

# NATIONAL CULTURES AND DIGITAL SPACE

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## INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION IN WORLD OF WARCRAFT, FROM LATIN TO NORTH AMERICA

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### VIDEO GAMES AS CULTURAL OBJECTS

In order to analyze elements of a social reality, we must understand that such phenomena involve not only isolated social relations, but also the contexts, material and technological elements that mediate those relations.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, technological objects stimulate and constitute a form of “cultural narration” in our daily lives.<sup>2</sup> But the types of media in which this cultural narration occurs—such as video games—can be highly complex, and thus it is important to examine the ways these technologies are constructed, not just in terms of their primary function as objects of play, entertainment or communication, but also the kinds of meaning associated with them and, perhaps just as importantly, the different purposes they fulfill in everyday life. Other scholars have paved the way for this critical trajectory, including Paul Du Gay et al., whose work shows how the use of the Sony Walkman affects users’ interactions with their surroundings,<sup>3</sup> as well as Heather A. Horst and Daniel Miller’s research, which shows how people appropriate artefacts like cellphones based on characteristics particular to their national contexts and cultural backgrounds, putting them to use in unique ways.<sup>4</sup> To paraphrase Adrienne Shaw, it is important to study video games in their cultural contexts rather than merely analyzing them as a form of culture.<sup>5</sup> Among other reasons, this is because the video game medium is characterized by communication and negotiation amidst players,<sup>6</sup> who bring with them a certain context and *habitus*.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, the creation and consumption of technologies such as video games involves a continual process of feedback and modification, allowing games to be adapted to the reality in which their players are living.

As a result, it is key to consider video games’ role as a form of contemporary cultural narration, in particular since the advent of massively multiplayer online (MMO) games. Once play goes online, gaming ceases to be an isolated activity in which the player interacts exclusively with the machine, and involves an increasing element of interpersonal interaction as online players come together and create collective spaces for gathering. Even if human interactions can be realistically simulated by machines, as shown by Sherry Turkle’s analysis of technological toys like Sony’s AIBO robot dog, the Furby and others,<sup>8</sup> we have to consider the difference between them, as interactions with machines are based on pre-programmed responses, and hence they are not willfully reciprocal. In other words, all

1. Author’s Note: I would like to thank all the people who contributed in one way or another to the development of this article, especially Claudio Ramos Zincke.

2. Ian Woodward, “Material Culture and Narrative: Fusing Myth, Materiality, and Meaning,” in *Material Culture and Technology in Everyday Life: Ethnographic Approaches*, ed. Phillip Vannini (Peter Lang, 2009), 60.

3. Paul du Gay et al., *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman* (Sage, 1997), 84-113.

4. Heather A. Horst and Daniel Miller, *The Cell Phone: An Anthropology of Communication* (Berg, 2006), 81-136.

5. Adrienne Shaw, “What is Video Game Culture? Cultural Studies and Game Studies,” *Games and Culture* 5.4 (2010): 416.

6. Anne Mette Thourhauge, “The Rules of the Game—The Rules of the Player,” *Games and Culture* 8.6 (2013): 389.

7. According to Pierre Bourdieu, *habitus* can be define as a “systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them.” See Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Stanford University Press, 1992).

8. Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More From Technology and Less From Each Other* (Basic Books, 2011), 35-66.

contact with the game and all dialogues produced have been pre-programmed, as opposed to human interactions, in which there is a degree of free will, since the person can decide how to respond to other players' communicative cues and whether to keep interacting with them or not. With artificial intelligence, robot toys or game software, on the contrary, the object is obligated to interact upon the user's demand. In online games, a player interacts with a number of real individuals, which not only makes player communications unpredictable and variable, but also increases the importance of interpersonal communication for success in the game.

