Virtually Religious:
Myth, Ritual and Community
in *World of Warcraft*

A thesis submitted
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (Communication Studies)

Jose Vallikatt
B.A. (Phil), MPMC (Mass Comm.)

School of Media and Communication
College of Design and Social Context
RMIT University
August 2014
Declaration

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the thesis is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged; and, ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed.

Jose Vallikatt

28.02.2014
Acknowledgements

I am greatly indebted to
God Almighty and Omniscient, who grants the wisdom and eternal direction,
Porticus Fellowships with whose resources I could accomplish this study,
Director Generals, MST, who allowed and supported me to do this study,
Mrs Frances Plude, whose benevolence and initial support provided me with the
motivation,
Fr Jose Palakeel, who has always encouraged me to pursue the study,
My parents and siblings who are always with me providing filial and fraternal support,
Friends and well-wishers who extend continued support.

I acknowledge with gratitude and respect
All my teachers who shared their wisdom with me to make me what I am today,
Staff and colleagues in RMIT who provided a great atmosphere to reflect about media
and communications in a very technologized world,
Clare Mitchell, who was willing to read through the text to suggest corrections
As well as the Warcraft players in India who participated in this research and immensely
contributed with their enthusiastic sharing,
Dr. Jenny Weight, who being the second supervisor to this research provided excellent
support
and
Prof. Dr. Peter Horsfield who journeyed with me
with his wisdom, encouragement, and unsurpassable care
to achieve this great task of
doctoral research in Communication Studies.
Table of Contents

Declaration ........................................................................................................................................ iii
Acknowledgements ................................................................................................................. iv
Table of Contents ................................................................................................................... v
List of Tables and Figures ......................................................................................................... ix
Abstract ............................................................................................................................................ 1

Chapter 1. General Introduction .......................................................................................... 5

Chapter 2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework .................................................. 13

A. Games and Game Studies ...................................................................................................... 15

A.1. Introduction ......................................................................................................................... 15

A.2. Scholarship in Digital Games and Virtual Worlds .............................................................. 15

A.3. Approaches to Digital Games Studies ............................................................................... 18

A.4. The Cultural Perspective in Video Game Studies ............................................................... 23

B. World of Warcraft .................................................................................................................... 29

B.1. The Gaming Industry and World of Warcraft ................................................................. 29

B.1.a. Asian Scenario .................................................................................................................... 30

B.1.b. Indian Scenario ................................................................................................................... 31

B.2. World of Warcraft: A Description ....................................................................................... 34

B.2.a. The Narrative World ......................................................................................................... 34

B.2.b. Gameplay ........................................................................................................................... 36

B.2.c. Servers and Geography ..................................................................................................... 39

C. Games and Religion ................................................................................................................ 40

C.1. The Question of Religion ..................................................................................................... 40

C.2. Media, Religion and Culture ............................................................................................... 43

C.3. Research into Religion and Gaming .................................................................................... 47

C.3.a. Online Religion .................................................................................................................. 48

C.3.b. Myth Studies of the Online World ...................................................................................... 49

C.3.c. Ritual Studies of the Online World .................................................................................... 50

C.3.d. Community Studies of Online World .............................................................................. 51

C.3.e. Religion in Digital Games .................................................................................................. 51

C.3.f. Video games in religious practice ....................................................................................... 51

C.4. The Approach of This Study ............................................................................................... 52

D. Conclusion ............................................................................................................................. 54
Chapter 3. Methodology ........................................................................................................ 57
A. Research Questions ........................................................................................................ 59
B. Research Approach ......................................................................................................... 59
C. Methodologies .................................................................................................................. 60
  C.1. Textual Analysis .......................................................................................................... 60
  C.1.a. Personal Play ............................................................................................................ 61
  C.1.b. Secondary Textual Material ...................................................................................... 64
  C.2. Interviews ................................................................................................................... 66
  C.3. Field Observation ....................................................................................................... 69
D. Conclusion ....................................................................................................................... 71

Chapter 4. Myth in WoW ........................................................................................................ 73
A. Context ............................................................................................................................. 75
  A.1. Myth .......................................................................................................................... 75
  A.2. Myths, Hero Quests and Game .................................................................................. 76
  A.3. Myth: Sacred Story .................................................................................................... 79
B. Text .................................................................................................................................. 79
  B.1. Into the Belly of Games .............................................................................................. 79
  B.2. World of Warcraft: A World of a Million Stories .................................................... 80
    B.2.a. In The Beginning Was No World: Mythic History of WoW .................................. 82
    B.2.b. The Mythic Environment ..................................................................................... 86
    B.2.c. The Mythic World and Its Population ................................................................ 87
    B.2.d. Geography of the World ...................................................................................... 88
    B.2.e. Quests: A Narrative Tool ..................................................................................... 91
    B.2.f. Religion in WoW .................................................................................................... 94
    B.2.g. Iconography, Greetings and Music .................................................................... 95
    B.2.h. Death and Eternity .............................................................................................. 97
    B.2.i. Personal Myths: Fandom .................................................................................... 98
Conclusion ................................................................................................................................ 100

Chapter 5. Ritual in WoW ...................................................................................................... 101
A. Context ............................................................................................................................. 103
  A.1. Ritual .......................................................................................................................... 103
  A.2. Ritual Process ............................................................................................................. 104
  A.3. The Ritual Logic ....................................................................................................... 106
B. Text .................................................................................................................................. 107
  B.1. Rituals in WoW: A Descriptive Analysis ................................................................. 107
  B.2. Players Seeking Ritual Identity .................................................................................. 111
  B.3. The Ritual Culture of WOW ..................................................................................... 113
Chapter 6. Community in WoW ................................................................. 127
A. Context .................................................................................................. 129
A.1. Community .......................................................................................... 129
A.2. Online Community .............................................................................. 130
A.3. Online Religious Community ............................................................ 132
B. Text ......................................................................................................... 135
B.1. Community in World of Warcraft ...................................................... 135
B.1.a. That’s What We’re Here For: The In-Game Community ................ 135
B.1.b. We’ve Played Together Ever Since: The Offline Community .......... 143
B.1.c. Look, We’re a Community Here: The Out-Game Community ....... 145
B.1.d. Do Unto Others: The Ethical Community ....................................... 148
Conclusion .................................................................................................. 152

