

FEMALE GAMERS, SYLVANAS WINDRUNNER, AND SEXISM:
GENDER POLITICS IN *WORLD OF WARCRAFT*

by

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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Council of
Texas State University in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Masters of Arts
with a Major in Rhetoric and Composition
August 2014

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my Dad. He's always believed that I could be whoever I wanted to be and could do whatever I wanted to do. His high expectations and continuous support have helped me reach goals I never thought possible.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to first thank my thesis chair and mentor Nancy Wilson, PhD. I met Dr. Wilson the April before I moved to San Marcos. Meeting her reassured me I was making the right decision to move 20 hours from home and pursue a graduate degree. She was there when I presented at my first conference. She was there when I presented at CCCC 2014. She has provided me with reassurance, wisdom, laughs, and even Thanksgiving dinner. I cannot thank her enough for everything she has done for me the past two years. I would also like to thank my other committee members Deb Balzhiser, PhD, and Rebecca Jackson, PhD. for all the guidance they have given me through my graduate career. Lastly, I would like to thank my husband Ryan, for encouraging and supporting me the past two years.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Jaidyn, the Draenei, is a tall and muscular male Paladin, a wielder of The Light. His white tentacle-like beard is adorned with golden rings; his handcrafted armor magnificently reflects and twinkles gold and silver. His mantle is encrusted with gems and each side of it is larger than his face. He swings his large golden axe with one arm. No one questions Jaidyn's masculinity—he is muscular, powerful, and quiet but confident. Because his appearance provides everything that is expected, he is not demeaned. No one questions Jaidyn's abilities.

But I am Jaidyn, and I am not a male; I only play one. “Man,” “dude,” “he,” “him,” and “that guy” have all been used to describe me. No one knows that I am a woman. It is for this reason that no one questions my ability to play a Paladin, to play any role (tank, healer, dps) in the game. It is why those with whom I am acquainted in the game are moved to action by my words. For example, Skwargoth, played by a male¹, was sending unwelcome private messages to women in our guild. We discussed it as a small group while clearing a dungeon. The women wished for guild members to confront him about the harassment, but the men in the group were hesitant to bring up the issue at the next guild meeting and didn't want to say anything. It wasn't until I, assumed to be male outside of the game, spoke up in support of these women that other men decided that it was necessary to say something to Skwargoth. As Jaidyn, I am a man, and I have power.

Nephaline, the Night Elf Druid, is tall and agile. She can transform into a wild cat,

¹ Many players use voice chat options such as Skype, Ventrilo, TeamSpeak, etc. which allow other players to hear them. Skwargoth, as well as other players, utilized this option. While I played Jaidyn, I did not. My gender was assumed to be male. I initially did not correct the misgendering.

a bear, a bird, or a tree at will. The golden moon on her forehead complements her light blue skin and royal blue hair. Her golden robes are adorned with vine engravings and bulbs of light. She uses nature magic to protect and heal her allies in emerald light. When I play my female character Nepheline, and am open about my gender being female, however, I give up a lot of the power I wield as Jaidyn. No longer is it assumed that I am capable; instead, I must prove myself over and over to show I am worthy of a spot on a team. I have had people leave my raid group when they hear me speak in my actual voice aloud in Ventrilo, which is a communication software used by players to discuss strategy for collaborative gameplay. I still remember one player, before exiting the Ventrilo program, saying, “I’m not playing with a woman. This raid will clearly end in failure.” I have been called names and told to stop playing because it was a waste of time to me and to anyone else on the game. Well, the joke is on them, because I play better on my Druid Nepheline than I do on Jaidyn. I also know that while my character Nepheline is a fantastic healer and has great stats, I lack power as Nepheline that I have as Jaidyn. Such overt sexism is exhausting sometimes, but these are some of my experiences playing *World of Warcraft*², and I am not the only woman to feel this way.

I have been playing video games for twenty years. Although I have experienced some difficulties in finding groups of people online to play with, or experienced doubt about my abilities as a player because of my gender, I often did not think too much about the larger cultural messages that both video games as well as players were sending about gender when it came to using computers and participating in digital communities. I enjoyed playing video games regardless.

² See Appendix A for a summary of the game.

A course on critical media studies provided me with a framework to begin closely analyzing digital texts and the cultural messages that these digital texts (re)construct. My experiences suggested that sexist elements did exist within video games, which prompted me to investigate how the game replicates cultural ideas about gender and rhetorically constructs gender in a way that we accept as “normal.”

However, a close analysis of Sylvanas Windrunner, a character in the fictional world of *WoW* only addressed half of the equation. I came to understand that Sylvanas Windrunner reflects her creators’ problematic attitudes about women, but to what effect? Did female players internalize these sexist messages? Resist them? Transform them? To answer these questions, I queried actual female gamers. In the process, not only did I illuminate the analysis of Sylvanas Windrunner, but I also learned how women respond to the game and negotiate the space in order to still enjoy the game issues of sexism, misgendering, and androcentrism.

Before my graduate work, I had recognized sexism when playing video games, but I had not looked at the games themselves with a critical eye. It wasn’t until I took a closer look at the female character Sylvanas Windrunner, a favorite character of mine from the Warcraft universe, as well as other women within the game, such as Tyrande Whisperwind or Jaina Proudmoore, that I noticed how often they are sexualized (either through lore or visually), have their purpose in the story directly connected to men, or are represented negatively in association with power or strength—observations I explore in detail in this thesis. Although the game replicates misogynist messages found within our culture through images, dialogue, and plot, it also reproduces these discursive messages, helping to normalize them within our culture. In order to understand how misogynist

messages from our culture permeate the game, as well as how it affects players, it is important not only to discuss how developers (re)construct ideas about gender within the game but also to allow women to represent themselves and discuss their own experiences. Without both of these efforts, the experiences of these women, and the sexism they encounter, will continue to be ignored. Rather, we should be more open to including experiences of marginalized groups in research, in this case, women in online video games. Gender representation is of particular concern in the digital humanities. I cannot think of a better way to articulate this sentiment than Moya Bailey did in her article, “All the Digital Humanists are White, All the Nerds are Men, but Some of Us are Brave,” in which she says, “The ways in which identities inform both theory and practice in digital humanities have been largely overlooked. Those already marginalized in society and the academy can also find themselves in the liminal spaces of this field. By centering the lives of women, people of color, and disabled folks, the types of possible conversations in digital humanities shift.” The discussion of women in gaming needs to continue to shift. If women are unable to talk about their experiences with technology that reproduces sexist attitudes within our culture about women, then these messages will continue to be reproduced without consideration for change. Ultimately this thesis is a response to a rhetorical situation that attempts to address issues of sexism within online video games such as *WoW* and to shed light on the experiences of female players in order to enact change.

Background

Though this thesis is specifically concerned with addressing sexism in online video games, it may be helpful to take a step back. Since *WoW* is an online game, it is

uniquely positioned within video game communities and also within the larger internet culture. This unique positioning means it is important to look specifically at how women are viewed by both the video game and online communities, which is why this background section begins with a discussion about women and the internet and the treatment of women within online spaces outside of just online games. Deborah Fallows, a writer for the Pew Research Internet Project, cites a 2005 Pew Internet Project survey that shows that 67% of the adult American population goes online, including 68% of men and 66% of women” (Fallows). Clearly, a large number of women use and spend time on the internet. Many of these women are also playing online games, like *WoW*, which in 2008 had over 400,000 female players (Breckon). Nonetheless, because video games have traditionally been a male-dominated entertainment form, particularly when video games were not played online, online video games continue to be referred to by the internet community as a male pastime. For example, according to *Know Your Meme*, a website operated by Cheezburger (a popular site for internet memes), the origins of the “there are no girlz on the interwebs” meme extends back to the “male-prevalent days of Usenet, particularly in the virtual Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs), a genre of text-based online role-playing games and predecessor to MMORPG like *World of Warcraft*” (“There are No Girls on the Internet”). Figure 1 shows the meme’s usage, highlighting its initial spike in 2008, three years after the Pew Research study showed the large percentages of women spending their time online, to today:

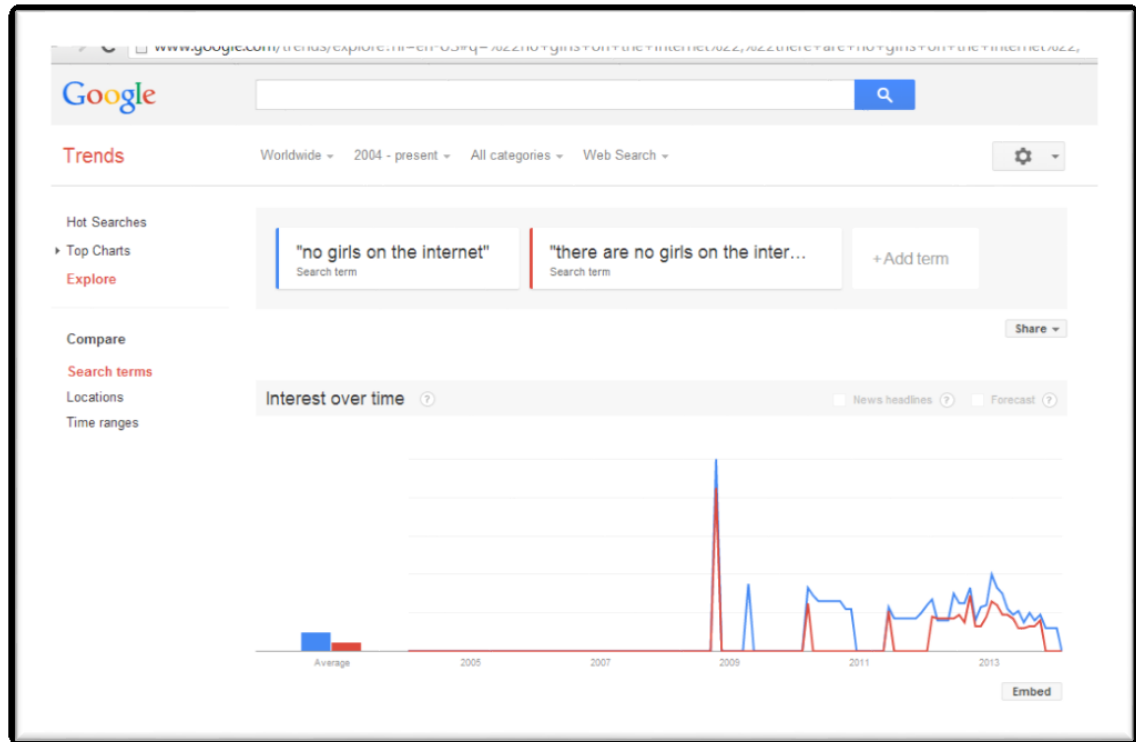


Figure 1- Google Search Trend of “No girls on the internet.” The figure shows the initial spike in 2008 of the search phrases “no girls on the internet” and “there are no girls on the internet.” It also shows the continued use of the search phrase since 2008 until present.

2008 is also the year that at least 400,000 *WoW* players were estimated to be female as mentioned previously. So while such a large number of female players were present within the game, internet searches of the phrase “there are not girls on the internet” spiked. Even though the Entertainment Software Association reports that in 2012, 47% of all video gamers were women, the rhetoric of the internet and gaming community continues to be one in which women are the “other” or the “outsider” of the internet and gaming communities. For example, one commenter on the Cheezburger website *Know Your Memes* argues that the meaning of “There are no girls on the internet” is that there is no gender on the Internet, which he argues in gendered fashion, means that there is no

“female advantage” (see Figure 2).

