

The Rogue in the Lovely Black Dress: Intimacy in World of Warcraft

Tyler Pace
Indiana University
919 E 10th Street
Informatics and Computing
Bloomington, IN 47408
tympace@indiana.edu

Shaowen Bardzell
Indiana University
919 E 10th Street
Informatics and Computing
Bloomington, IN 47408
selu@indiana.edu

Jeffrey Bardzell
Indiana University
919 E 10th Street
Informatics and Computing
Bloomington, IN 47408
tympace@indiana.edu

ABSTRACT

In this paper we present a critical analysis of player accounts of intimacy and intimate experiences in the massively multiplayer online role-playing game World of Warcraft (WoW). Our analysis explores four characteristics that players articulated about their virtual intimate experiences: the permeability of intimacy across virtual and real worlds, the mundane as the origin of intimacy, the significance of reciprocity and exchange, and the formative role of temporality in shaping understandings and recollections of intimate experiences. We also consider the manifest ways that WoW's software features support and encourage these characteristics.

Author Keywords

Virtual world, intimacy, sociability, reciprocity, World of Warcraft, massively multiplayer online game

ACM Classification Keywords

H5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

INTRODUCTION

The massively multiplayer online role playing game World of Warcraft (WoW) has achieved unprecedented success. With 11.5 million paying subscribers worldwide, its appeal as entertainment software is indisputable. In it, players build up their characters painstakingly over months, engaging in a freewheeling virtual economy, performing repetitive and sometimes even tedious tasks to achieve goals of ludic advancement [10, 11]. During these months, players spend considerable time developing expertise in its economy, geography, and combat all while forming meaningful and lasting relationships.

As players ourselves, we recognize that WoW supports fulfilling and even intimate relationships. As researchers, we wanted to understand *how* WoW as software enables and mediates intimacy and intimate experiences among its players. We see this as a part of the convergence between the increased emphasis in experience design in HCI and sociability in CSCW. WoW, as a software platform, appears to support and encourage sophisticated collaboration and to do so in a way that players find fulfilling. This paper describes a study of players' responses to an open-ended question about intimacy, including a critical analysis of themes running through the responses.

Intimacy and Technology

Intimacy is normally concerned with physical togetherness, yet modern communication technologies have been extraordinarily successful in their ability to help us maintain great physical distance in our relationships [17]. In response to both the changing nature of intimate relationships as a result of distance enabling technologies and the in-kind flood of new technologies designed to support intimacy, HCI has become increasingly interested in intimacy as a topic of research [12, 14, 20, 34, 43, 44, 50].

The majority of the research conducted on intimacy and technology emphasizes enhancing, replacing or creating more intimate experiences via either new or repurposed technologies [19, 46]. A frequent concern in these projects is to design and test technologies which replace the shared experience and situational awareness absent in many computer-mediated communications [3, 17]. Related projects aim to deemphasize the role of technology as a means for "efficient information exchange" in favor of mediums supportive of more "meaning" and "interpretation" [22].

Intimacy and Virtual Worlds

The study of relationships and collaborations as they are mediated by graphically rich virtual worlds is a growing area of interest in HCI and CSCW research [5, 35]. However, the emphasis of intimacy research has generally not been placed on virtual environments but rather on digital artifacts [20, 21] and low information richness computer-mediated communication systems like instant messaging [16, 18]. As a result, little research has been conducted in

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HCI and CSCW to explicitly understand *intimate* experiences and relationships as they are developed in or mediated by virtual worlds. Given the desire in our field to improve the sociability of interactive systems [e.g., 10, 31, 39, 45], and given the enormous success of virtual worlds to support and encourage sociability and intimacy, research into user experiences with intimacy merit study.

Some work on intimacy in virtual worlds has appeared in research in games and media studies. The Daedalus Project [48] explores friendship and romance in massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs). Chen examines how players forge camaraderie and trust through communication and coordination in World of Warcraft dungeon battles [7]. Kolo and Baur study social dynamics in online gaming [23]. Liebert uses the Sternberg Intimacy Subscale and Rubin's Love Scale to compare virtual versus face-to-face romance in over 500 participants [26]. Li et al use a dialectical approach to examine virtual relationships, focusing on how people cope with tensions within them [25]; and Malaby explores connections among players generated over time through reciprocity and shared experiences [28].

In her work on EverQuest, T.L. Taylor emphasizes the intimate, social nature of MMOGs, arguing that solo play is a "partially realized" experience which leads players to participate in varying types of social networks as a means to more fully realize the game. Taylor argues that MMOGs do not contribute to intimate relationships by accident or through the quirky appropriation of users, but that the very design of virtual worlds provides for and inspires the development of strong-tie relationships [47].