Chapter 7. The Virtually Religious ............................................................. 153
Introduction ................................................................................................ 155
A. Myths Played in WoW ........................................................................... 155
A.1. The Dynamics of Myths in WoW ....................................................... 155
A.2. Religions in WoW .............................................................................. 159
A.3. Religious Identities ........................................................................... 160
A.4. The Quest for Purpose ....................................................................... 164
A.5. WoW as Mediator of Meaning ............................................................ 167
B. Rituals Practiced in WoW ................................................................. 168
B.1. The Interaction of Myth and Ritual .................................................... 169
B.2. The Ritual Process in WoW .............................................................. 169
B.3. WoW as Collective Cultural Liminoid ................................................. 171
B.4. The Sacred Significance of Rituals in WoW ....................................... 172
C. Community Participation in WoW .................................................... 174
C.1. Social System in WoW ........................................................................ 174
C.2. Liminality, Communitas and Community in WoW ......................... 176
C.3. The Ethical Community ..................................................................... 177
C.4. Play and Social Cohesion ................................................................... 178
D. WoW, Popular Culture and Religion ................................................... 179
D.1. The Quest for Identity and Meaning .................................................. 182
D.2. Sacred and the Religious in WoW ..................................................... 186
D.3. Re-culturation of the Religious in WoW .................................................. 187
E. Challenges and Limitations of the Study .................................................. 188

Chapter 8. Conclusion ................................................................................. 191
A. Myth, Ritual, and Community ................................................................. 193
B. Religious Identity and Search for Meaning ............................................. 197
C. Play, Popular Culture and Religion ......................................................... 197
D. Transformations of Religion ................................................................. 199
E. Further Research ..................................................................................... 202

Appendices ................................................................................................. 203
Appendix 1 – History of events in World of Warcraft. ............................... 204
Appendix 2 – List of Players who participated in the research ..................... 207
Appendix 3 – Ethics Approval ..................................................................... 209
Appendix 4 – Informed Consent ................................................................. 210
Appendix 5 – Plain Language Statement .................................................... 211
Appendix 6 – Interview Questionnaire 1.................................................... 213
Appendix 7 – Interview Questionnaire 2.................................................... 214

Bibliography ............................................................................................... 217
Books, Chapters and Articles ..................................................................... 217
Interviews and Blogs of Research Participants .......................................... 244
Gamography ................................................................................................ 245
List of Figures and Tables

Table 1.1.  *Wow’s race chart* .................................................................................................................. 37
Figure 4.1.  *Purohit*, human priest avatar .......................................................................................... 81
Figure 4.2.  Avatar *Purohit* administers a smite over the ferocious Kobold Laborer ..................... 86
Figure 4.3.  *Well of Eternity* .............................................................................................................. 89
Figure 4.4.  Map: Continents of Azeroth ............................................................................................... 90
Figure 4.5.  Map: Locations discovered through game play .............................................................. 91
Figure 4.6.  *Purohit* meets Deputy Wilhem in front of Northshire Abbey ........................................ 92
Figure 4.7.  Artwork of Paladin .............................................................................................................. 96
Figure 4.8.  The Altar of the Blood God Hakkar at the Sunken Temple ............................................ 96
Figure 4.9.  Night Elf holding moon in hand .......................................................................................... 97
Figure 5.1.  The Emerald Dream ........................................................................................................... 109
Figure 5.2.  Temporary Pandals of Devi Durga in Hyderabad .............................................................. 121
Figure 5.3.  Shopping for Lord Ganesha on the roadside ................................................................. 121
Figure 6.1.  *Purohit* talks with community of players ................................................................. 136
Virtually Religious: Myth, Ritual, and Community in World of Warcraft

Jose Vallikatt

x
Abstract

In an age dominated by media technologies and products, religion in recent time has been assumed to be resurging, albeit in different forms. This study hypothesises that the massively multiplayer online role-playing (MMORPG) video game *World of Warcraft*, with its powerful ludic, narrative and fantasy features, is a significant aspect of cultural changes, including the religious. Within the framework of a functional definition of religion, this study uses textual analysis to investigate the place of the traditionally identified three major elements of religion namely, myth, ritual and community in constructing what may be understood as a cohesive religious environment in *World of Warcraft*. The textual data is supplemented by an exploration of the game-playing experiences and religious perspectives of players of *World of Warcraft* in India and gives added richness to the text. From a cultural perspective, the study identifies how a postmodern generation can construct meaning from virtual worlds like *World of Warcraft* that transcends some mundane aspects of their life. The study proposes a fresh outlook into how social researchers can look at notions such as religion, whose central ideas revolve around the metaphysical and super-natural, by exploring the boundaries of actual and virtual, of seriousness and play, and of sacred and secular within a technologically constructed fantasy digital game. Further, it explores whether the gamers themselves – individually or collectively – see the MMORPG environment of *WoW* as having religious characteristics that contribute to their search for transcendence and meaning. Finally, the study considers the implications this has for thinking about the relationship between new media and changes in social religiosity and the re-culturation of religion in a postmodern media context.
Virtually Religious: Myth, Ritual and Community in World of Warcraft | Jose Vallikatt
Chapter 1.
General Introduction
General Introduction

Introduction

Can one find any apparent connection between an exceedingly secular digital game *World of Warcraft (WoW)*\(^1\) that satisfies the entertainment needs of people, especially youth, and a social phenomenon such as religion whose central focus is the sacred, the spiritual and the metaphysical? Some would perceive explicit religious experience in digital gaming while some others would deny any spiritual or religious significance. Some would use online technologies including digital games for religious purposes whereas others might not see any such possibilities or potentials in it except pure entertainment. When research and studies suggest that online technologies are used for religious purposes (Martinez-Zárate, Corduneanu, & Martinez, 2008) or can demonstrate proselytising and fundamental tendencies (Hackett, 2006; Howard, 2009) or as contested space for religious propaganda (Cowan, 2004), it is a fascinating challenge to investigate and explore the mutual connections of digital media, cyberspace and religion in general and how interactive play might construct religious meaning by playing secular games in particular.

