IMMERSIVE, INTERACTIVE VIRTUAL WORLDS:
AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DESIGN AND
PLAYER EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

Immersion and interactivity have long been heralded as the products of good video game design. The immersive, interactive experience has been regarded as the ideal experience for the video game player. However, the spread of an online gaming culture through massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) has shifted the role of video games in everyday life. The immersive, interactive ideal is no longer so simple. Immersion in practice is a more complicated phenomenon than previously thought. The role of interactivity in shaping player experience has been also grossly underestimated.

While MMORPGs possess many of the qualities associated with the traditional conception of immersive design, the player often interacts with the virtual world in a way that is necessarily against immersion. The player interaction with the MMORPG often extends beyond the in-world experience into other media and social outlets, pulling the player out of the immersive environment of the MMORPG world.

This project investigates how the concepts of immersion and interactivity as we know them are not adequate to discuss to player experience in today’s massively
multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs). Using the narrative system of World of Warcraft as my example, I will illustrate why traditional conceptions of immersion and interactivity are inadequate to address the affective experience of today’s MMORPG player and define new ways of looking at the total, aggregate experience of the MMORPG player.
Thanks to all those who helped me through this process.

Special thanks to Chris for the hours spent walking with me through the Barrens.
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INTRODUCTION

The birth of the game studies field was marked by a debate over the central features of games and how games should be studied. This debate, coined the "ludology versus narratology" debate by those within the field, centered on the question of what a game is and whether a game should be studied academically. Theorists questioned how game studies might be categorized in the academic world. Ludologists argued that the game should be studied only as a unique media type, explored for its distinctive features, such as its design and its rule-based nature. Narratologists argued that the game could also be studied as a narrative or story by employing some of the already existing approaches of literary theory. Some scholars have argued that there were academic motivations behind the separation between narratology and ludology, namely the desire to establish game studies as a discipline separate and apart from existing disciplines, such as literary theory (Bogost 67). A primary goal of the ludologists was to separate game studies from its potential academic counterparts. Ludologists sought to gain recognition for game studies as a field born out of the work of the sociologists who studied games, such as Johan Huizinga and Roger Caillois. Using the work of these sociologists as the foundation for the field, ludologists in the game studies tradition have argued for a strict definition of games as, above all else, rule-based worlds. By emphasizing the unique rule-based nature of games, ludologists sought to define games as media structured by rules around goals and player activity (Bogost 67). Many narratologists have argued for a widening of this definition to allow for theme-based analyses to come into play. By emphasizing the theme-based nature of games, narratologists sought to define games as
media structured by plot, storytelling, and fictional settings. The debate between these two schools framed much of the early work done in the field.

In recent years, theorists on both sides have taken a more tempered approach, recognizing the validity of some of the arguments of both of the foregoing schools. This development has led to interesting research on narrative structures, their relationship to game design, and, in turn, the impact of both narrative and design on player experience. In particular, the concept of narrative has been heavily studied, as scholars worked to determine if games were stories. Much of the scholarly work done by theorists of video games in this area of study has focused on three concepts - narrative, immersion, and interactivity. Some critics have argued for a differentiation between immersion and its less intense form, engagement (Douglas and Hargadon 196). Other critics have defined varying modes of interactivity (Zimmerman 158). But, while much work has been done to define these terms, less has been done to examine how these three concepts relate to one another.

In this paper, I analyze the relationship between these concepts as I examine the particular cognitive processes associated with immersion and interactivity. I will argue that the design of the game creates the opportunity for immersive, interactive experiences on the part of the player. In particular, I will argue that the design of the narrative structure shapes the type of immersion and interactivity that the player can experience, as it sets the game’s capacity for immersion and interactivity. For instance, I will examine what narrative forms produce immersion and at what level. More specifically, I will ask whether one narrative form allows the player to be more deeply immersed than another
narrative form. Similarly, I will examine which narrative forms can enable which types of interactivity. I will then ask which types of interactivity correspond with which levels of immersion, in order to better understand the relationship between these concepts.

For the purposes of this paper, I will rely on the multi-leveled concept of narrative set forth by Eric Zimmerman and examine narrative as event, representation, and patterning. The open nature of this definition will allow for more applications of narrative to my analysis of the other two concepts critics have focused upon - immersion and interactivity. The key question will be how immersive and interactive is a given narrative structure? Immersion, generally defined as identification with character and narrative, will be examined as a multi-dimensioned concept. I will expand on Douglas and Hargadon's argument to identify the difference between immersion and engagement and the effect of this difference on the cognitive processes of immersion. These levels of immersion also correspond with stages of interactivity. Interactivity, generally defined as the reciprocal action between reader and text, will be examined as a concept that can appear in at least four stages. I will examine the types of interactivity that are possible in game environments, borrowing Zimmerman's classification system. Using these definitions, I will complete an analysis of the influence of the narrative type, level of immersion, and level of interactivity in gaming environments on the player. In this paper, the focus of the analysis will be the centered on specific processes of cognition. I will look at the specific types of cognitive processes at work in gaming environments. In understanding how these three concepts (narrative, immersion, and interactivity) relate, I will gain a sense of the cognitive processes at work in the mind of a player.
Most of the work that has been done on this topic (and in the field in general) has centered on the study of console games. Little scholarly work, however, has been published on the more recent phenomenon of online virtual worlds. I will undertake a comprehensive review of the literature that has been written to date. This critical review will provide the groundwork for an examination of these concepts and their relationship to online virtual worlds. The complex, massively multiplayer characteristic of these interactive spaces will provide a unique environment for study, as players interact with the game space and one another in an evolving fictional environment that often extends beyond the game world itself.
A. Narrative in Games

In order to discuss narrative in virtual worlds, I must first define what I mean by narrative. The use of this term has been a point of contention in game studies to date, as theorists have disagreed over the fundamental meaning of narrative. In working to define this term, it will be necessary to review the various definitions of narrative that have been applied to the game. In particular, the discussions of narrative and games offered by Jesper Juul, Eric Zimmerman, Henry Jenkins, and Marie-Laure Ryan will be useful. In completing this review, I will arrive at a definition of narrative that is most appropriate for the purposes of this paper.

Jesper Juul, a prominent game studies theorist, has argued for the strict separation of game from story in much of his work. As a key theorist in the “ludology” school, Juul argued in his early works that narrative and game are completely unrelated. In recent years, however, Juul has modified his own previous arguments, stating that “the strong position of claiming games and narratives to be completely unrelated is untenable” (221). Juul offers an examination of narrative in his book, Half Real: Video Games Between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds. Juul identifies six meanings of narrative that are commonly used in academic works. These meanings are as follows.

1. “Narrative as the presentation of a number of events.” (156)
2. “Narrative as a fixed and pre-determined sequence of events.” (156)
3. “Narrative as a specific type of sequence of events.” (156)
4. “Narrative as a specific type of theme.” (156)
5. “Narrative as any kind of setting or fictional world.” (156)
6. “Narrative as the way we make sense of the world.” (157)

The identification of these six meanings is important, as the varying usage of the concept has shaped game studies thus far. In his work, Juul identifies which meanings he believes apply to games. I will apply the term “narrative” in the all of these meanings, relying mostly on the fourth, fifth, and sixth senses identified by Juul for the discussion of virtual worlds. While Juul believes that these latter meanings are too general, I believe that they are useful for the study of narrative as it relates to the player. I will argue that it is necessary to understand “narrative” as a concept with many meanings. The definition of narrative that will follow will be open enough to allow for the interpretation of narrative in all of these senses.

While these meanings illustrate how complex a concept narrative is, they do not offer much in the way of a definition. Eric Zimmerman offers what is perhaps the most simplistic definition of narrative found in game studies. Zimmerman draws his narrative definition from the J. Hillis Miller essay titled “Narrative.” In defining narrative, Miller identifies the three basic parts of narrative as events, representation, and patterning. According to this definition, all narratives have some sort of change in event, represented through a medium, and presented in an order. This basic definition allows for the
interpretation of a variety of events as narrative, regardless of whether these events have typically been considered narrative. Using this definition these events can range from the traditional fiction, to a child’s game, to a dramatic production, to a funeral ceremony. Zimmerman wants others in the field to use this open definition of narrative, as he hopes it will encourage the invention of new narrative forms. The question Zimmerman wants games studies scholars to ask is not “Is this thing [such as a game] a ‘narrative thing’ or not?” (157). Rather, he wants to scholars to ask, “In what ways might we consider this thing [such as a game] a ‘narrative thing’?” (157). The framing of the question in this manner opens the door for the examination of narrative elements in a game.

The definition of narrative as events, representation, and patterning established above provides for a basic understanding of the concept. How then does narrative relate to games? It is here that the work of Henry Jenkins comes into play. Like Zimmerman, Henry Jenkins has offered a definition of narrative that he hopes both ludologists and narratologists can embrace. Jenkins identifies five main characteristics of narrative in games, which can be simplified as follows.

1. “Not all games tell stories.” (119)
2. “Many games do have narrative aspirations.” (119)
3. “Narrative analysis need not be prescriptive, even if some narratologists do seem to be advocating for games to pursue particular narrative forms.” (119)
4. “The experience of playing games can never be simply reduced to the experience of a story.” (120)

5. “If some games tell stories, they are unlikely to tell them in the same ways that other media tell stories.” (120)

Jenkins criticizes ludology for having too narrow a narrative model, too limited an understanding of narrative, and too limited a research question. In Jenkins’ model, scholars should be concerned with whether there are narrative elements present in a game, not whether games tell stories. As Jenkins states, “The discussion deals only with the question of whether whole games tell stories and not whether narrative elements might enter games at a more localized level” (121). This point, also stressed by Zimmerman, will be critical to the analysis of the relationship between narrative and game that will be done in this paper. In this view, a game need not be a *story* to be *narrative*.

What elements of a game can be narrative without telling a story? Jenkins introduces spatiality as a key concept that defines his vision of narrative elements in the game world. By spatiality, Jenkins means the environment and map of the virtual space. When players recount their experiences, they are likely to devote their attention to a description of the environment of the virtual space and the experience of navigating the map of the environment (122). Jenkins argues that spatiality should be included in the game/story debate as a crucial third concept. Addressing this concept is critical to the examination of virtual worlds. Jenkins uses spatiality to argue for “an understanding of game designers less as storytellers and more as narrative architects” (121). As Jenkins
states, “Game designers don’t simply tell stories; they design worlds and sculpt spaces” (121). In Jenkins’s view, the game space (the environment) is necessarily connected to the narrative model, as stories unfold through spaces. The way a space is designed shapes and molds the player’s experience of it. Jenkins argues, “game consoles should be regarded as machines for generating compelling spaces … and that the core narratives behind many games center around the struggle to explore, map, and master contested spaces” (122). Applying this concept to Zimmerman’s definition of narrative, we are left with an idea of narrative as events, representation, and patterning within a given environment. The author (designer) creates the space and the player interprets the space.

In what other ways might a game possess narrative? Marie-Laure Ryan offers an analysis of the work done on this topic to date. Like Zimmerman and Jenkins, Ryan begins her discussion of narrative and game by introducing the question “Is the concept of narrative applicable to computer games, or does the status of an artifact as game preclude its status as narrative?” (181). Ryan believes that narrative is applicable to games and goes on to examine how the concept could be applied to theoretical game studies. She identifies the key participants in the ludology and narratology (also referred to as narrativism) camps and uses their debates to discuss three keys issues. The issues she presents are the following –

1. “Can games be narrative or possess narrativity?” (181)

2. “What is the role of narrative within the game system?” (181)
3. “How can the concept of narrativity be invoked fruitfully in games studies?” (181)

In Ryan’s view, games and narrative are connected. As she states, “The unique achievement of computer games, compared to standard board games and sports, is to have integrated play within a narrative and fictional framework” (182). It is only when using a narrow definition of narrative that games are excluded. By widening the traditional definition of narrative, Ryan argues, games can be seen as narratives.

Ryan works through the theoretical arguments of the ludologist camp and challenges their assumptions and assertions. The first argument that Ryan challenges is the “Games and Narratives Are Different Things Because They Have Different Features” argument. Ryan works through this argument point by point to argue in the end that games are simply a variation of traditional narrative form. Ryan defines the traditional narrative form using a definition proposed by Gerald Prince, the general features of which are “one or more fictitious events communicated by one, two or several (more or less overt) narrators to one, two or several (more or less overt) narratees. A dramatic performance representing many fascinating events does not constitute a narrative, since these events, rather than being recounted, occur directly on stage” (Prince qtd. in Ryan 184). As this definition, which pointedly denies drama narrative status, necessarily denies games narrative status, Ryan argues for a widening of this definition. While game narrative differs from traditional narrative in many ways, this difference does not prevent a game from being considered narrative. Above all, Ryan argues that games can suggest stories, even if they do so in a mode that differs from drama, novels, and movies (187).
The second argument that Ryan challenges is the “Games are Simulations, Narratives are Representations” argument. Invoking this argument, Ryan states that games, unlike novels and movies, are different each time they are played. In the terms of ludologist theorist Gonzalo Frasca, this variability in experience is what defines games as simulations, which differ, in his argument, from the unchanging narrative representations (Ryan 188). Yet, as Ryan argues, hypertexts and oral storytelling also possess the capability for variability in experience. In these forms of narrative, as in games, there are variable outputs. In this way, these new textual mediums are more like simulations. This makes it impossible to argue that the representation/simulation distinction is defining narrative. Narrative can be both simulation and representation. The third, and final, argument that Ryan challenges is the “Games are Like Life and Life is Not a Narrative” argument. While it has been argued that the personal involvement of the player in the game precludes the game from narrative (see Aarseth 2004), Ryan argues that the player is both the agent and the spectator. She argues that playing a game is halfway between living life and receiving a narrative. As Ryan states, “There is life on one side, and its various modes of imitation on the other, including the diegetic narration of novels, the mimetic enactment of drama, and the interactive simulation in games” (191). In games, the player is both receiving and shaping the text in an interactive, simulated environment. Applying these concepts to the definition of narrative drawn from Zimmerman and Jenkins, we are left with an idea of narrative as events, representation/simulation, and patterning within a given environment. In games, both the designer who creates the game and the player who interacts with the game can shape the narrative.
In addition to the general definition of narrative provided above, there are several specific types of narrative that will be useful to the analysis of narrative within the gaming world. These types, drawn from Henry Jenkins with slight modifications, are evocative narratives, enacted narratives, embedded narratives, emergent narratives, and spatial narratives. While I have briefly mentioned some of these concepts above, it is important to take the time to now establish a functional, working definition for each of these terms.