In a chapter of his recent book, *Coming of Age in Second Life*, anthropologist Tom Boellstorff explores different notions of intimacy in Second Life, including friendship, sexuality, love, family, and, surprisingly, intimacy as addiction. To Boellstorff, virtual world intimate encounters, like all other meaningful activities in-world, must be understood as strictly in-world phenomena, bracketing aside their real-world counterparts [4]. Collectively, this research greatly improves our understanding of the sociability of virtual worlds. Yet when they talk about intimacy, they tend to do so in predefined ways, such as using a priori measures of intimacy or working, as Boellstorff does, from a position that a priori excludes real-world intimacy.

Missing in this research is the voice of the player. How is intimacy experienced and expressed by WoW users? What sorts of experiences are "intimate"? How is an intimate encounter related to in-game events and experiences? The answers to these questions could shed light on the design of collaborative systems that encourage friendship and interpersonal investment (or even, if appropriate, romance) among collaborators.

RESEARCH APPROACH

Both sociological and psychological literature on intimacy concludes overwhelmingly that the notion of intimacy is

hard to define, and it is what a person makes it [33]. In 1992, two psychology researchers, Register and Henley, used a phenomenological approach to study intimacy [41], a research method common in both the humanities [e.g., 13] and psychology [e.g., 49]. The subjects in the Register & Henley study were asked to "recall and describe a specific incident in which you experienced what you would call an 'intimate experience.'" No additional information was given, including any definition of "intimacy," because the researchers wanted the subjects to tell them what they thought intimacy was. For Register and Henley, such a phenomenological approach to intimacy offered a means to account for a "systematic, descriptive account of the most fundamental aspects of an experience" as reported by their research participants. A phenomenological account makes "no a priori assumptions about the phenomenon [intimacy]" and instead requires researchers to "bracket" their understanding of the studied phenomenon.

Modeling our project on this study, we asked users of various virtual worlds to tell us about their experience of intimacy in virtual worlds. This open-ended question was the center of a short Web-based form that was distributed via popular virtual world distribution lists and Internet forums so as to understand virtual world participants' conceptualization of intimacy in their own words. 12 different channels were used to disseminate the form, including popular forums, such as World of Warcraft, Wowhead, and MMO Champions as well as numerous guild lists and game research forums, such as SLED and DiGRA. The form was widely distributed across virtual worlds not just for the purpose of increasing participation but as an intentional strategy to incorporate the perspectives of participants of many different virtual worlds into our research on intimacy. As of this writing, 441 participants from 13 different virtual worlds initiated it and 159 participants completed it. From the 441 overall participants, 149 World of Warcraft users began it and 62 completed it. We attribute the low completion rate to the demand that users compose a prose response, rather than clicking multiple choice forms.

For the form's central open-ended question, we asked participants the following, following it with a large text area in which they could respond.

Please recall and describe a specific incident in which you experienced what you could call an "intimate experience" in the virtual world you chose. This can be as short or as long of an experience as you would care to write about. For our purposes, it is not as important what you say, as that you say it clearly and **in as much detail as possible.** Please try to include as much of what you were aware of in the account as possible.

This question left open the definition of "intimacy" and encouraged participants to recount and share as much detail as they feel comfortable. An emphasis on the words and descriptions of participants is at the foundation of the work presented in this paper. Response lengths varied: of the 62 responses analyzed for this study, the median word length

was 115, with a max length of 520 words and a standard deviation of 113 words.

In addition, the authors have extensive experience with virtual worlds, both as researchers [-anon-] and as accomplished WoW players. We hope this dual perspective contributes to a sensibility for the material qualities, expressive languages, and social understandings of virtual worlds.

FOUR THEMES OF WOW INTIMACY

In our sample, 94% of participants have played WoW for at least a year, and 65% for more than three. 67% played WoW at least 15 hours a week. 76% of participants were male, and 90% were between 18 and 33 years of age. We conclude that our sample was composed largely of serious, veteran players of WoW. Not surprisingly, their responses to our question were diverse. In the main body of this paper, we work through their responses by exploring four high level themes that emerged in them:

- Intimacy is often located across real and virtual worlds, and not *in* one or the other
- Intimacy often emerges from mundane, rather than extraordinary, experience
- Intimacy involves reciprocity
- Intimacy is experienced in and articulated with temporal categories and concepts

We identified this collection of four themes through a procedure known as *explication de texte*, or close reading, an analytical method that originated in the humanities [36] and which involves the careful examination of diction, rhetorical devices, style, and other formal and thematic elements in a text. Two of the three researchers involved in the study have doctoral training in the humanities. This phase followed a process. Initially all three researchers conducted their close readings independently of one another to identify her or his own set of narrative themes. Subsequently, the researchers collaborated to combine, refine, and distinguish among themes before arriving at the four above as the most salient. This process was also used by Register and Henley in their work on intimacy [41].

