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"At least I'm not Chinese, gay, or female": Marginalized voices in *World of Warcraft*

1 Introduction

World of Warcraft, the world's most popular massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG), is a virtual world set in a fantasy-style environment where millions of players from around the world can interact with each other through avatars and in the game's multiple text chat channels. The game has existed since 2004 with multiple game expansions and additions to the story and world, which has created an ongoing gaming experience for the players. Because of its relatively long history and international player base, *World of Warcraft* provides an interesting site for analysis of player interaction and identity; by acting through an avatar and text chat, players can remain relatively anonymous, which can provide an element of identity leveling and play (Paasonen 2005).

However, the setting of *World of Warcraft* is not immersive due to one particular aspect of player interaction, which is the widespread adoption of voice chat to facilitate communication. Because much of the control of the avatar is done with the keyboard in addition to using the same keyboard for typing in text chat, players have adopted voice chat using various voice-over-IP software programs to facilitate communication while playing the game. This use of communication technology intersects with a widespread stereotype of the identity of the average player of online games. The use of the voice adds additional information to the communication context and removes part of the anonymity of communication in the game, leading to identity-based repercussions for players who do not fit the stereotype of the average player. This chapter investigates how communicative mode – the use of text versus voice chat – interacts with certain stigmatized identities in *World of Warcraft* and how players develop strategies of communication to mitigate the negative repercussions of revealing their identities. Furthermore, this work explores the implications of silencing the marked voices and identities in the game.

To illustrate how communication type and identity interact, I will first provide an example in the form of a narrative of an event from my ethnographic study of *World of Warcraft*. Following this narrative, I will explain the methodology used to collect such narratives and experiences from players of the game, and

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then provide some background information about the research on language use in virtual worlds that informed this study. The subsequent analysis section first presents background and observations about two groups of players who do not fit the stereotype of a WoW player: players who are not male and/or not heterosexual, and players who are not American or not American-sounding. To conclude the analysis section, the strategies employed by these two groups when communicating in *World of Warcraft* are presented. The chapter ends with discussions of implications of these strategies on perceptions of the voice and identity of the player base.

1.1 Ethnographic introduction

You are an average player of the online game *World of Warcraft*, and you log in one night to play and find an invitation appearing on your in-game chat box. It's from another player, one named Stragos, who you met a few nights ago while you were both trying to kill a particularly annoying creature that was roaming the virtual countryside. Stragos has invited you to a raid, which is a large co-operative event involving many players who work together to defeat a series of resilient enemies called *bosses*. You accept his invitation.

The next thing that appears on your screen is a flood of orange and red colored text chat, full of unfamiliar names in the middle of a familiar discussion – the roles of the players in the raid – but then conversation turns to you and your character.

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[Raid] Stragos: This guy is a hunter I met a couple of days ago
and can fill our last DPS spot.

[Raid] Minky: k, we need a hunter for CC on the trash

[Raid] Andersonz: ok as long as ur not a huntard too bad

[Raid] Xternal: Hey hunter, nice pet, is that the wolf from
Blades Edge?
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Stragos has vouched for you, Minky appreciates your character's relevant skills, and Xternal has demonstrated a friendly interest in your character choices, but this is all accompanied by the insult "huntard." This term is a common derogatory name for hunter-type characters in the game, made from a blend of "hunter" and "retard" and intended to disparage the playing ability of people who play those types of characters. Before you can type anything in reply, Stragos moves things along.

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[Raid] Stragos: VENT INFO ALL ON VENT NOW
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Vent, short for *Ventrilo*, is a voice chat platform used by many *World of Warcraft* groups to coordinate raids. Since raid events are fast-paced and require players to make extensive use of their keyboards to control their characters, another method of communication outside of the text chat box is often preferred. Voice chat in the form of Ventrilo is the preferred mode of communication for this group. You already have this software installed on your computer from previous raids and you have a headset that helps you hear and talk to the other raid members, and you quickly load the program and type in the access information.

You listen for a few moments to the chat room where the other members of your raid are talking. Stragos (indicated by his name on the Ventrilo screen) and several other voices (all male and American-sounding) are discussing the finer points of positioning of the group during the first fight.

"Hey new guy," says another American male voice that you don't recognize, "have you done this fight before?" You look at your Ventrilo information and see that it is Andersonz, the player who called you a "huntard" just moments ago.

Now you must make a decision.

You have a microphone right by your mouth. Do you speak your answer?

The response depends on your experience in *World of Warcraft* and your own identity. Are you an American male like the rest of the people talking in the chat channel? If you are, like many of the men I interviewed for my ethnography of *World of Warcraft*, then you are likely to engage your microphone and speak your response without worry. If you are not like the American males in the channel, other considerations come into play surrounding whether you will speak your reply or not.

My in-game friend, Mork, would often say that he preferred to type his responses as opposed to speaking them into voice chat because it was loud where he was and people could never hear him due to background noise. The actual reason, as he explained to me long after we became friends, was because other players claimed to have a hard time understanding his non-native English.

Donnal, a member of the group that I studied, never talked on voice chat outside of our guild, because, as he explained, he often felt "like a zoo animal on display," even sometimes "uncomfortably sexualized by the way people reacted" to his Scottish English variety (see Cutler's chapter in this volume for more discussion of the Scottish English variety).

Theon, a gay American man, confided that he had no problem speaking in voice chat, but he would avoid talking at length with people that he did not know very well because he was afraid that his gay-sounding speech would slip into the conversation.

In this particular situation, I responded like this:

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[Raid] Parnopaeus: Sorry, my mic isn't working for some reason.
I have done this fight several times and I always stand way back
against the wall.
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My microphone was working fine, but I did not want to speak to this group of men – one of whom had already insulted me by calling my character a "huntard." The reason was that I did not want this group of men to hear my female-sounding voice and deduce, correctly, that I am a woman. In my limited experience in the game at the time that this happened, I already knew that to use my voice to speak over Ventrilo was to invite, at best, disbelieving comments about my gender ("whoa girls actually play *WoW*?" was a common reaction to my voice) or, at worst, months of unwanted advances and in-game sexual harassment.

