emphasis on this one embodiment of the person inhabiting the virtual space often undercuts the other aspects of early virtual worlds like MUDS - effectively stylized chat rooms - many of which did not have avatars as we understand them today. These early avatars were constructed exclusively through text and when taken together still produced a virtual world and strong identification with that world.[225] Richard Bartle, game designer and MUD scholar, considers the avatar one layer of a player's representative in the world, stating it is "...just a puppet. It does as it's told, it reports what happens to it, and it acts as a general conduit for the player and the world to interact. [...] It's a mere convenience, a

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[221] Tom Boellstorff, *Coming of Age in Second Life*: *An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human* (Princeton and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
[222] Mark Peterson, "Learner Interaction Management in an Avatar and Chat-Based Virtual World," *Computer Assisted Language Learning 19*, no 1 (2006): 79-103.
[223] James Calvin et al., "The SIMNET Virtual World Architecture," *Proceedings of IEEE Virtual Reality Annual International Symposium* (Seattle Washington, USA, 1993), 450-455.
[224] Carina Girvan, "What is a Virtual World? Definition and Classification," *Education Technology Research and Development 66* (2018): 1087-1100.
[225] See Turkle, 1994; Gromola, 1997; Kolko, 1999.

tool."[226] While Bartle is certainly underselling the importance of the avatar as it has since been taken up within game studies, he also makes a case for the embodied avatar not being a defining feature of *all* virtual worlds, despite being so heavily emphasized when we talk about virtual worlds that resemble online games.

We can account for Girvan's link between the avatar and virtual world because of how closely games and virtual worlds have been theorized together, a sensible trajectory given the strong family resemblances between the most popular virtual worlds and the most popular online games. Drawing on Wittgenstein's 'family resemblances' concept, there are fibers that run through both virtual worlds and online games so they take a very similar shape and share a similar language of interpretation.[227] Still, Boellstorff is adamant that *Second Life* cannot be reduced to a game, as a virtual world has no inherent win or loss state, or inherent gameplay goals, although virtual worlds can be places where play happens.[228] Despite this, early massively multiplayer online games with more traditional gamic elements, some of which predate *Second Life*, like *Ultima Online*[229] and *EverQuest*[230] were, and still are, described as virtual worlds.[231] T.L. Taylor notes, "*EverQuest* instead popularized what had been brewing on a smaller scale for a number of years - the notion of shared persistent world environments full of both instrumental and free action."[232] In this case players are semi-directed to externalized goals and activities, but there is a degree of freeform expression in this kind of online game. If *EverQuest* and the MMOs that follow in its legacy are not wholly virtual worlds, they are nonetheless virtual world-like, and tried and true virtual-world methodologies still apply.

One other key aspect of the virtual world is the 'world.' In a legendary team-up of MMO and virtual world researchers, Boellstorff, along with Bonnie Nardi, Celia Pearce, and T.L Taylor, emphasize the 'worldness' of virtual worlds, stating "...they are not just

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[226] Richard Bartle, "Avatar, Character, Persona," (1999). https://mud.co.uk/richard/academic.htm.
[227] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations.* Translated by G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958), 31-34.
[228] Boellstorff, *Coming of Age*, 22.
[229] Electronic Arts, 1997.
[230] Sony Online Entertainment, 1999.
[231] T.L. Taylor, *Play Between Worlds*: *Exploring Online Game Culture* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2006), 25-28.
[232] Ibid., 28.

spatial representations but offer an object-rich environment that participants can traverse and with which they can interact."[233] More than this, the world must persist - it must be subject to events and changes that occur while players are not online, which precludes matchmaking-style online games like most first-person shooters or MOBAs.[234] The 'worldness; of these virtual worlds has been called into question, however, as Espen Aarseth broke down *World of Warcraft*'s world, Azeroth. For Aarseth, these worlds are "carefully constructed arenas optimized for gameplay, and their resemblance to real worlds is usually second to their function as playground and social channel," where they more closely resemble a crafted amusement park with the trappings of a world, rather than an actual world.[235]

To summarize, for Boellstorff, *Second Life* and virtual worlds are not even games, yet the popular online games featured in prior research possess the three characteristics Boellstorff uses to describe virtual worlds, and plenty of MMOs have had this term used to describe them as well. Despite Boellstorff's distinction, when considering contemporary and more recent work on MMOs, it is sensible to say that not all virtual worlds are games, but we must concede, based on the interpretations we've seen here, that online games *can* also be virtual worlds (or at least resemble them enough to produce an unresolved debate), though not all games with online connectivity are de facto virtual worlds.

According to this framework, three of the four games chosen as research sites for this project cleanly fall into the 'virtual world' category: *Lost Ark, Destiny 2,* and *World of Warcraft*. Each has avatars, a 'worldly' world, persistence, people who inhabit the worlds and shape them (though this is mainly socially rather than physically), and each has varying intensities of what Taylor called 'instrumental action:' 'gamey' systems and activities overlaid onto these virtual world foundations. The fourth game, *DOTA 2*, does possess a social world and avatars, but has no 'worldly' world aside from a small

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[233] Tom Boellstorff, Bonnie Nardi, Celia Pearce, and T.L. Taylor, *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012), 6.
[234] Ibid.
[235] Espen Aarseth. "*World of Warcraft* as Spatial Practice," *Digital Culture, Play, and Identity: A World of Warcraft Reader*. Edited by Hilde G. Corneliussen and Jill Walker Rettberg (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2008), 121.

wooded arena that resets for every new match of the game. It also has layers of chat rooms and sub-communities that can be inhabited as a player and as a researcher. As such, research methods that have been applied to virtual worlds, MMOs, and online games alike have relevant methodological strategies for all four games, and I have applied some ethnographic methods from the study of virtual worlds to *DOTA 2* as well. Observation, participant observation, and interview techniques used in virtual worlds methodologies still apply for this research. Importantly, I will generally refer to the games of this study as 'online games' due to the inclusion of *DOTA 2* and the tension surrounding the virtual world term, though they each possess varying amounts of virtual world features.

Ethnography and Online Games

The Evolution of the Research Question(s)

As ethnography is the central component of this work and this work is conducted in games that are at least *almost* virtual worlds, it is sensible to consider the approaches from Boellstorff et al.'s *Ethnography in Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method.* For Boellstorff and company the first step to an ethnographic methodology is the research question. For each researcher, they remark that their research questions began broadly and were changed and refocused through the exploration of their sites of study, and were general in nature.[236] The authors note, "Tom began his ethnography in *Second Life* with the general question 'How does 'culture work' in virtual worlds?' [...] T.L. began her work on text-based virtual worlds with the question, "How does embodiment work in virtual environments?"[237] In the writing of this dissertation my own research questions have become more complicated than when I started this project: layered with findings that I already have at the time of writing as the bulk of the research has now been completed. My initial question is now synthesized with my greater motivations for doing the work as I present the research as a persuasive text. I consider myself a researcher of game culture's more challenging aspects, and I am motivated by the *hope* (perhaps naive but whatever, call me a dreamer) that some of the things I observe might be able

[236] Boellstorff et al., *Ethnography*, 52-53.
[237] Ibid.

to direct us to strategies for shifting parts of the culture, and I write with this end in mind. But my motivation *is not* my research question and I did not go into this project with an expectation of what I would find. Like Boellstorff and Taylor, I began with a similarly general question:

> "What happens when people are *nice* to each other in toxic online games?"

This then grew into the more general framing of 'positivity,' in order to include a range of supportive acts that may uplift other players.

Through the preliminary stages of the research certain things became obvious: in the first games I was considering as potential field sites (*DOTA 2 and World of Warcraft)*, niceness and positivity were *rare*. Through this first question, two new aspects of the project emerged: 1) that in these games I may need to *make* positivity happen in the spaces to see what happens and 2) I would need to account for what it actually *feels* like in the day-to-day of these games when players being nice or positive to one another is so rare. The framing of positivity as transgressive then emerged organically from seeing how positivity was responded to across these games. At different stages of the research I began asking sub-questions based on what I observed:

1. Who is positivity benefitting or challenging?
2. At what layers of the game spaces and of the general culture is positivity making a difference for players?
3. What about each game of this study is making positivity more or less common, and more or less transgressive?
4. What is or is not happening to make positivity a strategy for cultural change in these games, or in games culture generally?

These questions did not invalidate or erase the initial question, but through conducting the research my focus shifted between these questions and informed choices I made about how to approach the research as the study went on.

Ethnography as Adaptive Methodology

It was not only the questions that changed throughout the project. Moving between games, activities, and communities produces new considerations for how to conduct ethnography. Christine Hine notes that this kind of iteration is a beneficial feature of digital ethnography as a method.[238] Although change is part of the research process, Hine notes:

> "The moves we make need to be carefully considered, since they are highly consequential for the constitution of the object that we study. Ethnography is purposive rather than passive: however, it is not 'adaptive' in the sense that we just do what the field tells us to, but rather, we actively adapt our strategies in order to explore something in particular."[239]

This is not unusual when studying online games. Celia Pearce began by studying *Uru,*[240] but followed the players of the game to subsequent sites after the game's closure.[241] Similarly, Bonnie Nardi followed her research outside of the game worlds into physical spaces,[242] and into communities of modders.[243]

Following this, I began by approaching each game in a similar way in order to establish the baseline experience of play. As I became more familiar with the

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[238] Christine Hine, *Ethnography for the Internet: Embedded, Embodied and Everyday* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 54.
[239] Ibid.
[240] Ubisoft, 2003.
[241] Celia Pearce, *Communities of Play: Emergent Cultures in Multiplayer Games and Virtual Worlds* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2011).
[242] Bonnie A. Nardi, *My Life as a Night Elf Priest: An Anthropological Account of World of Warcraft* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2010).
[243] Bonnie Nardi and Jannis Kallinikos, "Opening the Black Box of Digital Technologies: Mods in *World of Warcraft*." *Proceedings of the 23rd EGOS Colloquium* (Vienna Austria, 2007).

relationship between each research environment, the players therein, and their relationships to positive play, I used different strategies to interact with players that were informed by the shape of each game, play practices, and the communities. These shifts in approach and the rationale behind them will be detailed as they emerge in the substantive chapters of this dissertation, but I will provide one up-front example of adaptability in this project as context:

Destiny 2 was the third game I researched for this project. As it was originally built for consoles it has substantially less robust social systems (even on its PC version), than the other games of this study. While the bulk of the social research done on the prior two games in the research process - *DOTA 2* and *Lost Ark* - were conducted through the game itself, *Destiny 2* directed me to a number of external platforms, including Discord, which became a key site for the participant observation of *Destiny 2*. This led to new questions about what a Discord-based sub-community means for *Destiny 2*'s social world, and I was then compelled to consider the broader implications of Discord communities for each of these games. Through doing so, I was more attuned to the value of game-adjacent platforms, and how important they are for the present-day social structure of online games. This is but one example of how a project can shift over the course of ethnographic research.

The above example provides an opportunity to discuss the ethnographic research paradigms I used during this study. According to LeCompte and Schensul there are four dominant ethnographic paradigms - positivist, critical, interpretive, and ecological - along with the emerging social network paradigm.[244] Within ethnographic research, paradigmatic synthesis is common, and my approach falls within a mix of critical/interpretive paradigms, with some elements of the social network paradigm. The critical paradigm is attentive to relationships of power, institutions, and the way people's communities and identities impact their world and their own relationship to institutions of power.[245] The interpretive paradigm is more concerned with how individuals make sense of the world and the things that happen in it.[246] The critical/interpretive synthesis

[244] Margaret Diane LeCompte and Jean J. Schensul, *Designing and Conducting Ethnographic Research: An Introduction* (Lanham: AltaMiraPress, 2010), 57-79.
[245] Ibid., 62-64.
[246] Ibid., 67-71.

then accounts for structures of power and where people fit into it, with the underlying premise that those people make meaning and impact the structures of power through their practices.

The social network paradigm is concerned with connections between people and communities and institutions, asking questions about who is connected to who, and how?[247] While this was not the research goal of the study, it is a necessary component to address and to engage with, as even in the one example above we can see how players inhabit multiple network sites simultaneously. While this is not an exhaustive study about player networks, I had to account for the movement of players across various gaming and gaming-adjacent sites, and the simultaneous membership players have across different sub-communities and across games.

Finally, LeCompte and Schensul describe the positivist approach as one where the “task is to discover and document events and processes and not to change them while conducting research,” through the repeated testing of hypotheses in search of objective truths that are verifiable through their consistent replication.[248] It is worth stating that I did not come to this project with a positivist approach, as it may seem that I was trying to make positivity happen to prove a hypothesis about what positivity can do in online spaces. While I was looking for positivity and making it happen in some cases, I did not have any expectations about what positivity would do in play environments, or even how other players would understand positivity in relation to my own perspectives and to each other. Certainly, I had hopes about what positivity might achieve as I am personally invested in gaming culture being a bit better than it is today, but I endeavored to stay open to what I would find and to be critical of positive interactions. I give due attention to findings or discoveries that undercut my own personal motivation for this study, as interrogating these aspects of play is ultimately more generative than claiming that positivity worked wonders for players and communities when this was not always the case.

[247] Ibid., 73-76.
[248] Ibid., 58-61.

Field Sites and Scope

In the classical anthropological tradition most exemplified by Bronislaw Malinowski's research in the Trobriand islands,[249] ethnography centered around a discrete geographical location, or what Boellstorff refers to as the "village": a single site where the researcher would be embedded and the subjects of the study would be observed.[250] Studies of online games can maintain this appearance with an emphasis on single-game research projects, despite some of those projects taking place across multiple sites linked through one game, as we've already seen with Pearce and Nardi's work. In 1995, George E. Marcus described a move towards what he dubbed "Multi-sited ethnography."[251] For Marcus, the rise of the global and fragmentation of the local in conjunction with prevailing postmodern theories of socio-cultural conditions led to a rethinking of situated culture from delineated socio-cultural site to one of multiple sites that accounted for the emergence of connected but differential social phenomena across multiple locations or sites.[252] For the study of online games, Marcus Carter's *Treacherous Play* is one such project that examines a phenomenon - betrayal, in Carter's case - across multiple games.[253]

I followed this approach when scoping this project, and considered it valuable to think of positive play in relation to multiple sites. In part this was because multi-sited ethnography has a practical side for digital ethnography and the study of online games, as players move through many networks simultaneously and the boundaries of a site are more complex than those of a small village. On this point, Boellstorff contends that "Multi-sited ethnography may thus be useful for capturing a holistic picture of the life of a community or activity, and the scope of the fieldsite may itself be emergent."[254] Additionally, when thinking about the implications of positive play for gaming culture broadly, it seemed relevant to gather data from more than one site to understand how positive play differs across contexts. However, I do not think of these games as

[249] Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (London, Routledge, 1922).
[250] Boellstorff et al., *Ethnography,* 59.
[251] George E. Marcus, "Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography," *Annual Review of Anthropology 24* (1995): 95-117.
[252] Ibid., 95-102.
[253] Carter, *Treacherous Play*.
[254] Boellstorff et al., *Ethnography,* 60.

completely discrete from one another. Drawing on Christine Hine's reading of Marcus's work, the multi-sited ethnography is also a "radical reconstruction of the field," and "the product of an active ethnographer strategically engaging with the field, rather than a passive mapping of a pre-existing territory or cultural unit."[255] In this sense, there are ways each of the games as research sites are distinct, and ways they are not. This creates a comparative lens not just for the phenomena of positive transgression, but for the communities and game cultures through a reflexive reading of positive transgression in each context. Marcus notes:

> "The object of study is ultimately mobile and multiply situated, so any ethnography of such an object will have a comparative dimension that is integral to it, in the form of juxtapositions of phenomena that conventionally have appeared to be (or conceptually have been kept) 'worlds apart.' [...] This move toward comparison embedded in the multi-sited ethnography stimulates accounts of cultures composed in a landscape for which there is as yet no developed theoretical conception or descriptive model."[256]

The ethnographic study of online games clearly already has a theoretical conception and descriptive model. However, this particular arrangement of games and the focus on positivity in relation to the culture in and across all four games allows for new possibilities for understanding the map as it has been drawn, and that is itself a contribution of this study. The choice of sites also informs the findings regarding positive play, and as such the findings of this study are not a definitive account of all forms of positive play, but mainly apply to these kinds of games with associated cultural features.

I chose these games as field sites because based on a combination of my prior experience with them and literature about them, they were each home to a generally toxic community of players but afforded enough freedom of movement and expression

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[255] Hine, *Ethnography*, 62.
[256] Marcus, "Ethnography," 102.

in the space that alternative modes of expression may be possible. Additionally, for three of the four games, I could point to an event or in-game quality that stood out as a seemingly positive feature nested within these toxic games. This meant there would be something positive to explore even if nothing emerged out of observation. For *DOTA 2* there was an encounter with a player who used music in the game during one of my matches to keep up the team's morale. In *Destiny 2* there is something called a sherpa - a player helping newer or less skilled players experience the most challenging content in the game, a seemingly benevolent and positive act. In *World of Warcraft* I identified the 'Proudmoore' server, an unofficial but long standing LGBTQ+ friendly server. For *Lost Ark* I was motivated by its newness: it was released early into this study and as a brand new game it seemed a fruitful opportunity to see what kinds of toxicity and positivity take shape in real-time.

Participant Observation

For Boellstorff and company, participant observation is "the cornerstone of ethnography."[257] Participant observation describes a researcher going into the research site, and becoming, as much as is possible, a member of the community and culture that is being studied.[258] Participant observation projects take on various forms and are as adaptable and as changing as the research questions and research sites of ethnographic projects. Barbara Kawulich notes that some preconditions for participant observation include "having an open nonjudgmental attitude, being interested in learning more about others, being aware of the propensity for culture shock and making mistakes [...] and being open to the unexpected in what is learned."[259] This propensity for listening and understanding is mixed with analysis, as it is not sufficient to the participant observer to simply belong to the group being studied.

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[257] Boellstorff et al., *Ethnography*, 65.
[258] Kathleen M. DeWalt and Billie R. DeWalt, *Participant Observation: A Guide for Fieldworkers* (Plymouth: AltaMira Press, 2011), 1-3.
[259] Barbara B. Kawulich, "Participant Observation as a Data Collection Method." *Forum: Qualitative Social Research 6*, no 2 (2005): 2.

Adler and Adler present three tiers of membership within fieldwork: peripheral membership, active membership, and complete membership.[260] Peripheral membership affords an 'insider's perspective on the people, activities, and structure of the social world" through "direct first-hand experience," but the researcher may object or strategically decide not to participate in certain activities.[261] Active membership involves taking part in the core activities of the group being studied, and "interact as colleagues: participants in a joint endeavor."[262] Complete membership is a total immersion into the group being studied, though it is often less 'complete' than total belonging in the environment. Adler and Adler note, "the complete membership role encompasses a range of behaviors that vary along a continuum by the researchers' degree of commitment to the group and its goals."[263] The complete membership itself is itself divided into two categories, the "opportunist" and the "convert." The opportunist studies "settings in which they are already members," while the convert achieves group membership through the act of doing research.[264] There is a 4th tier of lesser concern to Adler and Adler, the 'wallflower' - that conducts the study without membership. Instead they are purely a passive observer, attempting not to disrupt or interact with the environment.[265]

As a longstanding research method, there is sufficient debate about how ethnography should be done: How close should researchers get to subjects, and how should one divide the analytical component from the participation component? H. Russell Bernard's approach is that participant observation involves a fluid and reflexive movement between participant and researcher, and emphasizes distance as a strategy,[266] whereas Gary Allen Fine encourages an extremely close proximity between researchers and subjects.[267] Boellstorff et al., on participant observation in playful

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[260] Patricia Adler and Peter Adler, "Complete Membership," *Membership Roles in Field Research* (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 1987).
[261] Ibid., 36.
[262] Ibid., 50.
[263] Ibid., 67.
[264] Ibid., 68.
[265] Ibid., 8.
[266] H. Russell Bernard, *Research Methods in Anthropology* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018).
[267] Gary Alan Fine, "Towards a Peopled Ethnography Developing Theory from Group Life," *Ethnography 4,* no. 1 (2003): 41-60.

environments, note that “The either/or nature of this question misses that participant observation means that participating - including playing - is absolutely essential. We cannot pick one or the other. Good participant observation means play and research in parallel, as the same engaged activity.”[268] Taken together, in practice participant observation is more of a holistic technique and orientation towards a situated and culturally-concerned research project - with the most important shared aspects of any ethnography being adaptability and accountability. Adaptability means being open to change and adapting scope, sites, method, and analysis based on what emerges through the research, while accountability is about transparency regarding these changes throughout the research process.

The precise split of research to participation, and the methods used to record and analyze observations will change based on the situation. Similarly, proximity between researcher and research subjects, and the level of membership a researcher can attain, depends on many factors. In online games there is differential distance between different players. If I’m in a guild or clan, for example, I do not have the same proximity, and perceived membership, to a player who I observe only in passing through the world - but the observations in both cases may be noteworthy.

In my case, membership was not particularly easy to define for any of the games. In one sense I am an opportunist complete member of all of the games except for *Lost Ark*. I had played each of the other games prior to identifying them as relevant sites for this study, while with *Lost Ark* I was as familiar as any player who did not play the Korean, Russian, or Japanese versions of the game could be with it. When thinking about the online game environment, however, there are several tiers of membership active at once. Even though I am a lifetime player of online games, I am *not* a member of every micro-community within these games. Relationships with individual players and groups of players are emergent, and so membership is often contextual, and depending on the activity I was participating in and the stage of the research, I was anywhere between wallflower and complete membership at different points of the study - even within the same temporal period.

[268] Boellstorff et al., *Ethnography*, 69.

For example, while studying *World of Warcraft* I eventually found a guild, wherein I went from active to complete member over the course of the research as I raided and did other group content with them, and we got to know each other well. During this same period, I would be doing random activities on other characters, on other servers, and the level of membership was more peripheral, although it is actually quite difficult to not be at least somewhat active when playing with others. While the same level of rapport does not exist in these ephemeral gameplay situations as with a guild and complete membership, these activities are not easily classified into discrete categories.

A third element of the research at this time was a wallflower-like passive observation that consisted of spending time in the capital cities while observing the global trade chat and the interactions of avatars in the virtual space. Here I was mostly passive - but I also existed in the world. Other players could, *and did*, interact with me. In the game it seemed there was an assumption that I belonged: another avatar in its rightful place, going about its in-game day. I would also, at times, ask questions or reply to people in the trade chat. Each of these activities were contemporaneous but not always simultaneous, and each of them informs a portion of the ethnographic research of this study. The key thing is that these different scales of membership are a feature of the research, and not a flaw, as different things were observable from these various vantage points. These differential proximities to players and social phenomena through each of the games presents opportunities for reflection and analysis on how these relationships and perspectives inform one another, and how I was impacted by them at different levels of community belonging.

Interviews

Boellstorff et al. consider Interviews a central component to ethnographic research.[269] In Play Beyond Worlds T.L Taylor advocates for the necessity of interviewing to capture 'the richness' of virtual worlds,[270] while Christine Hine states that interviewing can "make explicit the taken-for-granted and often tacit ways in which

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[269] Ibid.
[270] Taylor, *Play Between Worlds.*

people make sense of their lives."[271] While several virtual world and online game studies have used qualitative interviews in conjunction with ethnographic methods,[272] there are few studies that use qualitative interviews when studying transgression in play, instead using surveys or forum data to include player perspectives.[273] My own interviews are a critical opportunity for players to convey their feelings and thoughts about their own experiences with toxicity and positivity in game environments that have been uncommon in player studies. For this project I used semi-structured interviews with players of all kinds, which included those who self-identified or were located within communities that I identified as having positively transgressive traits through the research. Despite trying to recruit lone transgressors that I observed in-game on multiple occasions, I was unable to recruit any of these positivity renegades. Still, the interviews provide much needed context for how players perceive the game worlds, the motivations for positive actions in play, and also a point of comparison and relation between my play experiences and those of other players who share these worlds. Additionally, the players I spoke to provide their own accounts of both toxic and positive events that I did not observe in my ethnography, thus providing alternative perspectives for interpreting both toxic and positive play, and illustrating a wider range of play possibilities than those encountered on my own.

Practically, I began each interview in a semi-structured format, but transitioned when possible to the 'interactive interview' format, where researcher and participant converse together about the possible meanings of the phenomena being discussed.[274] The (auto)ethnographic component of the study provided some common ground from which to converse, and wished to give the opportunity to the participants to reflect on, and in some cases challenge, some of the things I have observed and done in the games. This was an opportunity for participants to reflect on me, and to critique my actions as well, in ways that my own self-reflection may not have achieved. This also

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[271] Christine Hine, *Virtual Ethnography* (London: Sage, 2000), 5.
[272] Mia Consalvo and Jason Begy, *Players and their Pets,* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).
[273] See Carter et al., 2015; Goodfellow, 2015.
[274] Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams and Arthur P. Bochner, "Autoethnography: An Overview," *Historical Social Research* 36, no. 4 (2011): 273-290.

made it possible for players to work out how they *felt* about the games and the social aspects that occur during play.

Players were recruited primarily through networks of play that I established over the course of the research. I attempted forum recruitment multiple times throughout the project, but found that this did not translate into participants. Once I began recruiting from the groups of players I had come to know in each game, other players in these networks became interested in the research and offered to participate, and I was introduced to other groups of players. I also reached out to networks of players I had previously established through prior research projects. Overall, I interviewed 12 players, each of whom had played one or more of the games in this study, and interviews were between 50-90 minutes. Participants throughout this study and guild names have been given randomly generated aliases to protect their anonymity.

'Breaching' and Analytic Reflexivity

Autoethnography is the practice of researching and writing one's own personal experience within a research site to analyze an element of culture.[275] It allows the researcher to reflect on their experiences with the research to analyze the emotional and evocative aspects of the data, and to account for the reflexive changes and 'epiphanies' the researcher experiences over the course of a study.[276] Though this work is more ethnographic than autoethnographic, I draw upon this evocative aspect established through autoethnographic practices through what Leon Anderson calls 'Analytic Reflexivity,' where the researcher's experience supplements the data from each of the methods present in a study.[277] For this project, analytic reflexivity allows me to detail the reaction to positive transgression around myself as someone partaking in this kind of play. It also affords me the possibility of comparing the experiences of participants with my own. Importantly, it provides opportunities to document the

[275] Ibid.
[276] Stacy Holman Jones, Tony E. Adams and Carolyn Ellis (Eds). *Handbook of Autoethnography* (London: Routledge, 2016).
[277] Leon Anderson, "Analytic Autoethnography," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 35, no 4 (2006): 373-395.

emotional stakes of experiencing both toxic and positive play in ways that strict observation and interviews may not always uncover.

This project was pitched as a project of unrelenting kindness and positivity. Ever since I read it, I was fascinated by David Myers' work where he became the griefing and trolling player 'Twixt' in *City of Heroes* (NCSoft, 2004).[278] Myers conducted a 'breaching' or 'Garfinkeling' experiment to see how other players would react. The term Garfinkeling comes from the work of Harold Garfinkel, who studied sociological phenomena by 'breaching,' or pushing against social norms.[279] David Myers applied this approach to online games by becoming a notorious troll who abused game mechanics to grief other players and ruin their gameplay experience.[280] Despite my enthusiasm for Myers' study, I appreciate that his tactics were ethically suspect given the degree to which his actions hindered other players. To avoid this ethical conflict, I flipped David Myers' dubious breaching experiment, and conducted an inverse project, where throughout online play I would remain a friendly, helpful, and positive force in games and game situations where the atmosphere is often extremely negative. According to the Terms of Service of each game, I acted only in accordance with what a player could reasonably expect to encounter in these games, even though what is encountered on average is usually worse. As previously mentioned, one of the influences of this study was when a *DOTA 2* player began playing piano over voice chat while encouraging our team in a match. While I originally anticipated that I would conduct a similar style of more creative or 'extreme' positive interventions, in practice I found that in each game it was sufficient enough to push only slightly against the norms of the space with this positive mindset to create a 'breach.' To avoid any ethical conflicts, when the level of positivity was dialed up, I instead focused on established players or community groups who were already engaging in these kinds of positive projects on a larger or more intense scale than I was able to achieve within the parameters of this study.

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[278] David Myers, "Play and Punishment, The Sad and Curious Case of Twixt," *Proceedings of the [Player] Conference* (2008), 1-27.
[279] Harold Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1967).
[280] Myers, "Play and Punishment," 6-10.

Platform Walkthrough and Discourse Analysis

Platform Walkthrough

To establish a baseline of non-transgressive play in any game it is necessary to unpack what is expected of players, both from developers and other players. While some of this is uncovered through interviews and play, these expectations are also conveyed through game systems, and through popular discourses around play in the chosen games. In Nardi's study of *World of Warcraft*, for example, she analyzed game interface elements and forums to situate out-of-game practices like modding and theorycrafting, both of which impacted the culture observed during play.[281] To appropriately situate the ethnographic and interview components, some analysis of the games is required. This analysis incorporates Clara Fernandez-Vara's interpretation of games-as-text, where the contexts of play or external socio-cultural practices intersect with the interaction between players and game systems.[282] The textual elements of the game are not necessarily in their narratives, but can instead be found in their interfaces, communication structures, and gameplay mechanics. As Blamey found in her work on Blizzard Entertainment's *Overwatch*,[283] game elements such as chat, voice chat, and player matchmaking directly contribute to the toxicity in online games. It is this version of 'text' that is most useful for this project.[284]

For this aspect of the research project I combined a modified version of Light, Burgess, and Duguay's walkthrough method for apps, combined with Consalvo and Dutton's toolkit for analyzing video games. On the walkthrough method, Light, Burgess and Duguay state:

> "The core of this method involves the step-by-step observation and documentation of an app's screens, features, and flows of activity - slowing down the mundane actions and interactions that form part of normal app use in

[281] Nardi, *My Life as a Night Elf Priest,* 2010.
[282] Clara Fernández-Vara, *Introduction to Game Analysis* (Routledge, 2014).
[283] 2016.
[284] Courtney Blamey, "Bringing Down the Banhammer: Understanding the Impact of Competitive Players on Moderation Tactics in Overwatch," (Masters thesis, Concordia University, 2019).

order to make them salient and therefore available for critical analysis."[285]

Each of the games possess layers of interfaces and subscreens, some of which are explicit channels of communication nested within other features of the game. To get a full picture of the games and the environment the players inhabit, Consalvo and Dutton point to a systemic analysis of interface elements to get a better sense of what players interact with, and what goes unnoticed by players during play.[286] Zanescu, French, and Lajeunesse already conducted one such synthesis between the walkthrough method and interface analysis for *DOTA 2*, which supports the adaptation of the walkthrough method onto videogames.[287]

My approach was to first play the games as normal to establish a baseline of play without being hyper-aware or overly critical of the systems at the onset in order to get a more organic sense of what it felt like to play and communicate with other players within these systems. Once I felt comfortable with the baseline experience of the game, during the early-to-mid point of each game's research period I then conducted a walkthrough of the current game I was researching. I moved through all the interface layers to better understand how the systems worked, how they intertwined, and to consider how their design impacted their use and the broader gameplay environment. I then continued to play each game as organically as possible with a more developed understanding of the interface elements. Again, this was not a primary method of the research and does not take up a large portion within this dissertation, but it was key for understanding player interactions and game systems that could emerge as relevant during the ethnography.

Discourse Analysis

As another secondary method, I also applied discourse analysis to meta discussions about the games being studied, the game communities, and the concerns

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[285] Ben Light, Jean Burgess, and Stefanie Duguay, "The Walkthrough Method: An Approach to the Study of Apps," *New Media and Society 20,* no 3 (2018): 882.
[286] Mia Consalvo and Nathan Dutton, "Game Analysis: Developing a Methodological Toolkit for the Qualitative Study of Games," *Game Studies* 6, no 1 (2006).
[287] Andrei Zanescu, Martin French, and Marc Lajeunesse, "Betting on *DOTA 2*'s Battle Pass: Gamblification and Productivity in Play." *New Media and Society* 23, no 10 (2020): 2882-2901.

facing players. I drew from Mirko Tobias-Schäfer's 'media dispositives' approach[288] which is itself a configuration of Michel Foucault's dispositif.[289] For Tobias-Schäfer, the peripheral sites of participation are of equal importance to the technology (the games in this case), their design, and the social use of those technologies.[290] For this study, game forums are integral sites of participation where ideology proliferates and contributes to the production of the culture within the game world. Effectively, it is impossible to separate the internal game 'world' from the external game 'world': for the sake of understanding the culture at large they are the same world, though the discourse may have different features in different sites.

I approach discourse analysis through Laclau and Mouffe's ideological approach to discourse theory, rather than a primarily linguistic one.[291] On Laclau and Mouffe's ideological approach, Carpentier and Spinoy note:

> "Their focus is on the meanings, representations, or ideologies embedded in the text, and not so much on the language of the text. And in contrast to for instance conversation analysis, where the context remains confined to specific social settings (such as conversation), their macrocontextual approach refers to the social as the realm where the processes generating meaning are situated."[292]

For Laclau and Mouffe, meaning, social phenomena, identity, and subjectivity are constructed discursively, and are not "stable and fixed," rather they are positioned or self-positioned within a contextual discourse, or multiple discourses.[293] In order to

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[288] Mirko Tobias Schäfer, *Bastard Culture!: How User Participation Transforms Cultural Production* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011),15-16.
[289] Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge.* Translated by A. M. Sheridan Smith (London: Routledge, 1972).
[290] Schäfer, *Bastard Culture!*, 16.
[291] Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985).
[292] Nico Carpentier and Erik Spinoy, "Introduction: From the Political to the Cultural," *Discourse Theory and Cultural Analysis.* Edited by Nico Carpentier and Erik Spinoy (Cresskill, New Jersey: Hampton Press, 2008), 5.
[293]Ibid., 7.

unpack transgression, behaviours cannot simply be coded as positive or negative within games but must be considered through their negotiation, through an observation of what is being talked about in and out of game, and who is doing the talking. These negotiations are partly traceable through discussion within communities and positioned against broader discourses of what constitutes appropriate versus transgressive behaviours.

In practice, I began looking at game-adjacent community sites - including subreddits, official forums, and popular Youtube videos and streaming channels - for each game at the onset of the research. This was to get a general sense of the frequent, or high-engagement topics of discussion. During the primary research period for each game, I frequented these sites and followed breadcrumbs to other forums, making note of frequent topics of discussion, and the way discussions played out in each forum, and I checked these sites multiple times a week, documenting threads with screenshots and notes.

Other Practical Aspects of my Research Methods

This section briefly details the practical strategies that I used to collect, record, and analyze data not detailed above. As already stated, I tried to achieve a balance between organic participant observation while still producing a body of relevant data for analysis. For the (auto)ethnography my approach was to record everything. This meant that I could immerse myself in the game environment as needed and review the footage of gameplay as a reflective exercise. Even with the recording going, however, I made frequent notes about how I was feeling while playing, and if outlying events occurred (extreme toxicity, noteworthy social interaction, positivity in play) I would: (1) make a mental or physical note that this may be important; (2) stay in the moment as it played out; (3) take screenshots if I was in a more observational role in this moment; (4) take notes immediately after the event happened; (5) later review the recording, pull screenshots from it, and reflect upon the event with some distance. I did not keep all the recorded footage as there were many sessions that I would characterize as uneventful upon review, though I did keep some of these session recordings in case they became relevant at a later date. During the review of this footage I took detailed notes about

where I was, who else was there, how I was feeling while rewatching, what players were doing, and how they were reacting to events as they unfolded.

Establishing the outer context of each game and a baseline of the game experience was a simultaneous and ongoing process throughout the research. Before knowing what kinds of play interventions to make in the world, I first needed to understand what 'a normal day' of gameplay looked like, with attention to variances and deviations in play patterns. This meant spending a lot of time playing and naturally going where it seemed the game was compelling me to go. During this period I was also on forums and fan sites, watching videos of content creators and livestreamers to get a sense of how influential players were playing each game, asking "What is the broader rhetoric of 'what you're supposed to do' in each of these games, and how is that taken up in different segments of the community?" I did this to direct myself towards the average or standard play experience as it is crafted through the game systems and players. I attempted to keep this engagement contemporaneous: during the same period that I was focusing on a game, I would be examining each of these community areas to establish an evolving understanding of 'everyday gameplay.'

Until the research concluded in April of 2023, I maintained at least a small, consistent presence within each game and in community spaces. In some cases this meant checking in as little as once a week on official game forums, Discord servers, and subreddits, for example. However, during periods of high community engagement, such as during *DOTA 2*'s competitive tournament season, or during the launch of the new *Destiny 2* expansion, *Lightfall*, I spent additional time researching these sites, and revisiting the games even though I had moved on from those games as my primary research site for the time being. My rationale for this choice, was that during these events two key things happen:

1. There is more activity from the player base in general. In the case of *Destiny 2*, this was a chance to get back into the game after it had hit a lull point, and a number of players stopped playing. Practically, there was much higher player engagement during this period than when I had conducted my first round of research on the game.

2. New, returning, or ‘casual’ players tend to return for these events. Once a baseline has been established, these periods may provide a contrast in observable play, or be grounds for contestation between players who continue to play during a game’s ‘offseason’ and those to return for new content. Effectively, these are both times when things happen within the community, and they are themselves outlier events - grounds for play experiences outside of the baseline and possibly more observable phenomena.

I also briefly went back to each game at the end of the research project, with minor increased forum presence as one final reflection on each game before closing the research. Overall I spent between 1100-1300 research play hours across all four games total, with only slightly less than this recorded on video, though over time this video was pared down to 80 hours for more focused review. I took approximately 1230 screenshots and 200 pages of field notes between handwritten journals and condensed typed reflections.

Chapter 3 - Toxic Ecosystems, Negative Currencies, and Four Online Games

To get to positivity and its transgressive features in online gaming, we first need to understand the toxic environment and the negativity that circulates within it. As a vessel for this discussion, this chapter introduces each of the games featured in this study. To better contextualize games culture and to prepare for the in-depth analyses of each game, this chapter is split into two halves. The first half of this chapter elaborates on the macro-culture of gaming that was introduced briefly during the discussion of #gamergate in chapter 1 through the concept of 'toxicity.' I outline the history and prior applications of the term toxicity through three spheres: toxic masculinity, toxic work culture, and toxic fandom and the technocultural sites where fandom is found. For each of these examples I consider some of the ways gaming culture has been theorized as toxic through these respective lenses and pull from examples across gaming to illustrate these points. To close this half, I then briefly consider the relationship between toxicity and the circulation of negativity within gaming culture as a social currency.

In the second half of this chapter, I break down each of the games in this study and relate the preceding overview of toxic culture to each game's histories, gameplay, recent events, and community concerns. This breakdown of each game also features some basic details about gameplay and a game-specific literature review. I then close the chapter with a discussion about adjoining spaces and third-party platforms like Discord and Twitch and consider their importance for studying online games in 2023. Together these halves serve to concretize toxicity and negativity in the precise contexts of play that this study explores, concluding that although these are separate games, they are part of a network of play under the umbrella of gaming's toxic culture.

Chapter 3A - Overlapping Spheres of Toxicity

As a socio-cultural term, 'toxicity' is used in three central ways: First is through the concept of toxic masculinity; second is in reference to corporate, workplace and organizational culture; and third is in relation to popular culture both through fandom practices and the technocultural spaces where fandom is located, which includes social media and other message and image boards like Reddit and 4chan. Each of these approaches to toxicity is relevant for understanding the term as it has been applied to

games culture and so I will briefly discuss each of these three understandings of toxicity below.

Toxic Masculinity

According to Carol Harrington, the use of 'toxic' to describe a social problem came from the mythopoetic men's movement in the 1980s.[294] Shepherd Bliss characterizes the mythopoetic men's movement as a project of retreat-based male bonding that occurred through a collective return to nature and mythology where men could get in touch with each other and their true masculine feelings which had been eroded by culture and society due to the domestication of manhood and absent fathers.[295] The rituals that transitioned boys from adolescence into manhood, like war and hunting were also less common.[296] The 'toxic' aspect of toxic masculinity in this period was directed more towards the threats to the ideal masculine image than to the effects of modern masculine values on society, and so does not totally align with our use of the term today. Harrington states "the idea of toxic masculinity harmonized with conservative political agendas concerned with the social control of low-income, under-employed men, and with patriarchal family values."[297] Unsurprisingly, the ideals of the mythopoetic men's movement were picked up by U.S. policy makers in the early to mid 90s to address crime in America, and the term was repurposed to describe marginalized men, often with criminal records, and this version of toxic masculinity is still heavily operationalized today by prominent conservative and alt-right figures.[298]

A second strand of toxic masculinity developed from the work of psychiatrist Terry Kupers, who described it as "the constellation of socially regressive male traits that serve to foster domination, the devaluation of women, homophobia, and wanton

[294] Carol Harrington, "What is 'Toxic Masculinity' and Why Does it Matter?" *Men and Masculinities* 24, no 2 (2021): 3.
[295] Shepherd Bliss, "Revisioning Masculinity: A Report on the Growing Men's Movement." *Gender* 16 (1987): 21-24.
[296] Tracy Karner, "Fathers, Sons, and Vietnam: Masculinity and Betrayal in the Life Narratives of Vietnam Veterans with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder." *American Studies Journal* 37 (1996): 63-98.
[297] Ibid.
[298] Harrington, "What is 'Toxic," 4.

violence."[299] Harrington presents the current feminist use of the term toxic masculinity as an extension of Kupers' definition, describing it as "a shorthand for characterizing homophobic and misogynist speech and violence by men," as a response to the networked, masculinist right-wing politics which increased in the lead-up to the Trump era and festered throughout his presidency.[300]

Harrington is mostly critical of the term toxic masculinity. Despite feminist interventions towards the contrary, through its current usage the term toxic masculinity has a 'you know it when you see it' quality that primarily signals an author's values through its application to prominent figures or media objects, and so for Harrington the term has lost some of its theoretical and descriptive value.[301] A secondary effect of the term's overuse is a reinforced binary between toxic/healthy masculinity that obfuscates its pervasive and systemic qualities. Drawing on Brian Donovan's work,[302] Bridges and Pascoe note a common phenomenon within the current use of toxic masculinity known as "masculine rescripting," where men - now encouraged by society - will disavow the most extreme aspects of toxic masculinity such as extreme violence and vocal misogyny while adopting more traits traditionally seen as feminine in order "to distance themselves from hegemonic masculinity."[303] While this strategy gives the image of a healthy, prosocial, and feminist masculinity, it is used as an avoidance tactic by men who still reinforce structures that uphold traditional gender roles and heteronormativity.[304] This masculine rescripting is also visible in attempts to transform toxic masculinity into actionable plans for men that end up replicating the very same language and strategies of the mythopoetic men's movement now 40 years later.[305]

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[299] Terry A. Kupers, "Toxic Masculinity as a Barrier to Mental Health Treatment in Prison," *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 61, no 6 (2005): 714.
[300] Ibid., 5.
[301] Harrington, "What is 'Toxic," 5-6.
[302] Brian Donovan, "Political Consequences of Private Authority," *Theory and Society* 27, no 6 (1998): 817-843.
[303] Tristan Bridges and C.J. Pascoe, "Hybrid Masculinities: New Directions in the Sociology of Men and Masculinities," *Sociology Compass* 8, no 3 (2014): 252-255.
[304] Ibid., 255.
[305] Ed Adams and Ed Frauenheim, *Reinventing Masculinity: The Liberating Power of Compassion and Connection* (Oakland: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2020).

Harrington's chief concern is that masculine rescripting is reinforced by toxic masculinity's current common usage, a sentiment echoed by Elizabeth Pearson. Pearson states:

> "Current discussion leaves little room to see how masculinity is not simply a property of men's bodies (it is also about women), with particular men responsible for extremist masculinities; nor does it acknowledge the ways in which toxicity is produced, not in particular men because of who and what they are, but through a matrix of gendered relations produced in space and productive of that space."[306]

While Harrington suggests abandoning the term toxic masculinity, I still consider the term toxic masculinity to have some value, and the key to that value is in Pearson's 'matrix,' or what I've referred to in this chapter's introduction as an ecosystem. I frame toxic masculinity (and toxicity more broadly) within this chapter through the links between phenomena and how they feed back into each other to shape a larger ecosystem, but Kupers' and Harrington's definitions account less for the systemic features and more for individual qualities or actions, even if they do produce a pattern across people or media objects. Dauw and Connell present an alternative term, hegemonic masculinity, which they describe as the "culturally exalted version of masculinity."[307] Later in this chapter there will be examples of particular men who enact toxic masculinity as defined by Kupers and Harrington, so I am reluctant to dismiss it as a term. However, because I am considering these figures and their actions in relation to a much larger assemblage of toxicity within gaming that exists along gendered lines, I follow Dauw and Connell and consider toxic masculinity a component of hegemonic masculinity. Within an ecosystem of hegemonic masculinity, toxic masculinity as enacted by people is one of the ways that a narrow gender identity is valued, upheld

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[306] Elizabeth Pearson, "Extremism and Toxic Masculinity: The Man Question Re-posed," *International Affairs* 95, no 6 (2019): 1259-1260.
[307] Esther De Dauw and Daniel J.Connell, "Introduction: The Subaltern and the Hegemonic," *Toxic Masculinity: Mapping the Monstrous in Our Heroes*. Edited by Esther De Dauw and Daniel J. Connell (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2020), 4.

and “exalted” into its hegemonic position. When I use the term toxic masculinity in this chapter and later in this dissertation, I refer both to enacted actions and the systemic qualities those actions draw from and uphold.

We’ve already seen toxic masculinity within games culture in Chapter 1 through a recap of #gamergate, but toxic masculinity in gaming extends far beyond this event in both directions. Carly Kocurek in *Coin-Operated Americans*[308] and Shira Chess in *Ready Player Two*[309] highlight the differential construction of men’s and women’s ‘gamer’ identities from within the games industry as early as the 1970s that persist into design, marketing, and the culture today. The hypersexualization and commodification of women’s bodies in gaming goes as far back as the Atari era[310] and persists despite pockets of resistance through subversive and countercultural design.[311] There has been a long-form exclusion and marginalization of girls and women within gaming spheres[312] that was enacted alongside the development of a media form rife with macho and militarist hyper-masculine narratives and representations.[313] Along this same line, game design and player culture has existed predominantly on a spectrum from heteronormative[314] to outright homophobic as well,[315] though there has also been a strong queer counterculture within gaming[316] that has influenced trends towards more

[308] Carly A. Kocurek, *Coin-Operated Americans: Rebooting Boyhood at the Video Game Arcade* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).
[309] Shira Chess, *Ready Player Two: Women Gamers and Designed Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).
[310] Matthew Thomas Payne and Peter Alilunas, “Regulate the Desire Machine: Custer’s Revenge and 8-bit Atari Porn Video Games.” *Television and New Media* 17, no 1 (2016): 80-96.
[311] Meghan Gestos, Jennifer Smith-Merry, and Andrew Campbell, “Representation of Women in Video Games: A Systematic Review of Literature in Consideration of Adult Female Wellbeing,” *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking* 21, no 9 (2018): 535-541.
[312] Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins, “Chess for Girls? Feminism and Computer Games,” *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games*. Edited by Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1998), 2-45.
[313] Nicolas Taylor and Gerald Voorhees, “Introduction: Masculinity and Gaming: Mediated Masculinities in Play,” *Masculinities in Play*. Edited by Nicolas Taylor and Gerald Voorhees (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 1-19.
[314] Tereza Krobová, Ondřej Moravec, and Jaroslav Švelch, “Dressing Commander Shepard in Pink: Queer Playing in a Heteronormative Game Culture,” *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace* 9, no 3 (2015): 1-14.
[315] Danielle M. Vitali, “From Bullies to Heroes: Homophobia in Video Games,” *Inquiries Journal* 2, no 2 (2010). http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/a?id=159.
[316] Ruberg, *Video Games.*

inclusive representations in recent game design, though not without industry and consumer push-back.[317]

Two more sites of toxic masculinity in gaming are social play and in the professionalization of play in the form of esports and videogame broadcasting. Todd Harper's work on fighting game communities revealed "a sort of geek masculinity, running parallel to hegemonic masculinity, but with a focus more on technology, knowledge, and skill than physical power and prowess."[318] Emma Witkowski studied the experiences of competitive women esports players and found that women's "gender performances (while varied), are made alongside productions of hegemonic sporting masculinity as a gender performance that is locally dominant, associated to traditional sports, and aligned to male body skill superiority, antagonistic competitiveness, and heterosexual virility."[319] Despite appearing to equalize the physiological differences that support the divide between men and women in traditional sports - described by Breger et. al as "...invisible and simply a way of doing business"[320] - competitive videogame play replicates the gendered inequalities found within mainstream sports.

Despite the early emphasis on technical proficiency over physicality and athleticism in esports, Lily Zhu describes a return to privileging to the traditional athletic masculine physique through the competitive *League of Legends*[321] community.[322] Zhu notes that as esports and general competitive play have increased in popularity, mainstream athletes were tapped by game companies or competitive esports teams to lend legitimacy to the growing esports industry.[323] Alongside this trend, Zhu observed

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[317] Adrienne Shaw, "Putting the Gay in Games: Cultural Production and GLBT Content in Video Games," *Games and Culture* 4, no 3 (2009): 228-253.
[318] Todd Harper, *The Culture of Digital Fighting Games: Performance and Practice* (New York and London: Routledge, 2014), 116.
[319] Emma Witowski, "Doing/Undoing Gender with the Girl Gamer in High-Performance Play," *Feminism in Play*. Edited by Kishonna Gray, Gerald Voorhees and Emma Vossen (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 188.
[320] Melissa L.Breger, Margery J. Holman, and Michelle D. Guerrero, "Re-Norming Sport for Inclusivity: How the Sport Community Has the Potential to Change a Toxic Culture of Harassment and Abuse," *Journal of Clinical Sport Psychology* 13, no 2 (2019): 278.
[321] Riot Games, 2009.
[322] Lily Zhu, "Masculinity's New Battle Arena in International E-Sports: The Games Begin," *Masculinities in Play.* Edited by Nicholas Taylor and Gerald Voorhees (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 232-233.
[323] Ibid.

increased criticism of esports players' bodies targeted at Asian men.[324] Zhu attributes this as a strategy of emasculating Asian bodies on behalf of the Western community who felt threatened by the success of Asian teams in *League of Legends* competitive tournaments.[325] Toxic masculinity also manifests along intersectional lines, as Todd Harper notes that black women within the fighting game community reported "racial/gendered insults thrown her way, lack of respect, and in general mistreatment by her male co-competitors," all within an ostensibly 'professionalizing' competitive gaming environment.[326] Voorhees and Orlando point to some course-correction within the competitive *CS:GO*[327] scene, where various male players within a competitive team demonstrated a range of "hegemonic, subordinate and counterhegemonic formations of masculinity."[328] However, the array of masculinities on display in this analysis still align with Bridges and Pascoe's concept of masculine rescripting, as Voorhees and Orlando note that this *CS:GO* team produces a more marketable esports brand through a diverse representation of masculinity that appeals to a broader range of consumers.[329]

To close this section, Marc A. Ouellete points out that these currents of toxic masculinity flow through a game as innocuous as *Minecraft*.[330] Within *Minecraft,* a mentor-apprentice relationship exists between many players, wherein more experienced players teach newer players how to play.[331] This mentorship happens not only within the confines of a game, but through the consumption of video content on external platforms like Twitch or YouTube.[332] This mentorship relationship transfers more than gameplay skills, as it is a mechanism for funneling young men "into particular domains designated as masculine" through a personal and affective cultural onboarding.[333] This is not an

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[324] Ibid.,
[325] Ibid., 236-241.
[326] Harper, *Digital Fighting Games*, 116-117.
[327] Valve, 2012.
[328] Gerald Voorhees and Alexandra Orlando, "Performing Neoliberal Masculinity: Reconfiguring Hegemonic Masculinity in Professional Gaming," *Masculinities in Play*. Edited by Nicolas Taylor and Gerald Voorhees (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 211-212.
[329] Ibid., 211-228.
[330] Mojang, 2011.
[331] Marc A. Ouellette, *Playing with the Guys: Masculinity and Relationships in Video Games* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland and Company Inc., 2021), 50-53.
[332] Ibid.
[333] Ibid.

inherently toxic relationship in a vacuum, but through mentorship and social play the development of new skills (learning to play better) comes packaged with the embodied histories of toxic masculinity through mentorship and teaching. These teachers are both experienced and culturally embedded players in close proximity to new players within game worlds or on competitive teams, and distant mentor figures like popular streamers or YouTube personalities. Both of these mentorship relationships replicate the bonding features sought after through the mythopoetic men's movement. The current mechanisms of cultural integration into games culture are indivisible from the histories of misogyny and exclusion as they are enacted and reinforced through this socialization and mentorship process that is both interpersonal and mediated.