This study is an investigation of the religious dimensions and significance of the massively multiplayer online roleplaying game (MMORPG) *World of Warcraft*. The research is located within the cultural contexts of media studies as today scholars increasingly recognise computer gaming as an aspect of culture (Williams, Hendricks, & Winkler, 2006) and *World of Warcraft* as civilisation (Bainbridge, 2010). As online technologies, digital games and virtual worlds constitute a significant part of popular culture today (Boellstorff, 2008; Johnson, 2010; McAllister, 2004; Taylor, 2006; Wolf, 2002), they become avenues for millions of users to interact, collaborate, and form relationships with each other. The practices in the online technological domain increasingly shape new cultural outlooks both in the online life as well as in the offline life of players (Dovey & Kennedy, 2006; Jahn-Sudmann & Stockmann, 2008; Martin & Deuze, 2009). In this study diverse dimensions of gaming are explored and affirmed in a

---

\(^1\) The full title *World of Warcraft* and the abbreviation *WoW* are used interchangeably throughout the text as seems most appropriate.
scholarly context (Branston & Stafford, 2002; Corneliussen & Rettberg, 2008; Pearce & Artemesia, 2008). Digital role-playing games especially MMORPGs in this context are found to be spaces for identity exploration and community formation (Bowman, 2010). It is important to explore the religious dimensions of digital gaming along with other social phenomena as these games and online avenues “turn out to be surprisingly complex domains of psychosocial exploration” (Wertheim, 2000, p. 236; see also Turkle 1997).

The central focus of this study is to investigate religious elements in digital games especially World of Warcraft. Postmodernist trends and outlooks have transformed cultures across the globe (Docker, 1994; McRobbie, 2005) and popular culture pervades most aspects of human life. Religion, one of the significant aspects of human culture, also is being considerably affected by these postmodern transitions to which digital games make a sizable contribution. Though the proponents of secularisation have prophesied the death of religion in the context of rational thinking and technological advancement, recent history witnesses a reappearance and resurgence of religion, albeit in new and numerous forms. A number of scholars in this context have observed the return of religion in human culture (de Vries, 2001). Religion and its practices, and theorisation about religion acquired new dimensions and new significance after 9/11 not only in America and the European Union but also across the world (Doran, 2010; Rockmore, 2011). Religion has become an important topic of discussion and scholarly research, though now it tends to be entwined in the mesh of politics, economics, media and culture.

Popular culture also has played a significant role in the recovery of religions, though the shape and substance of many popular religious practices are different from those of mainstream religions. Popular culture, along with other cultural representations, borrows various symbolisms from religion to give people new expressions of their humanity in their everyday lives. This popular use of traditional symbolism helps ordinary people to “use religion to make sense and give meaning to their lives” even though it is used “apart from or in tension with established religious groups” (Santana & Erickson, 2008, p. 18). These religious symbols in turn gain new vitality as they are expressed outside the traditional religious structures in such phenomena as Neo-pagan religious movements and new age spiritualties (Heelas, 2008; Heelas & Woodhead, 2005; Pike, 2004), or as popular expressions in cultural artefacts such as sports, pop music, advertising, television
fiction, cinema, art and literature (Clark & Clanton, 2012; Mazur & McCarthy, 2011; Santana & Erickson, 2008).

Video games are no exception to this. Many video games draw themes from religious mythology and, it is argued, occasionally they function like religion (Detweiler, 2010; Wagner, 2012a). The religious and the secular are thus found to complement and contribute to each other when people turn to and use secular artefacts to build their idiosyncratic religion or religious meanings. In postmodern contexts it is increasingly the case that the secular and religious worlds can and do coexist. The sacred and the secular do not destroy each other though their power structures and the idea of dogmatic authority does undergo major shifts (Ostwalt, 2003).

In the wake of the apparent resurgence of religion, some scholars have proposed a new paradigm for the study of religious phenomena in the media age, namely “media, religion and culture” (Hoover & Lundby, 1997). The main focus of this theorisation is that religion is not confined to events that occur in a sacred or metaphysical realms but rather it emerges as a social reality within a cultural context (Hoover, 2002b). Though dealing with sacred realities religious significance needs to be understood as located within the society and materialised within everyday human realities. The structures and styles of society directly affect religion in its governance, maintenance, and promotion.

In their attempt to ‘rethink’ the connections between media and religion the culturalist scholars of religion have taken more seriously the theories and terminologies of culture (Hoover & Lundby, 1997). From a cultural perspective, their observations and data re-establish a relevant and significant place for religion in the media age (Hoover, 2006; Hoover & Clark, 2002; Horsfield, Hess, & Medrano, 2004; Mitchell & Marriage, 2003). An important area of attention in this renewed interest in religion has been the interaction between religion and media not just in religions’ uses of media, but also in media serving as an important site for individuals’ reworking of old religious meanings and practices. Scholars working in this interdisciplinary area of media, culture and religion are building new theoretical frameworks (Horsfield, 2003) so that each discipline can complement the others.

A significant gap is perceived in the existing research: the relationship between digital games, especially MMORPGs, and religion. The current study is an attempt to fill
that gap by exploring the parallels between *World of Warcraft* and religion. It builds upon the existing research already done in the area of online gaming and the interdisciplinary field of media religion and culture. Employing a functional definition of religion and its three major functional elements of myth, ritual and community, and in the context of a new gaming culture, this study explores the mythic structures, ritual practices and the community formation around the virtual phenomenon called * WoW*. It investigates the functions of myth, ritual and community in * WoW* and considers whether they provide functional satisfactions which are parallel to the satisfactions that religions have been seen as providing. The intention of this study is not to establish * WoW* as another religion but to investigate ‘what is going on there?’ in * WoW* in relation to social religiosity from a functional point of view.

Employing these three lenses – myth, ritual and community – to investigate potential religious elements in * WoW*, this study looks also at how * WoW* presents subthemes such as purpose and meaning of life, media’s role in constructing worldviews, liminal process in media, quest culture, online communities, and sacredness through the game’s narrative and ludic devices. As * WoW* provides ludic as well as narrative possibilities to its players (Frasca, 1999; Juul, 2005a; Simons, 2007), it appears to function also like religions whose thriving forces are narrative mythologies presented in their scriptures and enacted through ritual practices among a community. Therefore, as the gameplay of * WoW* is analysed in this study, religion is explored through the notion of play as well. As postmodern cultural developments transform broad aspects of human life including religion, and as play has been an important element of the new media transformations, play as a dynamic of religious signification is also explored. Play, fun and humour have been identified as important ways in which people participate in religion today (Raj & Dempsey, 2010b). As both role playing games and religion offer mythic fantasy worlds, it can be considered that game-playing is the brink between fantasy and reality for players (Pike, 2001), just as religious participation is the threshold to spiritual reality for others.