This chapter focuses on *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard, 2004), a game that reached its peak number of users in 2010 with 12 million subscriptions worldwide. In light of this massive quantity of players spread across different geographical regions, it is important to consider: Is this collective space constructed in the same way across different regions? Do we have the same gaming experience, regardless of geographical locale? Do players in the global south experience *WoW* differently than those in the global north? And in what ways do players integrate elements of their national cultures into the gaming experience? While important research has already shed light on certain aspects of the experience of playing *WoW*, such as conflicts and relationships that are generated therein, or transformations in the player experience in modes such as the PvE (player-versus-Environment) "end-game," up to now research has yet to examine how aspects of one's regional culture are integrated in *WoW*, which can profoundly affect the experience of the game.<sup>9</sup>

#### RELEVANCE AND METHODOLOGY

This chapter focuses on the new spaces of socialization that have been generated by virtual platforms like MMOs. As Dmitri Williams has argued, virtual communities—online video games among them—have taken the place of public squares, taverns and other previously-dominant social spaces and meeting places outside the household and workplace.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, social interactions between players do not just take place within the game, but rather interpersonal communication is extended and expanded upon through other media and platforms. This shows why the division between "virtual reality" and "real life" cannot be sustained, as a number of studies have argued.<sup>11</sup> Scholarship also demonstrates that online games are fundamentally social experiences,<sup>12</sup> in which relationships are developed based on shared interests and common objectives.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, players' approaches to *WoW* and other MMOs can be associated with factors such as age,<sup>14</sup> nationality<sup>15</sup> and commitment, as it sometimes can be confused with relations of production.<sup>16</sup>

In this chapter, I use an auto-ethnographic approach to analyze *WoW* from the perspective of my own experience of the game as a 23-year-old female Chilean player.<sup>17</sup> In video games in general, as well

9. For an analysis of conflicts and relationships among players, see Bonnie Nardi, *My Life as a Night Elf Priest: An Anthropological Account of World of Warcraft* (University of Michigan Press, 2010); Lauren B. Collister, "Surveillance and Community: Language Policy and Empowerment in a World of Warcraft Guild," *Surveillance & Society* 12.3 (2014): 337-348; and Nickolas Jordan, "World of Warcraft: A Family Therapist's Journey into Scapegoated Culture," *The Qualitative Report* 19 (2014): 1-19. For an examination of PvE play, see Mark Chen, "Communication, Coordination and Camaraderie in World of Warcraft," *Games and Culture* 4.1 (2009): 47-73; and Alex Golub, "Being in the World (of Warcraft): Raiding, Realism and Knowledge Production in a Massively Multiplayer Online Game," *Anthropological Quarterly* 83.1 (2010): 17-46.
10. Dmitri Williams, "Why Game Studies Now? Gamers Don't Bowl Alone," *Games and Culture* 1.1 (2006): 14.
11. See, for example, Sima Forghani, et al., "MMORPG Worlds: On the Construction of Social Reality in World of Warcraft," *Living Virtually: Researching New Worlds*, ed. Don Heider (Peter Lang, 2006), 67-92; Vili Lehdonvirta, "Virtual Worlds Don't Exist: Questioning the Dichotomous Approach in MMO Studies," *Game Studies* 10.1 (2010); and Golub, "Being in the World (of Warcraft)."
12. Torill Elvira Mortesen, "WoW Is the New MUD: Social Gaming From Text to Video," *Games and Culture* 1.4 (2006): 404.
13. Margaret de Larios and John T. Lang, "Pluralistic Ignorance in Virtually Assembled Peers: The Case of World of Warcraft," *Games and Culture* 9.2 (2014): 107.
14. Thorsten Quandt, Helmut Grueninger and Jeffrey Wimmer, "The Gray Haired Gaming Generation: Findings from an Explorative Interview Study on Older Computer Gamers," *Games and Culture* 4.1 (2009): 43-45.
15. T. L. Taylor, "Does WoW Change Everything?: How PvP Server, Multinational Player Base and Surveillance Mod Scene Caused Me Pause," *Games and Culture* 1.4 (2006): 1-20.
16. Nick Yee, "The Labor of Fun: How Video Games Blur the Boundaries of Work and Play," *Games and Culture* 1.1 (2006): 68-71.
17. Using guidelines regarding auto-ethnography elaborated by Atkinson (2011), Denzin and Lincoln (2002) and O'Riordan (2014).