Theme 1: Intimacy Across Realities

At the basis of all of our findings is a rejection of the commonly held dichotomy that radically separates the real world from a virtual one. In ways both explicit and implicit, players constantly blur the two worlds in their communications with each other, their expressions to us researchers, and in their play itself. Without a doubt, real world mental models of intimacy shape the perception and construction of virtual intimacy. Real world models of gender were especially present in participant accounts of physical intimacy. Many female participants recalled that they were often pursued in flirtatious and romantic ways after revealing their offline gender.

I have had a lot of men flirt with me in-game after they found out my true gender (via Ventrilo [VoIP Software]), and would get a lot of flirtatious emotes and the like. {#8}

Furthermore, male participants often reflected on the difficulty of initiating potentially romantic relationships with fellow players due to the gender anonymity and misrepresentation offered in a virtual world.

also people I've noticed try to create 'intimacy' with a player identifying themselves as female—regardless of they are or not. {#50}

I hit it off with him, and I thought he was a girl. {#12}

However, in spite of the use of real world models of intimacy in virtual worlds, some participants nonetheless argued that virtual worlds categorically cannot support intimate experiences. These participations stressed that the imaginary aspect of a virtual world precludes the possibility of authentic intimacy:

I wouldn't say I've had a REAL intimate experience on wow [WoW] {#1}

I don't believe that wow is a place where intimacy occurs on a regular basis, and not between people who don't know each other. {#16}

I generally avoid intimacy in WoW. It's an imaginary world and it's a mistake to treat other players as if you are playing by the same rules in real life. {#45}

A variant of this position argues that intimacy is possible in virtual worlds, but it is not as authentic as intimacy in the real world. For these participants, virtual worlds impose physical and emotional *boundaries*; whereas real-life intimacy involves the “breaking or disrupting” of boundaries enabling one to “enter the life-world” of another [41], the virtual world boundaries cannot, for the participants, be fully overcome:

For the most part there is some detachment in intimacy compared to a real life experience, but they can still be moving and enjoyable. {#24}

The relationship is a bit strained .. because we wonder how we would see each other if we were actually geographically closer ... and didn't have to rely on the internet to communicate. Because of this, the relationship is a bit of a dead end, however, still enjoyable. {#34}

Overall, however, participants who partially or fully denied the potential for meaningful intimate experiences in virtual worlds were in the minority; less than five of the 62 participants argued explicitly against the possibility of intimacy in WoW. For many, WoW provides the means to extend pre-existing relationships into the virtual. World of Warcraft can serve as both a shared activity and opportunity for private, emotional expressiveness [29] which positively contributes to the growth or maintenance of intimacy between persons in relationships which exist prior to WoW.

90% of the time we [husband and wife] are playing in the same room so intimacy within the game world doesn't progress very far past flirting or suggestive /says or /emotes ("Toon1 grabs Toon2's firm ass and squeezes" etc)... Either one or both persons are busy/entrenched in something in

game, and we stop at the flirting, or we both get turned on and leave game for intimacy in real life. {#47}

I remember it was nice to ... to use the more romantic emotes [avatar animations] without causing my husband embarrassment in front of his guild-mates. {#36}

For many participants, relationships that developed in-world move outside of World of Warcraft and may even involve a strong romantic component. As reported by participants, romantic courtship beginning in World of Warcraft appropriates a broad spectrum of communication technologies with reducing levels of computer mediation and reducing reliance on WoW as the sole medium for communication. While conversations may originate in-world, they often move to instant messaging, phone calls and eventually physical meetings.

I met my current boyfriend within the game ... We met while grouped together to complete an instance [dungeon] {#27}

in one instance I befriended one of these people on Facebook, thus quite intimately inviting them into my 'offline' world if there is a distinction between the two.... On the other hand, some of my offline friends ('real life' friends) also play, and I speak with them through the game sometimes. These interactions are probably the most intimate. {#29}

Even though romantic relationships from within World of Warcraft often move beyond the game, the virtual world offers a strong sense of co-presence that many participants find fundamental to the creation and maintenance of their in-world intimacy.

I and a guy I liked spent a lot of time flirting in game. One evening we discovered an abandoned hut near Ironforge [a major city in WoW] and spent the whole evening with our avatars cuddling on the bed just touching. I really felt close to him and didn't notice time passing. {#60}

As demonstrated by the accounts of our participants, World of Warcraft is capable of facilitating intimate relationships and experiences. Through the use of embodied avatars, participants are able to establish the *presence* of a "palpable Other" [8] which is so fundamental to the experience of intimacy. The presence of the other is manifested in a bodily form (avatar) which enables the symbolic (rather than physical) sensations of awareness, touch, activity and expressiveness so important to intimate interactions [27].