Though the ‘gameness’ of * WoW* is not the exclusive focus of this study, it surveys the potentials of * WoW* to provide players with moments of “religious meaning-making” through gaming devices and within the game environment. Similarly the study builds on the ludic parallels inherent in religious rituals and game rituals. As we perceive the play element as an important aspect of religious practices and study of religion today, the
study will consider its implications for understanding the social contexts of the decline of religious traditions and institutions where “subjectification of meaning has become self evident” (Versteeg, 2006, p. 97). An investigation into the ludic practices in gaming and religion can open up exploration of relatively new territories in cultural studies of the digital games subset, and the study of religion itself, which have been frequently overlooked (though with a few exceptions stemming mostly from anthropology and ritual studies) (Bornet & Burger, 2012a).

Hence, the study will focus on how the mythic narratives in *World of Warcraft* and the possibility of players to take roles in that grand narrative may become a space for transcending their everyday life with specific significances and meanings and how the time and space of the everyday world enshrined in game-play may create an environment for liminal experiences of transcending everyday realities similar to the rituals in religions. In this consideration, the study has taken a theoretical approach that sees game time as ‘alternative time experiences’ (Bittarello, 2008; Brasher, 2004, p. xiii), and virtual space as ‘transitional space’ (Lovheim, 2005; Nitsche, 2008; O'Leary, 1996). The intention is not to be prescriptive about the religiosity of *World of Warcraft*, but to explore the nature of gaming and contemporary religious meaning making from the perspective of what has been called “the culturalist turn” in the study of media and religion whose approach is to “decentre religion and media from traditional, institutionally dominated definitions, refocusing on the intersection of institutions, authorities, and production with popular practices, circulation and reception” (Morgan, 2008a, p. xiii).

This research is located in the multi cultural and multi religious context of India. Today, popular religiosity and postmodern religious perspectives are progressively blurring the boundaries of the previously existing strict demarcations of classical religious understandings and cultural geographies. Though not many studies have been undertaken in the Indian context there is immense scope for investigating transformations of social religiosity in the postmodern cultural context of India. Even as digital gaming is increasingly capturing the interest of the postmodern generation of India today, scholars have not yet paid enough attention to undertaking serious studies in the field of digital games in general and their religious significance in particular.

India is home to various cults and ritual practices that will fall in the purview of popular religious practices. Notable recently published studies (Bornet & Burger, 2012b;
Raj & Dempsey, 2002, 2010b) encourage social scientists to do more studies in the Indian cultural and religious context. The fact that play is found to be an integral part of Indian religious practices provides a better context to this study justifying this investigation of popular religious practices and transformations in social religiosity in the popular religion of India.

In investigating the religious motifs of myth, ritual and community in World of Warcraft and its implications for thinking about the relationship between new media and changes in social religiosity and the re-culturation of religion in a postmodern media context this study chiefly employs qualitative methodologies. Primarily this study employs textual and critical analysis of the game and game playing to identify characteristics that utilise or construct mythology, rituals and community formation or participation. On a secondary level it also utilises interviews with game players in India to explore their perceptions of the myth, ritual and community aspects of the game and the significance of those elements for them. While this valuable data of players is critically analysed I also make my own interpretations to substantiate the thesis.

In the following chapter I will review the scholarly work already existing in digital game studies as well as cultural and religious studies within the new paradigm of media, religion and culture to present a theoretical framework of religion for this study. Thus the study is based on the existing theoretical frameworks and recently emerging theorisation on online gaming. That chapter, which contains three major, sections will review the scholarship in digital games and online communication spaces as well as various approaches to games studies from a cultural perspective. Secondly it will provide a detailed description on World of Warcraft in the context of the flourishing gaming industry. Lastly it will draw out the cultural relationship between games and religion within the framework of the media, religion and culture paradigm. Religion in this study is chiefly understood through the functional definition proposed by J.M. Yinger (1970), which emphasises the three major functions of religion namely myth, ritual and community. The overall approach of this research is based on a broad cultural studies theorisation developed by scholars such as Geertz (1973a) and the theorisation of the media, religion and culture school headed by Stewart Hoover (2006; 1997).

In the three chapters that follow the methodology chapter, I present the three major elements of religion being investigated - myths, ritual and community – as they are found
in *WoW*. The text of *WoW* drawn through my own personal play, accessing player walkthroughs, and from the personal interviews I have done with the *WoW* players are presented descriptively in the context of already established theorisation. For these frameworks I have depended primarily on Joseph Campbell (1949; 1988), for his studies in myths, Victor Turner (1969, 1982) for his work on rituals and liminality, and Emile Durkheim (1893, 1912) for the sociological aspects of religion in general and community in particular.

The seventh chapter is analysis and discussion of the data, where the text is critically analysed and interpreted to identify their relationship to the re-culturation of religion and social religiosity in a postmodern media context. In this chapter, information from the player interviews is further considered to provide added perspective to the analysis. In the last chapter I draw conclusions and expose the possibilities for future research. This chapter will explore how the interaction of three elements can be constructed and understood as having religious significance, as well as how the gamers individually or collectively see the MMORPG environment of *WoW* as having religious characteristics or as related to their offline religious behaviour.

Different authors identify the virtual worlds of gaming not just as entertainment or escape, but also as important sites for imaginative exploration of possible alternative ways of being and behaving, with “real life” implications. It is interesting, therefore, to note that the virtual worlds of today frequently rework traditional religious and mythic motifs into new mythological structures in the design of their game-playing spaces. The quest starts here: the quest of searching the sacred spaces on secular grounds; the quest of perceiving actual experiences in virtual worlds; the quest of exploring the religious dimensions of *World of Warcraft* as well.
Chapter 2.
Literature Review and
Theoretical Framework
A. Games and Game Studies

A.1. Introduction

Digital games\(^2\) have become a constituent element of the culture of a significant proportion of human populations today. The convergence of digital technologies and the Internet have dramatically changed the speed, spread, shape, and style of the game experience, enabling people to play not only individually but also with others across the globe. The capacity of digital games to provide a parallel, virtual world for players to inhabit and within which to explore their lives is a further cultural development. The increased number of media and research publications on digital games are testament to the growth in social and academic perception of their increasing cultural significance. As this study proposes and will investigate, that social significance extends to a reworking of religious dimensions of culture.