Henry Jenkins introduces the concept of evocative spaces and transmedia storytelling in his article “Game Design as Narrative Architecture”. Jenkins argues that in today’s media environment, players consume media with a certain amount of pre-existing knowledge in the form of a narrative competency. Jenkins argues that games can invoke other media forms in telling a story. He uses the examples of American McGee’s Alice as a videogame that creates an “evocative space,” which invokes the narrative competency of the players, asking them to recall previous versions of the Alice in Wonderland story that they have encountered. Jenkins argues that games should be “taking their place within a larger narrative system with story information communicated through books, film, television, comics, and other media, each doing what it does best, each a relatively autonomous experience, but the richest understanding of the story world coming to those who follow the narrative across the various channels” (126).
In this same article, Jenkins introduces four other types of narrative that he believes are commonly found in videogames. While Jenkins broadly introduces these concepts, offering examples from various media, he fails to provide an exact definition for these concepts. In the section that follows, I will create a working definition for each concept, using the thoughts and examples offered by Jenkins to support the definitions that emerge.

Henry Jenkins identifies “enacting stories” as a type of narrative that is present in games that allow players to “perform or witness narrative events.” These types of narrative unfold through the character’s progression towards a certain goal. As Jenkins states, “the story itself may be structured around the character’s movement through the space and the features of the environment may retard or accelerate that plot trajectory” (129). He identifies two levels at which such types of narrative can occur – on the level of broadly defined goals/concepts or on the level of localized incidents (124). Jenkins refers to narrative storyline of the localized incidents as “micronarratives.”

In Henry Jenkins’ discussion of “embedded narrative,” he introduces the idea that a story is “less a temporal structure than a body of information” (126). Embedded narratives, in this sense, are pieces of information that the designer of the narrative has embedded throughout the story. As Jenkins states, “the author of a film or a book has a high degree of control over when and if we receive specific bits of information, but a game designer can somewhat control the narrational process by distributing the
information across the game space” (126). This type of embedded narrative is particularly prevalent in the sprawling environment of today’s massively multi-player online role-playing games (MMORPGs). The game designers can create storylines that will only be accessible in certain portions of the game world, which the designer knows are only accessible to players of a certain level, or race, or class. In World of Warcraft, as we will discuss later, there are separate storylines that are embedded within the game design, depending upon the race that the player designs his avatar to be.

Henry Jenkins identifies “emergent narratives” as those narratives that are “not prestructured or preprogrammed, taking shape through the game play” (128). In the worlds of MMORPGS, emergent narratives are a common phenomenon. These narratives emerge through individual players within the game, through groups of players, through player forums, and through gaming guides.

Henry Jenkins identifies “spatial stories” as a type of narrative that privileges spatial exploration over plot development (124). In games, this type of narrative is often associated with the adventure game, where the character moves across the game environment, pursuing broadly defined goals in an order of his or her choosing. As Jenkins states, “The organization of the plot becomes a matter of designing the geography of imaginary worlds, so that obstacles thwart and affordances facilitate the protagonist’s forward movement towards resolution” (124-25).

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B. Immersion in Games

Like narrative, immersion is a concept that has been difficult to define in relation to video games. There are many definitions of immersion that are commonly used. Put simply, immersion is identification with character and narrative. There are, however, various levels of immersion and it is from this point that analysis can begin. In Hamlet on the Holodeck, Janet Murray defines immersion as the “experience of being transported to an elaborately simulated place” (98). For Murray, this feeling is comparable to the feeling of being submerged in water. One has the sensation of “being surrounded by a completely other reality, as different as water is from air, that takes over all of our attention, our whole perceptual apparatus” (98). Many theorists have found the computer terminal to be a place where immersion is possible. As Murray states, “The enchantment of the computer creates for us a public space that also feels very private and intimate. In psychological terms, computers are liminal objects, located on the threshold between external reality and our own minds” (99). It is this liminality that opens the door for so many possible experiences. Murray identifies narrative as a similar threshold experience. Narrative can be a powerfully immersive experience, in Murray’s terms, as it is balanced on the threshold between the real and imaginary.

How then does one become immersed in a world or a narrative? Murray identifies the active creation of belief in the world as one of the elements leading to immersion. This point is an important concept to consider as it relates to the cognitive processes at work in the mind of the player. Murray argues, “Because of our desire to experience immersion, we focus our attention on the enveloping world and we use our
intelligence to reinforce rather than to question the reality of the experience” (110). Rather than simply suspending our disbelief, we actively create a belief in the virtual world. We embrace the alternative reality that the virtual environment offers us to the extent that we become fully immersed in the virtual world (to the exclusion of other worlds). Yet there is more at work in the process of immersion.

In *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, Marie-Laure Ryan analyzes the immersive experience of narrative using a metaphor of transportation and of being “lost” in a narrative (93). She expands on the work done by psychologists Richard Gerrig and Victor Nell to analyze the cognitive processes at work in the mind of an immersed reader. She summarizes their argument in six points, stating that, “some [‘the traveler’] is transported… by some means of transportation… as a result of performing certain actions… The traveler goes some distance from his or her world of origin, … which makes some aspects of the world of origin inaccessible… The traveler returns to the world of origin, somewhat changed by the journey” (94). Ryan quotes these points to demonstrate Gerrig’s argument that pleasure in reading is tied to performance. This is an important point to consider when analyzing how a player becomes immersed in a virtual world and why the virtual world experience is pleasurable. The player performs actions in the virtual world following the directions present in the text and the laws of the virtual world. In other words, through his performance, the player becomes fully immersed in the narrative world of the virtual environment. As Ryan states, “The metaphor of transportation captures how the textual world becomes present to the mind” (94). The
player must go to, and act in, the virtual world in order to become immersed within the text that it offers.

Richard Bartle, in his text *Designing Virtual Worlds*, identifies four ways in which game designers can create worlds that promote immersion. By using smart design, games can become more immersive for the player. In particular, the level of control, detail, freedom of choice, and self-expression in the virtual world affect the extent to which immersion possible. As Bartle states, “The more immersed a player is, the less the virtual world can dictate to them” (241). Players must have a sense of control in order to feel immersed. In addition, Bartle argues, “More detail makes for more persuasiveness” (242). If the world is detailed, consistent, and non-contradictory, players are more likely to become immersed in the world.¹ Yet, as Bartle goes on to point out, “Virtual worlds should be as open-ended as possible… Choice promotes immersion” (243-244). Players must feel as though they have a freedom of choice if they are to become immersed.

Finally, players must have the ability for self-expression. Bartle claims that, “By giving players freeform ways to communicate themselves, designers can draw them more deeply into the world – they feel more a part of it” (244). Thus, self-expression and individuality can draw the player more deeply into the world. Each of these elements – the level of control, detail, freedom of choice, and self-expression – will be discussed in further detail

¹ Jesper Juul also stresses the importance of coherent worlds in *Half-Real*. Coherent worlds allow for immersion. Incoherent and incomplete worlds necessarily force the player to engage in extratextual interpretation in order to make sense of the world. This will be discussed in further detail in the section on engagement.
later in the paper, as I examine their presence within a virtual world.

What then detracts from immersion? Unfortunately, the self-expression that helps the individual become immersed can, at times, reduce immersion for other players. Individuals can choose to act in a manner that detracts from the realism of the game experience for other players. This is particularly applicable to the world of online gaming, where there are expanded opportunities for the both customization of the avatar and for interaction with many other players. Bartle identifies this as a negative outcome of a design that promotes self-expression. Bartle also identifies reality and sterility as the “twin enemies of immersion” (244). He argues that overly realistic worlds or overly sterile worlds can make players less engaged, as they do not want to become too involved in their interaction with the environment. If the virtual world is not appealing, the player is less likely to become immersed in the experience.

There are still some many unanswered questions regarding how a player becomes immersed in a virtual environment. Does every player experience immersion in the same way? Do different games produce different levels of immersion? In “The Pleasures of Immersion and Interaction: Schemas, Scripts, and the Fifth Business”, J. Yellowlees Douglas and Andrew Hargadon set up the difference between immersion and engagement. Immersion, according to their definitions, is the identification with the character and the narrative. Engagement, on the other hand, is the connection with an extratextual perspective. Rather than being immersed in the narrative the player is aware of the narrative as a textual device because of some point of rupture within the narrative
structure. In the examination of a virtual world environment that will follow, it will be important to look for possible moments of rupture that draw the player out of the immersive, in-world experience and force the player to look at the experience from a “real world” perspective. In order to facilitate this type of analysis, however, it is important to further define the concepts of immersion and engagement.

The definition of these concepts that Douglas and Hargadon provide help to situate immersion and engagement in relation to the type of experiences that they provide. Douglas & Hargadon identify two types of affective experiences – immersive experiences and engaged experiences. For Douglas and Hargadon, the key to the level of the affective experiences is the schema. The schema, in their definition, is the cognitive framework of an experience. Using their broad terms, the schema is similar to the narrative framework described in the previous section. If a player is presented with a highly normative schema, according to Douglas and Hargadon, the player will be more likely to have an immersive experience. As the player will be easily able to discern the schema, he or she will become free to observe the small details and experience the identification with the character that characterizes immersion. Yet, if the player is presented with a set of contradictory schemas, according to Douglas and Hargadon, the player will be more likely to have an engaged experience. As the player will be unable to easily discern the schema, he or she must assume an extratextual perspective, as described above. The player will have to connect with the material text in order to process the information being presented. It is important to note here that it is also possible for a player to have instances of both immersion and engagement within a single
text. As they state in describing these types of experience,

Highly normative schemas enable readers to “lose” themselves in the text in what we might call an “immersive” affective experience. When immersed in a text, readers’ perceptions, reactions, and interactions all take place within the text’s frame, which itself usually suggests a single schema and a few definite scripts for highly directed interaction. Conversely, in what we might term “engaged” affective experience, contradictory schemas or elements that defy conventional schemas tend to disrupt the readers’ immersion in the text, obliging them to assume an extratextual perspective on the text itself, as well as on the schemas that have shaped it and the scripts operating within it (196).

The notion of engagement introduced in this passage is similar to the concept that Jesper Juul discusses in relation to incoherent and incomplete fictional worlds. In *Half-Real*, Juul states that in order to make sense of an incomplete world, the player must fill in any gaps in the world with outside knowledge (122). In an incoherent world, the player must rely on the rules to make sense of the game world (130). Both incomplete and incoherent worlds force the player to draw on elements that are outside of the fiction of the world in order to make sense of it. This is similar to the extratextual perspective that Douglas and Hargadon identify with the engaged (but not immersed) experience. In examining virtual worlds, it is then important to consider whether it is possible for a player to achieve a simultaneously immersive and engaging experience. It will be necessary to identify whether a player can maintain an extratextual awareness of the game’s narrative design and rule structure while also experiencing an active immersion in the environment.
In *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, Marie-Laure Ryan offers a classification system of different forms of immersive experiences that will be useful to our discussion. Ryan identifies what she calls “four degrees of absorption in the act of reading” (98). In our terms, this is similar to the level of engagement in the act of playing. Ryan defines these four degrees as follows.

1. “Concentration. The type of attention devoted to difficult, nonimmersive works” (98).

2. “Imaginative Involvement. The ‘split subject’ attitude of the reader who transports herself into the textual world but remains able to contemplate it with aesthetic or epistemological detachment” (98).

3. “Entrancement. The nonreflexive reading pleasure of the reader so completely caught up in the textual world that she loses sight of anything external to it, including the aesthetic quality of the author’s performance of the truth value of the textual statements” (98).

4. “Addiction. This category covers two cases: (a) The attitude of the reader who seeks escape from reality but cannot find a home in the textual world because she traverses it too fast and too compulsively to enjoy the landscape. (b) The loss of the capacity to distinguish textual worlds, especially those of fiction from the actual world” (98).

These terms help to elucidate the distinction between immersion and engagement that we discussed in the previous paragraph. Ryan is correct to point to the “split-personality” of
the player who is engaged, or as she refers to it “imaginatively involved.” Yet, Ryan’s terms are tailored to the literary experience of reading rather than the gaming experience. As such, these terms do not fully articulate the experience of the virtual worlds player.

What then is the relationship between these different forms of immersive experience and the experience of the virtual worlds player? How can the player experience the most heightened affective response? While there are few games that produce such a response, Douglas and Hargadon argue for the continued search for such enhanced experiences in games. This sort of “enhanced experience” is related to the concept of flow, borrowing Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s term. Douglas and Hargadon define flow as a “condition where self-consciousness disappears, perceptions of time become distorted, and concentration becomes so intense that the game or task at hand completely absorbs us” (204). Flow, in this sense, is similar to immersion and perhaps may best be described as a simultaneously immersive and engaging experience. In instances of flow, the player is actively immersed in the game world while still experiencing the game as a rule-based text. The player is actively immersed in the environment, while also being actively engaged with the game objectives and rule structure. Douglas and Hargadon open the door for the study of virtual worlds as experiences more inclined by design to provide the player with instances of enhanced experience. This will be an interesting area to expand upon as virtual world design steadily improves and, later in this paper, I will examine how virtual worlds are already providing their players with an enhanced, immersive experience.
C. Interactivity in Games

The final concept to discuss in relation to narrative, immersion, and games is interactivity. Like the previous concepts, interactivity is difficult to describe in one way. While it is possible define the term, it is also necessary to define the different levels of interactivity that are possible. Eric Zimmerman provides a readily adaptable definition of interactivity. He takes his initial definition of interactivity from the online dictionary <dictionary.com>. The online definition stresses reciprocal activity and a two-way flow of information in its definition. Zimmerman suggests that, while this definition may be adequate, it is too general for the purposes of games studies. All forms of narrative, using this definition, are interactive. Zimmerman suggests subdividing the concept into four categories. These categories are as follows.