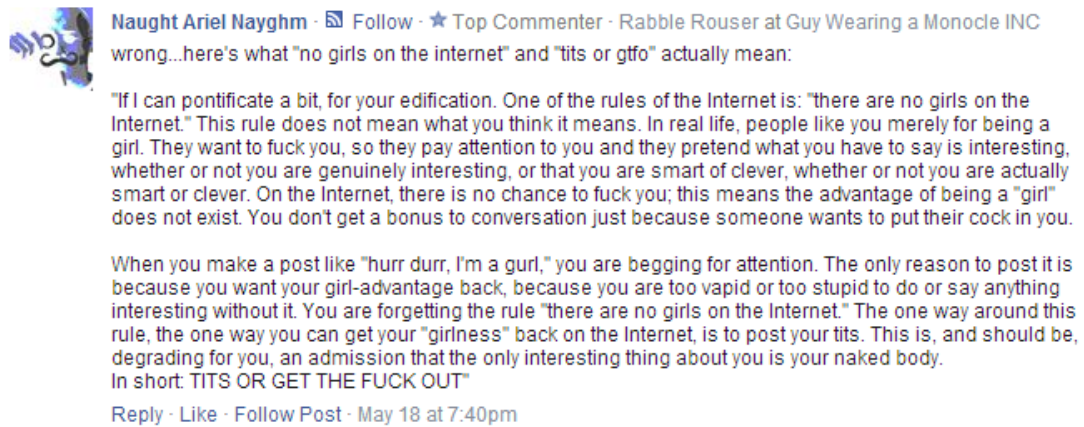


Figure 2 – Naught Ariel Nayghm “no girls on the internet”

Ironically, the commenter in Figure 2 proves that there *is* gender on the internet—the male gender. The commenter points out that “girlness” is only sexual visibility. The only reason, as the commenter says, that a woman would be frank about gender is for attention—otherwise why not accept being male by default? Moreover, the commenter’s anger suggests his resentment in the increased visibility of women—or at least women who do not wish to pass as males. His response is to try to bully them by issuing an ultimatum: they can either function as sexual objects, “TITS,” or leave the online space, “GTFO.” Both options serve men, not women. Thus, even though the reality is that women are on the internet as frequently as men, some men wish to ensure that it remain a “boys-only” club. As I will discuss, such misogyny and phallocentrism also surface in online gaming communities. In particular, sexist perspectives in our culture permeate *WoW*, and the game recreates these sexist perspectives within the game

through the use of images, dialogue, and plot.

It is important to note, however, that women are neither always oppressed nor completely powerless. Rather, women situate themselves as players *despite* the sexist nature of the game or some of its players, and find ways to avoid sexist behavior or respond to it. In fact, I argue that the game is reconstructing gender issues present within our society and many female players are working to create an online space that is more female friendly. In other words, there *are* girls on the internet.

Literature Review

In this thesis, I examine the sexist ways in which female characters are portrayed in online games designed by and for men—specifically *WoW*—and the implications of these depictions for real women, as well as how women respond to these depictions. I also examine how women negotiate the space of the game as players and talk about their own experiences with sexism and harassment. My initial research yielded work by Yee, Cole and Griffiths, and Wang and Wang. These researchers were mostly concerned with psychological and sociological motivations for play and social interactions between players. Women were only a small part of their research, which limited the information about women within the studies. However, their research did provide me with an initial starting point—that female gamers are part of this online community and that more in depth research about having a female identity in online spaces is still being worked on.

Researchers such as Littleton and Yates, Mandelbaum, and Corneliussen consulted actual female online gamers and interrogated stereotypes; as a result, their conclusions are far more nuanced and complex than the articles about empirical studies on online gamers I had initially found. Thus, while I seek to interrogate the empirical

findings of the initial studies I read about, the methodologies and results used by researchers who focused on female gamers function as valuable sources of theory, data, and methodology. This feminist research allows female gamers to represent themselves. This thesis is attempting to extend this effort in the following ways: allow female gamers to represent themselves by allowing them to provide narratives about their own responses to how the game portrays women as well as their own experiences playing the game, including prejudice and harassment they have experienced as a result of being female.

Psychological and Sociological Research

Nick Yee's article "Motivations for Online Play" discusses a study conducted using an empirical model to address player motivation and how this is correlated to demographics such as age, gender, and usage patterns. Yee asked online video game players 40 questions about player motivations based on Bartle's Player Types. He surveyed 3,000 MMORPG players using online spaces such as fan sites that cater to MMORPG players (773). Yee's research in order to show the myriad of reasons why players are motivated to play video games addresses three main motivations for playing online games: Achievement, Social Interaction, and Immersion (773). Yee's results revealed that "male players scored significantly higher on all achievement components than female players, while female players scored significantly higher than male players on the relationship subcomponent" (774). While males were more focused on achievements associated with the game, women were more focused on relationship building within the game, such as joining guilds and socializing with other players. However, Yee notes that "while these results seem to confirm stereotypical assumptions of gendered play styles, the variation in the achievement component is in fact better

explained by age than gender” (774). Despite Yee’s affirmation that age is more likely the demographic that contributes to results about scoring based on achievement versus relationship components, he does recognize that stereotypical assumptions do pinpoint women as interested in primarily relationships in online gaming.

While Yee states that gender is not necessarily the reason these variations exist, some of the information that Yee provides seems to indicate that he agrees with the stereotypical assumptions that he points out. Significantly, in his introduction, Yee includes a small statement from both a male and a female as evidence of their motivations for playing, the male comment tells us x and the female tells us y:

Currently, I am trying to establish a working corporation within the economic boundaries of the virtual world—primarily, to learn more about how real world social theories play out in a virtual economy [male, age 30].

The fact that I was able to immerse myself in the game and relate to other people or just listen in to the “chatter” was appealing [female, age 34].

These statements are implicitly gender-charged. Despite 3,000 responses, Yee chooses a gender stereotype to represent all female players. He does not make an explicit case for why he chose the specific two statements, but only explains that these show multiple reasons for motivation for play (772). The male responder recognizes ideas outside of the game, uses vocabulary that references social theories and virtual economies, and highlights his intelligence and interest in intellectual ideas beyond the game. The female is immediately gendered as interested primarily in relating to other people and in the ‘gossip’ of the game. Unfortunately, the article also includes only one small snippet of a

female voice. Thus, the narrative of women within the gaming community continues to be narrow and limited. Women's motivations for playing could easily fall into any of the three categories, or even outside of all three of Yee's categories. Other research, such as that done by Cole and Griffith, shows that overall women enjoy playing *WoW* more than men, despite *WoW*'s intricate achievement system, emphasis on adventure and violence, and in depth story building.

Cole and Griffiths' article "Social Interactions in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games" shows that women are clearly a part of the online community. Of the 912 self-selected participants surveyed from 45 different countries, 30% were female (576). Also, the study found that approximately three quarters of both males (76.2%) and females (74.7%) said they had made good friends within the game (577). It is clear, based on these statistics, that females are part of the larger social context of online games and are contributing members of the community. Also, this statistic seems to contradict Yee's findings. This close range of the statistics, 76% and 74%, suggests that both men and women enjoy relationship building in online games, rather than men being less interested than women in social interactions. In fact, according to Cole and Griffiths, over 48% of the participants named *WoW* as their favorite game, and *WoW* was "significantly more popular among females than males" (581). Their study points to *WoW* being a place to explore gender since it is a popular game for women and also very popular with all survey participants.

Cole and Griffiths suggest that "women are drawn to MMORPGs because they enjoy gaming within social communities that encourage exploration of an environment with others as a team, allowing for the opportunity to play out different aspects of self-

identity in a safe setting and supporting the pleasure associated with success” (581).

However, the empirical model limited the ability for women to discuss why they enjoyed these elements. Since the focus of the study was specifically on social interactions, it did not explore how these online settings are gendered, or the fact that while settings sometimes provide a space for exploring self-identity that is safe for men, these same settings do not always provide a safe space for women. Women must negotiate their places within the social context in order to create safe spaces, especially when gender is concerned.

Although Cole and Griffith look at social interactions among online gamers, Wang and Wang look more in depth at social interactions, specifically at what motivates players to help other players. In “Helping Others in Online Games: Prosocial Behavior in Cyberspace,” Wang and Wang discuss what motivates male and female players to help other players. Using an online questionnaire to measure altruism and prosocial behavior, they collected their data from a popular game website in Taiwan (345). According to Wang and Wang, by mimicking many aspects of real life social behavior, the social community in *WoW* and other online games work in similar ways to real life social behavior, and shows the strategic nature of socially organizing taking place within the game. Wang and Wang find that men are often more likely to seek out friends of the opposite sex, and point to previous research by Rollman, Krug, and Parente that suggests that women “provide emotional support to their male friends, while men seldom provide support to their same-sex friends” (346). They also found that women were more likely to help others regardless of gender (346). Since the social community of online games mimics real social life behavior as Wang and Wang point out, it also shows that this

behavior is not only positive in nature, but also negative. The authors, however, do not discuss issues of sexism or other marginalization that occur within real life social behavior that is being mimicked within the online game.

In conclusion, the scholarship of Yee, Cole and Griffiths, and Wang and Wang makes it clear that female gamers are a part of the online gaming community. In their attention to motivations for players, including social interaction and prosocial behavior among players, these authors present a complicated vision of the online game environment and community that leaves little doubt that women do inhabit this community in a meaningful way, even if their population, although growing, is often overlooked or underprivileged (as Yates and Littleton point out). However, none of these studies considers how games such as *WoW* rhetorically construct gender in these spaces or how women negotiate gender in what is still considered by many players a male pastime—both issues I explore in this thesis.

Women, Feminism, and Video Games

In *Understanding Computer Game Cultures: A Situated Approach*, Yates and Littleton argue that gaming should be viewed as a cultural activity. The authors stress the relationship between gender and computer gaming because “work on gender and computer gaming has traditionally focused upon women and girls’ exclusion from gaming and gaming cultures” (104). If so much of the early research about women and video games has focused on their exclusion, then it becomes difficult to interrogate the ways in which women who are gamers negotiate their place within the community. The authors go on to discuss the emergence of brands in the gaming industry that were created to reach a female demographic, such as Mattel’s Barbie and “pink brand” video

games. The industry also targets women as primarily interested in community building and social interaction. Yates and Littleton interviewed women who oppose this stereotype, who argue that the reasons that women play are varied. The researchers call for further research focusing on games “as media texts which therefore carry preferred readings” and “how the reading of games sets up subject positions for gamers” (120). Researchers have begun to answer that call for further research.

In “World of Warcraft as a Playground for Feminism,” Hilde G. Corneliussen discussed the ways in which gender becomes a category within online games, asserting that *WoW* is a “place where gender is being constructed, represented, and negotiated in ways not totally different from hegemonic Western discourses of gender” (65). If the way gender is constructed within the game is similar U.S. discourses of gender, then the game is likely also replicating sexist imagery and messages that are part of our larger culture.

Corneliussen specifically discusses areas of game design that are gendered, such as the background story, visual representations of player characters, NPCs (non-playable characters), and in-game activities. For example, Corneliussen discusses the story of NPC Aegwynn, who became the Guardian of Tirisfal, and an incredibly powerful mage. Corneliussen shows the strength of Aegwynn’s character; Aegwynn doesn’t fit the stereotypical female character. However, she also observes, “despite these stories of strong women, most of Azeroth’s history is a story of war and conflict played out by men, which leaves most of the population of Azeroth, including most of the female characters, invisible” (70). The idea of female characters, and in turn, female players being invisible, is connected to other work within the digital humanities such as the research by Yates and Littleton I presented previously. Ultimately, according to

Corneliussen, a digital world such as *WoW* can be “a perfect cultural playground for perceptions of gender in our modern world” (65).

Corneliussen builds on the research by Salen and Zimmerman who argue “the organizing principle of cultural rhetoric reveals how games represent broad patterns of ideological value. The design of a game, in other words, is a representation of ideas and values of a particular time and place...Creating a game is also creating culture, and therefore beliefs, ideologies, and values present within culture will always be a part of a game, intended or not” (4.30). Thus, in order for play to be meaningful, players must actively engage with and accept the discourse the game provides. This does not necessarily mean that all players agree with the rules of the world the game creates, but they do accept them as plausible, which means that the game may in many ways reflect cultural reality, such as negative portrayal of rape victims.

In “The Visible Female: Rape Culture and Horror in *Starcraft* and *Warcraft*,” Jolie Mandelbaum focuses specifically on two characters from Blizzard Entertainment games, Sylvanas Windrunner and Sarah Kerrigan, in order to illuminate the ways that cultural depictions of rape have permeated into video games. She analyzes the two characters and the points in the plot and dialogue of the game when the two characters are called “bitches.” Mandelbaum draws parallels between the way rape victims are treated within our culture to the way these two characters are treated within the game, comparing the fragmented narratives of the two characters to rape narratives. She writes, “While men in positions of power are afforded the privilege of ignoring the existence of a rape culture, Sylvanas and Kerrigan ruin that for everyone” (94). Kerrigan and Sylvanas refuse to keep silent or remain helpless after their rapes. Instead, these women garner for power. And in

Sylvanas' case, she attempts to exact revenge on her rapist. The characters are not viewed in a positive light and are called "bitches" by other characters within the game. However, Mandelbaum does not believe that Blizzard is attempting to bring awareness to the issue of rape culture. Rather, she says, "I think in a company staffed by men, it's incredibly telling that the two worst monsters they could think up were ones who destroyed the idea of the silent and invisible victim" (95).