Theme 2: Transforming the Mundane

WoW is a vast game in which many players find themselves investing dozens of hours per week of play time. Much of this time involves repetitive activities, from monster killing to item collecting, time that is often referred to as "grinding." The grind of the game molds players into routines and habits which form mundane "day to day" routines for their avatar(s). As a result, intimate experiences were regularly described as poignant moments capable of breaking through the mundane nature of the game experience. Our participants collectively suggested a common sequence, in which the mundane grind is the default state, which is then interrupted by something surprising (often

involving someone transitioning from just a random other player to someone with whom one has authentic emotional ties), followed by a new order in which the friends or lovers rediscover WoW together.

For a few participants, the veil of the mundane is pierced by an attraction or connection to another player. This attraction represents the dialectic of destiny and surprise that is often characterized as a complex component to intimacy [41]. In the same moment, participants contrarily feel as if the intimate occasion was both always meant to be and yet also novel and exciting, usually for no explicable reason.

I came back to check on my auctions and stand in front of the bank to waste time like anyone else who had nothing better to do after being level 60 [maximum level at the time] for two years ... I noticed a rogue ... Somehow, she stood out from other[s] ... {#2}

The mundane often involves the performance of identity and in particular, gender. Many participants attribute virtual identity markers (primarily avatar gender) as a likely representation of offline qualities. Frequent tension between the different expressions of gender (e.g., offline males playing online females) sometimes results in unexpected connections between players.

Originally, the guy ... was talking to me a lot, but I didn't realize that he was a guy, cause his avatar was a girl ... It's a big joke with us really, because his girlfriend/fiancee thought I was hitting on him, and the whole time I thought he was a girl. Anyway, we all reconciled the situation, and we are still, what I like to call, friends to this day. {#12}

World of Warcraft goes to great lengths to engage players in its deep lore and game play, using features such as narratives surrounding chains of quests, virtual architecture and other forms of in-world cultural design, and so on. For many players, it is easy to get lost in the sea of avatars trekking about a fantasy world in search of adventure. However, in many accounts, participants recalled moments at which they realized (or remembered) that there are humans behind the avatars. For these participants, avatars were able to transition from simple ludic objects or visual representations to embodied others [8;27] capable of emotional expression and reception [29].

I remember that I wasn't playing "just a game" anymore and that the player behind the character is actually someone that I could be dealing with in real life. {#21}

After noting their perception that real humans are central to the intimate experiences of World of Warcraft, many players reflected on the disruptive and unexpected nature of having an intimate experience with another human in a world of superficial fantasy and adventure.

intimacy, in this case, was a human connection beyond the expected. In game, we are expected to play in a fantasy realm ... the unexpected here, is that I felt connected with this player and was able to emote [i.e., using software-based emoting features] sympathy, sadness, and sexual attraction towards the person behind the character. {#21}

Additionally, knowing that humans are behind avatars inspires some to behave in ways they would not have. Generally, these behaviors involved “extra” attempts at friendship or relationships maintenance. Expressing a desire and ability to function within, maintain and promote a community-at-large (e.g. a WoW guild) are central to intimacy [29].

This was a player who was not generally liked by the guild members but whom I had gone to lengths to retain and integrate into the guild because I recognized his value as a player and a human. {#45}

Other participants recalled experiences where the normally mundane conversations about the game transformed into meaningful, significant and intimate conversations.

I have had many conversations with several people inside that game that I have not met in real life. I have talked to them about anything and everything under the sun, and we have continued talking outside of the game as well {#12}

The conversation started with game talk, then it started to shift characters from digital to real. Somehow our conversation about guild progression turned into conversation of childhood abuse, sexuality and future goals. {#21}

In addition to recalling the extraordinary moments capable of eclipsing the mundane, many participants noted how the often vilified mundane can be a subtle contributor to intimate relationships.

We raided together for a long time, as well as other group activities in the game, they were like a family to me. {#12}

He and I were guildmates ... He was the one that showed me the ropes, and introduced me to other players ... I would have stopped playing several times if it wasn't for him. {#44}

Spending significant periods of time with these people (4 hours a night 2 or 3 nights a week) eventually leads to a stronger feeling of familiarity {#28}

For most participants, World of Warcraft is an exercise in finding enjoyment in the mundane. The enjoyment, as we have seen, does not come from players liking repetitive and monotonous game content per se, but rather because the mundane grind of virtual life does not command every second of their attention, opening up possibilities for social relationship development in-world. The game encourages this exploration through a number of mechanisms, perhaps the most conspicuous being its disproportionate rewards for social activity (e.g., group quests, dungeons, raids, the crafting system). A more subtle example would be the in-game transportation system, which often involves players stuck in a vehicle mostly without control of their character for 5-7 minutes at a time, which encourages players to participate more in guild chat during the ride.

