

WoW, a new religion?

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Media, Myth and Ritual

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This paper is dedicated to Mary. She helped me so much with finding people for the interviews, allowing me to observe a World of Warcraft Raid and giving me 'inside information ' Without her, this paper could not have been written.

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Can a computer game become a religion?

Can a computer game become a new religion? World of Warcraft seems to come close to that. It is a "Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game" created by the company Blizzard Entertainment. With more than nine million players¹, it is one of the largest multiplayer games at this time. It offers an immense virtual fantasy world that is full of myths, rituals and magic.

In this essay, I will show my findings of observations and interviews of four people that are regular World of Warcraft players. How do they experience the game? What role does it play in their lives? And do they see it as a substitute for 'traditional' religion?

I will elaborate a bit more on what World of Warcraft exactly is before developing my framework. In my framework, I will explain the relationship between religion, play and games. After that, I will present Mary, Patrick, Dave and Ian, all players of a World of Warcraft guild. I will present my observation of a so-called raid, and afterwards I will thematically treat with the results of the interviews.

In the world of World of Warcraft, one has to create a character, a virtual avatar, from one of the different races featured in the game. There are two 'sides' that fight each other, the Alliance and the Horde. The 'Alliance' consists of dwarves, elves, humans and gnomes. The Horde consists of orcs, trolls, tauren and 'undead'. This division is similar to the way the war between humans, elves and orcs as described in *Lord of the Rings*. Each race has a specific history and properties. The player, or his avatar, enters the magical world where he has to fulfill so-called 'hero quests' in order to develop his character and gain an understanding of the world. He has to fulfill quests where different powers work to prevent this. He has to fight enemies and monsters and explore unknown areas. The quests are part of the game narrative. They contain myths and stories that contribute to the mythical character of World of Warcraft. (Krzywinska, 2006) To give an example:

"The ancient prophecy of Mosh'aru speaks of a way to contain the god Hakkar's essence. It was written on two tablets and taken to the troll city of Zul'farrak, west of Gadgetzan. Bring me the Mosh'aru tablets. The first tablet is held by the long dead troll Theka the Martyr. It is said his persecutors were cursed into scarabs and now scuttle from his shrine. The second is held by the hydromancer Velratha, near the sacred pool of Gahz'rilla. When you have the tablets bring them to me."

¹ Blizzard Entertainment Press release, July 24 2007, <http://www.blizzard.co.uk/press/070724.shtml>

Players can fight dangerous creatures and decide whether to explore this world alone or accompanied by a fellowship while they are fulfilling their quests. When they finish a quest they can earn experience points and reach higher levels. This increases the potential and the possibilities of the avatar. Many players join online guilds and virtual communities in World of Warcraft. During the year, Blizzard Entertainment organizes holidays that are similar to holidays in the 'real' world, such as Christmas, Easter, Oktoberfest and Halloween. (Krzywinska, 2006). In World of Warcraft, it is even possible to marry another character in the game.

Summarizing, World of Warcraft is an online fantasy world that contains epic stories and quests, rituals and community. In the age of a spiritual marketplace where people construct their own religious beliefs and spiritual practices, World of Warcraft seems to fit nicely.

Religious Identification

Roughly stated, In the last fifty years, religion has become more pluralistic, fluid and voluntarily. The church is not longer the central place for social and spiritual needs. People combine Christianity with yoga, buddhism and self-help books. Many people believe without belonging (see Davie, 1994). And there are probably many that belong without necessarily believing all the doctrines. Danièle Hervieu-Léger, a French sociologists, acknowledges the changes in religion. Traditional religion is in movement, it is changing. Even if people don't necessarily attend a church or believe in the doctrines, they can still identify with a religion. Hervieu-Léger proposes four dimensions of identification with religion:

- (1) Community. This contains the social markers and symbols that define the borders of those who do belong and those who do not belong to a certain religion
- (2) Ethics. This is a dimension often emphasized by people feeling inspired by, for example, the Christian ethics of compassion for the weak and poor or human dignity.
- (3) Culture. This dimension is very broad and seems to overlap the other three. Hervieu-Léger mentions tradition, symbols, practices, doctrines, books, ritual codes, history, habitudes, moral, art, aesthetics and many more aspects of the cultural.