Players who are not American males, meaning that they are female or Chinese or Scottish or even speak a non-standard variety of American English, are far more likely to avoid using voice chat because of these potential repercussions. This chapter is an ethnographic account of this phenomenon: the voluntary self-exclusion of *World of Warcraft* players from a prominent form of communication (voice chat) because of their way of speaking and the marked identities indexed by those voices. Although this exclusionary practice arises out of pragmatic concerns from the players affected, it contributes to the perceived homogeneity of the *World of Warcraft* player base and the erasure of minority identities. The player base of *WoW* is often stereotyped as young adult, white, male, heterosexual Americans, even though the majority of players do not fit into this category (Williams, Yee, and Caplan 2008). Approximately one-third of the *WoW* population is female[1] and most game servers are located outside of the United States, yet these populations are frequently erased or overlooked because many members of these groups of players do not want to admit to their identities for fear of identity-based repercussions. This silencing is part of a historic trend in gaming culture that occurs in many different forms; for example, Anastasia Salter and Bridget Blodgett's (2012) analysis of the silencing of female voices in gaming blogs and forums shows the vitriolic and multimodal quashing of protests from women about the casual use of the word "rape" in game culture.

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1 No reliable demographic numbers exist for *World of Warcraft*. A 2010 study by Schiano et al. found that 34% of players on American servers were female, which is the basis for this statement.

1.2 Method

The source for this paper is a five-year participant-observation ethnography conducted from June 2007 until May 2012 (modeled after ethnographies of virtual worlds such as Boellstorff (2008) in *Second Life*). I spent approximately twenty hours per week playing *World of Warcraft* as a player and member of a guild called <Ragnarok>. A *guild* is a game-sanctioned social structure, organized and run by individual players as a team. Guilds can be groups of friends, people with similar playing styles and goals, or random assortments of players. <Ragnarok> was a guild that was created near the beginning of my ethnography by an in-game friend of mine, and the guild was focused on providing a safe space for female and LGBT-identifying players while also participating in advanced gaming activities such as raids. The guild was the site for the ethnography and my observations include how members interacted within the guild and with the wider *WoW* population. This chapter represents one portion of the ethnographic study; other outcomes of the ethnography include investigation of surveillance tactics (Collister 2014), multimodal communication (Collister 2013), symbol use and semantic shift (Collister 2012, 2011), and discourse structure (Collister 2008).

All of my public and semi-public interactions in text chat were recorded to a text file on my computer using the chat logging function built in to the *WoW* interface. Members of <Ragnarok> were made aware of the research project via posts on the guild's forums and in-game announcements, and all players were given the opportunity to decline to have their text chat included in the study. When possible,[2] players whose text chat is quoted extensively were contacted directly for permission and given another opportunity to opt out. All names included in this chapter are pseudonyms for the names of the characters.

Select voice interactions were recorded with permission from all parties using an audio recorder in the software Ventrilo. Additionally, twenty in-depth participant interviews were conducted with members of the guild, which were transcribed and form the bulk of the data used in this chapter. Finally, I also supply my personal experience and observations as both a regular player and an ethnographer to supplement the insights given by participants.

2 Background: Identity, interaction, and the internet

Early research paints a picture of the internet as a place where identity is fluid and malleable and where all identities are welcomed. Because physical cues are

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2 Some players disappeared from the guild or the game and did not leave any follow-up contact information, so they were not able to be contacted for this secondary form of permission.

filtered out in online contexts (Kiesler, Siegel, and McGuire 1984), scholars like Danet (1998) theorize that communicators are easily able to perform any identity that they choose. Filiciak (2004) suggests that the player's experience in a game like *World of Warcraft* is "an idealized image of the situation of the postmodern human creature, in which a user can freely shape his own 'self'" (90). Similarly, Bessiere, Seay, and Kiesler (2007: 534) suggest that the character in the game is a representation of the "ideal" physical self, that "anonymity and fantasy frees players from the yoke of their real-life history and social situation, allowing them to be more like the person they wish they were." Assertions that the "real self" can be best expressed online insinuate a separation between one's physical identity and one's online identity (e.g., McKenna, Green, and Gleason 2002; Paasonen 2005); the extreme version of this position is that online personas are independent from their physical animators (Stone 1995).

In response to these separate constructions of self, Nancy Baym questions: "…how do we know where, exactly, true selves reside? Furthermore, what if the selves enacted through digital media don't line up with those we present face to face, or if they contradict one another? [...] Is there such a thing as a true self anymore? Was there ever?" (2010: 3). O'Brien (1999) has theorized that the self online and the self offline are not separate, but rather that the self exists in fragments, some that are anchored in the physical world and others anchored in the virtual world. To O'Brien, this multiplicity of identity is licensed because of the expectations associated with online communication – that is, we are taught to expect a fluid or fragmented identity in online spaces, and so we feel comfortable presenting ourselves this way and interacting with others who do the same. These expectations help participants in online communities understand the limits and possibilities in their medium of communication; this understanding constitutes what Ilana Gershon (2010) and others call "media ideologies" about the material forms of communication and the contexts that come along with them. Gatson (2011: 224) has shown an example of these expectations and ideologies in her work on online fandom spaces, concluding that presentation of self in online communities happens in both online and offline spaces but that "a rendition of the online persona as inherently less truthful – or at least less dense/rich/full – than offline presentations is problematic at best." In fact, following Gatson's logic, online presentations of identity may be *more* authentic because there exist safe spaces online with different rules from the offline world (and the rest of the online world), where people are able to reveal aspects of their identities that they might feel they need to hide offline for fear of harmful repercussions.