Theme 3: Intimate Reciprocity

Participant responses suggest that reciprocity occasions intimacy in World of Warcraft. Reciprocity is a form of exchange, which anthropologist C. A. Gregory defines as “a transaction involving two transactors, A and B, and two objects, x and y” [15]. Anthropologists divide exchange

into two broad categories: market and reciprocity-based. In market exchange, objects are exchanged under the understanding that they are of equal value, and at the conclusion of the transaction, neither transactor has any further obligation to the other. In reciprocity-based exchange, objects are circulated between the transactors over a period of time, such that no given transaction brings closure to the exchange: the transactors are in a perpetual state of reciprocal interdependence, characterized by a mutual sense of indebtedness between the transactors, forging social relations that often go far beyond the mere exchange of material objects.

This characteristic of reciprocal exchange—that it is constitutive of human relationships—is one of the recurrent themes in our participants’ responses when asked to relate intimate experiences in World of Warcraft. In particular, gift exchange in-world, which is a traditional form of reciprocity going back to antiquity, contributes to the establishment of a complex social network in which people have dependant, obligatory, yet intimate relations with one another [9, 24, 46]. Gifts take on both symbolic and tangible forms. In the ensuing section, we consider several of these forms and examine how they cultivate intimacy.

Vulnerability and Empathy as Symbolic Gifts

Intimacy requires knowledge of each other [42]. The act of knowing and being known cultivates intimacy, and intimacy is established “when you reveal the secret of your *I* to yourself or another and experience a sense of understanding and appreciation.” [32]. The revelation of personal and private information about the self through in-game chat when interacting with other players is a common practice in virtual worlds, including World of Warcraft. Whether it is the disclosure of fear of doctoral exams, relating a traumatic event, characterizing a general depressed state, or describing an abusive relationship, our participants indicated that they often seek counseling and solace in fellow players through verbal communication, and that this instigates intimate and positive feelings among players. One player wrote:

One night after a run of some instance or other we got started talking about relationships and stuff and after that he went out of his way to make me feel better about myself. I would classify it as an intimate experience because up to that point I hadn't really opened up to anyone, even my family, about what I was feeling. On some level it was easier to tell him about what I'd experienced because it was over a computer and I didn't have to face him. {#48}

Another player shared his experience in detail:

I had been having a rough senior year in high school, I thought I was going crazy and all sorts of other things. I knew from a previous time that he had a degree in psychology so one night I decided to approach him for help. He agreed to try, and for the next several hours we discussed everything that was going on in my life at the time...He was very assuring that he doubted I was crazy, and that I was just frustrated with a world beyond control. His concern for me being safe and stable was something I was not used to, it was

like a beacon of hope ahead in my future. We spent hours talking into the early hours of the next morning. This has turned into something akin to a father son relationship with someone I've never actually seen. {#55}

In these quotes and others like them, self-disclosure reveals one's vulnerability, which occasions another players' empathy and forges an emotional connection. Seen from this perspective, self-disclosure is a symbolic gift proffered to those who offer comfort and assistance in return. Gift exchange in these examples is a means through which individuals communicate and attribute values they associate with each other [6].

Diegetic Artifacts as Tangible Gifts

In-game artifacts come to stand for people and relationships, and they create a kind of closeness that WoW players consider to be intimacy. A player related the following occasion:

On my birthday, which was near the end of this time, he gave me a really nice crafted piece of gear that he had spent a considerable amount of time/gold creating. {#27}

The comment was offered in the context of describing how a romance was germinated between the two players first through grouping together to complete instance runs. The diegetically appropriate gift, offered on a real-world special occasion, is a piece of gear crafted by its giver that not only enables its recipient to advance in game (i.e., making her stronger in-world), but it also obligates her to reciprocate (i.e., placing her in a weaker, subordinate social position) [30]. This kind of tradeoff of in-game benefits/obligations and social benefits/obligations is the kind of rich complexity that prevents a market-like closure to social exchangers and instead leads to the ongoing mutual indebtedness that builds personal relationships. As for the gear itself, we might call it a threshold object, by which we mean an object whose meaning is largely defined by and defines a transformative moment in which the player relationship changes. The gear is rich in personal symbolism to be sure, but at the same time it retains its more impersonal status as good gear.

A Reciprocal Turn to Intimacy

As the great anthropologist Mauss observed, gift exchange creates a social bond between givers and recipients through a sense of obligation that demands the return of the gift. [30]. Regardless of the nature of the gifts exchanged (i.e., symbolic or tangible), the act of giving and taking channels the flow of gifts, and at the same time, it also enables an intimate relationship between the actors. Put another way, these gifts in World of Warcraft are important less in their objective existence than they are meaningful to the players, mediating their relationships with each other. The reciprocity episodes described above demonstrate that reciprocal exchange in World of Warcraft is not merely material: both the objects of exchange (e.g., vulnerability) and their outcomes (e.g., solidarity) are social and emotional. Reciprocity is a vehicle by which people achieve mutual solidarity through a sense of moral obligation. The feeling of indebted-

ness, coupled with gratitude and faithfulness, motivates players to create intimacy in their relationships.