1. “Cognitive Interactivity, Or Interpretive Participation with a Text” (158)
2. “Functional Interactivity, Or Utilitarian Participation with a Text” (158)
3. “Explicit Interactivity. Or Participation with Designed Choices and Procedures in a Text” (158)
4. “Meta Interactivity, Or Cultural Participation with a Text” (158)

It is this breakdown of interactivity into categories that will be most useful for this paper. By cognitive interactivity, Zimmerman means the “psychological, emotional, hermeneutic, semiotic, reader-response” (158). This type of interactivity would emerge when actively engaging with the text through the interpretive act, either for the first (or the second or third or fourth) time. Functional interactivity, by contrast, is defined as
“functional, structural interactions with the material textual apparatus” (158). This includes the examination of the physical object of the text. In the novel form, this could include the print choices, typography, and structure of the novel (table of contents, margins, etc). In games, this might include the console itself, the console controllers, the use of introductory and cut scenes, and the design of the in-game menus. The third type of interactivity Zimmerman identifies is explicit interactivity. By explicit interactivity, he means overt participation, “choices, random events, dynamic simulations, and other procedures programmed into the interactive experience” (158). In games, this includes the building and choice of an avatar, or the choice to follow a particular path in the game (and engage with the consequences of that choice). The final type of interactivity that Zimmerman identifies is meta-interactivity. Meta-interactivity is interaction “outside the experience of the text” (158). Zimmerman identifies fan culture as an interesting example of meta-interactivity. In game culture, this type of interactivity manifests itself in the creation of machinima (short films created through game play), as well as role-playing and cosplay (the act of dressing as a character from a fictional work) in the public arena of gaming conventions. As Zimmerman identifies, these modes of interactivity do not work in isolation. It is possible to have various instances of interactivity in one work. I will examine these concepts again, later in this paper, in order to demonstrate which types of interactivity are most prevalent in today’s online gaming worlds.

In “Paradigms of Interaction: Conceptions and Misconceptions of the Field Today,” Lisbeth Klastrup offers a definition of three types of interactive texts that will be
useful to our discussion. While we have defined types of interactivity, we have yet to look at what types of texts can create these experiences. The first type, the “static interactive” text, is characterized by surface or presentation level choices. Static interactive texts are fully programmed texts that contain manipulable sequences. The second type, the “pseudo-dynamic interactive” text, is again characterized by choices on the surface or presentation level. This type of text differs, however, from the static interactive text in that there are elements in the program that ask for individual information in order to personalize the experience and provide the illusion of interactivity. The third type, the “dynamic interactive” text, is characterized by story content or “fabric” choices. Dynamic interactive texts are programmed to adjust the content based on the choices or movements of the individual.

In dynamic interactive texts, there are two types of interactivity that Klastrup identifies. The first type, “surface interactivity,” consists of the movements the player makes through the game space. The second type, “fabric interactivity,” consists of the choices the player makes to structure the game space and content. In virtual worlds, this can include creating an avatar, building a house, selecting a trade, or making a family. Surface interaction is present when the user only has the ability to “manipulat[e] objects in the world and navigat[e] through the world by choosing direction and style of movement” (Klastrup 9). Fabric interaction is present when the user has the ability to “manipulate the world itself” (9).

By analyzing all of these elements in a text, Klastrup argues, we are able to determine the “architecture of interaction” of the text. Klastrup defines the architecture
of interaction as “what functions of interaction it offers and how it ‘programs’ its users to use these functions through interaction with the environment and perhaps also other users” (9). Klastrup asserts that we must differentiate between “actual” and “perceived” modes of interaction in a text. To do this, Klastrup states, we must examine the text on the level of code. In order to truly understand the architecture, Klastrup argues, we must first understand the code or building blocks of the text.

D. Synthesis - Narrative, Immersion, and Interactivity in Games

How then do narrative, immersion, and interactivity relate to one another? What is the effect of this relationship on the virtual worlds player? The majority of literature written on this subject suggests that there is an inherent conflict between immersion and interaction and that high levels of one of these experiences will not allow for high levels of the other. Douglas and Hargadon discuss the relationship between immersion and interactivity stating,

For our affective experience to remain immersive, both narrative and interface alike need to overtly guide or curtail our possibilities for action. Interactive games fulfill their promise as immersive when they offer us an obvious schema for narrative structure and interface, and when they offer us predictable, tightly scripted interactions enabling us to enjoy virtual experiences either unattractively risky or denied to us in everyday life (States 1993 qtd. in Douglas and Hargadon 199).

For Douglas and Hargadon, immersion and interactivity can only interrelate through
closely scripted design with limited interactions. Murray, likewise, believes that immersion and interactivity can interrelate, although she is cautious when it comes to combining narrative, interactivity, and immersion. Participatory narrative, according to Murray, is perhaps a little more problematic for the concept of immersion. Murray raises several important questions, such as “How can we enter the fictional world without disrupting it? How can we be sure that our imaginary actions will not have real results?” (103). For Murray, the answer lies in defining the boundaries between the representational world and the actual world, in order to allow for full immersion in the virtual realm. As she states, participation in the virtual realm has to be “carefully structured and constrained” (106). The range of allowable behaviors should be appropriate to the virtual environment. There should be a structuring of the virtual experience so that the player recognizes his or her time in a virtual world to be a visit to a place that is immersive while it lasts, but not meant to be interpreted as a permanent experience. Murray offers an analogy to an amusement park ride to illustrate this example. While you participate fully in the environment while on the ride, you recognize that the experience will end when the ride comes to a stop. Again, however, this combined experience must be tightly scripted in order to produce the desired effects.

Yet, as we will see in the coming chapters, virtual worlds offer an expanded opportunity for an entirely new class of interactions. How will this expanded interactivity correspond with the depths of immersion that an entire virtual world can offer? While the concepts of immersion and interactivity as traditionally conceived can
help to describe aspects of the virtual worlds player experience, I would argue that neither concept fully explains the experience of the virtual worlds player. There is a fundamental conflict between the ideals of immersive, interactive design and the actual ways in which players are utilizing these virtual worlds. In the next chapter, I will look at how one virtual world, World of Warcraft, is designed in order to understand the ways in which the environment is immersive and interactive in the traditional sense, as well as the ways in which the environment necessarily breaks this mold.
A. Introduction to Virtual Spaces

As the virtual experience increasingly becomes a part of daily life, it has become all the more important to understand and to analyze the virtual worlds we inhabit. With each passing year, the number of virtual environments available to players continues to rise. From the game-based worlds of massively multi-player online role-playing games (MMORPGs) to the career-based worlds of military training simulators, virtual environments are becoming increasingly varied. At the same time, they are becoming more commonplace and more pervasive. Virtual worlds are now present in nearly all realms of life. Yet, removed from both time and space, virtual environments exist as cultures of simulation.

What then is a virtual world? While a wealth of scholarly work has been devoted to the study of console games, less work has been done on the study of online virtual worlds. In Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet, Sherry Turkle completes one of the first studies of this nature, as she explores the world of interactions within these simulated cultures. Turkle completes a comprehensive case study of the virtual worlds of multi-player dungeons (MUDs). MUDs, popular at the time of Turkle’s writing, are primarily text-based game engines, designed and utilized for entertainment purposes. They allow players to connect, across time and space, to one server where they can interact in an environment of their own design. As Turkle identifies through
extensive player interviews and analysis, these virtual interactions are complex by nature. Removed from physical reality, players in the virtual world exist as disembodied bodies. They are not constrained by the limits of their real body or physical surroundings. As long as there are no constraints imposed by the virtual environment itself, players are free to design their virtual selves and virtual interactions in whatever manner they please. In the text-based worlds of Turkle’s MUDs, almost anything goes and freedom is a defining characteristic of the virtual realm.

Since the time of Turkle’s research, virtual environments have become increasingly complex. Virtual communities of all types have grown dramatically in both size and complexity. The simple text based world of the MUD has morphed into the massive, graphic-intensive world of the MMORPG. People from disparate backgrounds, in locations across the globe, have gained the ability to join together to form massive virtual communities. These communities typically form around common interests and shared hobbies. Oftentimes these communities have a strong formative influence on their players, shaping their interactions in the real and virtual realms. As such, it is becoming increasingly important to think about these notions in terms of the virtual environments present today.

So the question remains, how and why are players interacting in today’s virtual worlds? The theoretical work of Richard Bartle and Nick Yee will help to answer this question. Bartle discusses the motivations of players of virtual environments, dividing players into four categories: explorers, socializers, achievers, and controllers (qtd. in Castronova 72). This analysis, completed in 1979, proved useful for an early analysis of
players of virtual worlds. Nick Yee further extends this analysis to discuss the modern virtual world player and identifies five categories of motivation for players in MMORPGs: achievement, relationship, immersion, escapism, and manipulation (2). While some of these categories echo the player types introduced by Bartle, others add a new element to the conversation and provide for a more nuanced understanding of the motivations of MMORPG players. Let us briefly examine each of these classification systems here, as an understanding of these categories will help to enrich our analysis of the cognitive processes at work in the mind of the player.

I will begin this analysis by correlating the player types identified by Bartle with the player motivations identified by Yee. The explorer is a player who is primarily motivated by immersion in the virtual world environment. This type of player is more concerned with navigating the game space than he is with in-game goals. The achiever, on the other hand, is motivated by game progression and advancement through the game stages. Simply stated, the achiever is motivated by achievement. The socializer, on the other hand, is a player who is primarily motivated by the relationship building capabilities in the virtual world and the interactions that are possible through the world’s social channels. Finally, a controller, the last type of player, is concerned with manipulating the game world. Nick Yee argues, correctly, that the majority of MMORPG players have multiple motivations that drive their game play. All player types, for instance, may be motivated by escapism. Yet, none of Bartle’s player types address this motivation. For that reason, it is more useful to think of the MMORPG player as an individual player, whose game play is driven by multiple motivations, rather
than as a player type who game play is characterized by one primary concern. This idea of the individual MMORPG player will help to shape our analysis of the cognitive processes at work in the mind of the player as we examine narrative, immersion, and interactivity in virtual worlds.

How do virtual worlds relate to our definitions of narrative, immersion, and interactivity? Do the massively multi-player online environments of MMORPGs challenge the previous definitions of these terms, as stated in Chapter 1? Jesper Juul offers a concept that may help in this analysis. Juul argues for a differentiation of fiction from storytelling in his book *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*. As Juul states, “Fiction is commonly confused with storytelling. I am using fiction to mean any kind of imagined world, whereas, briefly stated, a story is a fixed sequence of events that is presented (enacted or narrated) to a player” (122). This distinction is important, as it represents the move of a prominent ludologist to a more centered approach towards games. The concept that Juul describes as fiction is similar to the open definition of narrative constructed in the previous section. Juul recognizes that games can create imagined worlds (fictions) that are separate from the story element. Perhaps a virtual world can best be described as a hybrid phenomenon, capable of creating both a fiction and a narrative story. This unique nature of virtual worlds is described in Edward Castronova’s text *Synthetic Worlds: The Business and Culture of Online Games*. Castronova opens Chapter 2 of this text, titled “The Player,” by stating his main argument, which can be summed up by the following statements. Virtual worlds
(which Castronova calls synthetic worlds) are much more immersive than previous, primarily text-based, virtual environments. This new level of immersion deepens social realism and, in turn, virtual worlds become much more like real life. It is at this point that the analysis of virtual environments begins to differ from the analysis of other gaming environments and it is from this point that my analysis will begin.

B. Gaming Environments - World of Warcraft

In this section, I will explore the world of the most popular MMORPG available on the market – World of Warcraft. I will analyze the design features of the environment, in order to better understand instances of narrative, immersion, and interactivity within the environment. In examining these instances, I will gain a sense of the cognitive processes at work in the mind of the player.

In November 2004, Blizzard Entertainment released what would become its best-selling, critically acclaimed MMORPG, World of Warcraft. World of Warcraft, currently available in four regions of the world and seven languages, is the most popular subscription based MMORPG in the world with more than 8.5 million subscribers worldwide (“Press Release”). The expansion pack for the game, World of Warcraft: Burning Crusade, sold 2.4 million copies within the first 24 hours of its January 2007 release, breaking one-day sales records (“Press Release”). World of Warcraft is an online role-playing experience that is set in the Warcraft universe. Through its online interface, thousands of players are able to interact with one another in its virtual world.
Ten playable races and nine playable classes inhabit the Warcraft world ("Introduction to World of Warcraft"). Each race/class has particular attributes assigned to it, which direct the game experience. Through their choice of race, players determine which “side” to play on (Alliance or Horde) and which racial traits their characters will possess. Through their choice of class, players determine what class options, such as spells and skills, will be available to their characters. Players choose between these races and classes to create an avatar and a storyline that appeals to them. Once they have created their avatars, players can fill their time in a variety of ways including skill advancement, exploring, chatting with other characters, and completing quests. Players can further customize their experiences with a choice between fifteen career professions and the availability of thousands of quests that can be completed in a variety of ways. A strictly linear narrative or a universally defined structure does not dictate the experience of the game. *World of Warcraft* players are largely able to construct their own unique experiences.

The depth of the customization of game play is most evident in the ability of players to choose their realms. Players can shape their entire *World of Warcraft* experience in this choice by deciding between four types of game play. Players begin this customization by determining which of the four available realms best meets their style of play. Players can choose to play in a “normal realm,” where the game play is centered on player vs. environment (PvE) objectives. Players in this type of realm can choose when to battle other players and are only available for this type of interaction when they have marked themselves as open for player vs. player action. Players must
make the active choice to flag themselves for this type of play. Alternatively, players can choose to inhabit a player vs. player (PvP) realm or “war realm,” where one faction is constantly in battle against another. In this type of realm, a player can choose to be open for player vs. player action at all times. All players on a PvP realm are automatically available for player vs. player combat anytime they enter a “contested zone” (“Introduction - Realm Types”).