In virtual worlds and online games especially, scholars describe the separation of online and offline identity and rules through the concept of the *magic*

circle, or the idea that playing a game is "a stepping out of 'real' life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own" (Huizinga 1955: 8). The magic circle is often taken to mean that the temporary sphere of activity, e.g., an online game, exists independently of the rules of "real life," which has resulted in numerous criticisms of the magic circle. Consalvo (2009) asserts that "real life" rules *do* apply to game worlds in addition to the rules of the game, that they are not separate because we can never fully remove ourselves from the society that we are embedded in. Bainbridge (2010: 13) recast the magic circle as a "membrane" or a more porous boundary where the virtual and the physical influence each other. There may be significant "bleed" between the multiple fragments of the self across the lines of the magic circle, in which aspects of a player's physical identity may affect the choices they make inside of the game world (Waern 2010). However problematic the particulars of the concept may be, the idea of the magic circle is important to retain because participants in virtual worlds are aware of the boundary between the virtual and the physical, and those boundaries may be reinforced by interaction with the same people in online and offline spaces (Boellstorff 2010; Cherny 1999).

Although it is important to remember that the magic circle is a problematic construct, I reference the magic circle because it exists as an important emic construct in the *World of Warcraft* community. In general, when I refer to the magic circle, I mean the fluid and porous boundary between offline and online contexts. Dmitri Williams's *mapping principle* (2010) helps to understand how the context of the virtual world affects player behaviors in important ways. Williams's example is the concept of death. In the physical world, death is a permanent state and carries with it weighty emotions and implications; however, in virtual worlds, death is often temporary. The temporary nature of virtual death leads to players intentionally killing each other as practical jokes, purposefully infecting others with virtual diseases, or laughing off a friend's death – all behaviors that would never be appropriate offline. Understanding the context of the virtual world is key to understanding the way players behave inside the magic circle and outside of it. The characteristics of the magic circle may change in different interactions and may shift throughout time, but the circle is always salient to participants in some capacity because it provides a boundary for the contexts that influence and guide their behavior.

Another behavior that is affected by the magic circle is the act of making connections between players. As players interact more with each other inside of the game's magic circle and eventually form relationships, they will inevitably come into contact with multiple fragments of identity in multiple contexts and begin to construct a larger picture of their interlocutors' identities. When a player is interacting only briefly with another in a game environment, the physical

identity of the other player is not as important as their abilities in the game and their play style. If these interactions continue into stable game relationships, whether as part of a regular raid team, questing and adventuring partners, or friends in a guild, players seek to know about the identity of their comrades beyond the virtual space. Once a player begins to engage with other players in ways that reference identity outside of purely in-game features, they interact with broader aspects of their interlocutors' identities. They begin to understand that not only is their friend a Night Elf hunter in the game, but they learn that their friend is a female linguist in "real life" who enjoys science fiction novels and jazz music.

However, in learning more about the offline selves that belong to a player's online friends, a tension arises between online and offline identities in which people struggle with what to reveal about their "real-life" selves, what to keep hidden, and how to do so (Li, Jackson, and Trees 2008). Language is one oft-used resource for showing membership in certain demographic categories through the use of enregistered linguistic variables such as (ING)/(IN) variation, shifted vowels, or lexical choices (Agha 2006; Campbell-Kibler 2011). Some language features that index identity features cannot be changed or hidden easily if they are connected to an identity that a speaker does not want to reveal – for example, the pitch of one's voice and the amount of politeness are indicators of gender (Herring and Matinson 2004) and different sets of pronunciations index a speaker's location, ethnicity, or native language. Age is another identity that can be problematic in gaming performances, such as children or young adults with young-sounding voices who are playing adult characters in online games (Wadley and Gibbs 2010). If a player decides to use their voice to communicate with their fellow players, there are some identity traits that they could hide and others that will be easily conveyed by the sound of their voice or their manner of speaking. WoW players are aware of this; furthermore, they become aware of the consequences for possessing particular types of easily-conveyed identities through interaction with the broad community of players.

When I was interviewing participants during my ethnography, a young man called Pollux described the various ways that he perceived that he had been treated poorly due to being much younger than the average *World of Warcraft* player. He described how he had been denied leadership positions, constantly referred to with demeaning and diminutive names, and even had his voice made fun of in public forums. After he listed the ways that he felt marginalized, he said a phrase that stuck with me: "It could have been worse. At least I'm not Chinese, gay, or female. They have it really bad." In the following section, I will explore those marked identities that were problematized by the *World of Warcraft* player population during my ethnography, and the resulting impact on the players and their use of language and communicative mode.

3 Marked identities in *World of Warcraft*

The dominant, unmarked identity in *World of Warcraft* is a white, heterosexual, American male; for those who do not fit into this classification, how does the dominant identity shape their experience? In this work, I will focus on two particular sets of marked identities: non-male/non-heterosexual, and non-white/non-American. While each of these four identities have different experiences (and there are many other identities that are not the focus of this paper), they are grouped into two sets because each set has similar experiences. Those who are non-male and/or non-heterosexual face exclusion from events and general harassment based on their status as a threat to the dominant identity in the game; those who are non-American and/or non-white are linguistically profiled based on their language, both negatively and positively.

In the following sections, I will discuss the cultural environment in *World of Warcraft* for players with marked identities, beginning with gender and sexuality and followed by ethnicity, highlighting the role of language variety in the communication and identity landscape. These sections will include examples from broad gaming culture as well as examples from my ethnography. In subsequent sections, I will describe the communication methods (including the choice of which mode of communication to use) that players used to avoid identification with marked identities. Finally, I will discuss the impact on players themselves as well as the game environment resulting from avoidance of these identities.

3.1 Gender and sexuality

Hegemonic masculinity is a useful concept for understanding behavior in *World of Warcraft*. Kiesling (1998: 71) explains it as an "ideology based on a hierarchy of dominant alignment roles, especially men over women, but also men over other men." Hegemonic masculinity accepts and, in fact, *relies* on the existence of multiple forms of masculinity that exist in any culture, and can therefore only be understood in relation to other forms of identity that exist around it (Coates 2001: 3). In the *World of Warcraft* community of my ethnography, the dominant form of masculinity was the white, American, young adult, heterosexual male; other male identities were more or less accepted (older men, native English speakers from non-American countries), while some were explicitly marked (gay men, non-native English speakers).

