

Interpretation, Conflict and Instruction in Online Multiplayer Games: Lessons from Warsong Gulch

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Abstract: In this chapter a particular perspective on cooperative play in multiplayer online games is presented, and the complexity of interpretation, conflict, competition and player-to-player instruction is discussed. The methodology used is retrospective textual analysis based on the playing of approximately 600 rounds of Warsong Gulch for pleasure between 2008 and 2010. A rationale for this methodology is provided, and its theoretical underpinnings are specified. The difficulties inherent to the evaluation of research strategies in an inter-disciplinary field are noted. It is acknowledged that online games are populated, social spaces, and argued that theories of textuality are nevertheless pertinent because of the manner in which players are available to one another during a game, and because players' arguments during play indicate the presence of multiple and even conflicting interpretations. The analysis leads into a discussion about what constitutes violence in this context, and the problems inherent to differentiating between competitive and collaborative play. It is argued that there is a relationship between conflicting interpretation, and player-to-player pedagogy.

Introduction

Player 1: wtf...
Player 2: wtf
Player 3: opps...lol

Players argue about goals, strategy, equipment and etiquette. They disagree about what constitutes competence, and how expertise might be demonstrated and assessed. My interest in these conflicts grew out of our earlier research into learning practices in *World of Warcraft*, during which it became clear that players' management of shifting levels of expertise and incompatible expectations required effort and tact (Carr and Oliver, 2009). Most of our interviewees, for example, had witnessed or taken part in arguments about loot, strategy, preferences and skills. Within an ongoing relationship there is presumably some motivation to avoid or at least manage these tensions. This is one reason why it is interesting to look at the conflicts that occur within randomly assembled groups of players, such as the teams that take part in 'Battleground' games in *World of Warcraft (WoW)*. These tensions are examined in this chapter. The social nature of online gaming is obvious - and the relevance of research strategies affiliated with the social sciences is equally obvious. Yet approaches associated with the 'Humanities' are also rele-

vant. For instance, it is arguable that theories of textuality are applicable because of the ways that players are present to one another during a game, and because players themselves argue about what is going on.

Battlegrounds are small areas set apart from *WoW* as a whole, where volunteers join teams to play a short, intense game that offers player versus player (PVP) combat. Warsong Gulch (WG) is the smallest and most accessible of *WoW*'s battlegrounds. Players enter Warsong Gulch to play a version of 'capture the flag' [1] and despite the limits of the game-space (a field and two opposing forts) and the apparently clear rules, and the obvious goals (capture the opposition's flag three times, while defending your own) conflicts frequently erupt within teams over what constitutes effective and valid play. These quarrels can manifest as typed tantrums that combine evident frustration with attempts at instruction. It will be argued that these conflicts point to the complexity of theorising interpretation in online multiplayer games, and indicate the difficulties inherent to the conceptualizing of learning, tutoring, pleasure and aggression in this context.

Background

MMORPGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games) such as *World of Warcraft* are designed to accommodate different tastes and different levels of commitment. Players have the option to take part in PVP combat, form casual groups to undertake missions while levelling up their characters, and join guilds to collaboratively battle the game's monsters ('player versus environment' or PVE). Players might focus on collectables, (the attainment of gear, pets, achievements, for example). There are ample opportunities to chat and socialize, pose, contribute to events, or undertake solo adventures. These options are not mutually exclusive. As this variability suggests, there are different ways to play the game – and different ways to study it.

It is unsurprising, then, that the game studies literature on MMORPGs is methodologically diverse. As might be expected, there is generally a relationship between the manner in which the game is conceptualized (as a text or a social space, for example), the disciplinary affiliation of the analysts involved, and their research design: the evidence used, the types of questions asked, and the kinds of problems investigated. Perspectives informed by the humanities, for example, have been used to explore intertextuality and myth in *WoW* (Krzywinska 2006, 2007) as well as representations of warfare (MacCallum-Stewart, 2008) and depictions of in-world ethnicity (Langer, 2008). Analysis of this kind is generally undertaken from the perspective of the player-analyst[2], which is a relatively common and uncontroversial approach (Corneliussen and Rettberg, 2008). There is also MMORPG research literature that is methodologically affiliated with the social sciences. For example, quantitative studies of player activities have been published. See, for instance, Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell and Moore's paper (2006) for a large-scale study of patterns of play, preference and levelling rates. There are al-

so indications in the game's Terms of Service that its developers, Blizzard, conduct research while monitoring the game and its players in various ways. See Williams (in press, 2010) for an insight into developer's research practices, an account of the resources demanded by quantitative research and the challenges involved in managing data sets on this scale.