as *WoW* in particular, innumerable factors work in concert to develop a complex reality that can be perceived by playing a game, which generally exceeds that domain, evidencing a cultural dimension to game's meaning that cannot be grasped through a "close reading" of the game in isolation. Therefore, this chapter is based on data collected from two high-population *WoW* servers, one in Latin America (Us-Ragnaros) and one in North America (Us-Thrall), both in the Eastern Standard Time Zone (UTC -5).<sup>18</sup> In order to gather relevant information, I created avatars to engage in gameplay on both servers, recorded observational and analytical notes, made note of conversations among players in the game's chat rooms, intervened or proposed certain topics of conversation for comparative purposes and recorded information over more than 228 hours (9 days) of gameplay between September and December of 2015. Observations for this chapter focused particularly on the public discussion boards such as "General," "Trade" and "Looking for Group," as well as analysis of the guilds to which my characters belonged.

#### INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION IN *WoW*, FROM LATIN TO NORTH AMERICA

It is difficult to translate the experience of player communication in *WoW* into a linear written form, as in-game interactions lack non-verbal communication and involve multiple, simultaneous conversations registered in the same chat dialogue box, all of which are programmed to disappear after two minutes have passed, or if there are more than eight new messages from players. While communication—from the coordination of activities to the exchange of goods—is an important part of the game, the everyday conversations that players have while playing are not a core element of gameplay. Players have access to these chats in the main hubs of the game—places to rest, where goods can be exchanged or tasks can be completed (see Image 2.2.1). The lower left corner of the screen is the default space for the in-game chat dialogues, though this interface can also be customized according to the user's preferences.

On these servers, gender, a user's class or race cannot be verified, and therefore players generally do not know whom they are addressing when emitting judgments or opinions. In this space of anonymity, people can make statements without experiencing the same social retaliation that might occur in an environment with their own acquaintances or one involving direct personal contact, as is also reflected in Jules Skotnes-Brown's work in this anthology. This does not mean, however, that the construction of this space is neutral: as elaborated in the work of Lisa Nakamura, gender, class, race and other factors impact the experience of online interaction.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, most players share some characteristics, such as the masculine gender, and these commonalities determine the norms of behavior inside the game, which is also complemented with each player's own national culture brought into the game as they have different expectations or cultural norms.

Many *WoW* players, even those with shared characteristics, do not participate actively in the chats available. This could be explained, at least in part, by the dynamics of communication typical to the online gaming context: a light and playful conversational environment where everything and everyone—even, and especially, sensitive topics— can be derided or insulted, which causes some players to keep their distance. A language-based analysis is crucial for understanding these chats, not only because of their frequent use of slang, gaming abbreviations and online chat lingo, but also because of what is considered acceptable or not within a given community, i.e., the ways normativity

18. Data from Blizzard Entertainment, Inc. show 303,418 players on the North American server and 314,840 players on the South American server analyzed in this chapter (2015).

19. See Lisa Nakamura, *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet* (University of Minnesota Press, 2008); and Lisa Nakamura, *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet* (Routledge, 2002).



Image 2.2.1. Visualization of chat dialogue boxes, World of Warcraft.

is conveyed through language. Therefore, having described the basics of the *WoW* interface, which is essentially the same for players in the Latin and players in the North, the following section will take a closer look upon the differences between servers, analyzing the cultural factors these differences reflect, as well as exploring player actions that could be seen as a cultural appropriation of the gaming experience by analyzing three themes that were often brought up in both servers: 1) Recruitment and the demand for guilds, 2) Interpersonal relationships and 3) Political discussion.