Nardi (2010) devotes a chapter of her ethnography of *World of Warcraft* to dealing with the hegemonic masculinity that exists in the game community. Nardi (2010: 152) characterizes the space inside of the *WoW* magic circle as "the

boys' tree house," with women existing as a minority that must be subsumed in the tree house or overtly excluded. In Nardi's account, "male discourse" (she labels it this way because it was primarily males who engaged in it) was the norm rather than the exception, and women were expected to conform to the discourse around them (including homophobic and sexist language) and accept the overt sexualization of women for the enjoyment of the male players. Women or gay men may intrude upon the tree house and threaten the status of hetero-sexual men as the dominant identity and target audience for the game. To avoid this, many heterosexual male players often engage in masculinist discourse during advanced gaming activities (such as raiding), and this discourse is considered effective if it offends or excludes female and gay male players (162).

The masculinist discourse and the assumed maleness of players creates an environment where women and LGBT individuals have to "come out" and publicly display their identity in contrast to their assumed heterosexual male-ness, and where they assume risks for doing so. In such an environment, many players in these populations either hid their identities or conformed to the dis-course around them. In Nardi's study, she described that those who did conform to the discourse generally avoided "hardcore masculinist rhetoric" themselves; however, part of conforming to the discourse is being silent about others' use of these terms (Nardi 2010: 156). Taylor (2003) has described how women in online games are not subjected to the same risks as they are in the physical world (another application of Williams's (2010) mapping principle), which gives some a sense of empowerment that allows them to confront those who use such rhetoric; in fact, some female players called out others on their uses of such terms, but overall, the masculinist rhetoric went largely unchallenged.

Some women in Nardi's study as well as in Gray's (2012) study of players of games on the Xbox Live network avoided the masculinist discourse by building their own networks of people they enjoyed playing with. The guild that served as the home for my ethnographic study is an example of this kind of network; known as a "safe space" guild, <Ragnarok> was a guild where women as well as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender players were welcome to play while not being forced to hide their identities. It was not the only guild of its type on the server, and was one of hundreds of safe space guilds in the *World of Warcraft* community. To ensure the safety of its players, guild leadership enacted rules against derogatory language and harassment and relied on participatory surveillance tactics to enforce the rules (see Collister 2014 for an in-depth dis-cussion of the guild's surveillance culture).

These tactics kept guild members safe while interacting with members of the guild itself and at guild-sponsored game events, but players still had to worry about the rest of the *World of Warcraft* culture outside of the guild. Players often

encounter others from different guilds who play by different rules when it comes to identity-based harassment. To this end, while many women and LGBT individuals felt safe within the *World of Warcraft* space occupied by their guild <Ragnarok>, they had to adjust their expectations and behavior when interacting outside of the scope of the guild. Like Gatson's (2011) study of fandom communities as safe spaces for identity expression online, <Ragnarok> and guilds like it essentially created another magic circle for themselves inside of the magic circle of the *World of Warcraft* game. There was movement across the boundaries, but rules applied differently inside of the guild than outside of it, and players were highly conscious of the boundaries and the rules outside of the guild.

3.2 Non-nativeness, linguistic profiling, and linguistic adoration

Another stereotype of the *World of Warcraft* player is that it is dominated by American English speakers. "Nativeness" and accent when speaking are thus another source of scrutiny, and the perceived level of nativeness leads to practices of *linguistic profiling*, or the act of assigning identities and stereotypes based on the language variety used by the speaker (Baugh 2003; Moyer 2013). The protections in the <Ragnarok> guild against gender- and sexuality-based harassment did not extend to linguistic profiling. While the guild's bylaws included prohibitions of racist language, it was not a focus of the guild's mission and therefore did not receive the type of surveillance and scrutiny that gender- and sexuality-based harassment did. Players who spoke non-American or non-native forms of English received scrutiny and sometimes identity-based harassment both inside the guild and outside of it.

In *World of Warcraft* specifically, the Chinese identity is problematic due to the racialization of cheating and gold farming, practices which are propagated by player-made videos such as *Ni Hao* by Nyhm[3] that generalize all Chinese-speaking players as cheaters (Dibbell 2007). The Chinese players in Nardi's (2010) study of gaming cafes in China did not judge each other so harshly (176), but when Chinese players come into contact with other players, especially from English-speaking countries, they are often linguistically profiled based on their level of nativeness in speaking English. Any speaker who is judged to be not a native speaker is assumed to be using questionable methods to achieve in-game success (Nakamura 2009). Nick Yee (2006) writes, "it is not the behavior

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3 "Ni Hao" by Nyhm can be viewed here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0dkkf5NEIo0

per se that is the damning piece of evidence as to whether a player is a gold farmer, but rather, whether they are fluent in the English language" (6). Yee supports this assertion with a number of stories from his large-scale survey project, but the most striking is the following story from a French-Canadian player:

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I'm French Canadian and it happen to me to answer in French to
get rid of moron.
So there is this guy: "can I get gold, I will send it back to you
by mail, I want to buy an epic"
Me: "pardon je ne parle pas anglais!"
Him: "WTF hey do you have GOLD"
Me: "Vraiment desole, je ne comprends pas!"
Him: "I'll report you, f*** farmer, china FARMER are the suckx!"
(Yee 2006: 2)
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In this example, simply not speaking English at all resulted in another player assigning a "china FARMER" identity to a French-speaking Canadian. For many, the diversity in non-English speakers is erased, and non-English speakers are leveled into one stigmatized identity group: Chinese Gold Farmer.

Players in Yee's and Nakamura's studies report repeatedly harassing players who were suspected to be gold farmers because of their level of English fluency. Simply not speaking English renders a player automatically cast as "Chinese" and therefore a target for racist discourse and harassment. This has led to a conflation between the Chinese ethnicity and a style of play referred to as "Chinese," similar to that which was observed by Steinkuehler (2006) in the game *Lineage II* and which contributed to animosity between Asian and American players in that game (209). This conflation of ethnicity and play style was problematic for Chinese players in *World of Warcraft*, many of whom resented being reduced to the status of "gold farmer" because of their ethnicity. Because of this, some Chinese players choose to remain on Chinese language servers, because they are less likely to encounter these stereotypes. They do this despite the fact that Chinese servers are less populated and game content is often changed in China due to government regulations (Nardi 2010: 185).