Other social scientific research on MMORPGs is more qualitative and interpretive. For instance, participant observation perspectives from ethnography have informed research into player communities (see T.L Taylor's 2006 book length study, *Play Between Worlds*) and their learning practices (see Nick Taylor's 'Periscopic Play', 2008, for a discussion of this literature). The research on learning, expertise and mentoring in game worlds often emphasizes the social nature of MMORPGs, with a particular focus on very committed players involved in tightly co-ordinated group activities. Within the literature on player communities there is a tendency to look at either helpful play (cooperation, mentoring, guilds, learning in games – see Galarneau, 2005; White, 2010) or what might be described as unhelpful or anti-social play, including 'griefing' and cheating (Chee, 2005; Lin and Sun, 2005). These generally implicit good play/bad play distinctions are another reason why gaming in Warsong Gulch is worth investigating. In Warsong Gulch, team-mates might fight each other while collaboratively combating the opposition, and instruction is frequently entangled with what might be described as aggression.

Methodology

This analysis is textual, opportunistic and retrospective. It is based on time spent in Warsong Gulch for pleasure. Whether casual play undertaken for the sake of pleasure constitutes a legitimate basis from which to generate analysis is open to discussion. To be coherent, however, the criteria used during any such assessment would need to be compatible with the disciplinary and conceptual framing of this research.

Casual players such as myself rarely feature in the MMORPG literature, and yet the capacity to please casual players is one of the reasons for *WoW*'s mainstream success (Ducheneaut *et al*, 2006). There are reports that a committed or 'hardcore' gaming persona is associated with credibility in some game studies circles (Taylor, N., 2008), and yet the specifics of such categorizations remain elusive. For instance, levelling up to level 80 (the current ceiling in *WoW*) simply involves the performance of repetitive actions. That is why it is popularly referred to as 'grinding'. It suggests a familiarity with the game, but arguably that is all it suggests, because despite the clear labelling of characters according to their experience level, skill and ability are variously constituted and measured in *WoW* (Carr and Oliver, 2009). Even within PVP battlegrounds, skills and commitment are difficult to assess. For example, a low level character might arrive in Warsong Gulch wearing excellent gear or carrying particularly powerful weapons. This would indicate that

the player concerned is familiar with particular aspects of *WoW* as a whole (available resources, methods of acquisition, etc.). Plus, good gear grants characters bonus powers, which may lead to high scores, which could be seen as indicative of skilled play. Yet it is not unusual to see well-equipped characters playing badly. Perhaps their equipment was purchased rather than awarded. Perhaps the player is accustomed to playing a particular class (say, a hunter) and is experimenting with a new character and class (a priest or rogue, for example). Or perhaps the player levelled up his or her previous characters while playing against the game's monsters, which means that he or she has had limited experience of fighting against other players. Battlegrounds are split into decade bands (10-19, 20-29, etc.), and one of the interesting things about the level 10-19 band (the main locale of this study) is that it potentially mixes experienced players using new characters, with new players levelling up a character for the first time. For all of these reasons, firmly establishing the commitment or the experience level of players during a game is not possible, and thus - in this particular context - any claim that rested on a distinction being made between casual and committed players (or, indeed, player-analysts) might prove unsustainable [3]. While the focus on the level 10-19 band shapes this analysis, it is difficult to determine to what extent. I have played in different bands and it is not my experience that more coherent, goal-directed play is common at higher levels or in different battlegrounds - even if it seems that it should be.

