

**A LINGUISTIC PROFILE OF POWER AND IDENTITY IN MASSIVELY
MULTIPLAYER ONLINE ROLE-PLAYING GAMES**

by

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Sociolinguists have claimed that a relationship exists between language and power. That being said, past studies addressing language and power have been concerned with issues of how language and power are created and maintained in face-to-face conversation (e.g., Brown & Gilman, 2003; Kiesling, 1996) and the role that institutions play in creating power roles and powerful language (e.g., Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003; Fishman, 2006). Kiesling (1996) proposes a framework for studying language and power in face-to-face conversation in which he theorizes that “people place themselves in certain power roles by using language to index these roles; however, every speaker cannot simply use any strategy or form to index any role. They are limited by ascribed traits, previous roles they have filled in the community, the roles available in the situation, and their competence in a certain strategy or form” (Kiesling, 1996, p. 41). The purpose of the current study will be to adapt Kiesling’s power framework to the study of language and power within virtual communities in order to explore the following research questions: 1) How is power defined in *World of Warcraft*?, 2) What are the power roles within *World of Warcraft*?, 3) How does a player’s use of language create or reflect the power role(s) that they occupy within *World of Warcraft*?, and 4) Can language be used to create power *ex nihilo* or does language use reflect the power that an individual has according to their power roles? The answers to these research questions reveal that participants within *World of Warcraft*

have a variety of beliefs about power, power roles, and powerful language. Additionally, participants may use language to both create powerful positions and reflect powerful positions that they already have.

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PREFACE

On Collaborative Work

This thesis is unusual in a number of ways, though perhaps the most striking is that it has two authors. This is due to a number of factors which will be explained here.

We, the authors, discovered early on that we were interested in similar topics of research. Instead of each venturing out into the strange new world of research on their own and struggling with the same issues separately, we decided to do it together. This resulted in the ethnography on *World of Warcraft* and, ultimately, two theses. We used the same methodology, the same participants, and the same background literature, although we did different projects with our data. Because of this, Chapter 1 was written collaboratively by both participants. Chapter 2 until the end of this thesis marks the end of the researchers' collaboration and represents a unique contribution by Benjamin E. Friedline.

Acknowledgements and dedication

I would like to thank Dr. Scott F. Kiesling, Dr. Claude Mauk, and Dr. David Mortensen for their support for their support during the thesis writing process. Their encouragement and support played a key role in allowing me to complete this thesis in a timely fashion.

In the game world, I would like to thank all of my friends from *Azeroth Inferius*. I thank you for accepting me into your group and for putting up with all of my questions for this project.

I would also like to thank my friends from *Messiah College* who introduced me to *World of Warcraft* and gave me the idea to pursue this research topic.

To the members of the University of Pittsburgh Linguistic Thesis Support Group, thanks for being there to provide motivation and support to keep on writing. Thanks also to Lauren, my friend and colleague, for working with me to explore this novel topic. We work great together, and will work together on similar projects in the future.

Most of all, I want to thank my wife for her continual support as I wrote this thesis. Her encouragement and infinite love sustained me through the sleepless nights and the endless toil that were involved in writing this thesis.

My part of the thesis is dedicated in memoriam of my mother, Karen A. Friedline.

Benjamin E. Friedline

April 15th, 2008

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The bright light of the fiery sun settles softly upon the dense jungle forest, slowly awakening the jungle's inhabitants to a new day in the Stranglethorn Vale. A soft gray mist rises lazily from the rain-drenched ground, masking the thick vines that hang from the decrepit trees. A cacophony of voices arises from the forest, a mixture of shrill ghostly shrieks and the voracious howl of a lone predator. Two travelers venture cautiously through the endless maze of strangling vines and lethal flora and fauna, narrowly avoiding detection from a nearby jungle lion. As the two travelers venture onward through the lecherous jungle heat, they come upon the remains of the ancient ruins of the long-lost city of Kal'ai. The ruins stretch for miles in each direction; a lone statue still stands guard in the city's center, malevolently guarding the remains of its long-dead creators. As the two travelers gaze upon the statue, the mist momentarily clears, only to reveal the visage of a shadowy figure looming in the distance.

The figure draws closer to the party of travelers, and it becomes clear that the figure is an enemy, an orc hunter. The hunter watches the mage and his warrior friend, but does nothing except stand and star at the two travelers. After a short time, Agerionos decides to try to make contact with the foreign, barbarian orc by using hand signals.

You wave at Katilana.

You smile at Katilana.

The orc turns from the travelers and continues on her way, leaving the two travelers alone. A bloodbath has been averted. As soon as the orc has left the two travelers alone, Demant turns questioningly towards Agerionos and asks,

[Party] Demant: not gonna attack?

Agerionos watches the orc go, saying,

[Party] Agerionos: nope

Demant seems to be uncertain about the validity of Agerionos's decision. He has a difficult time allowing his sworn enemy to go free. He asks Agerionos a simple question.

[Party] Demant: why?

Agerionos turns to Demant and explains,

[Party] Agerionos: well, some players are just lvling

[Party] Agerionos: if they leave me alone, I won't attack

Demant knows that all orcs are bloodthirsty killers. He simply cannot accept the prospect of letting one live – one that could be so easily killed.

[Party] Demant: he would kill you if he knew he could

[Party] Demant: besides u need honor

[Party] Demant: its how you buy all top stuff

Agerionos tries again to convince his companion of the orc's lack of interest in slaughtering passing humans.

[Party] Agerionos: well, I saw him help out the 32 hunter

This evidence seems to convince Demant that he is safe – for the moment.

[Party] Demant: oh

[Party] Demant: ok

Several hours pass, and the two companions search the dank catacombs of the once mighty city for the artifacts that they had come in search of. While they are busy searching for the long-lost treasures, two undead beings silently approach. As the undead crest the rise of a nearby hill, the two travelers notice them for the first time.

[Party] Demant: see those two

[Party] Demant: 60+ horde

[Party] Demant: up there

Agerionos looks up. Two creatures, once human but fallen to the plague, are coming in their direction. He can see the rotting flesh dangling from their bodies, and the stench only gets worse as they come closer.

[Party] Agerionos: yep

The two undead beings are quick to engage the two travelers in battle. Demant draws his bow and sends a flurry of arrows towards his undead opponent. Meanwhile, Agerionos engages the undead priest by conjuring a set of magical missiles, which are sent with deadly intent towards their target. The mage and the hunter watch as their instruments of death fly towards their enemies.

The magic missiles reach their target first and fizzle upon touching the priest's conjured shield. The priest laughs as he sends a death spell hurtling from his skeletal fingers towards Agerionos. Just as the spell is cast, Demant's arrows strike the undead rogue's reinforced hide armor and harmlessly clatter to the ground. The rogue runs forward and quickly impales Demant with his magical dagger.

Demant has died.

After dying, Demand tells Agerionos:

[Party] Demant: lol he killed me

[Party] Demant: got you too?

Agerionos has been running away from the priest's death spell, but to no avail. The cords of death wrap around Agerionos's body, killing him almost instantly.

Agerionos then has a moment to respond to Demant's question.

[Party] Agerionos: yeah some people are jerks

The two travelers make their way to the spirit healer after their deaths. The spirit healer fills their roaming spirits with life once again and the two travelers make their way back to their corpses to resurrect so that they can begin their search for lost treasures once again. In Azeroth, death is only a temporary setback.

1.1 AN EXPLANATION

What you have just read is a portrayal of an event in the game world that happened during the course of our research. We presented it here in order to give the reader a perspective on what it is like to participate in the game world. However, this narrative does not detail the player's entire experience. Before engaging in analysis, we want to say a few words about what players do in the game and what the player's experience is like in *World of Warcraft*.

Upon obtaining an account and a version of the game installed on the computer, the player logs in to the main screen using a username and password. Then the player chooses how they will be represented in the game world. The player chooses to join a political faction, either the Alliance or the Horde. If the player chooses to play for the Horde, all who play for the Alliance will instantly become their enemies, and vice versa. Next, they select an avatar;

although they can select a human avatar, a variety of other fantasy races are available for selection (e.g., orcs, trolls, gnomes, and elves). After selecting a race, a player then selects the physical attributes and the job of the avatar. Aside from sex (male or female only), the physical attributes are highly customizable; a player can change the hairstyle, the facial expressions, and even add things like tattoos, piercings, horns, or tusks to the avatar, depending on the race chosen. On the other hand, the player is limited to a fixed number of jobs when creating an avatar, including hunters, priests, warriors, mages, shamans, rogues, paladins, and warlocks. Lastly, a player chooses a name for the avatar. See Figure 1 for an example of the character creation screen for the character “Carl”, a dwarven priest.



Figure 1: The character creation screen from *World of Warcraft*.

Then, upon deciding on the race, class, appearance, and name of the character, the player clicks “accept” and is launched into the world of Azeroth. A cinematic movie plays, introducing the characteristics of the race chosen by the character and the state of the world at the present time, and then the player is on their own to explore the world. See Figure 2 for a screenshot of the player’s first view of Azeroth. On the player’s screen is the back of Carl’s head, and in the distance, there is a character with a bright yellow exclamation mark over his head – this is a non-playable character, or NPC. NPCs are created by the game developers to make the game world seem like an inhabited world; they provide quests, vend items, and speak within the game world. The game gives the player a tip to go talk to characters with exclamation marks for directions with how to interact with the world – and in order to “talk”, the player is instructed to use the mouse to right-click on the NPC when Carl is standing next to him or her.



Figure 2: The player’s first view of the world of Azeroth.

Talking to this character starts Carl on a “quest”, or an activity to be done within the game, as shown in Figure 3. In the early stages, these quests are designed to acclimate a new player to the mechanics of the world around them, but as the player progresses through the game, the player receives access to higher level quests in higher level areas. The quests introduce the history of Azeroth, main characters in the story of the world, and give the players the means to acquire money, items, weapons, and armor in the game world. These quests are harder to complete, but they provide opportunities for receiving higher level items and more experience. Quests are an important part of activity in the game world – they give the player directions in which to travel and the impetus to explore the world inside the game. Some quests even require that the player find other players to team up with, for example, to defeat an exceptionally strong dragon terrorizing a village. After completing quests, aside from getting material rewards like money and gear, a player receives “experience points”, which is the game’s way of measuring a character’s progression through the game. With more experience points, a player becomes stronger and can take on larger monsters. After a certain amount of experience points, a player gains a “level,” which marks how strong they are in relation to other players or monsters. A five level difference in opponents can mark the difference between a routine fight and a brush with death. The highest attainable level currently in *World of Warcraft* is level 70.



Figure 3: A beginner's quest in *World of Warcraft*.

After accepting the first quest, the player moves Carl to the instructed area to gather the materials to complete the quest. Along the way, the player might see other characters doing the same things that they are, as pictured in Figure 4 with the other character, Tamral. These other characters are actually other *players* with characters in the realm, and they may be interacted with by talking (typing into the chat box) or gesturing (selecting from a list of gestures that your character is programmed to make). These players, if they are aligned in the same political faction as Carl, may be friendly and offer assistance; alternatively, if they are of the enemy faction, they may attack – as happened to Agerionos and Demant in the opening narrative of this thesis.

There are a multitude of things to do in *World of Warcraft* as the character progresses through the game. Questing is just one option; players can also explore the world, socialize with other players in chat channels or when standing around in a large city, defend contested territory from the enemy factions in special player-versus-player Battlegrounds, learn how to craft

weapons or armor by gathering materials and patterns from the world, and go on intense raids of difficult dungeons with many people for glory and incredible rewards (also called “phat lewt”).

There are ten million players of *World of Warcraft* with active accounts, and the game is divided up into a number of “servers”, or separate versions of the game, to divide up the large number of players who are logged on at any time. There are four kinds of servers: Player-versus-Environment (PvE), also called “normal” servers; Player-versus-Player (PvP), where players can fight each other; Role-Playing (RP), where players adopt histories and personalities for their avatars separate from their own; and Player-versus-Player Role-Playing (PvP-RP), a combination of PvP and RP server styles. The choice of server for the player depends on their style and, in many cases, what server their friends play on. At any time, there may be ten thousand characters logged into any server at any one time – these are ten thousand people that the player may interact with on their journey through Azeroth.