### Recruiting and Demands of the Guilds

An important part of the interpersonal communication in *WoW* is produced in their open channels, where they often use them to recruit players or look up for guilds. As T. L. Taylor has demonstrated, guilds are the primary formal organization in the game, constituted of different associations of people whose avatars take on diverse objectives in *WoW*. To recruit players, guilds sometimes place conditions on new members with regard to their schedule, level of progression in the game or possession of a requisite item level, role or class. The data for this chapter included a total of 88 announcements for Latin American guilds and 119 announcements on the North American server, which were analyzed to determine the specific characteristics of the most sought-after players and guilds in each region.

Player characteristics have a defining role in guild selection and membership. Aside from the basic characteristics of guild announcements, such as the guild's appeal to either casual or hardcore players, guilds use a number of criteria to filter through potential members and make decisions regarding new applicants. For both Latin American and the North American servers (as determined by Blizzard's designations), I distinguish data using categories related to both the domain of the game (referred to the player's experience and their knowledge of the class and role they play) and to player's personality

(such as responsibility, commitment, sense of humor, among other attributes). The few guilds that demanded certain characteristics of their members on either server tended to value personality characteristics more those related to the game domain, though players interested in completing raids always sought players with a higher ranking (see Table 2.2.1).

	<b>Total characteristics referenced</b>	<b>Characteristics related to game domain</b>		<b>Characteristics related to player personality</b>	
<b>North American</b>	119	15	12.6%	22	18.5%
<b>Latin American</b>	88	21	23.9%	39	44.3%

Table 2.2.1. Distribution of game domain and player characteristics among WoW guild announcements

The most notable difference between servers were the specific personality characteristics sought by guilds: Latin American groups frequently aimed for properties like punctuality, while North American guilds often looked for fun players with a sense of humor. There were also particularities to both servers—on one hand, there were ten announcements on the North American server from guilds seeking mature players featuring an age condition (18 , 21 and 30 ), and even one guild that required player interviews before inviting them to join. On the other hand, on the Latin American server there were guilds searching for players or guilds with certain nationalities, possibly because regional slang and national dialects can create barriers among the Latin American players, impeding communication. Nationality was also an object of humor, as players would frequently ridicule the slang of certain countries during their chats with other players on the Latin American server.

Recruitment strategies and new player orientation practices also differed considerably between the South American and North American servers. One observation regarding recruitment was that, for players who had not completed the latest content or were just starting the latest raid, Latin American guilds offered the experience of “learning on the go” or the idea of “growing together,” while on the North American server, some guilds tended to offer to sell their services in exchange of gold (375k) so the person could access in-game rewards. This practice is further publicized when guilds document their time taken for each task. This is a difference that impacts not only the individual player experience, but the ways of a given server views the game itself.

Guilds tended to offer a pleasant and stress-free community on both servers. Offers promising such an environment were more prevalent on the North American server than those seeking certain player characteristics, and there were also “atypical” guilds seeking out-of-the-ordinary experience—for instance, playing old content/earlier expansions of the game while staying under their maximum ranking in the announcements of two guilds; or unusual, humorous announcements that seemed to be aimed at a particular audience (six guilds). On the other hand, on the Latin American server there was a guild whose announcement stated that there was “a lot of bullying,” the only case in which a guild was publicized based on an attribute that is largely considered negative.

### **Interpersonal Relationships**

When players dedicate a considerable portion of their time to playing *WoW* and interacting with

other players, they can develop interpersonal relationships of friendship, love or animosity, including connections that are built in-game, relationships established prior to the game and new bonds with other players that evolve through the shared experience of online gameplay. These dynamics provide the basis for the construction of interpersonal relationships as well as the foundations for entire communities on the same servers: among these communities, player's responses and questions about the game may be scrutinized or comments about a player's personal affairs may be asked, establishing the particular dynamics for the dialogue that will develop in that community—whether more friendly or more hostile—as well as the types of exchanges that can take place within the parameters of a given domain.