The Toxic Workplace and Organizational Culture

Ouellette's 'mentorship' frame channels the language of labor deliberately to emphasize the work-like characteristics that videogames possess, as established by Nick Yee[334] and Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter.[335] The language of labor and the laborious qualities of games are important to keep in mind as we move onto the next lens of toxicity: workplace and organizational culture. Current literature on workplace toxicity bears a closer resemblance to the origins of toxic masculinity - including the mythopoetic men's movement and its conservative adoption - than it does to the feminist redefinition of toxic masculinity. The literature I surveyed has strong capitalist undertones that firmly position workplace and organizational toxicity within a neoliberal work culture that is taken for granted as personally and socially beneficial, and most writing on toxic workplace culture is of the self-help variety. Still, there is some benefit to examining this version of toxicity as it does circulate within gaming culture in response to recent events that we'll soon see further in this chapter.

Kusy and Holloway define a toxic person "as anyone who demonstrates a pattern of counterproductive work behaviors that debilitate individuals, teams, and even

[334] Nick Yee, "The Labor of Fun: How Video Games Blur the Boundaries of Work and Play." *Games and Culture* 1, no 1 (2006): 68-71.
[335] Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter, *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

organizations over the long term,"[336] while Sull, Sull, and Zweig point towards systemic workplace issues as the cause of high worker turnover, noting "leading elements contributing to toxic cultures include failure to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion; workers feeling disrespected; and unethical behavior."[337] There is some concern in these interventions for the personal emotional pain that can occur in response to toxic individuals and structures, but Peter J. Frost exemplifies this broader strand of toxicity analysis bluntly, stating that people seriously "feel stripped of their hope, self-esteem or confidence," in a toxic workplace, but emphasizing that most importantly "their intellectual and emotional capacities *are lost to the organization.*"[338] Workplace toxicity occurs interpersonally, but it is of utmost concern to these scholars of toxic workplace theory when it threatens the productivity of an organization rather than the emotional well-being of those experiencing toxicity.

Van Rooij and Fine paint a more systemic picture of organizational toxicity by tracing it throughout the corporate culture of three large companies, BP, Volkswagen, and Wells Fargo.[339] They identify three levels, "structures, values, and practices" through which companies establish their own internalized norms.[340] Structures produce 'artifacts,' tangible and intangible manifestations such as a company's "physical environment and architecture, its technology, its creations, its style, its stories and myths," and this also includes "published documents that cover the values, operations, rituals, and organizational charts."[341] Values correspond to the corporate ideologies and rationalizations for corporate actions throughout the entire workforce from the executive to the lowest-level laborer, while practices encompass the observable common behaviors at work.[342] Most importantly, Van Rooij and Fine found that within large companies the institutional norms within these three layers often took precedence over

[336] Mitchell Kusy and Elizabeth Holloway, *Toxic Workplace!: Managing Toxic Personalities and their Systems of Power* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009).
[337] Donald Sull, Charles Sull, and Ben Zweig, "Toxic Culture is Driving the Great Resignation." *MITSloan Management Review* (2022): 4.
[338] Peter J. Frost, "Emotions in the Workplace and the Important Role of Toxic Handlers," *Ivey Business Journal* (March/April 2006): 2. (emphasis mine).
[339] Benjamin Van Rooij and Adam Fine, "Toxic Corporate Culture: Assessing Organizational Processes of Deviancy," *Administrative Sciences* 8, no 3 (2018): 1-38.
[340] Ibid., 5.
[341] Ibid.
[342] Ibid.

external societal norms and the law: workers put in positions where compliance with internal workplace culture is morally compromising or outright illegal will go along with the established workplace norms because workplace structures and incentives make this more optimal than dissent or reporting harmful workplace practices.[343] In summary, Van Rooij and Fine note that "toxic processes developed first at the level of values […] became reinforced by the structures of hierarchy and incentives, and became deeply embedded as they developed into common practices."[344]

Through this prior work on workplace toxicity we see three different approaches: (1) personal and emotional turmoil in response to interpersonal toxic encounters, (2) damage to organizational health (aka productivity and profitability) in response to low employee morale and motivation, and (3) workplace norms that become adopted by individuals as culturally normal through the habituation of the work process. Each of these intersects with gaming culture in a few ways, most obviously through the workplace issues like corporate misconduct,[345] sexual harassment,[346] crunch,[347] and the barriers to unionization[348] within the games industry that have all become public knowledge over the last few years. Recent events of this nature relating specifically to each of the organizations that operate the four games of this study will be covered in their relevant sections later in this chapter, but here I outline the ways the toxic aspects of the game industry have been theorized in a general sense.

Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter in *Games of Empire* trace how game development since the early 1980s has been a project of speculative labor targeted at young men.[349]

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[343] Ibid., 5-9, 31-32.
[344] Ibid., 15-16.
[345] Cecilia D'Anastasio. "Top Riot Executive Suspended Without Pay Following Investigation Over Workplace Misconduct." Kotaku article. December 13th, 2018. https://kotaku.com/top-riot-executive-suspended-without-pay-following-inve-1831084598 (accessed March 27th, 2023).
[346] Amanda Silberling, "Activision Blizzard is Once Again Being Sued for Sexual Harassment." TechCrunch article. October 13th, 2022. https://techcrunch.com/2022/10/13/activision-blizzard-is-once-again-being-sued-for-sexual-harassment/?guccounter=1 (accessed March, 27th, 2023).
[347] Amanda Cote and Brandon, C. Harris, "'Weekends Became Something Other People Did': Understanding and Intervening in the Habitus of Video Game Crunch," *Convergence: The International Journal of New Research into Media Technologies* 27, no.1 (2021): 161-176.
[348] Brendan Keogh and Benjamin Abraham, "Challenges and Opportunities for Collective Action and Unionization in Local Games Industries," *Organization* (2022). https://doi.org/10.1177/13505084221082269.
[349] Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, *Games of Empire*, 21-26.

They point to Alexey Patjinov - the creator of *Tetris* who developed the game in his spare time while working at the Moscow University of Science - and his eventual windfall from Tetris's success as a catalyst for many hobbyists trying to professionalize through speculative game development.[350] Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter state:

> "Millions of young men [...] yearned to achieve the celebrity Patjinov finally attained. Game making was the line of flight for digitally adept youth seeking to escape from the tedium of service or industrial jobs. Well before the dot-com boom, games were generating a rush of desperate ventures financed by whatever means were at hand - day job, credit card, university grant."[351]

The game industry continues to benefit from speculative - often free - labor practices to test games[352] or create new assets for them through mods (discussed more in Chapter 4).[353] Zhang and Fung position this trend within the neo-liberal work ethic, as players participate to build up an "entrepreneurial self," building relationships and social capital to advance into the game industry.[354] Olli Sotamaa notes that while this kind of work can be part of an aspirational pipeline into the game industry, many mod developers are just fans and players of games, and enjoy the creation process.[355]

Even though not all players, mod makers, and content creators are aspirational laborers, Ergin Bulut's recent work still points out that game companies continue to grow out of and to recruit from this pool of aspiring workers who begin as players with a dream of working in the industry.[356] Riot Games, the company that runs *League of*

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[350] Ibid., 23-24.
[351] Ibid., 24.
[352] Lin Zhang and Anthony Y.H. Fung, "Working as Playing? Consumer Labor, Guild, and the Secondary Industry of Online Gaming in China," *New Media and Society* 16, no 1 (2014): 38-54.
[353] Olli Sotamaa, "When the Game is Not Enough: Motivations and Practices Among Computer Game Modding Culture." *Games and Culture* 5, no 3 (2010): 239-255.
[354] Zhang and Fung, "Working as Playing," 47-49.
[355] Sotamaa, "When the Game," 244-247.
[356] Ergin Bulut, *A Precarious Game: The Illusion of Dream Jobs in the Video Game Industry* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2020).

Legends,[357] was founded by players who worked on the *DOTA Allstars* Mod for *Warcraft III*,[358] while another *DOTA Allstars* dev, 'IceFrog,' was hired by Valve to begin development on *DOTA 2* as a standalone game. In another example that has become infamous among players of Blizzard's games, original *World of Warcraft* game designer Jeff Kaplan - who only recently left Blizzard Entertainment in 2021 amidst the company's many scandals - was hired by Blizzard back in 2002 in-part because he lead an *EverQuest*[359] guild called 'Legacy of Steel.'[360] Kaplan was a harsh critic of *EverQuest's* design choices, and one of the posts directed at Sony Entertainment that made him such a promising prospect for Blizzard reads as follows:

> "Do me a favor so I don't waste my guild's time on this kind of jackass shit-fest again, send me an email at [...] when you decide to A) Implement an encounter that wasn't designed by a r******[361] chimp chained to a cubicle B) Get a Quality Assurance Department C) Actually beta test the fucking thing and D) Patch it live. And please for god's sake, do it in the order I laid out for you. Don't worry, I won't charge you a consulting fee on that one."[362]

Kaplan's post is indicative of the broader toxicity that is valued within these companies that can often ascend to the highest levels of these organizations, producing an all-too-real technocorporate fraternity version of *Mad Men*.[363]

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[357] Riot Games, 2009.
[358] Blizzard Entertainment, 2002.
[359] Sony Entertainment, 1999.
[360] Legacy of Steel Guild Website, archived posts. Thursday, April 18th, 2002. http://web.archive.org/web/20090608034937/http://www.legacyofsteel.net/oldsite/arc27.html (accessed March 27th, 2023).
[361] Censorship mine.
[362] Legacy of Steel Guild Website, archived posts. Saturday April 13th, 2002. http://web.archive.org/web/20090608034937/http://www.legacyofsteel.net/oldsite/arc27.html (accessed March 27th, 2023.
[363] AMC, 2007.

It should come as no shock that toxic masculinity (in its modern usage) is well-documented throughout games industry workplaces and is part of a broader culture of exclusion that also includes racism and homophobia. Elizabeth Hackney states:

> "Although gamers consist of diverse individuals, such as people of different races, genders, sexual orientations, and status, developers and marketers primarily consist of one group. This group can generally be classified as straight, white, male. Individuals who fall outside of this category can often say they feel out of place in the industry, but that they also want to ensure more people like them can enter and thrive in the gaming industry."[364]

Kelly Bergstrom briefly explored the 'bro culture' of Riot Games where "women were overlooked for promotions, but also sexualized by management."[365] A surreal confession from an anonymous male employee in Cecilia D'Anastasio's original exposé of the sexism at Riot Games reveals that "one of Riot's male senior leaders regularly grabbed his genitals" and "if [this senior leader] walked into a meeting with no women he'd just fart on someone's face."[366] DeWinter and Kocurek found that even for women with a high degree of technical competence and with a proven track record for skilled play - which are both highly valued within the games industry - the goalposts were frequently moved.[367] Additionally, because women made up 'as low as 4 percent' of their company's labor force, they often felt isolated, angry, and were silenced, bullied and ignored by their male coworkers.[368]

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[364] Elizabeth Hackney, "Eliminating Racism and the Diversity Gap in the Video Game Industry," *John Marshall Law Review* 51, (2017-2018): 864-902.
[365] Kelly Bergstrom, "What is Behind the (Glass)Door? Examining Toxic Workplace Cultures Via an Employment Review Site." *Proceedings of AoIR 2021: The 22nd Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers*. (Virtual Event, October 13-16, 2021), 1.
[366] Cecilia D'Anastasio, "Inside the Culture of Sexism at Riot Games." Kotaku article. August 7th, 2018. https://kotaku.com/inside-the-culture-of-sexism-at-riot-games-1828165483 (accessed March 28th, 2023).
[367] deWinter and Kocurek, "Exclusionary Cultures," 65.
[368] Ibid., 66-67.

While there are numerous texts about racism and homophobia within other spheres of gaming culture, there is little that examines these elements within the workplace and so there are fewer direct examples of interpersonal toxicity in these areas, but it no doubt exists. Some systemic elements are still visible, however. Citing an IGDA study,[369] Sam Srauy notes that 73% of developers in North America identify as white. While attempting to study race in the North American games industry, Srauy was stonewalled by all but 6 developers despite the promise of anonymity in the research.[370] Nevertheless, Srauy found that the internal culture combined with 'market logics' (what the developers imagine the gaming audience to be) to produce games that draw upon normalized racist discourses within North America.[371] Kishonna Gray in *Intersectional Tech* considers 'The Kinect,' - a 2009 Xbox camera peripheral that controlled games through an observation of the human body in action, which failed to read darker skin tones and thus did not function for many people of color.[372] While there is no single internal cause for the Kinect's discriminatory failings, through the literature we can see a trend wherein the expected consumer and privileged voices within development spaces manifests in the game products being created: the Kinect's problems are likely the result of a lack of people of color within the design teams to consider and test for compatibility with darker skin tones. Critically, the internal culture of development studios is replicated in the games and peripherals that they produce.

Before moving on to toxic fandom, a less obvious but crucial implication of this toxic workplace literature emerges when we pair it with the previously mentioned 'play as labour' or 'playbour' frame. To quickly refresh that perspective, modern game design gamifies labour-like tasks such as menial resource collecting, daily questing, and repeatable or 'grindy' activities such that play very closely resembles work at the processual level.[373] Nick Yee notes that even social groups in games, like guilds or clans, have workplace-like characteristics, including inter-member mediation, task

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[369] J. Weststar and M. Legault, "Developer Satisfaction Survey 2015 Summary Report." In Srauy, 2019.
[370] Sam Srauy, "Professional Norms and Race in the North American Video Game Industry," *Games and Culture* 14, no 5 (2019): 478-497.
[371] Ibid., 493-494.
[372] Gray, *Intersectional Tech,* 129-143.
[373] Nick Yee, "The Labor of Fun: How Video Games Blur the Boundaries of Work and Play," *Games and Culture* 1, no 1 (2006): 68-71.

designation, and burnout, and equates managing a guild to 'working a second job.'[374] A video from an internal Valve software meeting shows company CEO Gabe Newell talking about monetization of their *DOTA 2* spinoff game *Artifact*[375] and attributing the 'toxic' label to these kinds of factors driving players away.[376] From the company's perspective the concern for players is in-line with Peter Frost's mindset of organizational benefit,[377] though in this case the players are seen as assets to the company's profitability that falls in line with the organizational toxicity paradigm.

Boluk and LeMieux examined this relationship between players and Valve's internal workplace culture to outline how this vision of neoliberal productivity and self-driven monetization are built into their competitive gaming scenes.[378] They point to a now-infamous Valve handbook that documents what Valve calls the 'flatland' within the company, where in place of a traditional workplace hierarchy, salaries and projects are not static, but are renegotiated through a system of internal peer-reviews that measure skill, productivity, group contribution, and product contribution.[379] Within Valve, work and play are both framed as productivity, and "Players are no longer thought of simply as customers for whom the company must deliver, but as fellow producers within a gamespace of global capital who voluntarily generate surplus," through play and spectatorship.[380] Within the corporatized view, toxicity is more about the negative reception of game mechanisms than it is about players being subjected to individual or systemic cultural issues that emerge from the sociocultural elements of game design. Not only are players the future of the gaming workplace, but even those who don't enter the industry are already viewed as workers from those inside these companies. What's more, toxicity circulates within this enmeshed player/laborer Mobius loop.

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[374] Nick Yee, *The Proteus Paradox: How Online Games Change Us and How they Don't* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014), 59-77.
[375] Valve, 2018.
[376] YouTube Video. "Gabe Newell discusses Artifact at Valve HQ". PCGamesN YouTube Channel. March 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mERhtoD21rU (accessed March 27th, 2023).
[377] Frost, "Emotions," 2.
[378] Stephanie Boluk and Patrick LeMieux, *Metagaming: Playing, Competing, Spectating, Cheating, Trading, Making, and Breaking Videogames* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 207-274.
[379] "Handbook for New Employees: A Fearless Adventure in Knowing What to Do When No One's There Telling You What to Do." (Valve Press, 2012). In Boluk and LeMieux, 264-265.
[380] Boluk and LeMieux, Metagaming, 265.

In this section we've established there is, at best, a thin line between the development environment, including its culture and processes, and the play environment. That is not to say that developers and players always completely align - in fact there is near-constant conflict between these groups, as we'll see when we dig into the games - but the same toxic cultural threads inform the culturally permissible ways of being and the modes of interaction that are common within and across these two spheres. If we revisit Van Rooij and Fine's systemic adoption of workplace values through previously established pipeline from playerbase to industry, we can see that it isn't just the workers who are absorbing the toxic corporate culture through the internalization of industry values: players absorb the culture as well. The internal culture of modern game developers is itself produced by players who enter the industry after growing up in that self-same culture. Between the player layer and the industry layer, we need to consider one more sphere of gaming culture, and that is fandom and technoculture.

Toxic Fandom and Technocultures

Even though players do embody and enact toxicity within online games, if we think back to #gamergate (examined in chapter 1) most of the organizing, discourses about the movement, and the targeted harassment and brigading took place publicly over social media rather than in-game. Mortensen's characterization of #gamergaters as football hooligans paints a picture of 'gamers' not just as players but as fans.[381] Through #gamergate we see a segment of the gaming fandom who's identifications with gaming's broader culture resulted in gatekeeping and elitism that resembles other fan communities wherein individuals who perceive themselves as insiders possess a high degree of personal investment (sense of self, monetary investments, collective belonging) in media products.[382] Players of the games in this study also display deep investment in particular properties, franchises, and developers in this fandom mode. While these discussions can take place in-game as well, there is a huge amount of

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[381] Mortensen, "Anger, Fear," 788.

[382] Courtney N. Plante et al., "'Get Out of My Fandom: Newbie': A Cross-fandom Study of Elitism and Gatekeeping in Fans," *Journal of Fandom Studies* 8, no 2 (2020): 123-146.

meta-discussion about game communities, new products or in-game content, developer decisions, and the culture of the games that happens over social media and in various community forums. Before we dive fully into the gaming layer and get into the specifics of each game in this study, it is worth laying out how toxicity has been thought about in regards to fandom and its online presence. Gamers-as-fans are not wholly unique online denizens. Though gamers possess some unique elements, they also fit into a broader pattern of toxicity as it has been observed in online fan communities through social media and other technocultural sites.[383]

Henry Jenkins' work brought fandom to the forefront of media studies by revealing fans to be invested, active, and critical consumers that have become central to media industries.[384] Jenkins primarily examined fan practices and their impacts on cultural production, both in terms of media influence through active consumption, feedback, and remediations of cultural products: what Jenkins' called 'convergence culture.'[385] While fandom was once found primarily on diffuse message boards or at conventions, Jia, Li, and Ma point to social media as a persistent and connective driver of fandom's power to shape culture, economies, and public interest that has only increased since Jenkins' era.[386] They also point out that fans have developed greater awareness of their cultural power over time.

Lincoln Geraghty[387] and Jonathan Gray highlight paratexts as artifacts of fan power.[388] Gray focuses mostly on 'officially' authored sources that surround original texts, like 'making of' documentaries, lifestyle magazines, and reviews from "journalists and/or religious or political figures" that circulate within audiences and influence

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[383] Toxicity among fandoms and within social media could no doubt be theorized separately, but this project's engagement with fandom and social media is at the point where they intersect, and so I found it more productive to theorize these aspects together here.
[384] Henry Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2006).
[385] Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2006).
[386] Bolin Jia, Jiaying Li, and Jingkun Ma, "Transformation of Fan Culture Under the Influence of Social Media," *Advances in Social Science, Education, and Humanities Research* 615 (2021): 2173-2178.
[387] Lincoln Geraghty, "Introduction: Fans and Paratexts." *Popular Media Cultures: Fans, Audiences and Paratexts*. Edited by Lincoln Geraghty (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 1-14.
[388] Jonathan Gray, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media* (New York: New York University Press, 2010).

opinions and interpretations of original texts.[389] Geraghty expands on Gray's work to include fan productions like videos and inter-fandom discussions about media objects.[390] Gaming went through a similar development with paratextuality through the work of Espen Aarseth who highlighted rules and guides to often being external to games themselves,[391] and Mia Consalvo[392] building on Aarseth's work to produce what Jan Švelch has called the "expanded definition" of paratextuality in games, which can include "all the phenomena from the original framework + criticism and journalism, user discussions, fan fiction and fan art, streaming, [and] transmedia storytelling."[393] Paratexts are an important part of understanding contemporary gaming culture in online games. The rules and cultures of game worlds, and opinions about what players should and shouldn't do are being formed (at least partially) for many players through discursive opinions on message boards, and through watching livestreamers and YouTubers who are themselves fans - or just as often anti-fans - of the games they play.

Anti-fandom is another stepping-stone for understanding the present atmosphere of online gaming communities and the relationship that players have to the products they play and to each other. In 2006, writing in the context of television studies, Jonathan Gray presented the anti-fan as the missing piece of fan and audience studies, which had until then emphasized positive relationships between fans and their media objects.[394] For Gray, anti-fandom included distant audiences and those who refused to watch but nonetheless invested themselves as anti-fans based on a negative reading of the perceived moral lessons or subject matter of a media text.[395] Gray also presented a third strand of invested anti-fan that has become exponentially more visible and relevant

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389 Ibid., 36.
390 Geraghty, "Fans and Paratexts."
391 Espen Aarseth, "Genre Trouble," *Electronic Book Review* (2004). https://electronicbookreview.com/essay/genre-trouble/ (accessed March 29th, 2023).
392 Mia Consalvo, "When Paratexts Become Texts: De-Centering the Game-As-Text," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 34, no 2 (2017): 177-183.
393 Jan Švelch, "Paratextuality in Game Studies: A Theoretical Review and Citation Analysis." *Game Studies* 20, no 2 (2020). https://gamestudies.org/2002/articles/jan_svelch (accessed March 29th, 2023).
394 Jonathan Gray, "Antifandom and the Moral Text," *American Behavioral Scientist* 48, no 7 (2005): 842-845.
395 Ibid., 842.

in the social media age.[396] According to Gray, this kind of anti-fandom "may be performed with close knowledge of the text and yet be devoid of the interpretive and diegetic pleasures that are usually assumed to be a staple of almost all media consumption," though Gray also left open the possibility that there may be second-order pleasures and collective functions through these disdainful, even hateful, close readings.[397]

Time has proven Gray's earlier assumptions about anti-fandom to be fruitful. Revisiting the concept in 2019, Gray provided a taxonomy of anti-fandoms that illustrates various modes of collective identification through shared discourses of dislike and hate of particular media products.[398] There are competitive anti-fans who value one media object over another and tear-down the one they don't like rather than uplift the one they do.[399] There are anti-fans who align against fan practices within the same or competing fandoms; there are hatewatchers who take pleasure in the collective tear-down of a text they anticipate will be bad, and there are disappointed anti-fans who rally around the "unraveling" - drops in quality or ideological and narrative shifts - of franchises that they once loved.[400] A great deal of discourse within online gaming, particularly in the sites surrounding the games of this study, fit within these taxonomies.

Even though Gray's taxonomies have a strong negative valence, these kinds of fandoms are purposeful for those who belong to them and have not been theorized as inherently toxic, but the concept of toxic fandom has come to prominence alongside anti-fandom. Toxic fandom draws from the modern usage of toxic masculinity and its offshoots: geek masculinity and[401] toxic technocultures.[402] Salter and Blodgett detail the transition of the geek from outsider to mainstream status in society, and highlight a

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396 Melissa A. Click, "Introduction: Haters Gunna Hate," *Anti-Fandom: Dislike and Hate in the Digital Age*. Edited by Melissa A. Click (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 1-22.
397 Ibid., 842-843.
398 Jonathan Gray, "How do I Dislike Three? Let me Count the Ways?" *Anti-Fandom: Dislike and Hate in the Digital Age*. Edited by Melissa A. Click (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 25-41.
399 Ibid., 26-28.
400 Ibid., 30-39.
401 Anastasia Salter and Bridget Blodgett, *Toxic Geek Masculinity in Media: Sexism, Trolling, and Identity Policing* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).
402 Adrienne L. Massanari, "Damseling for Dollars: Toxic Technocultures and Geek Masculinity." *Race and Gender in Electronic Media.* Edited by Rebecca Ann Lind (London: Routledge, 2016), 312-328.

gendered defense of the geek image and label.[403] The term toxic technoculture was coined by Adrienne Massanari and describes platform-based cultural movements that "coalesce around a particular issue or event," who commit "implicit or explicit harassment of others" while displaying "retrograde ideas of gender, sexual identity, sexuality and race [to] push against issues of diversity, multiculturalism and progressivism."[404] Though Massanari focuses on Reddit, she also notes that 4Chan, Twitter, and online games all foster toxic technocultures,[405] and similar formations can be seen as far back to the earliest proto-message boards.[406] I would also consider livestreaming platforms and YouTube to be similar hubs of these kinds of technocultural formations.

Members of these technocultures are often technically proficient, and the sites in which these technocultures flourish enact the kind of toxic geek masculinity that has become valorized since the rise of information technology and the STEM fields.[407] When we put toxic technocultures and geek masculinity together, we get toxic fandom as described by Williams and Bennett as "increasingly hostile responses to media franchises" and a trend where "male fans have opposed wider inclusion of women, characters from ethnic minority groups, or non-heteronormative characters."[408] These exclusions, though not limited to digital spaces, are most often carried out within the technocultural sites that Masannari describes, though it can also be found on more general-purpose social media as well.

Anti-fandom and toxic-fandom brush up against a third related category of fandom that is also worth mentioning: reactionary fandom.[409] Reactionary fandom was put forward by Mel Stanfill to describe the overlap between present-day fannish

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[403] Salter and Blodgett, *Toxic Geek Masculinity*, 8-12.
[404] Adrienne Massanari, "#Gamergate and The Fappening: How Reddit's Algorithm, Governance, and Culture Support Toxic Technocultures," *New Media and Society* 19, no 3 (2017): 333.
[405] Ibid.
[406] Allucquère Rosanne Stone, *The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1996), 108-117.
[407] Ibid., 331-333.
[408] Rebecca Williams and Lucy Bennett, "Editorial: Fandom and Controversy," *American Behavioral Scientist* 66, no. 8 (2022):1037.
[409] Stanfill, Mel. "Introduction: The Reaction in the Fan and the Fan in the Reactionary," *Television and New Media* 21, no 2 (2019): 123-134.

practices, right-wing organizing, and reactionary political ideologies.[410] Broadly speaking, 'reactionary politics' describes a political position that aims to return to a former socio-political era that denies trans rights, civil rights, women's rights and socialist policies.[411] The strategies for achieving this reactionary state are in-line with the technocultural practices described by Massanari, and are also carried out along fannish lines, at times in regards to the exact same content that fans consume, with Proctor and Kies pointing a reactionary-inflected 'culture war' in the fandoms of popular media franchises like Marvel and Star Wars.[412] There are also community micro-celebrities that function as socio-political influencers and thought-leaders in political movements, fandoms, and of course in gaming.[413] Thinking back to #gamergate, it should be obvious by now that games are not exempt from these same forces, and as each game in this study is introduced below we will see examples where these aspects of anti-, toxic, and reactionary fandom are at work within the community.

In closing this section on toxic fandom and technoculture, I consider the implications of these fandom practices within the on-the-ground scale that sets up the upcoming ethnographic research by returning to the idea of the anti-fan in relation to toxic and reactionary fandom. We can't disregard the possibility that the formal aspects of anti-fandom - pointed and aggressive criticism that enact vast amounts of dislike and hate - may reinforce a confrontational and hyper-critical mode of interaction at the interpersonal level. If one's orientation towards the media we consume is built largely out of a hateful relationship, can we be surprised that folks respond similarly, even proactively, to *people* with this same kind of hatefulness? I am not trying to draw a direct link between Gray's anti-fandom taxonomies and reactionary politics, but I am reluctant to dismiss the connection between anti-fandom, toxic fandom, and reactionary fandom entirely when the gaming environments we're about to examine in this study operate as anti-fandoms, replicate reactionary politics within them, and have adversarial modes of address and interaction as their norm.

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[410] Ibid.
[411] Ibid.
[412] William Proctor and Bridget Kies, "Editors' Introduction: On Toxic Fan Practices and the New Culture Wars," *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies* 15, no 1 (2018): 127-142.
[413] Rebecca Lewis, "'This Is What the News Won't Show You': YouTube Creators and the Reactionary Politics of Micro-celebrity," *Television and New Media* 21, no 2 (2020): 201-217.

Whitney Phillips in her study on subcultural trolling points to an 'adversary method'[414] exemplified by Arthur Schopenhauer's *The Art of Controversy*,[415] that trolls employ in their interactions with others. Schopenhauer's methods have a 'win-at-all-costs' approach that view all interactions as arguments to be won through a range of dubious means including name calling, provocations to rage, and what we would now call gaslighting. Phillips states:

> "The goal is to aim for the lowest possible personal blows, not just in relation to an opponent's argument but in relation to his person, family, friends, income, race, or anything that might appeal to what Schopenhauer calls the 'virtues of the body, or to mere animalism.'[416] Regarding this last tip, perhaps the sharpest tool in the rhetorician's arsenal, Schopenhauer warns that an opponent is likely to respond in kind and begin hurling his own insults. If and when that happens, one must remind one's opponent that personal insults have no place in a rational discussion and request that he or she consider the issue at hand - at which point one may return to one's own insults and prevarications."[417]

Importantly, Schopenhauer's adversary method isn't just applicable to trolling online - it exemplifies the form that many conversations take on gaming forums and other technocultural sites. This technique, though it derives from trolling, has become another imbricated mode of communicating between toxic masculinity, geek masculinity, and toxic technocultures.

The key takeaway from this section on toxic fandom is that this is the social terrain in which these online games are discussed and experienced by players - not

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[414] Whitney Phillips, *This is Why We Can't Have Nice Things: Mappin the Relationship between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2016), 124-128.
[415] Arthur Schopenhauer, *The Art of Controversy*. Translated by T. Bailey Saunders (Lavergne: Kessinger Books, 1896).
[416] Ibid., 32 (Quoted in Phillips, 2016, 125).
[417] Phillips, *This is Why*, 125.

exclusively, but predominantly. Even if there is some greater social purpose to an anti-fandom for those who belong, negativity is the social currency that circulates within the community, and this cannot be without consequence for players in these spaces.

The Circulation of Negativity in Gaming Spaces

Toxicity, though I would consider it a net negative (and both a producer and product of negative emotions) is not itself negativity. Here I bring in Sara Ahmed's work on 'affective economies' in conjunction with Mia Consalvo's concept of 'gaming capital' to elucidate the connection between toxicity and negativity and to foreground the ways we'll encounter negativity as the normalized and prevailing social currency within the games of this study.

Owing to its psychological roots, the study of affect, feeling, and emotion is often assumed to be inwards and personal, but Ahmed's work is concerned with "the sociality of emotion."[418] Ahmed opens her piece "Affective Economies" by talking about white supremacy specifically, but the phrase she uses to describe the emotional relationship between those with different stakes in the white supremacist movement kept going through my mind as I observed the cultures of these different games in relation to the previously theorized toxic anti-fan: "Together we hate, and this hate is what makes us together."[419] Hate is not generated from the ether - it is produced in part through its attachment - or 'stickiness' - to what Ahmed calls signifiers: physical or immaterial objects that circulate through society.[420] For Ahmed, hate and other emotions are economic in that they produce a form of capital, a surplus value of emotion that increases as the objects circulate: the more the objects circulate, the more intense and pervasive the emotion.[421] Emotion is not produced directly from the objects themselves but through their relations and circulation in a social world.[422]

Most importantly, this circulation of emotionally-charged signifiers has a range of social effects: we align or distance ourselves from others based in part on our shared

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[418] Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 8.
[419] Sara Ahmed, "Affective Economies," *Social Text* 79, vol 22, no. 2 (2004): 118.
[420] Ibid., 117-118.
[421] Ahmed, *Cultural Politics*, 45.
[422] Ibid.

emotions in response to the objects that circulate and the responses of others to those objects: our political allegiances, the social groups we join, the friendships we seek out, and the ‘others’ we demonize are at least partially informed not just by shared interests, but by commensurate emotional orientations towards objects that carry both meaning and feeling, which circulate throughout society.[423] Ahmed states:

> “In such affective economies, emotions *do things*, and they align individuals with communities - or bodily space with social space - through the very intensity of their attachments. Rather than seeing emotions as psychological dispositions, we need to consider how they work, in concrete and particular ways, to mediate the relationship between the psychic and the social, and between the individual and the collective.”[424]

This affective dimension is not siloed from other forms of self-identification or interpersonal relation but holds real stakes for how groups of people view the order of the world and their place in it. Recently, affective responses to objects like Donald Trump, surgical masks, and vaccines are just some examples of affective signifiers that produce strong collective reactions that hinge on emotion. These kinds of signifiers are both products and productive of socio-cultural formations and political positions, and current reactionary politics makes liberal use of their circulation to generate lasting resentment out of negative emotions.[425] As I write this section, the term ‘woke’ is being used in conservative news media to unite an incensed political base, and the term as it is being circulated as an affective object needs no meaning or definition other than its emotional content to do that work.

To bring Ahmed’s theory closer to gaming, let’s briefly revisit #gamergate one last time. #Gamergate originated out of objects in circulation: Zoe Quinn’s game

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[423] Ahmed, “Affective Economies,” 128-136.
[424] Ibid., 118.
[425] Tereza Capelos et al., “Reactionary Politics and the Resentful Affect in Populist Times,” *Politics and Governance* 9, no 3 (2021): 186-190.

Depression Quest,[426] a review for that game, and a break-up post written by Quinn's ex-lover that tapped into a simmering and undirected anger in-line with toxic geek masculinity that existed within the soon-to-be #gamergaters. It wasn't these original objects that circulated most as the movement progressed however; it was instead the signifiers of Zoe Quinn, Anita Sarkesian and other representations of feminism (or just women generally) in gaming. As we discussed in Chapter 1, the underlying premise of 'journalistic integrity' quickly fell away as the movement gained momentum,[427] and one's relationship to affective objects in circulation played a large part in how one identified with or against the movement. Here I think of Adrienne Shaw's work "The Trouble with Communities" that indicated a strong but temporary community counter-formation that grew between disparate people and groups who were pulled closer together through what Shaw calls "the danger" of the #gamergate moment.[428]

#Gamergate's lifeblood was trading in hateful discourse about these figures, propagating this discourse through a recirculation of these emotional signifiers, and acting on their hateful feelings by producing even more artifacts, whether it was discussions, symbols, videos, or even actions that could further be remediated into more affective objects. This collective movement was bound together by a sharing of that affective relationship to the symbols in circulation and by acting upon them. Even the countermovement comprised of the communities that formed and crystalized in response to #gamergate were fueled largely through their affective dimensions - the emotional poignancy and shared sense of danger of the moment pulled groups who were targeted together, and Shaw noted that as the urgency of the moment faded and the emotional intensity of the objects in circulation lessened, so too did the ties between these impacted communities lessen as well.[429] Still, emotion as propelled by the circulation of cultural objects mattered on any side of this event, and even though the

[426] The Quinnspiracy, 2013.
[427] Mortensen, "Anger, Fear, and Games," 787-806.
[428] Adrienne Shaw, "The Trouble with Communities." *Queer Game Studies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 156.
[429] Ibid., 158-160.

circulation of these particular artifacts slowed and lost intensity, more than traces of their impact remained.[430]

It isn't that #gamergate was the harbinger of negativity into gaming spaces, but it brought gaming culture's negativity into the mainstream. If we revisit Jeff Kaplan's 2002 forum post from earlier in this chapter,[431] we can see negativity on full display in front of his guild, the *EverQuest* public, and the lurking Blizzard developers who would go on to hire him. It is telling that Kaplan was mostly well liked by players until he left Blizzard[432] and that this forum post that channels negative emotions through pointed outrage and anger frequently resurfaces on Blizzard community sites. Negativity - whether it is anger, disgust, rage, or disappointment - has been a defining part of gaming culture that has only grown since #gamergate, even if it has grown with less visibility outside of the gaming milieux.

Here I bring in Mia Consalvo's concept of gaming capital. Gaming capital builds on Bourdieu's 'cultural capital,' which describes a cultural value acquired over time that grants one legitimacy through pastimes, interests, and knowledge within a cultural context.[433] Consalvo rethinks Bourdieu's concept as an alternative to thinking of gaming as 'subcultural,' instead positing gaming capital as a more appropriate fit for gaming's "dynamism of gameplay as well as the evolving game and paratextual industry."[434] Consalvo notes that gaming capital as a term "is useful because it suggests a currency that is by necessity dynamic - changing over time, and across types of players or games."[435] Consalvo says that gaming capital can be acquired by players in several ways: players read paratexts like guides, they seek out player-created content, they seek knowledge of the games, of the industry, and anticipate future games before they're announced; they learn how to modify games, they practice and hone their skills,

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[430] Torill Elvira Mortensen and Tanja Sihvonen, "Negative Emotions Set in Motion: The Continued Relevance of #GamerGate," *The Palgrave Handbook of International Cybercrime and Cyberdeviance*. Edited by Thomas J. Holt and Adam M. Bossler (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2020), 1353-1374.
[431] In the Toxic Workplace and Organizational Culture Section
[432] One thread in the Overwatch forums after his departure titled "I miss jeff kaplan" includes the comment "Yes, the reality is, he was one of us… a gamer." Indeed he was. https://us.forums.blizzard.com/en/overwatch/t/i-miss-jeff-kaplan/750085/4 (accessed April 1st, 2023).
[433] Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*. Edited by J. Richardson (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood, 1986), 17-21.
[434] Mia Consalvo, *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Videogames* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2007), 3-4.
[435] Ibid., 4.

and they even cheat to acquire “wealth and power more quickly than they would if they didn’t cheat,” which can convert into gaming capital.[436]

Thinking of Kaplan’s post with the added perspective of gaming capital, we can already see one example of a direct conversion of public negativity into a higher cultural status through Kaplan’s hiring by a top-tier game studio. The gaming YouTuber and livestreaming environment is another location where negativity manifests publicly in spades. The largest content creators for the games in this study have an extremely adversarial position to the games they play and produce content for. One example is ‘Bellular,’ who frames the majority of videos he makes for *World of Warcraft* as pure doom and gloom, with his most recent video boasting a thumbnail loudly proclaiming “PLAYERS ANGRY” (Figure 3.1). This trend is an ouroboros and self-fulfilling prophecy all at once as Bellular and similar content creators report on the environment of outrage and anger they themselves are actively fueling.

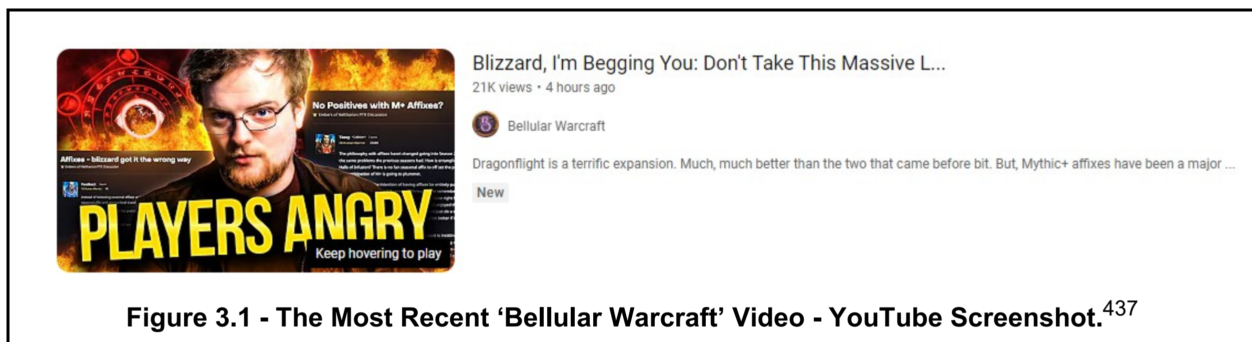

Figure 3.1 - The Most Recent ‘Bellular Warcraft’ Video - YouTube Screenshot.[437]

Another livestreamer, Asmongold, recently built an entire series of videos around the documented lack of skill of ‘Gús,’ a player he invited to his raids from his viewer community. Making fun of Gús’s failures in stream chat was a way of accumulating gaming capital at the expense of another player, broadcast to hundreds of thousands of other players (Figure 3.2).

[436] Ibid., 20; 38-39; 112; 122-123.
[437] “Blizzard, I’m Begging You: Don’t Take This Massive L…”. Bellular Warcraft YouTube Video. April 1st, 2023. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gw8RFCdwHe4 (Accessed April 1st, 2023).

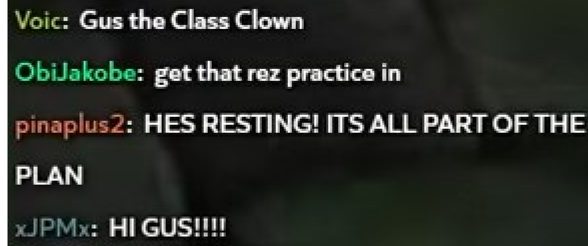

Figure 3.2 - Asmongold's Chat Roasts Gús After He Dies During a Raid - YouTube Screenshot.[438]

Bullying, harsh criticism of gameplay, and antagonistic relationships towards other players and the companies that produce these games are all encouraged in this genre of video. Asmongold has accrued 3.4 million followers according to his Twitch page,[439] has a net worth estimated to be between 2-3 million dollars,[440] and recently started a company that builds gaming PCs, becoming a key figure for play at the hardware level in addition to his cultural presence.[441] Asmongold is not alone, as across gaming many successful streamers and YouTubers like 'Angry Joe,' 'Dr. Disrespect,' and the 'Angry Video Game Nerd,' have created lasting brands that generate millions of followers by trading on antagonism and negativity. Even in-game, there is evidence of guild leaders in *World of Warcraft* being elevated to leadership positions within their groups through the way they berate the other players they play with.[442] There are of course far more intense manifestations of these trends on streams and in videos that embrace the reactionary and post-#gamergate mode of interaction as well, though I will refrain from platforming them here. Additionally, these platforms are themselves imbricated in the

[438] "The Return of Gús! Asmongold Raids Classic WotLK" Asmongold Gaming YouTube Video. Oct. 21st, 2022. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qYQb6WBl5wQ. (Accessed April 1st, 2023).
[439] Asmongold Twitch Page. https://www.twitch.tv/asmongold (accessed June 9th, 2023).
[440] A leak of Twitch earnings from 2021 put Asmongold as the 14th highest paid Twitch streamer, making 2.5 million dollars off of his Twitch income alone. Full list available at the DOT ESPORTS website. https://dotesports.com/streaming/news/full-list-of-all-twitch-payouts-twitch-leaks (accessed June 9th, 2023).
[441] Starforge Systems Website "Our Creators" page. https://starforgesystems.com/pages/our-creators (accessed June 9th, 2023).
[442] See Mark Chen, 2009; Joshua Jackson, 2018.

dissemination of this content through their algorithms that leverage the high virality of rage, emotion, and divisive content online.[443]

The production, celebration, and adoption of these affective artifacts across digital spaces is a way of concretizing one's belonging within them. Participation and the recirculation and remediation of those artifacts are ways of accumulating cultural capital. This kind of negativity as accrual of capital within digital culture has been documented in other spheres as well, like news media[444] and vlogging,[445] with the trade in negative emotions having a documented impact on clicks, viewership, and engagement.[446] If we're talking about gaming specifically, this phenomenon is hardly limited to the lightning rod that was #gamergate. It continues to persist in the fabric of game spaces and the anti-fan orientation that many players have towards the games they play through vocal manifestations of toxic masculinity, racism, and homophobia that occur on forums and in-games.

One poignant example of how these affective artifacts circulate on-the-ground within the player culture occurred while I was hanging out with *World of Warcraft* players in a public Discord server. Over a period of seven hours, one of the players in this Discord was streaming[447] his in-game activities with various groups of randomly matchmade players. As other players watched, the streamer and some of the audience would frequently comment that other players "sucked," were "terrible" and "garbage," and couldn't be trusted to play well. Across these seven hours - peppered with racial slurs and casual transphobic discussions - the streamer and one other viewer took turns criticizing nearly every random player that this streamer grouped with, despite the streamer himself making multiple misplays throughout the stream. The criticized players

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[443] William J. Brady, Ana P Gantman, and Jay J. Van Bavel, "Attentional Capture Helps Explain Why Moral and Emotional Content Go Viral," *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 149, no 4 (2020): 746-756.
[444] Claire E. Robertson et al., "Negativity Drives Online News Consumption," *Nature Human Behaviour* (2023): 1-14.
[445] Rachel Berryman and Misha Kavka, "Crying on YouTube: Vlogs, Self-Exposure, and the Productivity of Negative Affect," *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 24, no 1 (2017): 85-98.
[446] Marie K. Shanahan, *Journalism, Online Comments, and the Future of Public Discourse* (New York and London: Routledge, 2018), 45-51.
[447] Discord allows you to stream your gameplay in a stream accessible only to other members of that Discord server in a kind of closed-circuit watch-along.

can't hear these critiques and insults, but the streamer and viewer used this opportunity to build gaming capital between each other and the other members of the Discord who were spectating and chatting along. As this was happening in the Discord, a parallel trade in negative currency was happening in-game: one of the groups the streamer entered was suspicious of the streamer's abilities and the group leader asked "are you a potato?," which translates to "are you a useless player?" The leader assumed that the player they invited - the streamer - was a bad player by default and used an antagonistic framing of a pointed question precisely because it generated their own gaming capital between themselves and the other members of the group who observed it. The steamer assured the group leader that they were not in-fact a "potato" and the group activity went along as normal with continued critique from the most vocal observers in our Discord chat. No one really got along, but the social ties on either side of this group activity were building through these parallel exchanges of toxicity-rooted negativity in the game space and the parallel site of Discord.

Toxicity and Negativity in Summary

Across this larger section on spheres of toxicity in gaming, I've examined three aspects of toxicity: toxic masculinity, toxic workplace cultures, and toxic fandom and technocultures. We've seen that each of these spheres of toxicity apply to gaming spaces, and below we'll see a few examples of how game-specific communities actualize these theoretical formations of toxicity. Games and players exist in the overlaps across these spheres, as all players are implicated in systemic trends of toxic masculinity enacted at the very least inside the work environments where the cultural logics behind these games become playable products. Thomas Malaby, studying Linden Lab, the company that developed *Second Life*[448] noted that the philosophies and views of the workplace scaffolded game design and manifested in play: there is no way that the game environments as players experience them aren't affected by industries' underlying ideologies and workplace issues.[449] What's more, players are already seen

[448] Linden Lab, 2003.
[449] Thomas M. Malaby, *Making Virtual Worlds: Linden Lab and Second Life* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2009), 107-124.

and treated as laborers within online games, and as players we are also positioned as fans, or at the very least denizens of technocultural sites where fandom happens. Our very presence in these online games positions us as necessarily engaged participants in the cultural stakes of play, de facto politicized by the very form of fandom in modern times.

Players are constantly vocal and hypercritical of other players, of game design choices, of new content that they still purchase anyway, and tend to position all who aren't in a close circle[450] or who aren't in full agreement about a topic as adversaries and will treat them as such. Adversarial address and a general performance of negativity has become a dominant method of accruing gaming capital across various gaming locations. The currents of negativity are as common in the company meetings where CEOs fart on their employees, as they are in the forum discussions about how the latest game or expansion is terrible, as they are in the interactions between two players who have never met before who are trying to complete a common group activity together in-game.[451] Online gaming in particular is saturated with negativity fueled by systemic and interpersonal toxicity throughout every sphere from game design to content creation to forum discussions to gameplay.

The above is not an exaggeration, but it is worth saying that not every interaction is toxic and feels bad, and of course not all players are feeling negatively all the time in response to these phenomena.[452] If we consider the anti-fandom perspective, some players no doubt achieve some positive outcomes or feelings out of their hateful relationships to different facets of gaming, but this doesn't erase the massive volume of hate and negativity circulating within gaming culture. The point of all of this set-up is to convey this: *holistically, being subject to systemic toxicity, its interpersonal manifestations and the negative feelings that result - both acute and lasting - is unavoidable if one participates at all in any sphere of this environment.* What's more, toxic masculinity and the documented misogyny, racism, and homophobia across these spheres compounds this negativity depending on one's subject position. That negativity

[450] As we'll see in Chapters 5 and 6, these closed circles don't even afford that much protection.
[451] Chapters 4 and 5.
[452] Though it isn't far off.

is also mobilized in various ways, at various scales, as a social currency. Before embarking on the search for positivity I will end this section by affirming the picture that the first half of this chapter made clear: that toxicity and negativity in gaming spaces are real, serious, and pervasive.

Chapter 3B - Introducing the Games

Below I introduce the games in this study. The games are presented in the sequence that my research on them was conducted, and the games will appear in this same sequence in Chapters 4 and 5 for consistency. This section is most concerned with linking the macro culture of gaming that's just been established with the outer layer of each game, though I will provide some general details about what players do in each game. These in-game aspects will be explored in much greater detail in Chapter 4 through an in-depth look at each game's communication systems and their varied player uses, and then in Chapter 5 through gameplay experienced and observed through my ethnography.

Though their genres are not exactly the same, *Lost Ark, Destiny 2,* and *WoW* each have some shared features common to MMOs, and I'd like to outline a few of these here, leaving space for more game-specific detail below. Across these three games players create customizable characters[453] that they pilot through each game world, which are large, persistent, and active even while players are offline (Figure 3.3).

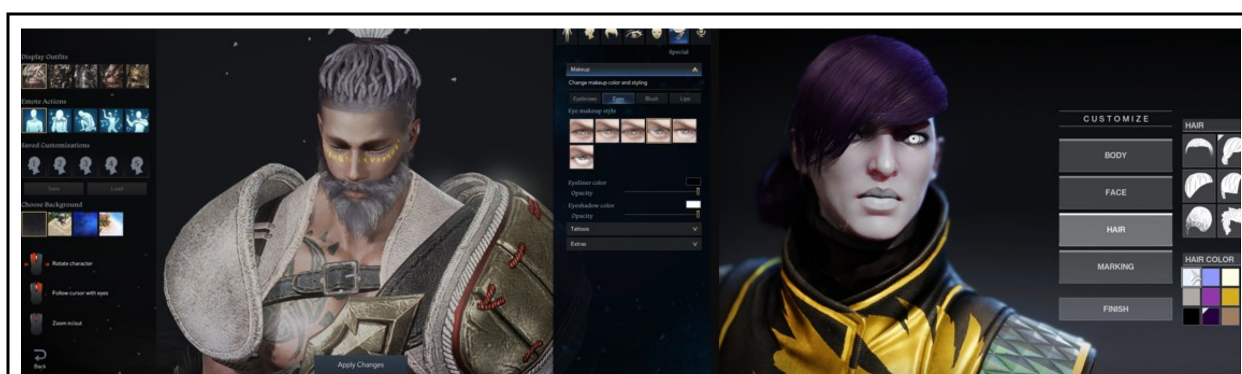

Figure 3.3 - *Lost Ark* (left) and *Destiny 2* character creation systems - Author's Screenshots.

[453] Commonly referred to as 'avatars' in games literature, though I've never actually heard a player refer to their character as an avatar. The term 'character,' 'toon,' 'main,' or 'alt' are the common expressions with particular use cases, though I most commonly saw players refer to their characters by their name or character class, which differs from game to game.

The flow of these games is to start weak and to become a more powerful character with more abilities over time. A combination of experience and items gained from killing monsters (and sometimes other players) progresses a player's power level, while gold or other currencies (also accumulated by killing monsters and players) creates virtual economies within the games. The nature of each game's item and progression system may not be identical, but this general flow of gameplay applies to each game. There are also optional cosmetic rewards like pets and outfits that players can go after in various forms that play into the worldliness of each MMO.

Each of these games also has PvE (player versus environment) and PvP (player versus player) content that can have different rewards, or different paths to the same power-increasing rewards depending on how each game is designed. PvE content includes smaller content for groups of 3-5 players, usually called dungeons, and larger content for around 10-25 players, often called raids, though each game's terminology and exact player-numbers may differ. MMOs have content for solo players as well, but the games push players together to group-focused activities in order to acquire the best items in the late game, and so MMOs are a kind of funnel for interaction as the games go on. Even if one only participates in the economic aspect of the games, like crafting items to earn more gold for instance, players may still need to engage with other players to most efficiently sell their goods.

Each game also has various social systems to facilitate grouping to participate in the group activities that make up the later stages of the game: *WoW* and *Lost Ark* have guilds, while *Destiny 2* has clans, but these are similar forms of player-selected social groupings. Each game also has players encountering each other randomly out in their worlds, and players can matchmake with random players for various activities, so players are not limited to seeing and playing with only their guildmates or friends.