Figure 4: Interacting with another player in the game world.

This type of gameplay and interaction is not new or unique to *World of Warcraft* – this style is common among Massively Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Games (MMORGs). MMORGs have been studied by researchers from several academic fields, from psychology to computer science and art to linguistics. These studies tap into the communities in these online games and strive to describe the behaviors and interests of the players. All in all, research has shown that MMORGs have vibrant communities with in-group norms and, most of all, observable and describable linguistic features used within the community. This research is our inspiration in doing this thesis on *World of Warcraft*. It is our goal to describe the community at hand, show the manner that players use to interact with each other, and unveil how relationships are formed within the game world.

1.2 DATA COLLECTION

1.2.1 Methodology.

All conversation data were collected through participant observation. The observations took place over a period of approximately 6 months for approximately 5 to 10 hours per week in which the two researchers involved in this study joined different communities within *World of Warcraft*. Lauren Collister joined a Role-playing community (RP) and Benjamin Friedline joined a Player vs. Player (PvP) community. As both researchers interacted within the community, they logged all conversations in which they were participants (both overhearers and speakers) using a function present in the game which records all chats into a text file on the player's computer.

Furthermore, both researchers maintained ethnographic journals to record pertinent observations about online communities and virtual discourse.

In addition to the participant observation, data about players' perceptions of language and power in *World of Warcraft* were collected through an online 'power questionnaire'. This questionnaire asked participants to provide virtual demographics (e.g., avatar's race/class), self-conception of personal power, and reflections on how powerful/powerless people spoke within *World of Warcraft*.

1.2.2 Participants.

The participants in this study were members of the online community World of Warcraft. These participants were either on a Role-playing (RP) or on a Player vs. Player (PvP) server and were, for the most part, online acquaintances of the researchers or else members of the researchers' guilds. Little is known about the background of the participants in terms of gender, occupation, race, or age due to the anonymity of the online environment, but the participants were believed to be adults (18+). The researchers know several of the participants in this study from real-life, and most of the other participants in this study were members of the researchers' respective guilds. We believed that the participants in this study were over the age of 18 because they shared this information with us during our online interactions. The participants' names were changed in this thesis to protect their real identities.

1.2.3 Our Avatars.

Benjamin Friedline's avatar's name is Agerionos. This name was chosen by using an automatic name generator within the game. Agerionos is a level 70 human (Alliance) mage on Darkspear, a Player-versus-Player server within *World of Warcraft*. He is a member of a medium-sized guild of about 20-30 players. The guild has level 70s, but it also has a number of lower-level participants. Only one avatar was used for Ben during the course of the project.



Figure 5: Agerionos, the human mage.

Lauren Collister played three characters in the *World of Warcraft* universe on the Scarlet Crusade server, mostly due to the in-guild practice of creating multiple alternate characters

(“alts”). This practice is more common on roleplaying servers than on PvP servers. Her main character was Parnopaeus (“Parn”), a female night elf (Alliance) hunter who was level 64 at the time of the writing of this thesis. She had two alternate lower level characters: Skakavaz, a draenei (Alliance) paladin, and Alai, a blood elf (Horde) mage. All of these characters were in the same guild, a small group (10-15 players) mostly made of people with connections outside of *World of Warcraft*. The guild was called *SeeD* on the Alliance side and *Yevon* on the Horde side. The names for the guild were borrowed from Square Enix’s console-based video games *Final Fantasy VIII* and *Final Fantasy X* respectively. The names were chosen because the founding members of the guild originally met and bonded through a community for *Final Fantasy* fans.



Figure 6: Parnopaeus, the night elf hunter.



Figure 7: Skakavaz, the draenei paladin.



Figure 8: Alai, the blood elf mage.

1.2.4 Transcription Conventions.

In the course of the analyses, we will present sections of discourse collected from our data. It is important to understand how to read the data, so we set forth here the method for reading our transcriptions in this section. The data are taken directly from chatlogs saved by the game via the /chatlog function and no editing (save for changing names to pseudonyms and adding line numbers for ease of analysis) was done by the authors.

Below is a sample piece of data that we might analyze in this work.

54 1/22 00:04:48.937 [Guild] Elemaa: hi parn and Seiz

55 1/22 00:04:50.968 [Guild] Seiz: Yeah

56 1/22 00:04:54.640 [Guild] Seiz: Hi Elemaa

57 1/22 00:04:56.218 [Guild] Parnopaeus: hello elemaa!

The numbers on the far left side indicate line numbers, put into the text by the authors. The next numbers, 1/22, indicate the date that the utterance happened (January 22). The next sequence, for example 00:04:48.937 is a timestamp, showing the time of the sending of the line (hitting the Enter key on the keyboard) down to the millisecond, in 24 hour time. The first line, therefore, happened at 12:04:48 AM (and 937 milliseconds). We will be more concerned with seconds and minutes than milliseconds, but the precise timing becomes important when looking deeply at individual interactions.

[Guild] indicates which chat channel the speaker was using to say such an utterance, in this case, the Guild chat for the large social group of a "guild" in *World of Warcraft*. There are other chat channels that are often used, and in the game interface, each channel has its own unique color to make it stand out from the others; however, in our chatlog, all colors are neutralized to black unless adding color helps parse out a section of chat. The other most often

used channel names are below:

[Party]	a group of five or fewer people working on a quest or task
[Raid]	a group of six to forty players working on a quest or task
[Guild]	a social group within the game
[Officer]	officers of a guild only
[General]	general chat for anyone in a particular zone
[Trade]	special channel for selling goods and services in a city

Following the bracketed name of the chat channel is a name and a colon, such as Elemaa:. This is the name of the speaker of the utterance - more precisely, it is her character's name. A person named Amber in real life may have the name Elemaa for her character, and the character name is the one that shows on the screen. Following the colon is the actual utterance, or the thing being said. Sometimes, in our transcriptions, a parenthetical phrase in italics will occur in a line -- this is a definition of a particular piece of jargon, added by the authors so that those unfamiliar with the lingo of *World of Warcraft* may still understand what is being said. Such an addition looks like this:

8 10/30 23:01:11.593 [Guild] Avery: R u resto? (=restoration, a type of healer)

If some particular line needs additional explanation besides a definition of jargon, the author's notes will be included in [square brackets], as below:

10 11/12 23:13:29.921 [Officer] Avery: Because, omg, she had such a *hard day* [with men]

This layout comprises the majority of the discourse discussed in this work. However, there are two other types of chat which may occur.

The first other type of chat is called simply "Say", and is not in a particular chat "channel" at all. When a player "Says" something (sometimes called "/s", referring to the keystrokes needed to perform such an utterance), a speech bubble appears above the avatar -- this bubble and its contents are visible to everyone who is within a certain range of the character in the game. In the chat log, such an utterance looks like this:

2 10/25 00:04:06.046 Alai says: They do indeed.

Here we have the line number, date, and timestamp followed by the character's name (Alai) and "says:", then the utterance. "Emotes", or actions written out in words, appear in this way as well.

4 10/25 00:04:16.812 A sly smirk spreads across Kalel's face.

Players often use /s on Roleplaying servers to roleplay as their characters, while [Guild] and [Party] channels are considered to be “out of character”, or where players can converse normally.

A final and unique form of chat that occurs in *World of Warcraft* is the "whisper", often called a "tell" or a "PST". This is a private message sent from one player to one other player, and is only visible by the sender and the receiver. This particular form of chat appears on the screen in *World of Warcraft* in a bright pink font, drawing great attention to itself. Much like "Say", this form features the name of the character and the verb "whispers:", followed by the utterance.

20 7/18 18:14:46.421 Vickie whispers: Don't mind him, he's a cocky ass bastard...

1.3 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The internet has become an integral part of the lives of many people from all around the world. For some, however, the internet is not just a part of life, but an extension of life in the virtual world – or what is commonly referred to as ‘second life’. This second life is embodied in a multitude of forms: blogs, chat rooms, online games, and hundreds of other incarnations. One of the most popular forms of online life in recent years has been the Massively Multiplayer Online Role-playing Game, or MMORG. A recent poll revealed that the MMORG *World of Warcraft* by Blizzard Entertainment now has a worldwide population of 9.3 million participants (Boyer, 2007). If one considers the hundreds of extant online games, this would mean that millions upon

millions of people from around the globe spend countless hours in front of their computers participating in these online games. Recent studies have shown that people enter these realms to make friends (Brown & Bell, 2006), to socialize (Bartle, 1996; Griffiths, Davies, & Chappel, 2003; Williams et al., 2006), to make real life money by selling online currency (Steinkuehler, 2005), to escape from real world responsibilities (Yee, 2006), to experiment with language and identity through role-play (Kelly, Pomerantz, & Currie, 2006, Mortenson, 2007; Turkle, 1995), and to harass or harm other players through grief play or player killing (Bartle, 1996; Lin & Sun, 2005; Steinkuehler, 2005; Taylor, 2006).

1.4 RESEARCH INTO ONLINE COMMUNITIES

1.4.1 Introduction

Research into online communities is becoming increasingly important as more and more people enter into online communities. Online games make up a large portion of the activities that people within these online worlds engage in, but few (if any) studies have examined the interactions between the language and the society within these online worlds. On one hand, past research has attempted to describe: 1) the participants (e.g., Bartle, 1996; Griffiths et al., 2003), 2) the online cultures (e.g., Steinkuehler, 2005; Taylor, 2005; Turkle, 1995), and 3) the motivations for gameplay (e.g., Williams et al, 2006, Kelly et al., 2005). On the other hand, studies have attempted to describe the unique features of online language by exploring chat communities (Ferrara, Brunner, & Whittemore, 1991), Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs) (Cherny, 1999), instant messaging (Baron 2004, 2005), and mailing lists (Bury, 2005; Marcoccia, 2004).

The current study is unique in that it is the first study that brings sociolinguistic questions into online environments. More specifically, the current study will explore the relationship between language and power in these virtual worlds.

2.0 POWER

2.1.1 Defining power

If asked to describe power, many of us would probably define power as control over the actions of another person or a group of people. However, one of the problems with conducting a sociolinguistic study of language and power is the fact that power is described differently depending on who is describing power and their academic discipline (Fishman, 2006).

Kiesling (1996) conducted a meta-analysis of past work on language and power in order to describe power. According to Kiesling (1996), theorists have traditionally defined power as: 1) institutional roles, 2) persuasiveness, 3) value (e.g., power vs. solidarity), and 4) control of an ideology. The strength of Kiesling's (1996) conception of power lies in the convergence of these different definitions of power. More specifically, Kiesling accepts that there are different realizations of power that are largely dependent on the identities of speakers and hearers, the context of the interaction, the roles that speakers and hearers occupy within a given society, the relationships between speakers and hearers, and the freedom that speakers have to try to use language to occupy different roles. Furthermore, Kiesling conceives power to be a naturalized part of the social practices of a society. That is, power is an inherent part of every society, and notions of power are passed from generation to generation through socialization practices with little variation. This leads to the following description of power:

- 1) Socially and culturally situated in every society.
- 2) Passed from generation to generation and resistant to change.
- 3) Relative to the relationship between the hearer and speaker.
- 4) Relative to pre-existing socially determined roles.
- 5) Relative to the position that a participant wishes to create through language.

The aforementioned five points are a description or a location of power, not a definition. If anything, this description of power indicates that a definition of power is relative to the society in which the power is situated. Thus, power in *World of Warcraft* can be reified only if the ways in which the society constructs power are fully understood. This brings me to the first research question in this study: How is power defined within the *World of Warcraft* community? This question will be addressed later on in this paper.

2.1.2 Motivating the study of power in virtual worlds

The next part of this review will look at how Kiesling operationalized power in his study of the speech of fraternity men in order to motivate the use of a similar framework to study the language of participants in *World of Warcraft*. According to Kiesling,

In the framework ... power is one of the most basic productive social relationships; importantly, power relationships are real and meaningful to the speakers, as shown in the details of talk. Through language, people place themselves in relatively enduring power roles, as defined by a community of practice (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992a,b). Essentially, the framework suggests that people place themselves in certain power roles by using language to index these roles; however, every speaker cannot simply use any strategy or form to index any role. They are limited by ascribed traits, previous roles they have filled in the community, the roles available in the situation, and their competence in a certain strategy or form (p. 41).