(4) The emotional dimension. Religious feasts and rituals are moments where people experience belonging to each other. This can be the traditional service on Christmas Eve, for many the only time in the year to attend a church. (Hervieu-Léger, 1997 : 71)

If we apply the four dimensions of religious identification from Hervieu-Léger to World of Warcraft, there are many similarities. The guilds are social networks where people play and chat together, and build relationships. The ethical dimension is dictated by the rules of the game and the rules in the guilds. The cultural dimension is present in the myths, the visual design and the festivals. The emotional dimension, the emotional, is present when people feel that they belong to each other.

In his famous book *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), the anthropologist Clifford Geertz' gives a general definition of religion:

“(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.”

(Geertz, 1973 : 90)

World of Warcraft is a virtual world that is shaped by symbols present in the design, stories and myths that could establish moods and motivations by the players to see this computer game as a coherent fantasy world that is realistic. But World of Warcraft is a game? What does a game have in common with a religion?

Religion, art and play

Is there a relationship between religion and games? According to the Dutch anthropologist Jan van Baal, they can both be classified as illusions (Van Baal, 1972). He argues that religion, art and play are all illusions. Religion is based on an unprovable reality, art on a symbolic reality, and play on a fictional reality. Why are these three 'illusions' so highly valued? Human beings are individuals and social beings. They try to relate themselves to others and to reality as a whole. Therefore, they have to communicate. However, communication is always finite. There is no logical piece in the puzzle that solves all problems. Religion, art and play are illusions that enable people to deal with the world.

Religion, according to Van Baal, supposes, "All explicit and implicit notions and ideas, accepted as true, which relate to a reality which cannot be verified empirically" (Van Baal, 1972: 4). Why do people ascribe the highest value to that what they cannot prove, nor make true? An expression like 'the certainty of faith' points that one realizes that there is an uncertainty that from a factual point of view is an illusion. It does however have value for the practice of life. It gives support in crisis situations. Religion bases its unprovability by referring to forces like the community, the nature, or the divine, that are important realities for people. The problem of western Christianity, especially after the Enlightenment, is the credibility of religion. The world has become disenchanted, and stories, dogma's and creeds seem to contradict modern science. Van Baal calls the modern man a 'bricoleur sans trésor'. (ibid: 44) The old truths about the world are no longer sufficient to explain it.

Art is concerned with aesthetics. But beauty cannot be defined. There are no objective properties for beauty. It is enjoyed anyway. Speaking beauty provokes a silent enjoyment. Beauty makes the human being silent and provokes feelings that cannot be put into words. Religion and art are things that are, despite there unprovability or intangibility, taken very seriously.

This is not the case with play. Play is, by definition, not seriously. However, it is valued enormously and seems to be indispensable, something that one does not ascribe to religion or art. When we call play an illusion, no one denies it. But when we call religion and art an illusion, people deny it strongly.

Play is an illusion that is not taken seriously. Nevertheless, when a game is played, it is done with sincere earnestly. According to Van Baal, one can be absorbed in the game and play someone else without losing oneself. One can be someone else without losing his or her identity. Everyone knows that the game is an illusion. However, the rules of this game world are kept strictly, without making objection. Those rules are binding as long as the game takes. The function of a game is relaxation, but one can only play well by making an effort.

In games, there is no distinction between the sacred and the profane in the religious sense. We can make another distinction, the one between play and everyday life.

Playing in the margin

We can consider playing World of Warcraft as a ritual. In anthropology, rituals are often associated with *rites de passage*, that form an essential part of society. Rituals that mark the transition from boy to man can be boot camp, graduation or confirmation. The 'ritual' of playing World of Warcraft is not a 'rite de passage'. Playing games is not a central feature of society, but happens in the margin. The anthropologist Victor Turner makes a valuable distinction between liminality and the liminoid. The word 'limen' refers to the Latin word that means 'margin'. Turner uses the term liminality for rites de passage. It is the 'in-between' phase where social norms are inverted. A novice is neither boy nor man, and he is subject to treatment and experiences that are part of the initiation. The liminoid is 'like the liminal', but different. Liminal practices are part of the community, while liminoid takes place in the margin. Turner describes the liminoid as follows:

Liminoid phenomena develop apart from the central economic and political processes, along the margins, in the interfaces and interstices of central and serving institutions – they are plural, fragmentary and experimental in character." (Turner, 1982 : 54)

There are always times and places separate from 'daily life', where people can 'play', apart from work and institutions. Where the liminal is integrated in social-biological rhythms and transitions, the liminoid is more concerned with play and entertainment apart from daily life. Liminoid places are bars, pubs and social clubs, and I believe that the virtual space of World of Warcraft can also be included. The people that were playing together during the raid were using their free-time to play games and have fun with each other.