With this cursory explanation, I present the games:

DOTA 2

Origins and History of the Game

DOTA 2 is a game in the MOBA or 'multiplayer online battle arena' genre. It began as the *DOTA* custom game mod for *Warcraft III* in 2003.[454] As mentioned earlier in the chapter, *DOTA* began as a player-led project maintained by players and fans who eventually split up and went their separate ways, with one contingent going on to create Riot Games and their own MOBA *League of Legends* while another *DOTA* developer - 'IceFrog' - was hired by Valve to produce an official sequel which became *DOTA 2*. *DOTA 2* entered an invite-only beta in 2010, and even though the game wasn't fully accessible to players, Valve hosted an inaugural global tournament for the game dubbed 'The International,' which boasted an at the time unprecedented figure of 1.6 million USD as the prize pool.[455]

DOTA 2 released officially in 2013 to a dedicated fan base, and was able to rival - but not surpass - *League of Legends* in terms of player count in these early days.[456] Longterm, *DOTA 2* saw some growth but failed to sustain its player base compared to its competitors, averaging between 400,000 - 500,000[457] players consistently over its lifetime, with some short peaks of over a million players.[458] Where it was able to rival its competitors was in its esports prize pools, as Valve continued to host 'The International' each year since its inception. Valve used a crowd-funding model where players could purchase in-game items that would directly fund the payout for their yearly tournament, mobilizing their smaller but passionate player-base to produce increasingly higher prize pools which peaked at 40 million dollars in 2022.[459] Despite its relatively small player base, *DOTA 2* has 8 out of the 10 highest esports prize pools in history,[460] which is both

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[454] Blizzard, 2002.
[455] Liquipedia Entry, The International 2011.
[456] Paul Tassi, "No, *DOTA 2* Has Not Unseated *League of Legends*." *Forbes* Article. April 12th, 2013. https://www.forbes.com/sites/insertcoin/2013/04/12/no-dota-2-has-not-unseated-league-of-legends/?sh=5a697b1729fa (accessed April 8th, 2023).
[457] This is not the game's total reach, but an average of how many players are actively playing simultaneously.
[458] Data from DOTA 2 SteamCharts Website. https://steamcharts.com/app/570#All (accessed April 8th, 2023).
[459] Liquipedia Entry, "The International."
[460] Esports Earnings Website. "Largest Overall Prize Pools in Esports." https://www.esportsearnings.com/tournaments (accessed April 8th, 2023).

an indication of the game's imbrication with esports and a testament to the dedication and passion of *DOTA 2*'s community for its competitive scene and highly skilled players. Even more than its prize pools, *DOTA 2* is best known for having the most toxic community in gaming, as a 2019 report by the Anti-Defamation League found that 79% of players "experienced things like physical threats, stalking, and other forms of abuse while playing the game,"[461] a number that I find surprisingly low given my own experiences with the community.

What do you do in the game?

The main activity in *DOTA 2* is a competitive PvP (player versus player) game mode, where ten players do battle in a five versus five match. Each player on a 5-person team chooses one of the 124 heroes currently in the game (Figure 3.4, left) and takes a unique role or position on the team to accumulate experience and gold (which is used to buy powerful items) by killing non-player monsters and other players, or supporting those players by healing or protecting them.

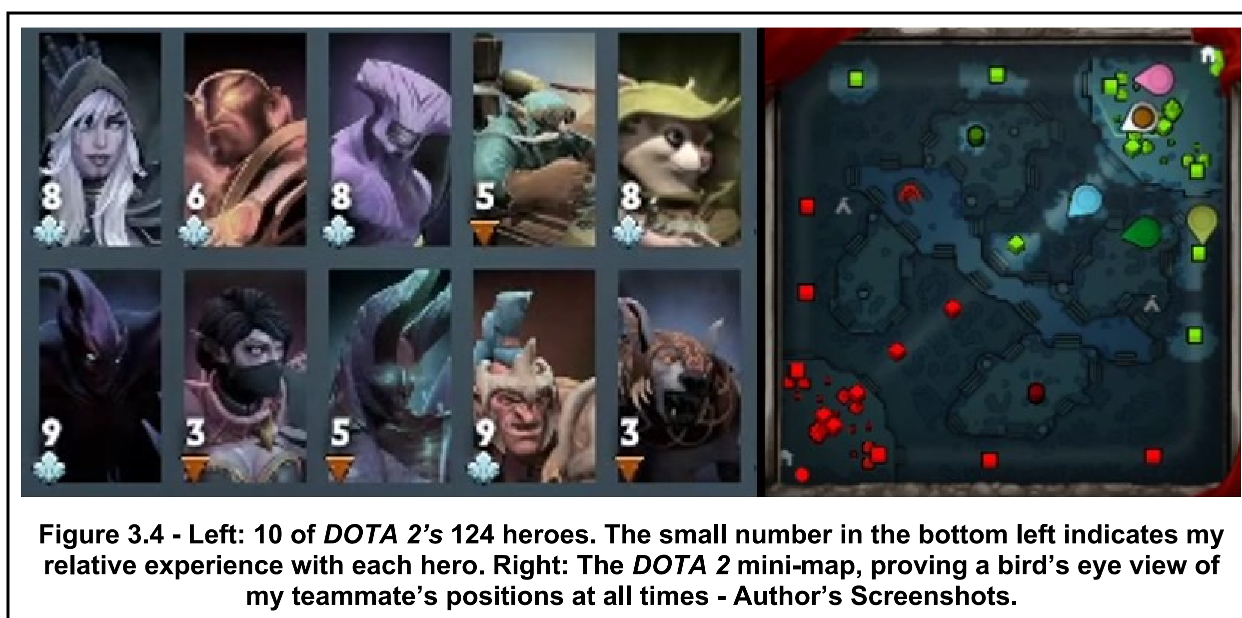

Figure 3.4 - Left: 10 of *DOTA 2's* 124 heroes. The small number in the bottom left indicates my relative experience with each hero. Right: The *DOTA 2* mini-map, proving a bird's eye view of my teammate's positions at all times - Author's Screenshots.

The end goal is to eventually move across the map (Figure 3.4, right), break through enemy lines to the opposing base, and destroy the enemy 'ancient' (Figure 3.5) - hence

[461] Vignesh Raghuram, "New Study Indicates *DOTA 2* has the Most Toxic Community," *AFK Gaming* Article (July 19th, 2019).

the game's full title, *Defense of the Ancients*. *DOTA 2*'s elements may seem similar to MMOs as gold and leveling up are all part of the game, but these aspects are condensed into individual matches, and for every match these all reset to their starting point and players can choose new characters. The actual gameplay experience therefore feels very different.

Figure 3.5 - A game of *DOTA 2* in action. My hero (blue) approaches the enemy ancient (purple) guarded by one of my opponents (red) after 51 minutes and 21 seconds of gameplay.

A match of *DOTA 2* typically takes anywhere between 30 and 60 minutes, though because the combination of heroes, player skill, and communication with teammates can have various impacts on the game, matches can take much longer. Players can queue up for a match with players in their clans or on their friends list, but they can also be matched with random players. Players typically do some combination of both - as even players who queue with a full team of friends will be matched with an enemy team that they do not know, and players on opposing teams can communicate with each other through chat.

Literature review

DOTA 2 has been written about extensively but two topics are most useful for this study: players and e-sports. For player-focused material, Mattinen and Joseph traced the relationship between age and online abuse, finding that older players participated more in online abuse than younger players.[462] Matthew et al. studied resiliency to toxicity among DOTA 2 players, and found that players continued to play the game out of habit and were not significantly deterred by toxicity, which they characterize as 'flaming/verbal abuse; refusal to communicate; feeding on purpose; AFKing; and spamming.'[463] My own prior work on DOTA 2 players and toxicity found that players identified the behaviours that most inconvenienced them in-game as toxicity, which meant that players emphasized in-game disturbances like the aforementioned flaming and refusal to communicate as toxic over systemic issues like misogyny, racism and homophobia, despite often perpetrating these kinds of behaviours.[464]

Ravari et al. sought out differences in playing style based on players' national identities claiming that there are vague essentialized differences between players from different countries (a player from 'individualistic countries are more likely to leave a match early' for example) but that "while differences between countries as a whole can be recognized, different players will have wildly different styles, so when comparing players from two countries, their styles are likely to overlap."[465] They also note that players from countries with similar cultures tended to share similar play-styles, but again, these exact differences are not sufficiently elaborated. This article is flimsy for the claims it makes about national identity and its influence on play styles, but it is

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[462] Topias Mattinen and Joseph Macey, "Online Abuse and Age in Dota 2," *Mindtrek '18: Proceedings of the 22nd International Academic Mindtrek Conference* (2018), 69-78.
[463] Matthew Lee, et al., "It's Habit, not Toxicity, Driving Hours Spent in DOTA 2," *Entertainment Computing* 41 (2022): 1-5.
[464] Marc Lajeunesse, "'It Taught Me to Hate Them All': Toxicity Through DOTA 2's Players, Systems, and Media Dispositive," (Masters Thesis, Concordia University, 2017).
[465] Yaser Norouzzadeh Ravari, Lars Strijbos, and Pieter Spronck, "Investigating the Relation Between Playing Style and National Culture," *IEEE Transactions on Games* 14, no 1 (2022): 41; 44.

nonetheless important even beyond *DOTA 2* as it represents the trend of profiling players based on play style which I saw players do throughout this study.[466]

The e-sports and spectatorship segment of the literature begins with similar concerns. Ismangil found a great deal of Chinese nationalism around *DOTA 2* esports tournaments, wherein the nationalization of the competitive *DOTA 2* scene produced a kind of "digital tribalism," between countries,[467] and that a second layer of intra-China nationalist sentiment promulgated through memes that circulated within the Chinese *DOTA 2* community during the competitive season.[468] Georgen examined the participatory dimension of *DOTA 2* spectatorship, finding that watching constituted "enculturation into informal learning communities and for the collaborative play found within them,"[469] and Georgen et al. highlighted how the DOTA 2 'noob stream' (a stream meant for new or inexperienced players broadcast during The International) brought players into the game through the combination of announcers who mediated complex game knowledge and the communal experience of learning the game through spectatorship.[470]

Elam and Taylor observed players watching a competitive *DOTA 2* match in a physical space and found that players unfamiliar with the MOBA genre relied more on familiar sportive language to describe the game, and those with other MOBA experience were able to more effectively read the action taking place in the game.[471] Poyane found that toxicity (including hate speech) increased as stream sizes increased within general *DOTA 2* spectatorship - effectively that the bigger the streamer or channel the more

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[466] It is likely that different regions do produce different in-game cultures, but my issue with this article is a lack of specificity on those differences and suggesting very loose correlations between national identities and how that manifests in-game.
[467] Milan Ismangil, "(Re)creating the Nation Online: Nationalism in Chinese Dota 2 Fandom," *Asiascape: Digital Asia* 5, no 3 (2018): 198-224.
[468] Milan Ismangil, "Subversive Nationalism through Memes: A Dota 2 Case Study." *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 19, no 2 (2019): 227-245.
[469] Chris Georgen, "Well Played and Well Watched: DOTA 2, Spectatorship, and Esports," *Well Played: A Journal on Video Games, Value and Meaning* 4, no 1 (2015): 189.
[470] Chris Georgen, Sean C. Duncan, and Lucas Cook, "From Lurking to Participatory Spectatorship: Understanding Affordances of the Dota 2 Noob Stream," *Proceedings of the 11th International Conference on Computer Supported Collaborative Learning* (Gothenburg, Sweden, June 7-11, 2015), 581-585.
[471] Jessica Elam and Nick Taylor, "Above the Action: The Cultural Politics of Watching Dota 2," *Communication, Culture and Critique* 13, no 4 (2020): 501-518.

toxic communication occurred in the chat room,[472] while Musabirov et al. noted that larger streams of competitive *DOTA 2* had frequent and "sudden bursts of emotes and copypasta [that] disrupt meaningful conversation between spectators."[473] Taken together we can reliably say that larger streams produce more toxicity and less opportunities for deeper connection between viewers watching *DOTA 2*.

While not relevant for this study, there is also literature on virtual goods and economies by Musabirov et al.[474] and Bulygin and Musabirov[475] that traces player investments in purely cosmetic digital goods from *DOTA 2* players. Their most important contributions from this study are that cosmetic goods with no mechanical in-game impact are valued by players through social negotiation on forums, and that players care about their aesthetic appearance even if it doesn't convert to in-game power. Zanescu, French and Lajeunesse situate *DOTA 2*'s cosmetic item economy within the culture of productivity through play already explored earlier in this chapter.[476]
There is also some work on AI and deep learning, but it is not relevant for this study.[477]

Recent Events and Community Concerns

Over the research period DOTA 2 has been in a bit of a slump. In 2022, The International had the tournament's lowest prize pool since 2016, and the game itself is currently in its longest period without getting a substantial gameplay rework - a period referred to as a content drought within gaming - which is contributing to a substantial amount of malaise within the community.[478] In general, spirits among players are not at their highest and there is a lot of frustration directed towards Valve over their handling of

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472 Roman Poyane, "Toxic Communication During Streams on Twitch.tv. The Case of Dota 2." *Mindtrek '18: Proceedings of the 22nd International Academic Mindtrek Conference* (October 2018), 262-265.
473 Ilya Musabirov et al., "Event-driven Spectators' Communication in Massive eSports Online Chats." *CHI EA '18: The 2018 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (April 2018), 1-6.
474 Ilya Musabirov et al., "Deconstrucfting Cosmetic Virtual Goods Experiences in DOTA 2," *Proceedings of the 2017 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (May 2017), 2054-2058.
475 Denis Bulygin and Ilya Musabirov, "How People Reflect on the Usage of Cosmetic Virtual Goods: A Structural Topic Modeling Analysis of r/Dota2 Discussions," *Higher School of Economics Research Paper* (February 20th, 2020), 1-24.
476 Zanescu et al., "Betting," 2882-2901.
477 See Berner et al., 2019; Katona et al., 2019.
478 Alex Tsiaoussidis, "DOTA 2 is Suffering a Record-Breaking Content Drought and the Wait Still isn't Over Either," *DOT Esports* Article. April 3rd, 2023. https://dotesports.com/dota-2/news/dota-2-is-suffering-a-record-breaking-content-drought-and-the-wait-still-isnt-over-either (accessed April 9th, 2023).

the game over the last couple years. Even more than usual, I would characterize the DOTA 2 community as frustrated and agitated.

In 2020 a number of broadcast talent and personalities in the scene had sexual assault allegations levied against them, which prompted other talent to create reaction videos condemning the perpetrators. This contributed to a surprising and short-lived introspective turn within the community about its toxicity, particularly regarding the treatment of women in the scene. This was not without contestation as many players rushed to the defense of the perpetrators, though these individuals were swiftly excommunicated from *DOTA 2* entirely, and remain so as of 2023. The community quickly regressed to the norm, however. There are frequently threads on Reddit and the official forums attempting to discuss these issues but they always devolve into criticism of the posters who are raising their concerns and sharing legitimate stories and evidence of sexual harassment committed by players over voice and text chat when they learn that there is woman in a match.[479]

Across these threads and in similar discussions about the rampant racism in the game, the solution put forward by players is almost always to mute the offending players and to play with your friends or another closed group only. This strategy only makes these problems less visible but doesn't address any of the underlying cultural aspects that enabled the sexual assaults that were perpetrated within the community to begin with. This rhetoric is a common response across each of the game communities in this study when any form of toxicity is brought up for discussion. There is a deep-seated rhetoric of "personal responsibility" verging on victim blaming for not being vigilant or selective enough that players deploy to justify the things that happen - and things that they do - across these games despite ongoing evidence that the culture persists even if we mute it or play only with our friends.

[479] "I feel so demoralized playing this game because I am 'woman.'" Reddit Thread. February 3rd, 2023. https://www.reddit.com/r/DotA2/comments/10se9vs/i_feel_so_demoralized_playing_this_game_because_i/ (accessed April 9th, 2023).

Lost Ark

Origins and History of the Game

Lost Ark was originally released exclusively in Korea in 2018 by Smilegate, a South Korean developer. The game was then brought to Japanese and Russian servers throughout 2019 and 2020, and was only playable in these regions from North America and Europe through the use of a VPN. The game was officially released in NA and EU in February 2022 in a partnership between developer Smilegate and Amazon Games, the latter responsible for localizing the game for the Western market.[480] The exact division of labor and responsibilities between Smilegate and Amazon Games remains unclear, but both are praised or blamed on the community's whims for design choices that make it into the Western release. The game was well-received critically upon its release, praised for its sharp aesthetic and satisfying gameplay[481] and peaked at a respectable 1.3 million players in the Western regions alone during this period, but has since declined substantially over its first year. *Lost Ark* now has approximately 80,000 average concurrent players - or about 6.1% of its launch players - as of this writing.[482]

What do you do in the game?

Mostly, you hone, but I'll get to that in a moment. *Lost Ark* follows the tried and true MMO formula - you explore the world and level up (Figure 3.6, left) and then you group up with others and you fight monsters (Figure 3.6, right). *Lost Ark* has a large world and a vast ocean that players can explore and level through, and it is distinct from other MMOs at a glance because of the player's isometric[483] perspective of the game world. The game has a couple other key distinctions that may help explain its sustained decline in players.

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[480] "Amazon Games and Smilegate RPG's '*Lost Ark'* Launches. *Amazon Games News* Article. February 11th, 2022. https://www.amazongames.com/en-us/news/articles/amazon-games-and-smilegate-rpgs-lost-ark-launches#:~:text=Amazon%20Games%20collaborated%20with%20Smilegate,Korea%2C%20Russia%2C%20and%20Japan (accessed April 8th, 2023).

[481] *Lost Ark* MetaCritic Score. https://www.metacritic.com/game/pc/lost-ark (accessed April 8th, 2023).

[482] Data from *Lost Ark* SteamCharts Website. https://steamcharts.com/app/1599340#All (accessed April 8th, 2023).

[483] You are always looking at your character and the game world from a slightly angled top-down perspective.

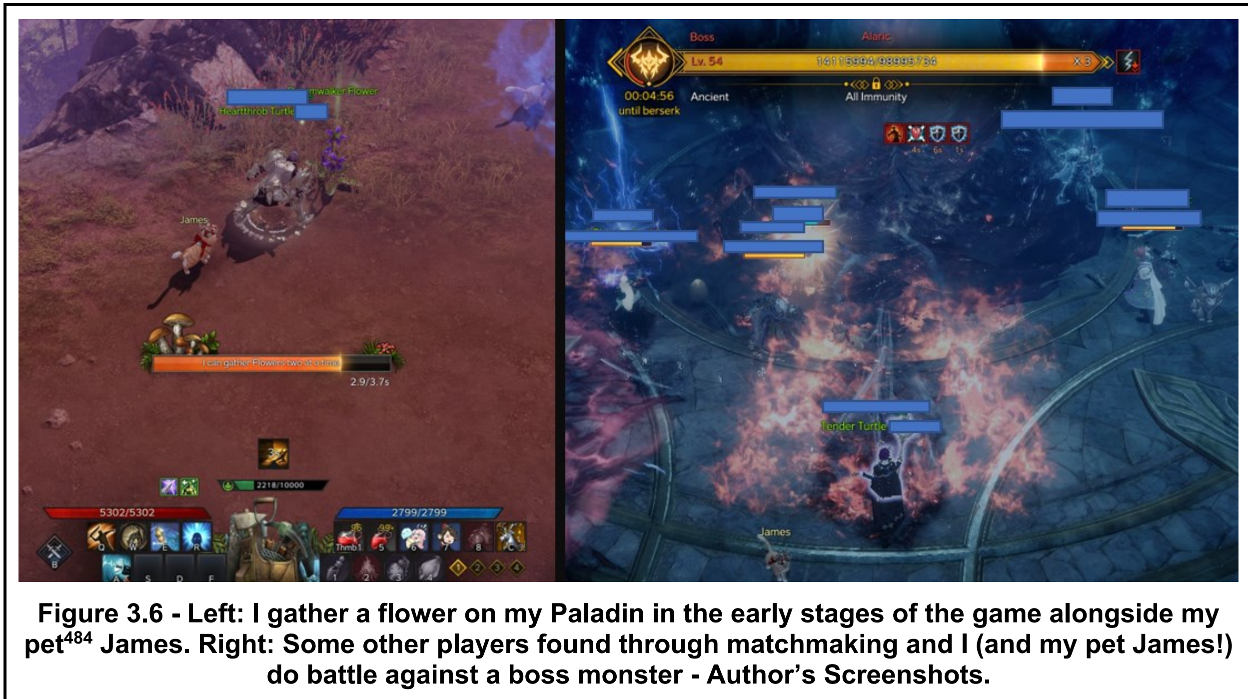

Figure 3.6 - Left: I gather a flower on my Paladin in the early stages of the game alongside my pet[484] James. Right: Some other players found through matchmaking and I (and my pet James!) do battle against a boss monster - Author's Screenshots.

First of all, instead of the more common system of item acquisition in MMOs where items drop from monsters with semi-random odds which produces satisfying and impactful moments of increased character power, *Lost Ark* has a fairly linear system for item progression. As you reach the end-game you craft one primary set of equipment for your character and this will only change at set intervals. To increase your power level you still group up and fight monsters, but the monsters themselves don't drop the powerful equipment like in other MMOs - instead they drop resources that you must invest into your different armor pieces and weapons in a process called honing (Figure 3.7).

[484] Pets in *Lost Ark* are companions that pick up items for you and provide minor bonuses to your character.

Figure 3.7 - The Honing System. Here I can spend seven types of materials and two different currencies to have a 44% chance to upgrade my helmet. This time it succeeded! - Author's Screenshots.

Honing is the backbone of *Lost Ark*, and though the game presents itself deftly in the skin of a sci-fi/fantasy adventure, it is actually a labour market simulator crossed with a slot machine. I'll tackle the slot machine aspect first: when you begin honing your equipment it takes relatively few materials and your attempts have a high chance to succeed. As your item level increases, your honing attempts require a greater number of resources, and your chances to succeed decrease to as low as 1%, meaning there is a high probability that you will fail to hone and the items you've collected will be depleted as a consequence (Figure 3.8). There is a 'pity' mechanic in the game where each failure makes the next attempt slightly easier, but it only raises the chance to succeed by a couple percentage points each time. A secondary pity system called 'artisan's energy' guarantees that you'll succeed but only when that number reaches 100%, which takes many attempts.

Figure 3.8 - The 'Honing failed' screen. Because of my failure, my chances have increased by +1% on my next attempt (yellow text). I bet I'll get it next time! (I didn't). - Author's Screenshot.

This aspect of the game was frustrating for many players. In one Reddit thread players compared the number of failures it took to reach item level 1370 - one of the higher breakpoints during the research period - with users reporting between 170 and 232 honing failures before reaching this level.[485] Many players complained about the honing system on the official forums as well, but those who did were met with resistance from other players. Some players offered the following advice in response to another's plea to Smilegate and Amazon Games to make honing less punishing by limiting the

[485] "How Many Fails to 1370?" Reddit Thread. March 21st, 2022. https://www.reddit.com/r/lostarkgame/comments/tja2mn/how_many_fails_to_1370/ (accessed April 8th, 2023).

system to a maximum of three failures: “Dude. My advice, seriously. Quit now,” and another remarking that “The game is a marathon, not a sprint. Youre going to be in for a rude awakening once you progress further into the game. 3 pities is way too little to upgrade. Doesnt even make sense. If you don’t have the patience now, you certainly wont have the patience later.”[486] Here we see the logic of labour in play rearing its head, as deployed by players against another who is seeking a more equitable and accessible approach to the game.

The game requires more than patience, however, as players need to be collecting as many materials as possible to compensate for failed attempts. There are a few ways to do that in *Lost Ark*. There are weekly group dungeons and monsters that provide large amounts of gold, which is but one of the numerous required materials for honing. Doing these activities requires a group, and in *Lost Ark* it is not always easy to get one. Players are discerning - often looking for only the highest power-level characters in a given tier to guarantee success in a group activity, so oftentimes the players who most easily find groups are those who are already succeeding in the game. In activities with random matchmaking, players will inspect others and leave the group if they judge group members to be too weak. Because of this it became extremely common for players to pay others with high power levels to simply bring their lower-powered characters along so they could earn their weekly materials: a phenomenon called ‘bussing’ by the community.[487]

In addition to ‘bussing’ there are activities that can be done either in a group or solo that players are encouraged to do *twice* everyday on each of their characters (up to six characters) called guardian raids and chaos dungeons. In *Lost Ark* players can have more than one character, and the materials from these activities can transfer, so players are encouraged to play one main character, and use their other characters (known as ‘alts’; short for ‘alternate character’) to funnel materials to their primary character in order to keep up with the power-level of others, lest they be put into a position where

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[486] “Lower the Pity System to 3 Hone Fails.” *Lost Ark* Official Forum Thread. March 10th, 2022. https://forums.playlostark.com/t/lower-the-pity-system-to-3-hone-fails/251591 (accessed April 8th, 2023).
[487] This term was adopted by the Western *Lost Ark* community because it is the term Korean players use to describe a ‘carry,’ where some players with more skill or player power ‘carry’ others through content. While the term has racist connotations in the United States linked to segregation, this use of the term did not appear to come from these origins.

they must pay to participate in the other more rewarding endgame activities. This means that players are encouraged by the game system to do 12 chaos dungeons and 12 guardian raids per day, in addition to 6 of each end-game dungeon and raid per week. To play *Lost Ark* at its designed pace is actually a full-time job. To offset this burden however, *Lost Ark* does allow players to pay real money for in-game materials (an approach known as 'pay to win' or 'p2w'), so there is a second layer economy contributing to this imbalance of player power. These types of mechanics are more common in Korean MMOs, but players in the West have been far less receptive to paying for in-game power.[488]

While it could be argued that players can play at their own pace, all of this matters in the larger scale of the game because new zones and new group content is gated behind player power level that is rewarded extremely unevenly. *Lost Ark* is an MMO and has social systems, but the game's progression system can cut social groups apart: the players who are luckier at honing, who make more characters, and who spend more will move onto the next tier of play faster, and it could be a day, weeks, even a month or longer before guild mates or friends catch up. We'll examine these social features more and the impact of honing on my own play experience more in Chapter 5, but for now it is enough to know that though the game appears to be a fantastical romp in the MMO-style, it is an extremely punishing grind that produces an extremely stratified player base and high resource inequality. Grinding is not uncommon in MMOs,[489] but *Lost Ark* pushes the amount of grinding to extreme levels.

Literature review

As a newer game, *Lost Ark* has almost nothing academic published about it. The closest thing to an academic take on the game is a magazine article written by myself and Courtney Blamey about the game's immediate and mostly positive reception among

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[488] Guo Freeman et al., "Pay to Win or Pay to Cheat: How Players of Competitive Games Perceive Fairness of In-game Purchases," *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 6 (2022): 1-24.
[489] Sabrina A. Sgandurra, "Fight. Heal. Repeat: A Look at Rhetorical Devices in Grinding Game Mechanics," *Simulation and Gaming* 53, no 4 (2022): 388-399.

Western audiences for a Korean magazine.[490] That aside, the field of *Lost Ark* studies is wide open.

Recent Events and Community Concerns

While players may have been put off by the pay to win elements of the game and the high levels of long-term grind, the decline in players is also partially attributed from within the community to the high volume of 'bots' that were in the game. 'Bots' are characters that appear to be players but that are actually automated programs controlling player characters to farm resources in the game for resale. This was especially damaging for *Lost Ark* because of its pay to win system, as the price of gold was inflated, which means the real world dollar couldn't purchase as much in-game power as if the economy had a more organic, bot-less growth. The bot issue affected newer players in-game as well because all the lower-level areas were overrun with bots hogging resources and monsters necessary to level up.

In January 2023, nearly a year after the game's release Amazon Games banned an enormous amount of suspected bot accounts, which revealed that at this time over two-thirds of *Lost Ark's* concurrent player numbers were actually bots.[491] This wide sweep also inadvertently banned many actual players who simply had not logged into the game for some time, leading to a surge of community backlash among the already dwindling playerbase.[492] The players that remain in *Lost Ark* are now concerned primarily with the near-inaccessible endgame activities produced by the combination of relentless grind, lack of developer confidence, and a player base that at best is perceived from within as unwelcoming to others.[493] There have been some initiatives to

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[490] Marc Lajeunesse and Courtney Blamey. "Lost Ark and the Impression of Korean Games from the Western Perspective," Game Generation Magazine Article, Issue 5, April 2022.
[491] Hope Bellingham, "Lost Ark Bot Ban Wave Knocked 200k Off the MMO's Player Count," *GamesRadar* Article. January 12th, 2023. https://www.gamesradar.com/lost-ark-bot-ban-wave-knocked-200k-off-the-mmos-player-count/ (accessed April 9th, 2023).
[492] Filip Galekovic, "Lost Ark Responds to Recent Ban Wave," *GameRant* Article. January 16th, 2023. https://gamerant.com/lost-ark-ban-response/#:~:text=Lost%20Ark%20developer%20Smilegate%20chimes,statement%20after%20substantial%20community%20outrage. (accessed April 9th, 2023).
[493] "Beginner Unfriendly." *Lost Ark* Official Forum Thread. May 7th, 2022. https://forums.playlostark.com/t/beginner-unfriendly/365607 (accessed April 9th, 2023).

ease newer players into the game,[494] but upon revisiting the game at the end of the research period I observed that the same barriers to endgame participation remained. We'll see how these played out in detail in chapter 5.

Destiny 2

Origins and History of the Game

Destiny 2 is the most recent game from Bungie, the developer responsible for the hugely popular *Halo*[495] series of space marine-themed first-person shooters. In 2014 Bungie released the original *Destiny,*[496] an ambitious project that promised to combine the tried-and-true sci-fi first-person shooter formula with MMO elements, like a semi-persistent world filled with other players. This kind of game is known as an MMOFPS because it combines elements from both genres. The original *Destiny* was a huge success, though it under-delivered on the ambitious goals set out by Bungie. *Destiny 2* released in 2017 and while the gameplay remained mostly the same, the game embraced a seasonal model where developers add new content at regular intervals[497] with new activities and goals for players to achieve. Each year they also release full-priced expansions for the game that add even more content including entirely new planets to explore (though they are not really planet-sized). *Destiny 2* is currently in its 6th year following the release of its most recent expansion *Lightfall*.[498]

What do you do in the game?

The formula is familiar: you start weak so you must gather materials, experience, and items, and you group up with other players to take on the most difficult challenges in the game, but in *Destiny 2* you do it with guns (Figure 3.9, left).[499] Compared to other MMOs, *Destiny 2* has extremely fast-paced gameplay and comparably quick activities. You spend most of the game looking at the world from your character's point of view,

[494] "New Players Come Here!" *Reddit* thread. December 27th, 2023 (accessed April 9th, 2023).
[495] Bungie, 343 Industries, 2001.
[496] Bungie, 2014.
[497] These season durations range in duration but they aim for around 3 months between these updates.
[498] Bungie, 2023.
[499] There are also swords, bows, and glaives, but most of the weapons in the game are guns of some variety.

and there are more game mechanics in *Destiny 2* that use jumping and traversal as part of gameplay (Figure 3.9, right). Each of the three classes in the game has unique abilities including special jumps that distinguish them from one another.

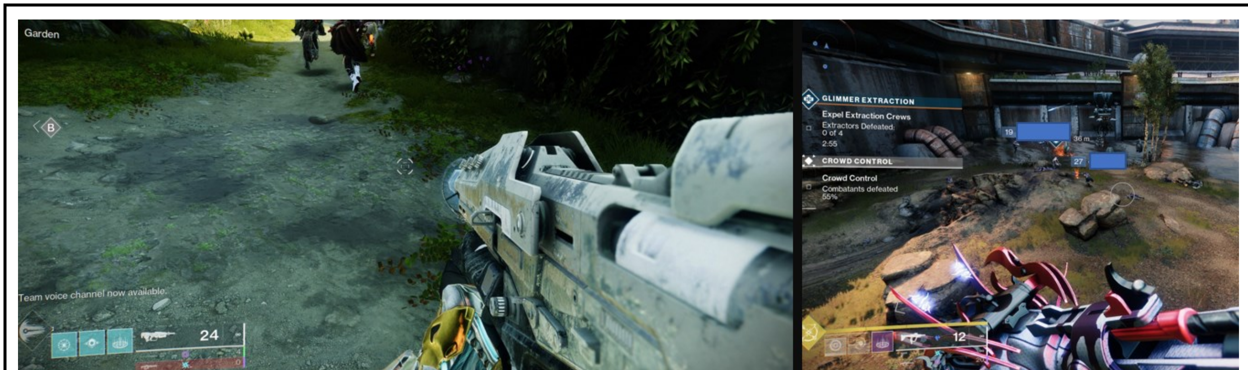

Figure 3.9 - Left: The standard point of view while playing *Destiny 2*; Right: I fly through the air towards other players to participate in a public event - Author's Screenshots.

Compared to other MMOs you see your own character much less, but the game has a very robust system for using your collected armor to customize your appearance which you can admire while emoting, while wielding certain weapons, and in your character menus (Figure 3.10).

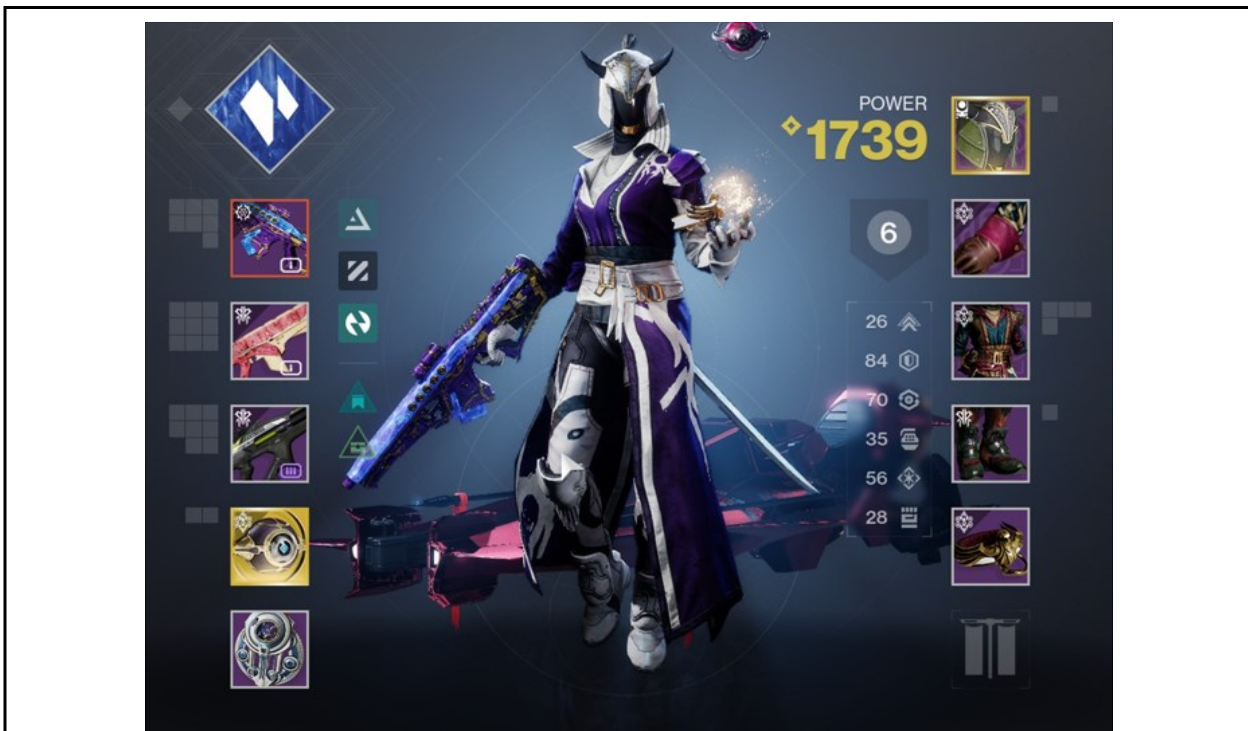

Figure 3.10 - *Destiny 2*'s Character Menu - Author's Screenshot.

The bulk of the game is spent completing strikes (short 3-player activities), dungeons (longer 3-player activities), raids (complex 6-player activities) or doing various casual and competitive PvP modes. There are also rewards for visiting the game's many planets, exploring them and doing patrols (small quests that give minor rewards) or public events (recurring activities open to all players).

There is also a unique seasonal game mode that changes with each new content drop, the most recent of which was a 6-player activity where players boarded a space-pirate ship to defeat its captain and plunder its treasure. In each of these game modes, players are trying to collect unique weapons or armor and materials to increase their power level, which is a literal number that aggregates the total power of all their equipment. While this sounds similar to *Lost Ark*'s system, when players invest into their gear in *Destiny 2* it is guaranteed to succeed. While collecting the materials can take some time, players are at least always rewarded for doing so. The endgame is also less stratified based on power-level: while there are still system-imposed rules and player-imposed norms gating players from certain activities based on their power, the gap between players is less severe, and compared to *Lost Ark* there is a much more successful contingent of the community that works to get lower-powered players into the game's difficult content. One *Destiny 2* subreddit dedicated to helping new players has approximately 93,000 members.[500]

Literature review

Destiny 2 has attracted primarily quantitative research and attempts to profile player behaviours for computation purposes. Limited qualitative work was found. At the industry layer, games journalist Jason Schreier got closest to a qualitative study in his book *Blood, Sweat and Pixels*, as he reported on the internal work culture at Bungie in the lead up to the release of the first game.[501] Schreier's report is largely in-line with other reports of the chaotic work environment of the industry, and the internal culture of

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[500] "Destiny Sherpa" Subreddit. https://www.reddit.com/r/DestinySherpa/ (accessed June 8th, 2023).
[501] Jason Schreier, *Blood, Sweat, and Pixels: The Triumphant, Turbulent Stories Behind How Video Games Are Made* (New York: Harper, 2017), 282-321.

crunch at studios.[502] Larsen and Carstendottir approached *Destiny 2* from the perspective of narrative and interactive storytelling and use the game as an example of perennial - long-form and episodic storytelling in a persistent media product without seasonal breaks, akin to professional wrestling.[503]

As for the quantitative work relating to players, Schaekermann et al. found that player 'curiosity' correlated with the events they chose to pursue in games, wherein players with higher self-reported social curiosity would pursue more social activities.[504] Drachen et al.[505] and Rattinger et al.[506] categorized in-game play styles based on their weapon choices, finding that more skilled players may prefer different weapons at different points of the game, and that players of similar skill levels cluster together. Similarly, Pirker et al. found that players who played with the same people repeatedly had better win/loss rates in competitive modes and had a tendency to play the game more and for longer than those who played on their own.[507]

Finally, Perry et al. found that playing with either friends or strangers built social capital and created what they call a 'harmonious engagement' with the game.[508] Effectively they find that playing with others makes it more likely that the game will serve a social function that aligns with other social goals in one's life by forging and strengthening relationships within the game. They also note that social capital is built through those relationships. Each of these studies emphasize sociality as an important dimension of online play in *Destiny 2*, but they provide very little on the actual experience of play, or the nature of those social relationships.

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[502] Ibid., 285.
[503] Blake Alexander Larsen and Elin Carstendottir, "Wrestling with Destiny: Storytelling in Perennial Games." *International Conference on Interactive Digital Storytelling* (2021), 236-254.
[504] Mike Schaekermann, et al., "Curiously Motivated: Profiling Curiosity with Self-Reports and Behaviour Metrics in the Game 'Destiny,'" *CHI PLAY 17: Proceedings of the Annual Symposium on Computer Human Interaction in Play* (2017), 143-156.
[505] Anders Drachen, et al., "Guns and Guardians: Comparative Cluster Analysis and Behavioral Profiling in Destiny," *2016 IEEE Conference on Computational Intelligence and Games (CIG)* (2016), 1-8.
[506] Andre Rattinger et al., "Integrating and Inspecting Combined Behavioral Profiling and Social Network Models in Destiny." *Proceedings of the 15th IFIP Entertainment Computing Conference 2016* (Vienna, Austria, September 28th-30th, 2016), 77-90.
[507] Johanna Pirker et al., "Analyzing Player Networks in Destiny," *Entertainment Computing* 25 (2018): 71-83.
[508] Ryan Perry et al., "Online-only friends, real-life friends or strangers? Differential associations with passion and social capital in video game play," *Computers in Human Behavior* 79 (2018): 202-210.

Recent Events and Community Concerns

As I already mentioned, *Lightfall,* the newest expansion for the game was released in February 2023. This expansion was not well-received by the community at large, sporting a mere 2.2/10 user score on metacritic.[509] Following the expansion's release, the forums and the official subreddit were flooded with a mix of negative critiques and extremely negative hyperbole about the expansion's quality and Bungie's design choices. This is not unusual for Bungie, as the game historically goes through ebbs and flows with each new season and expansion, and the community has a tendency to be extremely harsh towards Bungie and the game in general.
Over the research period for the game (which ended shortly after *Lightfall*'s release), the community typically followed a pattern of excitement when new content was released in a kind of honeymoon period, followed by discontent and criticism that there is not enough content in the game and a subsequent drop-off of players until the next season or expansion. *Lightfall*'s release was noteworthy because the honeymoon period was just bypassed completely, with vocal players going straight into the discontent phase. For the bulk of the research phase however, I observed players to be more bored of content rather than actively upset, with a slight uptick in mood when a new season was released.

Another important event in *Destiny 2*'s recent life concerns Bungie itself, as the company has presented itself publicly as 'not like the other gaming companies,' with Bungie's CEO releasing a press release in 2021 restating their commitment to diversity and inclusion.[510] Three months after this press release investigative games journalist Rebekah Valentine published an exposé on Bungie's internal work culture that included candid reports from employees.[511] The exposé featured all-too familiar accounts of harassment and 100 hour work weeks, but more notably included an account of

[509] *Destiny 2* MetaCritic Score. https://www.metacritic.com/game/pc/destiny-2-lightfall (accessed April 9th, 2023).
[510] "Diversity and Inclusion Learnings and Updates." Official Bungie Website Article. September 29th, 2021. https://www.bungie.net/en/News/Article/50746 (accessed April 10th, 2023).
[511] Rebekah Valentine, "The Battle for Bungie's Soul: Inside the Studio's Struggle for a Better Work Culture." IGN Article. December 10th, 2021. https://www.ign.com/articles/bungie-report-battle-soul-work-culture-harassment-crunch (accessed April 10th, 2023).

management's tactic of collecting negative feedback about particular women on the team who were singled-out on Reddit, which was then disseminated throughout the studio to publicly shame those team members.[512] Though Bungie still has a better public reputation than other game studios, these tactics show it is no exception to the toxic ecosystem that links player communities and the workplace.

World of Warcraft

Origins and History of the Game

World of Warcraft was not the first MMO, but it has dominated the online gaming landscape since it was released in November of 2004. *WoW* is based on Blizzard's real-time strategy game franchise *Warcraft,*[513] which saw players pitting armies of orcs against humans in a cartoony *Lord of the Rings*-inspired high-fantasy setting. Instead of focusing on army management, *WoW* puts players in the shoes of a single, customizable character (Figure 3.11, left) who can roam the world in search of adventure (Figure 3.11, right). The game's popularity crested after its release and was even featured in a hugely popular episode of *South Park*[514] called "Make Love, Not Warcraft," which included multiple scenes that took place in the game itself.

Figure 3.11 - Left: My gnome warlock 'Marcia,' my main character in *WoW*; Right: Marcia takes a boat to the Dragon Isles during the newest expansion's launch - Author's Screenshots.

Since its release *WoW* has released nine expansions for the game, introducing new continents to explore, new character classes and abilities, and resetting the cycle

[512] Ibid.
[513] Blizzard Entertainment, 1994.
[514] Parker-Stone Productions, 2006-2007.

of character progression so players can build up their power level again by exploring new areas and facing new challenges. Each of these expansions has a cycle of content patches, similar to *Destiny 2*'s seasonal model, that introduces smaller pieces of new gameplay to keep players invested and progressing their characters. The game reached its critical and commercial apex in 2010 at the climax of the *Wrath of the Lich King*[515] expansion cycle, which directly concluded an 8 years-long storyline that began in the *Warcraft III*[516] strategy game in 2002. At this time *WoW* had approximately 12 million players: a number attributed to the release of *Wrath of the Lich King* in mainland China at this time.[517] Though the game has been on a steady decline since this period, even 19 years after its release it is still a hugely popular and regularly updated MMO. Its latest expansion *Dragonflight* released in November 2022 and was remarkably well-received by the community.[518]

What do you do in the game?

In *WoW* you can do the standard MMO things we've already covered, but what sets *WoW* apart is the breadth of content within the game. As the longest running game in this study, the world is enormous (Figure 3.12, left), and there are a substantial number of activities that complement the standard PvE[519] and PvP[520] content in the game: There is a pet collection and battling mini-game based on the *Pokemon*[521] franchise, there are special mounts (large pets that your character can ride) to collect, and there are 8 prior expansions worth of old content that players can do to get armor and weapon appearances to dress up and show off their characters (Figure 3.12, right).

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[515] Blizzard Entertainment, 2008.
[516] Blizzard Entertainment, 2002.
[517] Blizzard Investor Press Release, "*World of Warcraft* Subscriber Base Reaches 12 Million Worldwide." October 7th, 2010. https://investor.activision.com/news-releases/news-release-details/world-warcraftr-subscriber-base-reaches-12-million-worldwide (accessed April 10th, 2023).
[518] The last three expansions faced a high-degree of criticism for streamlining the game, and for having excessive grinding systems that produced the same sentiment as *Lost Ark*'s honing. There was a lot of player fatigue leading into *Dragonflight*, but this expansion has sufficiently addressed these community critiques to satisfy much of the player base.
[519] There are 5-player dungeons and large raids for between 10-30 players, each with varying difficulties and competitive modes, in addition to solo and group content available in the open world.
[520] There are small-scale and large-scale battlegrounds where players battle other players over territory, and there are smaller 2v2, 3v3, and 5v5 arenas for highly competitive player versus player gameplay.
[521] Game Freak, 1996.

Figure 3.12 - Left: A map depicting only some of *WoW*'s massive world; Right: I peruse and try on my collection of hats on one of my alts, 'Marnie' - Author's Screenshots.

In addition to one's character class, you can also take on two professions to gather materials or craft items like armor and potions that are used heavily during the endgame activities. There are also rotating events for real-world holidays, like Halloween, that players can participate in. Like the other MMOs in this study, *WoW* is built on a lot of repetitive group content that cycles through the game, but there is an enormous backlog of activities that can make the game feel very lived-in by comparison.

Literature review

As the leading MMO for the last nineteen years, *World of Warcraft* has drawn a substantial amount of scholarly attention. Beginning with work on community and culture, T.L. Taylor was among the first to publish on *WoW*, identifying some player-driven in-game trends that persist to this day in some form or another.[522] Taylor encountered players policing others' language in chat which produced a tense and unresolved series of multinational negotiations on her European server which hosted players from multiple European and Middle Eastern countries.[523] Taylor also identified what she referred to as segregation imposed by players based on age, language competencies, and in-game power level. When applying for a guild, these factors were considered and evaluated through complex, resume-like guild applications hosted on third-party websites.[524] These were both part of a broader surveillance culture that was

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[522] T.L. Taylor, "Does WoW Change Everything?: How a PvP server, Multinational Player Base, and Surveillance Mod Scene Caused Me Pause," *Games and Culture* 1, no. 4 (2006): 318-337.
[523] Ibid., 319-323.
[524] Ibid., 323-326.

supported by player-made mods or add-ons, which are second-layer programs that allow players to monitor the performance of others in-game beyond what the designers intended.[525] These kinds of surveillance mods persist in-game today and have only become more direct and common, with Blizzard even implementing some of these mods into the core of the game over the years. We'll see more about mods in *WoW* and their present-day uses in Chapters 4 and 5.

One of the ways players have been theorized in the game is through identification with avatars and the game world. Tronstad considered the avatar as an extension or prosthetic version of ourselves in the game world that is a vessel for role playing according to the fictional world of the game and the other player avatars who inhabit it,[526] while MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler caution against the trap of overemphasizing in-game roleplay in MMOs like *WoW*.[527] For MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler, players seldom inhabit their avatars from the fictional in-world context instead speaking as they would out in the everyday world and engaging with the tasks in the game from an instrumental rather than immersed mindset.[528] *WoW* players may identify strongly with their avatars, but rarely leave behind their real-world selves when playing.

Nardi and Harris found that interaction between players in *WoW*'s early years produced collaboration and friendship,[529] while Bardzell et al. indicated that the social dimension of group content even with strangers is what makes *WoW*'s simple gameplay mechanics compelling for players.[530] Chen and Duh highlighted several general forms

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[525] Ibid., 326-334.
[526] Ragnhild Tronstad, "Character Identification in *World of Warcraft*: The Relationship between Capacity and Appearance," *Digital Culture, Play, and Identity: A World of Warcraft Reader*. Edited by Hilde G. Corneliussen and Jill Walker Rettberg (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2008), 249-264.
[527] Esther MacCallum-Stewart, and Justin Parsler, "Role-play vs. Gameplay: The Difficulties of Playing a Role in *World of Warcraft*," *Digital Culture, Play, and Identity: A World of Warcraft Reader.* Edited by Hilde G. Corneliussen and Jill Walker Rettberg (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2008), 225-246.
[528] Ibid.
[529] Bonnie Nardi and Justin Harris, "Strangers and Friends: Collaborative Play in World of Warcraft," *CSCW '06: Proceedings of the 2006 20th Anniversary Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work* (November 2006), 149-158.
[530] Shaowen Bardzell et al., "Blissfully Productive: Grouping and Cooperation in World of Warcraft Instance Runs," *Proceedings of the 2008 ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work* (November 2008), 357-360.

of perceiving and interacting with players in game.[531] According to Chen and Duh, players can 'stage themselves' by being on display and putting themselves in the paths of other players, they can 'gaze' or observe as spectators, and they can interact through 'superiority' by using in-game status (power level, status within a group) to make demands of other players, or by demonstrating game knowledge and skill expression as social capital.[532] They also emphasize that players move between observing 'individual others' (lone players) and various groupings of 'collective others,' like parties, guilds, and loose groupings of players in a given space, and in so doing players can find various shifting degrees of identification in relation to these various groupings.[533]

One of the common player formations in *WoW* is a guild. Williams et al. studied the social dimension of guilds to find that despite being instrumental to mechanical success in-game, players socialized through the guild system and "generated and reinforced relationships" by building social ties.[534] Mark Chen's guild ethnography of a competitive raiding guild highlights the ritual elements of assembling with guildmates before attempting a challenging raid, and the camaraderie that exists in these quieter moments of play.[535] Chen also points out that players take on roles within their social groups not solely based on their in-game class, but also on their real-life traits and personalities.[536] Chen's later work emphasizes the dual nature of guild life as bonds between guildmates can both strengthen and decay over time based on leadership, member tensions, and repeated failures in difficult content.[537] Chen's work overall shows that the social world of guilds and the gameplay aspect of guilds press upon each other, and players feel and respond to the effects of those tensions as they would in any other high-stress social situation.

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[531] Vivian Hsueh-Hua Chen, and Henry Been-Lirn Duh, "Understanding Social Interaction in World of Warcraft," *Proceedings of the International Conference on Advances in Computer Entertainment Technology* (June 2007), 21-24.
[532] Ibid., 23.
[533] Ibid.
[534] Dmitri Williams et al., "From Tree House to Barracks: The Social Life of Guilds in World of Warcraft," *Games and Culture* 1, no 4 (2006): 338-361.
[535] Mark G. Chen, "Communication, Coordination, and Camaraderie in World of Warcraft," Games and Culture 4, no 1 (2009): 47-73.
[536] Ibid., 52.
[537] Mark Chen, *Leet Noobs: The Life and Death of an Expert Player Group in World of Warcraft* (New York: Peter Lang, 2012).

Thurau and Bauckhage found that guilds have varying lifespans, and most guilds during *WoW*'s early years were social rather than professional or competitive.[538] Duchenault et al. examined factors related to guild disbandment, finding that organic social groups tended to fray if membership exceeded approximately 35 guild members, though guilds could offset this by creating (or naturally forming) micro-communities,[539] while Brignall and Van Valey added that though *WoW* can produce meaningful social connection, the ease of disconnecting also produced superficial relationships that could be abandoned easily.[540] Finally on the topic of guilds, Ask and Sørensen found that those who played together made sense of the game and its systems together through collective interpretation and mastery - what they call "collective domestication" - of the game.[541]

Bonnie Nardi's *My Life as a Night Elf Priest*[542] is a formative text on *WoW*'s early era that builds on the techniques pioneered by Boellstorff on *Second Life*,[543] Taylor on *EverQuest*,[544] and Pearce on *Uru.*[545] Parts of Nardi's work re-established earlier work on sociality, guilds, and mods through a lived-in practice and immersion in the game space. However, Nardi also pushed beyond those findings to explore sites of difference in play through China's *WoW* scene, and through the contradictory nature of gendered representation in-game in the context of the player-base at large. Writing against Corneliusen who described *WoW* as a 'playground for feminism,'[546] Nardi's longform ethnography attuned her to elements of the game world beyond the representation

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[538] Christian Thurau, and Christian Bauckhage, "Analyzing the Evolution of Social Groups in World of Warcraft," *Proceedings of the 2010 IEEE Conference on Computational Intelligence and Games* (August 18-20, 2010), 170-177.
[539] Nicolas Duchenault, et al., "The Life and Death of Online Gaming Communities: A Look at Guilds in World of Warcraft," *Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (April 2007), 839-848.
[540] Thomas W. Brignall and Thomas L. Van Valey, "An Online Community as a New Tribalism: The World of Warcraft," *40th Annual Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences* (January 3-6, 2007), 1-7.
[541] Kristine Ask and Knut H. Sørensen, "Domesticating Technology for Shared Success: Collective Enactments of World of Warcraft," *Information, Communication and Society* 22, no 1 (2019): 73-88.
[542] Nardi, *My Life.*
[543] Boellstorff, *Coming of Age.*
[544] T.L.Taylor, *Play Between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2006).
[545] Pearce, Celia. *Communities of Play: Emergent Cultures in Multiplayer Games and Virtual Worlds* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2011).
[546] Hilde G. Corneliussen, "World of Warcraft as a Playground for Feminism," *Digital Culture, Play, and Identity: A World of Warcraft Reader*. Edited by Hilde G. Corneliussen and Jill Walker Rettberg (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2008), 63-86.

level, specifically the threats of sexual assault and liberal deployment of homophobic slurs within a space still dominated by 'gamers'[547] which was obfuscated by *WoW*'s more universally appealing aesthetic compared to most games at the time.[548] Though Nardi's ethnography remains quite strong, it was published in 2010 on research carried out before 2008 during a period of high excitement and discovery in the MMO sphere, and things in and around the game have changed substantially since then.