Here, Kiesling (1996) operationalizes his power framework through power roles. Power roles connect language and power in that the language used by participants in a power role is indexical of the respective power that one individual holds within the community. As Kiesling notes, a participant in a conversation is limited to the roles that they may index through the use of language. That is, “previous roles they have filled in the community, the roles available in the situation, and their competence in a certain strategy or form” limit a player’s access to power roles.

Although no previous research has specifically looked at power in games such as *World of Warcraft*, past studies seem to suggest that power roles do indeed exist in virtual worlds. In her ethnographic study of *Lineage II*, Steinkuehler (2005) discussed the status difference of individuals who have played *Lineage II* since the game started (beta-vets) versus the status of those who are new to the game (nOObs). Steinkuehler noted that the language of beta-vets signaled that they had played the game for a long time and had significant experience with all aspects of the game. The language of nOObs, however, reflected a lack of knowledge about the game and a lower status within the game world. Kelly et al. (2006) also discussed status differences in her study of female expressions of gendered identities in online communities. She discovered that teenage women found that they could be more powerful within online communities by pretending to be males, by playing powerful avatars, (e.g., vampires and assassins) and by using powerful language. These examples are provided to illustrate the fact that previous research has alluded to the existence of power roles in virtual communities, but never explicitly defined the power roles nor sought to explain the existence of power roles in these communities. At this point, I suggest three additional research questions in relation to this gap in the literature:

- 2) What are the power roles within *World of Warcraft*?
- 3) How does a player's use of language create or reflect the power role(s) that they occupy within *World of Warcraft*?
- 4) Can language be used to create power *ex nihilo* or does language use reflect the power that an individual has according to their power roles?

2.1.3 Limitations of the power framework

In spite of the fact that power roles do appear to exist in online communities, several limitations to the power framework need to be addressed. Firstly, age, sex, and ethnicity are not likely to be crucial for determining a player's access to power roles. Past research within online environments (e.g., Danet, 1996; Kelly et al., 2006; Turkle, 1995) has revealed that physical attributes are masked by the text-based language that is used within the community. This is not to say that physical attributes play no role in determining which roles a player can and does adopt (such a view would be naïve). Certainly, a player's background, race, class, social status, and level of education will influence the way that they use linguistic forms, but my point here is that such attributes may not be as deterministic of power roles within an online community as they would be within face-to-face conversation.

An additional point of departure from Kiesling's (1996) power framework is the fact that some of the available power roles may have nothing to do with language use. Within any online game, a player chooses an avatar to represent him or herself within the virtual world. The choices in avatar creation are limited in that the game designers create a fixed set of avatar characteristics such as class, gender, and race. Thus, players are limited from the start as to

which power roles they can identify with through choices of their avatar's race and class. For example, one could choose to play a night-elf (race) - hunter (class). By making this choice, a player is massed with all others at the same level who have made similar choices in class and race. This is different from power roles in the real world because the same power role may be multiplied and reproduced hundreds of times within the game world; whereas in real world conversations, such as those in Kiesling's dissertation, the fraternity members are individuals with unique physical characteristics and abilities. My point here is that supply and demand may regulate access to particular power roles within the game world. For example, if there are many hunters, their skills will not be in demand.

2.1.4 Conclusions from power section

Limitations aside, Kiesling's (1996) notion of power roles provides a way to explore the relationship between language and power in *World of Warcraft*, if such a relationship exists. Four research questions have arisen from this literature review: 1) How is power defined within *World of Warcraft*? 2) What are the power roles within *World of Warcraft*?, 3) How does a player's use of language create or reflect the power role(s) that they occupy within *World of Warcraft*?, and 4) Can language be used to create power *ex nihilo* or does language use reflect the power that an individual has according to their power roles? The next portion of this paper will propose a methodology for answering these research questions.

2.2 MOTIVATING A METHODOLOGY FOR THE STUDY OF ONLINE ENVIRONMENTS

Kiesling (1996) used participant observation and in-person interviews in order to investigate language and power in a fraternity. The participant observations were used to collect and record speech data from the community as well as to understand the social dynamics of the fraternity from an emic perspective. The interviews were used to collect the participants' own views on language and power within the fraternity. The interviews increased the validity of the constructs that Kiesling proposed because through ethnographic interviews, a researcher gains access to how individual community members perceive their particular community. In Kiesling's study, the interviews detailed how individuals in the fraternity perceived power roles. Lastly, Kiesling employed discourse analysis to interpret the data that were collected from fraternity members.

In applying the power framework to *World of Warcraft*, it is obvious that the same methodologies cannot be used to explore virtual worlds due to the spatial constraints that separate the researcher from the participants. Based on a review of the literature, several methods for collecting data from online communities become apparent. Firstly, questionnaires have been used to collect data about the participants themselves as well as participants' ideas about the communities that exist online. For example, Griffiths et al. (2003) collected demographic data from players of *Everquest* by looking at questionnaires that were posted on two different *Everquest* fan sites. The questionnaires were not created by the researchers, but by the fansites themselves. Secondly, ethnographic interviews have been used to interview community members about their own experiences within virtual communities. Bartle (1996) used text-chat to interview the "wizzes" (= wizards or high level participants) within a MUD

community in order to come up with his player typology. Lastly, participant observation has been the most widely used method in past studies. Researchers have used participant observation to explore *Everquest* (Griffiths et al., 2003; Taylor, 2006), *Lineage* and *Lineage II* (Steinkuehler, 2005), *World of Warcraft* (Williams et al., 2006; Walker, 2007), *There* (Brown & Bell, 2006), and many other online worlds.

The methods used in online research are similar to those used in Kiesling's study, but different in unique ways. Participant observation can still be used, but no audio data can be recorded from online communities since the primary method of communication is through text-based chat. Therefore, participant observation can still be used, but only if the researchers create virtual avatars for themselves. These avatars lessen the distance between researcher and participant, and bring the researcher into direct contact with the culture and cultural artifacts in the online world.¹ All conversations that occur in the vicinity of the avatar can be digitally recorded and saved for later use. Interviews could be conducted online using the virtual avatars, but we have chosen to use a questionnaire method in order to collect participants' views on language and power within *World of Warcraft*. This method works better for our study due to the fact that the same questionnaire can be administered to a large amount of participants in the shortest amount of time. This questionnaire will add validity to our study in that community members are given a chance to report their own views on language and power in *World of Warcraft*.

After collecting data from these online communities, these data need to be analyzed in some fashion. The questionnaire data will be analyzed using qualitative research methods in

¹ Unlike other anthropological studies in which the ethnographer tries to arrive at a "native" understanding of the culture and values of a community through observation and participation, researchers in online worlds have the option of becoming a "native" of the game world. In other words, the ethnographer's own viewpoint becomes emic through constant participation in the online world.

similar ways to other online studies that have employed questionnaires as a method of data collection (e.g., Griffiths et al., 2003). More specifically, I will evaluate the participants' responses to open and closed-ended questions in order to answer the first three research questions: 1) How is power defined in *World of Warcraft*?, 2) What are the power roles within *World of Warcraft*?, and 3) How does a player's use of language create or reflect the power role(s) that they occupy within *World of Warcraft*?

Discourse analysis will be used to answer the fourth research question: 4) How does a player's use of language create or reflect the power role(s) that they occupy within *World of Warcraft*? Discourse analysis is an appropriate method for analyzing data from *World of Warcraft* because it provides tools for looking not only at what a speaker says (the message), but also how the message is situated within a larger frame of the context (Kiesling, 1996). The use of discourse analysis is supported by other studies which have successfully utilized discourse analysis in order to interpret linguistic data from online communities (e.g., Cherny, 1999; Steinkuehler, 2005).

2.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In light of the previously cited research, I propose the following research questions to examine language and power in *World of Warcraft*:

- 1) How is power defined in *World of Warcraft*?
- 2) What are the power roles within *World of Warcraft*?
- 3) How does a player's use of language create or reflect the power role(s) that they occupy within *World of Warcraft*?

- 4) Can language be used to create power *ex nihilo* or does language use reflect the power that an individual has according to their power roles?

2.4 INTELLECTUAL MERIT

This study is significant to the field of sociolinguistics because it brings traditional sociolinguistic questions into online environments. Previous sociolinguistic studies have been primarily concerned with communication in face-to-face conversations (e.g., Brown & Gilman, 2003; Goffman, 1967). Although the questions these face-to-face studies have addressed are significant ones, no studies have attempted to ask the same questions within virtual environments. Moreover, this study motivates a methodology for the study of language and power within online environments that can be used by other researchers to ask similar sociolinguistic questions within virtual worlds.

3.0 METHODOLOGY FOR STUDYING POWER

3.1 INSTRUMENTS

3.1.1 Power questionnaire

In addition to the participant observation, data about players' perceptions of language and power in World of Warcraft were collected through an online power questionnaire (See Appendix A for a copy of this online questionnaire.) The purpose of collecting these data was to determine how individuals describe their own power within an online community as well as to elucidate how individuals within the game world attribute power to other players. The motivation behind this questionnaire is derived from Kiesling's power framework, in which he suggests that "In an analysis of power, then, we must analyze these naturalized ways of thinking about social practices (including language use), and the reality that drives them" (1996, p. 72). This questionnaire asked participants to provide virtual demographics (e.g., avatar's race/class), self-conception of personal power, and reflections on how powerful/powerless people spoke within *World of Warcraft*.

3.1.2 Discourse Analysis of online conversations

After uncovering the ideologies of power roles within *World of Warcraft*, the next step in this study will be to examine the language of participants who hold particular power roles in the game world by using discourse analysis (DA) techniques. Discourse analysis is useful for this study because it includes contextual factors within the analysis of linguistic forms (Kiesling, 1996). This next step is motivated, once again, by the power framework in which, “people place themselves in certain power roles by using language to index these roles (Kiesling, 1996, p. 72).” My study will examine the language of several participants within *World of Warcraft* in light of the power roles that these participants are said to occupy within the context of the game.

4.0 E-LANGUAGE AND POWER

4.1 DEFINING SPEECH PRACTICES

In this section of the paper, I will systematize several of the speech practices that are central to the game in light of Hymes's (2004) ethnography of communication and Levinson's (1979) theory of activity types. These speech practices are being systematized in order to contextualize the typical activities and speech practices that occur within *World of Warcraft*. Moreover, this systematization of speech practices will be used later on to explore interactions between speech practice, language, and power.

According to Hymes (2004), systematic relations exist that underlie the diversity of speech within communities. The main speech practices from *World of Warcraft* that need to be systematized include guild chat, party chat, world/trade chat, battleground chat, and raid chat. These are all recognized speech practices within the *World of Warcraft* community. The dilemma lies in the choice of linguistic terminology that can be used to describe each of the speech practices. In other words, are they speech events, speech situations, or activity types? Bear in mind that the goal here is to relate any one of the above speech practices to one and only one descriptive term, not to force the speech practices into the terms by subdividing speech practices in *World of Warcraft* into smaller and smaller units.

The first two terms, speech events and speech activities, are derived from Hymes' (2004) ethnography of communication. Speech situations refer to activities that are associated with certain kinds of speech (or silence), and speech events refer to activities that are directly governed by the rules or norms for speech. Classifying the speech practices as speech events is problematic. If we look specifically at party chat, we see that different kinds of speech can occur within party chat. For some participants, party chat is used primarily to communicate quest information and coordinate group activities. For other participants, however, party chat is used for role-playing; that is, taking on the identity of the fictional character within the game. Therefore, the same speech practice (i.e., party chat) can be used to communicate two completely different types of messages. This is problematic for speech events because quest coordination and role-playing are governed by at least two completely different norms for language use.² These different norms suggest that role-playing speech events and quest coordination speech events exist. Again, subdividing speech events into smaller units (role-playing speech events and quest coordination speech events) to account for the differences is not helpful for the current investigation. I am looking for the most precise term or terms that account for the *World of Warcraft* participants' individuation of party chat, guild chat, world/trade chat, battleground chat, and raid chat into discrete speech practices within the game world.