Mandelbaum's research included following a series of discussion forums by the *WoW* ladies Livejournal community in which they discussed these two characters and the use of the bitch epithet to describe them. However, her research does not directly cite or quote the discussions she followed.

My research, particularly for Chapter 4 of this thesis, begins in the same site as Mandelbaum's. I initially looked at the game, but then also used the *WoW* ladies Livejournal community as a place to look for participants to talk about their experiences playing the game. This thesis looks to answer the call from Littleton and Yates to further research about looking at preferred readings of video games as texts, as well as, attempts to look at how *WoW* could be a playground for feminism as Corneliussen believes it has the potential to be, through the ways that women negotiate the space and find ways to enjoy playing despite sexism they may encounter.

CHAPTER II

METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION

Introduction

As I mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, I personally have been playing video games for twenty years. My experience with online gaming began in 2007. In the fall of 2007, I began playing *WoW*. I've been playing *WoW* off and on for about seven years now and I enjoy playing. As I considered the various sexist messages the game is sending as well as some of my own personal experiences with harassment in the game, I started to ask how other women read the game, as well as how they dealt with harassment and sexism. I found myself needing to answer two questions: 1) what story does the game tell about women? And 2) what stories do women tell about the game?

A critical analysis informed by Huckin's critical discourse analysis of the character of Sylvanas Windrunner would allow me to answer the first question. I chose CDA because that framework unearths power structures and social inequalities that seemed apparent to me as I spent time playing the game—particularly power structures of gender. In order to answer the second question, I decided to solicit other female players' experiences with the game—the game as it was created by developers and aspects of the game that required interaction with other players—in order to ascertain how they rhetorically situate themselves in response to the sexism they experience. I could easily connect the digital text, *World of Warcraft*, to my personal experience, but I determined that I needed to hear the female players' narratives because multiple narratives together would be much more powerful than one and because narrative inquiry provides a way for us to interrogate the stories that women tell about their own experience as gamers.

Research Questions

1. In what ways does *World of Warcraft* (re)construct cultural ideas about gender within the game? Through Sylvanas Windrunner in particular?
2. Do the ways *that WoW* (re)constructs cultural ideas about gender affect how female players are treated in the game?
3. How do women talk about the ways in which they negotiate gender in the *WoW* community?

Methodology

I have limited my scope for this project to *WoW* because it is one of the largest online games currently. Importantly, *WoW* has an estimated 16,000,000 players, 400,000+ players of which are female (Breckon), providing a large and diverse pool of potential participants for the survey portion of this project.

In order to show the complexity of gender within *WoW* and provide a holistic account of how gender is constructed and negotiated within the space, it is necessary to show how the game constructs gender through critical analysis performed on the character of Sylvanas Windrunner and then how women respond and negotiate gender within the game through surveys and autoethnography. To examine how gender is constructed within the game itself, as well as how female players rhetorically construct gender and negotiate the online space, I layer the different types of data, so I can generate a better picture of how gender is understood and (re)constructed within the context of the online digital community within and surrounding *WoW*. The qualitative data includes open-ended surveys that ask women about how they respond and negotiate gender within the space of *WoW* and a critical analysis of the character Sylvanas Windrunner, an

autoethnography of my own experience as a female online gamer, and a critical analysis of the participants' responses.

Critical Analysis

My critical analyses borrow from critical discourse analysis (CDA), a framework by Thomas Huckin. Through my critical analyses, I hope to address the social issue of gender and how it is rhetorically (re)constructed in online gaming environments such as *WoW*. CDA is a critical approach to looking at discourse within a text. CDA views language as a social practice and focuses on looking at how social and political inequality continues to be reproduced through texts, including digital texts.

CDA yields rich data because it “tries to unite at least three different levels of analysis: the text; the discursive practices (that is, the processes of writing/speaking and reading/hearing) that create and interpret that text; and the larger social context that bears upon it. In so doing, CDA aims to show how these levels are all interrelated” (Huckin 156). For example, in critically analyzing the character of Sylvanas Windrunner, I have taken into consideration the social inequality concerning gender that is reproduced by the game *WoW* and interpret how that narrative may be received by players.

Following the suggestion of Huckin, my process for examining the character of Sylvanas Windrunner in *WoW* has two phases. The initial phase is to uncritically read about and become acquainted with her character within the game. She has been one of the characters I have been most interested in since I began playing *WoW* in 2007. However, my enjoyment of Sylvanas' character was disrupted following the release of the expansion *World of Warcraft: Cataclysm* in December 2010. Despite the often violent nature of the game, very little cursing or derogatory name-calling is used by non-playable

characters within the game. However, during a cut scene in the quest zone Silverpine Forest³, the Horde leader Garrosh Hellscream calls Sylvanas a “Bitch.” The cut scene made me initially question what message developers were sending about women. This cut scene is frequently mentioned in fan pages about Sylvanas in large hubs such as WoWWiki and WoWHead, suggesting that it is a cut scene that sticks out in the minds of other players as well.

The disruption caused by this scene brought me to the second stage that Huckin calls for: “a more resistant stance, one that allows the reader to analyze the text-reader interaction in a more critical fashion” (159). I originally shared my critical thoughts on the character of Sylvanas Windrunner at the Southwest Popular Culture Conference in Albuquerque, New Mexico, in February of 2013. The discussion generated by my paper presentation at the conference also informs my perspective. The second stage of CDA included three steps. While difficult to consider the entire game, as it is a large and continuously changing game that has been on the market for 10 years, I reflected on my time spent playing the game. I then considered Sylvanas’ story as a whole. I reread about her lore and replayed quest zones that included her or dealt closely with her story. As I replayed the questing zones, I looked carefully at the sentence level of both Sylvanas’ dialogue as well as the dialogue of other NPCs that interacted with her. For example, the scene that Garrosh Hellscream calls Sylvanas a “Bitch” was a specific dialogue that I looked at on the sentence level, as well as the third step, the word and phrase level.

³ Silverpine Forest is a zone within the game meant for characters between levels 10-20. The quests follow a set story line that through text and dialogue that guides players through major game story events and allows them to gain experience to continue advancing through the game. Cut scenes are short cinematics that the player watches as a result of completing a quest.

Looking at the text at all three stages allowed me have both a larger context of Sylvanas lore and it's meaning to the overall text, but also allowed me to show specific places in which sexism was permeating the construction of her character and lore. See Appendix B for a list of terms and definitions derived from Huckin's CDA scholarship used within my critical analysis of Sylvanas Windrunner.

Surveys

In order to find out more about the experiences of other female players and how they negotiated their place in online gaming, I chose to ask them directly. Originally, I had hoped to do interviews rather than surveys to gather narratives of female players. I posted to the WoW ladies community on Livejournal in December 2013. It generated so much interest within the community, it became impossible for me to attempt to interview all willing participants in a timely manner. Not only did I have a large number of interested participants, but those interested were also very busy and many resided outside the United States. Instead, I created a survey (see Appendix C.) that included open-ended questions in order to preserve the voices and words that participants used. The survey was created using the Forms section of Google Drive. This program generates a hyperlink for participants to view and complete the survey. The goal of the survey was to ultimately answer the question: what stories do female players tell about the game and their experiences playing the game. The surveys would hopefully point to both how players responded to the sexism reproduced by the game, as well as show how players negotiated their play style around sexist treatment. Players who chose to participate in the survey were only required to answer two questions—"Do you consent to be a participant in this study?" and "Please select a pseudonym for this study." All other questions were

optional.

I specifically left space in most answer boxes for a participant to explain in as much or little detail as desired, in hopes of encouraging participants to share narratives, thoughts, and experiences. The only questions that had specific answers to choose from were questions #5, #6, and #8. These questions had a limited number of options because they asked what character roles (dps, tank, healer) the player liked to be, the expansion(s) participants had played during, and what type of server the participants played on.

The survey and an introduction to my research was posted to the online *World of Warcraft* community WoWladies on Livejournal.com on February 13, 2014. The reader can find the introduction letter addressed to potential participants in Appendix D. This specific site for posting the link was chosen because I have been part of the community for about two years. Because, as many participants noted in their responses, female players are routinely harassed due to their openness about gender with the WoW community, being an insider in this community allowed me to collect data with minimal backlash from male players within the larger *WoW* community. The survey received 60 responses within less than a month.

In Chapter IV, I analyze and discuss specific trends in the participants' responses, such as responses to characters, harassment narratives, othering, misgendering, and "default gender" as male. I chose these specific areas because high percentages of participants mentioned these issues in responses, which signaled that these are gender and identity issues on a large scale, rather than a personal one.

Autoethnography

As a member of the female gamer community on *WoW* for seven years, I have a unique

insider's perspective on the female experience within *WoW*. I have opted to tap into this knowledge via an autoethnography, a method of research that involves critical self-observation and reflexive investigation of personal subjective experience. According to Maréchal,

Autoethnography broadly operationalizes three different conceptions of self: self as representative subject (as a member of a community or group), self as autonomous subject (as itself the object of inquiry, depicted in “tales of the self”), and other as autonomous self (the other as both object and subject of inquiry, speaking with his or her own voice). It displays three main intersecting qualitative research traditions: analytic, subjectivist experiential, and poststructuralist/postmodern. (44)

I discuss my interactions with other players and within the broader *WoW* community. My initial thoughts as one member of this community is what ultimately encouraged me to begin asking other women about their own experiences. By shedding light on my own personal experiences as a female, in dialogue with the responses of other female gamers collected from the surveys, I hope to provide an in-depth look at how women rhetorically negotiate gender within *WoW*, including the contradictions and differences, rather than the experiences of women being static and identical.

For instance, despite my critical analysis and inclusion of sexism experienced by female gamers, I enjoy playing video games even within the online environment while interacting with other players. In fact, Sylvanas Windrunner is my favorite character within the game. Yet, I see issues with the ways women are represented and treated within this online space. Many of my experiences with male players have also been very

positive. The experiences that I share are not exhaustive and are purposefully chosen to highlight specific instances of sexism that I have personally experienced.

Biases

My primary motivation for interest in this research is that I am a female online gamer. Being of the female gender, I recognize that this may lead me to have certain biases about the role of women in online gaming. It is why I include my own narrative. By doing this, I hope to provide a space for contradictions in experience and to complicate how female experience is viewed. The ways that women talk about and negotiate the space is varied and complex, and in order to actually understand that, it is necessary to have multiple voices, even voices that are not necessarily in agreement about how to negotiate the space. I recognize that my experience is not universal. I do find that as a female, though, I have easier access to the larger female community of online gamers, including joining a female-only guild on one of the *WoW* servers that require audio interviews in order to join. I am also able to gain access to online WoW fan communities that are created for and by women.

However, I do exhibit bias in that I want to empower women within a realm that is often considered by mainstream media to be a male past time. I hope that, in some way, the use of the stories of these women will help to create recognition that the female gamer is not an anomaly, or an outsider. I do not believe the video gaming industry is necessarily “masculine” and the only way for a woman to be interested in video games is to be masculine.

Being a gamer, and having played video games for seventeen years, and online games for five years, I recognize that many other women may not have played for so

long, and therefore may negotiate their role within the online gaming community differently and spend their time in game on different past times than myself. My goal is to recognize this now, and continue to recognize that their time spent and experiences in game, while different from my own, are not less meaningful or valid. I hope to situate myself as a fellow gamer, and one who is interested in the experience and play time of my fellow female gamers. I also realize that I will have to play two distinct roles within this study. I am a female gamer, but also a researcher.

I am also white. I know that I am unfamiliar with women of color who may play *WoW* or other online games. I also recognize that I may not share many of their experiences in real life and in game, where they may have been marginalized not only because of their gender. My hope is that I will find a diverse range of women who play so I can better understand the spectrum of experiences that may occur within the virtual world.

I have grown up as part of the middle class. I recognize this bias may shape this study in some ways. For example, *WoW* is a pay-to-play game, requiring a monthly subscription, as well as it requires an Internet connection. I understand that this may keep many people from having access to this form of entertainment.

According to the ESA video game player data, only 17% of women play with a significant other (2012). I am one of those women. In fact, I began playing *WoW* and other online games at the encouragement of my significant other because we wanted something we could both enjoying doing together. I feel that playing with him has shaped my understanding and experience in game. I realize that I am the minority of women, however.