Work and play

Turner argues that this doesn't mean that this free time playing does not serve a function. He argues that the division between work and play is something that is partly inherent to the division of labour in capitalist societies and the industrial revolution. He argues:

“Perhaps it would be better to regard the distinction between “work” and “play” or better between “work” and “leisure” (...) as itself an artifact of the Industrial Revolution, and to see such symbolic-expressive genres as ritual and myth as being at once work and play or at least as cultural activities in which work and play are intricately inter-calibrated” (Turner: 32)

Time became divided between work, and leisure time. In agrarian societies, rituals and feasts were part of the seasonal work cycle, and were an important dimension of the communal life that was more ‘organic’. Many religious activities are nowadays seen as taking place in the margin, they are not a part of the capitalist system. However, religious activities and rituals used to be serious, and are serious in agrarian societies. Play involves the inversion of normal structures; for example, during a carnival or Halloween, people dress in disguise and behave differently, they can do things that are normally not allowed. Participation in rituals, such as carnival and rites de passage was obligatory and an essential part of culture. In modern society, activities that are considered to be play are part of the “liminoid”. Turner states:

“I see the “liminoid” as an independent and critical source (...) and here we observe how “liminoid” actions of industrial leisure genres can repossess the character of “work” though originating in a “free time” arbitrarily separated by managerial fiat from the time of “labor”- How the liminoid can be an independent domain of creative activity, not simply a distorted mirror-image, mask or cloak for structural activity in the “centers” or “mainstreams” of “productive labor.” (Turner: 33)

While playing a game may not be part of “productive labor” where people make their living, it can become the domain of creative activity. As we can see in the raid, people are working together to play the game and try to succeed in accomplishing goals in the game. They have to be creative in finding solutions. Consequently, playing World of Warcraft has become ‘work’ in a ludic setting. It is an activity that is separated from daily life, though the boundaries between serious play and humorous reflection are blurred. Achieving a goal in World of Warcraft, for example, finishing a quest, doesn’t contribute to the productive labour of making a living, but contributes to the satisfaction of the ‘free-time’ activities in the margin of everyday life.

Games

Games can be considered to be a subgroup of play, joyful activities set apart in time and space. When the everyday play is being structured it can become drama or a game. In both cases, the structure is independent from the players. In the definition of the historian Johan Huizinga, games are

“a free activity standing quite consciously outside “ordinary” life as being “not serious”, but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means.” (Huizinga, 1950[1944], 15)

In *Homo Ludens*, he argues how game elements are present in culture and how they structure people’s lives. Huizinga argues that games involve a ‘magic circle’; the boundaries of time and space that separate the game from the everyday life. For a football match, the field marks the borders during the time the game lasts. The Dutch game researcher Marinka Copier argues that this distinction is more fluid in computer games. When people are involved in playing World of Warcraft, they are not physically in the same space, and they can switch between the game and everyday life. She argues:

“[T]he concept of the magic circle refers to a preexisting artificiality of the game space that, combined with the strong metaphor, creates a dichotomy between the real and the imaginary which hides the ambiguity, variability and complexity of actual games and play. (...) I posit that even rules alone do not create preexisting artificiality. Games need to be played, and players actively influence each other as well as what the system of the game becomes. Thus the game-play experience is always the result of the interplay between different cognitive frameworks on rules, play, and culture.” (CopierM: 139)

Playing is part of a fictional reality. The rules are artificial, but in time and space of the game, very serious. At the same time, play is embedded in culture and everyday life. What is the relationship between game and ‘real life’? These were questions I had in

mind when I observed a 'raid' of World of Warcraft. Before I describe this event, I will firstly introduce the interviewees.

Profile

Patrick and Mary are a couple in their mid-twenties. Patrick works in administration, and Mary is a student. They are both interested in table-top role-playing games and martial arts. Mary has been participating in Live Action Role Playing (LARP), and reads and writes fantasy. They are both agnostic and do not participate in organized religion. Dave and Ian are friends of Patrick and Mary. Dave is a student and Ian works at university. They are also in their mid-twenties. Dave knows Mary from LARP events. Dave and Ian play table-top games and write fantasy as well. Dave has some 'theological beliefs' but doesn't go to church anymore. Ian is agnostic, writes science fiction and likes to read fantasy.