Levinson's (1979) theory of activity types and Hymes' (2004) speech situation do a better job of accounting for the speech practices in *World of Warcraft*. Norms are important as well for these two classifications; however, the difference between the norms in speech situations and activity types and the norms in speech events is that the norms in speech situations and activity types are inclusive norms. The point I am making here can best be illustrated by going

² Role-playing and quest coordination need not be mutually exclusive.

back to the example of role-playing in party chat versus coordinating quests in party chat. As I mentioned earlier, the norms for behavior in these two speech practices are completely different. What I am now proposing is that party chat can be an activity type or a speech situation because these classifications allow both quest coordination and role-playing to be part of party chat, without making the presence or absence of either quest coordination or role-playing a decisive factor in saying whether or not party chat still exists (as does a speech event).

At this point, both speech situation and activity type are candidates for describing the speech practices in *World of Warcraft*. Nonetheless, I want only one term to refer to the speech practices in *World of Warcraft*, and I believe that the theory of activity types more adequately accounts for the speech practices encountered in *World of Warcraft* than does the theory of speech situations. One feature of activity types that makes them a more viable candidate for the current study is the fact that activity types place constraints on the allowable contributions and the participants within speech practices (Levinson, 1979). Constraints are different from norms in that they govern the extent of allowable contributions as opposed determining which contributions must appear. The next section of the paper describes the activity types in *World of Warcraft* and suggests the inclusive norms for interaction and the constraints on contributions and participants in which activity type.

4.1.1 General and trade chat

General chat and trade chat are similar in that all players within a certain region can “hear” and contribute to either form of chat. The difference between these two types of chat is that trade chat occurs only within cities, while general chat occurs outside of cities. There may be anywhere from 10 to 3000 members in these chat channels at any given time. The chat that

occurs in this channel can revolve around a large number of topics such as looking for party members, recruiting members for a guild, trying to sell a particular item, and harassing other players. The game designers did not assign any roles to participants in general chat or trade chat as we see in other activity types. The following example comes from trade chat and involves several of these features.

Example 1: Trade chat

1 [Trade] Jandoe: Lvl. 375 alchemist LFW (*=looking for work*) everything FREE with mats. Xmuting (*=transmuting*) PRIMAL MIGHTS, EARTHSTORM and SKYFIRE diamonds. Tips appreciated!
2 [Trade] Blueglue: WTS (*=wanting to sell*) Bronze Bar stacks, got 19 stacks, plus 9, will sell for 40g.
3 [Trade] Bankman: WTB (*=wanting to buy*) Primal Fire Pst please
4 [Trade] Asman: wheres reagent vendor in darn?
5 [Trade] Mitz: WTS Sunfury Signetx31 Arcane Tomex2
6 [Trade] Mitz: WTT***
7 [Trade] Dagger: wtb large brilliant shards x 10 pst (*=please send tell*) please
8 [Trade] Rivvner: LFG Stealth Arc Run for 2nd key frag
9 [Trade] Qaqabar: [POSEY] is now recruiting mature players level 65+ to begin raiding Kara. pst for more info.
10 [Trade] Colgis: can anyone open Eternium Lockbox

In the previous example, we see that Jandoe is trying to sell their skills as a high-level alchemist. In the next line, Blueglue wants to sell (WTS) an item. In line 3, Bankman wants to buy (WTB) an item. In line 4, Asman asks a question about the location of a particular non-player character (NPC) in the game world. In lines 5-6, we see that Mitz wants to trade (WTT) an item for another item. In line 8, Rivvner shouts using caps lock that he is looking for a group (LFG) and wants to go on a particular quest to get a specific item. In line 9, Qaqabar shouts that his guild <POSEY> is recruiting members to start to raid the dungeon “Karazhan,” which is a very high level place that participants can go to fight ferocious monsters and uncover vast riches.

In line 10, we see another general question from Colgis who is in search of someone who can help with a locked box that she cannot open.

4.1.2 Battleground chat

Participants engage in three principal activities within battleground. The first is player versus player (PvP) combat. In PvP, the objective is to “kill” the avatars of other players to get honor points (a form of currency) from killing the enemy. PvP combat takes place within all of the battleground instances. A second objective is to capture a key point or an enemy flag within the battleground and/or protect an allied point or flag from being captured by the enemy. A third objective may be to kill a powerful enemy boss while at the same time trying to protect a friendly boss from being defeated by enemy forces.

Players use battleground chat to tell others what to do and to inform other group members about the enemy’s actions within the battleground. Normally, the game assigns the role of a leader to one participant within the battleground. This leadership role can be given to another player if the original leader does not want to be the battleground leader. Power may be linked to the role of battleground leader because they have the ability to control the actions of others within the battleground, at least hypothetically. I say hypothetically because some battleground leaders do not say anything within the battleground and the other non-leaders (participants who do not have the title of leader) try to direct the actions of others. In any case, the “leader” of a battleground will have to type and fight at the same time. This may affect a battleground leader’s language by making it shorter and more direct. That is, leaders will be more likely to use abbreviated forms and direct language because they have to multitask while interacting

within a battleground. Most of the battleground language that I have observed pertains to giving others orders as is illustrated in the following example:

Example 2: Battleground chat

[Battleground Leader] Cain: group 3 hold ST (=stables)..
[Battleground] Agerionos: k
[Battleground] Trick: ok
[Battleground Leader] Cain: group 1 take BS (=blacksmith).. group 2 take LM (=lumbermill)..
[Battleground Leader] Cain: group 3 hold ST..
[Battleground Leader] Cain: LM can support ST..
[Battleground] Trick: group one holds BS?
[Battleground Leader] Cain: LM can support
[Battleground Leader] Cain: BS as well..
[Battleground Leader] Cain: hold the bridge
[Battleground] Bronzey: too many at BS
[Battleground] Daggerz: inc (=incoming) stables
[Battleground Leader] Cain: fall back to LM

In this example, Cain issues orders to others within the battleground to get them to support weak positions, and Bronzey and Daggerz use the chat channel to inform the other members of the group as to what is occurring from their position. Battleground chat can only be heard by the 10 to 40 participants who are in the battleground. Likewise, only these 10 to 40 participants can actively contribute to the battleground chat.

4.1.3 Party chat

Party chat involves 2 to 5 participants who are working together to complete an objective within the game. Party chat may also involve socially oriented chat or role-playing chat. Other language in party chat revolves around negotiating ways to complete quests. One member in every party has the title of party leader. The game designers implemented this role into the game. This title may be linked with power in that the leader has the power to bring others into

the party and the power to kick people out of the party. The following example takes place in party chat as Agerionos (me) and another player join forces to complete a quest that neither can complete alone.

Example 3: Party chat

[Party] Poly: tada
[Party] Poly: right behind you
[Party] Agerionos: nice
[Party] Poly: can you pull him back a little
[Party] Poly: then ill stun him
[Party] Poly: thats good
[Party] Agerionos: nice, thx
[Party] Poly: good job
[Party] Poly: now what
[Party] Agerionos: want to try bloodsail?
[Party] Poly: we could attempt the bloodsail
[Party] Poly: sure
[Party] Agerionos: ok
[Party] Poly: i think theyre up by BB (= *Booty Bay, a small village*)
[Party] Poly: err down by
[Party] Agerionos: I think we could do the captain's chest too
[Party] Poly: we could try kiting the guy
[Party] Poly: to the goblins to help us kill him
[Party] Poly: hes a 47 elite [an elite monster is 2 or 3 times harder than a normal monster]
[Party] Agerionos: ok
[Party] Agerionos: i like your mount
[Party] Poly: hehe chickens are cool
[Party] Poly: :)

In this example, Poly and Agerionos are trying to complete a very difficult quest by themselves. Poly, who has done the quest before, instructs Agerionos in one possible strategy that they can use to defeat the difficult monster. The plan is to use nearby NPC (non-player character) guards to kill the monster for them so that the two party members do not need to fight him alone – and inevitably perish in the attempt. No other participants can hear this conversation.

4.1.4 Guild chat

A guild is an online organization that can be made up of anywhere from 10 to 1000 members. The purposes of joining a guild are to make friends and to coordinate organized quests and missions. Every guild has some form of organizational structure in which leadership roles are assigned to members of the guild. Traditionally, there is one leader, several officers, and many members in each guild with varying degrees of authority. The guild leader is the single most powerful person within the guild, with the officers being the second most powerful people within the guild. Guild leaders are the most powerful members of the guild because they have the ability to invite new members into a guild and to expel disruptive members from the guild. Guild officers also have the power to invite new members and expel disruptive members. The major difference between the power of guild leaders and guild officers is that the guild leader ultimately dictates who the officers are and has the ability to revoke officer status or expel an officer from the guild. Members, on the other hand, have little natural power (i.e., roles assigned by the game developers) within the guild hierarchy. Guild members can be invited or kicked out of a guild at the discretion of the guild leader and officers. Language that is common to guilds is socially oriented and only those who are members of the guild can ‘hear’ what transpires in guild chat. The following conversation is an example of guild chat.

Example 4: Guild chat

[Guild] Agerionos: how is everyone?
[Guild] Zull: So, i'm setting up a deadmines [Deadmines is the name of a dungeon] group, anyone up for it? ...hic!
[Guild] Palid: wut up..hick
[Guild] Zull: i'm good myself ...hic!
[Guild] Zull: Kay, that'sh old palie =P
[Guild] Agerionos: what level is it?
[Guild] Zull: it's 18-22 about
[Guild] Zull: well, 16-24 ish more appropriate

[Guild] Zull: 25seconds left on this drunkness hehe
[Guild] Zull: I remember i got banned once because i was drunk and i shaid something with !@\$ on it over the trade channel.... ...hic!
[Guild] Zull: sit*
[Guild] Zull: but it said...that
[Guild] Zull: i thought they fixed that in a patch lol
[Guild] Zull: Hey swamp
[Guild] Witchswamp: hey
[Guild] Zull: Say hi to the two new guys =), Cav and Agerionos
[Guild] Cavinol: hola
[Guild] Witchswamp: Greetings all
[Guild] Agerionos: hi

This example illustrates the type of language that one would expect to find in guild chat. As is illustrated by this example, much of the language in guild chat revolves around social relationships and coordinating group quests and missions. There is also some role-play in this example of guild chat in which the participants of the guild pretend to be drunk because their characters are drunk. In terms of constraints on participants, only guild members can hear and participate in this discussion.

4.1.5 Raid chat

Many players believe that raids are the epitome of the player's experience in *World of Warcraft*. By participating in a raid, a player can obtain the best equipment and experience the highest level content in the game. On the downside, many of the raids require a player to have higher-level equipment and certain hard-to-get keys that allow a player to unlock doors to particular dungeons. Furthermore, a raid instance can take from 6 to 10 hours to complete, possibly longer. Therefore, if a player wishes to experience in full the end-game content, they must be dedicated to spending large amounts of time inside the game world. Some dedicated players have accumulated more than a year of playtime. This is a considerable amount of time if

one considers that the average person needs to sleep, eat, and work, and the fact that the game has only been on the market for 3 years. This means that there are players who have spent one third of the elapsed time since the game's release playing the game.

The language within a raid instance is used to direct multiple players in taking actions within large dungeons. Since many of the players in the raid already know what to do, raid chat includes countdowns for when to start an attack. These commands are typically given by a raid leader who knows exactly what each member of the group needs to do to take down a particular boss monster. Precision in language is also important for raid chat because one or two people are directing from 10 to 40 people in a very complicated task. Even so, the text-chat is used to reinforce the orders given by the raid leader so that everyone knows exactly what to do. In raid instances, one player's error can lead to the annihilation of the entire raid group (all 40 players.)

Below is an example of raid chat.

Example 5: Raid chat

[Raid] Avalay: <--need to go get candles
[Raid] Brimr: i was right by the X thingy :-p
[Raid] Tfel: gg (=good game) resist >.>
[Raid Leader] Avalay: First - Blindeye - Charly (Nibe)
[Raid Leader] Avalay: Second - Olm - Phoenix + Brr (Xakaila)
[Raid Leader] Avalay: Third - Shaman - Moomarx + Caius (Kurse)
[Raid Leader] Avalay: Mage - Vanberge (Calline)
[Raid Leader] Avalay: Maulgar - Yakill (Avalay, Ec)
[Raid] Brimr: gotcha...I did ask :-p
[Raid Warning] Yakill: it is fire
[Raid] Tfel: ...