With such as large player population and female player base, WoW is a complicated and extensive digital text to use for research. Layering the different types of data (game design) and player experiences (survey and autoethnography) allows me to look simultaneously at both parts of the online experience—the game created by designers and how players interact within that design frame. The critical analysis specifically looks at how Sylvanas' character is created by developers and the social context that it replicates. Using my own personal experiences as a female, in dialogue with the responses of other female gamers collected from the surveys, shows the complexities and varied experiences of female players. I recognize that my experience is not universal.

CHAPTER III

CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF SYLVANAS WINDRUNNER

Introduction

As previously discussed, critical discourse analysis (CDA) examines 1) the larger social context that bears upon the text; 2) the text; 3) the discursive practices that create and interpret that text. Although I am not, strictly speaking, conducting a CDA, I will use terminology from Huckin's framework in order to critically analyze the cultural rhetoric of *World of Warcraft (WoW)* and the character of Sylvanas Windrunner, one of the most widely recognized female characters in the *WoW* universe. However, because I am also analyzing women's experiences playing *WoW*, I will add a fourth category: 4) the real-world ramifications of sexism.

Social Context: The Face of World of Warcraft as Male and White

A social context section is necessary to discuss as it provides the background of the social reality that a text is produced and read within a real-world context that exists outside of the text, in this case, outside of the game. This social reality contributes to not only how developers produce the game, but also how different players read and understand the game. The social reality for *WoW* is that it is primarily developed/designed by white men and that their interest in gender representation does not seem to be a priority.

Because men dominate software development and design, gender representation tends not to be a main concern for these developers. Tim Chevalier, a software engineer and programmer, discusses the issue of gendered hostility and shaming in his article "Gendered Language: Feature or Bug in Software Documentation?" Chevalier offers the

Ubuntu project as an example of gendered language, as the project's commenters were originally named Ubuntero. Commenters asked for the name to be changed in order to be gender neutral. When the issue was originally brought up, one of the programmers saw the complaint about gendered language as "trivial" and questioned why he should bother changing it (Chevalier). He ultimately refused to make the changes. Chevalier writes, "Defenders of the status quo in both libuv and Ubuntu seem to be saying, 'This is trivial, I don't care, why are you wasting my time?'" but the amount of time and energy that many people invested in defending the status quo communicates a different, implicit message. The majority of the 'it's trivial' commenters in these issues are men."

I bring up this example to help the reader understand that although the idea of gender within these spaces is often treated as a "trivial" matter by developers, the treatment of gender and how gender is rhetorically constructed in virtual spaces often work to silence female players and possibly female developers and designers. This means the matter is not trivial.

In the case of *WoW*, while I am not able to have an entire list of developers, writers, artists, voice actors, and actresses who are on the Blizzard *WoW* team, it is clear that the faces that represent *WoW* are primarily of white men. In August 2013, the Blizzard community manager created a forum that featured developer interviews with some of the well-known developers of *WoW* who participate in the annual convention Blizzcon and developers who regularly communicate with the *WoW* community. The community forum highlights interviews that community members can read, watch, or listen to. There were eleven members of the development/design team interviewed. Multiple male developers/designers were in multiple interviews. Of the eleven, only two

were women, but neither held a lead or director position. One was a quest designer and the other a concept artist. While these two women obviously contribute substantially to the creation of the game, they are subordinate to the main developers/designers with positions of power and with the face time to the community; those developers/designers are men. Moreover, as an audience member at SWPCA pointed out, one or two women in a group of men lack the power to be able to say that the use of a word like “bitch” is inappropriate to use. The discussions of sexism may not even come to light because female employees may not feel comfortable making their opinion known.

The lack of female input also means that the character production of Sylvanas Windrunner and other major female characters in *WoW* are crafted primarily by men. In “The Visible Female: Rape, Culture and Horror in Starcraft and Warcraft,” Mandelbaum discusses the Blizzard development team and the use of the slur “bitch” used against Sylvanas within the game. “Blizzard’s development team is overwhelmingly male and what we have is a group of men deciding where, how, and who gets to use a slur directed specifically at women” (83). Since men craft how women are represented within the space, men have the rhetorical power to shape how players view these characters. For example, developers have the power to write the narratives of in-game characters. The way these narratives are crafted encourage players to have specific readings of characters.

The Text: Sylvanas’ Story Begins and Ends with Arthas

The text, in this case, refers to the online video game *World of Warcraft*. It includes visual, audial, and written text all wrapped into one digital text that players “read” both visually and audibly. While I have played the game for seven years, the sheer amount of quests and zones make it difficult for one player to experience all the content

of the game, especially without putting extensive time into the game. After all, the game has increased in size with every expansion. The parts of the text that are specifically analyzed are the parts that are directly or closely related to Sylvanas Windrunner—so sections in which Sylvanas is present or speaking, or when Sylvanas is being talked about by other characters. Since Sylvanas’ character has been mostly absent for the last two expansions, the analysis of the text focuses specifically on content that was created during the *Burning Crusade* and *Wrath of the Lich King* expansions. I chose these two expansions in particular because Sylvanas plays a major role in the main story line of the two expansions. I also chose scenes, quests, and dialogue that a large number of players are familiar with because of their connection to the main story line.

The story of Sylvanas Windrunner is not a linear narrative, but fragmented pieces of lore. The large number of characters presented within the *WoW* universe means that a player usually receives small pieces of story through both text and video rather than a complete and full narrative. The pieces of a story that the player gathers also depend on a player’s faction, Horde or Alliance, as well as the specific race of the player’s character. The lore of the virtual world of Azeroth also extends outside of *WoW*. Originally the lore began in the games *Warcraft I*, *II*, and *III*. Sylvanas’ story is foregrounded in the context of *Warcraft III*. The background story that she provides to players both through conversation, written quest text, and cinematic is important to understanding the character of Sylvanas, which is why I am spending so much time providing the details. The fact that the story also includes so many visual aids and uses a multi-modal approach to disseminating the story highlighted to me the importance that developers placed on her backstory.

The battle of Quel'Thalas takes place within *Warcraft III*, and is only viewed by the player as a flashback. A Horde player, primarily a Blood Elf or Undead character, may retrieve an item that once belonged to Sylvanas. If the player returns it to her, the player is able to watch a cinematic in which Sylvanas retells the tale of her background story from *Warcraft III*. The cinematic reveals the advance of Arthas Menethil, the Lich King, and his advance on the high elven realm of Quel'Thalas. At the time, Sylvanas was a high elf and ranger general of the high elf military. Arthas and his Scourge, or army of undead, moved to destroy Quel'Thalas. Sylvanas was able to hold him off for some time, annoying Arthas, and making his military campaign take longer than originally intended. Arthas finally overtook Sylvanas and her troops, slaughtering them.

Arthas then raised Sylvanas in undeath as a banshee, completely under his control. Richard Knaack, in his *World of Warcraft* novel, *The Well of Eternity*, describes what happened to Sylvanas according to lore:

The official story given by the high elves of Silvermoon had the Ranger-General having perished valiantly in battle against the undead Scourge in defense of Quel'Thalas, and her body being burned to ashes in the fire that had devastated half the capital. Rhonin had been told a different story: that Sylvanas was instead captured, horribly mutilated, then finally slain for Arthas' pleasure. In this version of events, her body was taken into a dark temple, where Arthas corrupted her soul, transforming her into a haunting, imagery of Sylvanas' turning has her strapped to an altar while she screams and Arthas looks down on her while he manipulates her soul out of her body. (Knaack)

The scene is disturbing and while not explicitly a rape scene, implies that Sylvanas is raped. Mandelbaum comments, in her article, “The Visible Female: Rape Culture and Horror in Starcraft and Warcraft,” on this particular scene in her analysis of Sylvanas’ story as representative of a rape narrative. She writes, “This is a horrific image on its own; when coupled with the idea of bodily violation it becomes even more significant. (Mandelbaum 90). The manipulation coupled with bodily violation shows the links between the scene and a rape narrative. If rape is implied within the scene, it is not directly addressed within the *WoW* lore.

Sylvanas’ entire story is couched in terms of her relationship to Arthas; the relationship could be described in terms of an agent/patient relationship, as Huckin discusses in critical discourse analysis, “in which certain person are consistently depicted as initiating actions (and thus exerting power) while others are depicted as being (often passive) recipients of those actions” (83). The story then frames Arthas as the character that has power over Sylvanas. But this maneuver isn’t new for the *WoW* Development team. According to a breakdown of major lore characters that a player worked on, over 49% of major female characters’ stories “were important for their proximity to/effect on male characters” (Warcraft Ladystats). While the breakdown does not explicitly show Sylvanas as one of the examples of these female characters, Sylvanas’ main role within the prequel game *Warcraft III*, as well as her time in the first three expansions of *WoW*, is pervasive. Her main and primary goal is Arthas’ destruction. In fact, Sylvanas’ story would not even exist if it weren’t for Arthas (*World of Warcraft*). Simone de Beauvoir commented on precisely this phenomenon, observing that “woman is exclusively defined in her relation to man” and that woman is “always defined as Other” (162). Sylvanas’

story would not even exist without Arthas, and her primary role throughout the game until the *Wrath of the Lich King* expansion's end is to desire his downfall.

Since the end of *Wrath of the Lich King* expansion, Sylvanas has continually been portrayed more and more hostile, untrustworthy, and evil. Even one of the NPCs, one of her own people, sees a change occurring in her (Wowpedia). If an NPC that is one of Sylvanas' own people openly describes to players that Sylvanas is changing, it manipulates the player through presupposition. The language of one of her own followers is that she is changing. If one of her loyal subjects cannot view her as heroic, it frames her character as unable to be a hero, meaning there is no alternative to her being evil. The character has been set up completely by the development team to never be a hero, despite her heroic qualities and heroic deeds of the past, such as her giving up her life in attempt to save her people, or her break from Arthas and helping to restore free will to many of the undead under his power. Instead the developers continue to frame her character as one who is corrupted by power and unable to be a good leader. The conversation between her and Garrosh Hellscream is one example, and following that in-game dialogue, the official WoW forums were filled with multiple threads all questioning whether Sylvanas is going to be the next villain. Many players already recognized her as a villain, saying, "She's been a villain for quite a while, we've just had bigger priorities" (Tajit). The identification of her as evil and as a "bitch" by developers concurrently occurred with a physical makeover of Sylvanas' character; as she has become a less sympathetic character, she has also become more sexualized, again bringing up stereotypes of women.

The Discursive Practices – Women Cannot Wield Power; They're "Bitches"

Huckin describes discursive practices as "the processes of writing/speaking and

reading/hearing that create and interpret the text,” or predictable and accepted ways of talking about the text, and in this case, Sylvanas Windrunner and women. This section of the analysis focuses on the ways that the game uses discursive practices about women, or accepted ways of talking about women, such as using the gendered slur “bitch” and talking about rape, that works to further stereotyping about women. The continued use of language in this way also devalues women and replicates the social context of sexism that the game was created within.

Heading up the powerful Undead or Forsaken faction in Azeroth, Sylvanas Windrunner plays a significant role in the story and lore of *WoW*. And yet Sylvanas, as well as other women within the game such as Tyrande Whisperwind or Jaina Proudmoore, are sexualized (either through lore or visually), have their purpose in the story directly connected to men, and/or are represented negatively in association with power or strength. As Corneliussen observes, in fact “most of Azeroth’s history is a story of war and conflict played out by men, which leaves most of the population of Azeroth, including most of the female characters, invisible” (70).

The construction of gender in such a negative way goes beyond perceptions of characters like Sylvanas, and may also be affecting the way in which female players are treated in game. What is disturbing is the overall picture that the female “faces” of *WoW* send about women. However, each time I’ve brought this issue up with male friends who play *WoW*, I get an immediate reaction: “You’re overreacting” or “You’re being overly sensitive. That’s not how the game was meant to be.” It may be the immediate reaction fans want to have—after all we enjoy the game and don’t want to think about possible problems with it.

This does not mean that negative constructions of the female gender do not exist within the game, nor should it dissuade the audience from asking questions about a game produced by a team made up of primarily white men. To begin to dissect these elements of Sylvanas' character, one must examine not only the text but the discourse practices employed in that text. My purpose is not to place blame solely on Blizzard Entertainment's development team or on individual facets of the game. Rather, the purpose is to call attention to a systemic issue within our culture, particularly when we discuss computer culture and digital humanities that need to be recognized by the developers and by audiences. After all, "technology is culture" (Koh). Asserting that the patriarchy is gone does not make it so. Pretending that gender and other markers of identity are somehow invisible on the computer and the internet serves only to perpetuate a system of oppression. The purpose of this analysis, then, is to show how perceptions of the female gender are constructed by the game, as well as how female players react to this construction of femininity in digital spaces.