Community and friendship were highly valued on the South American and North American WoW server alike. Preparation for this chapter included extensive analysis of public chats, focusing specifically on dialogues seeking to establish friendships rather than those developing existing relationships or associations. Among the Latin American community, there was a greater disposition toward creating and maintaining friendships by acknowledging fellow players and making friendly gestures—such as wishing a fellow player a good weekend or expressing concern rather than insults. Meanwhile, the North American community was more susceptible to conflict due to a greater presence of “trolls” creating a hostile environment, bringing about a greater frequency of insults and aggressive comments in public chats, with other players often responding with even greater hostility to the player(s) who initiated the conflict. This was clear in the public chat, as some players marginalize certain type of people who have only recently started playing the game or who are overly sensitive by using insults, ironic comments or plainly stating that they were not welcome. Since these communications took place in the context of a public chat (not in a raid, battleground or dungeon), they did not revolve around any challenge or objective in which the less-experienced player could negatively impact other players' performance.

Hostility among the Latin American community, however, was primarily directed toward certain characters or prototypes of players. During the period of observation, there was one player (mentioned 421 times in the chat logs) who clearly participated in “trolling,” which Claire Hardaker would define as deliberate provocation of others to incite conflict, high emotional reactions and disturbance in others for the troll's own amusement. This player, who identified himself as male but described himself with contradictory statements, participated very frequently in the period of observation, using misogynist language and slurs and making ignorant statements on sensitive subjects such as Venezuela's political situation. On a number of occasions, other players declared that they were going to report him to Blizzard's moderators for hostile language. The presence of hostility toward this troll was notable in the content of some of his and his interlocutors' statements.

Players frequently made open requests for friends or partners (always women), both seriously and in jest, using *WoW's* in-game chats. In general, requests by players on the American server were seeking romantic relationships more often than friendship. When seeking a partner, players would sometimes offer gold (the in-game currency) or request a girlfriend with a webcam (as one particular player did on 13 occasions). The North American community requested friendship and partners with less frequency than on the Latin American server, but each player tended to make more friendship requests overall. One reason men were more frequently found looking for female partners, and women were observed participating less frequently overall in such searches, is likely because women are a minority on these servers, which is explained by Clara Fernández Vara and Adrienne Shaw as they elucidate how the industry of video games is perceived as a masculine one where women are misrepresented or their bodies are emphasized based on their sexual qualities, creating a cycle where

the industry creates video games that are unappealing to women.<sup>20</sup> Nick Yee even argues that it is the social and cultural constraint for women who enter these spaces that explains the lower percentage of female in the MMO population.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, the ethnography done in *WoW* by Jenny Sundén and Malin Sveningsson, showed how women were conceived as fineries or an additional aesthetic of the game and not players on the same level as men.<sup>22</sup> This is complemented with the studies of Jesse Fox, Wai Yen Tang, Jeffrey H. Kuznekoff and Lindsey M. Rose who showed how the treatment in online games is condition by gender as findings indicate more negative and severe comments towards women.<sup>23</sup> On the Latin American server, women represented a total of 29.8% of players, while on the North American server they made up 36.5%.<sup>24</sup> As a result, an extreme form of toxic masculinity has appropriated many of these chats, which may well have resulted in the relatively low female participation in these dialogues. The gender gap between players is evidenced in the use of sexually-connoted language and the fact that some players even go so far as to “pay” for a girlfriend. Thus on both servers, the gameplay experience took place in a sexualized environment dominated by aggression and toxicity, reinforcing the male-dominated communication in the in-game chats, where some concerns were commented on differently according to the perceived gender of the communicator, likely contributing to a lower proportion of women playing on *WoW*'s servers and chatting in the game's dialogue boxes.