As we see from this example, the raid leader, Avalay, is very direct in giving orders. He tells the group the exact order in which the monsters will be killed and tells the group which individuals will be fighting which monster. Again, raid leader is a position that is part of the game's design. This position may be linked to power because the leader has the ability to control

who enters and who leaves the raid group. The other chat that occurs in this channel pertains to the group's first attempt to defeat this group of monsters. The members are discussing why everyone died during the previous fight.

4.1.6 Summary of Findings

In this section, I have attempted to describe the five principle activity types in *World of Warcraft* in order to give the reader an impression of the kinds of language that normally occur in each activity type. Moreover, these descriptions are meant to show the reader that power roles may be part of the game's design. Party leaders, raid leaders, battleground leaders, guild leaders, and guild officers have power because the game itself gives them abilities to control the actions of others.

4.2 RESULTS

The data from the questionnaire were analyzed using qualitative methods. The results of the questionnaire are discussed in relation to the first three research questions that were proposed in this study:

- 1) How is power defined in *World of Warcraft*?
- 2) What are the power roles within *World of Warcraft*?
- 3) How does a player's use of language create or reflect the power role(s) that they occupy within *World of Warcraft*?

4.2.1 How is power defined in *World of Warcraft*?

The first research question asked: how is power defined in *World of Warcraft*? According to the responses that participants provided in the questionnaire, participants do not agree on a definition of power. Nonetheless, there are three main ways that participants define power that can be drawn from their answers to the questions: 1) Who is powerful on your server and 2) why are they powerful? Firstly, power is the ability to control the actions of others even though the others may not want to do a particular action. This type of power is exemplified in one participant's comment in which he describes the power of his guild leader, Rallyman.

Rallyman, cause he is the guild leader of my guild. He has the power to invite new people and to kick people out, and can order 25 certain perople (sic) to be somewhere at a certain time and they will be there.

Secondly, power is the ability to gain the respect of others through one's actions. According to one participant, "Poly [a guild leader], she is so willing to help and befriend people that when she needs help she has plenty of people willing to do so." Lastly, power is the ability to annoy other players or control a particular aspect of the game through one's actions. In the words of one participant, "Luzzgawr - a friend, because mainly is (sic) ability to control dialog in the trade chat. He is more so a goof with spamming odd things but it's the way he puts off negative banter. I laugh and laugh".

Although participants were not asked to define power, their responses to other questions regarding power reflect the workings of power within *World of Warcraft*. At this point, a definition of power can be proposed. Within *World of Warcraft*, **power is the ability to control the actions of others or an aspect of the game, and power is the ability to gain respect (or disrepute) from others based on one's actions.**

4.2.2 What are the power roles within *World of Warcraft*?

The second research question asked: What are the power roles within *World of Warcraft*? Another way of asking this question would be: What do people have in *World of Warcraft* that makes them powerful? According to players, power roles are most strongly correlated to equipment and being in demand in the game world. Table 1 is a compilation of participants' responses regarding what they thought made people powerful within *World of Warcraft*.

Table 1: Power roles

Question	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly agree
My gear makes me powerful.	1	2	5	13	4
My experience with the game and the game world makes me powerful.	1	8	7	5	4
My crafting abilities make me powerful.	8	8	3	5	1
People who play male avatars are more powerful than those who play female avatars.	20	1	2	2	0

Table 1 reveals that respondents thought that having good gear placed someone in a powerful position. In *World of Warcraft*, there are different grades of gear based on the color of the gear. For instance, purple items are exceptionally rare, and having them makes a player's avatar more effective in combat within the game world. After purple items, blue items are semi-rare, green items are uncommon, and white items are standard, or common, within the game world. The powerful participants are those who have blue and purple items. In addition to gear, some respondents thought that having experience with the game made one powerful. Knowledge of game mechanics (e.g., how to complete a particular quest) and the game environment (e.g.,

where to find a rare item or creature) was also linked to power within *World of Warcraft*. On the other hand, respondents did not think that avatar gender and crafting abilities were linked with power in *World of Warcraft*. The result regarding avatar gender and power should be treated with caution in light of current findings in language and gender research within online environments (Herring, 2004; Postmes & Spears, 2002). These studies, as well as language and gender studies within face-to-face conversation (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003), reveal that people may not be consciously aware of gendered attitudes.

Power roles may also be correlated to the supply and demand of a particular class in *World of Warcraft*. Figure 9 combines the results from two questions on the questionnaire: 1) What is your avatar's class? and 2) Is your avatar powerful?

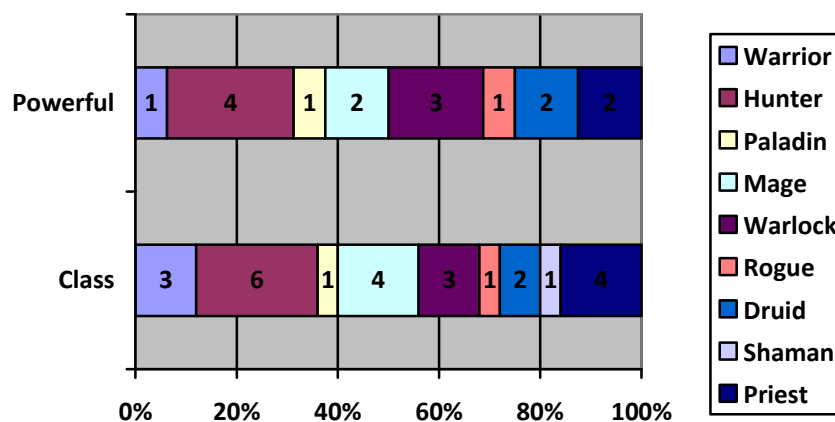


Figure 9: Class and power

This chart appears to rather uninformative, that is, until the qualitative comments regarding this relationship are considered. According to one participant, “Lots of people think hunters are overpowered, but socially not so much. Many people don’t like them as a class, and tanks and healers are less common and more desirable than dps [damage per second (e.g., mage

or hunter)] in general.” This comment suggests that although a particular class has powerful abilities within the game, they are not very desirable in the community, perhaps because there are so many hunters within the game world. Here, we might describe the social power in relation to a supply-and-demand model. On many servers, DPS, such as mages and hunters, are abundant in quantity, whereas fewer people play healers and tank-type characters. If we look at the results of the current study, we see that this is the case for the respondents to the power questionnaire. In figure 10 we see that many more people play a DPS type class than healers or tanks. Thus, it is possible here that power is derived from being in demand in *World of Warcraft*.

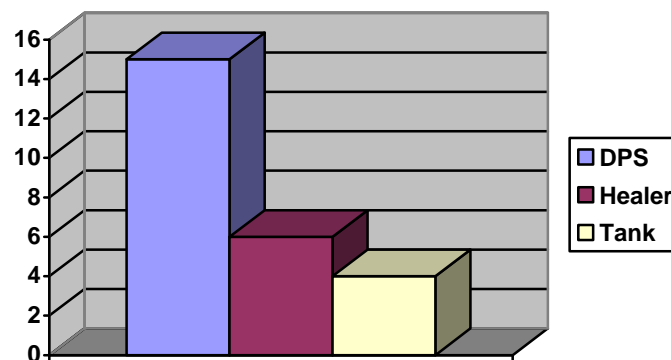


Figure 10: In-game population

In sum, respondents to the questionnaire linked power in the game with: 1) possessing high level equipment, 2) having experience with certain aspects of the game, and 3) playing an in-demand class. Conversely, respondents did not link power to having high crafting abilities or playing an avatar of a particular gender.

4.2.3 How does a player's use of language create or reflect the power role(s) that they occupy within *World of Warcraft*?

The third research question asked: how does a player's use of language create or reflect the power role(s) that they occupy within *World of Warcraft*? Respondents' answers to the questionnaire indicated that the language of most of the powerful participants could be grouped into two opposing categories, collaborative and aggressive. These categories were created by me in order to describe the patterns in the data. According to the questionnaire, direct and confident language could fit into either category. On the other hand, positive language and polite language are features of collaborative strategies only, which places demeaning language, insults, and cursing to be features of aggressive language. In other words, strategies that protect the face of the addressee are considered to be collaborative, whereas strategies that are not concerned with protecting an addressee's face are deemed aggressive. Table 2 summarizes respondents' answers to the question regarding how powerful participants spoke within the game.

Table 2: Language and power across servers

Player vs. Player	RP Server
Direct language	Direct language
Confident language	Confident language (no hedges)
Positive language	Grammaticality
Polite language	
Demeaning language	
Insults	
Cursing	

Table 2 shows that there are some shared characteristics between powerful language on RP and PvP servers, whereas grammar is only important for the RP servers. A server difference in the type of language that indexed power roles was also found in the use of correct grammar. For RP servers, using correct and accurate grammar was consistent with creating a powerful

position on the game server. Interestingly enough, grammatical correctness was not viewed as being important for players within the PvP realm. This difference can be explained in terms of role-playing. When a person role-plays, they are performing an identity that is at odds with their real life identity. In using ungrammatical language in role-play, a player would “sound stupid,” and the identity that they would be performing would seem less authentic. Moreover, using ungrammatical language is seen as an attempt to subvert the community, and the user of the ungrammatical form is often ridiculed for being unable to speak properly. This is not the case for PvP servers because the focus is not on performing identities, but on negotiating with other players in order to complete in-game tasks.³

In order to better understand how grammar is linked to power, it is helpful to return to the definition of power in which power is the ability to gain respect from others based on one’s actions. For role-players, grammatical language is a crucial action in the performance of identities within the game world. Accordingly, when a player uses ungrammatical language, they do not have power because they do not have command of the ability to gain respect through using grammatical language. In other words, ungrammatical language indexes incompetence and community subversion which indexes a non-powerful position on role-playing servers.

³ Role-playing does occur on PvP servers. There are no rules against it. However, after participating in the community for nearly 8 months, I could probably count the instances of role-play that I have seen on one hand, meaning that they are few and far between.

4.2.4 Can language be used to create power *ex nihilo* or does language use reflect the power that an individual has according to their power roles?

One final research question remains: Can language be used to create power *ex nihilo* or does language use reflect the power that an individual has according to their power roles? The following conversations reveal that both verbs “reflect” and “create” work to describe the relationship between language and power.

4.2.4.1 Collaborative language in party chat

The first conversation in example 6 comes from party chat. This is an illustration of how power can be created *ex nihilo* by using language. In the grand scheme of language and power in *World of Warcraft*, the two individuals in the following conversation have little power. Firstly, they are around level 30 (with the maximum level in the game being 70) and are easy prey for any players with characters from levels 35-70 who are in the mood to kill lower level characters. Thus, their avatars have little power in the world when compared to the majority of other avatars who are higher levels. The second point follows from the first and pertains to the quality and rarity of the equipment that the characters are wearing/wielding. At level 30, an avatar is very limited in terms of the equipment that their avatar can wear, and all of the available equipment for this level would be largely unimpressive and powerless. Lastly, to the knowledge of the author, these players did not have any avatars above level 30. This being the case, the players in this conversation lack the type of knowledge and experience that they could bring into the conversation to index power. In light of the power roles that have been explored here, these players appear to be powerless bystanders in a hostile world intent on their slaughter. In the next portion of this paper, I will examine how these players use language to create power within their

group conversation in light of the fact that they are powerless in terms of many of the things that make a player powerful within this world.