Sylvanas' story as an example of rape is problematic because it continues the stereotyping of women who are victims of this abuse. As O'Hara explains, "Popular rape myths about rape victims include: 'only bad girls get raped,' victims 'ask for it' by getting drunk at parties or wearing provocative clothing, and women who claim they were raped are lying, have ulterior motives, or wanted sex at the time but changed their minds afterwards" (O'Hara). The treatment of Sylvanas after her soul is ripped from her body by Arthas is a perfect example of these rape myths as she is never sympathized with by any of the leaders of the factions, or even by the people whom she died trying to save. By using this trope of rape within the text, the developers continue a discursive practice

in which rape is continued to be talked about in a way that is harmful to victims of rape.

Part of the insinuation of rape and death being linked in Sylvanas' story sends the message that rape is a death, and that the way Sylvanas is able to break away is only through another life, a life of undeath, but she is no longer the high elf Sylvanas. Sylvanas' sister Vereesa, even refuses to acknowledge Sylvanas as her sister and considers her sister dead when the player speaks with her in Dalaran (Blizzard). While it may be possible to argue that the developers intended to showcase the negative treatment of rape victims in order to eradicate callousness towards victims of rape, Sylvanas' character continues to be written as a "bad girl," a "bitch," and she has yet to be redeemed in a way for the audience to view her as a hero.

No Heroic Ending for Sylvanas

Sylvanas' entire plot in the *WoW* universe until the end of the *Wrath of the Lich King* expansion was focused on her torture and death by the Lich King, her escape from him, and her work towards eventually avenging her death and the death of her people, the high elves, at his hands. Despite her large role in the defeat of the Lich King—there is in fact an entire dungeon in which Horde players work with her to try to defeat him, as well as bases in Northrend to bring about his downfall—she is absent from the final defeat of the Lich King in the Ice Crown Citadel raid and cinematic. She also lacks a spot in the statue built in one of the main cities, Dalaran, to celebrate the heroes who brought about an end to the Lich King.

Her omission completely leaves her out the minds of players as they experience the final raid and cinematic. For players, the raids and subsequent cinematic are usually very important to understanding the story line currently taking place within the game.

According to Huckin, “the ultimate form of backgrounding is omission—actually leaving certain things completely out of a text. Omission is often the most patent aspect of textualization because if the writer does not mention something, it often does not even enter the reader’s mind and thus is not subject to his or her scrutiny. It is difficult to raise questions about something that’s not even ‘there’” (98). Why, despite her large role within his defeat, is Sylvanas subsequently left out of the celebration of heroes? The omission of her in the victory statue and her character in the final battle cinematic could perhaps send the message that she is in fact not viewed as a hero, and furthermore that she lacks importance within the story. In fact, none of the figures in the final battle against Arthas or in the victory statue are women. Only men are able to be the heroes at the end, despite the large role of Sylvanas, as well as another female character, Jaina Proudmore, in bringing about his downfall. Her disappearance from the final defeat of the Lich King stresses the point that Simone de Beauvoir made in her book *The Second Sex* that as a woman, Sylvanas is secondary. After her disappearance from the final scenes of the expansion *Wrath of the Lich King*, her character falls into the background and subsequently is either forgotten or treated as a villain instead. Ultimately, her omission encourages players to read the text as one in which women are heroes and women are not an important part of the story.

Sylvanas as the Bad Girl

The negative treatment of Sylvanas can be further seen in the way she is treated by even other members of her faction—other leaders who are supposed to be her allies. The following conversation occurs during the *WoW* expansion *Cataclysm*, which follows the death of Arthas, between Garrosh Hellscream, leader of the Horde, and Sylvanas. The

conversation taking place is primarily concerned with the problem the Forsaken are currently having with the numbers of their people falling in battle. Sylvanas believes she has found a solution: raising the newly dead as Forsaken since her people cannot procreate:

Lady Sylvanas Windrunner says: Warchief, without these new Forsaken my people would die out ... Our hold upon Gilneas and northern Lordaeron would crumble.

Garrosh Hellscream says: Have you given any thought to what this means, Sylvanas? What difference is there between you and the Lich King now?

Lady Sylvanas Windrunner says: Isn't it obvious, Warchief? I serve the Horde.

Garrosh Hellscream says: Watch your clever mouth, bitch. Cromush, you stay behind and make sure the Banshee Queen is well "guarded." I will be expecting a full report when next we meet.

High Warlord Cromush says: As you command, Warchief!

Garrosh Hellscream says: Remember, Sylvanas, eventually we all have to stand before our maker and face judgment. Your day may come sooner than others... (Wowpedia).

While I think the argument can be made that indeed what she intends to do—raise her dead enemies as her own people much like the Lich King did to her—seems abhorrent, Garrosh Hellscream makes judgment on Sylvanas, as though her crimes are more terrible than his own, and calls her a “bitch.” (It is worth noting here that he becomes such an evil character that Blizzard decided to write him out of the story entirely.)

Sylvanas is the only character in *WoW* who is called “bitch,” and she is called it

again by another male character later in the same questing zone (Blizzard). As one of my survey participants, Mez, points out, “While I won't argue that she's definitely up to some shady business, the gendered slur was rather uncalled for, especially since they don't generally use profanity in *WoW* narratives.” It was a deliberate choice made by the development team that is unusual. All major *WoW* lore-related websites do include the conversation in Sylvanas’ lore page, though they do not discuss the dialogue or try to put it into any context. The dialogue simply remains near the bottom of her lore page. The use of the word “bitch” is something that has caught the attention of the mainstream *WoW* audience, as it was added to her lore page, but it seems they do not know how to deal with the material. The lack of discussion about the dialogue may be because the negative connotation associated with the word in speaking about women is one that is inherent in American culture, and we have heard it used so often that we become desensitized to everything that the word “bitch” is implying. According to Huckin, connotation refers to “certain words or phrases... [that] derive from the frequent use of a word or phrase in a particular type of context” (84). Andi Zeisler, one of the co-editors of *Bitch* magazine, a feminist magazine that attempts to take back the word, defines “bitch” as a way to refer to women who are powerful and uninterested in pleasing men in a negative way:

Bitch is a word we use culturally to describe any woman who is strong, angry, uncompromising and, often, uninterested in pleasing men. We use the term for a woman on the street who doesn't respond to men's catcalls or smile when they say, “Cheer up, baby, it can't be that bad.” We use it for the woman who has a better job than a man and doesn't apologize for

it. We use it for the woman who doesn't back down from a confrontation. So let's not be disingenuous. Is it a bad word? Of course it is. As a culture, we've done everything possible to make sure of that, starting with a constantly perpetuated mindset that deems powerful women to be scary, angry and, of course, unfeminine. (Zeisler)

Sylvanas *is* powerful, and because she is powerful, automatically she is painted as a scary, angry, and unfeminine character through the word "bitch," and the story writers don't work to change that in any way—in fact, they reinforce it.

While the lore page, edited by players, has a lack of discussion about the word being used against Sylvanas, feminist video game blogs and communities have not been silent about the issue. Mandelbaum, author of "The Visible Female: Rape Culture and Horror in Starcraft and World of Warcraft," posits that what designates Sylvanas as a bitch is that she "disrupts the female body as a blank text to be read that makes these two women [Sylvanas and Kerrigan] troublesome enough to be designated bitches" (90). Mandelbaum also cites the feminist blogs and communities as a place in which discussions about how female characters are treated in *WoW* take place. She specifically cites the WoWladies community on *Livejournal* as a place in which she has witnessed similar discussions. It does not seem that Blizzard's staff is likely trying to call attention to rape culture or how victims are treated, but it does show what mainstream gaming culture fears: being called on privilege. Apparently, marginalized groups being vocal about their concerns and treatment is scary.

The fear of marginalized voices and these voices being open about their identities is particularly disturbing because the negative attitude toward NPC (non-playable

character) females could be contributing to the hostility of some male players against the growing number of female players. Many of the stories in the following chapter include harassment narratives that women shared. These narratives including name calling, sexual harassment, intimidation, and even stalking as a result of women being open about gender. Other players are outright hostile towards marginalized groups, like women, who play *WoW*. This quote is from a player on a *WoW* fan website and his response to women who play *WoW*:

All girls who play wow play only to attract the attention of weak minded beta male because in real life their mediocre looks and lack of personality doesnt get them much attention, they come on wow and are worshipped/carried by weak minded desperate men. So they resort to mentioning sexual things, making japanese emotes to seem cute, having overly female names as a way of getting attention. Put xD and ;P at the end of sentences to MAKE SURE YOU KNOW THEY ARE FEMALE.

Then once they use you, they move on to the next fuckboy. (Dondonian)

While this comment seems exaggerated, these kind of comments about women non-playable characters in games, as well as about female players, are not uncommon on *WoW* and other video gaming websites.

Female Sexualization in Video Games

Perhaps one of the most notable changes about the character of Sylvanas is the change in her character model that took place during the *Wrath of the Lich King* expansion. Karen Ross, in her book *Gendered Media* explains, “Historically, boys and men have always been perceived as the primary target market by game developers, so

characters and contexts, especially violent ones, have been constructed with the preferences of a male audience in mind...and where most female characters do appear, they are often highly sexualized” (129). Previously, Sylvanas’ model was of a female night elf (not her actual race). She was completely covered in a long robe as well as a hood. During the *Wrath* expansion during every night of Hallow’s End, Sylvanas could be and can still be seen in the game as a ghostly version of her former self. Her model is of a blood elf, with different colorings to represent her as dead. This image of her is also fairly sexually neutral, at least in terms of her comparison to other females of the blood elf race. Interestingly enough, while the vast majority of players were male in *WoW* history, Sylvanas had remained until this point in the expansions relatively physically sexually neutral, but even with a known high population of female gamers, this new model was chosen. Her newest model is highly sexualized. Her upper body armor consists of mainly a plate bra, with her shoulders, cleavage and midriff show (Wowpedia). The sexualization of her character completely ignores that she is undead, a zombie (See Figure 3). She is rotting. Let me say that again: she is a rotting corpse. This sexualization of her character completely ignores her actual physical circumstances within the game. The playable Undead characters do not resemble her at all. The playable undead character models show clear signs of rot, of missing skin fragments, and even missing jaws and eyes.



Figure 3- Sylvanas' character model changes. Moving from left to right, the images show the oldest character model to the newest.

This sexualization of Sylvanas becomes problematic as it is tied so closely to personality in that as Sylvanas gains power and openly shows her anger, she becomes more sexual but it also presents a negative look at women in terms of what is appropriate for a female leader to look like. A study conducted for the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media discussed how women are represented in film and media. Their findings concluded that females were more likely to be less clothed than male counterparts and that these representations of women may contribute to body image issues:

Females are more likely than males to be represented in sexually revealing attire (28.3% vs. 8%) and partially naked (26.6% vs. 8.5%) or showing some exposed skin in the cleavage, midriff, or buttocks section of the

body. Girls and women also are more likely than boys and men to be thin (34.3% vs. 10.7%) and referred to as physically attractive (14.9% vs. 4.3%) across the context of the plot. These findings are problematic, as studies show that exposure to thin media can increase females' internalization of the thin ideal and body dissatisfaction whereas viewing sexualized content may heighten self objectification, body shame, and appearance anxiety. (Smith et al. 5)

These statistics show that the sexualization of women permeates other areas of media, including video games. The way that women are represented physically in terms of sexuality is a discursive practice within the media; it is acceptable for women to be portrayed in this way. However, the continued use of this practice, as these statistics show, can be harmful to women's self-image. Not only does this set up a negative image of female leaders in terms of personality through the way Sylvanas is depicted, but her sexualization emphasizes that women who occupy the space in online games are sexually available.

Perhaps where Sylvanas' visual representation is most sexualized is within fan art. No longer is Sylvanas' lower body completely covered with black pants with armor, but often with only a bikini plate armor with high boots. Often her upper armor is even more revealing, and her breasts larger. This sexualization of her in the game must have affected the perception of her by players of *WoW* in order to have created these images. Almost all of the highly sexualized fan art images of her have been created after this change occurred in the game. Clearly, her sexualization by developers has been recognized by players who had not visualized Sylvanas as necessarily sexual previously. The

objectification of female characters also welcomes male players to objectify and view female players as sexual objects, which may explain why so many women in the surveys mentioned the sexual advances of men who assumed that since the women were present in the space, that the sexual advances were welcome.