Theme 4: Time and Intimacy

The passage of time is a phenomenon through which people organize their experience of the world [40], and it is not surprising that temporality factored heavily in many of our participants' intimate experiences in World of Warcraft. Intimacy often was described by reference to certain events, which in turn were described as taking place during a period of time and in a certain order. As such, intimacy can be seen as embedded in a process or chronology. Though intimacy was described as taking place within chronologies, not all chronologies had the same structure.

Two Temporal Strategies of Describing Intimacy

In analyzing the responses, we noted that many of the responses could be categorized as either intimacy episodes or intimacy histories. An *intimacy episode* is a narrative that dwells on a single episode or event, exploring it in detail. An *intimacy history* is narrative that sketches intimacy across many individual episodes or periods of time. Each of these temporal structurings affects the resulting characterization of intimacy.

One of our participants, in a single continuous response, used both strategies in succession to describe how he met his girlfriend in-world. We add markers in square brackets to indicate the shift in strategy.

[Intimacy episode begins] The first time I ever spent any amount of time with her was one random day in front of the bank in Ironforge... A short while later, one of the Grand Marshals came by and I got to talk to him for a while... I noticed a rogue shadowing him who was in the same guild as he was, but hadn't really seen her around or heard of her before. I played maybe 14-16 hours any given day and new most everyone in a raiding or PVP guild. Somehow, she stood out from other NE rogues. I had put on my Lovely Black Dress and danced with her for a little bit (turned out that she, too, had the dress). After a couple of minutes of that and some random tells back and forth trying to figure out whether it was an alt of someone I knew... We found ourselves in the top floor of one of the many empty rooms within the confines of Ironforge. I usually carried a wide variety of things in my bags and happened to have the mats for a picnic: bananas, spring water, some ham... we sat up there for an hour or so eating my goodies and just making small talk. [Intimacy history begins:] Some weeks later we were talking on MSN while she was at work. That then became phone calls, then phone calls became a relationship. We've since been together officially for 4 months although we've been very close for nearly a year. {#2}

The intimacy episode is presented as a sequential narrative, and yet it is presented as a unity: "the first time I ever spent any amount of time with her." This part of the response luxuriates in the pleasure of the moment when his relationship with the other player crossed the threshold into a meaningful relationship. His subjective perspective is emphasized in details such as how it came to be that he first

noticed her avatar, how she “somehow stood out,” and the reliance on concrete visual imagery.

In the history portion, beginning with “Some weeks later,” the tone and emphasis changes. The narrative is much more objective. He offers almost no visual details and instead offers times and technologies. This narrative has a unity as well: it is what happened between the threshold episode and the present, with an emphasis on milestones: being together, formalizing their relationship, etc. In the following sections, we explore each of these two strategies in more detail.

The Intimacy History

The previous section offered a brief intimacy history and identified some of its key features. The following is excerpted from the longest example of this type of response in our study.

I met my boyfriend within the game of World of Warcraft. We met while grouped together to complete an instance.... We were both using Ventrilo [VoIP] ... which I assume how he was tipped off to the fact that I'm a woman outside the game. We chatted during the instance and he started trying to recruit me into his guild. This “recruitment”/getting to know me lasted for a couple weeks, and then I joined his guild. At this point, we began spending much more time together, during raids and such. A peculiar type of flirting occurred ... where if I had a question about game content, I had to first reveal a piece of information about myself (e.g., my real name, where I lived, what I did for a living.) ... This pattern lasted about 6 weeks. {#8}

Structurally, it is similar to the earlier example, in that the account spans time and emphasis both time and technology. As with the earlier example, it is unified around the theme of “how we came to be an item.”

Integrated into this structure are a number of details about the mechanisms and discursive nature of their communications: this is not only a history of their relationship, but also a history of their linguistic practices during courtship. The point of view of this narrative is not objective, since it is clearly hers, but it is not focused on her private internal reactions and thoughts, but rather the whole chronology as told by her. Her perspective is also grounded outside of WoW. Terms and phrases such as Ventrilo, “instance,” “outside of the game,” “raids,” “question about game content” are all spoken in the voice of the real-life player, rather than in-world avatar, who could not know any of these terms.