They are all part of the same guild. They play World of Warcraft raids together, but do also meet in 'real life' regularly, since they don't live too far from each other. I interviewed Patrick and Mary two weeks later, and Dave joined them later on. This interview took place in the house of Patrick and Mary. After that, I had an interview with Ian.

Mary plays between ten and twenty-five hours per week, Patrick plays around twenty five hours per week. Dave plays sixty hours per week. He plays when he is working at the same time. Ian is very busy with his job, and plays eight hours per week.

All the interviewees are fans of the fantasy-subculture. This subculture followed the popularity of Tolkien's *The Hobbit* (1937) and *Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955). Copier describes how the fantasy genre from the 1960's onwards expressed

"romantic ideologies that critiqued the discourses of capitalism, science, rationality , and materialism. (...) Rapidly, Fantasy became a trans-medial phenomenon that could be found in various media such as books, movies, television series, music, and games." (CopieM: 48)

The most popular table-top role-playing game that the interviewees also have played is *Dungeons and Dragons* a game that was created in the 1970's. This game is similar to World of Warcraft, except that the game is not played on the computer, but with pen and

pencil. Examples of books are the series *The Wheel of Time*, and the immensely popular *Harry Potter*. In addition, there are television series such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. The gothic music scene with bands such as *Evanescence* and *Nightwish*. Mary and Dave have been involved in Live Action Role Playing (LARP). According to Copier, some gamers that played *Dungeons and Dragons* decided to "really do it". People organized events where everyone dressed up in costume, and reenacted fights and battles. Mary, Patrick, Dave and Ian are thus not only players of World of Warcraft, but are embedded in the fantasy-subculture.

The Raid

Mary invited me to observe a group battle of World of Warcraft where she and her boyfriend Patrick live. They will both be playing, while others join them online. The house where Patrick and Mary live is decorated with many Japanese pictures including Japanese pop art. Besides, they have a huge collection of Manga comic books and fantasy books. For me, they have turned the speakers on, so I can hear the communication between the players. They can communicate with each other by using headsets. Tonight, they will be playing a so-called 'raid', a battle between a group of 25 players and a group of enemies that is generated by the computer. The raid they will play tonight is 'The Battle for Mt. Hyjal,.'. Many players that play together know each other because they have played before. Some have even met each other in real life at a conference in Arizona.

The players can choose between several strategic roles, for example the 'tanks', the warriors and the healers, that heal the warriors and damage dealers that improve the power of the group . The goal of the raid is to kill all the enemies in a designated area. The biggest bad guy is the 'boss', a very powerful character. If he dies, several items will be available for the players. These items can upgrade their characters (weapons, armor, magic, healing abilities).

Each role has many characters, such as paladins, priests, elves and so on. Patrick explains that it is no big deal if you die during the game. You can be resurrected by other characters. The greatest problem is that your armor and playing abilities can be damaged during the fight.

The raid they will be playing tonight is very difficult, and Patrick and Mary express that the chances are almost zero to get through it, because they have never been there. But it is a good experience to work together and see how it works

For a good raid, the group that fights together needs to be composed of a balanced group of players. There need to be enough tanks, healers and damage dealers. In general, players have one main character that is most advanced, and with whom they play the most.

Mary tells the group that there is a university student that will be observing the game. No one has a problem with that, according to the reactions. It is Mary's task to get the group together. This is very complicated, because some people that have promised to come are not online. One person went to a hockey game instead and another is taking a nap. In addition they had arranged to start at 7 p.m., but they normally do not start before 7:30 p.m. Mary is a bit annoyed that not everyone has shown up, because if they do not have enough people playing, they cannot do the raid. She is busy dividing the task, and asking others to contact people that are not yet online.

All the characters gather together around a 'summoning rock' (the virtual gathering place) before they actually start the raid. Mary is still busy collecting people. In the mean time, she sometimes needs to go to the kitchen to check the dinner. When she's back at the computer, she apologizes for the delay before they can play. "You must be very bored. I am sorry!" While waiting, people make jokes and have fun together. I can hear what they are saying through the speakers. Finally, they have the group together, and Mary is clearly happy that they can start right now. "Perfect. This group is all arranged. This makes me so happy!"