Another similar, though far less popular text from this same era is William S. Bainbridge's *The Warcraft Civilization*.[549] Bainbridge conducted an exploratory ethnography of the game world, though he treated NPCs (non-player characters) as subjects of the study more than other players. This turns a good chunk of the 'ethnographic' work into more of textual and narrative analysis of the game. Bainbridge does have one unique contribution regarding players about "nonverbal learning," where players often teach and learn about the game through modeling behaviors and observing other players in action without direct verbal communication - a point that I will expand upon in Chapter 4.[550]

Crenshaw and Nardi examined some of the changes to the game as *WoW*'s social systems became more algorithmically driven and automated.[551] While players used to be grouped in isolated servers, over time Blizzard allowed players to play with others on different servers which led to a loss of unique server identities.[552] Servers themselves were examined by Conaway, who found they contributed to players' sense of place and 'home' within a game by providing a mid-level social grouping, both smaller and distinct from a game's larger player base but larger than a more intimate formation like a guild.[553] Returning to Crenshaw and Nardi, these automated systems and server

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[547] Nardi, *My Life*, 152-175; 199.
[548] Nicolas Ducheneaut, et al., "Building an MMO with Mass Appeal," *Games and Culture* 1, no 4 (2006): 281-317.
[549] William Sims Bainbridge, *The Warcraft Civilization: Social Science in a Virtual World* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2010).
[550] Ibid., 96-101.
[551] Nicole Crenshaw, and Bonnie Nardi, "'It Was More than Just the Game, It Was the Community': Social Affordances in Online Games," *Proceedings of the 49th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences* (January 5-8, 2016), 3781-3790.
[552] Ibid.
[553] Evan Paul Conaway, "Server Worlds: Preservation, Virtualization, and Infrastructures of Control in Online Gaming." (Doctoral Dissertation, UC Irvine, 2022).

mergers eliminated much of the player-driven social processes that many players enjoyed about *WoW* in its earlier days.[554] Many players were disappointed by the weakening of strong community ties through these automations.[555] Braithwaite similarly found that *WoW* evolved to become a more individualistic game,[556] and Rapp added to this by pointing out that sociality in *WoW* has always been gratifying at least in part because of its role within the game's overall system made up of rewards, goals, and exploration which are enhanced by the game's emphasis on sociality.[557]

Nicole Crenshaw's solo work found that *WoW* players gravitated to third-party private servers - unofficial servers that replicated the game as it was near its release - because "players want to build and maintain relationships within games and related spaces, but are often encouraged by the game and other players to focus on their own self-interest, even to the detriment of other players."[558] Effectively, as the game grew and the social systems changed to de-emphasize sociality over more 'gamey' activities (kill monsters, get loot, repeat), social-minded players became dissatisfied and found player-created alternative spaces.

Crenshaw et al. provide a double-whammy of an ending to this story for the affected players as they found these third-party servers would be shut down by Blizzard in 2017 as the company exerted its legal rights over its own intellectual property.[559] Blizzard eventually released their own proprietary classic servers called *WoW Classic* in 2019.[560] Robinson and Bowman corroborate Crenshaw's earlier findings that the motivation for players to join this kind of classic server was rooted in their nostalgia for

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[554] Ibid.
[555] Ibid., 3789.
[556] Andrea Braithwaite, "WoWing Alone: The Evolution of 'Multiplayer' in World of Warcraft," *Games and Culture* 13, no 2 (2018): 119-135.
[557] Amon Rapp, "Social Game Elements in World of Warcraft: Interpersonal Relations, Groups, and Organizations for Gamification Design." *International Journal of Human-Computer Interaction* 34, no 8 (2018): 759-773.
[558] Nicole Crenshaw, "Social Experience in World of Warcraft: Technological and Ideological Mediations," *Proceedings of the 2016 Annual Symposium on Computer-Human Interaction in Play* (15 October, 2016), 3.
[559] Nicole Crenshaw, Jaclyn LaMorte, and Bonnie Nardi, "'Something We Loved That Was Taken Away': Community and Neoliberalism in World of Warcraft," *Proceedings of the 50th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences* (January 4-7, 2017, 2036-2045).
[560] Claus Toft-Nielsen, "Going Home Again?: Fan Nostalgia in Anticipation of World of Warcraft Classic," *MedieKultur: Journal of Media and Communication Research 66* (2019): 3-17.

sociality.[561] The more severe finding was that on this old-era server, players didn't play in the same ways that they played in 2004.[562] Even though these older servers had the same social systems as the original game at the time, the culture was different: players were now acclimated to playing less socially and were more focused on individual character progression rather than collective play.[563] The culture, as informed by the newer social systems within *WoW*, saw the players retroactively instrumentalize other players through the older systems. These findings indicate that culture, though inflected by the systems, plays a substantial role in the way players interact with one another, which is an indicator that when thinking about toxicity we should make efforts to think of the cultural dimensions of play alongside the mechanical elements.

Turning to work on identity, René Glas positioned Blizzard and players as stakeholders in a negotiation or struggle for ownership over the game world.[564] More than communities of guilds, players take up roles as invested citizens who try to influence other players and appeal to Blizzard to change the game in their favor. Glas notes that this relationship is uneven as Blizzard has the force to ban or silence 'deviant' players.[565] Another important contribution of Glas' work is that both the rules as Blizzard sees them and the rules negotiated by players between themselves remain vague: it can often be unclear what kinds of activities Blizzard is going to enforce or prohibit. Glas points to the haphazard strategy of banning players for real-money trading (the practice of buying or selling in-game currency for cash).[566] Some players are banned while others are left untouched, which produces a relationship of uncertainty between Blizzard and the players subjected to their governance over the game world in which players are deeply invested.

Building on this topic, Jenny Sundén brings up the case of Sara Andrews who was given "a warning by an in-game administrator" for advertising her guild as LGBT-

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[561] Jessica A. Robinson, and Nicolas D. Bowman, "Returning to Azeroth: Nostalgia, Sense of Place, and Social Presence in World of Warcraft." *Games and Culture* 17, no. 3 (2022): 421-444.
[562] Crenshaw et al., "Something We Loved," 2017.
[563] Ibid., 2042-2044.
[564] René Glas, *Battlefields of Negotiation: Control, Agency, and Ownership in World of Warcraft* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012).
[565] Ibid., 144-172.
[566] Ibid., 133-139.

friendly, which was seen as “a violation of [Blizzard’s] harassment policy,” while the rampant use of homophobic language in-game was not.[567] Sundén’s work goes on to reveal the logic of an ‘ideal player’ - similar but not identical to Aarseth’s implied player - where the assumed player behind every avatar “is at least symbolically male and straight.”[568] While the implied player emphasizes the player position from the design perspective - as was visible through Blizzard’s crackdown on ‘LGBT-friendly’ - the ‘ideal player’ considers the imagined other player from the perspective of the other players who inhabit the game world. When we combine both kinds of imagined player, Sundén presents an environment where feminist and queer disruptions “collide frequently with the ways in which gaming is habitually coded as a masculine activity.”[569]

Since the Sara Andrews incident, Blizzard has reoriented somewhat to a more supportive position, but Alexis Pulos noted that even as late as 2013, discussions about LGBTQ communities were still relegated to a small corner of the official forums and not well moderated, often devolving to players claiming “that queer issues have nothing to do with this game space” and “asserting that these issues should be left behind.”[570] Pulos notes that Blizzard began spotlighting LGBTQ guilds in their community features from 2009 onwards, but continued to perpetuate an in-game and forum culture that was hostile to queer players.[571] As evidence of this continuation, Edmond Chang found that developers removed opportunities for playful same-sex interaction in *WoW*’s Valentines event in 2010 and replaced them with questlines that required players to get drunk so they could flirt with same-sex characters as a homophobic meta-joke, channeling and stoking the homophobic anxieties within the player base.[572] Through all of this we see a severe contradiction within Blizzard’s operations about how it tries to appeal to its players by saying one thing and then doing another.

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[567] Jenny Sundén, “A Queer Eye on Transgressive Play.” *Gender and Sexuality in Online Game Cultures: Passionate Play*. Edited by Jenny Sundén and Malin Sveningsson (New York: Routledge, 2012), 173.
[568] Ibid., 174-175.
[569] Ibid., 175.
[570] Alexis Pulos, “Confronting Heteronormativity in Online Games: A Critical Discourse Analysis of LGBTQ Sexuality in World of Warcraft,” *Games and Culture* 8, no 2 (2013): 90.
[571] Ibid., 91-92.
[572] Edmond Y. Chang, “Love Is in the Air: Queer (Im)Possibility and Straightwashing in Frontierville and World of Warcraft,” *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* 2, no 2 (2015): 6-31.

One final dimension to explore is WoW's racialization of Chinese players. As mentioned earlier, along with Nardi,[573] Lindtner et al. examined *WoW* players in China and the internet café culture to reveal online gaming as a hybrid form with far less separation between real life and the game world than had been previously thought. Chinese *WoW* players played together in social spaces and moved between in-game conversation to 'real life' chat, and players would collaborate and spectate each other within this hybrid play space.[574] Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter detailed China's role in elevating *WoW* to the position of global juggernaut through its influx of players into the game in 2005, and the subsequent 'gold farming' industry that developed in China, where players would be employed to farm *WoW*'s in-game currency which would then be sold back to players for real money.[575] Lisa Nakamura followed the reaction of players towards gold farming, highlighting growing anti-Asian sentiment among the community in response to gold farming and the development of stereotypes against Asian players who were considered to be interlopers threatening the integrity of the game while making their livings.[576]

Recent Events and Community Concerns

The release of *Dragonflight* was billed by Blizzard and longtime players alike as a renaissance for the game. Similar to the other games in this study, the *WoW* player base is hyper-critical of Blizzard's decisions and *WoW*'s design nearly all of the time, but in the lead-up to *Dragonflight*'s release and in the expansion's early days, there was a noticeably optimistic atmosphere within the *WoW* community. One of the game's most well-known long term content creators, 'Preach,' very publicly quit the game in 2021 after harshly criticizing *WoW*'s declining gameplay while reacting to emerging details about Blizzard's workplace culture over the last decade, calling it "the tipping point," as

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[573] Nardi, *My Life*.
[574] Silvia Lindtner et al., "A Hybrid Cultural Ecology: World of Warcraft in China," *Proceedings of the 2008 ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work* (November 2008), 371-382.
[575] Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, *Games of Empire,* 123-152.
[576] Lisa Nakamura, "Don't Hate the Player, Hate the Game: The Racialization of Labor in *World of Warcraft*," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 26, no 2 (2009): 128-144.

he no longer “felt comfortable supporting and advertising the game.”[577] Preach, known for his ‘tell it like it is’ attitude, returned in the lead-up to *Dragonflight* not only giving his opinion on the game but producing a multi-part web documentary from within Blizzard HQ. This documentary featured interviews with senior Blizzard staff and addressed the changing culture and design philosophies at Blizzard entertainment.[578] Preach was no doubt granted this rare opportunity at an inside look at the company because *Dragonflight* was being put forward as a flagship product representing Blizzard’s changing ways as the company faced a sea of controversies.

Before unpacking Preach’s videos and their wider community implications, I will briefly detail two strands of Blizzard’s recent scandals. The first strand was set-off during a tournament for one of *WoW*’s offshoot games, *Hearthstone,* during the Hong Kong protests in 2019.[579] During this tournament a player from Hong Kong named Blitzchung donned a mask and announced “Liberate Hong Kong. Revolution of our age!” and was immediately banned from competing for one year, with Blizzard citing a tournament rule that players shall not do anything that “offends a portion or group of the public” or damages Blizzard’s public image.[580] Blizzard was heavily criticized by players for appealing to its corporate interests in mainland China, which prompted then-president J. Allen Brack to reduce the penalty while still condemning Blitzchung because Blizzard tournaments “are not a platform for divisive social or political views.”[581] This incident is frequently referenced throughout the community to reference Blizzard’s internal corruption, with previously mentioned streamer Asmongold even naming his current *WoW* guild <FREE HONG KONG> after he polled his community for a new guild name in 2022.[582]

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[577] “The End of an Era - Why We’re No Longer Covering WoW.” Preach Gaming YouTube Video. July 28th, 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eZ6w--GhpaM (accessed April 10th, 2023).
[578] “A NEW Era for WoW - Inside Blizzard HQ.” Preach Gaming YouTube Video. November 25th, 2022. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AK757rrOwdI (accessed April 10th, 2023).
[579] Blizzard Entertainment, 2014.
[580] Jon Porter, “Hearthstone Player Banned for Supporting Hong Kong Protesters During Live Stream,” *The Verge* Article. October 8th, 2019. https://www.theverge.com/2019/10/8/20904308/hearthstone-player-blitzchung-hong-kong-protesters-ban-blizzard (accessed April 10th, 2023).
[581] J. Allen Brack, “Regarding Last Weekend’s *Hearthstone* Grandmasters Tournament,” ‘Inside Blizzard’ News Article. October 12th, 2019. https://news.blizzard.com/en-us/blizzard/23185888/regarding-last-weekend-s-hearthstone-grandmasters-tournament (accessed April 10th, 2023).
[582] “Playing *WoW* From Level 1.” *Asmongold TV* YouTube Video. August 31st, 2022. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WnX37XAbx6o (accessed April 10th, 2023).

It comes as no surprise that the second strand of controversies comes from a number of 2021 reports about Blizzard's workplace culture. Even by the standards of a chapter on toxicity and negativity, the systemic culture of harassment and abuse at Blizzard is truly astonishing. In addition to the by-now expected tales of crunch and harassment of various kinds, one report with photographic and text-message evidence puts multiple senior leaders in a hotel room that they called the "Cosby Suite," complete with a framed portrait of Bill Cosby as they discussed the 'chixx' they intended to pick up at their yearly BlizzCon fan convention.[583] Within Blizzard itself, new mothers who worked for the company reported that though Blizzard provided areas to breastfeed their children and fridges to store milk, the fridges were not locked as promised and other male employees had taken breastmilk for their own nefarious purposes.[584] In the wake of these and other scandals, Blizzard employees organized a walk out and many players alike boycotted Blizzard games for a time. Many (though not all) key members of Blizzard resigned or were fired. After this restructuring, Blizzard was looking to demonstrate that they had changed.

Let's return to Preach, who is an ideal figure to reshape public opinion about Blizzard precisely because of his long history of tearing down the game and criticizing the company. This gives him an air of credibility within the player base: if this no-nonsense 'man of the people' says Blizzard has changed, then surely something must have changed, right? Preach's documentary took a different rhetorical form than prior videos.[585] Where Preach used to adopt a "Blizzard doesn't know what they're doing" or 'Blizzard doesn't listen to or respect players" tone, he instead gave the company the benefit of the doubt and broke down the internal rationale for the company's long term decision-making using well-produced graphics and thoughtful explanations. He was also extremely gracious to his interviewees, rarely challenging them on their comments. While these videos are of very high quality and do have a lot of positive feedback from viewers, they also clash with the audience of players that Preach has helped to grow. A

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[583] Ethan Gach, "Inside Blizzard Developers' Infamous Bill 'Cosby Suite'." *Kotaku* Article, July 28th, 2021.
[584] Michael Gwilliam, "Nursing Activision-Blizzard Employees Say Their Breast Milk Kept Getting Stolen." *Dexerto* Article. December 9th, 2021. https://www.dexerto.com/business/nursing-activision-blizzard-employees-say-their-breast-milk-kept-getting-stolen-1717345/ (accessed April 10th, 2023).
[585] "A NEW Era for WoW - Inside Blizzard HQ." *Preach Gaming* YouTube Video. November 25th, 2022. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AK757rrOwdI (accessed April 10th, 2023).

large portion of his fanbase reacted to his videos by accusing Preach of being a hypocrite and a sellout for returning to the game and for giving Blizzard employees a platform.

The controversies at Blizzard are heinous and the playerbase at large is vocally opposed to these events. However, we must consider that a non-trivial number of players deploy these controversies out of an anti-fan antagonism instead of from an actual position that supports worker's rights, women's rights, or Hong Kong's independence. Asmongold's <FREE HONG KONG> guild didn't come about as a statement of protest: it won his community vote because it is a poignant anti-blizzard meme, despite those voting for the guild name watching *WoW* content and playing Blizzard's game. Relatedly, players who demonstrate misogyny in-game can feel self-righteous because no matter what they do they are not nearly as bad as Blizzard. Blizzard's internal toxicity has produced more ammunition for negativity among the player-base that is redirected at prominent community members like Preach for attempting to work with Blizzard to change his brand into a more neutral or even positive platform. Preach attempted to portray current developers of the game as people rather than punching bags, some of whom may have been victims rather than perpetrators of the aforementioned behaviours within the company, and who are legitimately looking to right the ship. These tensions seep into the community as well: there are frequent criticisms levied between players for choosing to leave *WoW* or not, with these exchanges falling somewhere on a spectrum between legitimate moral grievance and trade in social currency.

An Ecosystem of Toxicity and an Assemblage of Gaming Spaces

Before closing this chapter, I want to address the shared culture of these games and the network of games and third-party platforms that players move through. The work of Crenshaw et al. on *World of Warcraft* reveals a cultural sea change within the game since its release foremost attributed to players acclimating to years of increasingly efficient and self-focused system design,[586] but there's more than system changes that influenced the cultural shifts in this time that are unaccounted for in academic writing

[586] Crenshaw et al., "Something We Loved," 2017.

about online games that I'd like to emphasize here. Crenshaw and company are certainly right that the game systems and the players changed over time, but *WoW*'s systems aren't solely responsible. The entire online gaming environment that includes *WoW* went through a substantial overhaul between the time Nardi and Bainbridge were conducting their ethnographies and Crenshaw's studies, which are now 7 years old themselves. Games research still tends to present these games as mostly (at times entirely) discrete artifacts, but they are connected, and their connectedness has only increased over time. To this point, all of my interviewees indicated they played *at least* two of the games I researched in this study, but I did not go out seeking players who played multiple games by design. I recruited players from individual game communities to talk about those specific games, but the reality is that this is not how most players play anymore.

Additionally, even though I began my ethnography of each game *within* each game, joining a group sometimes meant being invited to a Discord server. Discord is a third-party VoiP service similar to Slack but marketed towards gamers. Users are free to create private and public servers, and it has become a platform where players can aggregate their various in-game social groups across games. Discord servers have been created by guilds, clans, streamers for their Twitch channels, and small groups of friends as mini enclaves away from their larger social groups. There is also a public Discord server list, called Disboard, where users can find interest-based communities. This was another location within gaming that has been documented as having a high number of unmoderated and targeted hate networks.[587] Players in-game and in Discord make frequent references to their experiences in other games that they play concurrently or alternate between over longer cycles as new content comes out for each game. The current shape of online gaming is one of interconnected environments and cultural overlaps sustained by third-party and meta platforms like Discord and Twitch.

To paint a more comprehensive historical picture of the changes to the online gaming ecosystem between the early literature and now: when *WoW* released in 2004 YouTube didn't exist, and in 2006 Twitch's predecessor Justin.tv wasn't even live.

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[587] Daniel G. Heslep, and P.S Berge, "Mapping Discord's Darkside: Distributed Hate Networks on Disboard," *New Media and Society* (2021): 1-22.

Esports at this time was situated mostly in small venues through touring circuits for FPS games like *Halo* 2[588] and *Counterstrike*[589] in the United States, and in PC bangs with *Starcraft*[590] in South Korea.[591] Attributed largely to the rise of livestreaming and Twitch's aggregation of videogame viewership, esports grew from having "about 10 tournaments in 2000 to 696 in 2012,"[592] and now has an estimated 523 million viewers across the globe.[593] While gaming has had a competitive element for decades, it reached new levels of saturation. Livestreaming itself grew substantially during this time, as individual personalities began to broadcast their own gameplay for others, forming participatory audience-communities[594] and parasocial relationships.[595] Similarly, early voice communication software that players used like Ventrilo and Teamspeak were barebones VoiP programs, a far cry from the user-friendly multi-server social media-like hub that Discord has become since its release in 2015. There were fewer channels for players to connect to one-another across games, fewer broadcasters of gaming content circulating ideas about what the culture should look like, and there were also fewer online games overall for players to move between. Now, following in the footsteps of larger media companies like Disney and HBO, video game companies like Valve and Blizzard became less interested in keeping players within individual games, instead opting to invest players in various games that are housed in their proprietary platforms (Steam for Valve, Battle.net for Blizzard).[596]

Livestreamers and players alike now move between games flexibly. The aforementioned Asmongold, most famous as a *WoW* streamer, played at least three

[588] Bungie Inc, 2004.
[589] Valve, 2000.
[590] Blizzard Entertainment, 1998.
[591] Dal Young Jin, "Historiography of Korean Esports: Perspectives on Spectatorship." *International Journal of Communication* 14 (2020): 3727-3745.
[592] Julia Hiltscher, "A Short History of eSports," *eSports Yearbook 2013/2014* (2014): 9-15.
[593] "Esports Ecosystem in 2023: Key Industry Companies, Viewership Growth Trends, and Market Revenue Stats." Insider Intelligence article. January 1st, 2023.
[594] William A. Hamilton, Oliver Garretson, and Andruid Kerne, "Streaming on Twitch: Fostering Participatory Communities of Play within Live Mixed Media," *CHI '14: Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (April 14th, 2014), 1315-1324.
[595] Brett Sherrick et al., "How Parasocial Phenomena Contribute to Sense of Community on Twitch," *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 67, no 1 (2023): 47-67.
[596] Andrei Zanescu, Marc Lajeunesse and Martin French, "Gaming DOTA Players: Iterative Platform Design and Capture," *Proceedings of DiGRA 2019* (Kyoto, Japan, August 6-10, 2019), 1-3.

different MMOs regularly during the research period, two of which were *Lost Ark* and *World of Warcraft*. Not only does Asmongold play these games, but he helps to shape player perceptions about the games through his critiques. He also contributes to the shape of the player base as his audience will follow him to the new games he plays and even congregate on the same servers he chooses to play on (Figure 3.13).

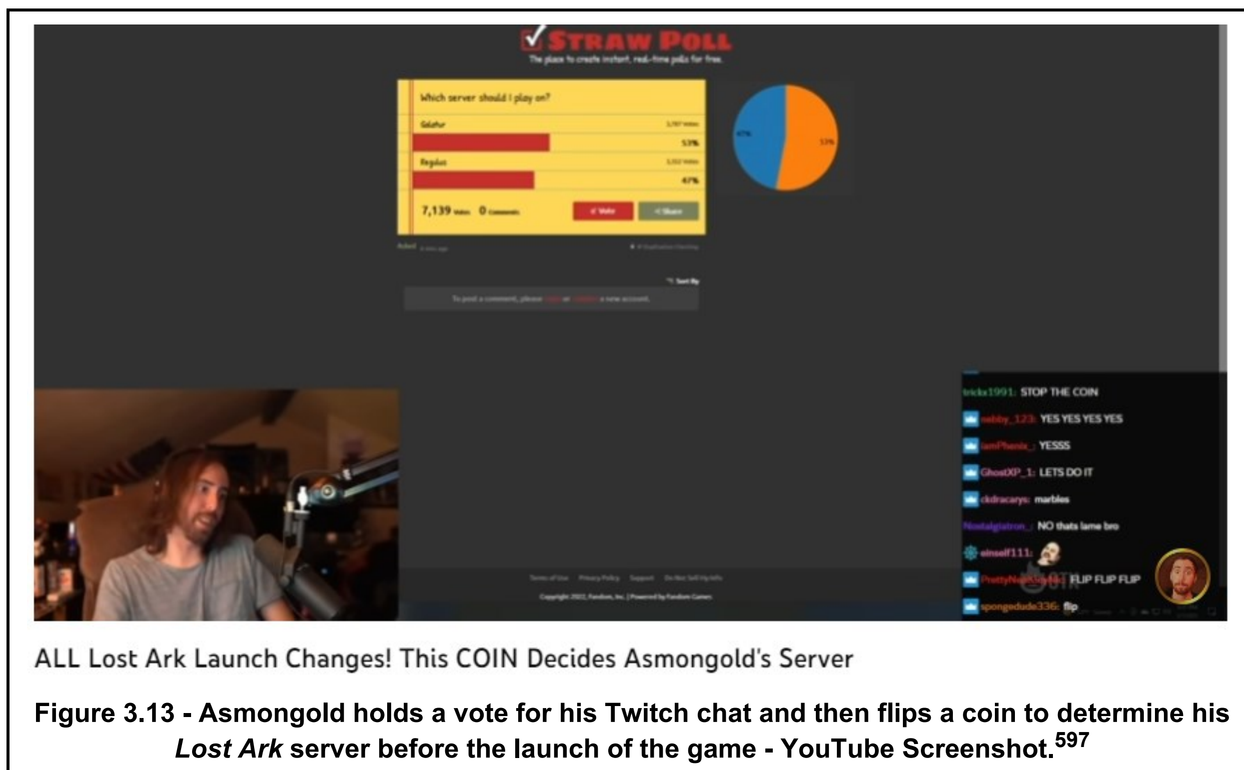

Figure 3.13 - Asmongold holds a vote for his Twitch chat and then flips a coin to determine his *Lost Ark* server before the launch of the game - YouTube Screenshot.[597]

Streamers exert a not inconsequential level of influence over the shape of the social world within these games in addition to their paratextual influence on fandom. What happens in certain spheres of Twitch matters for what happens in these games.

When Celia Pearce first wrote about the closure of the game *Uru*[598] and its players as a video game diaspora, there was a strong sense of communal identification between those players as '*Uru* players' even after they migrated to *Second Life* and There.com.[599] Similarly, Consalvo and Begy found that players of the closed

[597] "ALL Lost Ark Launch Changes! This COIN Decides Asmongold's Server." Asmongold TV YouTube Video. February 8th, 2022.
[598] Ubisoft, 2003.
[599] Pearce, Celia. *Communities of Play,* 7, 69-192.

Faunasphere stayed in touch and felt connected to each other as '*Faunasphere* players,' noting they "actively work to form groups and relocate their play activities elsewhere, often investing great energy in the search for a new virtual 'home.'"[600] Now, online gaming communities are re-organizing, changing shape, and changing games even though their games aren't shutting down, and at least for the players I encountered there was a much weaker sense of a single game being someone's 'virtual home' than earlier work would indicate. Players can of course still have strong identifications with particular games, but throughout my research the players and communities I saw and interacted with had diasporic qualities to begin with: they moved between games every couple months, or they logged on in their MMO(s) of choice only for particular weekly activities, or to play with specific friends or guild members. There are also noticeable ebbs and flows in player bases depending on things happening in each game. *DOTA 2* gains players during the International competition and through its related in-game celebrations every year,[601] while *Destiny 2* and *WoW*'s communities are much more active at the start of new seasons or when expansions release.[602] Lin and Sun found that Chinese *WoW* players migrated to Taiwanese servers because the China government blocked the release of new *WoW* content.[603] Also players may balance a subscription-based game like *WoW* with a free-to-play option like *DOTA 2* or *Lost Ark*. Players jump between games with their friends, and they relocate with the market - not exclusively or prescriptively - but far more than has been accounted for in prior literature.

This is not the focus of this project, but it was nonetheless important to highlight this ecosystem for what comes next. To be attentive to the reality of the present-day online gaming environment and to consider the full ecosystem of toxicity in gaming I

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[600] Mia Consalvo and Jason Begy, *Players and their Pets: Gaming Communities from Beta to Sunset,"* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 91-92.
[601] Olivia Richman, "Dota 2 Player Count Surpasses 1 Million in 2022 for the First Time." *WIN.gg* Article. November 2nd, 2022. https://win.gg/news/dota-2-player-count-surpasses-1-million-in-2022-for-the-first-time/ (accessed April 7th, 2023).
[602] Ed Smith, "Destiny 2 Player Count Reaches All-Time Steam Peak on Lightfall Launch." *PCGames* Article. March, 2023. https://www.pcgamesn.com/destiny-2/player-count (accessed April 7th, 2023).
[603] Holin Lin and Chuen-Tsai Sun, "A Chinese Cyber Diaspora: Contact and Identity Negotiation in a Game World," *Transnational Contexts of Culture, Gender, Class, and Colonialism in Play.* Edited by A. Pulos and S. Lee (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 179-209.

established within the first half of this chapter, it is necessary to understand that players move through gaming environments and their adjoining spaces like Twitch and Discord fluidly, and are at times in a Discord voice chat while watching a stream and playing a game simultaneously, absorbing it all at once. Online games and their cultures are no longer discrete. Each game in this study and the platforms that run parallel to them form an assemblage of technocultural sites that players encounter differentially. These games share similar DNA, and they can also share some of the same players. Even if not all players play each game, all players of these online games fit somewhere within gaming's larger culture.

The way I now understand the online gaming environment relative to toxicity is that gaming culture is not wholly monolithic, but it has become what I'm calling 'monolith-ish.' In *WoW,* players were brought closer together through greater efficiency and consolidation of servers, while games themselves were pulled closer together through the rise of platforms like Discord and Twitch. This coincided with an exponentially greater volume of games and game-related media. The research on various forms of toxicity within gaming presents a cultural force that is exerted upon those who participate at any level, even within resistive or countercultural orientations towards online gaming. While not all players share the same values and behaviours, we are all encapsulated within an ecosystem saturated with toxicity that impacts all online games in some way through this highly networked and interconnected environment.

As we've seen through this introduction to the games and their outer cultural layers, they are not wholly distinct, but they are not completely identical either. As we move further inward to the communication mechanisms within each game, and then into the full ethnography of positivity, we'll see that despite these overlaps there are different opportunities for gameplay, sociality, and player expression. I'll end this chapter with a question that will unfold in the coming pages, and be revisited in full in the conclusion: how can the differences between these games - as articulated through transgressive positivity in play - be mobilized against the monolith-ish toxicity of this interconnected gaming culture?

Chapter 4 - Play Acts and Online Gameplay as Communication

"*ping*... *ping*... *ping* *ping*...... *ping*... *ping-ping-ping-ping*" - Any *DOTA 2* Player

The above is no doubt familiar to any *DOTA 2* or MOBA player, and the sound that these words represent conjures up memories and feelings of play when it is heard. The *ping* is a simple short audio/visual queue used to warn players and direct their attention on the map.[604] It is also used to single players out, to encourage them to perform a particular action, to berate them for mistakes, to harass them for unknown reasons, or to make them feel uncomfortable or stupid.[605] It is, in just one of the games in this project, a single communicative feature among many at players' disposal. Yet the multitude of communication mechanisms - and more importantly, the way players use online games to communicate with one another - have received surprisingly limited scholarly attention. The ludology/narratology paradigm that game scholars optimistically state is behind us still informs the majority of academic game writing, and there is surprisingly little focus on the communication that happens between players in online multiplayer games outside of Constance Steinkuehler's work on the *Lineage* series (NC Soft, 1998),[606] Jason Hawreliak's brief engagement with players in his multimodal analysis of videogame semiotics,[607] and Aaron Hung's videogame conversation analysis in *The Work of Play*,[608] though each of these texts is firmly rooted in linguistic discourse analysis rather than communication studies.

This chapter brings the communication systems within each of the four games into focus using examples uncovered through my ethnographic work. It is also a foray into considering video games, particularly online games, not as representational or procedural artifacts, but as platforms for communication. There are arrays of communicative acts that occur between players within game-specific systems and

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[604] Jason Wuertz, Scott Bateman, and Anthony Tang, "Why Players use Pings and Annotations in *DOTA 2*. *Proceedings of the 2017 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (May 2017, 1978-2018).
[605] Ibid.
[606] Constance A. Steinkuehler, "Massively Multiplayer Online Video Gaming as Participation in a Discourse," *Mind, Culture, and Activity 13,* no 1 (2006): 38-52.
[607] Jason Hawreliak, *Multimodal Semiotics and Rhetoric in Videogames* (New York: Routledge, 2018).
[608] Aaron Chia Yuan Hung, *The Work of Play: Meaning-Making in Videogames* (New York: Peter Lang, 2011).

cultural contexts. This chapter explores the communicative facet of online games by focusing on the things that players do with the tools at their disposal rather than the messages encoded into the games by designers. This chapter is necessary before presenting the full ethnography on transgressive positivity because there is much less theorization about the ways players communicate and respond to one another through play online compared to other aspects of games research. As we look at positivity in-game, what kind of communication can positivity stick to. Producing positivity through one's actions in a game is about more than just using text or voice chat - though of course these are a factor - and this chapter is key to laying out how playful actions can communicate meaning and feeling as well. I build on semiotics and communication studies to present a framework for understanding various player inputs as acts of communication that are read and understood by fellow players, though as with spoken language this process is not without ambiguity.

The stakes of this chapter are as follows: any given online game is a platform for communication, and within any given game there are a range of communicative acts that happen at different scales - sometimes simultaneously. Additionally, there is a kind of language of play in each online game that requires a degree of familiarity to be read effectively - a literacy - that builds on the norms of the game space and of the culture. Some forms of communicative acts resemble (or are) standard speech and are communicated through text or voice chats, but other forms of communication happen through the very act of play: a keyboard stroke and the action that it corresponds to in a game can constitute a communicative act imbued with meaning of varying intensity and legibility.

The term I use for these communicative interactions in play derives from the work of John Searle's *Speech Acts*, wherein language is broken down to its most basic forms while still retaining meaning and function.[609] Instead of 'speech acts,' I propose the term 'play acts*'* to describe these communicative gameplay interjections of different shapes and sizes. This chapter cannot be a totally comprehensive breakdown of all the communicative elements of each game, but it does set the table for understanding a

[609] John R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

range of ways players communicate in online multiplayer settings that have been overlooked and highlights the relevance of communication in online games from a communication studies perspective. It also serves the purpose of familiarizing readers with some of the less obvious actions that occur during online play and introduces some of the player inputs and outputs that exist in online games. This will better contextualize the player actions that deviate from standard or common play practices.

This chapter is structured as follows: First I examine playfulness, representation, and procedurality in videogames and the ways they have been theorized as communicative and expressive. I briefly consider the role of play in relation to ritual communication. I then outline the standard communication elements of each of the four games, which includes text, voice, emoticons, and character emotes. Following this I draw on John Searle's *Speech Acts*, synthesized with other work on semiotics, language, and relevant writing on communication in games and play, and apply these theoretical contributions to illustrative gameplay examples from each of the four games to propose the 'play acts' concept. These gameplay examples come from observations during ethnographic research. These illustrative play acts are of varying scales: some are more complex than others and require greater detail and explanation, so not all games in this section receive equal coverage. Still, each example serves to highlight various forms of communication in play between players that are not solely located in the game mechanisms we most closely associate with player-to-player communication like text and voice chat. Ultimately this chapter demonstrates the interconnectedness between the standard communication systems and 'playful' ways of expressing oneself as communication with others.

Playfulness, Representation, and Procedurality

Videogames have long been theorized as communicative and expressive through their representational and procedural features: two approaches that focus on videogames as objects that convey meaning to players through the ways they are constructed and what they depict on screen. I will explore these two approaches in more detail below, but first I'd like to highlight a recent approach that foregrounds players as producers of communication within games. A 2022 piece by Jørgensen and

Mortensen contends that representation and procedurality are entwined with the interactivity of games, arguing that what players do in a game is just as important for how meaning is made.[610] They put forward a third communicative feature of games: play and playfulness.[611] According to Jørgensen and Mortensen:

> "This new perspective will allow us to understand how players use games as a medium for their own self-expression while also providing a perspective to understand trolling and harassment in games, and positions itself within a growing body of research attentive towards the fact that play is not always enjoyable or even consensual for all involved…".[612]

Jørgensen and Mortensen emphasize a "player-centric" approach to thinking about representation and procedurality through play and playfulness. However, they apply this player-centric approach through two examples of single-player gameplay, where a game can be understood as an interactive text with player inputs that change the meaning embedded into games by their authors through their representational and procedural properties.[613]

One of Jørgensen and Mortensen's examples is of an infamous series of *Red Dead Redemption 2*[614] videos, where a player finds many creative ways to kill a suffragette non-player character. This user's gameplay videos were "accompanied by misogynist video titles and comments from other users," and although this player was using game content to communicate with viewers of his videos, Jørgensen and Mortensen pivot away from this inter-player context that migrates to game-adjacent sites.[615] They instead consider what it means that the suffragette is herself a killable

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[610] Kristine Jørgensen and Torill Elvira Mortensen, "Whose Expression is it Anyway? Videogames and Freedom of Expression." *Games and Culture* 17, nos 7-8 (2022): 998.
[611] Ibid.
[612] Ibid.
[613] Ibid.
[614] Rockstar North, 2018.
[615] Jørgensen and Mortensen, "Whose Expression," 1006-1007.

character in the game, and how a player's interaction with this in-game asset may undermine the authorial intention behind that character's existence in the game world. They note that it may be a political statement that the suffragette can be killed, and a player going out of their way to kill the suffragette may be enacting that meaning, but they may also be acting playfully, or accidentally.[616] They conclude that the playful frame creates ambiguous meanings through the way player actions intersect with representation and procedurality through play.[617]

Jørgensen and Mortensen present Gary Bateson's term 'metacommunication' as a way of understanding ambiguous communication in a playful mode. For Bateson, metacommunication means "that play is a phenomenon in which the actions of 'play' are related to, or denote, other actions of 'not play.' We therefore meet in play with an instance of signals standing for other events…".[618] Jørgensen and Mortensen interpret this frame to consider that playful actions that look like harassment and "abusive language" are playful and not harassment for those harassing within the play frame, but Bateson's comments can (and should) also be read another way in relation to online play: that innocuous or standard gameplay actions are not 'mere' play, but that they can be, and often are, communicative beyond their face value.[619] There are two forks in the road in Jørgensen and Mortensen's contribution to player expression that I will now be walking down: what happens when the games are not just played by a single player, and what if we consider standard play actions rather than "excessive actions"[620] and examine them for their communicative meanings?[621] Before treading along these unexplored forest paths, however, it is worth doubling back and laying down some breadcrumbs on representation and procedurality, as these concepts have implications for how players communicate with one another online through playful actions.

Representation has been taken up in games in several ways. One way has been as an extension of other representational media with general representational media

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[616] Ibid., 1008-1011.
[617] Ibid., 1000.
[618] Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology* (Northvale and London: Jason Aronson Inc., 1972), 186.
[619] Jørgensen and Mortensen, "Whose Expression," 1005.
[620] Like gratuitously murdering a suffragette NPC for clicks.
[621] Jørgensen and Mortensen, "Whose Expression," 1005.

functions.[622] One such function of media representation is articulated by Shani Orgad as "a background to our social lives" that "shapes our individual and collective imaginations in consequential ways."[623] For Orgad, media representation is about "meeting people," inflecting "the way we see, think of and feel about the world, about our relations with others and about our place in the world."[624] One concern of representation in game studies has been that of identity through studies of race, gender, sexuality, and disability.[625] This aspects of representation have primarily been taken up through studies of player characters and avatars,[626] non-player characters in narrative or interactive contexts,[627] and subversive gameplay approaches, such as queering straight-coded characters through play.[628] Other approaches to game representation have included representations of geography and urban environments,[629] and representations of violence.[630] Representation is a popular lens for understanding games, but for a fuller picture of play we must consider the interactive and procedural components that Jørgensen and Mortensen suggest.

Procedurality was one of four properties put forth by Janet Murray that give games their interactive and immersive qualities.[631] For Murray the computer is an "engine," that can "embody complex, contingent behaviors."[632] Computers achieve this

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[622] Jed Hakimi, "'Why Are Video Games So Special?': The Supreme Court and the Case Against Medium Specificity," *Games and Culture 15*, no. 8 (2019): 923-942.
[623] Orgad, Shani. *Media Representation and the Global Imagination* (Cambridge, Polity, 2012), 1-5.
[624] Ibid.
[625] Jennifer Malkowski, and Treaandrea M. Russworm, "Identity, Representation, and Video Game Studies beyond the Politics of the Image," *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games*. Edited by Jennifer Malkowski and Treaandrea M. Russworm (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017), 1-18.
[626] Lisa Nakamura, "Gender and Race in the Gaming World." *Society and the Internet: How Networks of Information and Communication are Changing our Lives.* Edited by Mark Graham and William H. Dutton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 127-145.
[627] Rachael Hutchinson, "Representing Race and Disability: *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* as a Whole Text," *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games*. Edited by Jennifer Malkowski and Treaandrea M. Russworm (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017), 164-178.
[628] Todd Harper, "Role-Play as Queer Lens: How 'ClosetShep' Changed My Vision of *Mass Effect*," *Queer Game Studies*. Edited by Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 125-134.
[629] Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter. *Games of Empire*, 153-182.
[630] Randy Schroeder, "Playspace Invaders: Huizinga, Baudrillard and Video Game Violence," *Journal of Popular Culture* 30, no. 3 (1996): 143-153.
[631] Janet H. Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (New York: The Free Press, 1997), 71-87.
[632] Ibid., 72.

through their programming, which consists of “exact or general rules of behavior that describe any process, from running a payroll to flying an airplane.”[633] Ian Bogost applied the procedurality of computation and its relation to games in two key ways: by establishing that these procedures produce arguments through games, known as ‘procedural rhetoric,’[634] and for establishing literal units of procedural elements for the purpose of game analysis and critique.[635] According to Bogost, procedural rhetoric “...is a practice of using processes persuasively. [...] Just as verbal rhetoric is useful for both the writer and the reader, so procedural rhetoric is useful for both the programmer and the user, the game designer and the player.”[636] The processes Bogost describes are most often analyzed in conjunction with the representational elements of games, as Jørgensen and Mortensen point out that these processes exist in abstraction “until they are combined with audiovisual representations” and in so doing “gain rhetorical power.”[637]

The kinds of representations that have been analyzed for their procedurality have largely been identity-focused as mentioned above, but Bogost also applied this concept to political games. Bogost specifically emphasized how the game *Tax Invaders,* a reskin of *Space Invaders* wherein the player goal is to “defend the country against John Kerry’s tax plans instead of an alien invasion,” became a ludic space for rhetorical speech that would be inappropriate in a conventional political setting.[638] In the game the player controls George W. Bush’s head and actively shoots down John Kerry’s democratic tax plans, reinforcing republican ideology through play.[639] Of particular importance is that Bogost presents this rudimentary game as a speech act in direct comparison to a politician speaking in public. Bogost states:

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[633] Ibid.
[634] Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Video Games* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2007).
[635] Ian Bogost, *Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism* (Cambridge, The MIT Press, 2006).
[636] Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, 3.
[637] Jørgensen and Mortensen, “Whose Expression,”1002.
[638] Ian Bogost, “Fame and Metaphor in Political Games,” *Proceedings of the 2005 DiGRA Conference: Changing Views: Worlds in Play* (Vancouver, Canada, June 16-20, 2005).
[639] Ibid.

> "For conservatives it reinforces the notion that taxes are an invasion and we need to 'wage war' against them, like we would against alien invaders. This sort of rhetoric would be much more difficult, or at least more inappropriate, to enact on the soapbox. On the public pulpit, grandstanding politicians rely on the perlocutionary rather than illocutionary effect of their rhetorical frame. In speech act theory, an illocutionary act carries propositional content that the utterance expresses literally. A perlocutionary act carries an effect that is not expressed in the utterance, such as persuasion."[640]

The game is persuasive not because of what it is saying directly through a complex narrative or layered representation, but instead through what can be inferred and internalized through playing a game even with only the most basic representation and procedural complexity. This is yet another single-player example, but Bogost sets the groundwork for considering playful elements as communicative, persuasive, and most importantly as speech acts.

This same perlocution/illocution distinction was found in online multiplayer in *World of Warcraft*'s game chat by Friedline and Collister. They examine two contrasting strategies players use in chat to persuade players to act in the desired way. The first way is through the assertive language of one player known as 'Nomercy,' who typed to the other players in their activity using direct chat commands and the Caps Lock key to type in all capital letters in a player versus player game mode, issuing direct orders like "GROUP 1 GOING TO MINE."[641] They also reveal public shaming as a chat strategy in play, which Nomercy employs when players ignore his commands by attacking the lumber mill (lm) instead of going to the mine, stating:

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[640] Ibid., 4.

[641] Benjamin E. Friedline and Lauren B. Collister, "Constructing a Powerful Identity in *World of Warcraft*: A Sociolinguistic Approach to MMORPGs," *Dungeons, Dragons, and Digital Denizens: The Digital Role-Playing Game.* Edited by Gerald Voorhees, Joshua Call, and Katie Whitlock (New York: Continuum, 2012), 205.

> "Nomercy also uses public embarrassment by asking the question, 'why are you going to lm?' [...]. Here, Nomercy sees that several participants are not following his orders to assist at the mine or the stables, but are instead going to the lumber mill (lm). Nomercy does not actually want to know the answer to the question, but rather he wants to embarrass the two to three aberrant individuals who have disregarded his orders and gone off on their own."[642]

The above example begins with an illocutionary strategy through the direct orders and the heavy use of Caps Lock, but becomes perlocutionary as the direct strategy fails to achieve Nomercy's communicative goals.

As an alternative to this antagonistic form of game chat they examine another player, 'Terrified,' who used what Friedline and Collister call "collaborative language" to create temporary solidarity between players.[643] Before encountering a difficult battle in the game, Terrified asks another player about their unique in-game pet, and gives them a compliment moments before giving indirect orders about what they want the other players to do during the fight.[644] Both strategies are effective communication in the game context in that both players achieve their communicative goals, but Friedline and Collister are more interested in what enables these different strategies. They draw on the work of linguist Scott Kiesling, who contends that communication strategies are differentially available to members of a society based on power relations and one's role within that society.[645] In the game, it is not that power is realized through the communicative strategy, but that the communicative strategy is made possible through the relation between "linguistic and cultural artifacts that position players in power roles within the gaming community."[646] In the case of *World of Warcraft,* the cultural artifacts

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[642] Ibid.
[643] Ibid., 205-206.
[644] Ibid., 206-207.
[645] Scott Kiesling, "Language, Gender, and Power among Fraternity Men.' (PhD Dissertation, Georgetown University, 1996), 40-41.
[646] Friedline and Collister. "Constructing a Powerful," 195.

that Friedline and Collister identify include powerful armor and weapons, player level, and class choices that distinguish players from one-another and create distinct roles and power dynamics between players.[647] Something as innocuous as a piece of armor is itself communicating something about the wearer, such as power level and expertise, which opens up even more communicative possibilities when combined with the game's systems and culture.

If the cultural artifacts of a game, like armor in *World of Warcraft*, are communicative, then what is stopping playful actions from also serving a communicative function? Returning to Bogost and his second contribution to procedurality, the 'unit,' the answer is *nothing* - at least in a technical sense. The 'unit' can effectively encapsulate any phenomenon that is part of a procedural system. According to Bogost, "Units not only define people, network routers, genes, and electrical appliances, but also emotions, cultural symbols, business processes, and subjective experiences."[648] Within this framework, the unit is a piece that makes up larger units within a system (that is itself a unit) that is continuously unfolding, and includes *people* and the things that *people do* within a system. If we consider the armor in *World of Warcraft* or the rhetorically loaded symbolism in *Tax Invaders* as units that are by Bogost's own admission communicative acts, then why not actions in play that are carried out by a player (a person) in view of or explicitly directed at another player? These actions are no less a unit, and they are no less communicative, so why the blind spot for analysis of *people* in communicative play?

Sarah Kember offers one explanation in a critique of Bogost's oeuvre as a project of "Object Oriented Ontology."[649] Even though people are included in Bogost's formulation as units, they are stripped of subjectivity and rendered into mere objects within systems that Bogost believes do not require human input or output.[650] Bogost highlights people and emotions as units only so they can be distilled into components within systems and processes that are privileged as the site of paramount importance in

[647] Ibid., 200-203.
[648] Bogost, *Unit Operations,* 5.
[649] Sarah Kember, *The Gendering of Objects, Environments and Smart Materials* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 22.
[650] Ibid.

Bogost's work, which Kember characterizes as "...mediation replete with objects but devoid of subjects."[651] This trend has continued far into game studies where non-human units, whether they are systems, representations, game mechanics, or hardware, have been disproportionately privileged compared to human elements that use and produce these systems. Playful actions and what they mean have been academic casualties of Bogost's object oriented centrality to game studies, because we are so frequently turned away from people and what they do in favor of systemic elements.

Miguel Sicart brought a similar critique of Bogost to game studies, criticizing procedurality for forgetting the player, though Sicart still focused on this missing player as a unit that should be brought into conversation with the game itself rather than other players through online play.[652] Michael Ryan Skolnik offered a bridge between Bogost and Sicart through the concepts of strong and weak procedurality, wherein games exist within a spectrum of persuasive characteristics.[653] Skolnik states:

> "Strongly procedural games are those in which design features converge in order to push the player towards procedural interpretation of a fixed authorial meaning. Weakly procedural games, by contrast, are those in which design features tend to lead to open game play styles, emergent behaviours and player-constructed meanings."[654]

Both facets of procedurality produce rhetorical arguments through gameplay, but they allow for different levels of engagement, and player responses to game content. This spectrum is important to keep in mind as we move towards online game spaces, where aspects of gameplay, particularly in collaboration or in conflicts between players, can be socially emergent.[655]

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[651] Ibid.
[652] Miguel Sicart, "Against Procedurality," *Game Studies* 11, no 3 (2011).
[653] Michael Ryan Skolnik, "Strong and Weak Procedurality," *Journal of Gaming and Virtual Worlds* 5, no 2 (2013): 147-163.
[654] Ibid., 148.
[655] Pearce, *Communities of Play.*

The skewed approach towards procedurality revealed through Kember, Sicart, and Skolnik's critiques of Bogost combine with a general perspective on the perceived unseriousness of play that has already been mentioned in Chapter 1. So we have arrived at a point where few scholars, particularly within communication studies, have appreciated games as communicative media, let alone considered that playful interactions between players within a game could be meaningful communication. Play has been a secret agent within communication theory for some time, however. William Stephenson's *Play Theory of Mass Communication* was put forward in 1967, and though it did not catch on at the time, it bears some striking resemblances to James Carey's ritual communication.

Stephenson's theory of communication is best encapsulated through his analysis of newspapers and magazines, wherein "the communication situation is not one in which information is passed from a communication source to a receiver; it is one in which the individual plays with communication."[656] For Stephenson, the formal elements of newspapers and magazines, in conjunction with the way people read them in practice, are not dissimilar from games and play. Stephenson states:

> "People may read a paper from the back page forward; others follow a sequence, more or less regular, from headlines to comics, sports, and thence to editorials. These are only loosely maintained 'rules,' but a newspaper can foster or hinder such play. [...] Most people on picking up a weekly magazine like *Life* or *Look* first skim or scan it, skipping from page to page, looking at the pictures first, examining the headlines and captions; nothing is read thoroughly. [...] The initial and usual interaction is one of 'milling' around, as people do aimlessly and yet pleasantly at

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[656] William Stephenson, *The Play Theory of Mass Communication* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1967), 151.

a fair, a shopping center, or at the seaside promenade. All of this is 'pure play attitude.'"[657]

Stephenson identifies a functional playfulness in newspaper and magazine reading. It is worth noting that in conjunction with Huizinga's view of play as unserious, Stephenson considers more 'absorbed' forms of newspaper and magazine consumption less playful, though the playful aspects of communication never totally dissipate as they become more serious.