In the two remaining types of realms, players can choose to structure their experience with an emphasis on role-playing. Role-playing, briefly defined, is the act of the player performing the role of the character in the game. Players can choose to participate in a normal role-playing realm (RP) or a role-playing player vs. player realm (RP-PvP). In the role-playing realms, according to Blizzard, players are given the chance to imagine that they are “inhabitants of a fantasy-based world” and to “develop characters with a back story who do not simply progress from quest to quest, but instead assist or hamper the efforts of others for reasons of their own” (“Introduction - Realm Types”). In a role-playing realm, it is against the code of RP players to speak outside of character or to act in a manner that is inconsistent with the World of Warcraft universe. The designers of the game encourage players to interact with one another as if they truly exist in the virtual realm. There is more freedom to create a unique storyline in these realms through inter-player chat. As the topics in the general chat channel in an RP realm must be related to the game narrative, it is more likely that the player will feel a connection with the textual, chat-based element of the game. This element helps the RP realms emphasize full immersion in the virtual environment. This contrasts with non-RP realms
that may tend to allow for engagement with the virtual environment more easily than they allow for deep levels of identification with the character. In our analysis of the *World of Warcraft*, we will determine why these specific game design features are such a critical influence on the player’s experience of the world.

**C. Gaming Example - *World of Warcraft***

In the *World of Warcraft*, there are various types of storylines that emerge through game play. Before discussing these various types, it is important that we gain a basic understanding of how narrative is incorporated into the game design. In order to gain this understanding, this section will include a close, detailed analysis of one instance of narrative in the game. In this example, I will examine the Scarlet Crusade storyline, which first emerges in the low level quests of Tirisfal Glades and continues to appear in this region as the game progresses. The Scarlet Crusade is only one of thousands of quest storylines within the game, but an understanding of this type of basic quest is necessary to understanding how narrative, immersion, and interactivity function within the *Warcraft* world.

The Scarlet Crusade is a storyline that begins in the *World of Warcraft* MMORPG and extends into the world of the pen-and-paper role-playing game (RPG), *Warcraft*. In the *Warcraft* RPG, the Scarlet Crusade is introduced as a religious organization that is dedicated to the eradication of the undead. The lore of the Scarlet Crusade, which comes from various RPG source guides, is that the group became so dedicated to their mission
that they went mad and began killing innocents as well as the undead they sought. The crusaders live by the policy “when in doubt, kill” which has led to the creation of an environment of fear in the areas they inhabit (“Scarlet Crusade”). The crusaders are feared both by those that are against their mission (who they will certainly kill), those that once supported their mission (who they may kill), and even those within the ranks of the Scarlet Crusade (who they also may kill, if the other crusaders deem it necessary). In the scene analysis that follows, I will look at an introductory Scarlet Crusade quest that an undead member character is working to complete. This playable character is a member of the Horde faction and as such is a sworn enemy of the Scarlet Crusade.

This Scarlet Crusade storyline is the “Scarlet Crusade” quest that Executor Arren, a non-player character (NPC) in Tirisfal Glades, gives to the player. Executor Arren introduces the Scarlet Crusade storyline to the player when the latter initiates the conversation by clicking on Arren. The player knows to speak with Arren because he is flagged with a yellow exclamation point, a symbol within the game that signals to the player that an NPC has a quest available. Once the player clicks on Arren, a dialogue box appears on the screen and Arren offers a succinct summary of the history of the Scarlet Crusade and why they must be stopped. This dialogue box offers the player the textual narrative of the quest, and the player can always refer back to this text, as it is stored in the player’s quest log until the player has completed it (see Appendix A, Figure 1). According to Arren, the Scarlet Crusade is a “despicable organization that hunts us [the undead] and they will not stop until every undead is destroyed.” Arren asks the player to go on a quest to destroy the crusaders in a camp outside of town. This latest
Scarlet Crusade camp that is forming just outside of the town understandably concerns Arren, an undead himself, who fears for what might come if the Scarlet Crusade makes it into his town for they will most certainly kill him and his compatriots. The mission of the quest is to destroy the Scarlet Crusade camp and help to prevent them from overtaking Arren’s town.

In order to eliminate the camp and the Scarlet Crusade, Arren provides the player with the necessary information to direct the game play, including information about the quest objectives, hints on how to complete the quest, and a preview of the rewards that the player will receive for a successful completion. The player now knows that he must get twelve Scarlet Armbands in order to complete the quest, which means that he will have to kill all of the individuals whom he thinks might be wearing them until he receives the required number.

In the video clip (see Appendix B, Figure 1), the player (an undead mage) has infiltrated the Scarlet Crusade encampment that Executor Arren identified in the quest objectives. The area, which is completely full of Scarlet Converts and Scarlet Initiates, is a popular zone for battles between Horde players and the Crusade. The player immediately begins to attack the first Crusaders that he sees, using the combat skills he has learned as a mage to throw spells such as “Fire Ball” and “Frost Bolt” to defeat his enemies. The player has to target the individual that he wishes to fight and use a keyboard attack command in order to enter combat. The targeted individual will then begin to fight back immediately, using his or her own weapons and skills to try to defeat the player before his or her own health is exhausted. In this scene, the Scarlet Converts
typically fight with swords and daggers, while the player relies on spells to defeat the enemy. The fire and snow that can be seen surrounding the Converts are effects of the spells that the player has cast. The Scarlet Initiates can also cast these spells (see Appendix B, Figure 2), which creates a different battle, as the player and the enemy try to defeat one another using similar spells.

At the end of each fight, the corpse glistens, indicating to the player that there is something of value on the body that he can loot. It is only by looting the body that the player can obtain the items listed in the quest objectives (i.e. the Scarlet Armbands, in the case of this quest). The corpse may also drop other items. Commonly looted items include goods such as money, food, cloth, armor, and weapons. The player can choose whether to keep these goods and use them for his own purposes or to store them in his backpack to sell to a merchant or other players in the auction hall. Goods differ from quest items, which cannot be sold and are used to complete quests and gain experience points. The player must keep all quest items until the quest is completed, at which point the player will return these items to the individual designated in the quest objectives.

After the first fight, when the player in this video clip bends over to loot the body, he also proceeds to eat the flesh of the corpse. As a member of the undead race, the player is able to build his health by eating the flesh of the dead. By eating the corpse, the player will be stronger for the next fight, and he will not reflect the damage received in the last engagement.

Throughout the battles, the progress of the player is tracked on screen through a running tally. As the player collects additional armbands in this quest, the tally will
increase to reflect the number of armbands collected and the number remaining. Once the player has collected all twelve armbands, the quest log reflects that the “Scarlet Crusade” quest is complete and the player can return to Executor Arren to turn in the quest items and collect his rewards. Executor Arren will now be flagged with a yellow question mark, signaling to the player that there is a quest that can be turned in to him (see Appendix C, Figure 1). When the player clicks on Arren and initiates the conversation, Arren is pleased to see that the quest has been completed and members of the Scarlet Crusade have been defeated.

As Arren continues, however, it becomes apparent that this quest has not solved the problem of the Scarlet Crusade for the undead race. Executor Arren expresses a moment of regret at the current state of affairs between the undead and Crusaders only to laugh it off moments later with a dismissive “Light-blinded fools.” Through this dialogue the player learns that Arren does not think that the Crusaders will ever change their mission to accept the Forsaken undead and the quest is completed on an open note with no closure to the storyline. The player is left with the impression that the Scarlet Crusade will continue to target the undead race, even though this quest has finished. This signals to the player that this narrative is not complete at this stage. In fact, the Scarlet Crusaders storyline will continue to appear throughout the game, as the player progresses to higher levels. The player will continue to battle the Scarlet Crusade in many Tirispal Glades quest and, later, will see the Crusaders appear in the Plaguelands as well.
D. Gaming Analysis - *World of Warcraft*

There are a few key incidents to note in the scene described above. The first sequence of events to discuss is one that is critical to the narrative structure of the *World of Warcraft*. This sequence is the acceptance and completion of quests by the player. Through this type of exchange, the player experiences the game through written text rather than visual elements. The player and Executor Arren interact through a dialogue window. It is through this type of textual exchange that the player receives the majority of the *World of Warcraft* plot. This point will be important to remember in the analysis of narrative types throughout the *World of Warcraft*. The second sequence of events to discuss is one that is critical to the interactivity of the game. This sequence is the looting of the corpse by the player after the kill. The player can shape his game play through the accumulation of objects through the game. The importance of material objects and trade will need to be considered in the analysis of the interactive possibilities of the world, since the objects that the player possesses can significantly alter his in-world experience by providing him with certain advantages. Players who invest time in acquiring material goods can build avatars with more strength and skill than those players who do not focus on material goods in the game. The third and final sequence of events to discuss is one that is critical to the level of immersion possible in the game. This sequence is comprised of all race and class-specific actions that the player performs, from the casting of spells in battle to the eating of the corpse after the kill. These events help to shape the way the player experiences the world and will be important to consider when we analyze player identification with the characters in the world and the creation of an immersive
environment. I will begin by analyzing the narrative elements present and then move into a discussion of the interactive and immersive capabilities of the world and this scene in particular.

i. Narrative in World of Warcraft

In discussing the narrative dimension of this scene, we must first consider the narrative structure of the game as a whole. The World of Warcraft is a comprehensive gaming environment that relies heavily on the storylines and lore of the previous games in the franchise. There are multiple narrative forms at work in the majority of World of Warcraft game play. The scene analyzed above is no exception. Using the definition structure adapted from Henry Jenkins (see Chapter 1, pages 12-14), there are at least four narrative types that can easily be identified in the Scarlet Crusade scene – evocative narrative, embedded narrative, and enacted narrative. Each of these narrative types is applicable to the majority of game play within the World of Warcraft environment. I will examine each type of narrative, in order, to see how it applies to the larger narrative structure of the World of Warcraft and analyze specifically how it appears within the Scarlet Crusade quest scene. I will then analyze how these narrative forms contribute to the levels of immersion and interactivity in the virtual world.

First, let us examine evocative narrative within the world. In Chapter 1, we defined “evocative narrative” as narrative that requires the player to draw on his pre-existing narrative competency to make sense of the plot and the scene. In World of
Warcraft, the Scarlet Crusade storyline invokes the pre-existing plot structures of other
Warcraft franchise games and media. The Scarlet Crusade storyline is not a stand-alone
storyline that exists solely within the World of Warcraft. Rather, it is a storyline born out
of multiple game sources, including both pre-existing computer game storylines and
emerging supplemental narratives in the traditional pen-and-paper format. As such, the
Scarlet Crusade storyline is an example of evocative narrative. An evocative narrative
can be described as an autonomous experience that is enriched by a dialogue with its
larger transmedia environment. For our analysis, it is important to understand how
evocative narrative and transmedia storytelling interrelate. Transmedia storytelling is
briefly defined as storytelling across different media platforms. It can perhaps best be
described as a complex narrative (such as a virtual world narrative) that is delivered
through multiple channels, which can best be read as a whole. An understanding of the
story’s telling on multiple media platforms enhances this type of narrative. In the case of
World of Warcraft, the narrative exists on several media platforms beyond the virtual
world, including novels, manga, short films, and role-playing games devoted to the
Warcraft storyline. Although many of these media narratives were authored after World
of Warcraft was introduced, they often fill in gaps in the storyline for players of the
MMORPG and can be used by the player to supplement the in-world narrative. Blizzard
authors their narratives so that they are consistent and complementary across platforms
and narrative environments. Blizzard works to ensure that the stories they create are
consistent across formats.

In this way, Henry Jenkins’ notion of transmedia storytelling is critical to
understanding the way that the narrative of World of Warcraft is designed. Henry Jenkins describes transmedia storytelling and its role to the game world stating:

One can imagine games taking their place within a larger narrative system with story information communicated through books, film, television, comics, and other media, each doing what it does best, each a relatively autonomous experience, but the richest understanding of the story world coming to those who follow the narrative across the various channels. (124)

In Chapter 3, we will focus on the notion of transmedia storytelling as it relates to the player and his narrative experience of the game. For now it is important that we understand that two keys points. First, the Scarlet Crusade quest relies heavily on pre-existing narratives for the development of its plot structure. Second, Blizzard asks the player to read the World of Warcraft narrative across texts, as a part of the larger franchise narrative. Almost every quest within the World of Warcraft gaming environment then is rich with evocative narrative since they all exist within this larger franchise narrative structure. Let us examine what the presence of “evocative narrative” in the world means for the game play experience.

If the player is expected to draw upon pre-existing narrative competencies to comprehend more fully the larger plot, what does this mean for the player with no exposure to the Warcraft franchise or to video game culture in general? Is it possible for someone who has not been introduced to this world to gain any pleasure from the “evocative narrative” within the virtual world? How does the narrative function for this type of player? The storyline in World of Warcraft is capable of being followed by even
the newest members of the world, but it is enhanced by a familiarity with the franchise history and the game’s back-story. To an extent, the back-story is something that the player will have to learn prior to entering the game or through a source external to the game environment. There are elements of the Warcraft storyline that can be gained only through exposure to outside sources, such as the narratives of previous games in the Warcraft franchise and, at times, the pen-and-paper Warcraft role-playing games or the player-generated World of Warcraft wikis. While there are narrative elements of the Warcraft back-story throughout the virtual world, they are presented as bits of information and not as one coherent narrative. In order to gain a full and complete understanding of the game storyline, the player will need to look to sources outside of the World of Warcraft.

Yet, even though there is a reliance on evocative narrative within the Warcraft world, which requires pre-existing narrative knowledge by definition, this is not to say that Blizzard does not ever provide any narrative back-story for its players within game play. In World of Warcraft, back-story is simply provided through a scripted opening narrative and scripted quest narratives, rather than through game play. Scripted elements in this case refer to elements that are built into the game design. A description of these elements will help to illustrate how back-story functions within the game world.