This chapter builds a background and framework for thinking about the interaction of digital games, religion and culture. It reviews the cultural significance of digital games, approaches to the study of games, and rethinking taking place in the phenomenon of religion and its relation to media and culture. Arising from this background and framework, a theoretical approach will be proposed for the purpose of this study focussing on what have been identified in some religious studies as the three major elements of religion: myth, ritual and community.

A.2. Scholarship in Digital Games and Virtual Worlds

Scholarly interest in the study of digital games can be traced back to the turn of the millennium, though these drew on earlier pioneering work on the cyber world, such as that of Aarseth (1997), Jenkins and Fuller (1995), Murray (1998), and Turkle (1984). The organisers of the first international academic journal of computer game research, *Game Studies*, identified 2001 as “the Year One of Computer Game Studies as an emerging, viable, international, academic field” (Aarseth, 2001). In that year the MIT Program in

\(^2\) ‘Digital Game/s’ is used as an umbrella term in this thesis to signify categories of video games, computer games, or games played on mobile devices. These categories have their own specific peculiarities and there have been a lot of studies about them and their genre. A definition of digital games is still considered open ended just because of the numerous possibilities offered by them and various approaches with which they can be analysed. However, in the later part of this thesis *Digital Game* is used to signify *World of Warcraft*. 
Comparative Media Studies, under the leadership of Henry Jenkins organized a national conference, Computer and Video Games Come of Age, in collaboration with the International Digital Software Association in 2001. A number of academic journals started soon after, such as *Game Studies* (Gamestudies, 2001), *Games and Culture* (Sage, 2006), and *Eludamos* (Eludamos, 2007). These explored the emerging culture around digital games as well as the various approaches and methods of game studies that were developing.

Play and games have been subjects of scientific study for a long time (Caillois, 1958; Huizinga, 1949; Sutton-Smith, 1997) and digital games have also been taken up as a special domain in that field of study (see for example Salen & Zimmerman, 2003). As the gaming industry is proliferating with new games or new versions year after year, and the construction and shaping of gaming cultures is constantly changing, scholars have developed different approaches for engaging with the phenomenon. These include perspectives on how digital games affect cognitive areas such as thinking (Johnson, 2005), learning and literacy (Gee, 2003); psychological issues such as how games affect identity and personality (Griebel, 2006); gender perspectives (Terlecki et al., 2011); game violence and its impacts on youth (Anderson, Gentile, & Buckley, 2007; Walkerdine, 2007); political perspectives such as war (Halter, 2006; Huntemann & Payne, 2010) and militarism (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009); as well as ethical questions around the social context of play (Eastin & Griffiths, 2006; Warner & Raiter, 2005). Studies oriented to gender related issues occupy a major part of game studies (Cassell & Jenkins, 1998; Lucas & Sherry, 2004; Ogletree & Drake, 2007; Taylor, 2003).

The increased engagement of players with digital games has progressively opened up investigation into how games operate as replicas of real life and players projecting their offline behaviours to online environments. Studies have investigated, for example, how players occasionally import real life behaviours, such as cheating, into their game playing (Consalvo, 2007; Kücklich, 2009) and how game play is used for making money, generally known as ‘gold farming’ (Castronova, 2001, 2002; Coleman & Dyer-Witheford, 2007; Freedman, 2008) or ‘ludocapitalism’ (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009). Massively played games such as *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard, 2004a) and virtual worlds such as *Second Life* (LindenLab, 2003) have been found to connect game players

---

3 The full transcript and programme is available at http://www.web.mit.edu/cms/games/index.html
to real-world concerns about globalization, militarism, and exploitation (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009). Thus, the argument that game theory needs to be seen as a branch of economics and social exchange theory (Von Neumann & Morgenstern, 1944/1953) appears to have substance. It is in this context that the perspective of this study, that digital games can equally be studied from the perspectives of opening up intersected domains of social life including the religious, is being pursued.

New media and digital games are increasingly being seen as socially integrating phenomena where people mutually connect through online networks (Embrick, Wright, & Lukács, 2012; Lee & Peng, 2006; Nayar, 2010). This becomes evident from the popularity of various online multiplayer games, which enable and promote a communitarian experience of play. Technological advances have enabled a significant advance from Mines of Moria (1977), the first graphical online game that could support only 200 players to World of Warcraft which can be played by many million players at a time. While the former was a text-based fantasy game, the latter’s graphical interface provides a cohesive and persistent mythical environment for the players. The possibility of community formation around these digital games make them not only the subjects for significant study of social practices but also elevate them as a cultural force through which players may engage in quite different sets of meaning-making practices that reach beyond the game situation to enhance their everyday life. Studies relating to identity and agency (Bowman, 2010; Corneliussen & Rettberg, 2008; Donath, 1999; Hutchinson, 2007; Pearce & Artemesia, 2008) are attempts to analyse such motifs in digital gaming. Though many think that community formations require physical co-presence and that a ‘real’ spirit of community is essential to the existence of vitality in virtual communities (Foster, 1997), Howard Rheingold (1993) has been prominent in proposing that virtual community is as real as any physical community. In the emerging online communities, social and cultural patterns play as great a role as physical presence in the imagination and experience of being part of an online community (Baym, 1998).

The predecessor of today’s graphically rich MMORPGs, Habitat (Lucasfilm, 1986) boasted a real time animated view into an online simulated world in which users can communicate, play games, and carry out almost any real life possibility (Boudreau, 2008). Games that employed more advanced technology in game design, such as EverQuest (Sony, 2004), and widespread access to the Internet, revolutionised online gaming. These
games encouraged more co-operative game play through game events that required greater numbers of people to co-operate in order to achieve game outcomes, such as winning an epic battle (Boudreau, 2008). The World of Warcraft released in 2004 shifted the gameplay again from a “socially dependent multiplayer style” to “a more independent, solo style, allowing players to level their characters in shorter amounts of time with less help from other players” (Boudreau, 2008, p. 176). While these games serve functions like building community, social problem-solving and creation, and performing of alternate identities (Bowman, 2010), they are also considered to be interactive story-telling media where the player plays the story for him/herself (Harrigan & Wardrip-Fruin, 2007). Research that focused on digital games such as EverQuest (Chappell, Eatough, Davies, & Griffiths, 2006; Hayot & Wesp, 2004; Stern, 2002), and World of Warcraft (Corneliussen & Rettberg, 2008; Krzywinska, 2006a; Walker, 2007) therefore used different theoretical frameworks and approaches in facing major methodological and epistemological challenges of locating video games in the world of narrative and interactive media.