The playful elements are in fact strengthened as Stephenson situates the playful acts of reading within the wider context of mass communication. For Stephenson, mass media are one institution among many where communicative play occurs, and playful mediation is about "fostering mutual socialization," and "influencing customs."[658] Newspapers and magazines, and the playful way they were read and shared scaffold social norms and are in turn scaffolded by playful practices of communication from mass media to audiences, and between people, who are given 'something to talk to each other about' through their playful consumption.[659] Compare this to Carey's ritual view of communication as "...the maintenance of a society in time; not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs."[660] Carey's own foregrounding of the newspaper as the "symbolic work" of how people use media to ritually "square the circle" of society echoes Stephenson's playful frame for how people and institutions communicate.[661]

Carey himself acknowledges Stephenson's play theory in *Communication as Culture*, but only briefly in a footnote where Stephenson's work is largely dismissed on the basis of what Carey characterizes as "largely irrelevant methodological questions."[662] While it is true that Stephenson's work buries the lead in a substantial amount of methodological minutiae, Carey's outright dismissal of a play-focused

[657] Ibid.
[658] Ibid., 64.
[659] Ibid.
[660] James Carey, *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society* (New York and London: Routledge, 1989), 15.
[661] Ibid., 23.
[662] Carey, *Communication as Culture:* 27, footnote 3.

approach that both predates and supports Carey's own communication theory is a literal textbook example of a prevalent and lingering bias against play within the field of communication. If we take Carey's idea of communication as ritual at its face value, then we must also accept that the acts that make up ritual communication, such as reading the paper, are *playful*. We should certainly be critical of Stephenson's framework, particularly the overemphasis on play as pleasure that he adopts from Huizinga and Shramm, but when Stephenson is read in relation to Carey's work, particularly when we factor in more recent dimensions of meaning and purpose that we now ascribe to play, such as pain and subjugation,[663] belonging,[664] and validation through failure as only a few examples,[665] we open a space for considering playful actions as meaningful communicative gestures. If we read Stephenson across Carey with attention to our updated understanding of 'play,' we can see that play has always been a part of communication processes. This is true at the mass and interpersonal levels whether reading the daily paper or talking about 'the big game' at the watercooler.

In sum, this section prepares us to understand playful action in online games as communicative. We can consider these actions to be units within the game systems that are made possible by the architecture of each game. However, these actions are not fully *prescribed* by the game systems. Considering Kember's critique of Bogost, there are subjectivities in play: people who enact playful actions, both individually and collectively, and people who interpret those actions. As we will see, the meanings of various representational elements are built up over time through their use, and these uses extend far beyond what they were intended to do in their design as procedural elements of these games. Avatars and their animations, icons, and text all factor into the communicative soup of online gaming, and we turn our attention to some of the ways these are used and interpreted by players in practice.

[663] Aaron Trammell, "Torture, Play, and the Black Experience," *Game: The Italian Journal of Game Studies* 9 (2020): 33-49.
[664] Sandra Schamroth Abrams and Jayne C. Lammers, "Belonging in a Videogame Space: Bridging Affinity Spaces and Communities of Practice." *Teachers College Record* 119 (2017): 1-34.
[665] Ruberg, *Video Games.*

The Standard Communication Mechanisms of Each Game

Here I outline the standard inter-player communication tools found inside each game. As we move into examples of play acts, we will see that no communication occurs in a vacuum, and that moving one's avatar in a particular way or creatively using *DOTA 2*'s 'ping' feature can produce responses through other communication mechanisms, like voice or text chat. The table below shows the standard forms of communication across each game and their frequency of use, based on a combination of how often I encountered them in-game and community discussion about these features. Following this table is a brief discussion of each communication mechanism through the games, with some of their use cases that I observed in game. I rate each on a scale ranging from 'very low' to 'very high.' 'Very low' indicates that I observed players using these communication mechanisms in common activities or in the games' open worlds only once every 4-5 play sessions or more, while 'very high' indicates that these mechanisms were in use almost immediately upon logging into the game or an activity.[666]

Table 4.1 - Standard In-Game Communication Mechanisms and Observed Frequency of Use

	Text Chat	**Voice Chat**	**Emoticons and Sprays[667]**	**Character Emotes**
DOTA 2	High	High	Low	High
Lost Ark	Very High to Low[668]	Very Low	Medium	Medium
Destiny 2	Very Low	Medium	N/A	High
World of Warcraft	Very High	Low	N/A	High

[666] This is not intended to be a definitive account of how often these mechanisms are used in total and were not recorded and coded as such. The table represents my experience with these communication mechanisms across each game and is built out of my organic observations over time.
[667] Sprays are present graphical images that players can place on terrain. They were popularized in the competitive first-person shooter genre but are also found in *DOTA 2*.
[668] During the game's release when my research on *Lost Ark* began text chat use was extremely high, but it decreased substantially over time, settling into low usage.

Text Chat

Aside from *Destiny 2*, each of the four games has one or more often-used text chats. In *Lost Ark, WoW*, and *Destiny 2*, the chat is at the bottom corner of the screen, while *DOTA 2* has different chat positions depending on what screen of the game you are on: the splash screen, the pick screen, or in a match itself. In *Lost Ark, WoW* and *Destiny 2*, the text chats include persistent regional (in the sense of the game world) or group channels,[669] and activity-based chat channels that players are put into automatically as they join these activities. By default, these chat channels are on and visible to players. This aspect is true for *DOTA 2* as well, but because it is not an open-world game, there are no 'regional' chats in that sense. Instead, regional chats in *DOTA 2* correspond to real-world regions, like 'Montreal, QC,' for example. Players can also send each other private messages in each game, which occurred most frequently for me in *WoW* and *Lost Ark*, rarely in *DOTA 2,* and almost never in *Destiny 2*.

These large regional chats vary in their uses. In *World of Warcraft* the 'trade' chat is available and visible to any player who is presently in one of the capital cities of the game, and has an extremely high level of traffic. Players advertise their character's professions and try to buy and sell goods, but depending on what server is being played on, this chat can also be home to a wide range of discussions. *Lost Ark's* area chat has similar reach, but includes players who are in the same grouping of zones in the game. Because these areas have different levels of player traffic, the amount of communication taking place within this chat can vary. The max-level zones and enormous areas like *Lost Ark's* open sea tended to have more discussion than other areas of the game. *DOTA 2*'s region chat, in my experience, was mostly full of spam messages offering to boost characters for paid services. These kinds of messages were also found in *Lost Ark* and *World of Warcraft*, but made up less of the total number of chat messages in these channels. These chats are often impersonal, but at times players do have longform exchanges about various in-game and out-of-game topics.[670] On the opposite side of this, there are 'say' and 'yell' channels in *WoW* and *Lost Ark*

[669] This can include custom channels with invite-only participants, or default chats for various groupings of players in each game, like guilds, clans, and communities.
[670] The content of these exchanges within each game and their differences across games are explored in greater detail in Chapter 5.

that broadcast only a short distance around your character to other players in your vicinity. These are mostly used in a playful way out in the open world, though occasionally they are used during other game activities as well.

Activity-based chats are for players who are present in the same activity, whether this is a competitive PvP[671] match, or a collaborative PvE[672] activity like a dungeon or raid. If you join an activity, you are opted into these chats automatically, and in all but *Destiny 2*, these chats saw high to very-high use. These kinds of activities often necessitate communication to accomplish them and so players can use these chats to talk strategy and give directions,[673] but in my experience they were even more commonly used by players to voice dissatisfaction in a number of ways about other players participating in the activity. These activities are the key sites in each of the games where players that don't know one another come together either randomly or through selective matching to accomplish a task. Through chat, players are able - and to some degree, are encouraged - to strategize with one another about the activity through their written words. This did happen from time to time in most of the games, but the majority of activity-based chat usage was to blame others and to call players out after something had gone wrong in an activity. This is the kind of chat usage that synergizes with play acts, as all of the avatars of the players in an activity-based chat are in close proximity to one another over an extended period of time, and players use the chat to reaffirm and respond to actions carried out by players through their avatars.

Group chats are also worth discussing briefly, as they overlay onto the entire chat experience in each of the games. Group chats can be private between invited members, or they can be linked to a guild, community or clan. These channels, unless turned off by a player, are active in all forms of game content across each of the games, though the *Destiny 2* clan chat feature has a history of low functionality and being outright offline at times.[674] Joining an activity in *WoW* for example, does not remove the player from guild or community chat in the same way that leaving a capital city removes

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[671] Player Versus Players
[672] Player Versus Environment
[673] Friedline and Collister, "Constructing a Powerful Identity," 2012.
[674] "Is Ingame Clan Chat Offline?" Reddit Thread.
https://www.reddit.com/r/DestinyTheGame/comments/m77fqm/is_ingame_clan_chat_offline/ (accessed March 6th, 2023)

a player from trade. What this means is that in a raid composed of seven guild members and three random players, all ten of those players are in the 'raid' activity-based chat for that group, but the seven guild members are in their own guild chat as well. This means that during the activity multiple chats are occurring simultaneously, but not everyone in the activity is necessarily privy to the same information. Strategic discussions about the activity may occur in private chats among friends, communities, or guilds, even though there are players participating who are not part of these groups. It is not uncommon for guilds to talk about the players not inside the guild who are participating in the same activity. Effectively, in this kind of situation there is always the potential for individual players to be the subjects of a '*Mean Girls*'[675]-style back chat that may manifest as bullying or harassment in the activity chat.

Before moving onto voice, I would like to address *Destiny 2*'s low use of text chat. As mentioned in Chapter 3, *Destiny 2* was primarily built for console rather than PC, which makes it unique among the four games. Though *Destiny 2* did release with text chat, and it remains a feature of the game, the assumed lack of a mouse and keyboard for a large portion of the player base makes text chat a much smaller concern for the developers, and by comparison the chat in *Destiny 2* is a bare-bones feature. It was extremely rare to see the chat used at all. It is also worth noting that in contrast to the other games as well, players are opted out of chat by default, rather than in, and so there are fewer players who use it.

Voice Chat

Voice chat is available in all four games as well, though in all but *DOTA 2* it is not terribly common. *Destiny 2* does use voice similarly to how *WoW* and *Lost Ark* use text for activities, but much like its text chat, *Destiny 2* requires that players opt-in to hear others. As a result, there are many players who simply do not have this feature turned on. While searching for a group in *Destiny 2*, players may indicate if they have mics, or if microphones are required to join a group, however. This was the primary mode of communication in *Destiny 2* for some time, which builds on the history of first-person shooters and their reliance on voice communications rather than text.

[675] Paramount Pictures, 2004.

The use of in-game voice chat overall is presently quite low across all of the games in part because the prevalence of Discord has undercut in-game voice features for group content, especially among players who know one another. Even in the case of *Destiny 2* it was more common to be asked to join a Discord server than to use the game's built-in voice chat, at least during the period of my research. *Lost Ark* and *WoW's* built-in features are buried in a fairly complex UI, and there are many complaints among players that these features do not work very well, either due to latency, lack of overall users, or poor audio quality when compared to Discord.[676] Much like *Destiny 2*, if players wanted to talk to others for a raid, dungeons, or pvp match, they would send out a Discord server invite instead.

DOTA 2's voice feature was the most common among all four games, though it was still far less common than text chat. *DOTA 2*'s voice feature is the only one out of the four games that is on by default. Even if you are not using voice, players will be able to hear other players unless they are individually muted at the start of each game. Some players do this as a practice because of the high level of toxicity within *DOTA 2,* but many do not because *DOTA 2* matches can require quick and direct communication in order to win. However, much like the activity-based text chats of the prior section, I observed that upfront strategy was much less common than harassment after things have gone badly, or just general shit-talking from the moment a match begins. Overall, voice is commonly used for all games through Discord, but it is not something that is easily observable in-game except in DOTA 2, and in some rare instances in *Destiny 2*.

Emoticons and Emojis

Only *DOTA 2* and *Lost Ark* have these communication features. *DOTA 2*'s emojis are used within the text chat, and depict characters and objects from the game in various emotional states. These emoticons are not available to all players, however, and are instead limited edition collectible items that players can purchase and/or earn during *DOTA 2's* competitive battle pass season, or during other events. Because they are not available to all players they are not a common sight within the text chat. *DOTA 2*

[676]"Is Voice Chat Working For Anyone" *Lost Ark Forum Thread*. https://forums.playlostark.com/t/is-voice-chat-working-for-anyone/72774 (accessed March 6th, 2023).

also has sprays that are collected in a similar way, but are only active during the competitive season (Figure 4.1). These sprays allow players to paint a predefined image on the terrain which is immediately visible to all players and will remain there until that player sprays a different location.

Figure 4.1 - *DOTA 2* Loser Spray - Image from the *DOTA 2* Wiki[677]

These sprays are used by players - even professional ones (Figure 4.2) - for various communicative ends, though they are largely designed and used to be 'troll-y' rather than affirming or collaborative.

Figure 4.2 - Two professional *DOTA 2* players spam each other with the loser spray during a live match - Screenshot of a Clipped Twitch Video.[678]

[677] https://dota2.fandom.com/wiki/Category:Sprays?file=TI9_Spray_Loser.png (Accessed, March 6th, 2023).

[678] Twitch Clip of Two Professional *DOTA 2* Players Spamming the "Loser" Spray at One-Another in a Tournament Match. https://clips.twitch.tv/ConfidentTameHorseradishDogFace (accessed March 6th, 2023)

Some are used by players after their own misplay as a way of playfully acknowledging their mistake, and possibly using the humor of the emoticon to disarm any incoming comments from teammates or opponents.

Lost Ark has a large selection of emoticons, many of which are free to all players. They are more common to see in *Lost Ark* than *DOTA 2*, and when using an emoticon it appears both in the chat and above the head of the player who used it. These emoticons are cartoonish and expressive, and they can be a way to react to something that a player did in game that is a bit softer than criticism over text or voice chat (Figure 4.3).

Figure 4.3 - *Lost Ark* emoticons used to say hello in text chat - Author's Screenshot.

Despite having access to these expressive characters, I only observed the 'greeting' emoticons as being used with any frequency, though some players would also use the 'surprised' emoticons when another player died in player-versus-player or cooperative content. These were not the exclusive uses of the emoticons, but overall the emoticons were not as common in either game as one might expect.

Character Emotes

Character emotes exist in some form across each of the games. These are commands that a player can give their avatar to produce a kind of expressive gesture in the game world. Some of these are very basic, like in the case of *DOTA 2*, where some characters can be equipped with a taunt: a unique collectible item that allows a key to be pressed to make a character do something it could not normally do (Figure 4.4). For example, the character Ursa, a bear, has a taunt that allows them to use a unicycle and bang some cymbals together. For a time these taunts could be used back-to-back to

‘spam’ other players with over-the-top sounds and animations, but in 2021 Valve added a 1-minute cooldown if the taunt was used twice in succession to stop players from doing this.[679]

Figure 4.4 - In this DOTA 2 taunt, the hero Bane throws cheese wheels while Parisian accordion music plays - Author’s screenshot.

Of all the communication that occurs in DOTA 2, the taunts, while at times annoying, led to few toxic encounters, so it is surprising that this was the communicative aspect of the game that Valve adjusted.

Destiny 2 has a similar emote feature, where elaborate taunt-like animations can be collected by players and equipped to their loadouts. Players can have up to four emotes equipped at a time. Some of these emotes are even collaborative with other players to produce unique results in the game. The high-five emote for example lets a player hold out their hand, and another player can come by and press any of their emote hotkeys, and instead of doing the emote they have assigned to that key, they will high-five the other player. Emotes are used throughout *Destiny 2* across content pretty much all the time (Figure 4.5). Emotes in the game are primarily celebratory or used to pass the time while waiting for other players during group content, though some are used to troll other players after they’ve been killed in a player-versus-player match, in place of the classic ‘teabag’ maneuver.[680]

[679] DOTA 2, December 14th, 2021 Patch Notes. DOTA 2 Wiki. https://dota2.fandom.com/wiki/December_14,_2021_Patch (accessed March 6th, 2023).
[680] “Tea-bagging” is the act of rapidly and repeatedly crouching one’s avatar on the corpse of another player.

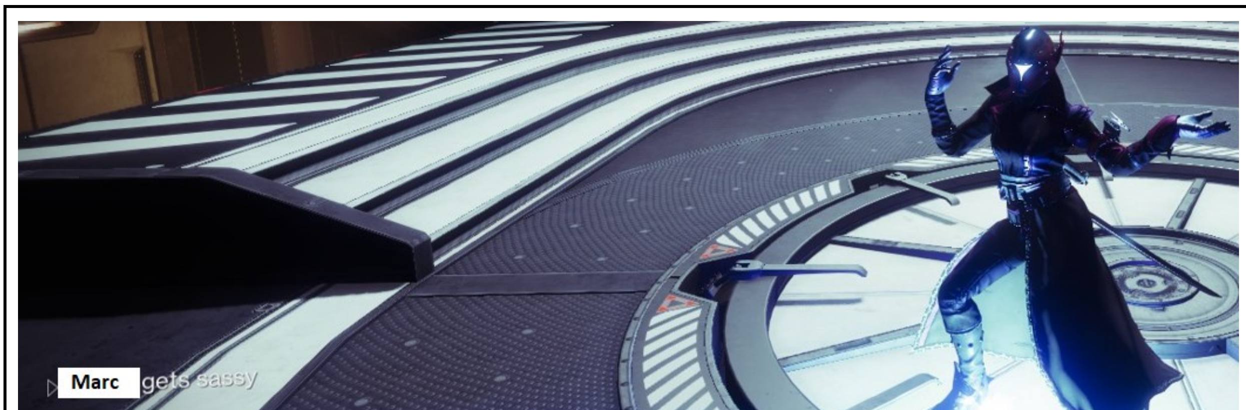

Figure 4.5 - Above: *Destiny 2* emotes in the game world. Here I use the sassy emote to become sassy; Below: *Destiny 2*'s emote menu - Author's Screenshots.

Lost Ark and *WoW* have a suite of emotes as well. In *Lost Ark* these function like emoticons, where players can consult an in-game list and assign the emote to a hotkey, press it, and the avatar will do the action. Some of these commands are locked behind content or are purchasable in supplemental packs for the game. They were used surprisingly little between players even though the game directs you to emote as part of certain quests. In *WoW* the emotes are more commonly seen. They are performed by typing a 'slash' command in chat, such as "/wink," and then a chat message indicating that you performed this action will be displayed. If this emote is animated your avatar will also perform the animation. The number of emotes in *WoW* is quite extensive, but there is no complete list of emotes within the game itself. Players have to consult an

external list, or learn what is possible to emote through seeing other players use them, which means emotes that many players use like '/dance' are far more common to see than '/puzzled' or '/suspicious,' for example. Most of the emotes I encountered in *WoW* were in neutral encounters, like players hanging out in capital cities, or during downtime in raids. When players were acting aggressively towards one another, it was rare to see emotes used in place of text or voice chat.

Additional Communication Features

There are a couple additional communication mechanisms in some of the games. Tactically, as mentioned at the opening of this chapter, *DOTA 2* has a notorious 'ping' feature that we will explore in more detail shortly. *Lost Ark* also has a ping feature, though it is worth stating that even though it can be used like *DOTA 2's* 'ping,' players I observed aligned more with its intended use as a strategic tool. *World of Warcraft* has colorful markers that players can deploy to convey certain pieces of information like where players should stand during a challenging encounter, or to outline a path that one of the players is going to follow. A matching set of icons can be put over players or NPCs to communicate various things, like who to follow, who to avoid, or what monsters should be killed in what order.

There are also feedback mechanisms in each game that occur after players have played together, known as commendation systems, where players can click a button to reward another player with some social prestige under the premise of showing kindness or leadership during play. These systems have received a large amount of criticism from players and game critics alike for not being effective methods of conveying the positive reinforcement they portend to, and commendations are often awarded so long as things don't go bad: even extremely ill-behaved players are free to give each other commendations or to use these positive reinforcement tools ironically.[681]

The final consideration is game mods - user-made game modifications that change the default user experience. *WoW* is the only game that uses mods extensively

[681] Nathan Grayson, "Overwatch's Commendation System is Great for Passive-Aggressive Jerks (Like Me)." Kotaku Article. June 8th, 2016. https://kotaku.com/overwatchs-commendation-system-is-great-for-passive-agg-1781328277 (accessed March 15th, 2023).

out of these four. Mods in *WoW* have previously been researched T.L. Taylor who considered them to be part of a culture of surveillance, where player-made tools would be used to monitor and direct player behaviour in group settings.[682] Nardi and Kallinikos[683] found that over a decade ago there were hundreds of *WoW* mods with tools that can customize the user interface to make certain features more accessible, intuitive, or aesthetically appealing for users, while Nardi[684] further emphasized that players can be pressured to use specific mods to even participate in some game content. Mark Chen considers these mods 'temporary actors' in the spirit of actor-network theory.[685] Mods haven't stopped since these earlier studies, and the pressure and surveillance that prior research has identified has become even more concentrated. The final example in this chapter will consider some of the ways mods are currently used in more detail, but for now it is enough to understand that through mods, players have access to information that the developers did not originally intend, and that some of these mods impact the culture and communication within these games.

From Speech Acts to Play Acts

Before moving into examples of different kinds of play acts, it is prudent to outline how I came to view communication in online games in this way. My perspective is informed primarily by John Searle's *Speech Acts* and Mikhail Bakhtin's concepts of 'the utterance' and 'speech genres.' The shared element between Searle and Bakhtin is their view that complete meaning and expression can be found within communicative acts that may seem partial or incomplete when only looking at the formal elements of a language. Bakhtin points to the overemphasis on the grammatical features of the complete sentence as a focal point of linguistics that misses the true site of meaning.[686] In practice, people communicate in fragmented ways, yet still convey intended meanings successfully. Present within any system of communication is what Searle

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[682] Taylor, "Does *WoW,"* 326-334.
[683] Nardi and Kallinikos, "Mods in *World of Warcraft*," 1-21.
[684] Nardi, *My Life*, 80-84.
[685] Mark Chen, *Leet Noobs: The Life and Death of an Expert Player Group in World of Warcraft* (New York: Peter Lang, 2012), 103-126.
[686] Mikhail Bakhtin, "The Problem of Speech Genres," *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. Edited by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press), 1986, 73-75.

calls ‘the principle of expressibility,’ which is the idea that “whatever can be meant can be said.”[687] Through the principle of expressibility, conveying one’s intended meaning to another is most often achieved through small contextual acts that are most efficient for conveying that meaning, rather than through highly complex syntactic structures (like this very sentence!).[688] For Searle, complex structures arise when meaning is obfuscated through ambiguity: complexity is added to our communication bit by bit to clarify context when the level of ambiguity gets in the way of a speaker’s ability to express themselves fully.[689]

This is where Bakhtin’s concept of the ‘utterance’ comes into play. For Bakhtin, the utterance is “the real unit of speech communication.”[690] The utterance can be of varying length and complexity as Bakhtin notes that “an utterance can be constructed both from one sentence and from one word.”[691] Enter Searle’s *Speech Acts*. The term was originally coined by J.L. Austin as a move towards thinking about words not only as grammatical units, but as acts with effects on the world.[692] As picked up by Searle,[693] speech acts describe verbal or written utterances that vary in size and complexity depending on the expressive goals of the person who speaks them and the context in which they are spoken.[694] Like an utterance, a speech act may be a simple one-word sentence or a complex illocutionary (“stating, questioning, commanding promising”) or perlocutionary (“persuasive, convincing, inspiring”) act.[695] While illocutionary and perlocutionary acts are often considered to have more complex structures than a one-word sentence, in certain contexts a one-word sentence can also have the same level

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[687] Searle, *Speech Acts,* 19.
[688] Ibid., 19, 68, 87-88.
[689] Ibid., 19-20.
[690] Bakhtin “The Problem,” 71.
[691] Ibid., 75.
[692] J.L. Austin, *How to do Things with Words: The William James Lectures Delivered at Harvard University in 1955.* Edited by J.O. Urmson and Marina Sbisà (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1976).
[693] It is worth mentioning that Searle and Jacques Derrida entered into a tumultuous debate regarding speech acts resulting from their interpretations of Austin’s work. My emphasis on Searle is not a disavowal of Derrida, as his deconstruction of speech acts is central to Judith Butler’s work on performativity, which factors into the conclusion of this chapter. That said, a larger accounting of Searle and Derrida’s debate is beyond the scope and focus of this chapter.
[694] Austin, “How to,” 22-24.
[695] Ibid., 23-25.

of expressiveness.[696] For example the word ‘don’t’ can be a commanding or persuasive utterance depending on the context in which it is said.

So how does this relate to communication in-game? Drawing on Wittgenstein’s “language games,”[697] Christiansen and Chater in *The Language Game* state that “real languages are not slightly mangled variants of a purer, more orderly linguistic system. Instead, actual language is always a matter of improvisation, of finding an effective way to meet the communicative demands of the moment.”[698] They directly relate the way humans use language to gestural play, describing language as “a game of charades - a limitless collection of loosely connected games, each shaped by the demands of the situation and the history of the players.”[699] Finding the right acts at the right time as we wade through language is part of the process, and while Christiansen and Chater are using games as a metaphor, they are also inadvertently describing the way players communicate in online play.

One way of thinking about Christiansen and Chater’s improvisational language through loosely connected games is through Bakhtin’s ‘speech genres’ concept. Bakhtin states:

> “When we select words in the process of constructing an utterance, we by no means always take them from the system of language in their neutral, *dictionary* form. We usually take them from *other utterances*, and mainly utterances that are kindred to ours in genre, that is, in theme, composition, or style. [...] Genres correspond to typical situations of speech communication, typical themes, and, consequently, also to particular contacts between the *meanings* of words and actual concrete reality under certain typical circumstances.”[700]

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[696] Ibid., 40-49.
[697] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations.* Translated by G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1958), 101.
[698] Morten H. Christiansen and Nick Chater, *The Language Game: How Improvisation created language and changed the world* (New York: Basic Books, 2022), 2.
[699] Ibid., 3.
[700] Bakhtin, “The Problem,” 87, emphasis in original text.

Effectively, a speech genre is a database from which utterances are pulled. Players, as communicators, are not entering the game of charades without a body of references to draw upon. How a player chooses to express themselves in online play is constructed from expressions that have come before. Additionally, a game (within a broader genre of online gaming, and larger language structures) produces its own speech genre from which players are learning and relying upon to communicate with one another, and as we've seen in chapter 3 the broader genre of online gaming has an array of toxic traits. One other implication of speech genres is that utterances occur at different scales: a couple words spoken in a dialogue between two speakers on the street relies on different forms of communication than one author responding to another in a book or a journal article, but for Bakhtin, the latter is still an utterance, it is just of a different scale and a different genre than words in a conversation.[701]

Bakhtin emphasizes the word, but there are other ways for players to express meaning through gameplay through the speech genres present within a game. Roland Barthes is most known for reading messages in text, image, and sound, but he also examined messages across bodies and gestures. In Barthes' era the form of gesture and body were primarily consigned to photographs and paintings,[702] but Barthes also moved away from the flat, static image through an examination of wrestlers' bodies in a live setting where wrestlers-as-performers commit "gestures of a kind of amorphous baseness," as communicative acts.[703] Though Barthes emphasizes the performers' "costumes and attitudes" like those sported by actors in a stage play, they are still distinct in that the wrestler's gestures are "immediate," rather than dramatic, needing "no anecdote, no decor, in short no transference in order to appear true."[704] The context of the gestures - the speech genre from which they are uttered - is enough to give them meaning within the totality of the 'sport,' even though it is an artificial one. It is another game of charades that is itself a charade, replete with particular communicative acts in

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[701] Ibid., 75, 88-95.
[702] Roland Barthes, *The Responsibility of Forms*. Translated by Richard Howard (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), 157-242.
[703] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*. Translated by Jonathan Cape Ltd (New York: The Noonday Press, 1957), 17.
[704] Ibid, 19.

gestural form that are still meaningful even though their performance is built upon artifice, not unlike a game.

Putting this all together, we are ready to think about players interacting through Searle's concept of expressibility, where players are frequently - if not constantly - communicating with one another while often relying on the smallest possible units of expression to convey meaning. These expressions are not only words, but they are utterances of various forms that players choose to use, in part because they make sense (are intuitive even) within the speech genre of the game. As we will see, the same actions that a player takes during play can at times be sufficient to express illocutionary or perlocutionary meanings like commands, questions, or suggestions. These are themselves speech acts that take place within and *through* play, though they do not necessarily occur through voice or text, hence the term 'play acts.'

To recap this chapter and its relation to playful communication so far: play acts are utterances - units of communication - within speech genres of play. This includes both generalized online play, and the precise play contexts within each game through each game's unique affordances. The overall language system within which these utterances occur are representational (through avatars, icons, and animations), procedural (through the communication mechanisms, game systems, and algorithmic aspects of a digital online game), and most importantly, they are playful (through the assumptive purpose of the activity and through the player inputs - key strokes, mouse movements, vocal utterances - that constitute the communicative unit during online play).

From here, we examine only a few of the communicative acts that occur through playful mechanisms in the four online games of this study. Each example I've chosen is meant to be a simple example from a common activity in each game. These highlight the technical aspect of play acts in practice and present different vectors of communicative interaction that can occur during play. These examples build in complexity in order to reveal some of the mechanisms of communication, how players find unintended communicative uses for systems within the games, and to show how versed players of online games are at communicating through actions that may at first appear to be rote elements of play. The aim here is to show how play and

communication online occur simultaneously in a range of acts, and how players pull from a lexicon of toxicity in even these most fundamental communicative gestures.

DOTA 2's **Ping as Gestural Sign**

As has been established, communication mechanisms in online games are partially textual, vocal, gestural, and semiotic through multiple visual elements. *DOTA 2*'s ping is one illustrative example where improvisational language, gesture, and signification each occur in play. For Barthes, the sign and signifier and related terms "signal, index, icon, symbol, allegory, are the chief rivals of sign. They all necessarily refer us to a *relation* between two *relata*."[705] Why then, could a playful act not be a relational equivalent as an improvisational element of language in a playful context?

While we're thinking with Barthes, let's consider the 'ping' in an old-timey-thought-experiment kind of way. The 'ping' is a semiotic "sign-function," or a sign with some social utility.[706] The 'ping' is itself is an abstract sound on its own, but it has a meaning that prefigures its use in the game: it is a high-pitched digitized bell reminiscent of the sound an elevator makes when it arrives at a floor, or the sound a car might make when its door is ajar. In the context of the game the 'ping' may already possess those connotations for a player as an alert, designed with this utility function in-game that relies on similar utility functions of this sound outside of the game. There is already a relation between sign and signified through the way the sound draws one's attention to some piece of information upon hearing and witnessing the ping. It also appears with a visual queue - by default an exclamation point and a small splash of colour that corresponds to one of the other players in the game, so you know who sent the ping (Figure 4.6).

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[705] Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology.* Translated by Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 35.
[706] Ibid., 41.

Figure 4.6 - Behold, the Infamous *DOTA 2* 'Ping!' - Author's Screenshot.

In the game the 'ping' can take on new meaning through the sound of the alert, and it takes on this new meaning through its *use* over time. The ping can occur abruptly or frequently, and players can give it different rhythms and tempos through their mouse clicks. The ping combines with other playful actions and speech acts that happen in game such as aggressive suggestions about what to do in play, or words over voice coms that inform you that you are doing something wrong or that you are useless and should uninstall the game, as just two possible examples. Eventually the words are no longer needed for us to understand the meaning of the ping: over time players interpret the rhythms of pings as a normal part of communication while playing *DOTA 2*. These are interpreted not through a long-form decoding of the message, but through the fast-paced action of play, through a process that Barthes calls "stimulus and response."[707] This does not occur without ambiguity, but we are able to have about as much certainty that we could have about anything we say in a short-form communicative act. The

[707] Ibid., 36.

pinger is telling us something, and players are able to infer meaning from its use in the moment, through an acclimation to its use cases over time over hours of being subjected to its sounds.

The ping clearly has semiotic properties: at its core the ping possesses communicative features that are found to be true of spoken and symbolic communication, but it is not a sign simply left out in the world despite having both visual and auditory signification. For the ping to exist, it has to be undertaken as an action during the course of play. Drawing on Saussure, the ping is 'parole:' it is an 'erratic' use of the game's language by players (speakers) over the course of play (speaking).[708] A player must physically use both hands to ping. They must press the alt key of the keyboard and click the left mouse button while being in the game world to produce it. In this sense the ping is also gestural and intentioned. Even though it is not the avatar undertaking something in the game world or impressing itself upon another avatar through a gesture that resembles the gestures of the human body that we can associate with charades or Barthes' wrestlers, these actions are still enacted by the player through those same playing fingers in the same playful context to communicate with and to affect another (or multiple other) players in some way, mostly negatively. This has implications for thinking about future play acts, as the movement of character avatars, the typing of messages, and pushing a push-to-talk key to communicate a more conventional utterance over voice chat, are all similarly gestural at a fundamental level.

The Competing Meanings of Running Away in a *Lost Ark* Guardian Raid

Let's turn to *Lost Ark* and examine two other examples of these kinds of communicative gestures, both of which take place in one of the game's many group activities, guardian raids. Guardian raids are timed end-game activities where players are grouped together with three other players to battle an epic boss monster. This activity is nearly mandatory within *Lost Ark*'s end-game progression system as it is one of few daily activities that rewards end-game progression materials, and so players are generally doing guardian raids twice a day.

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[708] Leo van Lier, *The Ecology and Semiotics of Learning Language: A Sociocultural Perspective* (New York: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2004), 34.

Each of the boss monsters have unique abilities and require special strategies to defeat, though they also share some core game mechanics. The important mechanic to know for the example below is called ‘stagger.’ In *Lost Ark*, player abilities deal damage to enemies, but some of them also have a stagger damage value ranging from low to high, though not all player classes or character builds have access to the same amounts of stagger. Stagger is important in group play because some powerful enemies in the game have abilities that can only be stopped by staggering them, and to successfully stagger the boss it often requires the full effort of all four players in the group. This is called a ‘stagger check’ within the community.

One such guardian in *Lost Ark* is called ‘Helgaia,’ who is a phoenix-like creature that will channel an ability over many seconds that first deals damage around her, and then powers her up for the rest of the encounter (Figure 4.7). This makes her much more challenging if she is not staggered. However, because not all classes have the same amount of stagger damage available to them, it may not be possible to stagger these monsters every time, even though it is preferable.

Figure 4.7 - Me and my pet Jose battle Helgaia - Author’s Screenshots.

In over 20 runs of Helgaia, I observed that in groups where it seemed unlikely that the stagger check would be beaten, players often ran away instead of trying to beat the stagger check. While this still empowers her, it at least avoids her high-damage attack by creating enough distance between the player's avatar and Helgaia's model, so this is a sensible plan if the stagger check will fail anyway.

During the research period, it was difficult to know if a team was going to beat the check until near the end of Helgaia's ability because there was no visual indicator.[709] Players needed to react on their instincts and game knowledge to decide if they were going to commit to the check or run away, and they needed to communicate this quickly. The main way players communicated their intention regarding the stagger check was by physically moving their avatar away from Helgaia. If one player runs away, this functions as a signal that all players should also run away, because without all players contributing it is even more unlikely that the check will succeed. Most groups I was with adapted to this communicative arrangement. If one player ran, the other players would run, and the fight would carry on without issue. In my own play, I always defaulted to trying to stagger the boss until another player would run away, but some other players would stay away from Helgaia immediately.[710] Regardless, most players would read this signal and adapt.

However, there is a segment of the player base that reads running away in this situation differently, and immediately assumes game ignorance or lack of player skill rather than quick evaluation and communication during play. One user on the Steam forums, 'Orphan Crippler' expressed that "Most ppl are beyond useless when with randoms sadly… they just run instead of staggering the boss so it gets stronger."[711] At a certain point, even context is not enough to make this signal clear. In one of my own runs, all four players attempted to meet the stagger check but did not succeed, and because we did not run I was killed by Helgaia's damage. The second time Helgaia

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[709] Some other monsters in the game had a stagger bar that made it much easier to know if the group was on track for meeting a stagger check. Guardian raids were an exception to this, but after the primary research period for *Lost Ark* ended, a stagger bar was added to all guardian raids in November 2022.

[710] This may have been because they assessed our group composition and assumed we couldn't beat the check, or because they were unfamiliar with or possibly afraid of the fight mechanics.

[711] Steam forum thread, "Stagger Bar for Raid Bosses." https://steamcommunity.com/app/1599340/discussions/0/3267933887510833194/ (accessed March 15th, 2023).

used her stagger check ability in the encounter, I ran away because it was clear we could not beat the stagger check as a group from the first try, which was immediately read as my own ignorance and lack of skill. This act was aggressively responded to in text chat by my party (Figure 4.8).

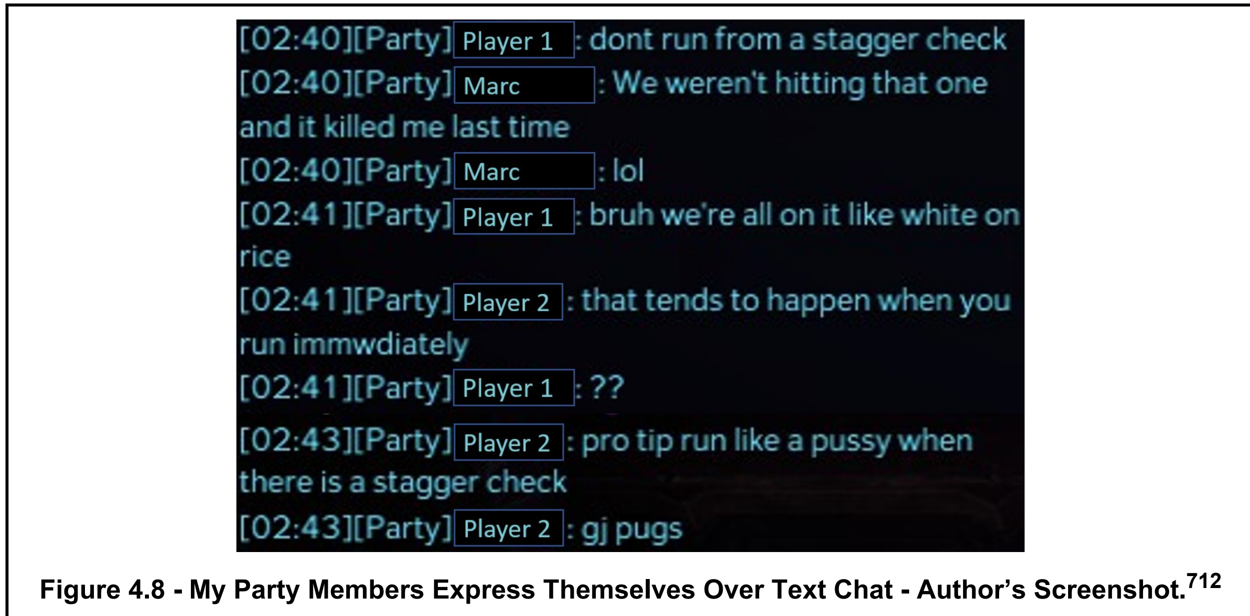

Figure 4.8 - My Party Members Express Themselves Over Text Chat - Author's Screenshot.[712]

We could of course chalk this reaction up to ambiguity or a lack of clarity in the play act. There's no denying that play acts, like speech acts, are not always one-hundred percent clear, but that itself is not a full explanation. Rather, if we consider the context of Orphan Crippler's comment in the preceding paragraph, there are players for whom this play act means something different, and these players are learning the meaning of this act not just through play, but through conversation with others in the game and external sites as well. In one Steam thread alone, players engage in multi-paragraph tirades about players who run from Helgaia being "brain dead" and "casual."[713] This despite it being a common practice that most players reacted to, and that did not cause most of my groups to fail. This was only one very specific example of movement in the game, but it exemplifies the way a player's avatar in *Lost Ark* can be used to convey meaning on the go.[714] It also shows that play acts enacted by the avatar

[712] 'Gj' means good job, while pugs means 'pick-up group' players. These are players who you do not know, but who you are placed with randomly or through semi-random matchmaking.
[713] Ibid.
[714] This of course applies to other online games as well.

lead to play acts through other communication mechanisms, and that external discussion about the meaning of particular play acts affects the way players respond to them in the moment. Thinking back to Searle's work, in this example players resort to text chat to clear up perceived ambiguity in the simpler utterance of moving one's character in a particular way. This play act, like many others, is polysemous. Though play acts do possess degrees of ambiguity and vagueness because of their multiple meanings, Ravin and Leacock point out that "polysemy is rarely a problem for communication among people," and players rely on many contextual clues and ambiguity-resolving strategies to convey intended meanings.[715] While there may be misunderstandings and miscommunication, the ambiguity of play acts is not as large of an obstacle to interplayer communication as it might seem.

***Destiny 2*'s Arsenal of Play Acts: Guns, Swords, Shoulders, and Symbols**

As mentioned, *Destiny 2* possesses several communicative limitations in comparison to the *DOTA 2, Lost Ark* and *WoW*, but players still find ways of expressing themselves to others through play acts. The aforementioned emotes are one such way, but as a first-person shooter, players literally see the world down the sights of their guns (or in the reflection of their swords, their glaives, and their bows… but mostly guns). It should not be surprising then, that *Destiny 2* players communicate with each other through their weaponry. One of the standard ways players who are in the same activity but who are not in a text or voice chat with another communicate is through their guns. In cooperative encounters players aim at objects or areas of the map in order to communicate that something is an objective or that a player should go stand over there in lieu of verbal or text communication. Similarly, players will shoot at the feet of other players to express discontent. While these bullets don't do damage to players outside of PvP, they nonetheless let a player know that they are in some way unhappy with something that another player has done.

Another play act uses swords. While it doesn't have any official name it is a common phenomenon, and I've heard it referred to as 'bopping' and 'sword charging' in

[715] Yael Ravin and Claudia Leacock, "Polysemy: An Overview," *Polysemy: Theoretical and Computational Approaches.* Edited by Yael Ravin and Claudia Leacock (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 1.

game. This act is made possible through the recently added 'eager edge' weapon trait that can be found on swords, which gives a small boost to lunge distance after switching to this weapon. An unforeseen consequence of this is that it could be used in cooperative gameplay to launch your teammates off of maps and into walls, killing them. While death is generally a small penalty, some players have reported being goal-kept from receiving end-of-activity rewards by players effectively playing goalie to *Destiny 2*'s reward chests, keeping the other players away like a soccer ball from a net.[716] A similar tactic made possible by the Titan class's shoulder charge, was used in one of my own raids while the raid leader was explaining the fight for the new players, much to the raid leader's frustration. While this has general griefing undertones, it wasn't purely trolling or griefing, as this player still wanted to participate in the raid even though the raid leader became audibly annoyed by this action. As this unfolded, this use of the shoulder charge was more like a bored student rolling their eyes or twirling their pencil in class, disrupting the other players that were trying to learn. The play act conveyed boredom, and it did pressure the raid leader to move us into the fight before we were ready. In this context, the shoulder charge asked the question "can we move this along?" and in response we did.

Destiny 2's text and voice limitations produce a unique in-game environment for communication, but that is not to say that *Destiny 2* does not have more complex communication situations. The game has challenging encounters where players need to convey information to one another quickly, but at the competitive level much of this occurs over Discord. Many of the endgame challenges, like raids, require quick and direct communication of information between different members of a six-person group, and much of the later part of the game is designed with voice communication in mind.

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[716] Reddit thread, "Intentional PvE Griefing with Eager Edge."
https://www.reddit.com/r/destiny2/comments/rvnww8/intentional_pve_griefing_with_eager_edge/
(accessed March 11th, 2023).

Figure 4.9 - Vow of the Disciple Glyph Icons - IGN Guides Website.[717]

One of the recent *Destiny 2* raids, 'Vow of the Disciple,' has 27 unique symbols (Figure 4.9) that players need to familiarize themselves with as all of them are used throughout the entire raid in various ways. Many of these need to be called out by one player to convey specific information to another player. For example, in the first encounter of the raid one player must stand in a spot where only they can see the symbols appear, and must tell another player what symbol out of the 27 has appeared. The appearance of a 'pyramid' or 'traveler' icon in this situation means that one designated member of the team who cannot see the symbol needs to go to a specific area of the room and kill a particular enemy called a 'Disciple's Compass', and not doing so quickly may cause your team to fail the encounter. This same conceit is repeated throughout the raid in various forms, and so a thorough understanding of each symbol's name and their contextual meanings throughout each different encounter of the raid is necessary to succeed.

[717] IGN *Destiny 2* Guide Website, https://www.ign.com/wikis/destiny-2/Vow_of_the_Disciple (accessed March 11th, 2023.

Even though these symbols have official designations by Bungie that are indicated on screen when you aim your gun at each one, players do not necessarily agree on what to call each symbol, which can cause communication breakdown within teams. For example, in one Reddit thread, the ‘Give’ symbol was referred to as “Jazz Hands,” “Diamond Hands,” “Bloody Hands,” “Claws,” or even “Goatse,” in reference to an ancient viral internet image that depicts a man holding open his own anus.[718] While many of these alternate symbol names rely on the hand-like imagery, the latter designation requires a specific point of reference in order to produce the intended association. Even in cases where it is possible for players to infer that a player calling out “Jazz Hands" refers to the “Give” symbol, there can be tension because the meaning takes longer to decode. This can frustrate players and cause raid groups to disband or group leaders to berate or kick members who don’t adhere to their standards for what the symbols should be called.

The heavy use of symbols contributes to an environment where players require a substantial amount of foreknowledge about the activities that use them, as well as the ability for improvisation in this language game[719]: even if a player prepares to do this raid by studying the symbols from a guide, they may need to adapt in a confrontational social situation when the players in a particular group don’t use the same names as the guide for each of the symbols.[720] A secondary effect of the symbols is the push for players who want to participate in this content to use communication mechanisms they may not want to. Discord, or at the very least voice chat, is almost mandatory to be taken in a group for this raid, which presents challenges for users who wish to participate but are uncomfortable with voice, or for those who are actively harassed through linguistic profiling.[721] As Kishonna Gray found, Xbox users were targeted for

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[718] Reddit Thread, “Vault of the Disciple Labeled Symbol Guide.” https://www.reddit.com/r/raidsecrets/comments/t7gc5v/vow_of_the_disciple_labeled_symbol_guide/ (accessed March 11th, 2023).

[719] Christiansen and Chater, *The Language Game*, 3.

[720] Though less common in *Destiny 2*, it is also possible for players who speak different languages to be matched together in group content, and my prior work found substantial tension between players in *DOTA 2* who spoke a different language but were required to play together (See Lajeunesse, 2018).

[721] John Baugh, “Linguistic Profiling and Discrimination.” *The Oxford Handbook of Language and Society.* Edited by Ofelia García, Nelson Flores, and Massimiliano Spotti (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 349-368.

their perceived race or ethnicity when using online voice chat in games based on their ways of speaking,[722] while Amanda Cote found that many women avoid voice chat because they have been targeted for harassment when using it.[723] This kind of content enforces a gendered and racialized power dynamic in-game because it encourages marginalized players to engage in a situation that puts them at greater risk. Additionally, players who are deaf or hard of hearing are excluded through the widespread enforcement of voice chat use.

Even though it is technically possible to do the raid through text chat, the playerbase is generally hostile to this approach, believing that voice communications should be a requirement in high level content.[724] There are competitive players who do 'coms-less' challenge runs,[725] and others who find that players who wish to do voice-less raids can participate, but can only be trusted with tasks that require less communication, or must have or develop a high level of finger dexterity as they will be expected to communicate through text while playing an intense and fast-paced game.[726] One player who was featured in a Bungie community spotlight, MitchySlaps, took a proactive approach to making the raid more accessible by transforming a stream deck - a peripheral used like a multipurpose controller for livestreaming - into a pseudo game controller that depicts each symbol on its buttons and automatically enters the callout into the text chat when the corresponding button is pressed (Figure 4.10).

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[722] Kishonna Gray, "Collective Organizing, Individual Resistance, or Asshole Griefers? An Ethnographic Analysis of Women of Color in Xbox Live," *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology*, no 2 (2013).
[723] Amanda C. Cote, ""I Can Defend Myself": Women's Strategies for Coping with Harrassment while Gaming Online," *Games and Culture* 12, no 2 (2017): 145. (136-155).
[724] Reddit Thread, "can you do vow raid without mic and just use text chat?" https://www.reddit.com/r/DestinyTheGame/comments/u79l7b/can_you_do_vow_raid_without_mic_and_just_use_text/ (accessed March 11th, 2023).
[725] Gladd YouTube Video, "VOW OF THE DISCIPLE NO COMMS RUN - Destiny 2 Witch Queen." https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E6G6-5dKMtk (accessed March 11th, 2023).
[726] Steam Forums, *Destiny 2* General Discussion. "Going to Raid Without a Mic, Is It Possible?" https://steamcommunity.com/app/1085660/discussions/0/6204299339023688750/?ctp=2 (accessed March, 11th, 2023).

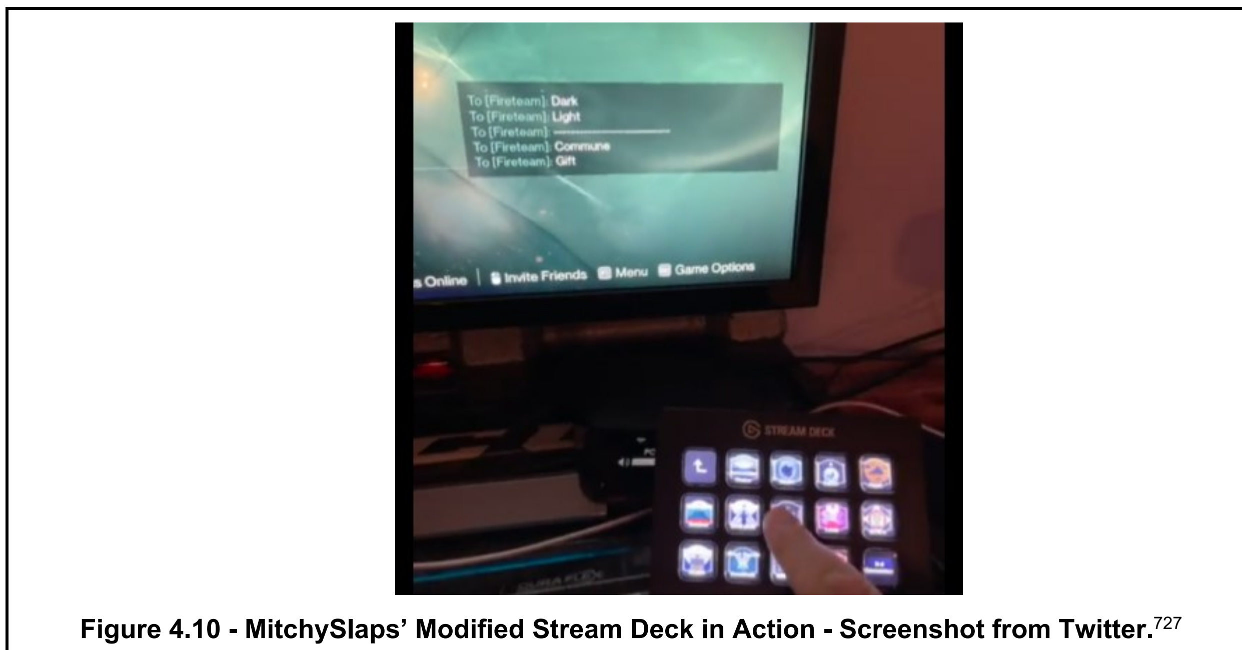

Figure 4.10 - MitchySlaps' Modified Stream Deck in Action - Screenshot from Twitter.[727]

MitchySlaps made this profile available for download for any stream deck owners, though this option is not viable for all players as even a basic stream deck is around $100 USD and has substantially less use for someone who does not also livestream. Still, through this example we see language improvisation that alters both the assumptive architecture upon which the game is designed and challenges the norms of the community through inclusive practices that emerge from the player base.

While using the gun and sword are playful utterances ascribed with consequential meaning, the Vow of the Disciple raid symbols produce fully illocutionary play acts. Symbol callouts are utterances that refer, but they are also commands - procedural ones at that - where players are prescribed by the game to order others to complete tasks through these referential utterances. Success and the linked social cohesion of the group over the duration of a raid (or many raids over time), depends on a mutually understood interpretation of the symbols and an agreement about how to communicate about them. Giving the correct symbol reading in the eyes of other fireteam members is more than this command though: it is also a sign that you are doing it right and that you belong. It is a form of boundary keeping, not just through skill

[727] https://twitter.com/MitchySlaps (accessed March 11th, 2023).

as Kelly Boudreau found in *WoW* but through a shared interpretation of the game's language.[728]

Similarly, MitchySlaps' creation of the modified stream deck is an illocutionary play act that is itself a statement of care and concern for players who are excluded by *Destiny 2*'s communication apparatus (an apparatus that includes both the game systems and player norms). This act occurs at a completely different level than the acts within the raid itself, though it comes about as a response to play acts that occur within the raid and produces new communicative possibilities, and with them, new possible improvisations. This is not unlike Bakhtin's utterances, which are made up of both simple and complex acts of differing scales, but which are nevertheless part of the same communicative process.