It is not only the Chinese population of *World of Warcraft* that is viewed this way, but like Yee's (2006) study, any non-English speaking population may be subjected to xenophobic treatment from members of the dominant identity group. Due to changes to the *World of Warcraft* server structure beginning in late 2013, participants in my ethnography have identified xenophobia on their server centered around an influx of Portuguese speakers. The American server that players from my ethnography inhabit is often paired up with a Portuguese-speaking Brazilian server for events, resulting in a mixing of the populations.

The American residents of the server have expressed a xenophobic attitude towards Portuguese speakers, categorizing the Brazilians as less skilled than their American counterparts, and resulting in the exclusion of players on Brazilian servers from American-led groups. This behavior results from the English-speaking population assigning the communicative burden – or the responsibility to ensure a successful conversation – to the non-native English speaking players. Lippi-Green (2011: 70) suggests that when speakers hear a foreign accent, they have to decide whether to accept a role in accommodation of that accent or disfluency in speech. Furthermore, she writes, "members of the dominant language group feel perfectly empowered to reject their responsibility, and to demand that a person with an accent carry the majority of the burden in the communicative act."

I did not observe the interaction between Portuguese speakers and English speakers in *World of Warcraft* because the server structure change did not happen until after my ethnography was over; however, a participant in my ethnography, Hohenheim, wrote to me in an e-mail to inform me of this phenomenon:

> Hohenheim: There have definitely been groups where people have been kicked [out] for being from Brazilian servers [...] there have been nights where people are like "Nobody from Brazil" or such. I've seen people complain about groups started by someone on a Brazilian server not speaking English. There seems to be a tendency of those folks to use all caps- like, it doesn't seem to be shouting to them, it's just kind of like whatever, caps lock on away we go, which leads to friction with the English speaking players who view that as rude and shouting. I haven't noticed any sort of quality of player correlation- like, you get good, bad, and mediocre out of both groups at roughly equal distributions, I think. But they're definitely perceived as lesser players more often than is fair, in terms of getting kicked [out] more quickly. I think condescending speech could be either actually condescending or just a stereotypical American not really knowing how to communicate with someone whose command of English is not perfect.
>
> (Hohenheim, personal communication, September 2014)

Hohenheim singled out some common observations, including the conflict between languages in the media ideology surrounding typing in all capital letters; the necessity of speaking English; and, the associated perception that these players are not as skilled as American, English-speaking counterparts. To further illustrate the point, Hohenheim shared the screenshots in Figure 1 with me. These screenshots (with speaker names obscured) show text chat during a raid. In Figure 1a, the speaker lists off the Brazilian servers and indicates that the "#1 rule of WoW" is to never invite anyone from these Brazilian servers to a group. The second screenshot, in Figure 1b, shows players excluding another player from participation in a raid event due to not speaking English.

Figure 1a: Screenshot provided by Hohenheim of a player excluding members of Brazilian servers from groups
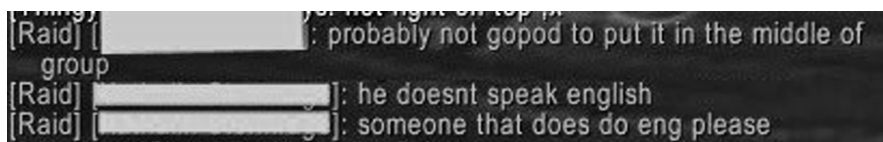

Figure 1b: Screenshot provided by Hohenheim of players excluding a non-native speaker from a raiding activity

Hohenheim's report is reminiscent of the treatment of Chinese players, although without the correlation to gold farming. Brazilians are perceived as rude, and get kicked out of (or excluded entirely from) groups for being from a Brazilian server due to a perception of being less skilled at playing the game; the perception of their skill comes only from the perception of their language abilities and the English-speaking Americans' belief that they do not know how to communicate with the Brazilian players. The communicative burden, or the responsibility of mutual comprehension to ensure successful communication, is placed on the non-native English speakers to accommodate to the American population that is presumed to be the dominant population. The linguistic profiling of players from the Brazilian servers illustrates that exclusion from gaming activities based on language variety is not limited to Chinese players.

At the other end of the spectrum from linguistic profiling, *linguistic adoration* refers to the assignment of positive values (sometimes uncomfortably so) to a speaker of a prestigious variety (Baugh 2003). Baugh refers to linguistic adoration by American English speakers for speakers of what he calls "British English" as well as speakers of French. Baugh pointed out that only some varieties of British English receive such adoration; conversely, Lippi-Green's (2011: 101-129) analysis of voice acting in animated films revealed an overwhelming use of British English varieties for villains in these films (see also Cutler, this volume). In *World of Warcraft*, players from Australia and the United Kingdom often chose to play on American servers and encountered linguistic adoration while doing so. Elisa, a young woman from Australia who was a member of <Ragnarok>, worked overnight in a busy hospital and liked to play *WoW* to relax after her shift ended at 5:00 AM. This time happened to coincide with the time when most players on our American server were starting nightly

gaming activities, giving Elisa an active group of friends across the world who happened to be gaming at the same time she was. On more than one occasion, Elisa reported that she felt like some people took her along on raids or other gaming activities not just for her playing abilities, but because they liked her Australian accent and found her voice to be sexy. This was not an unfounded assumption: when Elisa went offline after a raid one night in August of 2009, I observed the following conversation in text chat between two participants still online:

```
[Raid] Dakster: so sad she went offline

[Raid] Dakster: pretty voice is gone =(

[Raid] Terna: yeah I'm so glad when shes here

[Raid] Terna: shes an ok player but nothin like that aussie
accent to keep you up on a long raid nite

[Raid] Dakster: if u kno what I mean ha ha ha
```

The two (American male) players Dakster and Terna made an overt connection between Elisa's Australian accent and positive evaluations ("pretty voice," "so glad when shes here"); however, Dakstser's response "if you kno what I mean" makes an explicitly sexual connotation out of Terna's phrase about the accent "keep(ing) you up." The implication here is that Elisa is valued in the raid more for her voice and the sexual response it elicits in these male players than for her playing ability ("shes an ok player").

