

The Digital Ensemble: The spectacle of roleplaying large events in World of Warcraft

David Harris

Swinburne University of Technology
John St, Hawthorn VIC 3122
dgharris@swin.edu.au

Josiah Lulham

University of Melbourne
Parkville VIC 3010
jlulham@student.unimelb.edu.au

Keywords

Roleplay, Digital Games, World of Warcraft, Performance, Ethnography

INTRODUCTION

October 2021 hailed the return of the *Dance of the Dead*--a large scale roleplaying saga organised and participated in by a community of World of Warcraft (WoW) players. *Dance of the Dead*, hosted on the Moon Guard roleplay server, is the brainchild of one player, who each year pulls together a network of role playing communities across two in-game factions--the Alliance and the Horde--to enact roleplaying events over several months. These events end with a climactic player-vs-player chase involving hundreds of players.

Despite its age (and recent lawsuits regarding endemic misogyny and harassment of members of its development team), WoW is still home to several communities of role players that engage in regular role playing activities. MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler (2008) have detailed how role players in the early years of WoW sought role playing experiences almost *despite* the mechanics of a game which in many ways impeded what those who engage in table top and live action games would call role play. Despite these barriers, however, it is evident that roleplayers have persisted--some for over seventeen years. Throughout this time, other tools such as mods, open source wikis that act as repositories of WoW role playing histories and events, discord servers, and various forums have also enabled role players to persist in these activities--as Gui has shown, World of Warcraft's digital infrastructure is but one tool amongst a series of tools used by players to tell the stories of their character's exploits in Azeroth (2018).

Following in the footsteps of game ethnographers such as Bonnie Nardi's (2009) exploration of the digital everyday lives of WoW players, and Celia Pearce's (2011) work with play communities that formed in the multiplayer online game *URU: Ages Beyond Myst*, we have adopted an ethnographic approach, attending roleplaying in WoW as participant observers, and beginning a series of interviews with organisers of and participants in the events of *Dance of the Dead*. From our early observations in this ongoing research work, we suggest that, for people organising and participating

Proceedings of DiGRA Australia 2022

© 2022 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

in large scale role playing events in WoW such as *Dance of the Dead*, the digital environment of Azeroth becomes a *staging ground* for role playing spectacle. In other words, these events have a *front stage* for the performance of events to a digital ‘public’ of other roleplayers, and a *back stage* for their live coordination and choreography on discord. Further, we consider the digital environment, servers, and gameplay mechanics of World of Warcraft as just one component amongst a number of tools that enable the *staging* and recording of these role playing events; tools such as Discord servers, role playing wiki pages, forums, and even the World of Warcraft client itself.

In this presentation, we explore the theatricality of the player organised *Dance of the Dead* as a large-scale role playing event attended by over one hundred role players, observing the production of a kind of digital theatre ensemble that uses WoW as a staging ground for large online events. We also pose questions about what the persistence and longevity of these digital play communities means for our understanding of digital play and the games in which they coalesce for this play. This project is a work in progress, and we would greatly value the questions and insights of our generous audience.

BIO

David Harris is PhD candidate at the Victorian College of the Arts, and a teacher of interactive narrative and game design at Swinburne University of Technology. His research looks at the intersection of interactive or immersive theatres and the interactivity inherent in play and games. His enquiry is one of what a game or work *offers* an audience or player, and how these playful stakeholders *respond* to the situations these games or theatrical works provide. David is also an artist and theatremaker, with a practice of immersive theatre making and live game design.

Josiah Lulham is a PhD candidate at the University of Melbourne, conducting ethnographic work with live action role playing game communities. His dissertation investigates the play of these communities and considers the ways in which the ambition to ‘be immersed’ and have an experience in these bodily enacted yet fictional worlds ‘feel real,’ and the implications of this ‘real’ feeling in the separated yet entwined everyday lives of those players. Josiah is also an actor, theatre maker, and the co-artistic director of the Melbourne Playback Theatre Company.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Blizzard Entertainment. 2004. *World of Warcraft*. Online Game. Blizzard Entertainment.

Gui, Dean Anthony Fabi. 2018. “Virtual Sense of Community in a World of Warcraft® Storytelling Open Forum Thread.” *Journal For Virtual Worlds Research* 11 (2). <https://doi.org/10.4101/jvwr.v11i2.7281>.

MacCallum-Stewart, Esther, and Justin Parsler. 2008. “Role-Play vs. Gameplay: The Difficulties of Playing a Role in World of Warcraft.” In *Digital Culture, Play, and Identity: A World of Warcraft Reader*, edited by Hilde G Corneliussen and Jill Walker Rettberg. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Nardi, Bonnie A. 2010. *My Life as a Night Elf Priest*, 3–7. An Anthropological Account of World of Warcraft. University of Michigan Press.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvndv9nw>

Pearce, Celia. 2009. *Communities of Play: Emergent Cultures in Multiplayer Games and Virtual Worlds*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/unimelb/detail.action?docID=3339058>.