Group Play in *World of Warcraft*: A Confluence of Play Acts

The final example comes from a group activity in *WoW*, known as 'mythic plus' dungeons (from here referred to as mythic+ to match its in-game name). The purpose of this example is less about a particular kind of act as in the previous examples, but instead gives readers a sense of the frequency and density of play acts that happen in an activity with multiple players. This example first examines the lead up to a mythic+ dungeon run, then breaks down only 30 seconds of one mythic+ dungeon. I use this approach in order to account for various play acts that can occur in this extremely short time frame.

Briefly, what is mythic+? Mythic+ is an endgame activity where 5 players team up to complete one of *WoW*'s many dungeons as quickly as possible. These dungeons are modified by levels of difficulty designated by a + and a number, such as +10. To access higher levels players need to use an item called a keystone which corresponds to their desired difficulty level. To get higher difficulty keystone players need to complete lower ones successfully within the time limit. This produces an inherent pressure on players to do well in a run so that whoever uses their keystone gets a new, higher-level key

[728] Kelly Boudreau, "Beyond Fun: Transgressive Gameplay - Toxic and Problematic Player Behavior as Boundary Keeping." In *Transgression in Games and Play.* Edited by Kristine Jørgensen and Faltin Karlsen (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2018), 257-272.

instead of depleting it. These items are not tradeable, but each player only gets one per week and keeping the keystone level high is the path to the highest level of character advancement. There are also greater rewards for beating the dungeon more quickly. The following example comes from a +10 'Temple of the Jade Serpent" run, but also draws on comparative experiences between this run and 10 other runs of this same dungeon.[729]

Instead of random matchmaking, mythic+ uses an in-game application system (Figure 4.11). The player applying to the group can see what roles are already filled in the party, and the rating of the party leader for that particular dungeon. This rating is a numerical representation that combines the highest difficulty and the best time that a player has achieved in that dungeon. If you apply to join a party, the leader can see your role (Healer, Tank, Damage),[730] your class, your item level (which is a rough indicator of your character's power), and your overall dungeon rating. This rating adds all individual mythic+ dungeon scores together.

Figure 4.11 - Searching for a +10 Temple of the Jade Serpent Party - Author's Screenshot.

[729] Keystones have no inherent maximum level, but at a certain point the difficulty is so high that the dungeons are impossible to complete. During the season I played, competitive players were doing keystones in the low to mid 20s range, with the highest completed keystone of the season being a +29.

[730] 5-person parties are made up of 1 tank, who typically sets the pace of the run and is attacked by the enemies, 1 healer who heals the damage done by enemies, and 3 damage dealers (dps) who attack the enemies. Tanks and healers are rarer than dps and it is often faster for them to find groups.

Some players also use a mod called raider.io, which gives even more precise information about a player's individual dungeon scores, and other content a player has completed in the game, like raid bosses. This is in line with T.L. Taylor's idea of mods as a surveillance apparatus,[731] but while Taylor's emphasis in 2006 was more on play at the micro level (like damage meters or threat levels in a dungeon or raid), raider.io encourages surveilling players at the macro level as well. Effectively, every character becomes its own resume of accomplishments, and that resume is always on display if players choose to use these tools, and many do.[732] If a player wishes to participate they must keep these numbers as high as possible at all times, as most party leaders tend to take the players with the highest skill and item level combination available to them.

It is possible to apply for multiple parties and to be met with a red "declined" notification repeatedly, up to hundreds of declines per hour. Over the research period, there were multiple threads per day on the official forums of players claiming they can't get into groups that they are of appropriate rating and item level for, because they do not have the highest numbers among those in each dungeon's applicant pool.[733] Even though these players are qualified - even overqualified - for the dungeon, they are not the *most* qualified. It's key to remember that this group-finding process is not exterior to the game: it *is* playing the game even if it constitutes standing around and working through a menu for an hour to do the activity you were hoping to do. In this sense, keeping up one's rating and item level - which is itself another contributor to a player's gaming capital - is a macro-level play act that builds on numerous other small play acts. This communicates one's abilities to other players through *WoW*'s interface in its modded or unmodded form. It is a highly procedural play act, as players forming these groups are also trying to keep their numbers as high as possible, because this will be taken into account when they are applying for future groups, and the game systems and mod culture reinforce this.

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[731] Taylor, T.L. "Does *WoW* Change Everything," 2006.
[732]The current mythic+ rating system that is used by Blizzard was implemented in the game in 2021 in part because so many users had already been using raider.io since 2017 to evaluate other players.
[733] *World of Warcraft* Forum Thread. "Can't get into groups mythic +." March 3rd, 2023. https://us.forums.blizzard.com/en/wow/t/cant-get-into-groups-mythic/1536707 (Accessed March 16th, 2023.

However, players can also leave a short comment when they both host and apply for groups. Some groups are listed as 'chill,' which primarily indicates a less competitive approach to the activity, which can include an openness to selecting people who do not have the highest rating. When I applied for groups, I sometimes left a comment indicating that I was playing an alt,[734] and that my main character had a higher rating, which often got me into groups faster than if I applied with no comment at all. These are two simple ways a player can use a text-based play act to express themselves that pushes against the procedurality of this game system and the culture that has built up around it.

For this mythic+ run, four members of our group were assembled quickly but we could not find a healer for over ten minutes. The four of us greeted each other in text chat with some 'howdys' and 'hellos' and made our way to the dungeon, assuming we would find a healer eventually. Going to the dungeon itself can take some travel time depending on where a player's avatar is in the world. Dungeons have a feature called 'summoning stones' outside of them, and two players in a group can use them to summon the players who have yet to arrive (Figure 4.12). This can be convenient for other players who are further away from the dungeon and this benefits the whole group by getting everyone there faster.

[734] Short form for 'alternate character' - a secondary character that is often of lower level than one's main character, or 'main.'

Figure 4.12 - Players Gather to Summon their Party Members - Author's Screenshot

Rather than summoning, sometimes players will just go straight into the dungeons and wait for players to finish traveling on their own, while other players - even those close to the dungeon - may make no effort to get to the summoning stone at all, instead waiting to be summoned by others who make the effort to travel. These players always struck me as odd given how many of them also emphasized the speed and efficiency of getting things done once the dungeons themselves were underway. Regardless, I interpreted these as play acts that express a general lack of care for the other players in the group that aligns with John Sageng's view of instrumentalized play where other objects in a game - in this case players - are simply viewed as 'mere means' to another player's goals.[735] These simple actions may seem trivial, but they convey things about the members of a group before the dungeon itself has even properly started. In contrast, other players may politely ask for or demand summons which can produce a different response. In one particular run the last player to join our

[735] Sageng, "Moral Norms," 63-80.

group saw that the other four of us were already at the dungeon together waiting and quickly typed “omw (on my way) over,” to indicate that we didn’t need to go through the effort of summoning them because they were already hurrying towards the dungeon entrance. Two of us went out and did it anyway so they wouldn’t need to travel for long. Through all of these small interactions our small group of random players built a foundation for high morale.

Even if my earlier interpretation of those who make no effort to summon isn’t true of all players, the important thing is that as a player I interpret these actions and they influence my opinion of those players and my future interactions with them. Play acts from the group finder and from before a dungeon affect the inter-player dynamics for the dungeon activity itself. Each of these small interactions foregrounds future interactions with those players. I will assume that a player who makes no effort to summon or who demands a summon from others may play selfishly or will be more likely to respond negatively or aggressively if things in the dungeon don’t go exactly their way, while a player who is attentive to other players in the leadup to a run may be more likely to excuse mistakes. This is not to say that these align perfectly, but rather that this is what these play acts signified to me over time.

To start the dungeon the player whose keystone we’re using must put it on a pedestal, then a 10 second countdown timer will begin. Before this, classes with buffs[736] will apply them and players can eat in-game food to make their characters stronger. While players can do this individually with their own food items, these items can be expensive and not all players have equal access to the gold to purchase them. In the majority of my dungeon runs I used a communal item called a ‘banquet’ or ‘feast’ that all players in the group can share (Figure 4.13), which our healer then thanked me for in this run. While the banquet is meant more for larger raid groups of 10 or more players, I used them consistently in dungeons because it creates a group-focused moment out of disparate players found through the sterile application system, and I found that providing a banquet generally made other players more amenable to me as I used my own resources to contribute to our success in the activity. If I did something another player didn’t like later during the dungeon itself, I felt they were less likely to lash out at

[736] Effects that enhance the other party members.

me for it because I've already gone out of my way to give them something and helped the team.[737] Using the game's affordances, I deploy the feast as a form of "collaborative language" that Friedline and Collister identified in players' chat practices.[738]

Figure 4.13 - Left: My party enjoys the banquet; Bottom: A chat message automatically plays letting the group know I've prepared the banquet; Right: The timer counts down and we're ready to begin! - Author's Screenshots.

The first 30 seconds of this dungeon consists of two 'pulls,' where the tank player chooses which enemies to attack and in what order. Because mythic+ is about speed, there is a push for players to pull as many enemies as the group can handle: it is more efficient to damage them all simultaneously, but more enemies means more different abilities to manage, which in turn means more damage going out on the party. Pulling more also means that the healer may struggle to keep party members alive, so a balance must be struck by attending to what other players are doing. Over the 73 mythic+ runs I did over the research period, I saw only 3 instances where the players discussed how they were going to pace each run in text chat, and these were minor comments such as "pulling to boss," meaning the tank would pull all enemies before the

[737] Providing the feast for raids was also one of the ways I built rapport with both random raid groups, and the main guild I raided with during later stages of the ethnography.
[738] Friedline and Collister, "Constructing a Powerful," 205-206.

first boss of a dungeon at once.[739] Like the Helgaia example in *Lost Ark*, players mostly figure out the intentions of others on the go, contextually, through what they observe the other players doing. This includes using mods that monitor damage numbers, healing numbers, and the amount of stuns and interrupts[740] that players are using correctly (Figure 4.14, right), looking at player health bars and to see if they are affected by negative status effects and reacting to each avatar's position within the world (Figure 4.14, left).

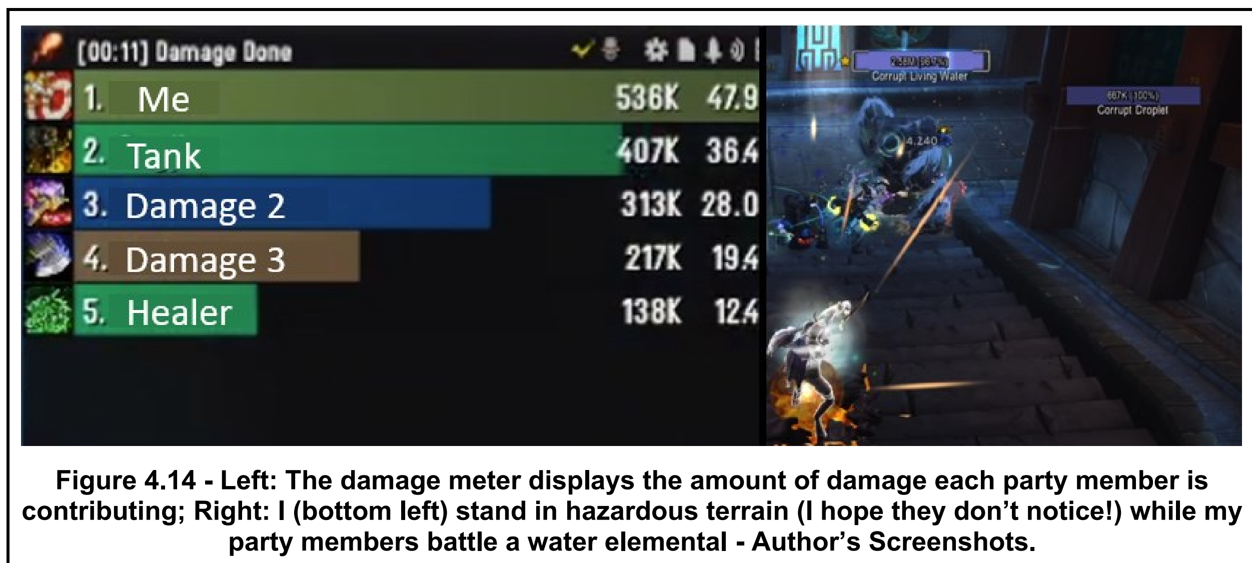

Figure 4.14 - Left: The damage meter displays the amount of damage each party member is contributing; Right: I (bottom left) stand in hazardous terrain (I hope they don't notice!) while my party members battle a water elemental - Author's Screenshots.

This group encountered some issues over the dungeon including several avoidable player deaths to less powerful enemies known as 'trash mobs',[741] and failing at multiple bosses.[742] Despite this, in this dungeon we were patient with each other throughout the run and eventually completed the dungeon successfully with only seconds remaining. In other runs, players have berated others, or used creative means of showing their displeasure as a response to certain play acts, or a whole conversation of play acts that can occur between the players throughout the entire mythic+ process.

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[739] Players did communicate about other things over text during runs, especially if someone was clearly doing something "wrong," but there was very little discussion ahead of time about what the strategy should be, even though most players have never played together before.
[740] Abilities players can use to briefly stop enemies from doing all the things that kill players.
[741] These are especially bad in mythic+ as each time a player dies 5 seconds is removed from the group's time to complete the dungeon.
[742] Groups are able to retry as many times as they please, but failing at a boss often means five player deaths which amounts to 25 seconds lost on the group's timer. This is in addition to the time spent trying to defeat the boss in the first place.

There is the obvious harassment through text that we've come to expect from online play, but it is also common for players to leave mythic+ groups if they think it won't succeed, or if there are player disagreements. This almost always guarantees that the group will fail. This in turn depletes the key of the player who started the group and wastes a substantial amount of time that each player spent to get the run started. I also observed some tanks deliberately turning bosses with frontal attacks towards other players so that the boss will hit and kill them. If we take this breakdown of play alongside the complexity of the user interface and couple them with the player-inflected spatial dimensions of the game world, we begin to see that players are saying quite a lot to one another when it can look like not much is being said at all if observing players from afar. Again, we can see how all of the communication channels in the game are operating in conjunction with playful acts to create an entire apparatus of communication within these games.

Towards Deeper Meanings: A Death in the *Destiny* Family

The day after I finished the first draft of this chapter, actor Lance Reddick, who was the voice actor for fan-favorite *Destiny 2* character Commander Zavala, unexpectedly passed away. A prominent actor well known (and beloved by me) for playing Lieutenant Cedric Daniels in the series *The Wire*,[743] Reddick voiced Zavala for just under 10 years, since the release of the original *Destiny.*[744] To say players were attached to the character and to the man who brought him to life would be an understatement. For being a fast-paced and militaristic shooter, Commander Zavala had a surprisingly calm and gentle quality that came almost entirely from Reddick's performance, and Reddick himself was a member of the *Destiny 2* community and an avid player of the game.

What does this have to do with play acts, you might be asking? I find that even in a lengthy breakdown of play acts in a chapter like this, it can be extremely difficult to convey how much all of this means for players, as it is easy to focus on the technical, 'gamey,' or procedural aspects of these play acts to argue for the value of the concept.

[743] HBO, 2002 - 2008.
[744] Bungie, 2013.

The shared grief of the *Destiny 2* community over Reddick's passing sets up a different angle by showing the emotional and social investments that players have and express through play acts.

The night that Reddick's death was announced, players across the game gathered around the Zavala character alone or in groups and used a variety of emotes to salute, stand at attention, and hold small candlelight vigils to pay their respects (Figure 4.15).

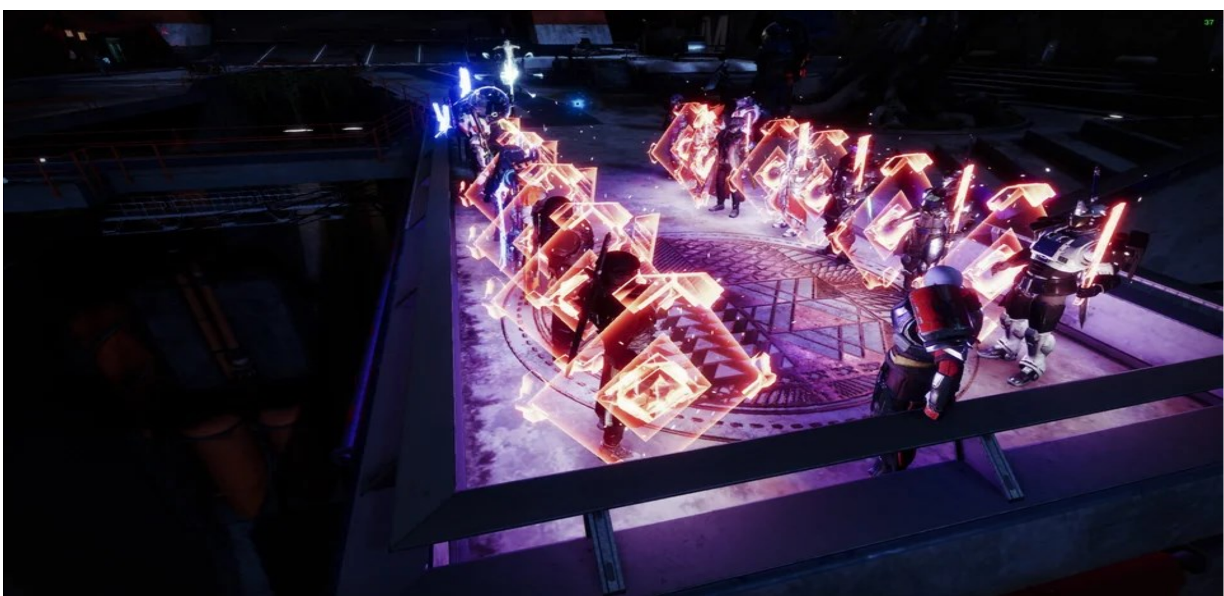

Figure 4.15 - Players gather to play tribute to Commander Zavala in remembrance of his voice actor, Lance Reddick - Screenshot from Reddit, Credit to u/Decent_Dimension_937.[745]

Of course, some of this was shared over social media as screenshots and words of grief filled up *Destiny 2* Discord servers, but this wasn't all just for show: players were mourning, and like we do out in the world we were mourning together. That night I stayed near Zavala's character model and watched as players would come visit Zavala on their own or in small groups to pay their respects through emotes. Even just watching this unfold was a really emotional experience and I was legitimately a

[745] Reddit Thread, "in memory of lance reddick." Friday, March 17th, 2023. https://www.reddit.com/r/destiny2/comments/11u2v5y/in_memory_of_lance_reddick/ (accessed April 4th, 2023).

blubbering mess through most of the night. It felt like a real memorial because *it was a real memorial*. The players cared, the players hurt, and they showed this in force.

Similar behaviors have been documented in MMOs before,[746] but here I want to emphasize this kind of event to show the emotional quality of play acts. At one point as I was observing players and Zavala, I was standing some distance away looking-on from afar and another player noticed me. They moved their avatar towards me, did a quick crouch action, and then slowly stutter-stepped their character away from me over to Zavala, while intermittently turning back to look at me. They were signaling to me using the limited player movements of the game, asking me to go over to Zavala and sit with them, and so I did. We sat together for a few minutes, exchanging not a word, but emoting in solemn remembrance of a person who meant something to us through this game (Figure 4.16).

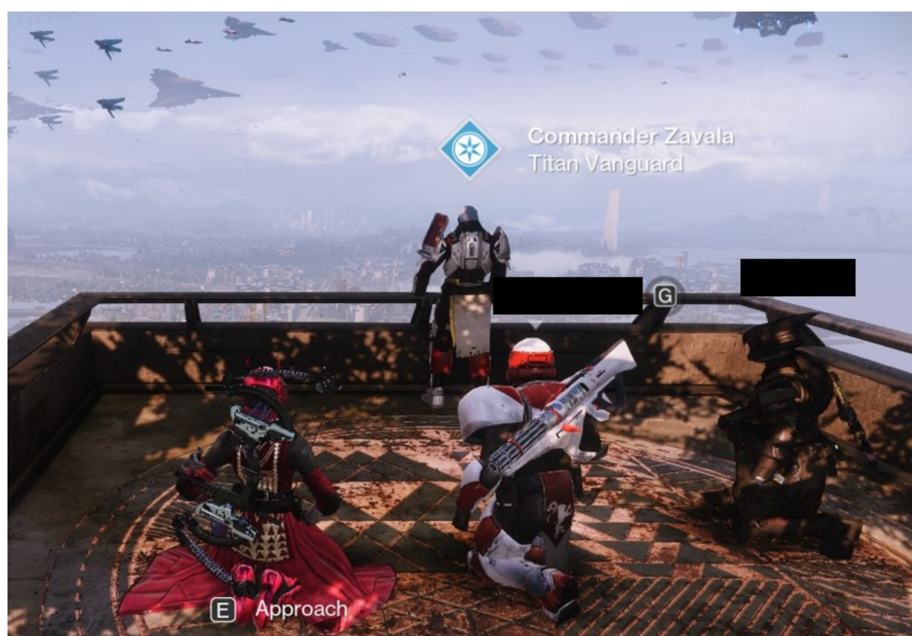

Figure 4.16 - Two players I've never met and I (left, in pink) pay our respects to Lance Reddick together - Author's Screenshot.

[746] Martin Gibbs, et al., "Tombstones, Uncanny Monuments and Epic Quests: Memorials in World of Warcraft," *Game Studies* 12, no 1 (2012). https://gamestudies.org/1201/articles/gibbs_martin (accessed June 10th, 2023).

These emotes were play acts, some communal, some *personal*, but they were all meaningful in a way that online play isn't often appreciated for being. These play acts served no greater in-game purpose and were for no in-game reward or incentive. These play acts of mourning are instead emblematic of the real emotional power that these actions can possess for players.

Play Acts and Transgressive Positivity

This chapter has demonstrated that playful actions in online games are more communicative than they have been given credit for. Games and players produce networks of signs and significations that are not always easy to interpret and decode from the outside. Players commit play acts that are statements, questions, assertions and even shared acts of expression in their own right. These combine with other play acts to produce communication through playful actions and the more conventional conversation systems that exist within the games. To play online, with and in view of others, is to speak. As we've seen throughout the examples, and in the work of Friedline and Collister, play acts also impose power dynamics upon other players. As we move into the subsequent chapters, we need to consider that these play acts possess at least some of the power of speech acts as well. Channeling A.J. Austin, John Loxley states "utterances can be performative: words do something in the world, [...] they are 'performed,' like other actions, or take place, like other worldly events, and thus make a difference in the world; it could be said that they produce a different world, even if only for a single speaker and a single addressee."[747] Play acts, as their own contextual utterances, need to be appreciated for their performative effects - that is to say their impact on the world(s) and the others who inhabit them.

Considering the conventional aspects of the play experience in each of these games, the positivity and harm made possible by play acts depends upon the lexicon of play acts being drawn upon through the established speech genre of play in a toxic ecosystem. Judith Butler notes that performative acts are successful in part "because that action echoes prior actions, and accumulates the force of authority through the repetition or citation of a prior and authoritative set of practices. It is not simply that the

[747] James Loxley, *Performativity* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 2.

speech act takes place within a practice, but that the act itself is a ritualized practice."[748] In one sense this resonates within gaming culture as the homophobic, racist, sexist, and ableist terms that Butler is referring to have come to be known as "gamer words" in segments of gaming and popular culture,[749] which is no surprise given the state of gaming culture as explored in chapters one and three.

The greater implication of Butler's intervention in the context of this chapter, is that the injurious speech act also goes beyond the word: ritualized and normative play patterns are invoked through play acts. These play acts form the language world of play acts and new players learning the language: improvising in this game of charades requires drawing in large part from the system of play acts that has already been established and that are experienced through play with others. This reinforces patterns of inter-player interaction - what we could also understand as the player cultures within these games - that are injurious for many, or at the very least lay a foundation for other injurious acts. The next chapter approaches transgression and transgressive positivity with this in mind: what new words or play acts can we introduce into our language of online play, because to address the culture we need to address its foundational language. The transgressive positivity I go searching for in the next chapter is not merely a playful experiment, but tests new or lesser-seen play acts against the normalized modes of communication through online play.

In summary, when describing player acts, activities, or comments in the following chapter, there should now be a greater understanding for the impacts these elements can have upon other players. Interactions between players are communicative gestures, whether intended or not, that impact other players who engage in these conversations, and those who are struck by stray or directed utterances alike. As we've seen in the examples above, these aren't only directed conversations between two players: online gameplay includes many players within many overlapping communication channels and

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[748] Judith Butler, "Burning Acts: Injurious Speech," *The University of Chicago Law School Roundtable 3,* no 1 (1996): 206.

[749] 'Gamer Words' refers to any number of standard slurs commonly heard in multiplayer gaming lobbies or within gaming culture. Urban Dictionary Entry "Gamer word." https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Gamer%20word (Accessed March 13th, 2023). The 'Gamer Word' concept can be found discussed in multiple other locations, and was also brought up by Coherent_Avenger, one of my interviewees.

play spaces at once, and play happens alongside a swirling morass of utterances that we can now understand as a combination of expressive, procedural, meaningful, injurious, and fraught communication.

Chapter 5 - The Quest for Positivity

By now we're familiar with the toxicity and negativity of online gaming, and through these pages have become attuned to at least some of their forms in each of these games. Here I tell the tale of my search for some alternative to this way of being, interacting, and playing online through a search for positivity in *DOTA 2*, *Lost Ark*, *Destiny 2*, and *World of Warcraft*. This positivity takes many shapes, from small personal play acts to larger community movements. I opt to recount this story as I went through it from beginning to end because this is not just an account of my findings about how positivity impacts online games, but is also a reflection of the impact of being positive in these spaces on a person over time. My earlier experiences informed my later research choices, and I highlight the various impacts that doing this work can have on those who do it. Because the amount of ethnographic data acquired is quite high, I use illustrative examples to support the broader observations and discoveries made throughout this process. To paint a fuller picture of the tension between toxicity and positivity, I supplement my own ethnography with interviews from 12 participants who shared their experiences playing these online games.

Each game is presented with a different focus. The first two games examine the interventions of a lone player in *DOTA 2* and *Lost Ark*. *DOTA 2* shows how positivity within toxic gaming spaces can be viewed as transgressive by other players, and how players take it upon themselves to discourage and discipline even the smallest friendly utterances. *Lost Ark* is approached through the lenses of instrumental and repetitive play as I attempt to counter the game's intense self-interested character progression system by helping others achieve their goals rather than pursuing my own advancement. In *Destiny 2* and *World of Warcraft* I explore larger formations of players trying to play against the grain through positivity. In *Destiny 2* I recount my experience within 'The Home of Vibes,' a *Destiny 2* Discord server started by Uhmaayyze, a popular livestreamer who promotes positivity and teamwork. Finally, in *World of Warcraft* I explore the game's unofficial LGBTQIA+ server, Proudmoore. I consider what effect that label and the implication of inclusivity and safety has within the larger context of the game. I also reflect on my time spent in a small guild on Proudmoore, called <Candid Camera>.

I conclude this chapter with a short reflection on this ethnography through the lens of Lauren Berlant's concept of Cruel Optimism. While myself and others were pushing back against the toxic elements of gaming culture in different ways to various effects and impacts, this search always brought me back to negativity and toxicity. Playing positively frequently activates the cultural norms of gaming culture, and at times it does so with force. Even players without the same underlying commitment to broader cultural change who are just trying to create small spaces that feel different than the norm are taxed by the added labour and emotional burden that it takes to play differently. Fatigue, burnout, and anxiety were common, and some players opted to self-exclude from these game spaces despite their attachments, friendships, and formative joyful experiences within these games.

DOTA 2: Revealing Positivity as Transgression

DOTA 2 is where this study began. I had conducted prior research on *DOTA 2* across multiple other research projects,[750] and it was my experiences with this game and its toxicity both as a researcher and a long-time player[751] that led me to ask the question 'what happens when someone is positive in this gaming environment," in the first place. Over the mountain of hours I had accumulated in *DOTA 2* it occurred to me that I rarely saw friendliness or camaraderie. Because of my proximity to the game and the glaring absence of any positive interactions during gameplay, I figured *DOTA 2* would be the best place to start to see if there was even something worthwhile to the question that grew into this project.

For this project specifically, my time in *DOTA 2* served primarily as a proving ground for the premise of positivity as transgressive, and by the end of the study I did not spend as much time in *DOTA 2* as in the other games. This is for three main reasons: First, I required comparably less preliminary research time in the game space to understand the cultural norms and systems within *DOTA 2*. Despite conducting this research four years after my first analysis of toxicity within *DOTA 2*, not a lot has

[750] See Lajeunesse, 2018; Zanescu, Lajeunesse, and French, 2021; Zanescu, French and Lajeunesse, 2021.

[751] Since I received beta access to *DOTA 2* in 2012, I have clocked 3,349 hours within the game - a number that is not uncommon among *DOTA 2* players I have spoken to across my various projects.

changed, particularly as the culture and in-game behaviors are concerned. General griefing, trolling, and flaming are still commonplace as are more targeted forms of racism and gender discrimination as described in chapter 3. It's hard to tell if anything has gotten better or worse as the environment is just saturated with these kinds of interactions.

Second, it didn't take long - only 50 matches of *DOTA 2* - to see the same kinds of in-game responses to my own attempts at positivity. My breaching experiment in *DOTA 2* felt like an in-game remake of the Bill Murray film *Groundhog Day*,[752] as each attempt to be positive played out almost exactly like the last. In my observations of other players, very little outside of faint praise for gameplay skill occurred. Nothing broke this trend. Third, *DOTA 2* players were extremely reluctant to converse about their experiences with the game, and though I do have some interview data from *DOTA 2* players, those players were first recruited from other game communities, and only later did I learn that they also played *DOTA 2*.

Despite these barriers, *DOTA 2* was still productive as a starting point for exploring positivity in toxic play for how it revealed positivity as transgressive: players would quickly react to and deny even the smallest attempts at positivity that broke the norms of communication in a *DOTA 2* match. With *DOTA 2* I opted to keep my positive intervention small and to replicate it over a series of matches. First, I would only respond to negativity by being upbeat: if we were losing the game or a player was angry at another, I would take the role of a coach or cheerleader by saying something like "it's ok, we can do it," or remarking on players' good plays rather than their mistakes, though this didn't produce any notable positive effects across my matches. Players typically ignored these interjections or continued yelling at one another despite my attempts to stay positive among players who came to blows. I also observed a few other players taking this approach, though even then there was often a second layer to these comments. One player specifically complimented my in-game skill during a match our team was losing, but deployed this publicly in chat to insinuate that the rest of my team wasn't very good, effectively using the positive reinforcement on one player to deploy a roundabout insult at others without being directly confrontational.

[752] Columbia Pictures, 1993.

I did one other thing across these *DOTA 2* matches to be positive - something that seemed innocuous to me but produced a consistent pushback from other players and revealed how much stake *DOTA 2* players have in the negativity of the environment. At the start of each *DOTA 2* match there is an acceptable greeting: 'gl hf,' which is short for 'good luck, have fun.' I felt like this greeting has lost a lot of its meaning over time and merely announces that we - the players in the match - are about to play a game of *DOTA 2* together. So I decided that as part of my positive *DOTA 2* player persona I would attempt to channel the spirit of what 'gl hf' is supposed to mean as a kind of well-wishing for the game we're about to play together, and to let the other players know that I'm actually happy to be spending time with them. I began each of my matches with some variation of "Hello fellow *DOTA 2* players, I'm happy to be here in this game with you tonight. Good luck, and let's have a great game," which I would broadcast over text chat to both teams. Without fail, at least one other player - more often multiple - would respond with extreme and pointed criticism of my attempt to be friendly with insults or threats to report me for my actions (Figure 5.1).

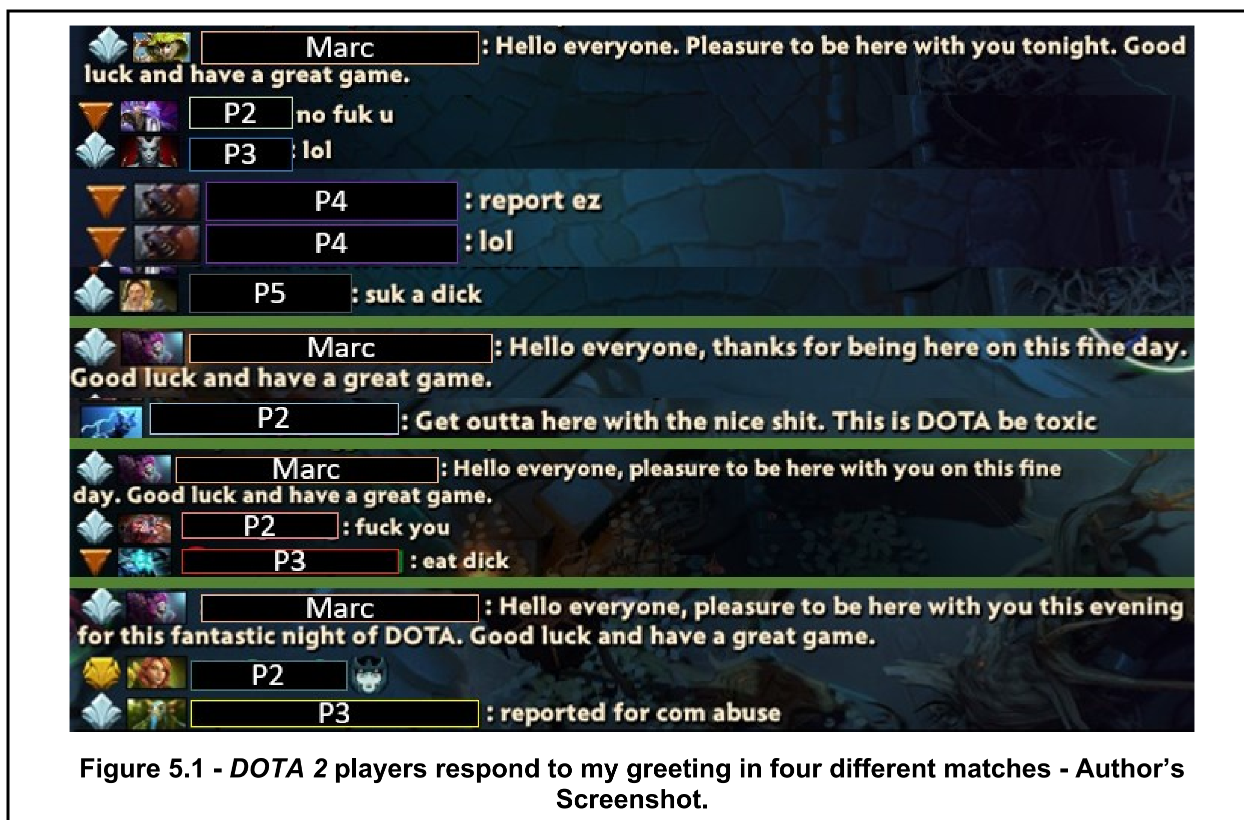

Figure 5.1 - *DOTA 2* players respond to my greeting in four different matches - Author's Screenshot.

Thinking back to Foucault's description of transgression as a lightning flash, we can see here how even the slightest bit of positivity - a Mr. Rogers-esque salutation - flashes in a space comprised of relentless turpitude. The friendly greeting reveals the walls of social acceptability and their active reinforcement by players invested in the norms of *DOTA 2*'s toxic culture.[753] It was telling that I observed far more immediate push-back in-game against my own positive greetings than I saw against toxic players including a player whose in-game name was somehow the logo of the Nazi SS division, or another player who quoted a textbook on phrenology to harass another.

The consistent reaction to this greeting revealed that there are players who come to this game to be toxic: it's part of what they want out of the experience. Though it's impossible to know how many, players actively searching for and producing a toxic experience for others in this and other games contribute to the default atmosphere of these games. Putting more negativity into the space when the environment is already built from a toxic ecosystem is substantially easier than trying to be positive. Being positive in this environment set myself up for confrontation more times than not, which is a trend we'll see repeated in subsequent games as well.

A second dimension of this greeting is that players are habituated to thinking that positivity is disingenuous. One interaction that grew from my start-of-match greeting carried through an entire match into the post-game screen where I had to explain to another player that I was being sincere and that I just wanted them to have a good time. This player's concern was that 'it's a bit too much' - meaning I was laying the positivity on a little thick. I didn't disagree as my pre-match greeting definitely felt unnatural, particularly in the context of a *DOTA 2* match. This is a bit of a catch-22 however, as I settled on this greeting over time because I found that anything less didn't register at all. Simply expanding 'gl hf' to its full form didn't seem out of the ordinary, nor did adding a couple words. The greeting needed a degree of positive panache to not get lost in the noise of chat, but I respected that it could be seen as patronizing in its final form. After the match I asked this skeptic for their advice: what was it that I could say that would make them think I was being sincere without laying it on too thick? They promptly left the match without further reply.

[753] Foucault, "A Preface," 34.

Holistically, I found the entire atmosphere of *DOTA 2* to be actively hostile to positive interactions, but it gets more severe than that as players are actively pulled into the toxic mindset while playing the game. Worthy_Cod is a player I met near the end of the study while playing *WoW*, and was easily one of the most positive people I met across all of these games. When Worthy_Cod agreed to talk they revealed that they too were a long-time *DOTA 2* player - clocking in around the 3000 hours-played range, and I was surprised as they opened up about becoming toxic while playing *DOTA 2*:

> "*DOTA 2* was just… I felt like the more you played *DOTA 2*, the more it just drags you down into this like… abyss of hatred. [...] I feel like the game kind of inspires toxicity. I felt like I didn't like the person I was after playing that game too much, like just being so aggressive to people if things didn't go my way." - Worthy_Cod.

In our conversation, Worthy_Cod began by pointing to a combination of the game's mechanics and how players would abuse them to further grief others. He noted that in a game where a team has a large advantage over their opponents, it's common to prolong the game rather than push to win, instead farming the losing team inside of their base. As we continued speaking though, Worthy_Cod opened up on the impact *DOTA 2* had on his own close relationships rather than interactions with other random players. He reflected on personal accountability for his toxic actions in play:

> "I had some friends. I had a friend from high school who was my best friend, [...] we stayed in touch when we went to college and he had friends that played *DOTA*, and that's kind of how I started playing. Also my brother [...] was really into *DOTA*. I used to play with them and I got to a point where I was much better than them and I knew it, and I was definitely getting too frustrated with them in games when they were just trying to have fun. We just kind of stopped

> playing with each other and sort of drifted apart. That was like, for me, an eye-opening moment, like 'oh, maybe I just don't need to play this game' because I've never been like this before, [...] but it felt like I was becoming a different person when I played the game." - Worthy_Cod.

It wasn't as though Worthy_Cod was able to make a clean break from the game, however. He fully admitted that he queued alone with random players and continued to be aggressive towards others, eventually going to extreme lengths to continue playing:

> "Right before I quit I was entering games and literally immediately muting everyone on both teams and just playing it like… just not even allowing myself to see communication. That's what I had to do to keep myself from being toxic to other people." - Worthy_Cod

Muting others is a frequent suggestion within the community to avoid being subjected to toxicity, but Worthy_Cod felt it was necessary to keep himself from producing toxicity by lashing out at others, even though he didn't act this way in any other game.

While Worthy_Cod pointed more to the game and his own reaction to it, we must also consider how common it is to be treated with aggression and negativity within *DOTA 2*. The abyss that Worthy_Cod described is not just mechanical, it lives in the culture as I found simply trying to greet other players, and this feeling where players are anticipating hostility gets under the skin as an emotional powder-keg creating this pervasive tension. Anything from a player's comment to a personal misplay can set off a chain reaction of more bad feelings and more outbursts. Another participant, Lasagne_Inspector, described an atmosphere of anxiety as they played, describing a perpetual fear that something is always going to go wrong even when a game is going well, and that when the inevitable mistake happens, someone is going to let you know:

> “Any mistake is punished by yelling a racial expletive. [...] Even when you’re succeeding you will get yelled at because the discourse is very much like a high-school jock… like a… like a gym. It is like you would take every person’s worst thoughts and you put them in an intensive competitive environment with no accountability and no social commitment to anyone else and in perfect anonymity. I think once I said ‘hi’ to someone and got a reply back that I was the nicest person they’d seen in like a year in *DOTA*.” - Lasagne_Inspector

Having last played the game a few months before we spoke, Lasagne_Inspector fully admitted that they have no desire to ever return to *DOTA 2*, saying that their life is just better without the game in it. After my own ethnographic work in the game, I came to agree with him.

After 50 straight matches of trying to make positivity happen, I had hit my limit as trying to be positive subjected me to more toxicity than in standard gameplay. The toxicity of the space, though it always wore on me as a player, took a new toll as I became active in trying to combat it through even the smallest action. Like Worthy_Cod and Lasagne_Inspector, I found the fog was just too thick to breakthrough, and *DOTA 2*’s in-game culture was so established - was so far-gone - that a single player couldn’t have an effect on the players or the culture, at least not without subjecting oneself to extreme punishment. The system and the players generally left no wiggle-room for positivity to have a meaningful impact at the inter-player level. I was nevertheless inspired by the reactions that players had, and found that positivity did produce at least some kind of effect. I was eager to see if this approach would produce a different outcome in another game. I took my initial plan into the MMO sphere and scouted out the then-upcoming game *Lost Ark* as a new environment to explore positivity, free of the baggage that *DOTA 2* has acquired over its life-span.

***Lost Ark's Early Days*: From Anticipation to a Culture of Aggressive Grind**

My time with *Lost Ark* began before the game officially launched. Unlike *DOTA 2*, I had zero experience with the game before I started researching it. It was going to be an entirely new adventure with a new community to explore, and although the game had been out in other regions for a few years, in North America it was going to be a mostly new crowd of players. I was optimistic, and I wasn't alone in my optimism: there was a lot of positive energy in the air in the lead-up to the game's release. The media cycle for *Lost Ark* wasn't unique for a new MMO: there were a lot of class breakdowns so players could get a sense of what kind of character they might want to play,[754] and detailed lists of all the activities one can do in the game.[755] *Lost Ark* was already a proven success in other markets which translated to less inherent skepticism about the product overall among eager players, and though there was some debate about the pay-to-win aspects of the game,[756] the collective anticipation for this new MMO didn't die down. I too was caught up in the possibilities that a new game could provide.

Content creators had a lot of fuel for *Lost Ark*'s pre-launch hype machine, including cross-region partnerships between established Korean *Lost Ark* streamers and North American streamers looking to migrate to *Lost Ark* as their number one game.[757] Many of these streams featured tier lists[758] based on data from the other regions, and as launch approached it became clearer that *Lost Ark*'s Western release wasn't a totally fresh start, as even before launch player perceptions of the game, its classes, and how to spend one's time were already being shaped by those who played in other regions through these cross-region partnerships (Figure 5.2).

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[754] "Lost Ark ~ Paladin Best LEVELING Skills! | Is Paladin a good first class?" Hi Im Fox YouTube Video. November 6th, 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DNc60wgIgmI (accessed April 20th, 2023).
[755] "Lost Ark - Complete End Game Breakdown | Everything NA/EU Players Can Do At Level 50." Legacy Gaming YouTube Video. January 16th, 2022. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jj8Z9PvC9Dk (accessed April 20th, 2023).
[756] "Cohh's Thoughts: Is Lost Ark Pay2Win (P2W)?" CohhCarnage YouTube Video. February 10th, 2022. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2u9IQwT1oYk (accessed April 20th, 2023).
[757] "In-Depth Lost Ark Class Overview Ft Saintone." Stoopzz YouTube Video. November 2nd, 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0UjYdMoNWzA (accessed April 20th, 2023).
[758] A tier list is a popular ranking system used in gaming communities to rate the relative power level and viability of classes, abilities, or items in a game. They are largely based on speculation and the opinions of the list creator but many players take them as a fact and enforce what they see in tier lists in-game. Classes that are low on tier lists are often not taken on group activities once that knowledge has circulated within the community.

Figure 5.2 - Ben Lee Gaming's tier list for all *Lost Ark*'s classes in the lead-up to the game's Western release - YouTube Screengrab.[759]

As a final portent of what was to come, there were an increasing number of videos about how to play the game most efficiently and how to maximize one's time to acquire the most materials possible.[760]

In-game, players were extremely active in regional chat in the immediate period following the game's launch, though I would not characterize their interactions as particularly helpful or friendly. My first screenshot of the game, meant to capture my character harvesting wood, saw two players being creepy towards women and debating the game's gender-locked class system[761] in the area chat for all to see (Figure 5.3, Left). During release, chat was near-constant, and players would freely talk about anything through most of the game's chats including politics, business, entertainment, and their experiences with other games. Though toxicity and negativity were commonplace, I frequently saw other players trying to de-escalate toxic situations or to

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[759] "Lost Ark PVE Tier List. Best Classes in Lost Ark for NA/EU Launch & After. Pro & Cons + Synergies." Ben Lee Gaming YouTube Video. January 12th, 2022. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iBoxLmNKUBo (accessed April 20th, 2023).

[760] "Lost Ark ~ Dailies & Weeklies Explained | What to prioritize when spending your time!" Hi Im Fox YouTube Video. July 4th, 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=laTVQ1x_ZF8 (accessed April 20th, 2023).

[761] Aside from one exception, all classes in *Lost Ark* are tied to the gender you select when making a character: only men can be Paladins and only women can be bards, for example.

steer the mood and discussion towards positive topics with mixed results (Figure 5.3, Right).

Figure 5.3 - Left: Two *Lost Ark* players are creepy misogynists on launch day; Right: A player gets frustrated with chat discussions - Author's Screenshots.

On release day I had formed a guild with some friends I knew from other games who were also playing, and we added more players to this guild in the days following launch. The goal was to create a positive and welcoming space and to do activities together, but the guild system in *Lost Ark* combined with the game's flow meant that we really weren't able to play with one another as time went on. While our chat was upbeat and friendly, by the end of the first week most of the guild were at different parts of the game as we did not share the same play schedule. While higher-level characters were able to go back to help lower-level guildmates, which we did when possible, all members of the guild also needed to group up with random players around their own levels quite often, or simply not play the game in order to wait for others to catch up. One of my *Lost Ark* guildmates, Sacred_Relish pointed out that the game flow didn't really support consistent play with others:

> "Unless you're all sinking money and hours into it, […] it was hard because we could have this very cute, chill space where we go hunt Mokoko[762] on this day, or like, we're going to do this, that, and the other. Even though we weren't the same level we could still do certain content together and it

[762] Mokoko seeds were collectible seeds scattered in the game world that players could find as they explored the world. Early on our guild would set aside time to help guild mates collect missing Mokoko seeds as one of our social activities that was not power level dependent. In the fuller context of the game, it was not enough to bridge the growing power gap between players over time.

worked nicely for that, but it was just unsustainable." - Sacred_Relish

As our time in *Lost Ark* continued, the gap between guildmates only continued to grow and many players who started the game together branched off to other groups or quit the game altogether within the first few weeks. Most of my time in *Lost Ark* was navigating various groups of random players who stuck around as the game's player numbers declined. Despite quite a bit of searching, it became extremely difficult to find new guild members or to join a guild that was social and who did activities together because *Lost Ark*'s guild system was not really about sociality, as one might expect from prior research on guilds in other MMOs.[763] This became a widespread community concern among players that was never resolved by the developers.[764]

As I discussed in chapter 3, much of the game focuses around the honing system that progresses one's characters, and the social systems within *Lost Ark* are built predominantly to fuel currency acquisition that supports honing. While *Lost Ark* guilds do have a closed chat room for members like in other games, they are also a mill for currency that can be turned into honing materials. By completing tasks set by the guild leader each week, guild members could acquire currency to hone their equipment. Guild leaders also had a sizable advantage in the guild as they set rates for the distribution of earned materials and decide what kind of tasks need to be completed each week. As such, the guilds I encountered took two primary forms: the first form involved mass-recruitment, designed to fill up every one of the 100 member slots in the guild to guarantee maximum completion of weekly tasks. The second form was the opposite, where only one or two players were in a guild together but they housed all of their characters in the guild.[765] This gave those players more control over currency distribution and weekly task allocation across their characters. In both cases, the guild

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[763] See Williams et al., 2006; Duchenault et al., 2007; Chen, 2009; Chen, 2012.
[764] "How on earth are you supposed to find a guild in this game?" Reddit Thread, February 22nd, 2022. https://www.reddit.com/r/lostarkgame/comments/symw7a/how_on_earth_are_you_supposed_to_find_a_guild_in/ (accessed April 20th, 2023).
[765] In *Lost Ark* you are encouraged by the game and the community to run six characters to maximize your currency earnings!

as a collective unit was not really about playing together as much as it was about exploiting the system to maximize in-game currency acquisition.

Even *Lost Ark*'s 'friends list' operated in a similar way. Early into the game's release players discovered that you could earn Amethyst Shards, a limited currency used to buy a range of cosmetic items, by having 50 friends on your friends list. The result of this incentivization of friendship wasn't that players attempted to cultivate any, let alone fifty, meaningful relationships. Instead players found the path of least resistance to their coveted rewards: chat spam. As *Lost Ark*'s game world opens up players eventually acquire a majestic schooner to sail the game's vast waters, and these waters also have the largest open chat region in the game (Figure 5.4, left). At this point the chat of *Lost Ark's* open seas became flooded with begging, bargaining, and trading for friends list spots: transactional and incentivized operations to maximize the number of Amethyst Shards a player could receive (Figure 5.4, right).

Figure 5.4 - Left: I sail the seas of Arkesia aboard my trusty vessel; Right: Players trade friends list spots to earn in-game currency - Author's Screenshots.

Unsurprisingly, as the game's lifecycle grew further away from the excitement of launch, this approach to socializing players, the barriers to consistently playing with

friends, and the game's overwhelming emphasis on individual character progression influenced the way players grew to treat one another across the game's activities. Thinking back to chapter 1 and John Sageng's work on moral philosophy and instrumentalized play, players in *Lost Ark* largely treated other players purely as 'mere means' to their goals of becoming more powerful.[766] Just over a month after the game's release the culture had settled into one of silence and instrumentalized play. Sacred_Relish and another *Lost Ark* player, Literary_Logger, both remarked that players stopped talking to each other both in group activities and in the open world:

> "I will not speak at all. I will not even say hello. I think that links back to a bit of just a community culture. You really don't talk unless you have something very specific to say or I guess you may just be more of a talkative type [...], but you really just don't communicate unless you really need to. Like a lot more people speak when things are going wrong. So like at the beginning [of an activity] everyone will be quiet probably, except the leader of the group. Maybe one or two people will speak, but the majority of the time it's just quiet until wipes happen,[767] and then people become quite toxic at times." - Literary_Logger

Indeed, aside from a few emoticons being used at the start of an activity, it became increasingly rare to see conversation in the game until things started going wrong, and though there was still some chat in the open world it became sparse. Players quickly grew intolerant of anyone who was new to an activity (Figure 5.5), or who had different strategies.

[766] Sageng, "Moral Norms," 80.
[767] 'Wiping' refers to the entire group dying and needing to restart a part of the activity from the beginning.

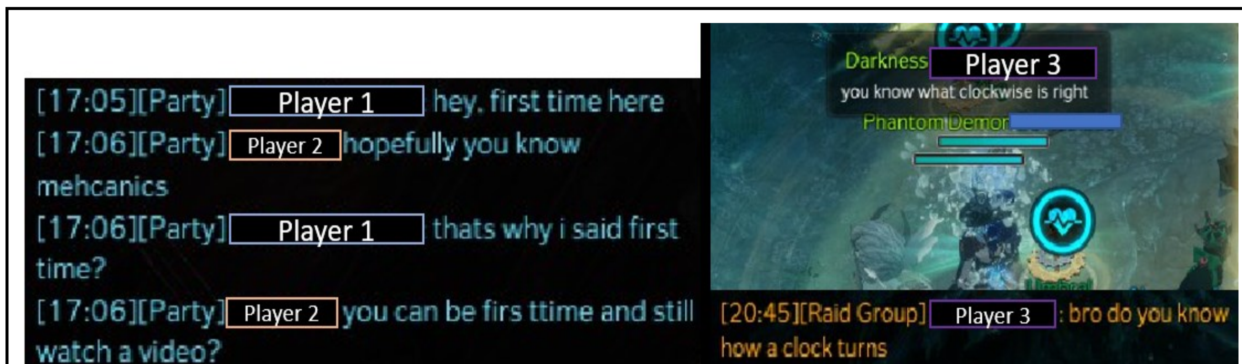

Figure 5.5 - Left: Player 1 greets our party and lets us know they're new to the dungeon. Player 2 becomes aggro immediately; Right: After our group fails to kill a dungeon boss, Player 3 targets a player and humiliates them in front of 6 other party members - Author's Screenshots.

Another layer to this was a suspicion that players you match with in groups weren't players at all, but bots who could use the party finder system to match with real players (Figure 5.6). These factors combined and the game was soon filled with distrust and hostility.