At the start of the game, a cinematic, an animated trailer similar to the cut scenes prominent in many video games, appears on the screen. Through this cinematic the overall World of Warcraft storyline is introduced. All players view this cinematic the
first time that they play the game. The narrator guides the player through the basic premise of the game, building upon the franchise history to give a basic plot synopsis of the game, as images of the races appear, introducing the game’s characters in the style of a cinematic trailer. After watching this feature, the player is taken to a screen where he can create his or her avatar by selecting various features (i.e. name, race, class, gender, and bodily features). Upon creating the avatar, the player is able to view another cinematic. This new scene is tailored to the player in that it presents the story of the player’s selected race and the race’s current status within the World of Warcraft. Like the general cinematic, the race-specific cinematic uses a movie trailer style to introduce the player to the environment and characters he will encounter in his initial explorations. The storyline in this cinematic builds upon the previous, general cinematic and offers the player more information about his or her specific role within the world. The cinematic is the most extensive traditional narrative that the player receives in World of Warcraft.

The focus of the cinematic is on the plot of the game and on character development. The cinematic exists to provide the player with the pertinent back-story in a succinct manner.

In the case of the Scarlet Crusade scene analyzed above, the back-story provided by the race-specific cinematic is of particular importance to the storyline of the quest. The player in the scene is a member of the undead race. It is through the race-specific cinematic that the player learns how the playable undead in the World of Warcraft (the Forsaken) separated from the non-playable undead characters in the world (the Scourge). In previous games of the franchise, this divide did not exist within the race. There was only one type of undead character. To explain this split, Blizzard introduced a new
storyline. When a player creates an undead character in World of Warcraft, the new player “awakens” to learn that he or she is no longer a slave to the previous undead race (hereafter known as the Scourge) and instead follows a new leader as a member of the new undead race (hereafter known as the Forsaken). The evolution of the undead race into two distinct races defines the quests for the Forsaken players that follow. The Scarlet Crusade quest is a seminal quest for these low-level undead players as it shapes the “us against them” storyline that defines undead game play. Without an understanding of the significance of the narrative, the player may not experience motivation to complete the quest objectives. The race-specific cinematic helps to motivate the player, by providing a reason for the killings he is about to complete.

In all of these ways, the Scarlet Crusade quest fits the definition of an “evocative narrative.” As we have noted, an evocative narrative in this case is defined as a narrative that draws on the pre-existing narrative competencies of the player to fully develop the storyline (see Chapter 1, page 13). An evocative narrative is not self-contained. Instead, the designer of an evocative narrative assumes that the player will start the game with a sense of the game space and the characters, as well as a sense of the game story framework. The quest asks the player to recall his previous encounters with the Warcraft franchise and draw on his narrative competencies (gained from these encounters and the opening cinematics) to complete the story. The evocative narrative necessarily pulls the reader outside of the framework of the game world. In our analysis of the level of immersion possible in the virtual world, it will be necessary to analyze the impact of this type of “extratextual” experience on the overall affective experience of the player.
The Scarlet Crusade storyline is also an “enacted narrative” within the larger undead storyline. An enacted narrative is a narrative that develops around a player’s progression through the game space towards a particular goal (see Chapter 1, page 13). In order for the player to experience this type of narrative, he must complete certain scripted actions within the game that lead towards quest completion. The concept of choice is critical to the emergence of enacted narrative in the game. The player must make game play choices in order to experience enacted narrative. As he chooses to perform game-progressing actions, he will gain access to new elements of the quest narrative. In the foregoing scene, as in each quest in the World of Warcraft, the player after receiving the quest enters an enacted narrative where the progression of the storyline is tied in to his progress towards the quest goal. Through the completion of quests, the player moves through the narrative structure of the game. As the player progresses towards the completion of the quest, the enacted narrative of the quest emerges with each game play choice he makes. The player is creating his own plot through these choices. To begin, the player must choose how to best meet the quest objectives. While the player is given loose instructions, he must choose the direction in which to move, the area to explore, the fights in which to engage, and the conflicts to avoid. It is through these game play choices that the concept of interactivity becomes important. The player determines how to progress through the game towards the goal, while knowing that the choices he makes will help to move or stall the quest narrative. We will further discuss the manner in which the player chooses to navigate through the enacted narrative
structure in our analysis of interactivity and immersion in the World of Warcraft.

There are also narrative paths in the game that are pre-determined by the game design. At times the design of the game is structured along a certain path and the player cannot make any game play choices. In these cases, when the player turns in the quest, the design of the game will determine the next step in the narrative progression. There are quests that when completed lead to another quest, which may or may not be part of the same storyline. There are also quest storylines that end when the quest is completed and turned in. These storylines may or may not appear again in the game play. In this way, quests are built into the design of the game environment and are an example of the way “embedded narrative” appears throughout the World of Warcraft. An embedded narrative is a narrative that is built into the game design and, more specifically, a piece of information that the game designer strategically makes available to the player (see Chapter 1, page 13). The majority of embedded narrative within the World of Warcraft text exists in the form of the written quest narratives available from various NPCs throughout the game. The designers of the software have used the yellow exclamation points and question marks to signal to the player that a certain character is significant to the narrative and that the player should speak to the marked NPC characters regarding quests. As we have seen, the player must navigate through the game space both to obtain and complete quests. In World of Warcraft, any area where the player can make progress in a quest helps shape and structure the narrative. Henry Jenkins describes this type of game space as “narratively salient space.” As Jenkins states, embedded narrative helps
steer the player towards these “narratively salient spaces” (126). Henry Jenkins describes the trajectory of an embedded narrative, stating, ‘We may have to battle our way past antagonists, navigate through mazes, or figure out how to pick locks in order to move through the narratively impregnated mise-en-scène” (127). In this way, the player is always engaged with the embedded narrative of the environment, as he learns about the larger plot while exploring the world. The designer can use such embedded narrative to control how the player interacts with the game environment. Even those players who choose not to engage with the enacted narrative of a quest storyline will confront embedded narrative as they move through the environment of the game world.

In all of the narrative forms analyzed above, there are multiple types of narrative plot progression at work - scripted narrative and non-scripted narrative. Non-scripted narrative plot progression is player-generated, and we will discuss this type in detail in Chapter 3. For now, we should note that non-scripted narrative plot progression comes from a source outside of the narrative design of the game. Non-scripted narrative is outside of the narrative structure set by the designer and typically takes the form of individual narrative authored by the player himself. In contrast, scripted narrative plot progression comes from within the design of the game itself. In World of Warcraft, there are two types of scripted narrative—single outcome narrative and variable outcome narrative. The Scarlet Crusade quest is example of single outcome scripted narrative. The player completing this quest has to move through a linear narrative plot to reach one possible conclusion. His completion of the quest does not alter anything in the game
environment except for his own progression through the game. A variable outcome scripted narrative differs from this type of quest narrative in that the completion of the quest can impact the larger game environment in more than one way. In *World of Warcraft*, the majority of variable outcome quests change depending upon the status of the environment at the time and are scripted in this way to respond to real-time conditions within the virtual world. An example of this type of quest is the level 33 quest that originates in the cemetery of Tarren Mill. I will describe the scene in detail below, so that we can analyze the impact of a variable outcome on the quest storyline.

Helcular’s Revenge is the first quest in a two quest chain. This quest begins with a visit to Novice Thaivand in the graveyard of Tarren Mill. Novice Thaivand, an undead NPC, tells the player the story of his master, Helcular, who was brutally murdered by the Alliance. Thaivand seeks vengeance for Helcular’s death and asks the player to assist him in gaining it. The quest begins when Thaivand asks the player to get Helcular’s rod from the yeti that overtook Helcular’s lair and to bring the rod back to him for further instructions. When the player completes this quest by killing the yeti and looting the rod, the player returns to Thaivand. Thaivand gives the player the second quest and tells him that he must go to Helcular’s grave and, using the rod, resurrect Helcular. The player must first visit three flames to ignite the rod, giving it the powers of resurrection, and then he must travel to South Shore (an Alliance town) to resurrect Helcular. It is here that the game play begins to vary and here that our scene analysis will begin.

In the clip (see Appendix D, Figure 1), we see two Horde characters moving
towards South Shore. Immediately, these characters are attacked by the South Shore
sentry, NPC guards whose sole purpose is to prevent Horde characters from entering the
Alliance town. The Horde players work together to defeat the sentry, so that they can
enter the graveyard and resurrect Helcular’s remains. Once the players resurrect
Helcular, the quest is finished. The game play of the storyline, however, continues on.
Helcular begins to roam the South Shore graveyard attacking any Alliance in sight and
deploying a squad of puppets to do the same. Helcular’s target is any Alliance character,
be it a NPC, a mob, or a character operated by a live player. In this way, by completing
the quest, the player shapes the game play of all of those players that are currently in the
area. Helcular and his army can act as a killing machine, slaying all characters within
their reach. If an Alliance player is within their path, it is likely that his game play will
be disrupted, as Helcular will engage him in combat and possibly kill him. The
completion of this quest by the Horde player will alter this Alliance member’s experience
of the world. The outcome of the Helcular storyline is dependent upon the status of the
environment at the time that Helcular is resurrected. If there are few players around, it is
doubtful that his presence will have a large impact. If there are many players around, it is
likely that his presence will have a large impact, as these players will need to work
together to rid the town of this character.

In the clip, we can see a line of characters with red text above their heads forming
a line along the perimeter of the cemetery, after Helcular has been fighting Alliance
NPCs and mobs for approximately one minute. This line is a line of Alliance live
players, demarcated from the mobs and NPCs by the red text, which indicates both their
names and their guilds (where applicable). The Horde players will be able to determine
the level and class of these players by hovering the mouse over their names or their
avatars. It is apparent in the clip that these players are quickly amassing a group to fight
Helcular. In moments, they will swoop into the cemetery and slaughter Helcular, his
puppets, and the two Horde players that resurrected him.

There are two features to note in this quest narrative. The first feature to note is
the significance of the group to the quest progression. It is necessary for players to work
together to defend their environment and protect their characters. The dynamic of this
social exchange is interesting in that the Alliance players have to work together on an
impromptu basis to defeat this Horde element that has just been introduced to their
environment. Because of the random nature of Helcular’s resurrection (dependent on
whether any players are working on the quest), the Alliance group that forms to beat him
will always be ad hoc, if it forms at all. The second feature to note is the variability of
the quest dependent on real-time conditions in the environment. The outcome of this
storyline will vary every time it is introduced to a player, as the environment of the
World of Warcraft is constantly evolving.

All of the forms of narrative analyzed above speak towards the larger narrative
structure of World of Warcraft. Through the presence of evocative, enacted, and
embedded narrative, World of Warcraft presents the player with a complex network of
storylines scattered throughout the Warcraft universe. By its very nature, the narrative
structure of World of Warcraft works to ensure that each player has an individualized
experience of the world. No two players will interact with the world in the same manner. It is this individualized storyline and networked narrative structure that will influence the levels of interactivity and immersion that each player will experience in the game world. In Chapter 3, we will discuss the ways that the individual experience can shape the narrative interpretation and the levels of interactivity and immersion. For now, let us discuss the ways in which interactivity functions within the World of Warcraft structure.

ii. Interactivity in World of Warcraft

Much as we did in our analysis of narrative, in discussing the interactivity of this scene, we must first consider the interactive capabilities of the game as a whole. In the previous chapter, I defined interactivity generally as a two-way flow of information and more specifically as a multi-layered concept that appears in four different forms – cognitive interactivity, functional interactivity, explicit interactivity, and meta-interactivity. In this section, I will analyze instances of interactivity within the World of Warcraft, using the classification system discussed in Chapter 1 and focusing specifically on the scene analyzed above. I will begin by exploring instances of functional interactivity within the game and move into a discussion of explicit interactivity within the World of Warcraft. We will discuss cognitive interactivity and meta-interactivity in detail in Chapter 3.

There are set actions that the player can complete during game play in World of Warcraft that are determined by the game design. These actions are programmed into the
design of the world and the player must perform these actions when completing any task within the game environment. For instance, during combat in the Scarlet Crusade quests, and all quests within the world, the player must control his avatar’s actions using keyboard and mouse commands. By using a combination of keystrokes and mouse clicks, the player moves his avatar through the world. By executing a series of commands, the player can tell his avatar to perform an action, whether it is to attack an enemy, wave to a friend, or initiate a conversation. In this way, in every action that he performs, the player is experiencing functional interactivity with the game environment. Functional interactivity is briefly defined as the interaction with the “physical text” (see Chapter 1, page 23). In the case of the World of Warcraft, the physical text is both the computer (the hardware) and the game interface (the software). The computer used to run the software (the hardware) is necessarily part of the physical text since the hardware is needed to make the software accessible to the player. To play the game, the player must utilize the software’s control commands and the tools needed to operate the software (the computer console, keyboard, and mouse). Each time the player navigates through the game space, using the programmed keyboard and mouse commands, he is experiencing functional interactivity.

Lisbeth Klastrup further describes this physical interaction as “surface interaction.” She briefly defined surface interactivity as the interaction the player experiences when moving through the game space (“Paradigms of Interaction”). It is the interaction that the player has when he uses his keyboard and mouse commands to move in one direction or another. Surface interaction offers the player a relatively low level of
choice. The player can only operate within the design limits of the game when experiencing surface interaction, as the player can only operate in a manner accepted by the programmed script.

Klastrup contrasts surface interactivity with another type, “fabric interaction,” which will be critical to our understanding of explicit interactivity within the game. Let us move into our analysis of explicit interactivity, as understanding this type of interactivity will also be critical to our understanding of the relationship between immersion and interactivity. In World of Warcraft, there are multiple levels of interactivity occurring simultaneously. At the same time that the user is experiencing functional, surface interactivity, the player is also experiencing explicit interactivity with the game environment every time he chooses to alter game play by performing an action, such as accepting a quest. In fact, the player experiences explicit interactivity within the game environment in every choice he makes during game play. Using a definition adapted from Zimmerman, explicit interactivity is briefly defined as overt participation with the text through designed choices and procedures (see Chapter 1, page 23). Rather than being limited to the physical interaction with the computer equipment and the software interface, explicit interactivity is the mental interaction with the game design – the narrative and rule structures of the game. Through game play, the player experiences explicit interactivity with the game design. This type of interactivity, which Zimmerman classifies as explicit interactivity, is the type of interactivity that Klastrup identifies as “fabric interaction,” which is briefly defined as the interaction the player experiences when creating his game world. This interaction includes all elements of personal choice.
within the game, from the initial choice of the avatar, to the choice of clothing and armor, to the choice of weapons, etc. This is the second type of choice that the player makes to shape his game experience. We will call this type of choice personal choice and add it to our list of the types of choices present in World of Warcraft that already includes game play choices. All personal choices that the player makes to shape his environment are examples of fabric interactivity within the game world.