A.3. Approaches to Digital Games Studies

An early concern of game studies was with the technology and design involved in game development itself. Many of these included various game theories as well. So the earlier works, such as Chris Crawford’s The Art of Computer Game Design (1984), and Aarseth’s Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature (1997), were followed by later game design theory and practice work such as those of Laramée (2002; Rouse, 2005), Bartle (2003), Salen and Zimmerman (2003), Rouse (2005), and Juul (2005b).

In looking at the social significance of games, a major focus of the earliest studies was on issues relating to an instrumentalist perspective, such as effects analysis (Gunter, 1998; Walther, Anderson, & Park, 1994), addiction and other psychological issues (Chappell et al., 2006; Cover, 2006; Gergen, 1991; Turkle, 1997) and aggression, violence and sex in video games (Anderson et al., 2007).

As the field grew, and in response to calls to utilise other research traditions which were not adequately represented (Squire, 2002), other approaches have developed, with scholars studying games from various perspectives such as literary studies (Ryan, 2001; 4 For a concise history of video games see (Yinger, 1970, p. 10).
Virtually Religious: Myth, Ritual and Community in World of Warcraft – Literature Review | Jose Vallikatt 19

Stern, 2002), screen studies (Nitsche, 2008; Perron & Wolf, 2003; Wolf, 2002), psychology (Gachenbach, 1998; Turkle, 1997), economics (Beck & Wade, 2004; Castronova, 2005; Freedman, 2008; Green, 2001; Steinkuehler, 2006; Yee, 2006), and philosophy (Cogburn & Silcox, 2009; Cuddy & Nordlinger, 2009; Gunkel, 2010).

This plurality of approaches has contributed to the richness of game studies, though scholars such as Kirkpatrick have argued that the plurality has lead to ambiguous definitions and disorientated approaches that at times miss the core elements of digital games (Kirkpatrick, 2007), with games and previous narrative media being treated on similar terms.

This lack of clarity can also be seen to have occurred because games themselves share sufficiently different characteristics that make it difficult for them to be classified into specific genres. Game designers themselves have drawn ideas for games from across disciplines, genres and worldviews, and have constructed games that cross existing boundaries. A number of scholars have constructed taxonomies and suggested classifications to enable games to be studied systematically, yet these also have added to the plurality rather than integrating it. For example, Vossen (2004) classifies games into categories such virtual, physical, fictional, nonfictional. Bartle’s (1996) analysis focuses on the motives of players, which he categorises as socializers (the players who play to enjoy the company of other players), killers (players who enjoy preying on and harassing other players), achievers (players who like to win and triumph) and explorers (players who enjoy discovering the game’s secrets and hidden mechanics, including discovering and exploiting programming errors). Lindley’s taxonomy (2003), developed within the Zero Game Studio of the Interactive Institute in Sweden, distinguishes game forms and functions based upon narrative, repetitive game play and simulation.

The narratological emphasis focuses its study on game narratives, drawing on the concerns and methodologies of the predecessors of digital games, the visually narrative media of film and television. Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al in their work Understanding Video Games (2008, pp. 169-204) provide a useful summary explanation of the narratological approach. The use of plot as a device for advancing through the game, the fictional world of setting, characters and myths, and the mechanics of narrative and the game experience constitute the game as a ‘storytelling’ narrative. The driving force in narrative

Available at http://zerogame.interactiveinstitute.se/
development in video games is the character that follows a goal. The creation of a player’s character as one among many characters opens up scope for ‘character study’ in games, similar to character study in film and literature studies. Similarly, the cut-scene, whose functional role is to introduce a central narrative tension, to shape the narrative in a certain direction, to compensate for missing game narrative and to provide the player with information, is another narrative device that makes videogames a kin-mate of narrative media genres.

Similarities to previous visual media includes games’ use of the screen as the output device, and Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al (2008, pp. 169-204) dedicate a section of their text to video game aesthetics, where they show how video games have applied the conventions and language of earlier media, particularly cinema, to emulate the visual representation of culture.

Though digital games have strong and engaging narrative content and patterns, and though, as with any narrative medium, digital games help people to escape from the ordinary into a fictional world, there is a common recognition that storytelling in games is different from that of other narrative media. The narrative mechanics of the game, unlike other narrative media, have many paths and ends, a function of the game’s interactivity achieved through techniques like “branching” the story and incorporating “quests” (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2008). The interactivity of the game enables the player to make multiple narratives within the narrative of the developer (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2008, pp. 181-184). Game narratives, therefore, do not engage players as passive spectators but involve them as co-creators of the story (Hutchinson, 2007).

A number of narratologists such as Kücklich (2001, 2003), Wolf (2002), Murray (1998), Jenkins (2004), Ryan (2001) and Stern (2002) argue that differentiation needs to be made between narrative and fictional forms. They suggest that it is the fictionality rather than the narrative quality that typifies the game text and should be the main focus of study.

---

6 A cut scene is a dramatically important sequence, often displayed without the interaction of the player. The scene is typically shown to motivate a shift in the “plot” of the game and displayed outside of the game engine. Egenfeldt-Nielsen, et al (2008) uses the notion of “literary repertoire” which is explained as an unfamiliar territory within the text that include anything which the reader/player might already know. Understanding the repertoire can affect both content and form of reading/playing.
Given that it is this interactivity of the narrative that is distinctive in this particular medium, others suggest that the play experience should be the focus of study. This is the ludology emphasis, an approach to game study which holds that the rules and play aspect of a game are central to the game and the game phenomenon and therefore need to be a major lens of any study. Frasca (1999) defined ludology as the “discipline that studies game and play activities” and argues that the interactivity of digital video games makes their content different from other narrative art forms and therefore needs other theories and methodologies apart from those derived from narrative studies alone.