After some more preparations, they start. What they have to do is to kill a group of 'infernals', ghostly kind of characters that enter the battlefield one wave after the other. "Let's get ready and kill!", Mary says. When the fighting starts, the screen is full of lightening and fire. When the infernals are being killed, they form a bunch of bloody corpses. When fighting, Patrick and Mary are very concentrated, and discuss the best strategy with the other player. There is relief when they have killed all the enemies, and people start making jokes again. "I think this character is so silly looking!". One person says: "Oh, my goodness, this is what I came for!"

Then, the boss is coming. He is a giant character and looks like a Goliath. When fighting, he makes a lot of "ooh" and "aah" sounds. Apparently, he is much more powerful than the group that is fighting him. In two minutes, all the players are dead. I hear sad music in the background. Mary is a bit frustrated: "I put healers in the group, but why did no one heal him [one of the warriors]?"

After the fight, people need to be resurrected and reassemble. The group will try to do it again. However, they cannot play continuously, because their equipment is damaged. Mary proposes some changes in the strategy. "In honesty, we need a different off-tank. This was the problem last night as well."

The second fight starts well, but when the boss comes, he is too powerful again. The third raid starts well too. Mary said: "Please, let us kill the boss this time. I just want him to die!" In the same time, they talk a bit of me. How old am I? Oh, 25, that is not too young.... They are optimistic about the outcome. "We are gonna kill him this time!" But, it doesn't look to good... "I don't like the boss, he is mean!". "I am sick of healing you while you are killing yourselves!" Someone said: "We can do this, guys!". But finally, everyone dies. Mary argues: "I think this is it for tonight. We all tried to kill this guy. I think we are all pretty frustrated. Thank you for coming everybody. I am sorry for the frustrating night." Someone else balances: "Oh well, at least we tried." Some people want to stop and go to bed (It's around 10 p.m.). Mary wants to play another part of the game with other people, which is much easier. My observation is finished.

Game and real life

We can frame playing the raid as a ritual. The guild plays those raids regularly. Rituals don't have to be consecrated behavior in the sense that there is a distinction between the sacred and the profane. In the case of the game, this (fluid) distinction is one between game and daily life. When people are involved in playing World of Warcraft, they are not physically in the same space, and they can switch between the game and other things that they are doing in the same time. Mary, for example, was taking care of the food she was cooking while the game was going on.

According to the British sociologist Nick Couldry, a ritual can be (1) a habitual action, (2) a formalized action, (3) an action involving transcendent values. (Couldry, 2003: 3). The

ritual of playing together only is certainly a habitual action, since the group does it regularly. The action is formalized, but these formalizations are largely due to the structure of the game. During the time that their avatars are together, they prepare themselves for the raid. But does playing at large involve transcendent values? In what way does playing together provoke something that transcends the actual ritual? Playing World of Warcraft can involve transcendent values if it sustains the community of the players.

Playing World of Warcraft is a mix of seriousness and fun. Playing the game, killing the monsters, is an occupation that asks for serious play. But there is plenty of time for jokes and social interaction in between. The 'magic circle' is fluid, as Copier argued. Van Baals notion, that playing itself is serious, but that it is not taken as reality is clear during the game. The players are very aware that they are playing a game, especially when they know that they are observed. How serious do they take playing World of Warcraft? Observing a raid didn't give me enough information about that. During the interviews, I asked the interviewees to reflect on the game.

The myths and narratives

The myths and the narratives are an important dimension, though Patrick and Mary argue that this depends on the person who is playing. Patrick says:

"I think it depends on how important you want it to be. I mean.. you can figure out the stories through the quests, or you can try to go through it as fast as you can."

When I ask Dave what he thought about the mythologies and stories in World of Warcraft, he expresses:

"I think it is fantastic. One of the things that draws me to the game and makes me coming back is the mythology and the stories that are involved there. I have other games where it is very generic. And generic gets boring in a while. If it's only about leveling, and, oh, let's kill someone, I wouldn't be that interested. But the fact that, when you go through things, you get to experience all these different stories, as they unfold. Especially with the new expansion. The expansion makes you feel that you are actively involved in the story. When you complete certain quests, the world around you changes. That's a huge change to the old games where it was like: Congratulations, you have saved the world! And then you go to the next level."