In the scene analyzed above, the choice to loot a corpse and gain material objects is an example of explicit, fabric interactivity, as the player shapes his game world through the objects he possesses and the personal choices he makes. There is an emphasis on material goods in World of Warcraft, as the accumulation of goods helps to customize the experience for the individual player. Through participation in quest narratives and in the virtual world economy, the player can design his own experience of the world through the goods he obtains. Through the material goods system, the player has the ability to make innumerable personal choices. The significance of this feature is that it provides the player with the ability to customize his game experience to his own liking. The player is able to move beyond the scripted design elements of the world to begin to create his own unique experience in the World of Warcraft environment. This idea of the ownership of the individual experience will be critical to our analysis of the levels of immersion that are possible in the game world. We will discuss this topic briefly in the next section and expand on this analysis more fully in Chapter 3 when we examine player-generated narrative. The importance of explicit, fabric interactivity lies in the fact
that it is one of the leading factors contributing to the immersive experience.

iii. Immersion in World of Warcraft

At this point, it is important to consider the third term introduced in Chapter 1, immersion. In Chapter 1, I defined immersion as identification with character, narrative, and environment and asked how one becomes immersed in a virtual world or a narrative. An immersive experience, then, is an experience that helps to create a level of identification between the player and the game world. In particular, interactive experiences that involve an element of choice tend to create a more immersive environment. Explicit, fabric interactivity provides the player with the opportunity to make choices and help shape the virtual world. The choice of an avatar, the first choice a player makes in game play, is one of the best examples of the importance of interactivity within the system as a contributing factor to the experience of immersion. In World of Warcraft, identification with the character begins the moment the player clicks the “Create New Character” button in the opening screen. Immediately the player will be presented with a variety of choices for his or her character from choice of the avatar’s faction (Alliance or Horde), to the avatar’s race (i.e. Dwarf, Orc), to avatar’s class (i.e. Mage, Rogue). The player creates a name for his avatar, selects a gender for his avatar, and designs the look of his avatar’s physical body. The choices that the player makes in this screen are personal and game play choices that will shape the rest of the game play. The player needs to select an avatar that will help him to achieve the game play that he desires. If the player does not enjoy the experience of acting through the avatar that he
creates, it is unlikely that he will feel an immersive identification with the game world. In fact, many players try different faction/race/class combinations before deciding which combination best suits their needs. Some of these players continue to play multiple characters, choosing one avatar as their primary and playing a second or third avatar as their “alt.”

It is interesting to look at the player forums to hear players describe the experience of creating their avatars and the choices that they made. In particular, the advice that veteran players give to new players is particularly telling. The majority of new players in the official World of Warcraft forum seek advice on the best way to experience the game, beginning with advice on realm, race, and class choice, the first personal choices in the game. In one forum, a new player asked, “How fun is your class?” Players responded in a variety of ways, with some players providing a class-by-class ranking and a breakdown of perks and disadvantages for each character type. All players that responded to the question had tried at least four different classes of characters. Overall, all veteran players stressed the same thing – experimentation (“How Fun is Your Class?”). There was no single, unified answer to the question on the forum. The most important lesson that the other players could impart was the value of experimenting with different choices. They presented this option as the only way to learn fully what class/race combination best matches a person’s individual playing style. Above all, players had the sense that they had to manipulate the environment to meet their own needs.

In this way, the interactive choices that the player makes can shape the way the
player experiences the entire game. Again, a critical concept to our notion of immersion is the concept of choice. As Richard Bartle argues, and as we have seen in our analysis of World of Warcraft, choice is a critical feature of the game world for the player (243). The choices that the player makes dictate his experience of the game. This is a critical point, as it is in moments like these that interactivity and immersion begin to intersect. Let us move on to our discussion of immersion so that we can further analyze this point.

In this section, I will look for instances of immersion within the World of Warcraft and specifically within the Scarlet Crusade scene analyzed above. World of Warcraft as a gaming environment possesses many of the characteristics that Richard Bartle identifies with immersion, as discussed in Chapter 1. There are four elements in virtual world design that Bartle identifies as critical to the promotion of immersion in a virtual environment. These four elements are the level of detail, level of control, freedom of choice, and freedom of self-expression within the virtual world. The question to consider is how these elements are incorporated into game design and, more specifically, how these elements are built into the design of World of Warcraft.

As a virtual world environment, World of Warcraft is saturated with details. Its creators, Blizzard, are meticulous about achieving consistency both within the world and across the Warcraft franchise, which contributes to the creation of a “believable” environment. While the world is structured, as demonstrated above, through various types of narrative the narrative structure is not rigid. Many aspects of the game are open-
ended, allowing for the player to make choices and have an interactive experience. The environment is richly saturated with details and believable as a virtual world structure, while remaining open enough to allow for an interpretative individual experience. These are the main design factors that contribute to the creation of an immersive experience for the player.

All of the elements Bartle identified are present in the *Warcraft* world. There are two primary elements, however, that we can pinpoint as the most influential factors leading to immersion in *World of Warcraft*. These elements are the freedom of choice and customization available in the world and the level of social interaction. I will begin by discussing the elements of choice and customization and then move into a discussion of the social element.

How does freedom of choice emerge in the case of the Scarlet Crusade quest? In this example, the player begins the storyline by receiving written text from a non-player character (NPC). The player has few game play or personal choices at this moment. He can make a game play choice when he chooses to read the text or not to read the text and to accept the quest or not to accept the quest. He cannot shape his experience in any other way. From this point, he can only follow a set number of scripted actions that the NPC presents to him and he cannot cause the NPC to deviate from its script. We can assume that the majority of players will choose to make the game play choice to accept the quest and progress with the game. From the moment the player accepts the quest, he has numerous game play choices to make that will impact the level of immersion
possible. Depending upon these choices, the player’s experience will change. If he makes the wrong choices, his avatar may die, costing him time, causing him frustration, and breaking the flow of the game play. If he makes smart choices, he may be able to complete the quest goals more quickly, continue narrative progression, and advance in skill more rapidly than other players. If the player makes his game play choices wisely it is more likely that he will experience immersion in the quest narrative and in the game world.

How then can the player engage in an immersive experience that allows for freedom of expression? In the case of the Scarlet Crusade quest, the level of player that is required is relatively low. Most players should easily be able to “solo” this quest (i.e. play it on his or her own). If, however, this quest were of a higher level of difficulty, it might necessitate “grouping” (i.e. joining with other players to work on the same quests). A player may also choose to form a group for a quest simply to engage in a more social form of game play. If a player chooses to group with another player, he will be able to experience a heightened level of player to player interaction. In completing any quest, the player has to make the choice between social or individual play. This is significant as the choice to play individually or as a member of a group can have a strong influence on the affective experience of the player. Depending upon the group of players chosen for the group, the individual player could experience a significantly heightened or significantly reduced level of immersion.

Richard Bartle identifies the influence of other players as one of the most
influential aspects of the game experience (see Chapter 1, page 17). Other players can
cause the individual to feel more connected with the game world or more separate from
it. Because immersion has traditionally been defined as entrenchment in one world to the
exclusion of another, interactions with other real players has often been seen as an
interruption of the in-world experience. The mixing of the virtual world environment
with the reality of other players has often been seen as a conflict that, when confronted,
would detract from the in-world experience. In Chapter 3, we will explore the ways in
which players interact with one another through media platforms external to the World of
Warcraft environment. In this section, it is important to consider how the design of the
Warcraft environment encourages player to player interaction within the world.

An example of the immersive, interactive capabilities of the group is found in the
social group chat channels. For instance, every time that a group forms in the World of
Warcraft, a group chat channel for that party appears on each party member’s screen.
The chat that ensues amongst the party members can act as an enhancement to the
storyline or, if focused on the outside world and issues outside of the game, act as
something that detracts from the in-world experience. The player’s affective experience
of the game world can be altered by the presence of other players within the same realm.
If the player is immersed in the in-world experience, he may not want to interact with
other real players who are not immersed in the world. The introduction of textual
elements from other players in the party can significantly alter game play. The same can
be said for the general textual chat channels that are built into the game’s interface and
appear on the player’s screen at all times (unless disabled). The text on these channels,
generated by other players, covers a range of issues, from players looking for others to group with, to players with questions about the in-world marketplace, to players alerting others to the presence of enemies nearby. Depending on the individual, these channels can have a positive or negative effect on the player’s experience of the world. If the content of the chat channels strays from the *Warcraft* context, the player may no longer feel connected to the virtual world experience.

Given that the player is unlikely to form a group for the Scarlet Crusade quest, it is unlikely that the player will encounter many “outside” disruptions. The player, in this individually-centered experience, will be able to concentrate more fully on the task at hand and the narrative that led him to this task. The storyline will be the focus of the player’s attention, as he works to complete the quest in whatever manner suits him. In the clip analyzed above, the player has chosen to seek out the Scarlet Crusaders immediately after leaving Executor Arren. After traveling to their camp, he begins to initiate combat with every Crusader whom he sees. At this point, the player must make several choices in order to maintain his health and complete the quest. He must choose which Crusaders to fight, picking between Crusaders of various skill sets and levels of difficulty. If the player chooses to attack a NPC of a higher level of difficulty than the player, it is more likely that he will have to plan his attack carefully. The player in this situation will need to be more cognizant of his avatar’s health, as it will not be as easy for him to defeat the NPC as it would have been if he had chosen to attack a lower-level character. The player will need to make choices about what attacks he can be successful
in and in what attacks he is likely to fail. The player will also have to think strategically, as he will gain more experience points by choosing to fight a character of a higher level. Defeating the high-level characters will cause him to “level up” more quickly, which will in turn improve his combat skills. While it may be more difficult to defeat the character in the short term, choosing to do so may have long-term benefits. The player can enter into these difficult battles and then make choices that will make it more likely for him to survive difficult fights, such as taking extra time to heal between attacks, whether by resting, eating, using first aid, or using healing potions. In the case of the scene analyzed, the player chooses to devour the flesh of his kills. This decision helps the player to gain health and stamina between battles. The player can also make choices about how to approach an attack. He can choose to use long-range weapons, which will allow him to attack the NPC from a distance, without engaging in direct combat. He can choose to cast spells, fighting from a distance without using any weapons. Whatever method he chooses to employ will produce distinct results in terms of the strength of the attack. The player can select the power and frequency of each hit by using keyboard commands. Granted, the game script determines the exact severity of the blow, but the player can still make the choice about what the best method of combat is in each moment.

In the World of Warcraft, there is an additional set of personal choices that the player must make that will affect the level of interactivity and immersion he experiences. Each player is capable of learning two skills outside of the primary skills available to all players (cooking, fishing, first aid, etc.) and the class-specific skills discussed previously.
The player can apprentice in these areas, receiving progressive training throughout game play. The player can choose to learn leather making, tailoring, engineering, mining, or a myriad of other skills. Depending upon the choice the player makes, his game play will be altered, as he will play not only to meet quest objectives, but also to develop his chosen skills.

In the case of the Scarlet Crusade scene analyzed previously, the player is an apprentice tailor and is learning enchanting skills. While he does not blatantly “train” in either of these skills during the clip, he does make game play choices that will affect his ability to advance in these trades. As a tailor, this player benefits from picking up any and all cloth that the Scarlet Crusaders “drop.” This habit will be useful to the player when he returns to town, as he can learn patterns to make armor for his body. New garments will help the player to be able to sustain greater hits, while receiving less bodily damage. As the player in this clip is still at a relatively low level at the time of the quest, it is unlikely that he will have high-quality protective armor already. He will improve his overall strength if he can make garments to wear, as he does not have the necessary money to purchase these items yet. In cases such as this, it is important for the player to choose his skills carefully, as the possession of certain skills can greatly alter the general game experience. The choice of these skills will also help to customize the game experience for the individual player. Thus, these choices, while seemingly small, are what shape game play for the player. Each time the player makes a choice, he can see the consequences for his avatar on the screen. This helps to engage the player in the environment of the world and leads to identification both with the character and the game.
space. The player is able to feel a sense of control over the events in the game world and the way his avatar navigates through the space.

Yet it is still not clear that just because the elements of choice and control identified above are present the player is experiencing immersion. As shown in Chapter 1, Douglas and Hargadon suggest that there is a difference between immersion and engagement when discussing a player’s affective experience. Yet, I would extend the work done by Douglas and Hargadon and argue that the player can experience both immersion and engagement within one game world. In analyzing the game play in World of Warcraft, we can see that there are clearly elements of the game that work to promote immersion. At the same time, however, there are an equal number of elements present that work to pull the player out of the immersed experience and remind the player that he is interacting with a text. Every time the player experiences functional interactivity with the game, he is reminded that he is interacting with a text through a game medium. This extratextual awareness leads to an engaged, rather than immersed, experience in Douglas and Hargadon’s terms. I would argue that World of Warcraft has the capabilities to produce both immersed and engaged experiences and that these experiences are dependent on both the context and the player. The extent to which an individual player experiences either depends on the player himself and the ability of the player to identify with the world and his character. If the player can actively believe in the virtual world, it is more likely that he will be able into enter into the fictional environment and experience immersion. If the player is unable to create this connection with the world and the
character, it is more likely that the player will experience the environment as a relatively static text and have an engaged experience.

E. Synthesis - Narrative, Interactivity, and Immersion in World of Warcraft

The design elements of narrative, interactivity, and immersion discussed above are the building blocks of the Warcraft universe. They are the features that Blizzard incorporated into the world to structure game play. How then do these concepts relate within the virtual world? We have discussed specific instances of these elements and briefly discussed moments of interaction between them. We have yet to discuss how these elements work together to structure the virtual world experience as a whole. In Lisbeth Klastrup’s terms, the World of Warcraft is a dynamic interactive text. This means that the player is able to experience the narrative text through multiple types of interactivity, including surface and fabric interactivity as we discussed in the previous section. Depending upon the type of activity being performed by the player, the type and level of interactivity will vary. According to Klastrup, this type of text or environment does not contain a “complete and predesigned content, but present[s] a framework for interaction and events” (“Paradigms of Interaction”). As Klastrup identifies, this type of environment varies depending upon who is populating the environment at the time and what choices they make. In our terms, dynamic interactive texts are the most likely to produce immersive, interactive experiences through the narrative.