Warsong Gulch is a pleasure to replay because of the amusing and unpredictable actions of my fellow players. It is a populated space and a social event. However, my pleasure in the game is also connected to my knowing that other players do not encounter 'me' in any recognizable sense. They encounter a hybrid agent: a mix of prerogative, acts, typed chat, game rules and software programming that manifests on screen as - for example - an armed and dangerous Horde-affiliated hunter accompanied by a wolf-sized spider. Likewise, it is important to my experience (and integral to my pleasure in the game) that the players I interact with are just as heavily 'filtered' or mediated - whether I encounter them as a blood elf accomplice, or as a pink-haired gnome assassin. Thankfully the convention in WG is to communicate by 'chat', which means that players converse using typed text that appears in a text-box or window in the corner of the screen, rather than using their voices [4]. There are certainly times when references to real-world events appear in chat (during the World Cup, or the Eurovision Song Contest for example), but these are fleeting and unusual. Games in Warsong Gulch last a maximum of 25 minutes and it is generally the case that the chat that is typed during that time will refer to the game in progress. I have not conducted follow-up interviews or analysed material from the forums. For all of these reasons, during play itself, and for the purposes of this analysis, my fellow players are only available in terms of how they are 'implied' (Chatman, 1978 p 151) by the phenomena that is on screen, which is accessed from the situated perspective of the player-analyst, and focalized (Genette, 1980) through the player-analyst's character - in the sense that the location of my character in the game determines to some extent what I see of the

game. This is consistent with the conceptual framework evoked and the methodology employed.

This is humanities-styled analysis directed at the game as text. In this instance, the theory that underpins this approach is drawn from some of Roland Barthes' work, which I consider useful because it enables me to provisionally distinguish between - and then combine - structural and textual analysis (see Carr, 2009). Barthes writes that textual analysis 'tries to say no longer from where the text comes (historical criticism), nor even how it is made (structural analysis), but how it is unmade, how it explodes, disseminates - by what coded paths it goes off.' (1977, p 127). Barthes explains that 'textual analysis is founded on reading rather than on the objective structure of the text, the latter being more the province of structural analysis' (p. 131). Based on these particular definitions - and he has others - the structural aspects of this analysis will relate to the elements of a game that could, in theory, repeat when the game is replayed. This includes the game-space, the interface and the rules, for instance. Depending on how the game is played in any given round, some of these features would be present and actualized, others might remain moot. Meanwhile, following Barthes again, the textual analysis of *WoW* will involve looking at how each game is 'is unmade, how it explodes' during play. The procedures employed here combine structural and textual analysis to explore the game as an ephemeral text that is collectively actualized by players through and during play.

The research strategy employed has limitations in terms of the kinds of questions that might be addressed, and the claims that might be made. Furthermore, it needs to be acknowledged that my fellow players are people even if I experience them as trolls, gnomes and elves operating in a fictive space, and despite my having retrospectively constructed them as textual figments for the sake of analysis. This work is not social science (see White, 2002, for a discussion of humanities research, ethics and Internet studies) but there are still obligations to be considered, and a description of game-participants suggested by Bernard Suits can be used to clarify these. According to Suits, 'Triflers recognize rules but not goals, cheats recognize goals but not rules, players recognize both rules and goals, and spoilsports recognize neither rules nor goals' (Suits 2005 p 60). During the game I invest in the game's outcome, and I 'recognize both rules and goals'. If I had set myself alternative goals (such as monitoring a fellow player for the sake of observation) or if I ran tests of some description, or conducted experiments of one kind or another then - as well as being ethically problematic in terms of consent, intrusion and privacy - I would be moving away from the role of player, and closer to the role of either trifler or spoilsport. In which case the term 'player-analyst' would no longer be appropriate.

The game

This analysis is based on the playing of approximately 600 rounds of *Warsong Gulch* for pleasure between 2008 and 2010 on different English language/European servers, using a range of characters drawn from most but not all of the possible classes (hunter, paladin healer or warlock, for example) and most of the Horde affiliated 'races' (usually troll, undead or blood elf). The rules have changed during this period, and the game changes every time it is played, so the notion of producing a representative account of the game as it unfolds during play is problematic. What follows is an indicative composite based on playing the game repeatedly. Fragments of chat have been incorporated. While playing I do not save either the combat log or the chat log, although I take occasional screenshots (as do other players, see links provided in the notes). During the game players can chat with team-mates, but they cannot 'talk' to the opposing team. There may be no visual connection between chat and a character, which means that I (or my character, at least) might be busy on the rooftop of our fort reading chat being typed by a team-mate whose character is located mid-field.