The language variety itself – whether it was one that elicited linguistic profiling or linguistic adoration – is not explicitly addressed in any policies in the guild; only harassment using derogatory language toward another individual was addressed. A player's way of speaking could still elicit these negative responses even when protective policies were in place. To avoid these negative responses, players developed strategies for their communication and use of different communicative modes to avoid negative repercussions for the sound of their voice.

4 Interactional strategy: Avoiding voice chat

I have illustrated how when a player's identity does not fit into the dominant identity of the culture, there are repercussions for revealing that identity including sexual-based harassment for women and gay men (Nardi, 2010), animosity based on racial identity constructs (Steinkuehler 2006), or the linguistic adoration of non-American (particularly United Kingdom) "accents" of English (Baugh

2003). While there were protections written into <Ragnarok>'s charter prohibiting harassment of any guild member based on gender, sexuality, or race, these protections did not extend outside of the guild and, in the case of ethnicity and race, were problematic even inside of the guild. When players stepped outside of <Ragnarok>'s own "magic circle," they were aware of the rules at play in the larger community and had strategies for dealing with other players who operated under that rule set.

In general, the players that I interviewed from the guild did not express reservations about talking to unknown players using text chat – in contrast to attitudes about voice chat. Even aggressive players who used forms of speech prohibited in the guild seem more distant and, consequently, less threatening in the text chat (see Iorio's chapter in this volume for another discussion of the impact of communicative mode on the interpretation of language use). Reasons for this include the ability to use the built-in `/ignore` function (which blocks all communication from the ignored player), as well as the lack of physical cues present in text chat which would otherwise reveal marked identity traits. Furthermore, text chat was policed by protective Game Masters (GMs), and if a player reported harassing behavior it was likely to be investigated by the GMs (even if players did not always see results of this protective measure – see Collister (2014) for a more thorough discussion).

Players expressed the majority of their concerns and fears about interacting with unknown, non-guild players when the modality they would be using would be voice chat. The situation in which players most often found themselves interacting with unknown others is during *pick-up-groups* (PUGs), or collections of otherwise unrelated players which most often formed for the purpose of raiding. Voice chat was almost universally required in these groups; however, if there was not a guild hosting the event, many times no set rules were in place for conduct beyond the most basic gaming norms (being a competent player, not stealing loot, etc.). Beyond these minimal *World of Warcraft*-wide norms, conduct can vary widely; players could abide by similar rules that <Ragnarok> had in place (often resulting in that player being asked to fill-in for guild raids) or they could be aggressive and unpleasant. Furthermore, voice chat platforms were not policed by GMs or any other authorities besides these unknown players, and offered little protection for users against harassment or unwanted behavior.

Fears about potential conflict with other players based on voice chat were alleviated in two ways: carefully attending to one's way of speaking or not speaking at all. Some players could hide their identities by carefully attending to the way they spoke. One member of <Ragnarok>, Theon, was often identified as gay by his use of features of gay-sounding speech; in an interview during the ethnography, he described the ways that he would not lie about his identity,

but be careful about overt markers in his speech when around players he did not know.

> Theon: I guess when people talk to somebody that they know is gay online they automatically assume that they're going to have the stereotypical voice, you know, like they expect me to talk like Sacha Baron Cohen's Bruno [a film character with a stereotypical flamboyant gay style] or something, and I don't, so I guess that, that, that's a surprise for some people. And then for actual ticks in the voice I suppose that there is a little bit of a lisp there but it's not completely in-your-face. […] I do try to be careful about it. Although I make no effort to hide it, I will not outwardly say it, or say anything about it unless I'm in a situation that I deem where I'm able to do something like that. Like, say for example, I'm meeting somebody for the first time, I usually will gauge their openmindedness a little bit before I say anything at length.

Speakers like Theon, who used a variety of gay-sounding speech and were aware of it, often style-shifted when using Ventrilo to avoid having to deal with potential harassment from unknown players. When I listened to Theon speak in a raiding context with a guild other than <Ragnarok>, he spoke with much shorter sentences and a clipped tone than when it was just friendly guild members. This style-shifting is reminiscent of the observations by Podesva (2008) on gay males and style shifts from a professional workplace and a casual gathering of friends. Theon's speaking style in a mixed-member raid situation might align with a professional setting, while his style in casual guild-only settings may be similar to those observed in casual offline settings by Podesva.

Not all speakers are able to hide the identifying features in their voices. Because voice chat and raiding are so closely linked, many women with female-sounding voices feel great discomfort when (and often exclusion from) participating in raids (Nardi 2010: 163). For these reasons, women often reported being afraid to speak on Ventrilo for fear of being "discovered" as a woman and subjected to unwanted treatment or exclusion. The women in <Ragnarok> encountered unwanted treatment outside of the guild, such as one guild member, Haley, who expressed in her interview that she was uncomfortable talking on Ventrilo outside of the guild because of "creepy guys":

> LBC: Has there ever been a circumstance for you in which you were reluctant to use voice chat?
>
> Haley: I don't think I have so far. Um, I think there's been a few times where I've been in a random PUG and it was a joke–not a bad joke or anything but I was just joked about like "Oh, it's a girl!" or something like that, you know, but it was never a way that made me uncomfortable, I think. I don't really have too much of a qualm too, I know some people don't wanna be known as a girl because they don't wanna be looked down on as far as ability. I don't really care about that 'cause if

they, you know, if they're gonna be a stickler about it I'd rather not play with them anyway. [laughing] But I probably wouldn't willingly talk on voice with people outside of our guild, either, unless, say, I knew them and they were friends or something like that.