How then is the design of Warcraft structured to produce dynamic interactivity?
The dynamic interactive nature of the World of Warcraft is most apparent in the variable outcome quests of the game. This type of quest varies from the typical quest structure in that the completion of the quest impacts the larger game environment, rather than just the individual player. Every instance of Helcular’s resurrection will vary dependent upon what other live players (Alliance or Horde) are in South Shore at the time. In this way, World of Warcraft is a dynamic interactive text. Each realm is populated by thousands of players whose behaviors are constantly changing. With these changes in behavior, the environment and the storyline change as well. World of Warcraft contains emergent content that insures the player will have a different experience each time he plays. While the game text is programmed to respond to the scripted choices and movements that a player makes, there are also non-scripted choices that the player can make. Social interactions with other players are a prime example of non-scripted game play. The impact of these non-scripted variable outcomes choices on the levels of interactivity, immersion, and types of narrative will be discussed in detail in Chapter 3.
Chapter III
Exploring the Virtual World Player

In the previous chapter, we discussed the structure and design of the Warcraft environment. Yet, as many game studies scholars have noted, players often experience game environments in unforeseen and unanticipated ways. In this chapter, I will examine the player experience of the virtual world and look specifically for ways in which the player interacts with the environment in ways unintended by the game design. In the previous chapter, I argued that the possibility for a truly individual experience is the key factor shaping narrative, interactivity, and immersion within the World of Warcraft. As we discussed, the game environment is designed so that the player has numerous choices to make and, through each choice, the player can customize his game play. In this chapter, I will argue that there are ways for the player to have a truly individual experience that exists outside of the designed in-world choices. The player, as I will demonstrate here, can go outside of these designed choices and can begin to shape his experience through non-scripted, player-generated game play both in the game world and outside of the game world.

I will begin by examining the types of player-generated game play that exist outside of the pre-determined game structure. In World of Warcraft, for instance, players often set their own goals and objectives that are outside of the designed quest structure of the game. Players frequently create their own individualized narrative around their
specific avatar and desired type of game play. I argue that this is an example of player-generated narrative in *World of Warcraft* and is an increasingly popular type of immersive, interactive game play. In this chapter, I will explore this type of player-generated narrative and examine the experience of the player that is generating these stories, in order to better understand ways in which the player interacts with the world. I will also explore the transmedia narrative environment of *World of Warcraft* in detail in order to understand the ways in which the player can interact with multiple worlds simultaneously across media platforms. I will analyze the relationship between the transmedia interaction and the immersive experience of the player.

**A. Player-Generated Narratives**

In this section, I would like to analyze two classes of player-generated narratives – in-world narratives and out-of-world narratives. I would define in-world narratives as narratives that take place within game play in the *World of Warcraft*. These narratives are created by players for the purpose of setting goals and objectives to structure their game play experiences. I define out-of-world narratives as narratives that exist outside of typical game play, but that are fundamentally based on the images and themes of the *Warcraft* environment. These narratives are created by players using the characters and environment of the game to create a story unrelated to the game progression. I begin this chapter with an analysis of in-world narratives within *World of Warcraft* and move into an analysis of out-of-world narratives.
i. In-World Narratives

In all player-generated narratives, players can design their own experiences. When a player creates his own narrative with a focus on achieving in-world goals, he is designing an in-world narrative that will meet his game play needs. As we have seen in Chapter 2, the narrative structure of Warcraft is a complex yet fluid network of storylines. There are many ways that the player can write his own script for his interactions within the World of Warcraft that is outside of the structured narrative experience. In this section, I will examine some of the common ways in which players author their own narrative experiences to alter their in-world experience of the game. I will begin by discussing the actions of the single player and move into a discussion of the multi-player experience.

First, let us examine the ways in which the single player can create in-world narratives. A common way in which the player can create narrative is through the creation of individual self-imposed guidelines for game play. An article on the fan website WoW Insider documents the stories of players who have set such guidelines for themselves (“15 Minutes of Fame”). One player, for instance, has chosen to embrace fully his class (Priest) and its characteristics in his game play. He has decided that he will complete the game as a pacifist and he will not intentionally fight anything within the game. Instead, he will work through the game by passing by any quests that require him to kill and he will focus on healing others, rather than killing. Other players have chosen similarly daunting feats, from playing through all levels of the game with no weapons or
armor to choosing to fight all battles in a style that it is incompatible with all of your avatar’s skills. One of these players describes why he chooses to follow self-imposed guidelines, stating, “It's a challenge playing this way, it really is. And that's exactly what I love about it. This way of playing isn't for everybody! That's okay! Some people enjoy raiding, some enjoy crafting or fishing, some like PvP. To each their own. For my part, I'll keep on looking for ways to do things just a little different, to make it work, and to have fun with it as I go” (“Meet Gweryc”). Although these players are not playing the game according to the designed method and they are certainly not playing in the most efficient or strategic manner from a game play perspective, they are still creating enjoyable experiences for themselves. This speaks to the success of player-generated narrative and to the importance of a game environment that allows for this type of flexibility. In creating player-generated narratives, the individual player has a high level of control and a high degree of choice, which will lead to a more immersive, interactive experience.

Player-generated narrative is often created through the collaboration of players participating in a multi-player in-world experience. Guilds and social groupings provide a method of shaping game play through group storytelling. Let us examine the role of guilds in the *World of Warcraft* as an agent of narrative change. The popularity of player-created guilds in *World of Warcraft* helps to promote player-generated narrative in the virtual world. Often, guild members will establish basic game play parameters for all of the players within the guild. These parameters are entirely player-generated and can
vary from basic goals (e.g. all players must increase a minimum of one level per week) to larger orchestrated strategies for game play (e.g. all players must achieve level fifty by next weekend and participate in battlegrounds with the rest of the guild). Guilds are inherently social and multi-player by nature. Because of this, guilds hold the potential for the creation of large volumes of player-generated narrative. A blog written by University of Bergen professor Jill Walker Rettburg, jill.txt, documents an evening of such player authorship in the post “Storytelling Competition.” In this example, Walker Rettburg’s guild in World of Warcraft has decided to hold a storytelling competition in order to determine who will receive a coveted piece of armor that one of the guild members has obtained. All of the guild members have agreed to gather together one evening to recite prepared stories before the group. The premise of the competition is that the authors of the stories must incorporate three items from World of Warcraft into their narratives. Each guild member telling a story has to use the same three items in the narrative, and they also have to obtain the item by completing various quests. These items were selected by other, non-participating guild members and revealed to those participating in the storytelling competition through a game of hide-and-seek. In this example, because the player has chosen to tell the story, she has had her game play altered away from the designed narrative and interactions of the world. She has had to participate in a non-scripted game of hide-and-seek to uncover required plot elements, complete various quests that do not aid in her game progression in order to obtain storytelling items, and construct an original storyline in her own free time to share with other players in the game. All of these activities are examples of non-scripted, player-generated game play
that have evolved organically through the social element of the world, rather than the designed game structure. The player has participated in a multiplayer interaction with the world that is completely unique to her individual experience.

The role-playing community in World of Warcraft offers players another outlet for storytelling and the creation of multi-player player-generated narratives. As mentioned in Chapter 2, at the outset of the game, players can choose whether to participate in a role-playing (RP) realm or not. Players who want to perform the roles of their avatars and participate in a fantasy role-playing environment choose to play in RP realms. Those players that choose to participate in a RP realm choose to have a game play experience that emphasizes narrative and storytelling. This choice extends beyond the initial selection of realm and affects all aspects of game play. The implications of this choice are highlighted when reading the player forum descriptions of the player experience on a RP realm. A recent post on World of Warcraft player forums highlights the ways in which players can interact with one another to create truly original and unique multi-player narratives. The thread begins with a player looking for other players to join a new storytelling RP guild that he is in the process of creating. A storytelling guild is devoted to the creation of a unified narrative experience for all members and the performance of this narrative. On the forum, the player defines a storytelling RP guild as different than a regular RP guild stating, “A normal RP guild is nothing more then a loose collection of RPers under one banner and theme. A storytelling RP guild has all the same elements as a story and actually does tell a story as it progresses, changes, and grows. It has direction, purpose, goals, a cast of characters, sub plots and tangents, protagonists and
antagonists” (“RP Storytelling Guild Forms Up”). This player seeks to create a full narrative system through his guild. He hopes to join with other likeminded players to create an entire original storyline within the existing Warcraft world. If the player can find other players to author the storyline with him, he can create his own individualized experience in the game environment. It is more likely that the player will feel immersed in the game environment, if he is free to have control and make choices. By designing his own narrative experience, the player will reach new levels of control and have an expanded number of choices.

In Chapter 1, I defined cognitive interactivity as interpretive participation with the text, using Eric Zimmerman’s terms (see Chapter 1, page 23). Cognitive interactivity is the player’s response to the text, on an emotional, psychological, or intellectual level. The cognitive interactivity of World of Warcraft varies for each player and is shaped by the individual experience of the world. Cognitive interactivity allows the player to view the game as a text. In viewing the game as text, the player gains the ability to take on an interpretive role and author his own experience. Through player-generated narratives, the player can interact with the text more fully and can shape his interpretation of the environment around him. I would argue that the cognitive interactive experience is one of the aspects of game play that most heavily influences the immersive experience of the player. Depending on the type of response the player is having to the game experience, the player may alter the way he plays the game and engages with the virtual world. Cognitive interactivity, thus, is closely aligned with our notion of in-world narrative.
ii. Out-Of-World Narratives

The primary reason why the *Warcraft* storyline is so pervasive across media is because of the response the players have had to the storyline. Due to the complicated nature of the narrative, many players feel the need to extend the narrative of the game world into other media forms in order to make sense of the narrative as a whole. In addition, many players simply want to extend the narrative of the game world into other media forms because they enjoy the storyline. In this section, we will discuss both of these types of narrative expansion, including those expansions driven by the desire to explain and those expansions driven by the desire to create.

There are two conceptual activities that largely shape the creation of player-generated narrative from the *World of Warcraft* – fan fiction and machinima. The concept of fan fiction will help us to understand the relationship between gaming and popular culture, as well as the players of virtual worlds. Fan fiction is typically defined as a work of fiction based on or inspired by an original work, but written by a fan of the original work rather than its author. In the case of *World of Warcraft*, many players identify strongly with their avatars and with the environment and, accordingly, want to create works of fiction that exist outside of the set narratives of the *Warcraft* world. As we noted in the previous section, players have in many cases already begun to enrich the *Warcraft* storyline by authoring their own narrative experiences in the environment through single and multi-player storytelling. As we will see, players oftentimes extend
this activity to out-of-world narratives as well.

Many players have begun to create their own fan fiction by using the World of Warcraft environment as their canvas and utilizing new technologies to author their own digital stories of the world. It is relatively easy for players to manipulate their avatar within the Warcraft environment by executing software commands. This flexible responsive design of Warcraft allows for players to manipulate easily the environment and to create their own narratives using the game environment. The game is equipped with in-game camera features, which allow players to record game footage that can easily be compiled by using external editing software. The outcome of this work is a short animated digital narrative, popularly referred to as “machinima.” Machinima provides players with a method in which to create full, animated sequences, using their avatars as the actors in their own original screenplay. The Academy of Machinima Arts and Sciences defines machinima as “filmmaking within a real-time, 3D virtual environment, often using 3D video-game technologies. In an expanded definition, it is the convergence of filmmaking, animation and game development. Machinima is real-world filmmaking techniques applied within an interactive virtual space where characters and events can be either controlled by humans, scripts or artificial intelligence” (“What is Machinima?”). Machinima, once produced, is typically distributed through various websites, including YouTube. Machinima series have become increasingly popular, with each series drawing its own fan base. Machinima filmmaking competitions have also gained in popularity and prestige, earning yearly spots at video game conventions nationwide.

In creating machinima, the player is able to move beyond the designed aspects of
the game play and is able to engage in a truly unique, individual experience of authorship that occurs both in-world and out-of-world. The traditional motivators for game play, such as “leveling” and gaining experience, are entirely removed in this process. Instead, the player is engaging in an act of creative authorship. The process of creating machinima can be both single-player and multi-player, but the intention behind the creation is always to share a story and an environment with the larger culture outside of the game world. In an interview with Newsweek, Sims creator Will Wright discusses the potential for producing mass-marketed machinima in his latest project, Spore. Wright states, “We have that built in throughout the game where you can capture game footage at any time, photos and stuff … So I can actually make a movie in the game, and with one click of the button upload it onto YouTube. Again, this is where we wanted it to blend from the game world to the world of Web content so that it felt like this game was another creative tool pouring into some of these sites. Plus you can take pictures, email them to your friends, and all that stuff within the game” (Croal). Through the merger of the game world and internet community, World of Warcraft has evolved beyond the in-world game experience to become a full online player community that the player can experience. Machinima is one example of the activities that has aided in this expansion of the game into the out-of-world experience.

Meta-interactivity is closely aligned with our notion of out-of-world narrative. In Chapter 1, I defined meta-interactivity as cultural participation with the text, again using Eric Zimmerman’s terms (see Chapter 1, page 23). We discussed Zimmerman’s concept
of meta-interactivity briefly in Chapter 2, but have yet to discuss how this concept applies to World of Warcraft. Earlier we defined meta-interactivity as interaction outside of the experience of the text (see Chapter 1, page 23). This is a concept that is critical to understanding the place of World of Warcraft in popular culture, since this is the type of interactivity associated with fan culture. Meta-interactivity is the interaction with the text in the larger cultural environment. Out-of-world narrative is a type of meta-interactivity, as is all fan narrative.