It is particularly important to bring up the treatment of female NPCs in the case of the character Sylvanas because the writers have continued negative stereotypes about women in their story writing that help to reinforce the validity of the belief that women have no place in video games, in places of power, or in other spheres that are currently considered male-dominated. Ott and Mack discuss how the use of these discursive practices of sexualizing women in video games can be harmful, point out that “when these stereotypical representations become commonly accepted in the media, the result is often the social oppression and disempowerment of individuals within the stereotyped group” (Ott and Mack 180).

Conclusion

By specifically looking at the character of Sylvanas Windrunner, I think it is clear that stereotypes and negative messages about women still permeate video games and digital culture. The problematic issues of gender stereotypes and negative messages connected to gender move beyond video games, though, and into the larger space of digital humanities and our work with technology. The rhetoric continues to be one in which discussions on gender and how marginalized people within virtual spaces are treated as trivial. The word “trivial” is meaningful because it says something about how seriously marginalized groups and their inclusion is viewed by men who use this as a way to silence the voices speaking up. The voices of the marginalized, particularly for the purposes of this study,

of women, are seen as having little importance and not worthwhile to consider or explore. As Sylvanas works to disrupt the privileged standpoint of men in the game, she is consequently silenced, and within the new expansion Mists of Pandaria, has little to no screen time (Blizzard). When groups of women have been open about being female in the game, they are seen as sexually available or are treated with hostility. If women seek to discuss issues of gender they see within the game, they are met with hostility and harassment, meant to silence them. Their issues are ‘trivial’ and they are seen as being irrational or overreacting. The continued silencing of female voices and the deliberate denial of importance to critiques on gender are central issues to the under representation of women in digital humanities, to women in video games, and to women in *WoW*. The following chapter will include narratives and opinions from *WoW* female players. Despite the attempts to silence women in virtual spaces such as *WoW*, as Moya Bailey says, “Some of us are brave.”

CHAPTER IV

WOMEN NARRATING THEIR ONLINE GAMING EXPERIENCE

Introduction

As I have discussed throughout this thesis, a brohood in video games exists. The term “brohood” is meaningful because of its use on the internet and within the gaming community. Often members refer to each other as “bro.” My purpose for using this term is to replicate how the word is used by people on the internet when discussing this membership. This membership is closed: no girls allowed. Actually non-heterosexual males are not allowed, either. And yet there are no actual barriers to keep such people out, to preserve this uber-masculine space. Instead, game developers develop male fantasies while being oblivious to how those environments may not appeal to women. By sexualizing/dismissing/subordinating/stereotyping female characters, male players can feel superior, in part because they are making female players feel unwelcome.

But as it turns out, women like *WoW*. Women, as humans, at times like to be aggressive, competitive, and violent. And female players, as humans, do not want to be subordinate on the basis of their gender. Nor do they want to pass as male.

It is women’s defiance of male-dominance that causes, ironically, aggression, competition, and violence from male players. As the women in this chapter will share, if a player performs as a heterosexual male, he/she is accepted. If the player’s performance deviates from that default gender, such as being open about being female or correcting misgendering, the brohood becomes defensive—intent on defending their boys-only space and hostile at the thought of this intrusion.

At a recent conference, for example, an audience member explained that he had felt similar to the women who had participated in the survey conducted for this thesis because as a homosexual he had been harassed and consequently refused to speak on a microphone while playing video games. He also felt frustrated as he was unable to refer to his spouse in any way that indicated they were a gay couple.

In this chapter, I share the thoughts and experiences of female players whom I surveyed who have been bullied and even abused for failing to adhere to this standard of uber-masculinity. Such intolerance of gender fluidity and difference comes from male players, but also from the game designers who have crafted an environment populated with characters who serve, literally, the male characters and, importantly, the male ego. Thus, female characters are often sexualized.

Content analysis of participant narratives revealed dominant themes centered around androcentrism and concomitant sexualization, slurs, and mistreatment of women within the game. These cultural issues are not just embedded in the game's code, but also become a part of how women experience video games in an online multiplayer environment.

Survey Participants

A total of 60 participants for this survey posted using Google Surveys. 93% of participants identified as female. The remaining participants identified as mostly female, female but gender questioning, bigender, and male. Participants were asked to self-identify in terms of gender and were not given any choices to pick from. Chart 1 shows how participants identified in terms of gender.

How Participants Identified in terms of Gender

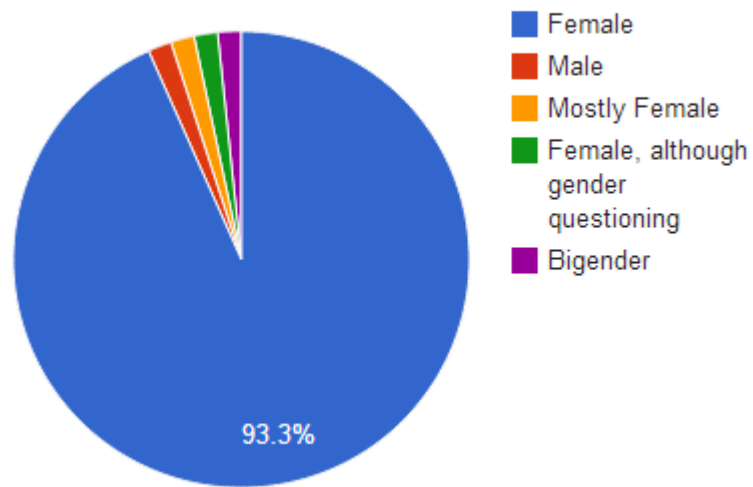


Figure 4- How Participants Identified in Terms of Gender

Participants were asked if they had ever experienced harassment, aggressiveness, or any other types of behavior based on their own gender. Chart 2 shows that 75% participants openly acknowledged that they had experienced harassment, sexual advances, or aggressiveness at some point while they played WoW.

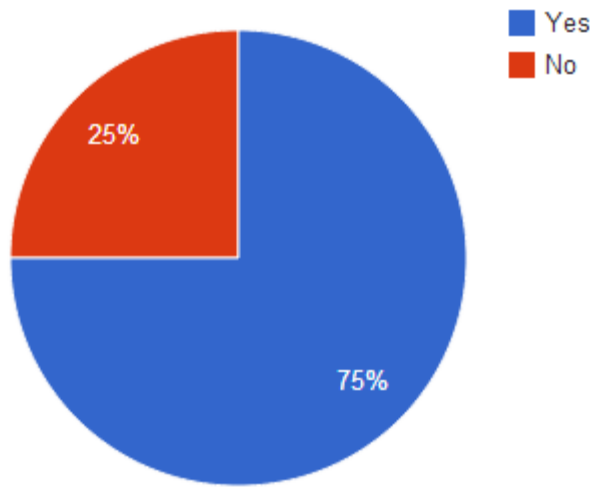


Figure 5 – Harassment or Aggressive Behavior Based on Gender

Of the 15 players who responded that they had not dealt with any harassment or aggressiveness based on gender, 60% gave specific reasons or steps they had taken in order to avoid this kind of behavior, such as playing only with people they knew in real life, playing solo, taking steps to only join female-friendly guilds, or not acknowledging their gender in online settings so other players assumed that they were male.

When participants asked if they ever participated in gender bending (playing male characters, pretending to be a male player, not disclosing gender information), 25% said they had played or currently play male characters. One player openly stated that she does not gender bend, and she corrects players who misgender her as a male player. 23% of players acknowledged that even though they don't necessarily pretend to be male, they are misgendered in the game by other players, and that they choose not to correct players who misgender them. The most common reason explained for choosing not to correct

misgenderings was to avoid harassment. This response seems to indicate that these women felt that being open about gender would lead to harassment, and that clearly that harassment was on a scale that meant it was better to be misgendered than be harassed for being a female player.

The Narratives

The purpose of including multiple quotes from participants in one space is to show the reader the magnitude of the aggression and sexual advances many of these women experience on a regular basis. The effect of multiple voices positioned together is much more powerful than only one person speaking for everyone. The multitude of voices shows the pattern of behavior taking place in these online spaces, and a pattern is much less easily ignored than scatterings of testimonials that remain solitary. My content analysis reveals the following dominant themes: androcentrism, the brohood, sexualization,

Androcentrism

Sandra Lipsitz Bem, in her article, “Transforming the Debate on Sexual Inequality: From Biological Difference to Institutionalized Androcentrism,” She defines androcentrism as men being the main character of life:

the privileging of males, male experience, and the male perspective. What exactly do I mean by privileging? On the one hand, one could say it's the treating of males as the main characters in the drama of human life around whom all action revolves and through whose eyes all reality is to be interpreted, and the treating of females as the peripheral or marginal characters in the drama of human life whose purpose for being is defined

only in relation to the main--or male--character. (4)

Based on Bem's definition, androcentrism seems to be what is taking place within the video game community and within *WoW*. Male players are privileged in that culturally men are treated as the main character, as the gender that all action revolves around. Thus, male players assume if another player is in a similar position, that player must also identify as male. Androcentrism also explains the hostility that some female participants in the survey dealt with when their female gender was identified. By not adhering to the default assumptions of the male players, their privilege was disrupted, causing the male players to become angry. This explains why there is so much anger with the character of Sylvanas, if as Mandelbaum suggests, she disrupts male privilege of being able to ignore rape culture. While the disruption of privilege often makes people angry, it seems necessary in order to bring about any change. Sylvanas' disruption has the potential to subvert stereotypes, however, the framing of her narrative continues stereotyping of rape victims as somehow at fault for their own fate. In other words, there are opportunities for developers to use lore to subvert these stereotypes rather than replicate them.

Bem argues that this phenomenon began with the discussion of equality for women, and how biological differences were cited as the main reason why men and women could never be equal. She argues that women are denied equality because arguments about biology call into question whether equality is even possible. Then, arguments of biology are used to put off social change:

The reason Americans have become so obsessed with the biology of sex differences is that for 150 years now, feminists like myself have been saying that we need to change our society in order to make women more

equal; and for that same 150 years, the society has been saying back that our biological differences may not even allow for the kind of equality that feminists like me are always advocating. Implicit in this response, however, is a false assumption, which is that biology is a kind of bedrock beyond which social change is not feasible. And not only is that assumption false in and of itself; it also leads to the misguided conclusion that the question of biological sex difference is urgent, both politically and scientifically. (2)

Bem's discussion of biological difference is important because it serves as one of the common counterarguments for why equality still does not exist for women, but also for other marginalized groups of people. By trying to deny social equality on something that the privileged group has no control over, such as biological traits, it allows the privileged group, in this case men, to ignore women's calls for social equality. Bem further argues that the biological difference argument also explains how androcentrism has developed within the culture of the United States.

Androcentrism is a dominant theme in survey participants' narratives as they expressed displeasure at the fact that most female characters seem to be minor side characters or only have their storylines couched within stories of male characters. Melly, another survey participant, explained the role of female characters in WoW:

I feel like other than Jaina they don't get enough attention or respect. Yes we have them, but they're for the most part side characters in badguys big storyline. Maeve with Illidan, Jaina with Arthas, Aggra and Thrall, Malfurion and Tyrande, Mediv and Garona. I feel like they're just there to

advance the story with a bat of their eyelashes most of the time. We have yet to really have an expansion that has a main end boss/focus that is female.

To further develop what Melly says here, the Arthas/Sylvanas relationship explained earlier in this chapter follows the same pattern as the pairings Melly mentions. Remember that Sylvanas' death and her goal after her resurrection into undeath is all centered on Arthas. Also, as Melly points out, not only has *WoW* not had an expansion with a main end boss who is female, it also has not had a main heroine who is female. Melly's frustration with the lack of female characters who aren't objectified and/or have their narratives couched in male character narratives, was expressed by about 30% participants.

Males and The Brohood

Before I began to read over the survey responses, I hadn't critically considered the brohood that exists in the video game community or the default gender assumptions that often accompany the playing of video games. I'd definitely experienced it, but my participants helped me realize that this wasn't a personal issue that I had been encountering. Their responses made it clear that the brohood and the default gender assumption of players (that they are all male) permeates video game culture. The following responses are the different ways that women discussed the brohood present within *WoW*. They also reveal a trend that many participants noted, that is that players are assumed by default to be male even if playing a female character.

Syrii: *I do feel that people tend to be a bit more "open" when you're playing a male character. You fit more easily into the default assumption that behind the keyboard, you*

are a male in real life.