LBC: Why not, do you think? Why wouldn't you be willing to talk to strangers?

Haley: I think it depends on the situation, I think for me as a girl there's definitely the factor of there's some creepy guys out there. [laugh] And I don't wanna deal with that at all, or even be put in that situation, and so it'd be easier just to chat first on text with them for a while.

Haley describes a multimodal strategy for deciding whether another person outside of the guild is safe to talk to on Ventrilo – by chatting with them in the text chat mode first. Her strategy suggests that she presumes that text chat can effectively conceal one's identity; indeed, this is a long-standing observation in the research literature, that online text-based contexts lend anonymity to the users and allow them to experiment with identity (see, e.g., Danet 1998). Haley does note that this strategy is in place only for those "outside of our guild" – reinforcing the existence of the magic circle created by <Ragnarok> inside of the guild itself.

Eversoul, an officer of <Ragnarok> with far-reaching connections on the server, expressed a similar sentiment to Haley. She describes her first interactions on Ventrilo and how she was shy to talk at first because she did not know anyone in the raid group, but also that she felt that the others were surprised that she was a female. During her interview, I asked her if she felt awkward in her previous guild being the only woman on Ventrilo with a group of men.

Eversoul: Yeah, it was a little weird being the only girl, but it somehow didn't surprise me. I don't think that was why I didn't talk, I think it was just because I didn't really know anybody else just yet.

LBC: How did they react to you being a female? Was it just like no big deal, or did they make a big deal out of it or comment on it in any way?

Eversoul: They didn't really make a big deal out of it. I guess when I first started going on runs with <Apathy> [another guild] and being in their chat program, some of them were surprised that I was a girl.

LBC: Like in that they thought – they had thought previously that you were a guy or that they were just surprised that there was a girl in general?

Eversoul: Probably both, because I don't think they – I think they have one female player and she never speaks in Vent. [laugh] And other than that they don't really run into too many female players, I guess.

LBC: So how did they react when you talked on Vent?

Eversoul: It was just general surprise and the standard line that "girls don't play *WoW*."

Eversoul's experience echoes Haley's and Theon's – she was reluctant to use voice chat with unknown others because she did not know the quality of the people she was interacting with, but felt more comfortable after she had interacted with the group more regularly and had gotten to know them.

Women were not the only ones who used these avoidance strategies to allow them more time to assess the people around them before talking on Ventrilo. A player named Donnal participated in a few of <Ragnarok>'s raids to fill in for missing guild members, and after several times filling in, he decided to join the guild formally. Only after he joined the guild and had time to read the guild's charter and talk in text chat with other members did he speak on Ventrilo, and it was then that we heard his Scottish-sounding English for the first time. I took down the following conversation between Donnal and Mindy, a veteran female <Ragnarok> member, from a casual conversation on Ventrilo in my ethnographic notebook:

Mindy: Your accent is so cool.

Donnal: Oh, are you going to tell me I'm sexy now?

Mindy: Not really, it's just nice to hear a new voice. I like hearing people from different places.

[silence]

Donnal: In my last guild, there was this woman who would not leave me be because of my accent. She even asked me to marry her and told me way more than I wanted to know about her reaction to my voice. I'm pretty sure she didn't know anything about me besides the fact that my accent turned her on. I never wanted to talk when she was around, and that's why I wanted to leave.

In this interaction, there are two expressions of linguistic adoration: the discomfort that Donnal felt when another player sexualized his way of speaking, and Mindy's judgment that his accent was "so cool." Donnal described how he avoided talking on Ventrilo in order to distance himself from the unwanted attention from his guildmate, and that being uncomfortable about talking on Ventrilo made him want to leave the group. Being uncomfortable about voice chat leads to feelings of distance from the rest of the group and can weaken ties between community members.

A similar discomfort about talking on Ventrilo as a non-American English speaker also occurs for non-native English speakers but with a much more derogatory connotation. An example of this from my ethnography is the experience of <Ragnarok> member Mork, a native Mandarin Chinese speaker. Mork was from China and was living in the United States while going to a university.

Mork's non-native English was quite evident when speaking on Ventrilo, sometimes to the extent that I could not understand the message that he was trying to convey. The particular variety of non-native English that Mork spoke was easily identifiable as Chinese, especially since Mork was proud of his heritage and often mentioned going "home" to China to visit his family during breaks from school.

Mork experienced linguistic profiling often, and vehemently voiced protestations against members of the guild who shared the *Ni Hao* video that mocked Chinese players as being gold farmers. Even though the guild had prohibitions against racist language, a lot of players did not understand how the *Ni Hao* video was racist and hurtful towards Chinese players. Mork told me once in November of 2008:

```
Mork whispers: its not funny !! i don't even want to talk anymore

Mork whispers: everytime someone talks to me on vent, they say,
oh your Chinese?

Mork whispers: and i say yes...

Mork whispers: and they say "you hear about that ni hao song"
and ask me a question about like how to make money

Mork whispers: like they think i'm some gold farmer...
so annoying !!
```

Mork's experience shows how the stereotypes about Chinese players in online games come up in everyday conversations. The association between his language variety and gold farming was so problematic for Mork that he refrained from speaking on Ventrilo to anyone except those that he had carefully vetted. While he was certainly forthcoming with his identity in casual speech, most often the first clue to players about Mork's Chinese identity was the variety of language he spoke. The association with gold farming was problematic for Mork, and it started with something he could not change – the way he spoke in voice chat. Because he avoided Ventrilo to avoid gold farming comments from other players, he missed much of the social interaction that happened in voice chat, causing him to feel left out of the guild's community. Eventually, through loneliness, he quit the guild and moved on to play on a different *World of Warcraft* server based in China. Mork's story is similar to Donnal's story, even though they experienced very different reactions to their language varieties from the community. The pressure to use Ventrilo in the community thus interacts with stereotypes about identity to create an unwelcoming environment for both Mork and Donnal, leading to their exclusion from part of the gaming community.