Example 6: Collaborative language in party chat

1 7/15 02:00:32.886 [Party] Terrified: ag where did u get ur pet? [a small bird that follows Agerionos]
2 7/15 02:01:07.621 [Party] Agerionos: one of my friends gave it to me
3 7/15 02:01:12.449 [Party] Terrified: it's awesome
4 7/15 02:01:15.949 [Party] Agerionos: its from a valentines day event
5 7/15 02:01:24.308 [Party] Agerionos: thx (=thanks)
6 7/15 02:01:40.652 [Party] Terrified: two mages so if things get out of control u each have sheep (= *a magic spell that transforms an enemy into a small sheep*)
7 7/15 02:01:47.214 [Party] Agerionos: yep
8 7/15 02:03:26.761 [Party] Terrified: brb
9 7/15 02:03:36.480 [Party] Agerionos: k (=ok)
10 7/15 02:04:10.714 [Party] Dysfunction: hold
11 7/15 02:04:20.558 [Party] Dysfunction: hold age (=agerionos)
12 7/15 02:04:29.199 [Party] Agerionos: k
13 7/15 02:04:30.730 [Party] Dysfunction: Terr is cutting virus scan off
14 7/15 02:04:58.199 [Party] Dysfunction: let Terr mark the target and we both pry 15
(=pyroblast, the abbreviated form is misspelled)
16 7/15 02:05:07.808 [Party] Agerionos: k

According to my definition of power, power is the ability to control the actions of others or an aspect of the game, and power is the ability to gain respect (or disrepute) from others based on one's actions. Based on this definition of power, I argue that Terrified and Dysfunction use language to create their power within this interaction. In line 1, Terrified issues an order to the two mages in the group (Agerionos and Dysfunction). Terrified says, "two mages so if things get out of control u each have sheep (=a magic spell that turns a monster into a sheep)." What Terrified is really saying here is: use sheep if things get out of control. This order is indirect (Eckert et al., 2003, p. 188-189) because the order is implied instead of directly stated. At no point in this utterance does Terrified state that the mages should use sheep if things get out of

control, instead he says if things get out of control, you both possess sheep. The mages know that they both have the ability to sheep, but they have to understand from the context that Terrified implies that they should use sheep if the group gets into trouble. In other words, Terrified is trying to control the actions of others by using indirect requests. Agerionos' response of "yep," indicates that Agerionos will obey Terrified's order and use sheep if things get out of control.

Dysfunction also seems to have power to control Agerionos's actions. At first, Dysfunction uses explicit directives. The directness is later mitigated by using explanations such as "Terr is cutting virus scan off." We see that Dysfunction says, "hold" and then follows up with, "hold age" in order to make sure that Agerionos knows that Dysfunction is referring to him. The purpose of these directives is to make sure that Agerionos knows that Terrified is away from his computer and to make sure he does not initiate a fight when one member of the group is missing. Agerionos's response of "k" indicates that he will modify his actions at the behest of Dysfunction's orders.

So far, I have suggested that Terrified and Dysfunction have the ability to control the actions of others without having any of the knowledge, gear, or experience that *World of Warcraft* players link with power roles. I will now describe how their language creates power within this particular interaction.

In the questionnaire, I asked participants to reflect on how powerful participants spoke within *World of Warcraft*. As a result of asking this question, I found that participants thought that powerful people either used collaborative language or aggressive language, but not both. In this interaction, collaborative linguistic strategies are used to create power. For example, Terrified compliments Agerionos's pet in line 3 and makes indirect requests to get the other

members to do what he wants them to do in line 6, while at the same time protecting their face (Goffman, 1967). These strategies are collaborative because they consider the face of the participants in the interaction and are not face-threatening to Agerionos. (Note: I was Agerionos.)

The way that Terrified's collaborative strategies create power may relate to conversationalising as discussed by Talbot et al. (2003, p. 123). Conversationalizing foregrounds solidarity while placing the real relationship of boss-subordinate in the background. In other words, the real power that the boss has to control the actions of others is discretely disguised as solidarity. If we look back to example 6, Terrified may be using the compliment and the indirect language in order to make it easier to dominate Dysfunction and Agerionos during the interaction, for he is, in fact, the party leader. As was discussed previously in Section 4.0 on activity types, the party leader has a certain amount of power simply because they are in the role of party leader.

Secondly, Dysfunction enters into the conversation for the first time after Terrified's departure and adopts Terrified's stance as the leader until Terrified can get his anti-virus program under control. Initially, Dysfunction uses direct orders with explanations, but later, gives direct orders to Agerionos. The use of direct orders with explanations is a collaborative strategy because it mitigates the face-threat of the orders, making them seem less direct and, thereby, more collaborative. Collaborative language can also be used by high-level players in battlegrounds, as is illustrated by the following example.

Example 7: Collaborative Language in a Battleground

1 8/8 00:25:33.625 [Battleground] Mary: give um hell solders
2 8/8 00:26:37.062 [Battleground] Duckman: get bs (=blacksmith)
3 8/8 00:28:50.312 [Battleground] Duckman: need another one
4 8/8 00:29:02.500 [Battleground] Mary: just get 3 or 4 and go on def (=defense)

5 8/8 00:29:12.921 [Battleground] Nightrider: we need the mines
 6 8/8 00:29:47.234 [Battleground] Duckman: get a mob [a large group of people] there
 7 8/8 00:29:59.953 [Battleground] Duckman: move from ST(=*stables*)
 8 8/8 00:30:06.093 [Battleground] Duckman: keep some D (=*defense*) there tho
 9 8/8 00:32:04.421 [Battleground] Duckman: cmon guys...lets get mines
 10 8/8 00:33:03.500 [Battleground] Nightrider: help at LM (=*lumbermill*)
 11 8/8 00:33:34.000 [Battleground] Nightrider: nvm (=*nevermind*)
 12 8/8 00:33:59.343 [Battleground] Nightrider: we need either mines or BS
 13 8/8 00:34:27.703 [Battleground] Nightrider: big in (=*incoming*) to LM
 14 8/8 00:35:36.718 [Battleground] Duckman: hold onto BS
 15 8/8 00:35:46.125 [Battleground] Duckman: get some reinforcements there
 16 8/8 00:35:47.984 [Battleground] Nightrider: need help getting LM back
 17 8/8 00:37:10.828 [Battleground] Duckman: dammit
 18 8/8 00:38:12.078 [Battleground] Nightrider: need help gettng LM back
 19 8/8 00:39:46.203 [Battleground] Duckman: take farm
 20 8/8 00:41:01.234 [Battleground] Duckman: lots at mine
 21 8/8 00:42:46.343 [Battleground] Duckman: we blow
 22 8/8 00:43:13.484 [Battleground] Nightrider: pretty much
 23 8/8 00:44:39.625 [Battleground] Duckman: hit lm
 24 8/8 00:46:13.718 [Battleground] Nightrider: inc to ST
 25 8/8 00:46:15.578 [Battleground] Duckman: watch ST
 26 8/8 00:46:17.343 [Battleground] Duckman: ST
 27 8/8 00:46:52.671 [Battleground] Droiddrop: the games over
 28 8/8 00:47:40.265 [Battleground] Nightrider: lol...alliance is just bad man, just bad
 29 8/8 00:48:18.640 [Battleground] Mary: no its cauce we dont think

The participants in this battleground conversation are very similar to Dysfunction and Terrified in the previous example in terms of gear and character level; yet the distribution of power in this particular speech activity seems to be very different from the power we see in example 6. Firstly, the person in the role of battleground leader says nothing during the course of the battleground. This is somewhat odd because the leader is expected to use the most powerful language because they are in the most powerful role. Secondly, no single member stands out as the leader or most powerful person in this battleground instance. Mary, Duckman, and Nightrider all attempt to give orders to others. Of these three, Duckman and Mary give the most direct orders, with Nightrider's orders being either indirect requests (e.g., "we need either mines or BS") or direct requests (e.g., "help at LM"). The former implies that people should go

to either the mines or the BS and the latter is a request for help at Nightrider's position, the LM. Finally, the participants engage in self-degradation practices. In line 21, Duckman says, "we blow." Nightrider follows up on this comment and says, "pretty much," in line 22 and, "lol...alliance is just bad man, just bad" in line 28. In line 29, Mary says, "no its cauce we dont think." In all of these instances the players who exhibited the most power within this battleground instance seem to be deprecating their own abilities and, in a sense, saying that they are powerless in the game world because they play for the Alliance instead of the Horde.

The participants in this conversation (particularly Mary, Duckman, and Nightrider) are not powerless; instead they rely on collaborative language and contextual factors to create powerful positions within the game world even though their characters are not very high levels and do not have powerful gear. Firstly, the participants in this conversation use collaborative instead of aggressive strategies to index powerful positions within the game. This strategy is similar to the one that we see in example 6 with Terrified and Dysfunction in which the participants use collaborative strategies in order to obtain the power to control the actions of others. Secondly, the fact that these three participants attempt to take on the role as the battleground leader tells us that they have experience inside battlegrounds and know what the participants need to do in order to win. The kind of power that they demonstrate here is knowledge or experience power. Lastly, these participants say that their failure is due to them playing for the Alliance instead of the Horde. In this case, the participants are trying to reaffirm their power in spite of a humiliating loss by saying that is it not their (the individual's) fault, but because the side they play for is weak. By using this strategy, the individuals are protecting their individual power by blaming the collective for the loss.

4.2.4.2 Aggressive language in a battleground

The next example illustrates how language can reflect the power roles that an individual occupies within *World of Warcraft*. The data shown here come from a level 70 battleground. The participants' avatars in this battleground are all at the maximum attainable level within the game. At this level, participants have had hours and hours of time within the game world to hone their skills and abilities, to acquire the best possible equipment within the game, and to learn all there is to know about the game and the game mechanics. As we saw earlier in the discussion on power roles, having one or all of the aforementioned attributes/items may place a participant in a particular power role within the game.

In the excerpt below, Nomercy has many of the characteristics of a 'powerful' avatar. Upon examining his avatar, one sees that he possess some of the very best PvP equipment. In order to obtain these items, the player has to be highly skilled in PvP combat. Based on the gear that Nomercy has, one can assume that he is a very skilled player, which may also explain the reason that he is placed in the power role of battleground leader within this battleground. In addition to his equipment and his obvious familiarity with the game, Nomercy is also a paladin healer. If we look back to figure 10, we see that there according to respondents to the questionnaire, there are limited numbers of healers on the server, which may make them more in demand. In this particular battleground, Nomercy is the only healer out of 15 players, thus making him very "in demand."

Example 8: Aggressive language in a battleground

2/6 23:07:10.127 [Battleground Leader] Nomercy-Crushridge: GROUP 1 GOING TO MINE GROUP 2 AND GROUP 3 GOING TO BS (=blacksmith) THEN PUSH TO FARM IM THE ONLY 1 WHO GO TO STABS (=stables)

2/6 23:07:35.697 [Battleground Leader] Nomercy-Crushridge: CALL INCS (=incomings)

2/6 23:07:38.527 [Battleground Leader] Nomercy-Crushridge: AND GG (=good game)

2/6 23:08:38.760 [Battleground Leader] Nomeracy-Crushridge: GROUP 1 GOING MINE
 GROUP2-3 GOIGN BS
 2/6 23:08:42.794 [Battleground Leader] Nomeracy-Crushridge: I GO STBS
 2/6 23:09:36.595 [Battleground Leader] Nomeracy-Crushridge: COME ON NO 1 ELSE
 AT STBAS (=stables)
 2/6 23:09:37.147 [Battleground] Highbon-Stonemaul: Inc stables
 2/6 23:10:06.582 [Battleground] Geedbrow-Perenolde: stables needs helpw
 2/6 23:10:07.603 [Battleground] Shadowstalker-Stormscale: 1 rogue at mine
 2/6 23:11:02.005 [Battleground Leader] Nomeracy-Crushridge: DONT FIGHT IN
 ROADS GUYS
 2/6 23:11:14.444 [Battleground] Shadowstalker-Stormscale: st
 2/6 23:11:15.010 [Battleground Leader] Nomeracy-Crushridge: why are you going to lm
 (=lumbermill)

Nomeracy uses language in this battleground to reflect his powerful position. Firstly, he uses very direct language to convey orders to the other participants in the battleground. Initially, he tells all of the participants exactly where they should go within the battleground in saying “GROUP 1 GOING TO MINE GROUP 2 AND GROUP 3 GOING TO BS THEN PUSH TO FARM IM THE ONLY 1 WHO GO TO STABS.” This is a direct order, and no additional language is used to mitigate the face-threat of this statement. Secondly, Nomeracy uses the CAPS LOCK key to convey his orders to the rest of the group. This is significant in an analysis of power because the use of the CAPS LOCK signifies that a participant is yelling in the chat channel. For many online participants, using all caps to convey a message is very face threatening because it means that someone is speaking in a louder than normal voice and is likely to be using aggressive language toward another participant within the interaction (see Collister, 2008 for a more detailed explanation of how prosodic information can be conveyed through online chat). Lastly, Nomeracy uses an indirect question in line 12 in order to get several participants to go where he told them to go. The question is: “why are you going to lm?” Here, Nomeracy sees that several participants are not following his orders and helping out the mine or the stables. He asks this question to the entire battleground even though there are only 2 to 3

participants who are going to the lumber mill. It is likely that the leader does this not because he wants to know the answer to the question, but because he wants to embarrass the 2 to 3 aberrant individuals who have gone off on their own, disregarding their leader's orders.