This characteristic of interactivity is reflected in the audience of games being called ‘users’ or ‘players’ rather than ‘viewers’ or ‘readers’. In Moutrop’s terms, interactivity is “the capacity to transform certain aspect of the virtual environment with potentially significant consequences for the system as a whole” (cited in Dovey & Kennedy, 2006, p. 23; Moutrop, 2004, p. 60). Ludologists argue that it is the rules that “add meaning and enable actions by setting up differences between potential moves and events” (Juul, 2003, original emphasis). Therefore they insist that game studies require new sets of theories, frameworks, and methodology which includes an intermedial approach (Grishakova & Ryan, 2010), cultural approach (Ang, Zaphiris, & Wilson, 2010; Ardevol, Roig, San Cornelio, Pagès, & Alsina, 2010; Wright, Embrick, & Lukács, 2010) as well as mixed methodologies (Coavaux, 2010; Lukaes, 2010; D. Williams, 2005).

These arguments reflect one of the problems in video game studies, namely understanding the particular nature of the game as a text. Recent scholarship in media studies has observed a narratological turn in which texts are seen as multimodal and media information as intermedial (Grishakova & Ryan, 2010), or related to intermedial aesthetic experience (Gibbons, 2010). Because games exist in hybrid forms, it is argued that they provide “hybrid modalities” such as naturalistic, sensory, abstract and technological (Burn & Parker, 2003, p. 47). Similarly, the gameplay experience in some games is inextricably linked also to ‘reading pleasures’, which encourage players to advance reflectively within the rule-based game world (Ciccoricco, 2010).

Some ludologists critique the interpretive textual analysis of digital games on the grounds that such interpretations are mere ‘projections’ of the researcher and hinder the study of the ‘gameness’ of games (Eskelinen, 2001). Others, taking a semiotic perspective, argue that in their combination of signifiers and signified, the signs within
the game are conduits of culture, ideology or ‘myth’ and need to be studied as ‘semiotic systems’ and their variable interpretations considered as part of game study (Burn & Parker, 2003). Therefore, it is to be contended that the text of games is generated partially by the narrative dynamic and partially by ludic dynamic, and their meaning is constructed during the process of play.

According to Barthes a text is made of ‘lexia’, the interconnected “blocks of signification” or “units of reading” (Barthes, Balzac, Miller, & Howard, 1974, p. 13). The text of digital games then can be interpreted using various codes. The act of interpretation, according to Barthes is “not to give it a (more or less justified, more or less free) meaning, but on the contrary to appreciate what plural constitutes it” (Barthes et al., 1974, p. 5). In our understanding these layered meanings are what can be understood as hypertext. Barthes says “in the ideal text, the networks are many and interact, without being able to surpass the rest; this text is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning, it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one (Barthes et al., 1974, p. 5). Their textual interpretation thus takes a writerly approach (Barthes et al., 1974, p. 5), one which is open to the possibility of a plurality of interpretations as the player plays with the text to create their own meanings.

Digital games need to be studied and understood as ‘playable texts’ (Lauteren, 2002, p. 218), without allowing their character as ‘text’ to diminish their qualities of playability, mutability, unpredictability, and interactivity, or their character as ‘playable’ to obscure their fictive nature and culturally situated significance (Buckingham, 2006). According to Carr (2006) the capacity of games to blend ‘static parameters and structures’ as well as ‘space for inventive manipulation’ makes them a very absorbing space where meaningful interactions occur. Nonetheless, Carr also argues that the pleasures of the games results not only from a single textual factor, whether ludic or representational, but also from the player’s interaction with the fixed and variable, programmed, calculated and chanced elements of the game.

Because games are interactive, the player needs to be seen as becoming part of the text, which Burn (2006, p. 84) describes as both “performer and audience” who improvise

---

7 Roland Barthes (1974) suggests five codes to interpret a text in S/Z. These codes will be revisited in subsequent sections.
with the fixed elements of the text while at the same time interpreting it. This multimodal functionality of players makes them simultaneously part of the representational system and part of the game system. The mechanics of video games allow the player to do something in/to the text, while the text is doing something on/to the player (Burn, 2006). This study of the game and its potential religious dimensions approaches this textual analysis issue through a systematic analysis of aspects of the text through the lens of myth, ritual and community, while also interviewing players to discover how those aspects of the text figure in their game playing and personal meaning-making.

A.4. The Cultural Perspective in Video Game Studies

There is a shared recognition among most scholars now that digital games need to be understood not just as instrumentalities of their own but as a significant aspect of contemporary culture. The titles of many recent books reflect this perspective: Computer Games and New Media Cultures (Fromme & Unger, 2012), An Introduction to Game Studies: Games in Culture (Mäyrä, 2008), Play Between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture (Taylor, 2006), Gaming as Culture (Williams et al., 2006), Game Cultures: Computer Games as New Media (Dovey & Kennedy, 2006). These more recent works build on earlier, though less common, work taking this approach. J.C. Herz’s Joystick Nation (1997) while investigating the role games played in an increasingly virtual world also explored the culture of virtual construction workers who “do code” wherever the big game is being created. According to Jenkins “This is a medium that anyone who wants to understand where our culture is at, has to look at” (cited in Raessens, 2006, p. 52).

It is their interactive quality that magnifies games’ cultural significance. Along with players’ interaction with the computer hardware and the game environment, the interaction with other players within the game environment makes the gaming experience a communitarian event. Within this context, Schott and Kambouri (2006) argue, even solitary playing events can be social performances. Often sociability extends from the virtual reality of the game which mimics real life events, to the real world of the players. Gordon and Koo (2008) demonstrate that this can occur to the extent even of fostering civic engagement. Play theorists argue that amidst all the postmodernist transformations, play can be a “distinctive way of relating to the world, involving an assertive, creative,
and even defiant spirit” (Henricks, 2010, p. 31). A cultural approach borrows from other disciplines and in turn contributes a perspective to the wider social and cultural study of media in general. Hayot and Wesp (2004) in their study of Everquest identify video games as an important site for the articulation and experience of cultural value, of broader understandings of communities and what they mean, of time and its relation to individual lives, and of social alienation and its proffered solutions.