To play in Warsong Gulch I log-in to *World of Warcraft* and then click on an onscreen prompt to join a queue. Once enough players are available, our characters are transported to the battleground. Each game is made up of two teams of ten players (one Horde, one Alliance). Teams begin the game in their own fort, with their own flag. Members of the team will be pulled from different servers. Any team's composition is largely left to chance. Generally it will be a mix of sexes, classes and species. Once volunteers are transported into the Gulch there is a short waiting period before the game begins, during which players might greet each other by character name, request and share buffs (cast temporary spells that offer protection or increased power), compare gear, or just stand around. Once the game begins, the gates are thrown open and the teams charge onto the field. Some players might stay in a group and directly assault the opposition's fort in an attempt to grab their flag. Others peel away to engage in battle mid-field. As the game continues some of the fighting will be closely connected to the overarching game goals (defend our flag, capture their flag). Some combat will be self-defence, and quite a lot of it will be fighting for the sake of fighting, fun and/or point scoring. Information including damage, healing and kills are tracked on a scoreboard (a separate screen) that can be checked during battle, but there are valid contributions to team success that are not rated. 'Crowd control', for example, involves casting spells that immobilize the enemy in useful ways, but cause little damage. Losing a fight usually means a character being 'killed'. Death in the Gulch means spending up to 30 seconds as a ghost in a graveyard waiting to be resurrected.

Events vary from game to game but after the initial rush it is possible that both teams will possess the opposition's flag. Each team may be attempting to carry it back to their respective forts. Things often unravel at about this point. A certain lack of unified purpose becomes apparent. Flag carriers are left undefended. Enemy flag carriers are ignored. Players are not working together, and things start

falling apart. If this happens it is not unusual for the combat on the field (fireballs, arrows, swords, axes and curses) to begin to be accompanied by conflict within the team itself. Orders, instruction, critique, directives and appeals for assistance appear in the on-screen chat box[5]. The relative value of different tactics is debated: “ffs if all u do is def [defend] how the hell do u expect to win?”. *WoW* has a default language filter (which it never occurred to me to turn off) as well as rules about using rude words in chat, so swearing is represented by initials or punctuation symbols. Calls for information are issued, some of which is quite general (“where the !@%\$ is everybody?”) and some which are more targeted (“dude, where are you running?”). Encouragement and advice are imparted (“GO GET FLAG don’t die...go get flag ffs” or “go go go go go go go go !!@%\$ GO GO GO GO GO”). There are elements of peer assessment (“we suck” or “good job!”) and reflection: “FFS – how hard can it be?” Team-mates share strategies, such as “great now get def or attack!” as well as observations and suggestions: “We’re gonna lose...go def dammit”. Players also offer one another more personalised forms of tutoring: “goddamit, rogue you’ve got !@%\$ stuns...use them on the healer”.

As these quotes suggests, some of the chatting in *Warsong Gulch* involves instruction. To take a single example in more detail:

Player A: Don’t sheep him you noob mother%\$£&£!

Player A’s suggestion was made during a group confrontation, where the opposing team had successfully attacked our base and an enemy character was in the process of carrying off our flag. I was new to Battlegrounds at the time, and I was playing a mage. I temporarily stalled the enemy flag carrier by magically transforming him into a sheep. Player A is suggesting that casting this particular spell is an ineffective strategy (‘Don’t sheep him’) and a sign of inexperience (‘noob’) and generally a bad thing (hence the swearing). Player A’s disapproval appears to be fuelled by his/her knowledge of the game’s rules. Changing characters into sheep will slow them down, but characters heal more quickly while in sheep form. So in this case, using the sheep spell was considered counterproductive because it restored the enemy agent that my team-mates were attempting to kill. While the statement is blunt it still qualifies as instruction, and the player that the comment was directed at did learn: I learnt to be careful about the use of a particular spell. I did not experience the comment as abuse. It stung, but it felt ‘fair enough’ because it was coherent in terms of game rules. It is also arguable that outbursts like this enrich game-play by injecting urgency, risk and drama.

Poor play (such as ignoring an enemy flag carrier as she runs past you) can provoke and frustrate team-mates, and yet player reactions are inconsistent and unpredictable. It is not uncommon to see players attempt to direct a team or dominate other players. But these attempts often fail. Players trying to lead might be followed temporarily, or they might be ignored. Rude or tyrannical players are told to ‘shut up’. I have witnessed disgruntled team-mates rebel by threatening to return the flag to the opposition. I have seen players go on strike by electing to remain in ghost form rather than resurrect. Judging by the decidedly mixed quality

of advice that is on offer, the players who issue it are not always experts. In fact, some players appear to start coaching and issuing orders precisely because they have a limited grasp of what is going on, and misplaced expectations as regards their status.