4.2.4.3 Comparison of language and power in examples 6, 7, and 8

Nomercy's use of highly aggressive language is in direct contrast to the collaborative language that we observed in the earlier dialogues in examples 6 and 7. Yet, in spite of the difference in terms of "power" strategies, both collaborative and aggressive strategies are powerful because they can be used to control the actions of others, as is illustrated by the previous examples. One thing that I wish to discuss here is the influence of activity type on the strategy (collaborative or aggressive) that participants choose to use. On one hand, we see highly aggressive language being used to index power only within the battleground, while on the other hand, we see highly collaborative language being used to index power in a party setting and also in a battleground of lower level participants. My point here is that different activity types may license different types of powerful language.

Collaborative language may be the norm for party interactions and aggressive language may be the norm for battlegrounds. In parties, most members share the desire to complete the same task in the fastest and easiest way possible without dying. Additionally, there is only one way to complete the majority of the quests that a party would endeavor to complete. As a result of the shared objectives and single-minded focus of the tasks, collaborative language works best to establish leadership within a party. On the other hand, the members of a battleground all have different opinions about the best way to win the battleground. These different opinions arise because there are many different ways to go about winning a battleground. It is possible that aggressive language serves as a better means to establish power within a battleground because a

leader has to get the attention of all of the other players and convince them to complete the task in the same way. However, as we see in example 7, even though aggressive language may be the norm for exercising power within a battleground, collaborative language can also be used (especially when the battleground leader is absent as in example 7).

Aside from activity types, an alternate explanation exists to explain the differences in the way that the players use language to index power. This explanation lies in the power roles such as equipment, ability, and experience that were identified in an earlier part of this thesis. In examples 6 and 7, the “leaders” did not have access to any of the power roles such as equipment, ability, or experience, so they relied on collaborative strategies to create their positions as leaders. In contrast, Nomercy has access to all of the material power roles, and his language is more aggressive. My point here is that having access to power roles such as equipment, ability, and experience may give a player access to aggressive forms of language. We might also conclude from these data that aggressive language is more powerful than collaborative language within *World of Warcraft* because it is used primarily by participants who have access to power roles within the game.

4.2.4.4 Spamming and ‘bully power’

The final analysis in this paper is probably the most difficult example for the power framework to account for because it explores the “bully power” language that some participants within the game world linked with powerful language. This example is difficult to explain for three reasons. Firstly, members of the *World of Warcraft* community differ in their assessments

of spammer⁴ language. For some members, spammers are powerful and use powerful language because they can control the trade chat channel and annoy a lot of people. For others, however, the same spammers are said to be weak and use weak language that annoys people and reflects their anti-social stance within the game world. Secondly, it can be hard to identify what ‘spam’ actually is. There are a multitude of different ways that a player can spam the trade channel, and a player may use multiple spamming strategies. One question that arises from the multiple forms of spam is: Are there some forms that are powerful and others that are not powerful? Lastly, many of the spammers do not have any of the material things (e.g., gear, experience, ability) that are linked to power roles within the game. We know this because you can check to see what types of equipment spammers have as well as see their level by clicking on their name in the chat box. This would mean that the way that they employ language within the game world in a way that some players perceive as being powerful. It is this final notion that I will explore in the final analysis in this paper.

Example 9: Spamming and bully power

1 1/7 22:07:57.133 [2. Trade] Poogler: People who arent Poogler name themselves
Rabitboy
2 1/7 22:08:03.084 [2. Trade] Voodooom: why you guys talk in trade your supposed to
talk in genaral
3 1/7 22:08:11.126 [2. Trade] Vermincol: I must be Poogler, I'd never been stupid
enough to take a name like Rabitboy
4 1/7 22:08:16.693 [2. Trade] Poogler: Yah!
5 1/7 22:08:24.745 [2. Trade] Rabitboy: POOGLER
6 1/7 22:08:25.661 [2. Trade] Marioboy: don't start that again... we always talk in trade..
dunno why either
7 1/7 22:08:31.860 [2. Trade] Nishary: stop spamming trade Poogler
8 1/7 22:08:31.861 [2. Trade] Poogler: O HAI RABITBOY

⁴ A spammer is a player who constantly posts messages to the general or trade chat channel. Sometimes the spammer posts the same message many many times, which fills the other players' chatlogs with spam. In other cases, spammers talk about controversial subjects in order to get a reaction from other players and/or make other players angry.

9 1/7 22:08:40.354 [2. Trade] Rabbitboy: HOW LONG ARE THE Q's (=queues for arenas)
10 1/7 22:08:53.402 [2. Trade] Frog: we talk in trade because we can talk to all cities
11 1/7 22:08:55.861 [2. Trade] Parasite: AI SPIE POOGLER
12 1/7 22:09:08.110 [2. Trade] Poogler: o me too
13 1/7 22:09:22.062 [2. Trade] Parasite: =O
14 1/7 22:09:22.062 [2. Trade] Poogler: i spie a Poogler

Besides being confusing, it is very difficult to discuss a conversation like we see in example 8 in terms of power. The linguistic strategies that I have discussed in previous sections of this paper do not seem to apply to this conversation. That is, neither collaborative nor aggressive strategies appear in this conversation; instead, we see these participants joking with one another in a conversation that a large number of people can overhear because it is in trade chat. Why, then, do some respondents to the questionnaire view this type of language as being powerful? This question cannot be answered in a satisfactory manner in this paper, but I can propose one possible explanation for why participants view this type of language as “powerful” or “powerless.” This explanation has to do with the type of activity in which the speech was produced and the fact that most participants do not consider joking as an appropriate kind of language within the trade chat activity type. This form is powerful or powerless because it introduces a culturally “aberrant” form of language into the trade chat that most participants do not view as legitimate. Power, then, could be derived from flouting the linguistic norms for the trade chat activity type. Some people see the aberrant behavior as being “powerful,” whereas others view it as being annoying and “powerless.” More work is needed in order to better understand how power operates within this activity type, specifically in light of spammer language.

5.0 DISCUSSION

5.1.1 Research questions

These are the central research questions that I sought to answer in this thesis:

- 1) How is power defined in *World of Warcraft*?
- 2) What are the power roles within *World of Warcraft*?
- 3) How does a player's use of language create or reflect the power role(s) that they occupy within *World of Warcraft*?
- 4) Can language be used to create power *ex nihilo* or does language use reflect the power that an individual has according to their power roles?

5.1.2 Discussion of findings in relation to research questions

The purpose of my study was to explore how language and power operate within *World of Warcraft* by way of participant analysis, an online questionnaire, and applying discourse analysis techniques on online conversations. The first research question addressed the need for an operational definition of power to use in this analysis. Accordingly, power is the ability to control the actions of others or an aspect of the game, and power is the ability to gain respect (or disrepute) from others based on one's actions.

The purpose of the second research question was to determine which power roles were available within *World of Warcraft*. According to the data collected from the questionnaire and the participant observation, power roles were assigned to individuals who: 1) had the best gear, 2) had a lot of knowledge about the game, 3) were skilled at playing their particular class, and 4) who played classes that were “in demand” on a particular server. In example 8, we saw an example of how Nomeracy fit into all four of these power roles. As a result of having access to all of these power roles (in addition to being the battleground leader), we saw that Nomeracy used highly aggressive language without any consideration for protecting the face of the other members. This relates to the third research question in that Nomeracy is using hyperaggressive language in order to index the power roles that he has access to within the game world. In short, Nomeracy is powerful within the game world both by the language he uses and by the power roles that are available to his avatar.

In examples 6 and 7, the participants do not have access to many of the same power roles as Nomeracy. Terrified and Nomeracy both are the designated leaders of their respective groups, but that is the extent of the similarities in power roles between the participants in the three examples. The participants in examples 6 and 7 have awful gear and are very low-level players on this particular server. What I mean here is that these participants lack all of the material things that the respondents to the questionnaire linked to power within the game, with the exception of being in a leadership position within the group. As a result, the power that these players create is highly dependent on the use of collaborative language to control the actions of others and/or on the participants’ ability to index power by displaying knowledge of the game.

As we saw in example 6, Terrified uses what I have termed “collaborative language” in order to index his power within the group. His language was mottled with indirect requests,

compliments, and positive politeness strategies; in other words it is quite different from the language used by Nomercy. Most likely, Terrified uses these collaborative strategies to keep everyone in the group happy so that they can complete the quest quickly and easily. It should be noted that a group member can leave a party at any time without suffering any game-imposed consequences. Terrified knows that his power over the individuals is limited, so he needs to use his power carefully without offending any of the group members, so that they remain in the party and continue to help him. The situation in example 6 is quite different from the situation in example 8: a battleground. In a battleground, a player still has the option to leave, but upon leaving, the player suffers a 15 minute penalty for deserting the battleground. Thus, a battleground leader worries less about insulting the members of the group, because most players do not want to leave and suffer a 15 minute penalty.

Conversely, I also argued in the previous section that Terrified's language may be a form of conversationalising (Talbot et al., 2003, p. 123). If this is the case, then Terrified is using a seemingly affable collaborative strategy in order to exert his influence over the other participants in the group. Conversationalising builds solidarity among people in higher and lower positions, but higher status participants can then use the strategy to exert their power (which is disguised as solidarity) to control the actions of subordinates. Terrified may be using the collaborative language in an attempt to index his position in a leadership power role. It is also possible that Mary, Nightrider, and Duckman use this strategy to establish some control over the others in the battleground even though they are not in leadership positions.

5.2 POWER AND IDENTITY IN MASSIVELY MULTIPLAYER ONLINE ROLE-PLAYING GAMES

In the examples that I have provided we see that power is attributed to participants for a variety of different reasons: leadership status, type of gear, level of character, supply/demand of character, character abilities, and linguistic strategies. Some of these attributes have real-world correlates such as leadership status, supply/demand, personal abilities, and linguistic strategies, but others are restricted to the domain of interactions in virtual games. In this section, I will explain how power in virtual worlds, such as *World of Warcraft*, compares and contrasts with power in the real world. Additionally, I will return to my definition of power in order to explore the directness of the relationship between language and power. More specifically, I hope to look at whether certain items or attributes are more directly linked to power than other items or attributes.

5.2.1 The real and the virtual

As we see from the introductory story and description of the game, *World of Warcraft* is set in a world that is very different from “the real world”. The introduction reveals that participants in this world can have magical abilities, fight mythical beasts, and even cheat death. Obviously, power in such a world would be very different from power that we encounter in our everyday lives. For instance, avatars in *World of Warcraft* level up over time as they defeat monsters and complete quests. As an avatar levels up, they gain new abilities and become stronger and more able to defeat difficult creatures within the game world. People in the real world may age or get a promotion in their job, but people in the real world do not level up and instantaneously acquire

new skills and magical abilities that make them more powerful. However, in the virtual world, a player's avatar does exactly that. Theoretically, an avatar could go from level 1 (extremely weak) to level 70 (the highest attainable level in the game) in a one day period.

An avatar's level is a very ostensible characteristic within the game world. Simply by clicking on other avatars within the game world, one can immediately view the level that the other players have attained. Additionally, participants have the option of viewing the gear of other players within the game. This is a simple procedure of clicking on another avatar and selecting "view" from a pull down menu. When viewing another player's avatar, you can see everything the avatar is wearing along with the quality of the gear [whether it is purple, blue, green, etc.]. Obviously, it is not possible to "check" people in the real world to see the quality of their gear and their level – such notions are ludicrous when removed from the context of MMORG interactions. Yet this is a very important distinction to make when assessing how power in virtual interactions compares and contrasts with power in the real world.