Dani: *I don't usually play male characters. What I do notice is that, in general, people don't assume that a player is female just because they play a female character.*

BustyRuffles: *When I play my male toons I feel more comfortable because I'm not going to get whispers or strange treatment. I cannot remember anything specific in regards to stories of a certain treatment, but I have found that there is a certain respect and camaraderie amongst the bro-hood. I don't feel like an outsider trying to cram myself into a world where I'm not really wanted*

Jeschalen: *Despite playing mostly female characters, many players in PuGs assume I'm male. I do not usually correct these assumptions to avoid trolling or harassment –*

Briony: *I don't pretend to be a male player, because it feeds the “girls don't play video games” attitude (though I totally understand people who do pretend, and don't judge them for it), but I also don't make it public that I'm female.*

Hatty: *No, I don't genderbend. The opposite if anything, I don't like being mis-gendered and I don't like the assumption that everyone is male and will correct it (politely).*

Jade: *I played in an otherwise exclusively male raiding team for a short period of time. They would swear a lot during raids and would be very blunt and straightforward to each other, but not to me. In a way that can also make you feel as if you're not taken seriously, as if you can't take criticism or so. It made me feel like an outsider.*

Come at me bro

I personally have been referred to by gendered male pronouns such as “he,” “him,” “bro,” “dude,” and “man.” Whether I choose to respond or not really depends on the rhetorical situation. In a group of strangers, I tend to, as some of the survey

participants said, let it go. I don't correct the misgendering either because I don't want to have the gender conversation, don't want to deal with harassment, and sometimes because my focus is on an achievement or a piece of gear. Also, I'd like to be able to just enjoy playing the game without having to constantly consider gender. My purpose isn't necessarily to correct every misgendering. I do often correct people in my guild though. Mainly because I get tired of having someone repeatedly call me 'man'. It just starts to get to me. Also, I feel if someone is going to work with me on a consistent basis, then I have no reason to not correct them and be identified as I prefer to be identified. But it boils down to one specific point: until I say something or I'm heard on an audio program such as Ventrilo, I'm assumed to be male.

Some players made and continue to make the rhetorical choice to not correct misgendering labels such as "bro," "man," and "dude," which they saw as gendered male. The purpose for not correcting the labels was often strategic, whether to avoid harassment or unpleasant encounters, or they didn't wish to bring up issues of gender because they wished to focus on gameplay. Other participants said that they politely corrected players that misgendered them. However participants responded, the response was a rhetorical strategy, based on the assumption that they were male, when they did not identify as male. Based on the overall results of the survey, while the rhetorical choices of how women dealt with gender issues differed, each had to explore specific rhetorical strategies to deal with issues of gender. These strategies included correcting misgendering, purposefully not correcting misgendering, choosing not to speak using voice chat, playing in all-female guilds, and playing only with players they knew in real life. Also, if gender was not the main concern for the participant, there was a specific choice for why

they chose a male or female gender for their character, whether for in game purposes such as roleplaying or because they identified as female personally.

The construction of gender within virtual spaces is complicated, often created in ways that are not explicit, but become integrated with gameplay. The constructed norm makes it difficult for participants who are part of the privileged group to even recognize it. Over 50% of survey participants revealed that they often did not explicitly state their gender, which led other players to assume they were male.

Sexualizing: Wanna be my girlfriend? NO?! Slut!

As an avid gamer, the sexualization of NPCs was not unfamiliar. Busty girls in mail armor bra and panties wasn't new. However, the sexualization in online games moves beyond characters, as my survey participants described. Playing online games primarily with my husband openly has limited sexual advances I've received while playing, though not eliminated them. While I recognized that sexual advances occurred, I never realized the extent that some female players had been sexually harassed and even stalked due to rejecting or not responding to sexual advances by male players. The participant responses also revealed a trend in female players being sexualized by male players; this included male players using gendered slurs (slut, cunt), making unwelcome sexual advances (after the female player refused the initial advance), and even violent harassment.

Jeschalen: *I have been harassed by male players in-game I was originally guildmates/friends with. When I rejected their advances and invitations to escalate the relationship, the online harassment began. It eventually spilled over into real-life harassment that targeted me and my boyfriend. It actually caused me to take a six-month*

hiatus from the game, and when I did return I moved my characters to a different server and renamed them to avoid detection.

Rhulain: *I've been stalked by two men while playing this game. I had to report them both to Blizzard and the police.*

Avebury: *When I was an officer for a guild once I kicked someone who was extremely rude and foul. He would often flirt with me and I'd either ignore him or rebuff him, I had made it very clear multiple times I didn't like him. After he'd said something really horrible one time I was fed up and kicked him, he logged onto an alt robbed the guild bank. And for weeks after he would talk about me in Durotar's general chat (which is a highly popular place for pvpers to hang out) saying he had me on facebook and that I was a slut and all sorts of stuff.*

Belynda: *I've had people accuse me of giving sexual favors for getting items.*

Dextera: *Another instance, later on during Cataclysm, occurred when someone disagreed with my guild leading and raid leading style. In guild chat he accused me of 'being on my period' which is why I was being 'so bitchy and irrational'.*

Saracen: *I told one friend I was female and all of a sudden he was acting very differently towards me. Whereas before, he'd never offered to get me gear, he was falling over himself to do so. It got worse when he found out I was a lesbian...I moved to another server and was shopping for a guild. I settled on one that the GM boasted was "women friendly" but slowly noticed the lewd innuendos, the players who would offer (unsolicited) to have a threesome with my gf and me, and how it all started with the GM and filtered down.*

Elektrofried: *With PUGs (pick up groups), who can leave out the comments about*

“being on the rag” or “that time of the month” when I’m not agreeing with how someone is doing something in the game and call them out on it. I.e. I’m tanking and I’ve told the DPS not to pull for me. DPS continues to pull agro, I don’t bother pulling that stuff off of them anymore. That’s led to insulting party comments/whispers, but it’s always relating to being a cunt. :/

Female Gamer: *I have even been kicked from guilds for being a “harpy” [aka getting to know other raiders and being nice to them. Since I am a female, this apparently means I want to have sex with them.]*

The severity of the hostility and harassment that these female players faced is disturbing. Let’s make something very clear here: these women are participating in an *online game*. The sexualization and objectification many of these women face is connected closely with stereotypes about women within our culture, but also stereotypes about why women play video games. When women break from those stereotypes, such as rejecting a sexual advance or being an aggressive raid leader, some men get angry and respond with hostility.

Stereotyping: Why can’t a girl be competitive and violent?

I have been obsessed with the achievement system in WoW for over five years now. The achievement system in WoW was implemented in late 2008, a few weeks before the *Wrath of the Lich King* expansion. The achievement system created specific challenges (some difficult; others not so much). I’m competitive, very competitive. I also adore lists. I spent time on small achievements, but also on extensive achievements, including the Loremaster achievement that required me to complete over 2,000 quests awarded the title Loremaster. I completed it in *Wrath*. At the time, very few people had

the title.

After I received the achievement, and it was announced in the guild (the game does that), one of my guild mates took a look at the achievement point standings of guild members. He said that he couldn't believe a girl had the most achievement points in the guild. He then spent the next few weeks trying to beat my achievement point numbers. I really don't mind that someone feels competitive and wants to challenge my lead. But, what did my being a female have to do with it? Why was it somehow shameful for a girl to have the highest number of points in the guild?

Apparently a lot of assumptions follow because I'm female: I must like to role-play, collect pets and mounts, and enjoy socially interacting with fellow players. I do enjoy those things. I also enjoy picking off other players with my Hunter in PvP (player versus player), earning achievement points, and taking down monsters. I'm not interested in hearing the problems of someone who isn't even my friend. I don't want romantic propositions or to hear someone tell me that I'm good "for a girl." I don't need someone's helpful tips, since I'm assumed to be new to video games. It comes back to an old cultural binary assumption: that a person must be masculine/male (rational, competitive, strong) or feminine/female (emotional, passive, weak). Men get angry when I (and other female players) push back.

I really enjoy playing *WoW*. The frustrating antics of people based on my gender is not something I deal with constantly. It has happened enough that I roll my eyes now. I don't even feel hurt, just annoyed. But I still question why it ever came to that. I thought we were done with gender politics. Apparently not.

Male Pushback: Get Back in the Kitchen--You Don't Belong Here

BustyRuffles: *I cannot go a day without reading some inane, misogynistic comment in general or trade chat. Comments about weight and looks being somehow tied to a female's interests in WoW, rape jokes (ugh!), jokes about women being inferior or needing to make more sandwiches...I can laugh a lot off, but the rape jokes are just too much.*

Avebury: *It is frequent to encounter general nasty from males in the game, the "go back to the kitchen," "suck my cock," and "girls don't play WoW" talk...The general attitude from males that it's acceptable behavior to ogle and catcall women most certainly carries over into the virtual world.*

Janina: *I've been told to get back in the kitchen or called names before, for asking people not to use the term rape as casually...Silly comments like, "ugh does this girl even know what they're doing" in raids. You feel like a target and terrified of messing up because of the abuse you get in return.*

Dani: *I was once accused of being a bad player and the cause of multiple wipes in a situation when it was not my fault (It was a fight I understood well and was very familiar with). I never said I was a woman, but one of the DPS assumed I was, because, in his mind, women can't play. After I dropped the group, he continued to verbally assault me until he was placed on ignore.*

Babbsie: *The pocket healer I travel with often gets flak because even though their avatar is male, they are assumed to be female. I am often told to "control my girlfriend."*

The Women Push Back

Many female players used specific strategies to rhetorically negotiate the messages about women and the treatment of female characters they find frustrating.

Some players did alternative readings of specific characters, seeing the strengths of female characters such as Sylvanas, Jaina, or Tyrande, and seeing them as characters of empowerment. As mentioned by Mandelbaum, other players use communities of women such as WoWladies Livejournal to discuss the problems they see with characters, (82). Others choose to purposefully try to ignore what they view as sexist or gendered dialogue and visuals.

One survey participant, Anne, often skips over sexist dialogue or situations, opting to ignore the content. She discusses why she chooses to ignore, rather than directly confront or bring these issues up for dialogue:

There is part of me that just skips past anything remotely sexist in the dialog or quest text - I just roll my eyes & move on - which is only supporting it, rather than pointing it out. Pointing it out always seems to be more work because of the crap that goes with it (see Pandaria & Ji Firepaw, as a recent example)

The specific scenario that Anne is referring to, deals with a gendered response from the NPC Ji Firepaw to players based on the gender of the character being played.

To female players he says, "Hello, friend! You're some kind of gorgeous, aren't you? I bet you can't keep the men off of you! Join me! You and I are going to be good friends!" To men, he instead says "Hello, friend! You've got a strong look to you! I bet you're all the rage with the ladies! Join me! You and I are going to be good friends!" (Myers).

Myers' article on *Joystiq*, "Why is Blizzard Still Okay with Gender Inequality in World

of Warcraft,” originally linked to a *WoW* official forum, where a conversation about the in-game dialogue began and got out of hand. The forum has since then been deleted by the development team. Players who brought up the problematic issue of the gendered dialogue and asked for the dialogue to be changed were bombarded with insults and comments that ended very similar to those that Chevalier mentioned in the dialogue about Ubuntu discussed at the beginning of chapter 3. The concerns that players had about the gendered dialogue of Ji Firepaw was seen as “trivial.” Trivializing the concerns of players about gendered language or gender representation acts only as a continued denial of inequality within virtual spaces, as those with privilege use idea of technology as neutral to ignore these concerns in order to maintain the status quo.

Conclusion

Clearly a lot of players think that it is appropriate to treat women players negatively. The range of comments that female players received should make it clear that some blatantly sexist comments emerge from other players, but the treatment of women goes beyond that. The negativity goes beyond even what I had originally thought—the capabilities of women to play, the sexist comments about getting back in the kitchen, the sexual comments—I knew these existed and that they shouldn’t. I was quite unaware of the extent that some of the harassment went, however. The fact that any woman has had to call the police, quit the game, or received harassment even outside of the game means that the issue of gender representation and discussion has reached a rhetorical exigency, as Bitzer discusses in his article “The Rhetorical Situation.” The purpose for responding rhetorically “is pragmatic; it comes into existence for the sake of something beyond itself; it functions ultimately to produce action or change in the world...in short rhetoric

is a mode of altering reality” (219). In other words, hopefully these narratives of women’s experience while playing can help players as well as game developers/designers recognize the need to respond to how gender is represented within video games.