Ian argues:

"So as far as the mythos is concerned though in relationship to it I have to admit that many players aren't particularly obsessed about it. There are these players that enjoy and they also enjoy fantasy novels and mythos in general. They generally enjoy the story-line in a lot of things. The thing about World of Warcraft is that it has a very rich story-base, but it doesn't involve those elements in-play as much. Like you can know absolutely nothing about the world, get on it and play and be perfectly happy for the rest of ever and never touch the mythos."

The stories are a dimension of World of Warcraft that makes it interesting. It is present in the quests and the way the world and the characters are shaped. The story could play an important role in the construction of the world and the construction of the cyber-self. Since it is possible to actually play with characters, I ask Patrick, Dave, Mary and Ian if they could identify with their character(s).

Identification with characters

Dave states that he couldn't identify with his character, because she is female. Mary adds that it was hard to approach the character of Dave in the game as a game character. She says:

"That's funny, in World of Warcraft I keep calling you Dave cause I cannot call you with your characters name, because you character is female!"

Dave explains:

"My main character is [Female name], she is a blood-elf paladin. Based on the concept of how blood-elves are, they are prissy, self-righteous. We always use to laugh. When someone needs help, she walks around with an attitude, look at my breasts! I mean, no." Mary said: "All my characters are female. Because I don't like male characters. I don't know people identifying with their character, but I do think people do identify with the job that they do." When I asked Isaac, he said: "I tend to make more female characters, I don't know why. There is some identification if you are able to customize it. It's interesting. It depends on what races people like to play. I hate Tauren. Some characters are better from a game-perspective."

Since they are able to play with several characters, they can use several characters. It depends on what they have to use for which purpose. For a raid, they might use the character that is the strongest. When I observed the raid, I noticed that people called each other by their 'real' name. While people might like their character, they probably do not completely identify with it, and, as Mary said, they do probably more identify with the job that they do.

Online and offline

As Marinka Copier argued, the 'magic circle' of the game is not very strict in World of Warcraft. Competitive elements of the game, the community dimension of the game and friends playing World of Warcraft make it hard to draw the distinction between offline and online.

Patrick uses World of Warcraft also as a social networking device. He says:

"We have some friends that live five minutes away. If you want to talk to them, you can go to them or chat with them in World of Warcraft. Just a minute ago I used it as an instant messenger to say to Dave: Hi, do you want to come over?"

Mary makes an explicit distinction between 'real life' and World of Warcraft.

"The big rule in our guild is: real life is more important than World of Warcraft. Always. If you say: I want to go with a raid. But if something happens in real life, you will not be penalized for it."

Isaac tells me that it is almost impossible to separate online and offline. He first told me that he tried to separate it, but that it was impossible. He replies:

"Oh yeah, but that doesn't work. Especially with friends you play online, that you talk with. I try to keep it separated but it never is completely separated. Especially the social aspect, if you end up talking about it in your real life, because there is all that social drama and you discuss it with other people"

Online community

The online community of the guild is very important. They all agree that their guild is very social.

Ian says:

"The guild that I am in with is a very nice and social guild. It's not like dealing with a lot of jerks."

Dave stresses that there is not a lot of community outside the guild, though:

"There is off course the organization. The guilds, every guild does it's own thing, and of course, the Alliance and the Hordes have their own communities. On the larger scale, there is not much. There is not much intra-guild communication. outside guild, except people that I know that have played in my guild. I still talk with them. There is not a lot of community at that level. There is a lot of community on the guild level. It's almost like an extended family in the sense that

you have people you are close to. Then you have the people you are relatively close to. And then you have the crazy cousins, the creepy uncle. You have to invite him to the party, but you'd wish he didn't show up (laughter). You have the people, that are part of the guild, you try to be welcoming, and we try that. But, you know, with some persons, you think, oh, no, not again!"

Ian also stresses that being in a community also involves 'social drama'.

"Because the community aspect is nice. But it does get a lot more personal drama to deal with. And I am not a person that deals with drama particularly well. And I just don't like to deal with it. So I tend to go away from people who do it. But in a social network, you can't because if you are forced to interact with people you don't normally interact with. There are conflicts. There are people complaining about the guild, and everyone has to listen to it. So there is a lot of inter-guild drama that you have to deal with where these people are not getting what they want, and, you know, someone gets promoted to an officer but they haven't been around as someone else. It's almost like a job-setting where you get someone who is promoted and you've been around longer than they have. So it's kind of an interesting dynamic."