This is not to say that we cannot make predictions about a person's power based upon how they dress. Certainly, we would evaluate the power of a person wearing a suit and tie differently from the power of a person in jeans and a sweater. If we compare these two people exclusively based on the way that they look, we would undoubtedly perceive the person wearing the suit and the tie to be in a more powerful position than the person wearing the jeans and the sweater. However, our predictions about these people may be quite inaccurate. The person wearing the suit and tie may be a recent graduate student looking for their first job, while the person in the jeans may be the CEO of a major company with a private jet and a net worth of over a billion dollars. My point here is that looks can be deceiving in the real world, whereas in

the virtual world, a person's "looks" (gear and level) may in fact be a reflection of the avatar's power in games such as *World of Warcraft*.

5.2.2 Indirectly indexing power

There is a connection between an avatar's level and gear and power in virtual worlds, but having the best gear and an avatar of the highest possible level does not mean that a character is powerful. According to my definition of power, power is the ability to control the actions of others or an aspect of the game, and power is the ability to gain respect (or disrepute) from others based on one's actions. In example 8, all of the participants' avatars are level 70 or above, and most have blue and purple gear; yet, not all of the participants in example 8 are powerful. We see that only Nomercy has the power to control the actions of others within this battleground instance. This indicates that gear and power may index power, as in the case of Nomercy, but gear and power do not directly index power within the virtual world. Additionally, we see in example 7 that leadership positions are not necessarily directly indexical of power. In example 7, the leadership position is filled, but the leader says nothing and has no power over the actions of others or an aspect of the game, nor does the leader gain respect or disrepute as a result of their actions.

Gear, avatar level, and leadership roles indirectly index powerful positions within *World of Warcraft*. In other words, a player who has a leadership position, good gear, and a high level avatar may appear "powerful," but such a player is not truly powerful because having any one of the aforementioned things does not a) allow a player to control the actions of others or b) gain respect (or disrepute) from others based on one's actions. Certainly, having any one of these

items or attributes will make it easier for a person to access power, but my point here is that none of the aforementioned things is directly linked with power in *World of Warcraft*.

5.2.3 Directly indexing power

In the previous section, I argued that having a high level character, the best gear, and being in a leadership position indicated that a person had the potential to be powerful within *World of Warcraft*. Bear in mind here that potential power does not mean that a character has power within the game. In this section, I would like to set forth several ways in which participants in *World of Warcraft* can directly index power. That is, by doing a certain thing or acting in a certain way, a participant is powerful according to the definition of power that I have used in this paper. Once again, according to my definition of power power is the ability to control the actions of others or an aspect of the game, and power is the ability to gain respect (or disrepute) from others based on one's actions. One aspect of this definition that is crucial for an understanding of power here is that in order to be powerful, a participant needs to perform an action within the game world, whether it be an action that controls the actions of others or an action that gives a player respect or disrepute. The standard way that these actions are expressed within the virtual world is through the use of linguistic strategies.

Players in *World of Warcraft* use language to directly place themselves in powerful positions within the game. In example 6, Terrified, a party leader, uses collaborative language to control the actions of the other participants in the group. Similarly, in example 7, Mary, Duckman, and Nightrider use collaborative language to control the actions of the other participants in the battleground even though neither of them is the battleground leader. In example 8, Nomercy uses explicit directives to control the actions of others in the battleground.

Nomercy appears to be the most powerful participant in this analysis. Not only does Nomercy's language directly index power, but his gear emanates his skill and experience as a player and adds to his ability to control the other participants in this battleground. I have already established that gear does not directly index a character's power in *World of Warcraft*. Nonetheless, having top-notch gear (as does Nomercy) contributes to the effect that Nomercy's language has on the other players and gives Nomercy the right to use powerful directives to control the actions of the other participants in the battleground. The participants in examples 6 and 7 are not high-level nor do they have high-quality gear, yet they have power to control the actions of others through their language. There is a crucial difference between the language that the participants in examples 7 and 8 use and the language that Nomercy uses. The powerful participants in examples 7 and 8 use collaborative language and Nomercy uses aggressive language. Both forms can directly index power, but the aggressive form seems to be used only by the participant who has the best gear and an avatar at the maximum level.

5.2.4 Relating indirect and direct indexicalities of power

As we might expect, there appears to be a relationship between the amount of power that a participant can indirectly index through gear, experience, and position of power and the power that a participant can directly index through the use of language. That is, as a participant acquires better gear and attains a higher level with their avatar, they have access to more types of powerful language. When an upstart player enters into the game world for the first time, they do not have gear, leadership roles, or experience within the game world or any of the characteristics or attributes that can indirectly index that they are powerful within the game world. Such a player can still be powerful within *World of Warcraft*, but only by directly accessing power

through the use of language. In the earliest stages of an avatar's career in *World of Warcraft*, one would expect them to use collaborative language to directly access power because they do not have the gear or experience to utilize more aggressive forms of powerful language. On the other hand, veteran players can use collaborative language and the more powerful aggressive forms of language because they have the gear and experience (i.e., high level avatar) to accompany their use of powerful forms.

Another way to think about the relationship between powerful linguistic forms and powerful avatar items and attributes is to think of powerful linguistic forms as actual power and powerful attributes as potential power. Under this model, a participants' potential to use powerful forms increases along with the avatar's level and as through the acquisition of better and better items. The first point that I am making here is that there is a relationship between a character's gear and attributes and the type of powerful language that they have access to within *World of Warcraft*. The second point is that some linguistic forms are more powerful than other forms. The aggressive form would be more powerful than the collaborative form because, for the most part, aggressive language can only be accessed by participants who have high-level characters in leadership roles with the best possible gear.

The idea that there are limitations on who can access certain power roles through language fits with Kiesling's (1996) power framework. Kiesling writes, "people place themselves in certain power roles by using language to index these roles; however, every speaker cannot simply use any strategy or form to index any role. They are limited by ascribed traits, previous roles they have filled in the community, the roles available in the situation, and their competence in a certain strategy or form." Much like communities in the real world, participants in *World of Warcraft* tend to use language to index certain power roles such as having gear,

being a leader, or having a high level avatar. However, one major difference between the roles in *World of Warcraft* and roles in the real world is that roles in the virtual world are constantly in flux. What I mean here is that as a participant acquires new gear and progresses in level and experience through the game, they have the potential to access more powerful linguistic forms, such as aggressive linguistic strategies. In the virtual world, an avatar's identity is not as fixed as it would be in the real world. Identities and social networks constantly change based on the pace at which a player passes through the game and how quickly the player acquires better gear and higher levels of experience. This is not to say that real world identities do not fluctuate, but only to say that virtual identities can fluctuate a whole lot more than real world identities due to the fact that participants in virtual worlds are not constrained by many of the power structures and institutions that are present in the real world.

5.3 CONCLUSION

This paper is unique in that it motivates a theoretical framework for the study of language and power in the virtual world. For this reason, the results and discussion here are put forth as an initial assessment of how language and power operate in virtual worlds in the hopes that others will continue the journey of exploring the richness and diversity within virtual environments. Firstly, I have defined several of the speech activities in *World of Warcraft* and have provided an assessment of the types of possible language for each activity. Secondly, I have used surveys and participant observation in order to operationalize a working definition of power for virtual worlds and to illuminate how participants perceive power within *World of Warcraft*. Thirdly, I

have used discourse analysis to look at specific examples of online interactions in a variety of different speech activities in order to examine the language as it is used by participants in different power roles. Based on these analyses, I have found that a player's language can be used to create a power role or reflect a power role that a participant already has within the game. I found that participants with high-level characters and high-quality equipment were more likely to use aggressive forms of language than lower-level participants with lower-quality gear (these participants would be more likely to use collaborative linguistic strategies). Fourthly, I found that power roles did not always correlate with the type of linguistic strategy, especially when we look at the spammer language. Finally, I looked at the relationships between power and identity in the real world and the virtual world. I argued that an avatar's appearance in the virtual world provides a much clearer indication of a participant's power than appearances in the real world. Nonetheless, I do not believe (based on my definition of power) that appearances in the virtual world directly index power. Instead, the examples that I have provided here seem to point to the conclusion that doing something with language (speech acts) is the critical factor in determining who is powerful and who is powerless within the virtual world. Thus, we might say that language can be used to index power, whereas power roles can, at best, indirectly index the power that a participant may have in a particular interaction.

5.4 LIMITATIONS OF THIS STUDY

There are several limitations to the generalizability of the findings in this study that need to be considered. Firstly, these data were collected largely from participants within the researchers' social networks within the online community. This implies that there are many

other types of communities on any given *World of Warcraft* server and that the ideas on language and power that have been presented in this paper are representative of a very small portion of the *World of Warcraft* population. However, in terms of being an ethnography, this study provides an in-depth, emic description of how participants in *World of Warcraft* conceptualize power; and it illustrates how these same conceptualizations are realized (or not realized) through actual conversations in the virtual world.

Lastly, there is a ‘bully power’ that participants use to irritate other participants within the game world. This was an unexpected type of power based on my own experiences within the game world (i.e., I would have interpreted these bullies as being powerless). Furthermore, it is difficult to position this type of power into the theoretical framework on language and power that I have used in this paper (e.g., Kiesling, 1996). The difficulty arises due to the fact that bullies have none of the attributes (e.g., gear, knowledge, and abilities) that I have linked to power roles in *World of Warcraft*, nor do they use collaborative or aggressive strategies. Bullies have none of these things, yet they have power to control the actions of others or gain disrepute within the game worlds. Further studies are needed to explore this type of power, and it is my hope that my preliminary research into this area of investigation will encourage others to follow in the footsteps of Agerionos and continue the journey that he has begun.

APPENDIX A

LANGUAGE AND POWER QUESTIONNAIRE

World of Warcraft Language Questionnaire

1

What is your main character's name?

2

What level is your main character?

3

What is your real life gender?



4

What gender is your main character?

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female

5

What race is your main character?



6

What class is your main character?



7

How long have you played *World of Warcraft*?

- ☐ Less than 1 month.
- ☐ 1 month to 6 months.
- ☐ 6 months to 1 year.
- ☐ 1 to 2 years.
- ☐ Over 2 years.
- ☐ Since launch.

8

How well is your character equipped?

- ☐ Common (white)
- ☐ Uncommon (green)
- ☐ Rare (blue)
- ☐ Epic (purple)
- ☐ Legendary (orange)
- ☐ Relic (red)

9

What is your favorite activity in *World of Warcraft*?

- ☐ Player vs. Player (PvP)
- ☐ Questing alone
- ☐ Questing with friends
- ☐ Talking to my friends online
- ☐ Exploring the game world
- ☐ Crafting
- ☐ Role-playing
- ☐ Leading others.

10

Are you a leader in *World of Warcraft*?

☐ YES ☐ NO

11

If you are a leader, how would you describe your leadership position?

12

What type of server are you on? (e.g. Player vs. Player, Role-playing, Player vs. Environment)

13

Please answer the following questions on a scale of 1-5. Be as honest as you can.

1 2 3 4 5
strongly disagree disagree unsure agree strongly agree

My main character is powerful.

1

2

3

4

5

Additional Comment

My gear makes me powerful.

1

2

3

4

5

Additional Comment

I am in a powerful position (e.g. guild leader)

1

2

3

4

5

Additional Comment

I play a powerful class.

1

2

3

4

5

Additional Comment

My experience with the game and the game world makes me powerful.

1

2

3

4

5

Additional Comment

My crafting abilities make me powerful.

1

2

3

4

5

Additional Comment

People who play male characters are more powerful than those who

play female characters.

1

2

3

4

5

Additional Comment

14

How do powerful people speak?

15

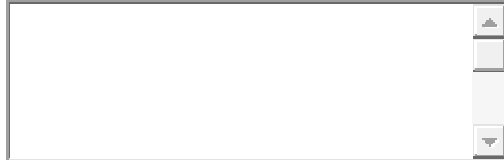
Which guild is the most powerful on your server?

16

Why is this guild powerful?

17

Describe a powerful person on your server. Why are they powerful?



18

How does this powerful person speak?



19

What do you do to be powerful within *World of Warcraft*?



20

Describe a powerless person on your server. Why are they powerless?



21

How does a powerless person speak?



* This survey was created and distributed through www.zoomerang.com.

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