Among hostile interactions, one tendency that was observed almost exclusively on the Latin American server was the use of homophobic slurs as insults or provocations against other players, some of whom went so far as to assert that homosexuality constitutes a sin by a player, without any other player comments reacting against this viewpoint. Just because several Latin American countries—Argentina, Uruguay, Mexico and Brazil—have taken a leading role by legalizing same-sex marriage, this does not mean that there is more respect toward the subject in Latin America's virtual spaces, where homosexuality is used as the basis for abuse and insults. For example, when one player asked a question about his love life, nearly all the responses were aimed at making fun of the situation was in, telling him to explain to his parents why he didn't have a girlfriend yet and making various references of coming out of the closet. Even though this occasion did not involve abusive language used against a homosexual player, male homosexuality was used as an insult and a way to make fun of others. On the North American server, on the other hand—both Canada and the United States have legal marriage for partners of the same sex—these jokes or insults registered with less frequency (three cases were observed in all, none of which were in reference to a particular individual). Other characteristics used as the basis for insults included age (being a child or adolescent), illiteracy and, with less frequency, mental disability, the latter of which was observed only on the North American server. Given the parameters of the *WoW* platform, it is possible that the rapidity of the messages produced in these chats requires players to express themselves with relatively little thought, favoring the types of simplistic and discriminatory insults that are commonplace in many online (and offline) cultures, and certainly in both the South American and North American *WoW* servers.

At times, the very presence of female players on the *WoW* servers could be a contentious subject. As there was a lower percentage of women in the servers, in many instances when a player declared

20. See Shaw, “What is Video Game Culture?” and Clara Fernández Vara, “La problemática representación de la mujer en los videojuegos y su relación con la industria,” *Revista de Estudios de Juventud* 106 (2014): 93-108.

21. Yee, “The Labor of Fun.”

22. Jenny Sundén and Malin Sveningsson, *Gender and Sexuality in Online Game Cultures* (Routledge, 2012).

23. See Jesse Fox and Wai Yen Tang, “Women's Experiences with General and Sexual Harassment in Online Video Games: Rumination, Organizational Responsiveness, Withdrawal, and Coping Strategies,” *New Media & Society* (2016): 1-18; and Jeffrey H. Kuznekoff and Lindsey M. Rose, “Communication in Multiplayer Gaming: Examining Player Responses to Gender Cues,” *New Media & Society* 15. 4 (2013): 541-556.

24. Data provided by Blizzard Entertainment, Inc. (2015)

herself to be female, other players tended not to believe her. For example, when a player self-identified as female on the North American server, another player responded, “women are a myth,” which was echoed by another player’s denial that the player could be female, stating that “girls in wow are guys in real life.” On this particular occasion, another player responded by saying it was a pathetic attitude, and an additional player agreed. On the other hand, players on the Latin American server expressed their doubt even more aggressively, labeling these female players transsexual, calling them “easy” or implying that they had male genitals. One of the particularly interesting points among these interactions, in terms of the language used by the players, is that Latin American players were consistently more aggressive and blunt than those on the North American *WoW* server. Likewise, nobody intervened to defend the player who had claimed to be female, nor did the player whose sexuality was being questioned express indignation or any similar reaction, all of which helped to validate this type of speech within the community.

In the open chats included in the *WoW* interface—namely the General Chat and the Trade Chat, which, unlike private chat rooms, are accessible to all players—the only normative enforcement for the use of language comes from reporting an individual player for breaking the game’s Terms of Service, which include provisions prohibiting verbal abuse, bullying and harassment. However, in the grand scheme of the game, due to the high number of players engaged in gameplay on densely-populated servers, reporting individual players has very little effect on the climate for interpersonal communication overall. Still, the game does provide a set of tools designed to allow players to mute specific other players, leave certain chats or censor mature language by replacing terms of offensive words with asterisks. Players are allowed to create, curate and moderate custom chats as well, and each guild also has its own intra-guild chat. Each of these layers of player-to-player communication expands the possibilities for collaboration and community-building among participants, as Lauren Collister shows in her research on guild policies and mechanisms for maintaining safe spaces.<sup>25</sup>