Figure 5.6 - Top Left: Player 1 believes player 2 is a suspicious (sussy) bot and asks them to say 'potato' as a form of improvised captcha; Bottom Left: Players in global chat discuss the bot problem; Right: 2 players in a group activity accuse another of being afk (away from keyboard) or a bot while the accused proclaims their innocence - Author's Screenshots.

Within approximately one month of its release, *Lost Ark*'s community felt fully in-line with gaming's toxic culture, propelled by the game's progression system on a trajectory of extreme instrumentality. Human or bot alike, other players were seen either as stepping stones or obstacles to one's own forward progress. The content creators who stuck around *Lost Ark* fully embraced and encouraged the culture of spending and grind, fully reproducing Christopher Paul's neoliberal myth of the toxic meritocracy in gaming, particularly the idea progress is earned through skill and persistence, while failure to be among the best players is evidence of one's own shortcomings or lack of

effort.[768] Players fully deployed this logic against others during play, and while there was some conflict between those who spent money on the game and those who did not, the larger divide was between those with player power - regardless of how it was achieved - and those without. Lasagne_Inspector, also a *Lost Ark* player, characterized his own experiences with the players and culture that crystallized in the game over his approximately 600 hours of gameplay:

> "People were toxic to other people on the basis of like, if you spent money you were not a real player because you bought gear, [but also] if you didn't spend money and you were bad, well, you're poor because you didn't spend money to brute force [your power level] which you should do. Even when I was watching podcasts [...] they would talk about other players not being good in their group and they would routinely make comments about - I don't even want to repeat words - but you know, insert slurs about intelligence or disability. [...] I think that game is from top to bottom made to be, [...] like, 'If you're great, you're able: you can do whatever you want, and if you're bad, you're garbage, and you should be discarded.'" - Lasagne_Inspector

Even within the MMO genre known for having these features, *Lost Ark* turned the neoliberal capitalist dial up to eleven, and many key figures in the community supported this way of playing.

Searching for Impactful Positivity, or 'How I Learned to Stop Honing and Love the Alms'

Despite playing as much as possible, when I reached the end game where players would theoretically be forced to congregate more, I found myself in a liminal space because of the time I had spent helping other players in my guild progress

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[768] Paul, *Toxic Meritocracy*, 63-90.

through lower levels before they quit the game. These activities, though benevolent, did not provide level-appropriate rewards for my own character and I eventually found myself consistently behind the curve of the further progressed players, which made getting into high-end groups difficult. While I had hoped to make a guild as a base for positivity in *Lost Ark*, the game proved a consistent and successful obstacle to that goal, so I found myself mostly alone. Still, I started prodding with positivity in the group activities that I joined.

Small play acts became crucial for keeping party spirits high in *Lost Ark*'s low-communication environment. *Lost Ark* features a number of limited utility items that players can use to make encounters easier, though many of these were seldom used by players. One of these items is a flare that players can use to quickly identify the location of an evasive monster, thus saving the group a lot of time, while another item, the scarecrow, can keep a boss in place for a few seconds making it easier to do damage while keeping other players momentarily safe. I took it upon myself to use these items in group gameplay as often as possible, and I found that it was substantially less toxic when these items were used. I don't consider this kind of item usage transgressive, as players developed an expectation that *someone* should be using these items even though they weren't commonly deployed. This became more of a toxicity mitigation strategy because not using these items - particularly in groups where no one threw a flare - would often annoy players. Without a flare, players had to spend more time searching for the elusive monsters, even though the most vocal players in this situation did not contribute to the group by throwing a flare themselves, either. I would sum-up the whole vibe of group play in *Lost Ark* as "what can you do for me?"

I also continued my approach of friendly greetings that I began in *DOTA 2*, and at the very least the community usually responded with the cute *Lost Ark* emotes or a curt 'hi' instead of personal attacks in both PvE and PvP activities. Still, I wanted to do more as this never translated to anything beyond momentary pleasantries. What's more, these kinds of exchanges didn't prevent other players from berating others or myself later in the activity. In these situations I found it increasingly difficult to stay positive or to say something that would de-escalate the situation. One incident recorded in my field notes describes my frustration after trying to do a few dungeons:

> "Played with a guy who called us idiots even though he died first. He initiated a vote to quit the dungeon and we accepted. I then re-queued and matched with the same guy three times in a row who immediately wanted to quit the dungeon without trying because he didn't like our group composition, all while calling us names. In the spirit of this research I should have said something like 'we can do it,' or 'let's at least try,' but I didn't. I asked 'what's wrong with you?' and after our group disbanded for the fourth time I turned off *Lost Ark* and called it a day."

I later remarked that "staying positive can be extremely hard," and that in those situations "my body wants to react negatively." I found myself in a similar position as Worthy_Cod in *DOTA 2:* I was being pulled into the negativity even despite having a firm commitment to the opposite. It wasn't the last time that the toxicity of these games affected me in this way, but I refrained from lashing out in the future even at my most frustrated. For now, I took a break, I regrouped, and I sought another avenue for exploring positivity in the game because this was not working.

My final stop with group activities in *Lost Ark* was the aforementioned 'bussing.'[769] As was the norm for players in my position, I joined the widespread practice of spending gold to have more powerful players run me through content. I hoped that I might eventually gain enough player power to find a new, functional guild, or at least new opportunities for positivity. Finding a guild didn't pan out despite my efforts, but the bussing environment was a unique experience in itself. A typical bus group consisted of two high-powered characters who would carry six other lower-powered characters through a normally challenging encounter designed for 8 players. However, in a bus group the 6 players purchasing this service don't even play. Once you load into the

[769] As described in chapter 3b, bussing was the process of paying higher-powered characters to run you through content.

activity you are encouraged to just stand around until the two higher-level players kill the boss.

The main ‘bus’ content at the time was a 3-phase encounter known as Argos. Between each phase there was a small break where players received rewards, and this was also where the transaction for participating in a bus took place. Because players could match cross-server for this activity but could not trade cross-server, a unique process to pay for the bus was developed within the community. During the second break, the players running the bus would post an item on the in-game auction house that would normally sell for one gold or less for a much higher price - usually between 900-1400 gold - which would then be purchased to pay for the bus (Figure 5.7, left). Because the auction house functioned across servers, this allowed players from different servers to pay each other.

Even this activity, which existed because lower-level characters were being gate-kept from doing the content legitimately, was being gate-kept: players who did not know this unintuitive and clunky payment system were harassed for not knowing how to pay (Figure 5.7, right).

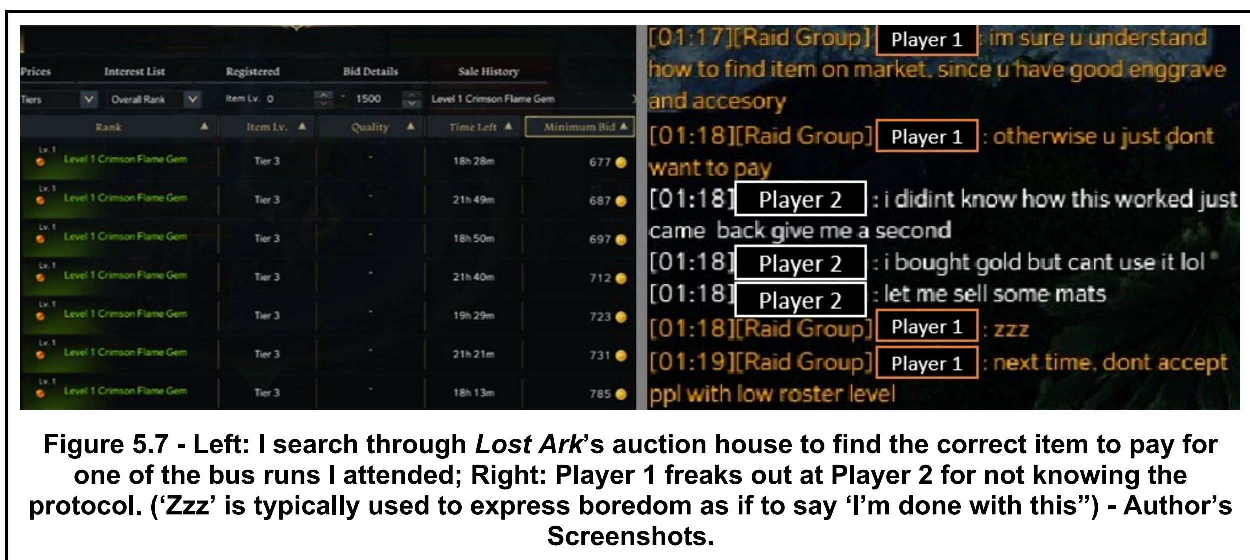

Figure 5.7 - Left: I search through *Lost Ark*’s auction house to find the correct item to pay for one of the bus runs I attended; Right: Player 1 freaks out at Player 2 for not knowing the protocol. (‘Zzz’ is typically used to express boredom as if to say ‘I’m done with this”) - Author’s Screenshots.

Players who took too long to pay were targeted for making the bus take longer than necessary. In *Lost Ark* even payment had to be swift and efficient or you would be

singled out for failing to play correctly, even in content where 'playing' just meant opening your in-game wallet.

I did a few buses and continued to hone myself towards the appropriate power level but it wasn't long after my first bus that I finally cracked as all the rewards I had earned were eaten by failed honing attempts. There was no end to the toxicity and there was no end to the grind. With limited research time I realized I couldn't guarantee I would make it beyond my current power-level without a lot of luck or spending a lot of money - something I resolved not to do.[770] More than all of this, the honing system itself wore me out, as it did to other players within the community.[771] In my field notes I remarked that "I feel like I'm on an infinite and circular hamster wheel." I was extremely close to quitting the game and calling it a wash, but I hadn't seen positivity make a real impact yet, and after a few days a new idea struck me: I'm just going to stop honing and instead I'll give all my stuff away to help others achieve their goals. And that's what I did nearly every day for two months.

Each day I completed the activities that gave me tradeable honing materials, and once or twice a day depending on how many materials I had accumulated I would go to the endgame social hub known as Punika, and I would announce that it is time for my daily honing materials giveaway (Figure 5.8).

[770] Because I did not have money! :D.
[771] Previously explained in more detail in chapter 3b.

Figure 5.8 - Left: I sit on my elk mount in Punika and announce to the whole area that I'm giving away materials; Right: I slightly altered the message each day to keep it fresh. This also helped signal that I wasn't a bot to other players - Author's Screenshots.

There were no stipulations to my giveaway. It was first-come, first-serve because I couldn't guarantee a more equitable system within the limitations of the game, though I did eventually have enough of a stockpile that if I had multiple players take me up on the offer I could usually provide them all an equal and impactful amount of materials. Early on players were skeptical because this wasn't a thing that players did. They remarked in chat that they thought I was a scammer or that I was quitting the game which reveals some of the giveaway's transgressive qualities. Over time these comments stopped and reactions to my giveaway ranged from strange to pleasant and for the most part felt different than anything I encountered so far in *Lost Ark* (Figure 5.9, left).

Figure 5.9 - Left: Two players congregate around me while waiting for a player who is more in-need of honing materials to claim them; Right: A player is skeptical of the giveaway then asks me to sleep with his mother, a line of conversation I promptly extricate myself from - Author's Screenshots.

There were only a few players who opened trade and said nothing, and even if some of the interactions were 'gamer-y,' they still had a different valence than in more standard activities (Figure 5.9, right).

In hindsight, I find it remarkable how long it took to come up with this kind of counter-play approach, but it makes sense given that it isn't a thing that players did in *Lost Ark*, and it hasn't been common in my experience to see this kind of charity in MMOs at all. Tom Boellstorff found that players in *Second Life* possessed this charitable spirit, and early work on *World of Warcraft* suggests that it was more common in the early era of MMOs, but upon reflection it was noticeably absent in my own research up to this point.[772] As we saw with *DOTA 2*, the socio-technical parameters of the game world heavily inflect what players think they can do, and this even applies to players who are actively trying to think outside of the box. It's telling that even though I did this nearly daily for approximately two months, I did not see it replicated on my server in that time. Aside from the excitement around the game's launch, these giveaways consistently set-up the most positivity I observed in the game's chat. While I can't account for how other players felt, disavowing honing and the game's rhetoric of self-interested progression was certainly the best I had felt while playing *Lost Ark* since the game's release, though I still felt conflicted about this strategy overall.

[772] Boellstorff, *Coming of Age*, 100; 185-187.

This breaching experiment, even though it did produce small flourishes of collective positivity and pleasant social situations that I did not observe elsewhere in the game, was far from a victory or confirmation of positivity as an anti-toxicity strategy. I felt that even with this play act, I was partially enabling players' participation within a game system that drove me to feel so miserable and frustrated, and which underscored a lot of the social dynamics within *Lost Ark*. I felt this acutely after one giveaway where a player followed up in area chat saying that both honing attempts from my gifted materials failed, remarking "depression, LOL" before leaving chat (Figure 5.10).

Figure 5.10 - Player 2's excitement, as expressed through the cheer emote, turns to disappointment after more honing failures - Author's Screenshot.

After I gave away my final honing materials it felt like the only way to actually win was to not play: extricating myself from the system was the only surefire way for me to feel morally good in relation to the way *Lost Ark*'s progression system exploited players and contributed to the culture of instrumentalized play that defined my experience within the game. What's more, while some players were clearly inspired by my generous acts, for some I was no doubt the best version of the instrumentalized player: I was a means of accruing honing materials with no downside or larger social or gameplay commitment. In the hyper capitalist system that *Lost Ark* reproduced it felt like no matter what I did I was part of the larger problem one way or another, and my most successful attempt at transgressive positivity within these games so far was also subsumed into the cultural norm of self-interested player progression. Interpersonal positivity was more possible in *Lost Ark* than in *DOTA 2*, but these kinds of interpersonal play acts are far too insular and fleeting to affect the pervasive systemic issues within the games. Before continuing I needed to re-strategize.

Intermission: A Question of Presence and Scale

After completing the bulk of my time with *DOTA 2* and *Lost Ark* I felt that positivity could have a transgressive effect if deployed in the right way, but it was difficult to see beyond the short-term impact of these interventions. There were two elements of my strategy that I needed to reckon with. First is the element of presence. My early breaching activities like greetings and general positivity in *DOTA 2* and *Lost Ark* were extremely enclosed and ephemeral, but for positivity to work against systemic issues, it would need to have a more consistent presence within the game world and amongst the culture. Judith Butler, in *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly*, emphasizes presence and visibility through the congregation of bodies in public space, be it physical or virtual.[773] I was only able in very few instances to produce that kind of presence in *Lost Ark*'s virtual world but it was at least a sign that positivity could enable collectivity around it, but a question remained of how to create a persistent positive presence out of short-lived transgressive play acts.

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[773] Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 71-73.

Inspired by Nancy Fraser's work, I considered that in order to produce a more persistent presence, I would need to scale-up the reach of those actions. Fraser's work is concerned with justice and governmentality, but also raises important questions about the scale of political action: were my acts among players large enough to reach those who needed to see those actions to produce meaningful change within the culture? So far the answer felt like a resounding 'no.' Similarly, to enable collectivity those positive acts would require increased visibility. In each match of *DOTA 2* and each activity in *Lost Ark*, positivity only affected a small number of other people and the giveaways in *Lost Ark*'s area chat were broadcast to up to a few hundred at once, though many of these players were probably bots. As one of my aims for this project was to consider how positivity impacted the systemic aspects of toxic culture, I would need to go beyond the limits of these first interventions.[774]

Taken together, Butler and Fraser's work nudged me towards thinking about ways to create a more consistent presence of positivity on a larger scale, and though I considered livestreaming, I thought that practically I was unlikely to be able to achieve the presence and scale by myself within the scope and timeline of this project. As a compromise, in the following games I continued my own smaller interventions, but I also sought out communities and people with presence who were producing positivity on a larger scale. My ethnography grew to include understanding what it was like within these larger formations that were already doing transgressive positivity.

Destiny 2: In Space No One Can Hear You Be Toxic

I didn't find a community immediately in *Destiny 2*, and my research began with a more exploratory phase that incorporated tactics from the previous two games. Unlike the fresh world of *Lost Ark*, I hopped into *Destiny 2*'s already-established universe. I had played the original *Destiny* and played *Destiny 2* briefly after the game's launch, but returning to the game in 2022 during *The Witch Queen*[775] expansion was effectively starting fresh as character power-level had been reset numerous times and the older

[774] Nancy Fraser, *Scales of Justice: Reimagining Political Space in a Globalizing World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).
[775] Bungie, 2022.

content that I was familiar with had been removed from the game. Aside from the relatively small amount of solo story missions that introduce players to the game's world, characters, and combat, I encountered other players nearly everywhere I went in the game. The game quickly ferries you into activities where you'll need to match with other people. After coming from *Lost Ark* the world felt surprisingly populated, especially given that many of *Destiny 2*'s locales are desolate planets sprinkled with invading alien forces for the player to shoot.

There are recurring public events in the open world that players congregate around, which puts players in close proximity to one another in a collaborative activity (Figure 5.11).

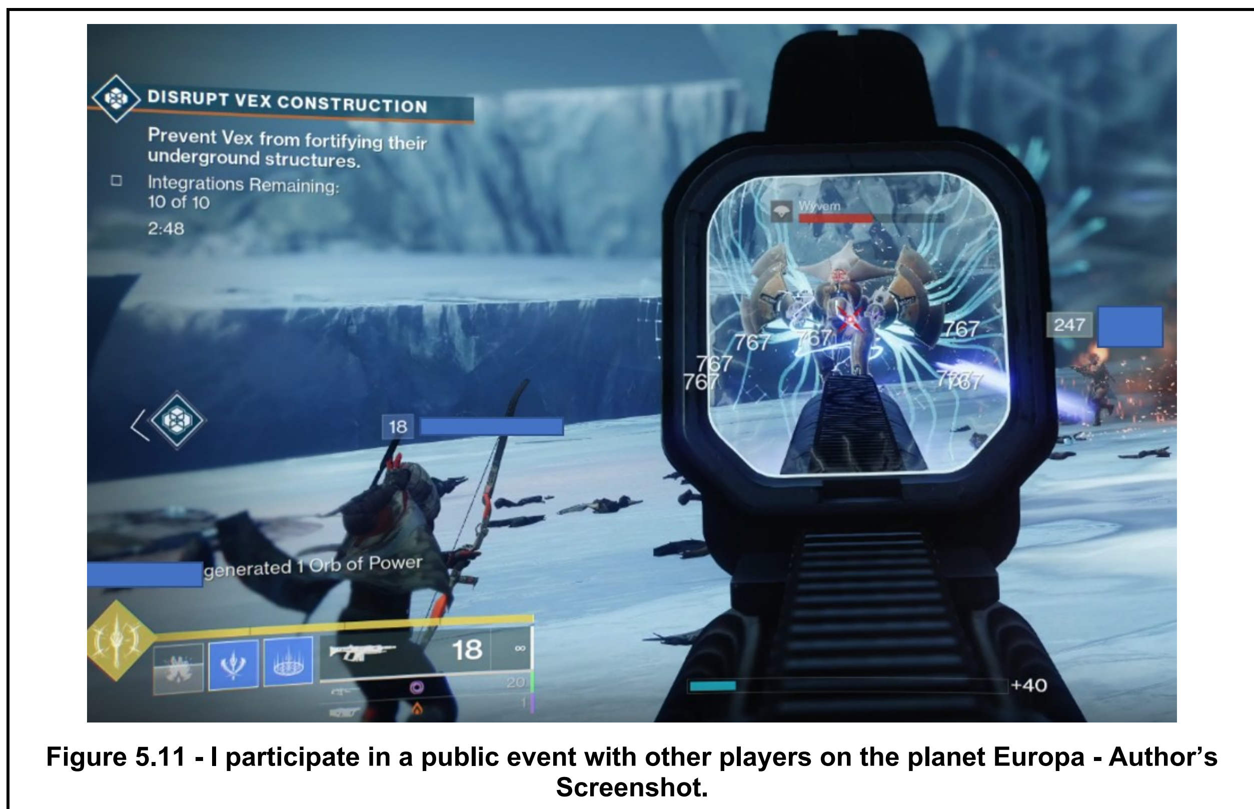

Figure 5.11 - I participate in a public event with other players on the planet Europa - Author's Screenshot.

Though there are more players closer together in the game world, *Destiny 2* was comparably silent to *Lost Ark*. Early on in my time with *Destiny 2* I would make sure to say 'hi' and type a friendly message in the game's text chat in communal areas,

especially in the game's main social hub known as 'the tower,' (Figure 5.12). Aside from one player who added me to their

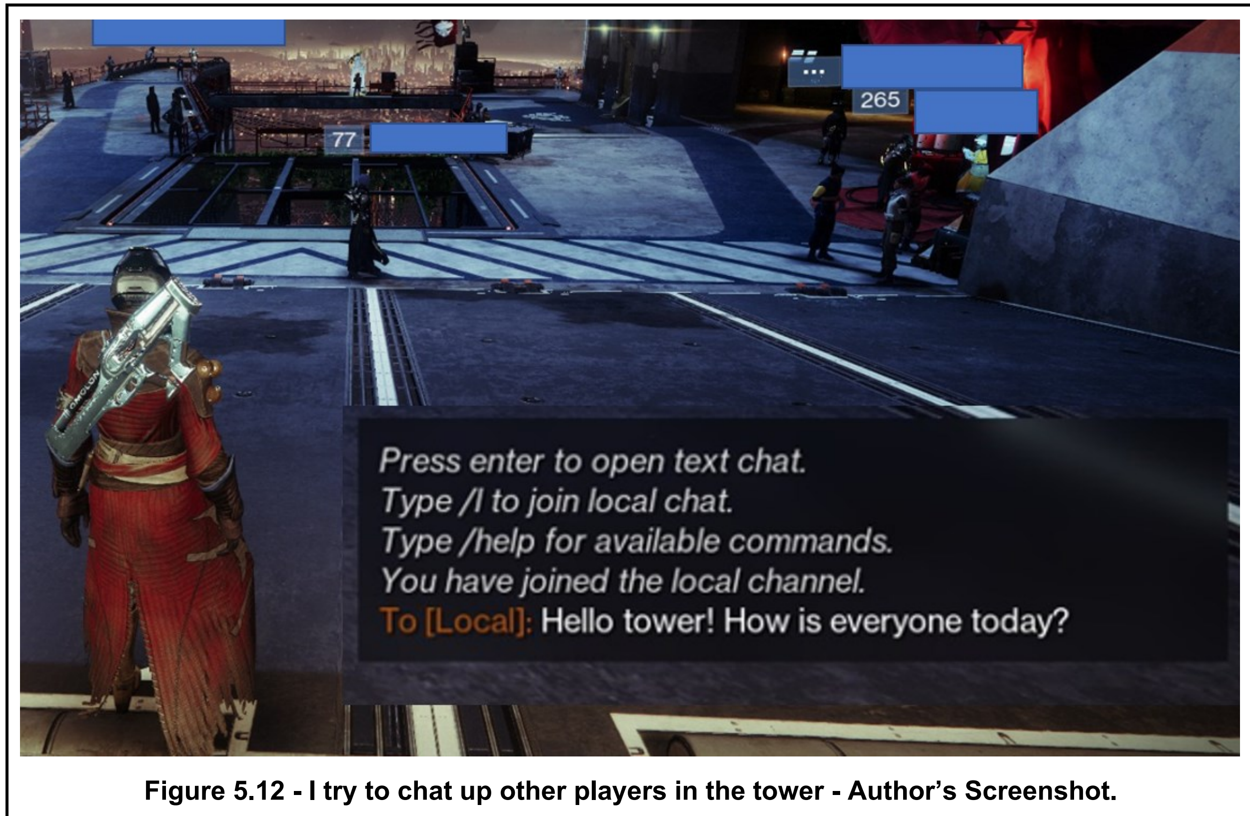

Figure 5.12 - I try to chat up other players in the tower - Author's Screenshot.

friends list, I received no replies each time I reached out this way. It isn't that *Destiny 2* players don't communicate with each other in-game, but thinking back to chapter 4, chat is not the main communication mechanism, which is unusual among MMOs. One of my participants, Sleigh_Provider notes:

> "I generally avoid matchmade content, and if I have to engage with it I will generally keep things like all chat off. [...] You know, I'm never going to see these people again, why should I care about their opinions? Like, especially if they're just going to be super negative. [...] Very rarely do I have a positive encounter in things like all chat or team chat, so I usually just keep it off." - Sleigh_Provider

My encounters in *Destiny 2* indicate that most players in the wild follow Sleigh_Provider's strategy and keep out of chat. Players instead rely on emotes, or for more difficult activities arrange private voice chats on Discord servers through private messages.

For an MMO, *Destiny 2*'s social and communication systems can seem surprisingly ineffectual and cumbersome. The game's 'looking for group (lfg)' feature is especially odd, as instead of an in-game menu, players looking for others to do the same difficult activities must use a web browser or mobile app outside of the game to open Bungie's official 'lfg' webpage. While these features of *Destiny 2* look archaic by the standards of other games, one of my interviewees who recently worked for Bungie, Generous_Frock, explained that these choices were by design to mitigate in-game toxicity:

> "Honestly it was intentional. [...] There's a reason that *Destiny* as a game shipped without any lfg in game, right. There's a reason that they did it through the website, and that was because they could police the website a thousand times easier than they could in-game." - Generous_Frock

In practice these choices appear to work. Encountering players on planets or using random matchmaking for appropriate activities felt largely toxicity free, even though I was new and inexperienced. Early in my *Destiny 2* research, I recorded this entry in my field notes after doing the 'wellspring offensive,' a PvE activity with 5 other random players:

> "First time doing the wellspring offensive. The difference between this game and *DOTA 2* and *Lost Ark* are night and day. I don't even know what I'm doing and I did no research but I can follow the lead of others and not feel like I'm going to be screamed at. I feel like I'm helping, and the revive

> feature[776] makes it feel like we're trying to help each other succeed instead of just yelling or getting bent out of shape."

Aside from one competitive PvP match where a player typed rude things to me because they didn't like my strategy, the players were mostly silent or using silly emotes. If other players died during a fight, others would try to safely revive them.

Maybe it was just that my bar was set so low from my prior experiences in the previous games, but regardless I was feeling optimistic so far. For players approaching *Destiny 2* from the outside without any greater social commitment or desire to participate in activities that require more organized group play, the game doesn't appear to be toxic at all. Had I found a game that encouraged positivity and eliminated positivity through the way the social systems were constructed? No, absolutely not, and thinking back to Sleigh_Provider's comments, there must have been toxicity somewhere if he was so reluctant to use chat, but early on I didn't see it. I didn't see it because in-game I *couldn't* see it. Speaking with some *Destiny 2* players about their experiences revealed that Bungie's systems actually concealed a community as toxic as any other. Generous_Frock was actually hired by Bungie in-part for his role in establishing a positivity sub-community for *Destiny 2* in response to the toxicity he witnessed among the player base on game-adjacent sites and in organized group play. Speaking on his motivation to create a positive community, he noted:

> "You go on Twitter: it's negative. You go to Reddit: it's negative. You go on YouTube and you look at comments: It's all negative. It's just something - not about *Destiny* - but I would say like MMO-type games in general just bring this whole level of toxicity." - Generous_Frock

[776] In *Destiny 2* when a player dies during an encounter they can be revived by other players. At times this can be strategically risky and in more difficult content revives are limited, but players often prioritize reviving fallen teammates.

Generous_Frock continued to say that in group play it was common to find “sweat lords” - a gaming term for players who enforce metagames and who are prone to angering easily and micromanaging the play of others.

He was right on both counts - the main community sites for *Destiny 2* were dominated by people complaining about the game and personally attacking others for their opinions on class balance and game content. Generous_Frock also reported that players acquired the private contact details of one of the community managers and harassed her because of development choices that Bungie had made regarding the game. In-game, these community features became far more pronounced for me once I started doing more organized group activities like raids, where groups often require the use of in-game voice chat or Discord to join.

Even within a clan or group of friends, *Destiny 2* players could be extremely toxic. Sacred_Relish raided with a small group of trusted players but noted that even within that group there were players that would target her because of her inexperience with the game and because of her gender. One clan member was consistently “being a dick over coms and trying to get a rise” out of her because she was newer to the game. Another player the group found through the lfg system became creepily attentive towards her once he heard her voice over chat. This player prioritized his class’s healing abilities on Sacred_Relish over the rest of the group while making flirtatious comments that Sacred_Relish did not wish to relive. This combination of play acts and voice chat singled her out and made her deeply uncomfortable. He even tried to pursue her in-game friendship by messaging other clan members for her gamer tag for days after she declined his initial friend request. She stated:

> “I just felt a strong incel behaviour kind of vibe. That was the most awkward thing I’ve done in a game space in my whole life because it was just very like ‘Oh, I should get your gamer tag, like we could play together sometime,’ and I was like ‘UM, NO.’ [...]. I felt like a girl in that space instead of like a player or a gamer - I felt very gendered in that

moment. [...] It was one of those moments where I felt super grossed out." - Sacred_Relish

Although the game's systems conceal many of the community's toxic elements, the more one participated the more clear it became that *Destiny 2*'s player base was similarly toxic to the others, but that the game and social systems did a great job of concealing this from new players.

***Destiny 2*'s Positivity Scene: Visiting the Home of Vibes**

Toxicity isn't the end of the *Destiny 2* story however. One of the notable things about the community is how invested some players are in playing against the negativity and toxicity I've just described. For example, the positivity community that Generous_Frock established is based on Reddit, has seventy-five thousand subscribers, and now functions as an alternative to the official *Destiny 2* forums and subreddit for players looking for upbeat discussions surrounding the game. Generous_Frock considered his community a "drop in the bucket," but such a concentration of people looking for positive ways to discuss the game is an indicator that there are a significant number of players looking for a more positive culture.

This happens in-game as well. One common player-led practice in *Destiny 2* is known as 'Sherpa,' named after the Nepalese people who have become famous for guiding Mount Everest's climbers during their expeditions. In the game, Sherpa refers to guiding newer or inexperienced players through more challenging group content. While this may seem like *Lost Ark*'s bussing, there are some important differences. Sherpa has no exchange of currency to participate, and there is no externalized gameplay incentive for being a Sherpa.[777] This practice developed during the original *Destiny* from players who just wanted to help others learn complex parts of the game and it remains common within the community, though there are different ideas about what a Sherpa'd activity might look like. Generous_Frock, a long-time Sherpa, noted that when going

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[777] The term has been co-opted by a small industry of third-party character-boosting services that can be purchased for real money, though when players refer to Sherpa they are more often referring to the free, community practice.

through the game's lfg system for new-player friendly runs, veteran players will still expect precise play and exact equipment loadouts even from inexperienced players.[778] Generous_Frock explains his approach to being a Sherpa:

> "If you do a raid with me and I shepherd you through a raid, I'm going to tell you, 'Here's how things work. Here's how everything in this encounter works. Do you want a role,[779] or do you want to kill stuff? I'll explain the encounter to you either way.' [...] I give you that option because if I just go 'HEY! YOU'RE DOING THIS!' that puts pressure on you. [...] Dude, it's a video game. We're here to have fun with it." - Generous_Frock

My initial experiences with *Destiny 2*'s Sherpa culture were through the lfg system and were far closer to the 'sweat lord' approach than that of Generous_Frock, but through Twitter I eventually found a public Discord community full of Sherpas called "The Home of Vibes," that has positivity as its mission statement. This Discord server was established by the *Destiny 2* livestreamer Uhmaayyze (pronounced 'amaze'), who's public persona on stream and over Twitter is built on positivity. Uhmaayyze's initial Tweet that caught my attention reads as follows:

> "If you play *Destiny 2* and you work or have family or you play casually and want to experience the kings fall[780] or dungeons, let me help you have that experience. I help

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[778] This reflects my own experience in Bungie's own matchmaking service as well. Though not as toxic as *DOTA 2*, once I was on voice comms (either in-game or Discord) for these activities, players would still yell at others, including myself, for not knowing what to do or not having specific weapons equipped despite those groups being labeled as newbie friendly.
[779] Usually for a specific and complex task, such as learning and calling out the symbols explained in Chapter 4.
[780] The newest raid activity at the time.

plenty of people this past week and they love it in the discord as well as the twitch channel. No toxic vibes."[781]

Uhmaayyze posts multiple inspirational Tweets per day, and actively Sherpas members of his community on his livestream while often dropping freestyle raps about staying positive, watching out for one's mental health, and general takes on *Destiny 2* game content (Figure 5.13). He was featured in Bungie's community spotlight in 2020[782] and had a feature article about his life and streaming career published on gaming website *Kotaku* in 2021,[783] and as of April 2023 he has over 49,000 followers on Twitch.[784] Uhmaayyze has clearly scaled up positivity, and I was curious how that played out in-game.

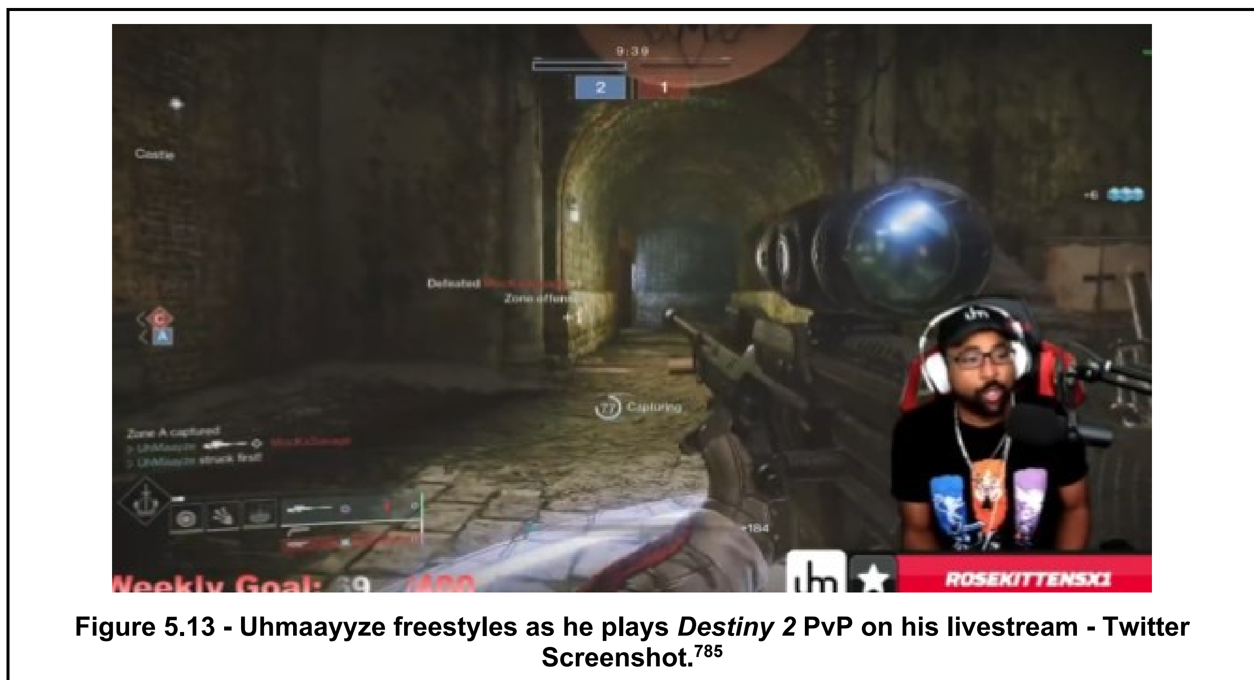

Figure 5.13 - Uhmaayyze freestyles as he plays *Destiny 2* PvP on his livestream - Twitter Screenshot.[785]

[781] Uhmaayyze Tweet, September 14th, 2022. https://twitter.com/uhmaayyze/status/1570060575647866881 (accessed April 27th, 2023).
[782] "Community Focus - Uhmaayyze." Bungie Official Website. August 14th, 2020. https://www.bungie.net/en/News/Article/49446 (accessed April 27th, 2023).
[783] Isaiah Colbert, "Twitch Streamer Drops Bars, Kicks Ass in *Destiny 2*," *Kotaku* Article. December 21st, 2021. https://kotaku.com/twitch-streamer-drops-bars-kicks-ass-in-destiny-2-1848254272 (accessed April 27th, 2023).
[784] https://www.twitch.tv/uhmaayyze (accessed April 27th, 2023).
[785] "Freestyle and gaming in destiny 2 part 66," Uhmaayyze Tweet. January 11th, 2022. https://twitter.com/uhmaayyze/status/1480969732996366338 (accessed April 27th, 2023).

While The Home of Vibes is technically Uhmaayyze's server for his fans, it has also grown into its own community. While Uhmaayyze sets the tone for the server and is its figure-head, he streams seven days a week and doesn't personally manage the entire Discord server. He has a team of moderators who enforce the server's rules, which include strict prohibition on general disrespect and hate speech, while encouraging respect for others' identities and personal pronouns. At the time of this research there are about one thousand users online during daytime hours, including over 50 designated Sherpas for various activities. I was most active in this Discord in September 2022 after the release of the King's Fall raid, and at this time it was common to see between three to six full groups of players in different voice chat channels throughout the day and evening. In addition to facilitating matchmaking between players seeking positivity, this Discord server was a site of various discussions with dedicated channels for talking about food, movies, cars, and any number of topics that some players in the server might have in common.

Finding a group to play with through The Home of Vibes was extremely freeform. Some players opted to use special voice channels, dubbed 'waiting rooms' where players looking to form a group could hop in or private message users in these rooms to fill spots in a party (Figure 5.14).

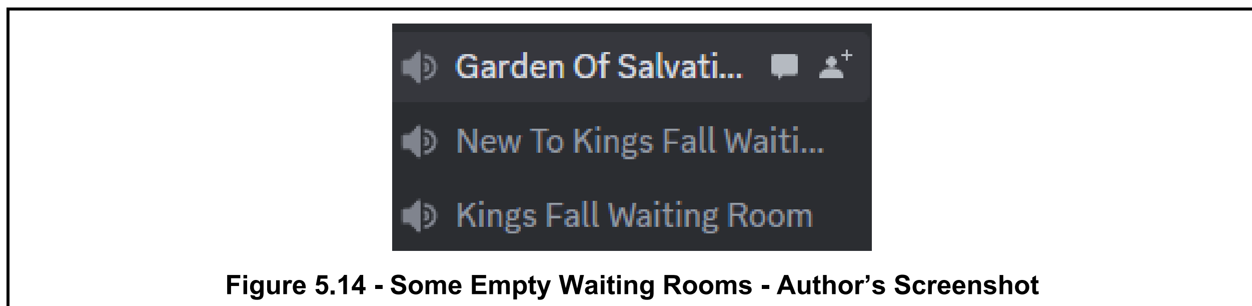

Figure 5.14 - Some Empty Waiting Rooms - Author's Screenshot

I more frequently saw players type messages in the 'raid-channel' text chat indicating that they were looking for others to complete a particular activity. New players could request Sherpas and usually one or more would volunteer, while groups with Sherpas also let the chat know if they had available space for new or inexperienced players. For my first raid with this community I saw a Sherpa announce in chat that they were going to help a new player for the raid King's Fall, and said they needed people to fill up the

remaining slots. I explained I was new but read up on everything in the raid. They said that was fine and I was invited to the group.

Our group of six raiders were all men, which was not surprising. As we congregated in our in-game group we chatted in our Discord voice channel, discussing our player classes, our hopes for items, and prior experiences with this raid. Our Sherpa, Partial_Swarm, assured us they'd done it dozens of times, while two of us were completely new to the experience.[786] The other members of the group had a few completions each, but were mostly comfortable with the raid.

King's Fall is a raid made up of eight sequential encounters of increasing difficulty. Five of these eight encounters are boss fights (Figure 5.15, left) that require the group to take on different tasks and to coordinate between each other in a frantic battle to defeat a powerful enemy, while the other three encounters are known as 'jumping puzzles' (Figure 5.15, right) where players use *Destiny 2*'s spatial elements to traverse various obstacle courses.

Figure 5.15 - Left: I shoot my gun at the Warpriest, one of the King's Fall bosses; Right - Another group member jumps across swinging platforms in one of the jumping puzzles - Author's Screenshots.

The first encounter wasn't explained to us, but it was simple enough that the experienced players were able to complete it without issue while the other new player

[786] King's Fall is a remake of a raid from the original *Destiny*, which I had completed a few times back in 2015. While I let them know this, I also admitted that I didn't remember everything, and they should effectively treat me as brand new.

and I just stood in the room and shot at whatever small enemies came our way. This wasn't what I expected from this run as it felt so far like playing with other random players from lfg or being carried in *Lost Ark* content.

The first jumping puzzle punctuated my fears that this group was going to be more of the same. This puzzle consists of a large chasm that fills with small spaceships that move across the area in various patterns. While the sequence is the same each time, the path a player must take is not intuitive and it takes several minutes of patience and correct jumping to make it across successfully. If a player falls they must start again from the beginning of the puzzle. As the ships started to appear the other new player was lagging behind the group and he playfully exclaimed "Don't leave me behind I don't know where I'm going," to which our Sherpa replied "Oh no, I'm getting out of here," as he used a combination of one of his skills and a high-level item to sail across the gap, leaving us all behind with no guide (Figure 5.16).

Figure 5.16 - I stare in disbelief as our sherpa (the tiny dot on the far horizon) abandons us while spaceships begin to traverse the chasm - Author's Screenshot.

Though our Sherpa stayed in the raid, the mood shifted as the group felt left behind. Though this wasn't the most toxic thing I've witnessed, it was not the positive experience I had expected from Umaayyze's server as it had been advertised. As my unease grew, another player in the group, Silent_Obligation, chimed in after he realized the Sherpa had left us to figure it out on our own, timidly saying "For the guy that's new, you can just follow me and jump down here," while attentively turning his character towards us to make sure we were jumping correctly. While there were some failures in this jumping puzzle and it took much longer because our impromptu guide was noticeably stressed by the new pressure of helping us due to our Sherpa's absence, we nonetheless completed it and continued to the rest of the raid.

As the raid went on our original Sherpa stopped speaking, despite questions and some concerns from our players. By the 4th encounter, Silent_Obligation reluctantly took it upon himself to explain each of the encounters in extreme detail and to organize our group even though they admitted they had never led a raid before and weren't completely comfortable in that position. While we died numerous times, over a brief discussion the other four of us who were still communicating supported Silent_Obligation's leadership and agreed to stay to finish the raid, though in the end it took almost six hours for what was estimated to be a two-hour activity. Our original Sherpa never left the group, and only came back over voice during the final boss to micromanage everyone's weapon usage, a trend that Generous_Frock previously attributed to 'sweat lords' in 'lfg.' Impressively, Silent_Obligation gently pushed back against our renegade Sherpa and told us to use what we were comfortable using, displaying an impressive level of patience even after hours of taking on a taxing job that he did not sign up for.

My first raid with folks from The Home of Vibes was indicative of the broader trends I observed over many more raids, though future Sherpas I partied with were more similar to Silent_Obligation than they were to Partial_Swarm. During one run, a Sherpa from the Discord server that wasn't even in our raid popped into our Discord channel just to ask if things were going ok and if we needed any extra help or explanations. It seems like such a simple thing, but through all my time playing games I had never seen that happen: someone was just going through all the raid channels to

make sure everyone was doing ok and having a good time. The server clearly attracted others who want something different out of gaming, but in none of my raids was some form of gaming's toxic culture completely absent. However, The Home of Vibes' dedication to being respectful, helpful, and inclusive was enacted by players to shut toxicity down and to keep the relationship between players in a group strong. Even saying something as simple as 'hey, that's not cool' when someone criticized another player worked in this environment because most of the players I grouped with understood that positivity was part of the server's mandate. In my first raid, Silent_Obligation took up the mantle of leadership in part because that's what this community is about, and we all supported him because we all believed it was the right thing to do. Instead of defaulting to negativity, or just breaking up the party because things went wrong, we (aside from our absent Sherpa) rallied around positivity and support, and I saw that dynamic reoccur raid after raid after raid.

Uhmaayyze had built a special environment that felt unlike anywhere else I had played so far, but scaling up positivity also means scaling up its opposite. Uhmaayyze isn't just transgressive in a ten-player *DOTA 2* match: he is a lightning flash across the *Destiny 2* player base. In addition to the pushback against his own positivity, Uhmaayyze is a Black livestreamer which already exposes him to a high degree of systemic discrimination[787] and outright racism from people who bomb his chat with racist terms. One player even did an entire raid with Uhmaayyze just so he could drop a slur at the end of it live on Uhmaayyze's stream over their voice chat. In addition to this, Uhmaayyze was targeted by an extensive campaign to impersonate and discredit him through a fake Twitter account made to look nearly identical to his own, while another group found his personal information and leaked it over Twitter.

Not long after, one night The Home of Vibes server erupted in chat as it seemed Uhmaayyze had reached his limit and announced over text that he "might Delete this discord tonight, we will see tomorrow." There was a sense of panic as chat flooded with people seeking others they had played with on the server to get them on their own

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[787] Kishonna Gray, "They're Just Too Urban: Black Gamers Streaming on Twitch," *Digital Sociologies*. Edited by Jessie Daniels, Karen Gregory, and Tressie McMillan Cottom (Bristol and Chicago: Policy Press, 2017), 355-368.

personal friends list in case the server went down. Others voiced their support for Uhmaayyze's decision and praised the community, thanked the team of Sherpas, and shared some of the experiences they had with others through the Discord server. The vibe was reminiscent of what Consalvo and Begy[788] and Celia Pearce[789] found as entire online games shut down: for many players in this server it seemed like the game was ending. One message from a community member read:

> "I know I have absolutely no say in this situation. I just want you all to know how I've enjoyed it here. This is the most friendly, welcoming and kindest Destiny community I've ever met. It means a lot to me personally to have people who respect each other, taking care of and helping each other out. You all made Destiny and gaming in general feel fun again and I genuinely can't express in words how much that means to me. You are the best <3."

This message is emblematic of how rare it is to have a space like this one in gaming, and how impactful it was that people on this server were at least trying, sometimes in spite of themselves, to be respectful and more positive people. There were also many comments from people admitting that they had social anxiety, or that they didn't fit into other communities because they felt vulnerable because of their identities, revealing that positivity can help to create a space for participation where it is otherwise denied.

Another commenter remarked "Just remember to spread love no matter who/where u are, make it contagious." That's what Uhmaayze's server had done: it made various manifestations of positivity contagious. It did so by denying negativity as a social currency within the space. Negativity definitely happened in raids on the server, but within The Home of Vibes it didn't convert to social or cultural capital as easily and it didn't circulate. Because of this, people apologized, people took care of each other's feelings, and people gently called others out for saying hurtful things. Those in The

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[788] Consalvo and Begy, *Players and their Pets,* 91-92.
[789] Pearce *Communities of Play.*

Home of Vibes on the night it looked to be over had taken this experience to heart and expressed how unique it was, and even though folks were sad they were still understanding and mostly upbeat about the possibility that this server could be gone.

The next morning the server was still there. Uhmaayze made an announcement later that day that “I kept this discord up because for some reason I still believe in this thing. Don’t let me down. <3! No toxicity will be accepted, thank you.” The server was grateful, but the event revealed how fragile a positivity movement can be. While the community persists today, the server hasn’t really been the same since this time. Even with the release of the latest expansion it was common to see only one or two groups doing activities during peak hours, and compared to the King’s Fall era it is much less active.

Uhmaayyze still streams every day, but has since gravitated to producing more selective content like his podcast ‘The Vibecast.’ Overall, the persistence required for the kind of positivity that Uhmaayyze is putting out is extremely high, and it comes with significant risk to oneself. What’s more, it feels extremely easy for the negativity and toxicity to win out and shut this kind of project down because of how pervasive it is, how bad it can make one feel, and how dedicated some players can be to enforcing the status quo through truly despicable means. I felt this acutely in my *DOTA 2* matches at a fraction of the scale and intensity facing Uhmaayyze. Clearly Uhmaayyze was affected even through his team of moderators if he was contemplating shutting down the impressive community he had built.

This kind of personality-based positivity community created a strong foundation among many of the players in the Home of Vibes, but the personal cost of pursuing this kind of project is extremely high. It also takes a team of people to run a community of this size, and not even a team can filter out the culture that closes in around this kind of group. Additionally, the community is precariously balanced on the success and reputation of the personality at its center, and is also co-dependent on the overall health of the game. As the newest expansion *Lightfall* was not well-received there was a substantial decline in active players on the Discord, and in-turn there was less opportunity for Uhmaayyze’s incredible contribution to the *Destiny 2* community to reverberate as it should. While The Home of Vibes ultimately endured, it did so under

duress. Shortly after this period I ended my time with *Destiny 2* and moved to *World of Warcraft* to explore an entire game server with an inclusive premise.

World of Warcraft: Getting to Know the Proudmoore Server

Before this research project I learned of the *WoW* server Proudmoore, which has a reputation for being the game's unofficial LBGTQIA+ server. In the context of *WoW*'s community, the culture of the game's production, and with Nicole Crenshaw's work pointing to servers having lost their strong sense of communal identity,[790] I was curious what this designation even meant for an entire server in 2022. The potential positivity in my mind before I installed myself on Proudmoore assumed that the inclusivity of this queer-friendly designation may have some correlating positive effects. I thought there must be a reason Proudmoore has been able to maintain its reputation for so long, and maybe there was some positivity to be found in that reason. Proudmoore as a research site also had an inherent transgressive quality through the implication of queer play on the server.

Jenny Sundén, in her work on queer play in *WoW* provides this definition, stating "Queer play is a symbolic act of rebellion, of disobedience, of deviance from dominating ways of inscribing and imagining 'the player.'"[791] Sundén conducted ethnographic research on a small guild of queer players and concluded her project being critical but optimistic about queer play and its transgressive potential in *WoW*, though Sundén's guild was admittedly isolated in the context of an otherwise standard *WoW* server and had only limited interactions with the mainstream culture of the game.[792] Would Proudmoore reproduce this same outcome on a larger scale, or were there other possibilities for queer play and transgressive positivity through a server labeled as LGBTQIA+.

Because it has never been officially recognized by Blizzard, the server's status as LGBTQIA+ friendly is one that can be seen on forums from time to time but has no official indicator or promotion outside of a few forum discussions about the server's

[790] See Crenshaw and Nardi, 2016; Crenshaw, 2016; Crenshaw, LaMorte and Nardi, 2017.
[791] Sundén, "A Queer Eye," 188.
[792] Ibid., 189.

culture. To learn that Proudmoore is the unofficial LGBTQIA+ server you need to go looking for this information, be on the server already, or just hear it through the grapevine. I stumbled across Proudmoore before this research project began because I was looking for an LGBTQ+ friendly guild a few years before this study during my personal leisure time.[793] The only speculation about why Proudmoore grew to have this label is because when *WoW* launched in 2004, a number of queer guilds like <Stonewall Champs>[794] and <The Spreading Taint>[795] settled on the server and organized annual pride marches that received journalistic coverage and got some traction within the community.[796] Over time the server picked up more queer players and those supportive of a more inclusive environment as the server's reputation grew, though there are still a lot of players who make characters on Proudmoore knowing nothing about the server (Figure 5.17).

[793] Though I did not end up playing on Proudmoore prior to this research.
[794] Named after the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar in New York which was raided by police in 1969 and the subsequent Stonewall Riots in response to the police raids which led to organized gay-rights marches the following year.
[795] Named after the colloquial term for the perineum, the section of flesh that bridges one's genital area and anus.
[796] James Stephanie Sterling, "Gay Pride in *World of Warcraft*." *Destructoid* article. June 24th, 2009. https://www.destructoid.com/gay-pride-in-world-of-warcraft/ (accessed April 29th, 2023).

Figure 5.17 - A new player inquires about Proudmoore's server culture in trade chat - Author's Screenshot.

Proudmoore is the third-most populated server on the Alliance side of the game,[797] with approximately 17,000 active players.[798]

I joined *WoW*'s Proudmoore server in early October 2022, roughly one month before the release of the game's newest expansion, *Dragonflight*. This first month was largely exploratory, as I created the two brand new characters that I would play most during my time on Proudmoore - a gnome warlock named Marcia, and a draenei[799] hunter named Mariame - and leveled up in the standard way by doing quests and

[797] On each server, *WoW* is split into two factions, Alliance and Horde. Servers tend to have a population imbalance between these two groups, with servers favoring one over the other. Proudmoore is an Alliance-heavy server, and the server's LGBTQ+ label applies to the Alliance side of its players, not the Horde side.
[798] *World of Warcraft* realm population website. https://www.wowrealmpopulation.com/wow-us-realms-population-alliance.php (accessed April 29th, 2023).
[799] Draenei are goat-like people from space.

dungeons (Figure 5.18).[800] During these pre-expansion periods, the game is less intense overall as players figure out what new characters they may want to play, and *WoW*'s competitive seasons are on a temporary hiatus.

Figure 5.18 - Marcia the gnome (left, standing in the miniature train set) dances with other players in a leveling dungeon - Author's Screenshot.