Every game is different. Often, after a period of relative chaos, players will seem to recall the overarching goals ('capture the flag') and begin to work together. A trio of players might spontaneously team-up to attack the enemy base and reclaim a stolen flag. An ambushed healer will cast a last minute spell that allows an injured character to survive and score. A small group of determined defenders will thwart an assault on a vulnerable flag carrier. These moments of drama, doom and glory are particular to a given round of the game, but the pleasures generated are fuelled by accumulated experience. The intense satisfaction experienced when things all come together seems owed in part to all those times that things went wrong.

The game ends when one of the teams has scored three times, or after 25 minutes of play. The scoreboard flashes up, and then characters are returned to wherever server and location in the wider game world that they came from. The player can opt to immediately join the queue to return to the Gulch. If the player takes part in a string of games at a single sitting, he or she may re-encounter some characters, but this is not guaranteed.

Discussion

One of the attractions of Warsong Gulch is that it provides an arena for casual PVP combat. Different character classes have different skill sets (some classes specialize in melee fighting, while others inflict damage at a distance, and others have the power to heal). Rules determine a character's repertoire of actions and hence the actions available to a player. As part of a discussion on the topic of contested interpretation and attempted instruction within WG, it is interesting to think about the co-presence of rules and what might be described as aggression. This aggression takes two main forms. There is the clubbing, axing, freezing, stabbing, exploding, trapping and poisoning that takes place on the field between opposing teams. These are the actions on screen that look like violence. Then there is the arguing and name-calling that happens within teams using chat.

This doubling suggests one of the reasons why it is difficult to satisfactorily conceptualize 'violence' in games (in addition to problems relating to the apparent lack of physical damage). For the sake of this discussion what I want to look at is the idea that consent is a key constituent of play as a voluntary activity (see Salen and Zimmerman, 2005 p. 79; and especially Goldstein 2005 p 344, p 353), and that violence as a concept does not co-exist easily with consent. These are complicated issues to work with but what I wish to suggest is quite straightforward: If A and B decide to wrestle, then that might be 'rough play', but if A tackles and wrestles with B against B's wishes, then this might be violence (although the meanings

of the act would depend on other phenomena including the context and the actors). To return to Warsong Gulch: the actions on screen that look most like violence are rule-bound. When you engage in PVP combat, you are taking part in a rule-based exchange of game resources (where certain attacks do particular kinds of damage, and armour offers particular kinds of protection, etc.). You have volunteered to take part and – providing that you are familiar with the game’s rules – it is reasonably clear what it is that you are consenting to.

What happens in the chat-window, on the other hand, is much less rule-bound, and less predictable. Consent is still implied (because it is a game and players can log out) but the terms of consent are not as explicit. Consent is less informed. If the chat-fighting is less consenting and less voluntary, does this mean that the chat-based aggression could be considered as ‘more violent’ than the graphically rendered combat? Does this mean, in turn, that there might be more violence on the game’s forums than in its battlegrounds – or that virtual worlds such as *Second Life* could be experienced as more violent than games like *World of Warcraft*? This raises questions about what it is generally meant by the notion of violence in computer games within popular discourse and in academic research, which is interesting because ‘Variations in the nature of video game “violence” have rarely been studied’ (Goldstein, 2005 p 341). Similar issues have been raised in discussions about the difficulties associated with attempts to theorise harm and ethics in online multiplayer gaming (Goguen, 2009).

Events in Warsong Gulch also indicate the implausibility of positioning competitive play and collaborative play as if these are easily distinguished and mutually exclusive modes. In Warsong Gulch teams combat the opposition while fighting each other. Yet, a minute later, these same team-mates might be collaborating on screen (while privately and simultaneously competing to inflict the most damage or deliver the most healing according to the game’s score table). The construction of competition and collaboration as polar opposites is particularly prevalent in older ‘girls and games’ literature, where it is also possible to find collaboration framed as feminine, and competition framed as masculine - see Jenson and Castell (2008) for a detailed interrogation of these ideas. On a related note, the manner in which aggression and instruction coexist in WG’s chat window also indicates how simplistic it can be to classify some forms of play or even game genres as ‘good’ (e.g. social, collaborative, incorporating mentoring and learning practices) and others as ‘bad’ (e.g. competitive, aggressive).