The type of misogynist dialogue described above was manifested on repeated occasions in which women and their bodies were sexualized and conventional gender roles were reinforced, making *WoW*’s chats sexist spaces dominated by insults that relegate women with the domestic sphere and objectify them sexually. In the public chats, there was such a common tendency to eroticize the female body that players were expected to partake in it regardless of their own sex or sexual orientation as it is what most people in the community like. The hyper-sexualization of women could be observed in recurrent jokes and insults that involved references to players’ mothers, and in the case of Latin American servers, their sisters as well. This did not imply that women could not participate in the discussion, but rather that they would have to adapt to the way the environment had been constructed, including the language patterns and topics of discussion sustained within these chats. Thus, the invitation to female players may exist, but certain conditions still apply, and a woman’s decision to participate might be heavily conditioned by the topics and dynamics of the discussions taking place.

### Political Discussions

Political topics were a regular part of the interactions between players on the *WoW* chats, whether they were making fun of future presidential candidates on the North American server—Donald Trump was mentioned 108 times in the dialogue registers, while Bernie Sanders was mentioned 27 times and George and Jeb Bush were mentioned 19 times—or discussing the political situation in

25. The nature of these compartmentalized channels exceeds the scope of this particular investigation; see Collister, “Surveillance and Community.”

Venezuela and other countries on the Latin American server—Venezuela was mentioned 41 times, president Nicolás Maduro was mentioned 20 times and Argentina was mentioned 12 times, including references that were not related to political discussion as such, but rather to nationalistic rivalries. Overall, participation in political discussion on the Latin American server was lower than on the North American server—consider, for example, that like the United States, Argentina was also in the midst of a presidential election year. As mentioned above, the types of dialogue observed in the game were not necessarily the most profound or detailed, particularly given that they were situated in a space where communication is reduced to short, typed chats in which everything was generally taken lightly. Indeed, exhibiting seriousness in a discussion or showing sensitivity towards certain topics could even provoke rejection from active participants in the *WoW* communications channels. Therefore, it is important to examine the nature of the political discussions that arise in these sorts of environments in order to understand why players argue about politics when they have very little chance of arriving at consensus or reaching a political compromise, let alone taking political action of any sort.

Because the servers have different compositions, the political conversations observed in both cases were radically distinct: the Latin American servers are populated by players from all the Spanish-speaking countries of Latin America, while the North American servers are populated by a far more homogeneous player base in terms of nationality. On the one hand, Latin American dialogues were filled with various provocations based on players' nationalities or expressing certain longstanding rivalries among countries, for example making fun of the fact that Bolivia is landlocked as a consequence of the War of the Pacific, or that the Falkland Islands are not part of Argentina's territory due to British occupation. When political discussion did arise, it was usually related to countries in South America (in addition to Mexico, which was mentioned seven times). Moreover, the comments on this server made less frequent reference to outside events than on the North American server: the Chilean earthquake of September 16, 2015 was mentioned as a news item as well as a subject of mockery, in one player's joking comment that there was a tsunami alert in effect for Bolivia. Even if these dialogues frequently began with the purpose of provoking conflict, they tended to end in a peaceful manner. When making light of the situation in Venezuela, for example, some players—who were not necessarily Venezuelan, but demonstrated their solidarity—intervened, disagreeing with the derisive comments and proclaiming the need to show respect regarding a sensitive matter. This policing of communications from within the players on the Latin American server nurtures a less hostile and fragmented community relative to the North American server. Political topics were mostly referenced anecdotally, by players sharing information about current living conditions in their own countries, without delving into more profound or larger-scale political arguments.