Overall I encountered very little toxicity while leveling in the open world, and I would characterize leveling dungeons as mostly quiet even though you are matched with players from other servers. This experience wasn't toxicity-free: in figure 5.18 my party is dancing because a player called us bad and left the dungeon. Still, the other players were patient and waited for the party-finder system to find us a new member as we entertained ourselves by having an impromptu dance party.

At this point it is worth explaining what makes a *WoW* server a unique social unit. As Crenshaw, LaMorte and Nardi explained, servers are no longer totally self-contained

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[800] I also made a third character of the new dragon-themed class that released with the new expansion called the 'evoker." Though I did not play it much, I mention it here because I did spend some time in chat on that character and it is relevant for a forthcoming example.

like in *WoW*'s earlier days where you could never cross paths with players from other servers.[801] Each server was largely its own community and completely isolated. Now, particularly in lower levels, players can see those from other servers because the game automatically pulls players from different servers together to fill areas with low player traffic to make the game feel more alive. Additionally, players match with those from other servers through matchmaking for group activities like dungeons, raids, and PvP. People on friends lists and in guilds can be cross-server as well. When you encounter a player from another server you see their server name next to their username, so my warlock appears to those from other servers as 'Marcia - Proudmoore' anywhere they could see my character's name. The same is true of guild names, with the guild leader's server determining the label that appears after the guild name. Being from a server labels you as such, which announces something about oneself to other players who have knowledge of your server's reputation.[802]

The servers aren't totally connected however. The largest communication channel on a single server - known as trade chat - is still server-specific.[803] This is the main location where a server's identity can be publicly expressed. Early in my life on Proudmoore I noticed that trade chat felt different than in my earlier experiences with *WoW*. On Proudmoore, my first time in a large city, players were in a longform conversation about another's amateur golfing career and instead of trolling this player, they were asking sincere questions about his time golfing as a point of conversation that anyone could take part in. Another exciting activity in Proudmoore trade chat was folks sharing their in-game outfits through chat links that players could click to try on another's curated wardrobe (Figure 5.19).

[801] Crenshaw et al., "Something We Loved," 2036-2045.

[802] The updated server system makes it challenging for servers to develop new reputations, so much of a server's unique identity was established in the early days of the game. Like Proudmoore's early guilds and pride parades, present-day server reputations are built on long-established ideas that persist. Other servers with reputations include 'Gurubashi' famous for having a high concentration of Brazilian players, and Moonguard, notorious for having a high level of sexual roleplay.

[803] The exception to this is low-population servers which are effectively on social life support, now deliberately linked across other 'connected' servers to keep smaller populations afloat. Proudmoore, being one of the largest servers, does not have this feature.

Figure 5.19 - Players share their outfits in trade chat with others while looking for fashion advice. I model a sword from one of the outfits on my Evoker - Author's Screenshot.

Among the four games I had played, Proudmoore already felt unique within the trade chat alone, and it also felt different than my recent days playing *WoW* on other servers. To more concretely confirm my suspicions that Proudmoore's chat culture was different, I made new characters on 10 other servers and spent roughly three hours on each over a one-month period exclusively observing trade chat trends. In terms of server size, the closest comparison to Proudmoore's Alliance-side population was that of Area 52's Horde-side population, which I chose deliberately, while the other 9 were chosen randomly.[804] The smaller servers from this sample saw very little conversation in trade overall and the game felt more akin to *Lost Ark* and *Destiny 2* based on trade-chat engagement there. Area 52 was emblematic of the other large servers I visited where trade chat was full of messages that were predominantly utilitarian: using trade chat for its intended function of publicly selling and crafting items for others in order to make gold.

Ask_Mouse, a WoW player I spoke to who did not play on Proudmoore, expressed that trade chat in her experience on other servers "always had a layer of toxicity" and that "there's always people just starting shit." Eager_Evoker, another player from the guild I eventually joined on Proudmoore described an overabundance of pro-

[804] The other servers were Black Dragonflight - Horde; Mal'Ganis - Horde; Maelstrom - Horde; Arthas - Horde; Gul'Dan - Horde; Kel'Thuzad - Alliance; Lightbringer - Alliance; Bonechewer - Alliance, and Rivendare - Alliance.

Trump conservatism and flat-earth discussions on her own prior servers which produced a lot of conflict among players and frustration before she migrated to Proudmoore. Eager_Evoker noted “You couldn’t find a group because everyone was so pissed off and discussed such strange things. As for me it was like ‘No, I don’t want to be a part of it.’” Truth be told, Proudmoore is highly unique when compared to other servers, even channeling the sense of community and playful sociality that Crenshaw et al. felt players had lost over time.[805] Worthy_Cod, another player I met on Proudmoore shared Eager_Evoker’s experience of pro-Trump conservatism on many of his former servers as well, and echoed my feeling that Proudmoore was unique. Worthy_Cod explained his decision to move to Proudmoore after bad experiences on multiple other servers and gave his impression of Proudmoore:

> “I looked up server reputations [...] and the big thing for me was just reading that it was a super LGBT-friendly server and it had been since vanilla.[806] I was like ‘Ok, that’s consistent.’ [...] It feels like you go into trade chat and it's usually that people are just having fun. There’s still going to be drama, but it’s more fun.” - Worthy_Cod

It wasn’t just in trade chat either, as Proudmoore was friendly and surprising a lot of the time, even when traversing the world alone. One day going about my business in the game world another player, also playing a gnome, sent me a private message out of the blue that “we cute gnomies gotta stick together,” while on another occasion a different player randomly opened trade with me to gift me a red rose (Figure 5.20).[807]

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[805] Crenshaw et al., “Something we loved.”
[806] The colloquial term for original *WoW* circa 2004-2005.
[807] The red rose item can be worn in one’s hand as a cosmetic item but serves no greater function. It was truly the thought that counted.

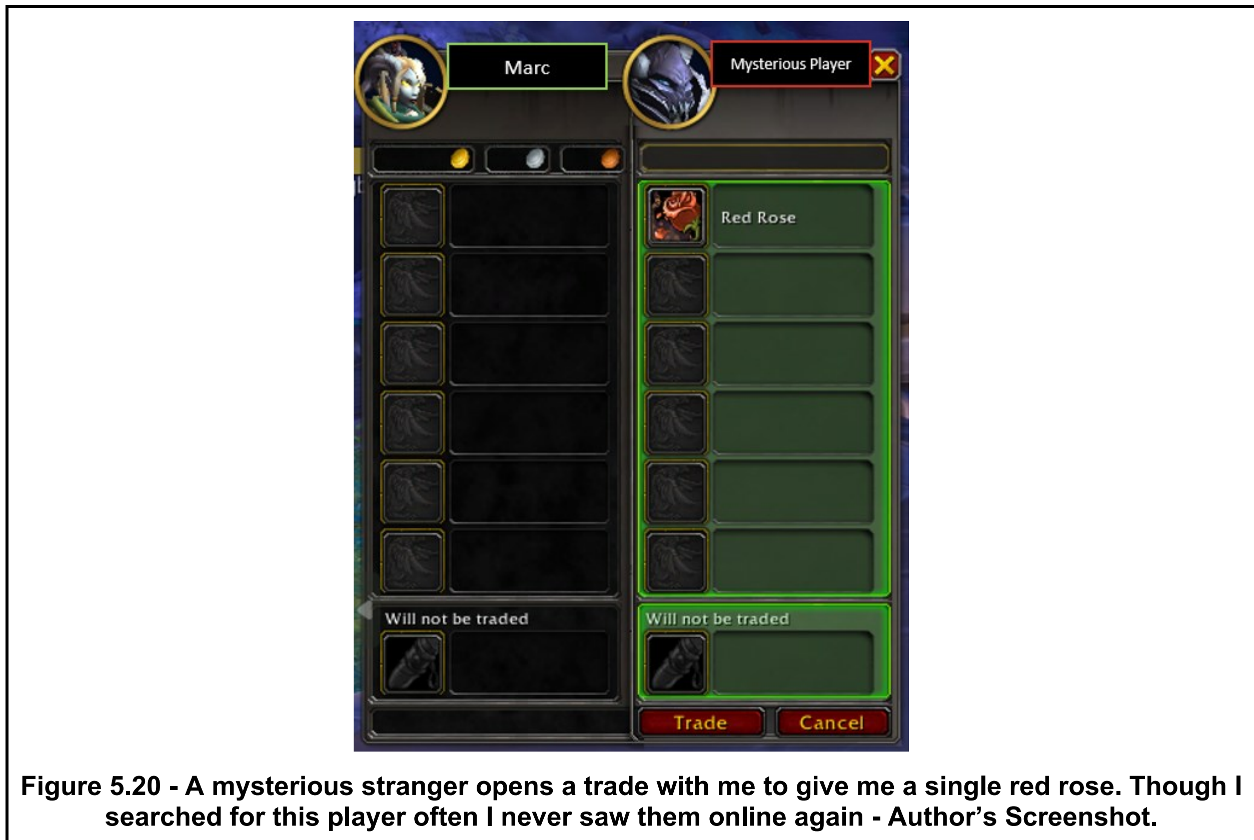

Figure 5.20 - A mysterious stranger opens a trade with me to give me a single red rose. Though I searched for this player often I never saw them online again - Author's Screenshot.

Proudmoore felt like a server where many of the players were trying to make small pushes towards positivity, or who were just trying to have a bit more fun. Slightly before I arrived on Proudmoore, the server even had its own positivity celebrity named Manapaws. Worthy_Cod explained the community love for this player:

> "[Manapaws] was just this big gay druid who had the auction house mount[808] and would always be chillin' in whatever the main city was at the time, and wherever people would be hanging out and he would always be helping people, giving gifts, just like doing generally fun stuff, and I thought he made the server feel more like a community. But it was also, like, I almost want to say a cult following where people would

[808] A giant and expensive brontosaurus mount that provides useful features for other players including a portable auction house that others could use. When on this mount you are making a statement and are extremely visible to other players.

> fanboy over Manapaws. It was a little weird. One night we're raiding and one of the women we played with, she hops in the voice chat and was like, 'OH MY GOD, I WAS JUST TALKING TO MANAPAWS!'" - Worthy_Cod

On Proudmoore, this kind of positivity that Manapaws represented is valued and it comes through many of the players I interacted with on Proudmoore, even in very small exchanges.

Though not free of toxicity - including people clearly going onto Proudmoore to provoke people based on the server's LGBTQIA+ reputation[809] - players in chat and out in the game world were often friendly, surprising, quirky, and far more lively than in the other games in this study, even when compared to those I met in The Home of Vibes. Proudmoore was a much less curated space, however. Compared to Uhmaayyze's server there was a substantial lack of moderation in chat, leaving the regulation of the server's trade channel to the players themselves. While slurs get automatically removed from chat because of Blizzard's filtering tools, players are still free to start bad-faith conversations about race, gender, and sexuality on the server without any official recourse or moderation, and so Proudmoore is far from a safe space or an enclave in that regard.

However, the server does have a culture of calmly shutting down people who are trying to stir the pot instead of piling more hate on the pile. One trade chat interaction involving anti-black racism saw the chatters calmly ask for requests from other players to report the racist player, while others expressed their disapproval, with one player saying "don't gotta be racist," and another simply exclaiming "full yikes." I witnessed this and similar interactions once every couple days over the four and a half months I played on Proudmoore, and it's safe to say the server is used to this kind of thing as it is an unsurprising target for trolls. Still, the server has a loose commitment to shutting hateful discourse down informally through the players who join together momentarily to uphold

[809] There was also some visible LGTBQ+ infighting in trade chat, including transphobic comments publicly made in trade chat from members of guilds labeled as LGBTQ+ friendly. The server was far from a Queer utopia despite its differences from other servers.

the server's implied values of inclusivity through the few means that are available to them. What's more, compared to Uhmaayyze's Discord where the project of inclusion and positivity is so condensed into one person's public image, Proudmoore's positivity and inclusivity are diffusely spread across a range of players.

Not every player on Proudmoore is committed to these features, but enough are to create a fairly large online gaming space that is legibly distinct from *WoW*'s average server culture. When thinking about negativity as a social currency, we can see that Proudmoore does not facilitate the circulation of negativity as much as other sites, including other *WoW* servers, which indicates that diffuse player-driven initiatives can impact the way people play together. Even if toxicity is visible on Proudmoore fairly regularly, players often get in the way of it picking up steam and when confronting discriminatory behaviours in chat it is likely that a player will be supported for calling things out. In the case of Manapaws, just doing nice things for other players is also highly valued in this space, and Manapaws' positive attitude and exploits afforded them a lot of cultural capital on the server. But even though Proudmoore is partially self-contained, the effect of the server culture on positivity and inter-player communication is undercut when players on Proudmoore cross with other segments of the *WoW* community.

Crossing Servers and Guild Life on Proudmoore

Even if one is based on Proudmoore, participating in many of *WoW*'s group activities means searching through lists of groups with plenty of players from other servers or using a random matchmaking tool to more quickly find another activity.[810] After *Dragonflight* released I started doing high level dungeons and raids with other players through the game's standard matchmaking systems. I felt that the positive impact of Proudmoore's server culture was even more noticeable as I was confronted with the alternative when put into the main current of the player base through the game's matchmaking. With a few exceptions, these group spaces were dominated by an overwhelming elitist discourse regarding other players, and even the kind of language players used was consistently hostile towards others and had a much more

[810] Previously explored in Chapters 3B and 4 respectively.

hateful vernacular than in Proudmoore's trade chat. In these situations it is often the most aggressive players who gain control of the group because of how valued negativity and hate are in this space.

In one of these raids against the boss 'Dathea, Ascended' (Figure 5.21, above), a player - who I'll call Angry_Andy - wasn't even the designated raid leader but loudly called-out any player who wasn't performing according to their personal standards and petitioned the raid leader to remove anyone who was 'dead weight,' (Figure 5.21, middle) In this instance dead weight meant two things: that a player was not doing enough damage to the boss as measured in 'dps' or damage per second, or that a player was taking too much damage by not doing one of the boss's mechanics correctly.[811] In this particular fight, players have to be careful not to be too close to one another lest they transfer a static shock effect between them that does a lot of damage over time. If a player failed at this part of the fight, Angry_Andy would call it "spreading aids." While the raid leader began this run with a calm disposition, their attitude changed in response to Angry_Andy, and the raid leader began kicking players from the group. Two other players asked why the raid leader kicked their friend and also left the group in protest, and the raid leader responded by calling them 'dogs' in a negativity pile-on (Figure 5.21, below).

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[811] As mentioned in chapter 4, damage can be monitored through a number of game mods, but there is also a newer mod called ElitismHelper that announces a range of mistakes made by any player to the whole group over chat during the course of a fight.

Figure 5.21 - Above: A group of cross-server matchmade players prepare to fight 'Dathea, Ascended' together; Middle: Angry_Andy insults other players and commands the raid leader to kick others from the group for low damage (dps); Below: Our raid leader insults players after they've left the group because he kicked their friend - Author's Screenshot.

Dungeons and PvP content played out in a similar way, and this kind of player culture in matchmade content was common among the players I spoke to. Eager_Evoker noted that she had a lot of general anxiety while playing the game because of her encounters with other players who operate in this way, saying she avoids group content as much as possible despite enjoying it otherwise. She noted:

> “I’m just trying not to do the content where I have to play with people who may be toxic about me. [...]. It’s terrible, especially if I play alone.” - Eager_Evoker

Another player, Hip_Slippers, is a raid leader for his group, but they often need to pull people from the raid finder to fill enough slots to run the raids. He explained that he is frequently stressed while running raids because he feels responsible and it's easy for something to go wrong and because player negativity can easily snowball in a group. He also noted that other players from raid finder can forcefully take over the leadership role from him by being vocal in chat, similar to what Angry_Andy did in my own raid. He explained:

> “There has been this thing of people that come in and try to lead, like they speak up and try to become the raid leader. I had one, it was already late and I was just like, I mean, he knew what he was talking about. It’s not like he came in and was just spouting nonsense. So I let him kind of give the full strategy [...] but it was crazy to me that he just came into this raid I led halfway through with nine other players and just took command.” - Hip_Slippers

Even when not being outright hateful, many players feel they have a right to commandeer and micromanage other’s experiences, and oftentimes this takes a toxic form as seen above with Angry_Andy. Being on Proudmoore does effectively nothing if a player uses matchmaking systems at all. The common trends from other game servers that more closely resemble each other take precedence over Proudmoore’s unique server culture.

One of the ways players offset the need to experience random matchmaking is through the guild system, so after experiencing a great deal of toxicity through matchmaking I searched for a guild on Proudmoore. It was not difficult to find one, as LGBTQIA+ friendly guilds and guilds claiming to have a positive environment advertise

frequently over Proudmoore's trade chat. With so many to choose from, I quickly found a raiding guild by responding to one that billed itself as both LGBT-friendly and positive in trade chat, called <Candid Camera>. <Candid Camera> was a small guild averaging between 8-15 players throughout my time with them. Once joining the guild a lot of time was spent on the guild's Discord which included players within <Candid Camera>'s circle of friends who were not on Proudmoore themselves. Still, the guild advertised itself as LGTBQIA+ friendly, and from my perspective it lived up to that reputation throughout my three months playing with the guild. Early on they recruited another player from Proudmoore who used homophobic language in the guild chat and this player was promptly removed without issue. The guild was not exclusively made up of LGBTQIA+ folks, but it was welcoming, supportive, and protective of the people in the guild regardless. <Candid Camera> also had a broad commitment to positivity in general, and so ended up being a good fit for me personally and for this project.

Worthy_Cod and Garden_Observer were the two guild leaders and started <Candid Camera> as a new guild right before the release of *Dragonflight*. The two met each other playing with a different guild that claimed it was LGBTQ friendly, <Mouse House>, on another server. They deliberately made <Candid Camera> as a positivity-focused and inclusive guild on Proudmoore because of their prior negative experiences with group play. Like my other interviewees, they remarked that playing with random players was often extremely toxic, but for them even closed guilds and curated friend groups could produce extreme levels of toxicity and create a negative environment.

While in <Mouse House>, Garden_Observer was new to the game and though he was frequently promised a spot in the guild's raiding group, <Mouse House> was stringing him along with no intention of taking him to raids. He also had a problem with one of the guild members who "would routinely say super misogynistic shit," and though the members of <Mouse House> would "feign disgust" at the things this player said, they'd always bring him to raid thus keeping him a mainstay within the guild. Worthy_Cod identifies as a member of the LGBTQ+ community, and was a more valued member of <Mouse House> at the time because of the role he played on the raid

team.[812] Using his leverage he confronted the guild leadership about the misogynist player, and they promised Worthy_Cod that this player would no longer be coming to raids with them, though he was not removed from the guild. Over time it became clear to Worthy_Cod that the guild had no intention of keeping their promise, eventually saying that this player "is going to start regularly coming to raid now, and you just have to deal with it," which prompted Worthy_Cod's exodus from <Mouse House> and his former server. After a break from the game, he wanted to return and was compelled to run his own guild with Garden_Observer.

As a brief aside, there is a widespread idea within gaming circles now that the only solution to toxicity is one of personal accountability, propelled by the oft-repeated sentiment that one should find a guild or make friends with players who are like-minded. But the above example indicates that not even these trusted circles are a real solution to the toxicity that runs rampant in games culture. Another *WoW* player I spoke to, Coherent_Avenger, noted that a substantial amount of the racialized harassment he has encountered in game as a Black man came from his guildmates or long-time friends: players who he's trusted and played with for years. For him this kind of harassment feels far worse than when it comes from random players, and even in close circles the culture supports this. Speaking of racism in his current play group, Coherent_Avenger noted:

> "Sometimes I've been attacked from a racist standpoint. I'd say that happens probably like once every three months. [...] It happened just a little bit ago in [his group's] Discord. Like, I really have personal roots with the people here, and personal ties, and they have come to me financially for help, and I helped them. And they've also come to me with their problems and I've given my opinion, and once I've done that they call me the N-word. I said 'alright, just pay your money back.'" - Coherent_Avenger

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[812] Worthy_Cod was the guilds 'tank,' a role that is necessary but that many players do not want to do and so are in high demand.

In our interview Coherent_Avenger sounded so defeated not just by how common it was for him to be harassed, but by how often it came from the people closest to him. On this most recent incident he said:

> "I mean, it's another day in the life of Coherent_Avenger. I mean, what can you do? I guess I can either choose to let it, you know, affect me in my life and my relationship personally, or I could just let [the racist player] be miserable."
> - Coherent_Avenger

But Coherent_Avenger's life *was* affected personally, and he admitted that despite trying to stay upbeat and friendly, upon reflection he doesn't really enjoy playing the game as much as he wants to. Yet the community's idea of how to deal with toxicity is to build the very spaces where Coherent_Avenger finds himself harassed anyway and where it hurts the most. Worthy_Cod and Garden_Observer had similar experiences with <Mouse House>, and Sacred_Relish's earlier account with her *Destiny 2* friends showed that there is no wall from racism, homophobia, and misogyny if it is so culturally embedded.

Returning to <Candid Camera>, from November 2022 to February 2023, I raided with the guild twice a week for six hours, and when available I also did 5-person Mythic+ dungeons with them. Worthy_Cod and Garden_Observer had a refreshing approach to playing with guildmates and random players alike. In Mythic+ dungeons they would talk players through fights and communicate extensively to make sure everyone was on the same page, and if a player made a mistake they'd never blame individual players other than themselves for anything that went wrong. Garden_Observer once expressed over the Discord that "I am only toxic to myself," and indeed he did have a tendency to beat himself up when things weren't going well. During raids where we needed to use matchmaking to fill up our roster, they would warn and then kick people for being toxic or aggressive rather than letting that attitude slide even if those players were skilled. This meant that some nights our raids would spend a lot of time in the matchmaking

system as we replaced toxic players because finding new ones can take some time. It wasn't just about killing bosses or getting loot in this guild though, as the emotional well-being of the guild members was being attended to as a priority from these guild leaders.

Players from other servers who entered the group through the matchmaking system also received a friendly experience because of our leaders' low tolerance for toxicity. In this small way, some of Proudmoore's server culture was able to come into contact with other players and impact their play experience, but multiple factors are required to make this possible. Positivity and inclusivity had to be actualized uncompromisingly by Worthy_Cod and Garden_Observer's leadership. They didn't let random players 'take command' as Hip_Slippers did. The guild members from Proudmoore and the other raiders from the Discord group also provided support for the leaders' decisions. Occasional stretches of downtime and raid failures needed to be accepted by players or the entire group could fall apart. More than this, the other guild members contributed to the sense of positivity in the environment by encouraging one another. Even though the guild was not exclusively players from Proudmoore, basing <Candid Camera> on this server provided a steadier influx of like-minded players who were willing to make gameplay concessions for a more positive environment. Garden_Observer noted that Proudmoore's community is "just more welcoming" and that his prior server Stormrage was always 'edgier.' Basing a new guild on that server would produce a wildly different experience and it would be far more difficult for Worthy_Cod and Garden_Observer to run <Candid Camera> the way they did without the core group they recruited from Proudmoore.

It took committed leadership and a very supportive guild roster to have even the small impact that <Candid Camera> did. Unfortunately, similarly to Uhmaayyze's server, the guild died down naturally as the weeks went on, with the guild leaders eventually remarking that they were feeling burnt-out on the game. Running any kind of guild is taxing on the players who do it, let alone one that is trying to swim against the current of the game's culture. As is by now familiar, trying to promote various forms of positivity within gaming's toxic environment adds physical, mental, and emotional labour to play, and it is extremely challenging to maintain momentum for these kinds of initiatives. The guild members empathized with Worthy_Cod and Garden_Observer, and we all agreed

to take a hiatus until the next large content patch which would arrive on an unforeseen date.[813] While there was no moment of intense harassment and drama like in The Home of Vibes, <Candid Camera> just kind of ceased to exist as fatigue took over, though the Discord did still see some traffic once in a while as players wanted to keep in touch. At the time of the hiatus some of my guildmates, Eager_Evoker and Avocado_Furnace remarked that they weren't sure if they would even continue playing *WoW* at all in the meantime, as it was this guild community that really connected them to the game at this point. The player side of me felt the same, and in truth when some of the guild got back together in May of 2023 I was actually disappointed that I didn't have the time to join them. As for the researcher side, I had already spent five months on Proudmoore, and I took the guild's hiatus as a sign to take my leave, and so ended my search for positivity.

The Cruel Optimism of Positivity: Playing in Spite of Toxicity

Before moving into a discussion of this project and some concluding remarks, I'd like to summarize this chapter by answering the lingering question of why anyone even plays these games at all. This chapter has shown that even when looking for spaces that feel good in online games, one is confronted by so much hate, instrumentalization, and negativity. These features often get dialed up when players push back against them making positivity its own bullseye for harassment of various kinds. Even players dedicated to keeping the spaces around themselves more positive have to wade through a muck of toxicity and put in extra work to achieve that result. Scaling up positivity from individual to collective actions still produced vulnerability proportional to the scale of the positive presence. With that vulnerability, any scale of positive work in gaming ends up being extremely taxing at the individual level, for small guilds, and especially in larger communities dedicated to making a different kind of gaming space.

This situation affects the emotional state of players as well. Only one of the players I spoke with, Literary_Logger, expressed that she felt *happy* when she plays, a feeling she attributes to being "really lucky" that she found a *Lost Ark* guild that suited her completely. But these group formations like guilds, clans, or Discord communities

[813] It ended up releasing on May 2nd, 2023, and <Candid Camera> did start raiding again though I was unable to join them because of my schedule.

are not everlasting. They are contingent on both management of the community and game health to keep players active. Additionally, even what seems to be a trusted guild can be a home for an even more intense toxicity than is experienced through interactions with random players, as Coherent_Avenger, Sacred_Relish, Worthy_Cod and Garden_Observer all encountered consistent and affecting harassment within trusted groups.

The other players I spoke to admitted they mainly feel anxious or sad when they play. Lasagne_Inspector, Eager_Evoker, and Hip_Slippers all characterized their emotional state when playing in groups as though they are walking on eggshells, primed by their prior experiences with toxicity to expect only the worst kinds of interactions. Even Worthy_Cod, the player who kept <Candid Camera>'s raids positive, admitted that he has "really bad anxiety" and after every raid would "overthink everything and dwell on it for way too long," as part of the pressure of leadership. Avocado_Furnace expressed that he is mostly sad when doing his favorite activity in *WoW*, stating "I hate every moment of my life where I'm playing it but for some reason it's addictive, you know," while Ask_Mouse has developed a strong association between MMOs and feeling bad, stating:

> "If I'm going into an MMO, chances are I'm not feeling great. I'm probably a bit down or something if I feel like playing a new MMO. [...]. You know, if I was to load up *World of Warcraft* right now? I probably wouldn't be doing that from a happy place." - Ask_Mouse

So what keeps these players here, and why not just stop playing altogether? Avocado_Furnace's use of addiction is one possibility that is too large to unpack here, but there's also another explanation that comes from many of the positive associations these players - and myself - have with online play, overshadowed as they might be. In the introduction to this project I talked about growing up in online games. The thing that really invested me in these spaces was meeting a ton of really fascinating people and developing friendships, some of which persist to this day. This still happens, and even the players in this study like Avocado_Furnace and Garden_Observer who admitted

they are more objective-oriented rather than social players, form meaningful friendships through these games. Avocado_Furnace admitted that <Candid Camera> was what kept him playing before the guild took its hiatus, and Generous_Frock spends most of his time on *Destiny 2* being a Sherpa to help new players nearly every day. Garden_Observer and Worthy_Cod have a close friendship after bonding through their shared experience with toxicity in their previous guild <Mouse House>, and care about each other enough to make a new guild together with a more positive and inclusive environment. They're trying to foster a space not only where they can play safely, but where meaningful connection like their own friendship is possible between other players.

Though she is now largely saddened by MMOs, I asked Ask_Mouse if she had any positive memories with the online games she played. She told me a story about *WoW*, from a day almost a decade ago where she wanted to cheer up one of her guildmates. I share it here in its entirety because this quote has stayed with me since our interview: it is emblematic of the quieter, more wholesome moments that players have experienced in online games but that seem so rare today. Ask_Mouse recalled:

> "I remember, particularly one day she was feeling really bad because, like she hadn't heard from [her husband] in a while and I think maybe he'd just left on deployment again [...] so she was feeling really down. And so my nerdy self - I must have been like 19 at this time - I was like 'all right, well, let's stop hanging around and go wander around and do things.' I remember touring her around, teleporting[814] and shit, and then we went to the southern pit of Dragonblight[815] and sat on the edge of a glacier overlooking the oceans of Azeroth. I put down the little picnic spread and we had a little picnic there, and chatted, and it was really nice. There was this

[814] Ask_Mouse played the mage class, which can teleport people to various locales all across *WoW*'s in-game world, Azeroth.
[815] A snowy *WoW* zone.

moment where I could offer some comfort to somebody who's having a tough time. And so that was really sweet. It was probably like my sweetest moment in *Warcraft*. The conversation just kind of trailed off and [we] just sat there and there's the fucking turtle boat going by…[wistful pause]. Yep. That's super nice." - Ask_Mouse

Figure 5.22 - Under a fake aurora borealis, I revisit the site of Ask_Mouse's picnic as I reflect on my search for positivity. In the distance I can see the turtle boat go by - Author's Screenshot.

At the end of my research I went back to the spot in *WoW* that Ask_Mouse described. I'm not totally sure why, but it was something I felt compelled to do. For a few hours I sat overlooking the water as I reflected on my experience in each of these four games and pondered what even brought me here (Figure 5.22). Honestly, at the end of my search for positivity, I was really damn sad. Ask_Mouse's story was familiar to me, but in over a year of searching these online games I found so little that resembled this

kind of play act that I too remember fondly from my own memories with these games. This was the kind of thing that drove me to do this research to begin with, but it's easy to forget because of how toxic these spaces can be and how overwhelming that facet of the culture has become. Some of my interviewees expressed the same longing, as the games they now play look the same - might even be the same - but don't quite feel like the games they remember. Coherent_Avenger stated:

> "What really sucks is I think what I'm trying to hold onto is the [...] magic that I had when I raided with [old friends] and everybody back then, but that magic's gone. Like, they can't replicate that anymore and I think I keep trying to get that." - Coherent_Avenger

For many players there was a magic to the connections they made with others through these games.

Whether it was a decade ago in Ask_Mouse's case, or more recently like the friendship between Worthy_Cod and Garden_Observer, there are players looking for connections with others that are increasingly difficult to make. Crenshaw et al. attribute this kind of shift to system design,[816] but throughout all four games of this study we see subsets of games culture - as enacted by people - that are actively opposed to reconfiguring the shape of these spaces in any way. Simultaneously, game design has changed over the last decade to de-emphasize sociality in favor of externalized rewards and the instrumentalization of other players. Even Avocado_Furnace, who I played with in <Candid Camera> and who I found to be a really friendly person, surprisingly remarked during our interview:

> "I don't even think of other people as people. [...] You like, think about your goal more than you think about people, you know? [...] Same as you're walking on a busy street right?

[816] Crenshaw et al., "Something we loved…" 2017.

> You don't care about other people around you mostly." - Avocado_Furnace

Against these odds it can feel extremely futile to persist at all. Throughout the research period of this project and again throughout my reflections, I kept coming back to the idea of cruel optimism, most succinctly expressed by Lauren Berlant as "When something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing."[817] I saw this in myself throughout this project, hopeful that positivity may possess some greater strategy for addressing toxicity. I also saw it in my interviewees and my guildmates who were trying to contribute something different to the cultural norms of these spaces, and in those who built enclaves where the games might feel different because of various commitments to inclusivity, friendliness, and attentiveness to others. I saw cruel optimism in players like Coherent_Avenger who were still chasing the magic of the friendships they once built through *World of Warcraft*, persisting in spite of sharp betrayal through the racism directed at him by trusted friends. I took on this project because like them I persist in spite of how badly I often feel when I play these games because some positive feeling and lingering memories keep me coming back. But my own individual successes with positivity in *Lost Ark* were even undercut by how they propagated another's participation in a system that notoriously exploits players and makes them feel terrible. Berlant expands on the concept of cruel optimism, stating:

> "Whatever the experience of optimism is in particular, then, the affective structure of an optimistic attachment involves a sustaining inclination to return to the scene of fantasy that enables you to expect that *this* time, nearness to *this* thing will help you or a world to become different in just the right way. But, again, optimism is cruel when the object/scene that ignites a sense of possibility actually makes it impossible to attain the expansive transformation for which a person or a people risks striving; and, doubly, it is cruel

[817] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 1.

> insofar as the very pleasures of being inside a relation have become sustaining regardless of the content of the relation, such that a person or a world finds itself bound to a situation of profound threat that is, at the same time, profoundly confirming."[818]

This is why we don't just disconnect and leave these games. Thinking with Berlant, the return to these spaces week after week, game after game, expansion after expansion and searching for some connection or feeling that we know *could* be there confirms who we are. This pursuit is part of our identities as players and it is built into our attachment to online games. Players looking for friendship and looking to produce positivity in spite of the obstacles in front of us are just so completely tied to these artifacts that letting them go can feel impossible, even if what we're trying to find through these games is impossible as well.

What happens if we entertain the choice to disconnect? If <Candid Camera> doesn't form, if Uhmaayyze doesn't try to build The Home of Vibes, what are we left with? Somewhere there is a choice that players in this relationship of cruel optimism make between staying or letting go. Ask_Mouse made that choice to disconnect because of how the toxicity impacts her, saying "Self-exclusion: this is my solution to this. And I still want to play these games, really, but I just don't see a way that I can reasonably do that." Choosing not to play is maybe the most sensible choice given the circumstances, and by the end of this research I got close to the same place as Ask_Mouse. I find it unlikely that I'll return to any of these games except for *World of Warcraft,* and that's only if <Candid Camera> is active in the future. But if all of us who are poking against the culture through positivity leave these spaces we cede more than virtual territory and lose out on more than a hobby or a pastime. In some cases we're giving up a key part of ourselves, and to not play means relinquishing all the possibilities of these spaces to those who use them as platforms for negativity and hate. In a very real way, this project of resistance within a culture where change seems impossible is constitutive of my own identity. Even if expansive transformation of online games culture

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[818] Ibid, 2.

is currently impossible, at the very least the various efforts of positivity explored in this chapter from small play acts to large community initiatives are forms of resistance to gaming's monolith-ish culture. Transgressive positivity in games denies that these spaces must be hateful, competitive, and instrumentalizing, and for individuals who try to play positively this kind of play reaffirms who we are in relation to what these game cultures have become.

Conclusion - Addressing a Few Questions Regarding Transgressive Positivity

As astute readers may have noticed, there wasn't a whole lot of positivity in this text that was ostensibly about positivity. It would have been dishonest to paint an optimistic picture as that's not where the research ended up. It isn't all doom and gloom though, as there were some beneficial outcomes to playing in this way. To conclude this project, here I will think through the potentials and limitations of the kinds of positive interventions I attempted and observed by revisiting each of the central research questions that drove this work.

1. *What happens when people are nice to each other in toxic online games?*

At times it can be quite a lot. In extreme cases like *DOTA 2* the faintest bit of niceness produced extreme resistance, while in *Lost Ark* generosity was a source of confusion for players who weren't used to seeing charitable acts in the public spaces of the game. Within smaller communities, positive acts may lose some of their transgressive edge within the boundaries of the group itself, but they also unite people together through affective relationships and shared ways of being that are distinct but not isolated from the main current of games culture, meaning positivity never totally felt average or normalized even where it was most commonly experienced in this study. In the most positive groups I observed, positivity always took effort and always felt aspirational: it is something that some players are striving for in the face of overwhelming odds. Those odds aren't just other players either as there is a deep internalized challenge to not being pulled into a negative frame of mind or absorbing and replicating the same language or play acts that make up the lexicon of online play.

In the right circumstances positivity can pick up momentum and create environments that don't feel like the default social experience in these games. The Home of Vibes' direct commitment to positive play and Proudmoore's LGBTQIA+ label attracted a concentration of players interested in the wellbeing of others, in more calm group play experiences, and who would interpersonally enforce a more tolerant space for marginalized folks who are most often targeted for harassment in online games. Both of these communities saw resistance, but they also were a platform for some

players to more freely express themselves, or even to participate at all when they might otherwise feel excluded. Still, these spaces were not wholly a world apart from the mainstream current of gaming, and when groups of players either with a collective purpose or a diffuse association with positivity were together they were also targets. It's hard to say how much positivity itself added to the harassment that Uhmaayyze and Proudmoore received because their identities subject them to racism and homophobia respectively, but based on my own positivity interventions it is likely that this added more fuel to the fire. Without question, positivity has a large transgressive quality within online games, and can be part of one's individual or collective identity in a countercultural position to mainstream gaming culture.

2. *Who is positivity benefitting or challenging?*

Who positivity benefits is very context dependent. As discussed above the particular positivity communities I was a part of were more inclusive than average gaming spaces, but they were also about more than positivity. The Home of Vibes had rules about inclusion and respect on the server and these were enforced by moderators and the community in addition to its positivity-oriented leader. In contrast, Proudmoore wasn't really a server built on positivity as much as it was a vague premise that this is where LGBTQIA+ *WoW* players could go. In The Home of Vibes, positivity and inclusion were working alongside one another deliberately because of how that community was managed, while on Proudmoore positivity was more of a complementary feature that emerged organically from the players who gravitate to that space. In these instances positivity benefitted some players who felt like they had no other space to play or socialize within these games because of harassment or how they feel in response to common interplayer encounters, but the full picture shows that more than positivity is responsible for these conditions. Positivity is still an important feature of those communities though, as it did keep people from freaking out at one another and it afforded players opportunities to speak up when they otherwise might not.

There were also personal benefits to playing in a positive way. Even though I was targeted at times during my breaching activities, some of the other things I did had

small impacts on how I felt during my play experience. Going out of my way to be friendly in *WoW* dungeons, and to help others by using my own resources for the benefit of other players felt good to do. Even at times when it didn't impact the way the other players treated me or each other in the long term, it is still worth something that I felt better overall when I made more of an effort to think about what other players might need. Thinking back to Avocado_Furnace's comment about 'Not seeing other people as people' when he plays, there is a loneliness that can take hold even within these densely social online spaces when instrumentalizing others. Instead of shutting down and resigning myself to a more solitary approach to playing online, I was kind of forced by my own project to continue to engage with players out in the game world. Finding positive ways to do so created many small and unusual moments, even if they lacked the larger potential for change that I hoped I might find.

Positivity was also a challenge for myself as it is not really a natural thing to do within these games, especially as people hammer down against it. From those I spoke to and through my observations, positivity is a challenging undertaking that requires a lot of self-motivation, dedication, and emotional bandwidth. This is in no small part due to how positivity in practice challenges some players who identify with and enact any of the many toxic aspects of game culture. Based on the extreme reactions of some players to positivity in play, clearly positivity can produce challenging confrontations with their expectations for the kinds of sociality these players will find, the culture they're invested in, and possibly in their sense of selves. Despite these visible moments of confrontation between positivity and toxicity, the lasting impact of these reactive challenges on those most affected by them are less clear as there isn't evidence from this data that players change drastically based on these confrontations.

3. *At what layers of the game spaces and the culture is positivity making a difference for players?*

Briefly, positivity *can* make a difference for individuals at every layer: on forums, on Discord servers, in content creation, and in-game. I observed, heard stories about, and felt the impacts of positive play on players in each of these spheres of the games I

studied. Generous_Frock's *Destiny 2* subreddit and Uhmaayyze's livestreaming and Twitter presence have a cultural impact that extends outward from the game worlds. Small play acts within a game can impact someone's day-to-day gameplay, even if it is just for a spontaneous encounter or during a short activity. Positivity pushes against the culture of online gaming at least a little regardless of where it occurs.

4. *What about each game of this study is making positivity more or less common, and more or less transgressive?*

Thinking back to chapter 3 and the relationship between the industry culture, game design, and player culture, there are some key differences between the games that inform why positivity and social interaction played out as they did. *DOTA 2* players are so habituated to the toxicity of the game that even the smallest bit of positivity was challenged by players. The game's social elements feel very loosely managed, reflecting an in-game approach similar to Valve's internal 'flatland' policy. Over time, without any direct interventions by Valve or more positive community role models the toxicity of the space has taken over and has a whirlpool effect that pulls players towards it over time.

Lost Ark's extreme emphasis on the grind and individual player progression coupled with the way the flow of the game organically broke up player groups limited the social possibilities of *Lost Ark* early in its life. The culture of the silence that developed in the game meant that while it wasn't a particularly friendly space, it was still possible to communicate with other players in a positive way without the pushback found within *DOTA 2*. It was less about hostility than it was about no one really putting anything out into the world that wasn't related to the game's economy or one's own advancement. Nothing in the game's social dynamics really encouraged positivity, but at the very least it was possible to put positive vibes out into the game world because players were in chat and were still receptive to the idea of helping others and being friendly even if it wasn't common. A more concerted effort by players in an environment like *Lost Ark*'s could actually produce a cultural shift or outcropping within the space, but it would take consistency and sustained effort to grow.

Destiny 2's in-game systems are the most limiting, making in-game positive interventions challenging to accomplish, but it also makes the environment feel less toxic overall. In this instance the low-communication design of *Destiny 2* actually benefits players. Outside of the game, Bungie does actually support positive players as they hired Generous_Frock in part because of his involvement in building a positivity community, and they also spotlight creators like Uhmaayyze and MitchySlaps. While far from perfect - especially as a player dives into voice chat and Discord groups - Bungie at least looks to be making an effort to give more positivity-oriented personas a place within the game's culture and to normalize prosocial player behaviours like being a Sherpa. The high engagement of Generous_Frock's positivity subreddit and the strong connection players had with The Home of Vibes shows that *Destiny 2* is attracting and fostering large numbers of players who don't want more of the same from gaming culture.

As for *WoW*, within Proudmoore's server itself positivity is much more common than elsewhere in the game. This server community attracts players who reinforce the space as distinct and more welcoming than others, and micro-communities based on that server have an added layer of support. For example, the server's positivity celebrity, Manapaws, was able to achieve their celebrity status and become so beloved among the community in part because they were the kind of person that this server wanted to represent them. Within the context of the server Manapaws is not transgressive but remains so within the larger context of the game. Because of *WoW*'s convoluted server system, Proudmoore is never totally isolated which leads to confrontations between players with vastly different ideologies, and while this may be disruptive to what individual players want out of the game, they also produce these transgressive moments as server cultures clash. There is a tension between safety and comfort and the potentials in these moments of conflict that are difficult to reconcile when looking for positivity.

5. *What is or is not happening to make positivity a strategy for cultural change in these games, or in games culture generally?*

There are players who are looking to be in these spaces while experiencing something different, and as Proudmoore and The Home of Vibes showed, forms of collectivity are possible. In the right situations, with a lot of effort and support positivity can be contagious. However, there is a notable lack of institutional support for these kinds of initiatives. Aside from Bungie, who spotlights key community members like MitchySlaps and Uhmaayyze, there is very little effort to hold up these kinds of players as exemplars of good behavior. Even more, there is no protection for these people or groups who end up in these positions. It is a huge problem that Bungie's limited exposure and support for these folks looks exemplary when compared to the other companies in this study. As I found in 2017, Valve actively hired *DOTA 2* players who made videos exploiting the community's xenophobia to more prominent positions.[819] Proudmoore's lack of visibility within Blizzard's own ecosystem is probably a good thing,[820] but that the server has existed in this unofficial form for nearly 20 years shows how little has been done to address the homophobia that circulates within the community if this partially shrouded unofficial server remains the best option for LGBTQIA+ players. Because these relatively small movements are not cultivated as a legitimate and serious part of what gaming culture could become with the right support and for these initiatives, the norms that have been established are never going to give way.

Even grassroots positivity is undercut, as the above has an impact on lone players looking to create positivity around themselves on a smaller scale. A player who has the initiative, willpower, and resilience to pursue these kinds of actions will find very little positive reinforcement along the way. If anything, the more active and the more successful one becomes the more harassment one becomes exposed to, and there is very little incentive to continue putting oneself out there if other players are going to berate you, and the companies don't really care about you even if you succeed in a publicly-visible forum. To even get to that point there is a high level of consistency,

[819] Marc Lajeunesse, "'It Taught Me to Hate Them All': Toxicity Through *DOTA 2*'s Players, Systems, and Media Dispositive." (Masters Thesis, Concordia University, 2017).
[820] Publicly announcing that Proudmoore is officially the place for LGBTQIA+ players would be an uncomfortable turn towards segregation while ultimately advertising the server as a target for harassment.

social organization and underlying support that is required which makes gameplay even more job-like than it is currently designed to be.

One last factor is that a game's culture is not now (if it ever was) bounded within a single game, and takes place across multiple platforms, which means it isn't enough for one or two companies to make changes. At the very least, any single game, Discord, and Twitch need to have a unified front against toxicity for anything that happens in one of these layers to stick as anything more than ephemeral resistance. That itself requires that workplaces address their cultures and ideological formations. If workplace ideologies don't change then none of the support will be earnest and carried through to the degree that they must be to uplift the kinds of players and community figures who will be critical for doing this work.

Additional Contributions

I would like to highlight two other contributions of this dissertation to the field of game studies. The first is the 'play acts' concept, which identifies the communicative features of interplayer actions as both ludic and communicative gestures that carry interpretable meanings. As an interdisciplinary field, game studies has lacked a communication-focused concept for understanding play that occurs between players, often relying on prior literature built in conjunction with linguistics, English, or informatics perspectives. 'Play acts' introduces a unit built from within communication studies to research online gaming with a stronger foothold within communication studies, particularly in respect to interplayer communication and multiplayer gameplay.

The second additional contribution calls back to the final section of Chapter 3B, where I identify the changing shape of the online gaming ecosystem into a tight assemblage of networks, producers, players, and platforms. Earlier work on online games and virtual worlds like *Second Life*,[821] *Uru,*[822] *Faunasphere,*[823] and even work on the early days of *World of Warcraft*[824] indicate that toxicity wasn't the norm. While these studies weren't free of the features that became toxicity, the environments did have

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[821] Boelstorff, *Coming of Age.*
[822] Pearce, *Communities of Play*.
[823] Consalvo and Begy, *Players and their Pets*.
[824] See Taylor, 2006; Tronstad, 2008; Nardi, 2010.

more pronounced elements of collaboration and exploration between players. It would be its own project to articulate the differences between these games in this compared to the current landscape of MMO juggernauts, but the key here is not that the games have changed, but that the entire landscape has changed, including who plays, how games are designed and made, and the increasing number adjoining platforms, producers, and their cultures. Prior literature on the inner layer of these game worlds is describing games culture from over a decade ago at a time that was pre-gamergate, pre-Trump and pre-livestreaming. In some cases this formative research took place during the infancy of Web 2.0. There is a very real need within online game studies to explore not only the present moment, but to account for changes within online gaming between 2010 and today. This remains a critical and understudied period for understanding how games culture developed and changed to what it is today, and this project offers an inroads to exploring this period in online play.

Limitations

First, this study is a snapshot of a particular moment in time that reflects a singular journey through multiple games. This work is not meant to be an all-encompassing conclusion about the power of positivity, nor is it an exhaustive account of all the positivity communities or movements in online play. The terrain of online gaming is vast and this work is part of an ongoing conversation that needs to continue. The spaces and players keep moving and growing, and the research needs to keep moving and growing with them. Even though I have an informed perspective on the subject matter, there is always more that can be said and more perspectives on this topic and on these spaces are always welcome.

Second, this project cannot totally address the inequalities of race, gender and sexual identity as they manifest in these game spaces. We aren’t even at a point where players can be identified, misidentified, or identify themselves as someone within a marginalized subject position without being pushed back against through a range of exclusionary practices. The methods I used can, at best, lay grounds for possibilities wherein the culture within these games might shift in small ways to allow more plurality of identity expression. The climate of these spaces can change to be less hostile with a

combination of player-driven action and developer support, and positivity is part of that player-driven action. That's my most optimistic read of the situation.

Honestly though, I think the systemic issues are so severe that positivity does very little even in this respect to tackle those problems. I have little reason to believe based on what I've found that the positive transgression breaching experiment could impact these much deeper facets of targeted hate against people of color, women, and queer folks within these spaces, and even larger communities are targets on the daily. Until game developers take an active, vocal, ongoing, and public position denouncing these hateful trends in gaming that is supported by stronger in-game protections, we find ourselves swimming perilously against the current. Even then, it's not as though the problems documented here are unique to gaming. As we saw in the work on #gamergate, fandoms, and social media that comprised some of the groundwork for this project, bad feelings are dialed-up everywhere, and the systemic elements that the games industry and players need to address are themselves imbricated within larger processes. What I've explored in this dissertation is not just a games issue, but is one site where far-right politics, neoliberal capitalism, and legacies of colonial ideologies and compounding discriminations produce an environment that truly feels terrible for many to participate in, and games are just one facet of daily life impacted by and replicating these factors.

Future Work

There is a need to stay updated and current on these issues. For as much as it stays the same, this ecosystem is always developing as new games, new player practices, and new industry initiatives unfold. New challenges and potentials emerge on a moment-by-moment basis, and without an active presence within these spaces there is a strong chance that this kind of research intervention will always be behind the moment and relegated to a kind of reporter position rather than being an active participant or catalyst of change.

Additionally, we should be striving for partnerships between researchers who are unaffiliated with game companies[825] and industry-based actors and initiatives who are working towards similar ends. It is unlikely to be able to do this work from within a game development studio, but anyone within these organizations looking to foster change should be consistently drawing on data and guidance that comes from outside their organizations. Future work in this area must include building a path to meaningful collaboration between active researchers and industry professionals. Additionally, because of the impact of game design, workplace practices, and industry culture on player culture, more research on the inner workings of these companies needs to be done when possible, though these institutions are often extremely closed off, and employees and researchers can be subject to strict non-disclosure agreements which creates substantial barriers to access and the ability to disseminate findings. Researchers like Rachel Kowert and the not-for-profit organization *Take This*! have made some inroads to fostering this kind of collaboration and industry presence, though not without these challenges.[826] What's more, many of their outputs are non-traditional - often in YouTube video or livestream formats - which presents another layer of difficulty when doing this work within academia, as traditional academic publishing is likely not the best way to get this information in the places it needs to go.

Finally, the massive network that exists between online games and third-party sites needs much more research. There are social, cultural, and economic flows that move between these various sites that need to be accounted for when analyzing any games or platforms within this network. While the third chapter of this dissertation establishes the situation and the project attempts to grapple with this current situation, we've only scratched the surface of the implications of these connections. In addition to analyses of these games and platforms as discrete units that will no doubt continue, there is a need to approach the study of online games with a more assemblage-oriented view. Snapshots of multiple games or connections between a site like Twitch and how it influences and responds to the changes within a particular game or set of games may

[825] As to not be compromised by one's place within documented toxic corporate cultures that emphasizes sales and retention.
[826] Rachel Kowert and Eve Crevoshay, "Harassment of Game Makers: Prevalence and Impact," *Diversity, Inclusion, and Equity in Game Development and Design F1000 Research Collection* (2023): 1-17.

not seem like a coherent package for a research project, but these and other sites like it are important junctures for understanding the current configuration of gaming from its cultural, social, and industrial dimensions.

A Final Word

Honestly, I had hoped to find a more hopeful path out of toxicity, but I don't feel like I came away with nothing. Positive play even at the smallest scale adds new vocabulary to the lexicon of play acts. Outside of the positive spaces like the ones I've researched here, positivity can be exceedingly rare in online games and may not be encountered by players at all. I still have some faith in the idea that simply putting a new possibility for how to act may spur some kind of self-reflection or new way of playing in players who encounter it in-game, and the more players take up this orientation to play, the more radical potential positivity can have. The more individual players do this, the more it will feel like players *can* do this instead of defaulting to the more toxic possibilities of interaction and the negative feelings that define play by modeling new ways of playing that deviate from the norm. This won't address toxicity on its own, but individual positivity is not a totally futile venture. I am not convinced that self-exclusion is a better solution than trying, failing, and then trying again in a relationship of cruel optimism to these games and the people who play them - though I understand why many players opt out of play and I find myself constantly on the line between giving it up and stubborn persistence.

So, can positivity change gaming? Certainly not on its own as the problems are too severe. Positivity can create some room to breathe for players who feel smothered by toxicity, and in conjunction with other commitments to more inclusive practices can create a more welcoming environment for those who are excluded or feel they need to self-exclude from these spaces. While one can certainly change the atmosphere and produce more feel-good rather than feel-bad moments, this doesn't always translate to breaking apart the underlying ideologies and structures of online gaming's culture, instead affording one more opportunity to participate in an activity that is probably going to make us feel bad anyway. It isn't only the most heinous dimensions of the culture that positivity can address, though. Just because a player may not represent the most toxic

parts of gaming culture, it doesn't mean that we don't contribute to the negativity and conflict that supports it. Through positivity, we can make individual efforts to change our own approaches to other players in these social spaces. It can be hard to stay positive when no one is watching but yourself, but this can be a thing we commit to as players rather than accepting silence and letting the most vocal haters take over every single gaming space.

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