T.L. Taylor has demonstrated the importance of identifying evaluative notions that emerge and persist in game studies as a field or a ‘nebula of debates and theories’ (Brown and Dowling 1998 p 20). In her paper about player-made modifications in *World of Warcraft*, for example, Taylor challenges the pervasive assumption that player-generated phenomena are necessarily enabling or liberating. She writes: ‘I want to juxtapose the common language of emergence and productive engagement with game systems – which I think often carries with it an implied notion of positive and ‘freeing’ interaction – with the development, by players, of tools that stratify, surveil, quantify, and regulate their fellow gamers’ (2008 p 195). It is productive to consider Taylor’s points in relation to contested inter-

pretation and pedagogy in the Gulch. As in Taylor's example, players in WG are involved in peer assessment and regulation. These issues are significant, because the kinds of assumptions that Taylor identifies and critiques are surprisingly pervasive. In debates about virtual worlds and inclusion, for example, the focus is nearly always placed on software as either enabling or constraining - while social practices (including the choices that players make that have excluding consequences) are rarely if ever interrogated. For more on these issues and the implications for educators working in virtual worlds, see Carr, 2010.

While it is doubtful that anyone would want to argue that the attempts at coaching found in the Gulch provide us with a model of pedagogy suitable for importing into formal learning contexts, suggestions such as "goddamit, rogue you've got !@%\$ stuns...use them on the healer" do involve instruction. Evidence of instruction is not the same, of course, as evidence of learning and yet my own experience (including the 'sheeping' incident) suggests that learning is a possible outcome. What I wish to consider here, however, is that player-to-player instruction in online games is generally assumed to be enabling, sociable and benevolent. This analysis of gaming in Warsong Gulch, with its focus on conflicting interpretation, suggests an alternative viewpoint, through which a player's pedagogic efforts could be seen as involving an attempt to impose a particular interpretation on his or her fellow players. This perspective is also relevant to the earlier referenced concepts of textuality, especially the idea that the actualization of the game-as-text during play involves a kind of explosion of potential meanings. The implication would be that in-game pedagogues are striving to channel these potentials in a particular direction - one that aligns with their preferred interpretation.

The feral pedagogies of the Gulch might be associated with attempts to control meaning, but authority in Warsong Gulch is never straightforward. There are the rules of the game, the various goals, team-mate's tastes and prerogatives, enemies, victory, death, and the perceived expertise and incompetence of fellow players to be considered. Players (and player-analysts) will construct and enact their personal versions of authenticity and meaning selectively, according to their situated perspective and interpretive resources. As argued, players' attempts at leadership via chat could be interpreted as an effort to impose a particular interpretation on their peers. It does not follow that the outcome of these efforts is predictable. As a player, I appreciate these attempts because they so often enrich the experience of play by backfiring. I want to suggest that rather than ruining or closing down the meaning of the game, these efforts to exercise authority and regulate meaning bring the game to life. These attempts are delicious because they are repeated, and because they repeatedly fail, and in the process they create a fractured dance where authority is constantly evoked and yet persistently thwarted.

Conclusion

In this chapter a version of textual analysis was described. This approach involved conceptualizing the online, multiplayer game as an ephemeral text that is collectively actualized by players. Through analysis it was possible to show that collaboration, competition, pedagogy and aggravation are thoroughly entangled during play. It became clear that players interpret the game in different ways. It was also argued that player-to-player pedagogy is a response to this variability; that instruction can be viewed as the attempted imposition of a particular interpretation of the game on fellow participants. It does not follow that such efforts should be regarded as sinister, especially given that they so frequently fail. What these attempts at order do indicate, however, is the complexity of interpretation in this context, and the applicability of Barthes' work on textuality. As noted, Barthes (1977, p 127) refers to textual analysis as the study of how a text 'is unmade, how it explodes, disseminates [or] goes off' when it is accessed and enacted – and this is suggestive of the pleasures and chaos, mess, fall-out, tensions and conflicts encountered in Warsong Gulch.