The Intimacy Episode

As noted with the earlier example, the intimacy episode has two overriding characteristics, which are clearly related to each other: the chosen event is rich in symbolic importance, serving as some sort of threshold; and the narrative places an emphasis on the internal subjective experience of that event. These narratives are often poignant when they describe the beginning of a romantic relationship, as in the above example of the Ironforge picnic, but they are not limited to romance, as the following examples show.

One [of my intimate experiences] would be getting Gladiator title with my RL friend in 2's. [He is referring here to a challenging chain of team-based player-vs.-player duels] This took a lot of work for both of us and really gets you to coordinate a plan over ventrilo in order to accomplish this achievement. After a couple energy drinks and a few hours of arena [we] kind of felt giddy after knowing our rating was guaranteed to receive that title. {#24}

The participant characterized the preceding quote as both “moving and enjoyable.” The episode description is brief, but the description of their accomplishment, and what it took to achieve it, is crowned with an expression of their giddiness, brought on by the combination of in-the-trenches camaraderie, achievement of a difficult goal, and caffeinated soft drinks. What makes this intimate, or “moving” in his words, presumably is this single intense moment of ecstasy, a moment that indicates the threshold of achieving the in-game status of Gladiator but which clearly means much more than that. The act of grouping and coordinating in-world to accomplish tasks often leads to feelings of cohesion, connection, and interdependence, collectively contributing to a sense of intimacy. The strong awareness of the other's presence, amplified by having shared values and goals, also fosters intimacy [33]. In a virtual world, this coordination-based intimacy may help overcome the loss of physical intimacy caused by the Internet-mediated distance relationship.

This singularity in collaborative achievement is echoed by another pairing, who are presumably well beyond the first blush of courtship:

My husband and I tend to work well together (thank goodness) but [our successful collaboration in the challenging instance Black Rock Depths] seemed special because we just sort of took charge of the situation and fed off of each other's strengths. We got through the part only to learn that our “veteran players” (his sister, etc) had never gone this far. It was great to think that my husband and I had combined into a cohesive unit (they helped, but I'm more talking about leadership and coordination) that was able to easily overcome this obstacle. {#40}

The intensity of feeling in this episode is communicated with a technique known in rhetoric as the ineffability topos—that is, the speaker's suggestion that something cannot be expressed in words. It appears when she writes “we just sort of took charge of the situation” as if she cannot say or herself does not really know how they managed. She also indicates that they passed a significant milestone (i.e., the place the better sister had never passed before) without even knowing it. The ineffable pleasure of this interaction is also manifest in her claim that “my husband and I had combined into a cohesive unit,” which happened in the midst of a 5-person collaboration rampant with violence and chaos. This poorly described melding of identities with her husband to accomplish a great goal she did not even know she had become a moment of ecstasy, subjectively described.

In all three of these intimacy episodes (including the Ironforge picnic one quoted earlier), participants share their experiences with us with an intensely subjective point of view. In contrast to the relatively objective intimacy histories, the intimacy episodes construct intimacy in phenomenologically rich ways, immersing us not only in what happened but even more directly in the subjective experience of what happened (indeed, it is difficult in the Blackrock Depths example even to know what actually happened). Also in contrast with the intimacy histories, the episodes are more focused on action in-world; whereas the intimacy histories made more reference to telephones and IM platforms, the intimacy episodes make more reference to in-world locations, actions, and specific reactions to play.

UNRESOLVED TENSIONS AND INTIMACY

Intimacy, regardless of whether it is defined by professionals or the popular voice of everyday players, is a complex cultural construct. From friendship to romance, physical to spiritual communion, and from cherished moments to full lifetimes, intimacy represents one of the best aspects of our social existence.

Our 62 participants did not offer any consistent, coherent, or authoritative unifying definition of intimacy. Several of them even expressed uncertainty and occasionally frustration because we did not define intimacy for them in the question. Yet within the diversity of responses, WoW players consistently pointed to certain patterns that they clearly associate with intimacy, and this pattern relates to all four of the themes above: the unresolved tension. By *unresolved tension*, we refer to a key ambiguity or indeterminacy that WoW as a software platform offers no help in resolving; indeed, WoW as a software platform seems to encourage these ambiguities or tensions.

At the center of it all is the tension between whether intimacy is a phenomenon of the WoW world, of the real world, or both. We have seen how real world mental models of intimacy inform understanding and behavior in-world. We have also seen how in-world relationships transition into real world relationships. Our participants indicated some disagreement about whether genuine intimacy was possible in-world. Our participants also showed that their own understanding of the worldedness of a given relationship could change unequivocally in the space of a single event, for example, when a chat about guild progression moves onto real life personal traumas.