I question whether these kinds of stories are well known within the video gaming community. My hope is that if it becomes more recognized as something that takes place, gender will no longer be written off by development and design teams. It is important that designers and development teams recognize issues of discrimination that technology helps to culturally perpetuate. It should also call attention to the community of players as a whole and encourage them to see the faulty assumptions and sexist practices being embraced or ignored by the wider community. Based on my experience, it is not all male players or game enthusiasts who act in these ways. Rather, it is a small number, but it often is ignored by male players who do not necessarily agree with what is being said or done to these women. I encourage men to act as allies to women within these spaces and openly acknowledge to fellow players that this kind of behavior is not okay. I do not advocate the increased voicing of opposition to harassment as a way to completely eradicate the behavior, nor do I think it will end quickly. In order to enact some kind of change, dialogue must start and continue in order to achieve any semblance of change.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

I began playing video games in 1995 when I was eight years old. I had friends make fun of me for asking for a Super Nintendo for Christmas. I'd run into people who didn't believe I played video games while I grew up. Or that I sucked at playing. I started playing online games in 2007, not long before the meme "There are no girls on the internet" began circulating as a searchable Google term. I'd become so used to my place on the internet, it almost seemed as though that's just how things were. No wonder it becomes so easy for those with privilege to trample on marginalized people.

Fast forward to 2012, and I assumed that we were finished talking about gender. Maybe it's because outright and blatant sexism happens less often, at least in ways that are easily identifiable. I think I also became settled into the routine online. It took graduate classes, discussions on privilege, and a reconsideration of my experiences to help me recognize that the mistreatment of marginalized people within the video game culture and the *WoW* community is a systemic problem, one that we had hoped digital spaces would erase, but that hasn't. It took some time for me to come to the realization that even these virtual spaces carry culturally specific expectations and assumptions about issues of gender.

These expectations and assumptions often go unchecked because technology promised a reprieve from identity politics. "Salen and Zimmerman claim that games can be seen as "ideological systems" that reflect the offline culture in which they are designed and played. They refer to this as "cultural rhetoric," which points to the persuasiveness of the meaning produced by a game and how players are invited to accept the discourse of

the game as a meaningful framework to play” (qtd. In Corneliussen 65). This quote supports the idea that characters such as Sylvanas Windrunner are crafted based on cultural and ideological systems in our actual world. I also argue that the way Sylvanas is crafted by game designers produces meaning about gender and how women should be treated and viewed. If the female characters of a game are treated in ways that construct the female gender as unimportant, evil, and encourages players to view female characters as sexual objects that deserve to be called gendered slurs, then some male players may see it as appropriate to treat female players in similar ways. I do not argue that all male players treat female players this way because that is simply not true. Rather, what I am suggesting is that if female players continue to be represented in such a negative way, it shouldn’t be surprising that players think it is appropriate. It is necessary that women be better represented in video games, and that discussions on gender and gendered language stop being silenced but are welcomed if we want the treatment of female players to change. I refuse to let the voices of female players be silenced.

In fact, one specific reason for including in this thesis responses and narratives from multiple female voices is that so little of the research I found included a representative number of female voices. Pulling from sixty other voices, as well as my own, allowed me to present varying experiences. While I could not include responses from all participants, all of the responses I received were critically considered as part of the overall argument I make here.

I believe that this thesis makes it clear how gender is rhetorically (re)constructed in *WoW*. The game itself replicates many sexist messages that are present within our culture, such as the sexualizing of women and the villainizing of women in power,

through the representation of women NPCs. The game also has the ability to address key issues, such as the way rape is talked about in media settings, but fails to do so in a way that is sensitive to rape victims and that encourages an audience to see the problems with continuing victim blaming.

Since online games are specifically social spaces, how gender is rhetorically constructed and (re)constructed by players is worth considering not only to better understand the population of players who engage in online activities but also to encourage social activism in order to open up dominant narratives to women who have been shut out. For example, knowledge of how others rhetorically negotiate gender can help me and other educators better understand gender as fluid rather than binary and consider the ways that we construct gender expectations in the classroom and in digital spaces. It also can hopefully help researchers in game studies and digital humanities consider the ways in which gender remains an important topic for analysis. Hopefully, with continuing research about women in these spaces, the master narrative of gaming as an exclusively masculine and masculinist activity can change. As the master narrative of gaming changes, researchers should be cognizant of the gender binary that exists within our culture when we talk about gender politics within digital spaces.

While my privileging of the identification as “female” was purposeful, I also found it problematic as I continued my research. I do feel it was necessary to look specifically at the female gender as the place to begin the discussion on gender equality within the space of *WoW*. My reason for this choice is that, as Corneliussen observes, “even though the fantasy universe constructed in *World of Warcraft* offers creatures that we do not expect to meet in our offline reality, it does not offer genders outside the most

common way of structuring the world” (68). In other words, the gender binary between male and female is culturally familiar, although a simplistic view of gender. I am not suggesting that I wish to uphold that cultural binary by focusing specifically on females, but this construction of gender is recognized by players, and often players are only referred to as male or female. I also needed a way to provide framework for showing how maleness permeates the center of this culture as the norm. I realize that gender is not binary, however, and some of my participants identified in ways other than strictly female including bi-gender, gender questioning, and transgender.

As a result of this shortcoming of my work, I challenge other researchers to consider gender and gender politics carefully in digital spaces, and ask them to consider genders other than the binary. It also means that the intersections of identity are not a major topic of discussion in this thesis, and more research should be done on identity markers in digital spaces. It seems of utmost importance to not forget that markers of identity do not disappear because of a computer screen.

APPENDIX A – SUMMARY OF *WORLD OF WARCRAFT*

World of Warcraft is a massively multiplayer online roleplaying game (MMORPG) developed by Blizzard Entertainment. The game is played online with millions of players on multiple servers. Server placement is dependent on geographic location as well as interest for playing the game. For example, some servers are PvE (player versus environment) which means the players using it are primarily interested in playing against the computer or design elements created by developers, other players prefer PvP (player versus player) which includes fighting other players in opposing factions, or others prefer RP servers (roleplaying) in which players focus on developing a storyline for the character they play and interacting with other characters in the game. The original game was released in 2004.

Although the actual main story as well as side stories within the game is incredibly vast, the story focuses on two opposing factions, The Horde and the The Alliance. Players choose one of these factions to join when they create their character. After a faction has been chosen, players choose the gender, race, class, physical appearance, and name of their character. A character's "class" refers to how the player will contribute to the game. For example, a druid, like Nepheline, is a Restoration Druid (this is her class). She uses nature magic (magic that comes from plant life) in order to heal allies in combat. Over the course of the game, players acquire new abilities and those abilities are determined by the class they choose at the beginning of the game.

Players begin the game at level one and "quest" or accomplish specific tasks given by NPCs (non-playable characters). Completing quests or collaborating with other players in dungeons (instanced zones where 5 players defeat specific monsters and meet

specific requirements) earns the player experience points in order to increase his/her level. As a player levels, he or she gains new abilities to use in combat. Depending on the level of the character, there are different zones, or areas that are meant for characters of a specific level to quest. All of the quests and monsters in the zone are set at a specific level of difficulty that the player is capable of fighting at his/her current level.

In order to meet and interact with other people, players often join guilds. Guilds are a way to socially interact with a specific group that includes a membership list and a private text chat channel for members. While some guilds are open and invite any and all players interested, other guilds have specific purposes such as raiding, PvP, or roleplaying. These guilds may have specific requirements for admission into the guild, including written or voice applications/interviews. Many guilds also use audio chat programs such as Ventrilo to easily communicate with other members. It is often through the use of chat programs (which some guilds require members to use) that make it more difficult for players to not disclose gender.

Since WoW went live in 2004, four expansions have been released. Expansion packs add extensive content to the original game. This content includes new zones, class abilities, dungeons, raids (similar to dungeons but collaboration between 10-40 people, rather than only 5). These expansion packs are *Burning Crusade* (released in 2007), *Wrath of the Lich King* (2008), *Cataclysm* (2010), and *Mists of Pandaria* (2012). A fifth expansion is supposed to be released in Fall 2014.

APPENDIX B – CDA TERMS BORROWED FOR CRITICAL ANALYSIS

- *Agent/Patient Relationship*: An agent is depicted as having more power than the patient. Ex. Males, such as Arthas, have agency, while women such as Sylvanas do not unless they are “bitches.”
- *Auxiliary Embellishments*: non-linguistic aspects of a text. Since the text being discussed is a video game, this includes pictures, cut scenes (video), and quests (while text based are a task that a player performs rather than just reads). These auxiliary embellishments are central to the discussion of the text.
- *Backgrounding*: Deliberately de-emphasizing pieces of information. Ex. Female characters being presented as victims or bitches.
- *Omission* is a type of backgrounding that includes leaving out specific pieces of information out completely. Ex. Sylvanas being omitted from the hero statue in Dalaran after the defeat of the Lich King.
- *Connotation*: refers to nuances in language that go beyond a dictionary definition of the word and are usually culturally and contextually specific. Ex. When Garrosh and Godfrey refer to Sylvanas as a “bitch.”
- *Deletion*: deliberate exclusion of information or agency.
- *Foregrounding*: the parts of the text that are emphasized.
- *Framing*: the “spin” an author gives to a text (164).
- *Insinuation*: Requires background knowledge; hints at or suggests a reader to make certain inferences. Ex. When Garrosh asks his lieutenant to keep an eye on Sylvanas. He clearly doesn’t believe she will follow his instructions although she agreed to.

- *Presuppositions*: can be considered at the word level or sentence level and causes a reader to assume the truth of a statement in which it is found.

APPENDIX C – SURVEY QUESTIONS

- How do you identify in terms of gender?
- What is your age?
- What country do you currently reside in?
- How long have you been playing *World of Warcraft*?
- Which expansions have you played?
- What kind of server do you play on (typically)?
- Tell me about your main character. (gender, race, class)
- What's your typical role? (Healing, tank, dps)
- What do you typically spend time doing on WoW? (dungeon, raid, pvp, achievements, pet collecting, etc.)
- Have you ever experienced harassment, aggressiveness or anything else because of your gender on Wow? If so, please share your experience.
- Are you interested in specific characters or WoW lore? (If a participant answers no to this question, question 12 and 13 are skipped).
- (if yes) What characters are you particularly interested in? Why?
- How do you feel about how female characters are represented in WoW?
- Do you typically play male or female characters? Why?
- Do you gender bend? (play male characters or female characters with 'masculine' qualities). What made you decide to do this? If you've played a male character, are your experiences different than when you play a female character? If so, please share one or more stories of when your experience has differed based on your assumed gender.

APPENDIX D – LETTER TO POTENTIAL PARTICIPANTS

Hi everyone,

You may remember my previous post where I asked for participants in my study. I found that many of you would like to participate! Many more than I had originally expected. The difficulty with actual interviews is of course trying to line up our schedules, especially for you ladies that live in other countries!

In case you missed the first post: I'm an English Grad student at Texas State University and I'm currently working on my thesis. I'm particularly interested in women's online gaming experiences, especially in relation to gender. As part of my Thesis, I'd like to conduct interviews with women who play *World of Warcraft*. The purpose of the study is to explore how women spend their time in game, their experiences in relation to their actual gender and the gender of their character, as well as differences in how women interact with men versus women in game. Ultimately: I want to look at female narratives of being gamers.

I'm incredibly excited to do this study and I'm really interested in the narratives I'm sure you all have as female gamers. I don't want anyone to feel that their experiences are not unique enough or that it needs to be something in specific for me to want to hear about it. I'm a sample size of one, so I'd like to come to understand the experiences of other women as well.

In my attempt to try to include as many of your voices and experiences as possible in my study, I've created a survey that you are welcome to take. I set it up very similarly to how I planned to conduct interviews. It allows for you to share your experiences in detail and narrate as many or few stories as you wish. If you deem it

important to discuss, I'd like to hear about it! I also hope this allows people who weren't sure if they had the time to participate the ability to actually do so.

I truly appreciate all of you who have openly supported my project. It has been truly wonderful speaking with all of you and hearing about your experiences. Thank you also to any of you who help me out by taking this survey. Please, also feel free to share this survey with other female gamers you know who play *World of Warcraft* or have played at any point.

Link to the survey: <https://docs.google.com/forms/d/12e7xvyHF6SBA9QcNI9kdJpH-kZmD5elna8cTfqeWSk8/viewform>

Megan/Nepheline

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