**B. Transmedia Storytelling**

We have discussed how the player engages with the designed rules and narrative of the World of Warcraft in order to experience varying levels of immersion and interactivity, as well as how the player engages with narrative in World of Warcraft in unintended and often unforeseen ways. The concept of transmedia storytelling, which we briefly discussed in Chapter 2, will help us to understand the larger interactive experience of World of Warcraft. In this section, I will discuss the ways in which World of Warcraft extends into other media forms, as well as the ways in which Warcraft participates in the larger video game culture. I will begin with a description of the various media platforms, in order to discuss the ways in which players interact with the virtual world of the MMORPG in other media forms. I will then discuss a form of transmedia storytelling within the World of Warcraft and discuss what the presence of this type of narrative in the virtual world means for interactions of the virtual world player.
In our previous section on out-of-world narratives, we discussed players that create their own World of Warcraft narratives called machinima. Machinima is own example of the extension of World of Warcraft onto a new media platform, in this case an animated film. World of Warcraft has also expanded onto other media platforms, including comic books (manga), novels, and online Wikis. Each of these platforms serves to enhance the overall World of Warcraft narrative and contributes to an expansion of the narrative beyond the game world. In this way, the narrative of World of Warcraft is constantly in dialogue with other media platforms through the process of transmedia storytelling and the exposure of its players to these other forms of narrative.

Yet, the World of Warcraft is also in dialogue with the larger video game and internet culture of which it is a part. The storyline we are about to discuss is an important type of storyline within World of Warcraft for this reason. It provides an example of the way in which World of Warcraft alludes to the larger themes of video game culture in its narrative design. Within the World of Warcraft narrative, there are several instances of evocative narrative drawn from the larger narrative culture of video games. In this section, I will explore one such instance in order to understand how these narratives operate within the Warcraft environment.

The Linken storyline begins when the player discovers a wrecked raft in Un’Goro Crater, a level 50-55 zone nestled between Tanaris and Silithus. This is the starting point of the “It’s a Secret to Everybody” quest chain, which asks the player to explore the raft.
and its contents, in order to learn to whom these items belong. Through these explorations, the player is introduced to a “stray traveler” in Marshal’s Refuge, who believes that both the player and the items the player has found in a backpack on the raft look vaguely familiar. The player finds out that the traveler, Linken, does not remember who he is or how he came to be living in Marshal’s Refuge. In fact, no one seems to know what he is doing there. While the items that the player has brought Linken seem to help a bit, he still cannot remember much. He asks the player to bring his sword to Donova Snowden, another NPC who will be able to temper the sword for him. The sword, Linken believes, holds the key to his identity and the purpose of his presence. Once the player brings the sword to Donova Snowden, he must complete several additional quests to bring Donova all of the necessary materials to complete the sword. The player then brings the sword back to Linken, who asks the player to continue to assist him in his quest to remember who he is and why he is in Marshal’s Refuge.

Linken sends the player to another NPC who he spoke with when he first arrived to see if she knows anything about his past. This starts the player on a chain of quests to speak to various NPCs. The player completes this series of quests and makes a totem, which he then brings to Linken. The totem triggers Linken’s memory and remembers that he has come to Marshal’s Refuge to fight Blazerunner, an NPC mob located in Fire Plume Ridge. The player then travels to Blazerunner and, upon defeating him, returns to Linken to spread the good news. Linken tells the player that he will now be able to return to his homeland with the Golden Flame, which Blazerunner had been using for evil. Linken promises to protect the Golden Flame so that it can never be used for evil again.
and parts with the player, giving him his sword as a token of his appreciation.

The Linken quest is interesting in that it asks the player to combine a non-
Warcraft character (Link from Zelda) with a Warcraft character (Linken) that exists
within a World of Warcraft storyline. The player is supposed to recognize Linken as Link
from the Zelda franchise and bring this recognition to the interpretation of the narrative.
The faded photograph that the player finds in the satchel only takes on meaning if the
player is able to recognize the figures in the picture as Link and Zelda. Without this
knowledge, the narrative changes. The Linken storyline is an interesting example of
transmedia storytelling within World of Warcraft. The narrative of a gnome warrior who
has lost his memory is unique to the Warcraft environment. Yet it is a narrative that
builds upon the player’s pre-existing narrative competencies. In this way, the Linken
storyline contributes to a type of meta-interactivity with the Warcraft world as designers
and players alike create participatory, fan-based narratives rooted in the Zelda franchise
through the game play. We will discuss fan-based meta-interactivity further in Chapter 3.

The Linken storyline is a referential storyline in that it introduces the player to a
caracter based on a Nintendo franchise game. The significance of the referential
storyline lies in the fact that it refers to an outside source and draws on this outside source
for internal plot development. In fact, the Linken storyline is not the only referential
storyline introduced in the game. In the Un’Goro crater alone, there are three other
referential characters (two with accompanying storylines) that are introduced. Larion and
Muigin are characters based on Nintendo’s Mario and Luigi. Like Linken, Larion and
Muigin look like their Nintendo counterparts. Both Larion and Muigin offer the player a
quest to complete and, in their respective quest narratives, mention one another. Those familiar with the Nintendo storyline will quickly realize whom these characters are meant to represent. Also present in Un’Goro Crater are gorilla mobs who “drop” empty barrels. These gorillas are meant to refer to another Nintendo franchise game, Donkey Kong.

Through the inclusion of these gorillas, as well as the Linken, Larion, and Muigin characters, Blizzard has devoted an area of the Warcraft universe to the creation of an homage to Nintendo. Perhaps the designers were giving a nod to the games that inspired them in the field. In any case, the designers of World of Warcraft contribute to a larger transmedia storytelling environment by including the Nintendo franchise characters within their world. The Un’Goro Crater/ Nintendo example is simply one of hundreds of references of this type within the world. From references to comic books and cartoons, to actual pop-culture and historical figures, the World of Warcraft universe is heavily populated by non-Warcraft storyline characters who help to shape the player’s experience. In order for the player to gain a full narrative experience of these storylines, he must engage with larger video game culture and other media forms. Transmedia storytelling in this way encourages an interaction that necessarily pulls the player outside of the game world and outside of the traditional immersive experience.

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2 See Adam Eternium/ HeMan, Keldor the Lost/ Skeletor, and Oric Coe/ Orko in Shattrath
3 See Haris Pilton and “King” Don - the Earbiter
4 It would be interesting to look at how players on non-US servers receive and accept these American popular culture referential elements.
C. Synthesis

We have seen in this chapter that the players of World of Warcraft have taken the game narrative to a level unintended by the initial design of the game environment. World of Warcraft has evolved beyond the in-world game experience to become a full online player community. When not participating in in-world game play, players can often still be found engaging in the Warcraft environment. Through online player forums, World of Warcraft wikis, online strategy guides, and machinima sharing websites, players can devote an extensive amount of time and energy to World of Warcraft while outside of the game world. The network of World of Warcraft narratives has expanded beyond the in-game environment and now includes extensive out-of-world narratives.

In the past, the player experience was limited to the so-called “magic circle” of the game. Johan Huizinga introduced this term in his book Homo Ludens to describe the space in which the game is played. Jesper Juul further describes this phenomenon, stating, “The space in which the game takes place is a subset of the larger world, and a magic circle delineates the bounds of the game” (164). I would argue, however, that the player no longer interacts with the game through this type of closed experience. The World of Warcraft is not experienced within a magic circle that is demarcated from the out-of-world experience. Instead, as Castranova explains, there is a fluid exchange between the virtual and the real. Castranova redefines the magic circle as a membrane by stating:

The synthetic world is an organism surrounded by a barrier. Within the barrier,
life proceeds according to all kinds of fantasy rules involving space flight, fireballs, invisibility, and so on. Outside the barrier, life proceeds according to the ordinary rules. The membrane is the “magic circle” within which the rules are different… In the case of synthetic worlds, however, this membrane is actually quite porous. (147)

The idea of the porous membrane is critical to our understanding of the way interactivity and immersion function in the world. While the narrative design of the World of Warcraft has the capability for producing an immersive, interactive experience, the overall narrative experience of the World of Warcraft player has expanded beyond its intended structure. The player’s in-game experience is increasingly carried over into his out-of-world reality, as his virtual experiences and his real experiences meet head-to-head. The fundamental interaction of the player with the game environment has shifted, and the player has taken on an interactive role as author and designer both in the virtual world and outside of the virtual world. This new type of interactive player experience has eliminated any chance for full immersion in the virtual world. Instead, the MMORPG player interacts with in-game and out-of-game realities simultaneously, in an engaged affective experience.
CONCLUSION

The rise of the game studies in the academic world has paralleled the rise of video games in popular culture. From the time of their introduction, video games have held a place in the world of popular culture and entertainment. As the player base continues to expand, it is important to think about the role that video games fill in culture. Video games clearly illustrate the culture of simulation in which we live. Video games teach their players about the world of virtuality. Massively multi-player online role-playing games (MMORPGs), in particular, encourage their players to inhabit virtual worlds. Available MMORPG environments in use today range from medieval fantasy worlds to distant space galaxies to urban superhero environments. These worlds transgress their virtual boundaries as their players continue their virtual interactions in their everyday lives. Some players create online and in-person forums to discuss their virtual worlds. Other players join together in massive conference sessions devoted to the particular virtual world they inhabit. A whole class of players has attempted to make a real world living off of their exchanges in virtual economies.⁵ All of these players are engaged in one activity – the extension of the virtual world into real life.

With approximately 10-20 million players, according to Castronova’s counts, virtual worlds are becoming an important force in culture that deserves to be examined. Key player demographics such as the average age of the gamer (29), the percentage of the US population over the age of 6 that plays videogames (50%), and the percentage of

⁵ See Edward Castronova’s Synthetic Worlds and Julian Dibbell’s Play Money for a detailed analysis of this phenomenon.
overall gamers that are female (43%) may surprise some and certainly attest to the
growing popularity of the virtual worlds phenomenon (Castronova 51). In a 2001 study
of Norrath, the world of the popular MMORPG Everquest, Castronova finds players that
are immersed in the virtual worlds to a surprising degree. Castronova identifies that 20% of
the 3,916 respondents to his survey agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “I live
in Norrath but I travel outside of it regularly”(58). That means that there are players who
identify more with the virtual, synthetic world than they do with the real world. As
Castronova finds, these individuals are more likely the “average” person than one might
think. He states, “There are few differences between the fully immersed and the less
immersed. The residents are somewhat less likely to be married or caring for children,
but not dramatically so. Both groups are above college age. Both consist primarily of
workers, not students. Both earn reasonable monthly incomes. Both groups are
overwhelmingly male” (60). Castronova goes on to identify the amount of time spent in
the world of Norrath by both the self-identified “Residents” and the self-identified
“Visitors”. Both groups spend a similar amount of time in the world and, as Castronova
states, “In terms of time investment, both groups seem to be heavily immersed in
Norrath” (60). This speaks towards the level of engagement and immersion that is
possible in virtual world. Players are gravitating towards these spaces.

There is the idea that a virtual world is more than a game. For Castronova, a
virtual world is not only a game, but also a “forum for communication”(68). In his view,
it is the capability for word-communication and bodily-communication (through an
avatar) that lends the new virtual worlds increased realism and immersive capability.
This capability for realism, communication, and interaction in a play-like context creates a unique experience. Castronova states, “For the first time, humanity has not one but many worlds in which to live. We are no longer stuck with the Game of Life as we receive it from our ancestors. We can make a new one, almost however we like. The human systems on old Earth are comparable to the human systems emerging on terrains created inside machines” (70). The potential for synthetic worlds lies in this ability to mimic the real world and provide a comparable, alternative space for players to inhabit.

Interactivity within the virtual world is critical to the creation of an engaging and immersive virtual environment. The need for experimentation in virtual environments has been identified and discussed as a leading motivator of participants. In discussing the motivations of players of virtual environments, Richard Bartle divides players into four categories: explorers, socializers, achievers, and controllers (qtd. in Castronova 72). This analysis, completed in 1979, proved useful for an early analysis of players of synthetic worlds. Nick Yee further extends this analysis and identifies five categories of motivation for players in the MMORPG: achievement, relationship, immersion, escapism, and manipulation (2). While some of these categories echo the player types introduced by Bartle, others add a new element to the conversation and provide for a more nuanced understanding of the motivations of MMORPG players. Each individual can have a different experience of the virtual environment and there is no universal motivating factor. An understanding of the types of activity being done in these environments and the multiple motivations of players will lead to an understanding of why MMORPG environments are being so heavily used.
As we have seen, virtual worlds offer an expanded opportunity for an entirely new class of interactions, from the participation in expanded in-world choices, to the creation of player-generated narratives that extend into the out-of-world experience. This expanded level of interactivity has corresponded with a new type of immersive experience. Immersion can best be described on a continuum, with engagement on one end and immersion on the other. Players can be seen interacting with virtual worlds both as complete, immersive fictional environments and as interactive texts within a larger transmedia environment. As we noted, the player’s in-game experience is increasingly carried over into his out-of-world reality, as his virtual experiences and his real experiences meet head-to-head. The player constantly moves through the porous membrane separating the in-world experience from the out-of-world experience. This constant motion between environments defines the cognitive experience of the player, as this motion shapes the way interactivity and immersion function for the player in the virtual world environment.
APPENDIX A

Figure 1

THE SCARLET CRUSADE
You'll be happy to know we appear to be making progress in the mine, thanks in no small part to your efforts. We can now turn our eyes to other concerns.

My scouts have reported that a detachment of the Scarlet Crusade is setting up a camp southeast of here. The Scarlet Crusade is a despicable organization that hunts us, and they will not rest until every undead—Lich King's Scourge or no—is destroyed. We must strike first!

Be careful, their unholy zeal makes them dangerous adversaries.

QUEST OBJECTIVES
Bring Executor Arren 12 Scarlet Armbands from Scarlet Converts and Scarlet Initiates.

REWARDS
APPENDIX B

Figure 1

See attached video clip (etd_kb339_Appendix_B_Figure1.mov).
APPENDIX B

Figure 2
APPENDIX C

Figure 1
APPENDIX D

Figure 1

See attached video clip (etd_kb339_Appendix_D_Figure1.mov).
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