World of Warcraft and religion

I have specifically asked them if they thought if World of Warcraft could be a religion. I argued that the mythology and the community elements were elements that could be found in religion and world of Warcraft.

Mary says:

"I definitely think that it has become a community. I don't know, I don't do religion things. It's definitely a place where you get the sense of community. Because everybody has a common interest. You can talk to them, and you know that, at least game-wise, they will support you. And when you become friends you know that they will support you in real life if something comes up."

Patrick says:

"I think for lot's of people it could be a social replacement, such as the church is. Some people go to church without believing anything, just because they want to meet people."

When I ask Dave if he thinks if World of Warcraft can be a substitute for religion, he expressed that this can happen to some degree. Just as religion has an important

community dimension, the guild is an important support group. He thinks that the music and the epic stories could be an attraction that religion also offers.

Ian says:

“Well, I think, for a lot of people, they really enjoy the fantasy aspect of it and that’s part of what their belief system is anyway. But when you look at religion as far as a replacement, most religions are organized religions, and so you go because it is part of a community. And it establishes a community for yourself. So World of Warcraft really can be a replacement for that, because it establishes a community where people have their own connected by the same aspect. The people might enjoying a particular aspect of it, but it is just like people that go to church but don’t, you know, believe anymore in the religious aspect. It’s still, it is the community that brings them to that relationship. I think you could call it definitely a replacement for church, in the sense that it forms a community that people can interact in.”

World of Warcraft: A part-time job?

During the interview, Patrick and Mary compare playing World of Warcraft with a job. For example, Mary says:

“The big rule in our guild is: real life is more important than World of Warcraft. Always. If you say: I want to go with a raid. But if something happens in real life, you will not be penalized for it. And there some hard-core raiding guilds. And they basically say: you have to be prepared to raid five days a week. You have to be willing to devote four hours a night to raiding. If you don’t show up for a raid, we will kick you out for the next raid. This is like you’ve signed up for a new job. You know, World of Warcraft is your part-time job.”

Later on, she says:

“Once I started getting into raiding, because I have never raided, I didn’t want to become a psycho. I don’t want to feel like the game is my job.” And she said: “I don’t know people identifying with their character, but I do think people do identify with the job that they do.”

At the same time, they agree that World of Warcraft is leisure. Dave states :

“The general goal is that you do World of Warcraft when you have nothing else planned. But you have to do some scheduling to decide what your raiding nights are. It is just like everything else.” Dave plays World of Warcraft when he works,

but does it as a 'leisure thing'. " Casual raiding means that World of Warcraft is not our life. I can do it a lot, because I play it at work. I mean, what else am I gonna do?"

When I interview Ian, and ask him about the 'work' element, he says:

"So there is a lot of inter-guild drama that you have to deal with where these people are not getting what they want, and, you know, someone gets promoted to an officer but they haven't been around as someone else. It's almost like a job-setting where you get someone who is promoted and you've been around longer than they have. So it's kind of an interesting dynamic."

I answer:

"From the former interviews, I really have the impression that it's like a second job."

He responds:

"Yeah, especially when you start doing raiding. So you want a certain kind of social praise and so you end devoting yourself to it and it becomes work. You are doing this thing for other people."

The division between 'real life', 'World of Warcraft life' and the division between work and play is not always clear, and is ambivalent. As Van Baal stated about playing a game, the goal is relaxation, but this can only be achieved by playing seriously and with concentration.

The playing of the raid is participating in the voluntary structure of the game, but, as Mary pointed out, there is social pressure of the guild to play. The guild itself becomes a community, where playing becomes part of the serious life that sustains the community. Though she argues that her guild is not as serious as others, it is clear that people are expected to participate in playing when they sign up for it.