On the North American *WoW* server, on the other hand, rivalries regularly developed surrounding a variety of contingent topics within the dialogues, such as the use of drugs, freedom of expression, the Paris attacks of 13 November 2015 or foreign policy issues affecting the United States such as the conflicts with Russia and Syria, even if this discussion was generally superficial. There was a common denominator of participants instigating conflict through comments or statements whose sole purpose was to stir fights on sensitive subjects, including declarations such as “white males are the cause of school shootings” or “Obama did sandy hook.” When referencing presidential candidates on the North American server, mockery and irony provided the guiding ethos for these channels—even the candidates themselves were the subject of derision, while on the Latin American server, the mention of candidates and leaders seemed inclined to produce conflict, but with a more serious tone. In conclusion, on both servers the same logic of association that appeared within the construction of the

community was reproduced on the political front. Within this realm, no major differentiation seems to be present between servers, with the exception of what is discussed, or how dialogues are used: on the North American server, political figures are an excuse to spread a playful dialogue, while on the Latin American server, politics are used more to produce conflicts and less as the subject of jokes.

#### CONCLUSION: THE IMPACT OF NATIONAL CULTURE ON THE EXPERIENCE OF WOW

The public spaces of communication in both Latin American and North American *WoW* servers develop certain behavioral norms that are bolstered by factors including the condition of anonymity and the male-dominated game environment. Dialogues developed in the chats should not simply be taken at face value, as they are also a constantly filled of mockery and playful jeering. Differentiation between regions takes place at their margins: on the North American server, players make fun of presidential candidates, while on the Latin American server, while there is space for sharing personal experiences, these are also the subject of frequent mockery from other players.

Since both Latin American and North American *WoW* servers feature the same software and chat tools, use the same game rules and have a majority of male players, there are similarities in the construction of online interactions within this space—such as a relative lack of reflection and a relative prominence of argumentation in the dialogues, as well as the persistent sexualization of women, among others. Although there are characteristics that can lead to a construction of a homogenous gaming experience across servers in distinct geographical locations, differentiation occurs nevertheless as the game is appropriated by gaming populations of diverse cultural backgrounds, precisely because the appropriation of the game is also a product of the player's prior socialization within the realm of *WoW*.

At least preliminarily, it can be shown that the experience of *WoW* differs between Latin American and North American servers with regard to the treatment of politics, gender relations and personal events. For instance, the Latin American server tended to have a friendlier atmosphere among players and presents hostility only towards certain individuals ("trolls"). However, women were frequently excluded given the misogynist discourse produced and reproduced in these spaces. On the other hand, the North American server was home to a disjointed community in which player interactions were notably more individualized and aggressive when discussing others' opinions. Yet at the same time, players on the North American server were more respectful in relation to other subjects, for instance vocally rejecting verbal violence towards women and mockery of homosexuality, both of which were persistent on the Latin American server.

The approximation towards the experience of the game appears to be different between the Latin and the North American servers. The types of available guilds are different as on the one hand, the North America server offers a mature atmosphere (selecting players by age criteria); and on the other hand, the Latin American server offers guilds with specific nationalities. Furthermore, there are two different perspectives on the game for players who have not started or are beginning to play the last content of the game: an experiential viewpoint (Latin American) and another that seeks effectiveness (North American), hinting the cultural dispositions that affect conceptions of the game.

These are not the only aspects that could be observed in terms of appropriation of the experience of the game, and other factors may influence or produce differentiation between servers. Further research could follow up on the interpersonal relationships in the game that are produced within chats or social guilds, or analyze how culturally and nationally determined characteristics are

integrated to the experience of the end-game (PvE/PvP), where players have a greater commitment. There is a more wholly constructed relationship between the characters of the game, and players are exposed to more engaging and demanding environments, where certain types of gameplay performance are expected. Likewise, further research could be developed on the level of commitment and immersion that exists while playing the game: What type of leisure are we seeking in our free time? Why do we choose to play on this platform rather than face-to-face? What consequences does this bring? Finally, this chapter points to emergent questions regarding the dynamic of anonymity: In what ways do people express or perform their gender, race or class in these games? Do they act differently dependent on their personal and cultural identity? Under what circumstances do players accentuate their gender, race and class backgrounds? Is there still a degree of discrimination when players know each other better? These questions point to the relevance of continued research on video games—particularly MMOs—as they constitute an important burgeoning space for socialization.

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