Players in Warsong Gulch frequently disagree about the game they are playing, while they are playing it. These conflicts indicate the challenges involved in attempts to theorise meaning and interpretation in digital games. These challenges are theoretical as well as methodological. A holistic account of meaning would seem to call for a range of research strategies, each of which would target a particular phase or aspect of the relationship between game and player (from design and production contexts on one pole, to contexts of reception on the other). If that is the case, then it suggests that it would be practical to share this labour across the field, and nonsensical to insist that any single methodology (or single book chapter) could satisfactorily address the entire spectrum. Textual analysis undertaken from the perspective of player-analyst is one useful strategy, among an array of viable strategies, through which it is possible to examine aspects of online games and issues of interpretation.

Notes

[1] There are many clips of Warsong Gulch game-play online at <http://www.youtube.com/> (try searching under 'warsong gulch tutorial' for example). An overview of the game that incorporates screenshots submitted by players is online at: <http://www.worldofwarcraft.com/PVP/battlegrounds/info-warsong.html> (accessed August 2010).

[2] Arguments about the 'player-analyst' as methodological strategy need to be considered alongside a more general issue, which is that - broadly speaking - those affiliated with the humanities do not engage with matters of methodology to the same extent or in the same way as those based in the social sciences. The point is

that different disciplines have different conventions, and it would be conceptually inconsistent to use criteria developed in one disciplinary context (relating to measures of validity or rigour, for example) to critique analysis that is obviously affiliated with another. It is noted, also, that there are questions pertaining to the notion of player-analyst that invite further consideration, including the issue of ethics. There is a great deal of literature on online communities research and ethics – much of which assumes a ‘human subject’ model of research. Natasha Whiteman’s work in this area has resonance for humanities-orientated player-analysts, because she writes about the need for the ongoing, reflexive development of an ethical research stance, rather than the simple adherence to any particular policy or guidelines (Whiteman, in press 2010). Furthermore, it is noted that there are many aspects of WG that might fall within the remit of ‘textual analysis’ (sounds, visuals, colours, character depictions) that are not addressed in this particular analysis.

[3] I do not discuss cheating, ‘pre-made’ teams or ‘xp off’ Battlegrounds in this paper. Changes to the rules of battlegrounds during 2009 meant that previously obvious indications of commitment became less evident, because the more blatant indicators of specialist PVP skills including ‘twinks’ (high powered, low level characters) became less common. For examples of rule changes see *World of Warcraft* Client Patch 3.2.0 (08-04-2009)..
<http://www.worldofwarcraft.com/patchnotes/patch3p2.html#3.2.0>

[4] Regarding chat, text and the use of ‘voice’ in online games: I am deaf/HoH so I would not use voice in games anyway - but why would anyone want to? For one thing, witnessing a bossy elf feuding via typed chat with an inept yet self-righteous orc can be funny. Surely having to listen to people yelling at one another would not be. Additionally, the use of voice might reveal demographic information of various kinds including class, gender, nationality or age for instance – some of which might be used as ammunition by a game’s dimmer participants. My skepticism regarding the virtues of using voice in games is one reason why I am not persuaded by attempts to tie concepts such as presence, immediacy, realism and immersion within online worlds with the framing of voice use as ‘natural’ and the erasure (or – the perceived erasure at least) of a mediating interface. It does not help that all these concepts tend to be weakly defined, even in research that claims to measure such phenomena. An associated problem with the ‘disappearing interface equals increased presence or more immersion, etc.’ arguments is that they nearly always assume and hence normalize particular kinds of bodies and particular kinds of embodied perspective while inadvertently positioning ‘others’ as deviant and impaired. For further discussion of these issues see Carr and Oliver, 2010. This ties also to points made later in this chapter in relation to excluding practices within online communities – see, for example, this forum entry:
http://www.threadmeters.com/pl3yVL/Deaf_player_cant_use_voice/. Finally, if text chat involves a layer of mediation or even disguise, it is interesting to specu-

late about links between perceived disguise and the anxieties relating to relative status expressed by some players.

[5] Some text-chat abbreviations are translated here:

http://www.webopedia.com/quick_ref/textmessageabbreviations.asp (accessed August 2010). Information about language filters and Blizzard's policy on harassment is online here

http://us.blizzard.com/support/article.xml?locale=en_US&articleId=20455 (accessed August 2010) and here: <http://www.worldofwarcraft.com/info/basics/chat-other.html> (accessed August 2010)

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