Conclusion

So, can we call World of Warcraft a religion or a substitute of religion? And what are the arguments for or against it? In my theoretical framework, I have tried to explain that (1) religious identification according to the dimensions of Hervieu-Léger fits many of the dimensions World of Warcraft could have for players. Moreover, (2) World of Warcraft contains a system of symbols in the myth and game-design that are pervasive. The game offers a mythical order of existence, and these conceptions have an aura of factuality in the game itself. The motivations that are involved in playing the game seem realistic in the context of the game. Geertz' definition applies in a 'ludic' way to World of Warcraft. (3) There are similarities between 'traditional' religion and play. As Van Baal argued, religion and play are both illusions. They are a way in which people relate to the world and themselves. Religion refers to an unprovable reality and play to a fictional reality. If, for many people, the improvable reality of religion might be fictional, and if this doesn't prevent them from being religious, why could a game not be religious? This brings me to the last argument, provided by Turner. Games take place in a 'liminoid', in the margin. However, the distinction between the serious world provided by the capitalist and industrial society and the private realm is artificial and a product of the industrial revolution and the emerging capitalist societies. Play has always been an important part of religion. The performance of rituals has a playful character. Rituals as last supper, carnival, and church liturgy are symbolic and can be both serious and 'fun'. World of Warcraft offers a world that can be as playful as many aspects of religion. If we take religious rituals serious, we should take gaming serious as well.

My theoretical framework has been framed and tested by my observation and the interview of four people. Testing a hypothesis on one observation and a few interviewees will not prove or disprove my hypothesis. Moreover, the definition of religion or religious identification is fluid and open to academic debate. In my observation, I have been able to see how people do play the game. My observation shows that the people playing World of Warcraft were part of a community that was based on the guild. They were serious about playing, but were aware that their game was a fictional illusion, based on the parameters of the game. This provided a 'ludic' attitude for them. They were both serious and playful about what they were doing. They were not losing themselves in the game; the 'magic circle' between the game-world and their everyday life was fluid.

My interviewees were all non-religious, in the sense that they were not involved in an organized religion. They were relatively indifferent about traditional religion, but very enthusiastic about myths, fantasy-books, and the community of World of Warcraft. As academics, they were very able to reflect on their World of Warcraft life. They all stated that they had a life besides World of Warcraft, but at the same time, their social life was interconnected with World of Warcraft. They all liked the myth and the stories, but stated that this was not necessary to enjoy the game. Their love of fantasy stories, in reading and writing, suggests that myth has an important place. The myth is fictional, and part of the structure of the game. It doesn't have a sacred status, it is very playful, but adds to the pervasiveness and coherent world of the game.

The boundary between work and play is, in-game, as flimsy as the boundary between online and offline. Play becomes work when it brings obligations, schedules, task management and time management. World of Warcraft is a serious virtual world where the community brings pressure, personal drama, and group dynamics. In this sense, it is similar to a job, but also similar to religious life. Organized religion has the same group dynamics. I agree with Durkheim that religion is extremely important in sustaining the community. The structure of World of Warcraft brings the same structure. When Mary, Patrick, Dave and Ian reflected on the question if World of Warcraft could be a replacement for religion, they mostly mentioned the community dimension. They agreed that the myths made the world more interesting, and I believe that the myth adds legitimation to the community. The fantasy genre provides an other-worldly experience that enriches daily life. Even though it is based on a fictional reality, it is satisfying. Ian formulated it well when he said:

“But when you look at religion as far as a replacement, most religions are organized religions, and so you go because it is part of a community (...) So World of Warcraft really can be a replacement, because it establishes a community where people are connected by the same aspect. The people might enjoy a particular aspect of it, but it is just like people that go to church but don't, you know, believe anymore in the religious aspect. It's still, it is the community that brings them to that relationship. I think you could call it definitely a replacement for church, in the sense that it forms a community that people can interact in.”

Though more research and reflection is needed, I conclude that, at least for Mary, Patrick, Dave and Ian, World of Warcraft offers stories, identification and community in the same way religious communities function. A computer game as a new, ludic, and fluid religion, why not?

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N.B. Parts of this essay contain paragraphs of my Master Thesis *Cyberpilgrims* that I sometimes slightly changed or rephrased.

The Observation and the Interviews

The observation of the raid was conducted in november 2008. During the raid, I made notes and recorded some of the conversations. The first interview took place in the beginning of december, in the house of Mary and Patrick. Dave joined the conversation later on. The interview was being recorded, though the last minutes are missing because the battery died. I conducted the interview with Ian, a friend of Mary, Patrick and Dave, two weeks later in a university building. I also recorded this interview. The names of the interviewees are changed, and they all accepted that I would quote them in my paper. I am very grateful for their openness, insights and the hospitality.