We have also seen that players manipulate this unresolved tension to create just the right nuance. On someone's real-life birthday, a suitor crafts an in-world gift for his love-interest. In another example, a wife sends her husband erotic emotes in private chat to thank him for his help questing, even though they are sitting side-by-side in the same room. An exquisite date in Ironforge leads eventually to real-life phone calls. The discovery of a player's real-life gender through VoIP changes text chat habits. Confessions of private fears and even sexual abuse are possible behind

the mask of the avatar. Long-term mentoring in-world starts to feel like a father-son relationship. A perceived psychological expert is consulted in avatar form. Help with in-game lore is offered in exchange for real-life information. Avatars create Twitter and Facebook accounts and friend each other. An intense sequence of team-based duels is enhanced with a long-distance toast of Red Bull.

These sorts of intimate behaviors are possible in part because the players themselves define the worlded nature of their intimacy in real time, as it suits their needs. The virtual world can be used as a protective mask, and that mask can be pulled away—or reinforced—at the players' discretion. An earlier decision can often be reversed. The relationships between WoW and the real world are not fixed by the software, and neither are they globally fixed by its community. They are often established by players provisionally and in real-time as a means of furthering their social interests and relationships.

In this paper, we have identified a number of these unresolved tensions. Besides in-world vs. mixed reality, we also see tensions between the mundane and the spectacular, in which intimacy emerges from the everyday. Tension also appears between gifts and obligations, in which the symbolic, social, and tangible value obscures precise measure and leads instead to mutual symbolic obligation. We see tension in the contrast between episodes and histories, in which intimacy is constructed as a sequence of events facilitated by the Internet or as an emotionally intimate portrait of an individual subjective response to a momentous and even ecstatic moment.

WoW supports this ambiguity through countless features, which supports Taylor's assertion that they are an intentional part of the design [47]. Among the most obvious are the range of communication channels that span worlds at graceful intervals, enabling players to control exactly how far they want to take relationships out of WoW: public and private chat channels, emotes, Ventrilo, guild Web sites, official forums, and extending beyond WoW to MSN, Skype, Facebook, email, the telephone, and the real-life meeting.

Another set of features, so obvious that it is almost easy to overlook, is the game's extraordinary amount of mundane content. This includes its thousands of quests, crafting system, in-game economy and auction house, instance and raid content, seasonal events, lengthy and boring transportation systems, dailies (quests that can be repeated once a day), and farming systems (picking herbs, mining ore, etc.) among others. As noted earlier, the very monotony of these tasks, often made more monotonous and efficient by player-created mods, are in a way *disengaging*, challenging players to find ways to make these pleasurable, since they are not that pleasurable in themselves. Sociability is one of the best ways to do so, and the game encourages this by offering disproportionately good rewards to those who engage in multiplayer, as opposed to solo, content. In other words,

group quests and raids model a behavior that WoW encourages players to take up on their own throughout the game world—and they do.

Another aspect of WoW that supports these fruitful tensions is its robust support for different kinds of exchange. We have already spoken of its communication channels. In addition, WoW offers player-to-player trade directly, via an in-game mail system that accepts attachments, and in its auction houses. The auction house and currency establish an in-world market value for many commodities, but just as in real life, what is exchanged as a commodity between seller and buyer becomes a gift exchange between friends. WoW's seasonal content encourages special event play, often with silly content, such as the ability during Halloween to turn other players into ninjas and pirates by firing a magic costume at them. While many craft objects have intrinsic game worth, by enhancing one's armor or attack power, many just look nice, such as dresses and fashionable hats, and offer no other practical benefits.

Collectively, these features and exchange channels enable players to discover and share the unexpected, from completing raids in Santa outfits to nearly naked races on foot across its continents. WoW's many elements become arguably a language of expression, a language that players master throughout their interactions within it. Thus, instead of Blizzard scripting in all the surprises and key moments, along the lines of a surprising plot twist in *Law & Order* or Master Chief's unforgettable first encounter with The Flood in *Halo*, players create them, usually sharing them with others, bringing value both to the gameworld itself and to their relationships within it. Key to the success in creating these fruitful tensions is WoW's multilayered yet consistent resistance to fixing meaning in advance.

CONCLUSION

Both virtual worlds and sociability are important areas of research in HCI. By focusing on intimacy in World of Warcraft, and specifically on ways that player's understand their experiences of intimacy, and considering these in relation to the technology, we can gain a better understanding of how WoW's success in these areas has been possible.

We have seen that WoW's apparent cultivation of ambiguity in several key areas empowers players to take over elements of WoW as a language of expression, granting them a capacity to construct nuanced social experiences—including intimacy itself. As we have seen from player testimony, these experiences interweave the emotional bonds of friendship, affection, and even love through an exchange of words, deeds, and gifts whose symbolism is hybridized from two worlds. This change itself is organized and experienced in and through user-generated narratives. Players are not simply actualizing social features designed explicitly into the system; rather, we see that veteran users are *skilled* at shaping sophisticated emotional relationships by appropriating system features into private expressive languages.

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