5 Discussion

The hegemonic masculinity of *World of Warcraft* and the full identity associated with it – white, heterosexual, American – leads to behavior that discriminates against those who do not conform to those identities. This behavior manifests in linguistic adoration of non-American English speakers, xenophobia and discrimination towards non-native speakers, and harassment of women and gay men. To play the game and participate with the larger *WoW* culture, players are expected to conform to and accept the discourse that surrounds them. This is why guilds like <Ragnarok> exist – to create a safe space inside of the magic circle where different rules apply.

The alternative – that is, objecting to masculinist and racist discourse and/or freely performing an identity outside of the safe space – has problematic consequences. Those women who objected to the masculinist discourse were often forced into more casual guilds because of the threat of female sexuality in *WoW* culture. Nardi describes two examples of this happening during her ethnography: women were unwillingly silenced on Ventrilo because their voices were said to disturb the men, and women were refused membership to very hardcore guilds like the top European guild <Nihilum> (163). This is not isolated to *World of Warcraft*; in studies of other virtual worlds, women in *Second Life* reported being sexually harassed after revealing their gender by talking on voice chat, and women playing *Dungeons and Dragons Online* reported feeling "weird and uncomfortable" when speaking on voice chat (Wadley and Gibbs 2010: 193). Tucker (2011) describes the widespread practice of *griefing*, or extensive harassment of a single player, as a means of policing the assumed masculinity and heterosexuality of populations of online game players. In Tucker's work, griefers often focused on those players who expressed a non-male or non-heterosexual identity that threatened the hegemonic masculinity of the gaming culture. Griefers like this have often extended their behavior to those outside of the game that they play with consequences that affect the lives of the people they target.

During my ethnography, a player named Laira was targeted by a group of male players with threats against her person, and in the broader gaming culture there have been repeated attacks on feminist commentator Anita Sarkeesian for her critiques of tropes in video games (for a summary, see Kocurek (2014) and Backe (2014)). It is not just the rules of the physical world that transcend the boundaries of the game's magic circle, but in these cases the social rules from the game world have moved outside of the boundaries of the game and impacted the lives of the players. To avoid such consequences, some players choose to avoid expressing their offline identities inside the magic circle of the

game, including never using their speaking voice, as it would reveal their way of speaking, consequently making them vulnerable.

This exclusion of other identities leads to a perceived leveling of the culture through erasure of identities outside of the stereotype. The dominant discourse around online gaming suggests that the average player is a young adult, white, heterosexual, American male (Yee 2005), even though several studies have shown that games like *World of Warcraft* in particular have a quite varied demographic base (Williams, Yee, and Caplan 2008). In parodies of *World of Warcraft* such as the South Park episode *Make Love, Not Warcraft*, the stereotypical identity portrayed is that of a young, white, American male. Where does this come from and why does it persist? The answer lies in the dominant voices that shape the perception of the culture and the small actions like commenting about Chinese gold farmers or claiming that women are bought to events solely for their voice or their accent. Each one of these small actions contributes to the larger silencing of a substantial portion of the game-playing population.

In practice and in participation in the game, the population is much more diverse than what can be seen in the leveling of voices. In this work, I have described how the hegemonic masculinity of *World of Warcraft* culture silences the voices of those who do not fit into its identity. This includes women and gay men, whose presence threatens the dominant gender and sexual identities; as well as non-American and non-native English speakers, whose presence suggests that gaming is a global cultural phenomenon. This leads to pockets of safe spaces in gaming communities which often must police themselves with little or no help from the developers of games or the most powerful figures in the industry or community. However, the examples described in this work also show that these identities are present and participating in the culture, and they are accessible to those who look beyond the surface of the game and study the contexts that shape gaming behaviors. Safe spaces like <Ragnarok> have grown in number as more players of different types flock to the game; news around the harassment of women and allied individuals in the gaming industry has gained mainstream attention;[4] even the player-staffed Tribunal in the game *League of Legends* (Riot Games 2011) exists as an attempt to punish harassing behavior in

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4 e.g., The 2014 "gamergate" coverage in the *Washington Post* (http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2014/09/12/with-gamergate-the-video-game-industrys-growing-pains-go-viral/), *Forbes* Magazine (http://www.forbes.com/sites/erikkain/2014/09/04/gamergate-a-closer-look-at-the-controversy-sweeping-video-games/), Al Jazeera (http://stream.aljazeera.com/story/201409032102-0024126), and the BBC (http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-29028236), to name a few.

online games. The makeup of the community has begun to change as players become aware of the culture around them and the tools they have to work with.

The ethnographic observations presented in this chapter serve as examples of the cultural constructs in the *World of Warcraft* community. The lived experiences of players show the intersection of the norms of an online society with the language ideology of the offline world, as well as how the context and rules of the gaming environment change the behavior of players. The use of voice is a bridge across the boundary of the magic circle that brings those ideologies into play in the gaming space. To avoid changing the dynamics of their gaming space and their gaming identity, many players choose to not use their voice and never build that bridge. These players and their voices do exist, however, and they are an important part of gaming communities that may not be readily visible to outsiders. Using an in-depth approach like ethnography to study the people who play the games and their everyday experiences, including those that silence them, brings these voices out for researchers. These voices demonstrate how diverse the community is and how its members struggle with offline language ideologies even in an online world. The existence of safe spaces like <Ragnarok> and groups like it, while not perfect, provide a site for players with marked identities and marginalized voices to make themselves heard, allowing for the intersection of cultures that can be enriching for those involved. I will close on a hopeful note with another excerpt from my interview with Pollux, the young man who told me "at least I'm not Chinese, gay, or female":

> Pollux: Although I would have never met all these people if I hadn't played WoW, and probably not if I hadn't been in <Ragnarok>, you know. Now I can say I have friends, all kinds of friends. [...] I would have never known them growing up where I did. And now I have all these people I can ask, like, any question at all, and get real life advice. And I'm going to college now, and I've started my own business, and I think I'm better because I played the game and found this group.

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