Engaging with these cultural dimensions of gaming has fostered a number of new approaches to and concerns in games research. These reflect a greater mutual openness towards context and generalizability and greater inter-disciplinary freedom to explore issues without being restricted to specific disciplinary definitional confinements and methodological rigidity. In doing so they link with the recent cultural turn in social science research which views media as relating and reflecting issues and events in the world, while serving to re-contextualise those events and issues for individuals through a process of reflexivity to indicate a range of alternative perspectives and interpretations (Jenson, 2002a, pp. 171-172). Taylor in a recent study (2009) has suggested that the gameplay experience is itself interdisciplinary, the result of the interrelations of various technological, sociological and cultural elements.

In a cultural approach one may adopt one or more mutually supporting and interrelated perspectives of viewing video games as text, space, practice, ritual, instructional medium, or as a psychological and an economical force (McAllister, 2004). Two aspects of this investigation of games as culture are considered particularly significant to this project.

One of those is through the lens of games as practice and culture, where digital games are understood as having the potential to establish sets of practices that provide a modality to human activity in creating reality.

The approach of viewing media as practice has been addressed in recent years by a number of scholars and researchers, where the key focus is to seek to understand not what media do to people, but what people do in relation to media (Rakow, 1999). In this approach, the value and meaning of games as cultural artefacts are best understood by

---

9 Reflexivity, an idea as described by Giddens, is a “general interpretive faculty that enables humans to ascribe meaning to their transactions with others, both in one’s most intimate relations and in encounters with institutions of political or religious authority” (Giddens 1984, p. 3; cited in Jenson, 2002b, p. 2).
understanding how they are produced and used for social relationships and cultural meaning rather than through their existence and character per se. (Ardevol et al., 2010; Couldry, 2004; Green, 2001; Malaby, 2007; Rutter & Bryce, 2006). For Pearce (2006), game-playing itself, not just the game, needs to be understood as a form of cultural production.

A significant part of the game experience is the opportunity to do and be within the game. Gamers generally enjoy the sense of being an agent in a rich and coherent game world (Krzywinska, 2006b; Squire, 2006). The possibility for transforming the nature of play by way of construction and manipulation of game avatars, architectural structures, weapons, and player-created artefacts will be topics for cultural study. So cultural researchers (Ang et al., 2010) have identified game characteristics such as the interaction of Extrinsic and Intrinsic Play, where players intrude their own play on the intrinsic play of the game. As modern games combine intertextual, cultural, and epistemological resonances in the gameplay experience, cultural studies have looked into several different dimensions of this extrinsic play: personal gameplay histories and how fantasy and pleasure are configured in the construction of realities and gameplay experience (Krzywinska, 2006b); identity and ‘fictive ethnicity’ tied to a specific virtual and fictional ‘locality’ (Pearce & Artemesia, 2008); cultural ‘colonization’ of a virtual world (Pearce, 2006); enacting a wedding engagement and marriage in a virtual world (Shim, 2010).

Games therefore have been studied as cultural spaces, and their characteristics variously speculated upon: not a utopian space but a space that “exists in the context of social time and material space” (Dovey & Kennedy, 2006, p. 29); as a ‘possibility space’ (Jenkins & Squire, 2002); or as spaces to “play in and play with” (Newman, 2004, p. 111).

A second significant understanding of games as a cultural phenomenon arises from their location within the wider social and cultural understanding of play.

Play is a common, universal, pervasive, and profound aspect of human behaviour and a critical element in the understanding of human nature, well-being, and self-consciousness. As digital interactive games have increased in popularity, scholars such as

---

10 *Avatar*, in video gaming, signifies player’s graphic representation, a character with which player moves around the world and do various activities. For a phenomenological explanation on avatar see Chapter on Myth in WoW, note 34.
Sutton-Smith (1997) and Salen and Zimmerman (2003) have re-explored earlier play theorists such as Johan Huizinga (1949) and Roger Caillois (1958) and have called their theories of play back into academic discourse.

Gameplay has deeper significances beyond the rules and algorithms of its programmed language as the locus where people expand and thicken a range of their own capabilities. In *Homo Ludens*, Huizinga (1949) argued that play precedes culture and in a certain sense is also superior to it. The dynamics of his concept of play consists in his emphasis of games not just as separate territories, but as ordered spheres characterized by special rules. Culture depends on play, and a spirit of play is essential to the development of culture. Most elements of culture – law and order, commerce and profit, craft and art, science and philosophy – are rooted on the principles of play. Although some critics are sceptical about Huizinga’s perception of play as a ‘culture-creating activity,’ they accept that his thesis raises questions about understanding how the new interactive technologies especially video games are “mechanically generated dramas that cast visions of the good (and bad) life and invite people to inhabit, sustain and negotiate places within those visions” (Henricks, 2010, p. 18). Though games stimulate “playful goals” of human life, according to Raessens (2006, p. 53) they “not only facilitate the construction of these playful identities but also advance the ludification of culture.” Caillois (1958) makes the distinction between “ludic” (rule-based) quality of events and the “playful” (spontaneous desires and impulses of players) quality. Apart from the social contest (agon) which Huizinga emphasised as play, there are other ways of engaging with the world playfully, as in activities featuring chance (alea), vertigo and balance (ilinx), and role play (mimesis) (Caillois, 1958, pp. 11-36).

Contemporary scholars suggest that it is not required to have all the ‘required’ elements present in all the games for a game to be a game.\(^\text{11}\) When Huizinga and Caillois were writing about play they could not have imagined the day when football and cricket would be played on a screen whilst sitting on a chair. They could hardly have thought that

---

\(^{11}\) The definition proposed by Juul has 6 features: 1) **Rules:** Games are rule-based. 2) **Variable, quantifiable outcome:** Games have variable, quantifiable outcomes. 3) **Value assigned to possible outcomes:** That the different potential outcomes of the game are assigned different values, some being positive, some being negative. 4) **Player effort:** That the player invests effort in order to influence the outcome. (i.e., games are challenging.) 5) **Player attached to outcome:** That the players are attached to the outcomes of the game in the sense that a player will be the winner and “happy” if a positive outcome happens, and loser and “unhappy” if a negative outcome happens. 6) **Negotiable consequences:** The same game [set of rules] can be played with or without real-life consequences. And the definition is: *A game is a rule-based formal system with a variable and quantifiable outcome, where different outcomes are assigned different values, the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome, the player feels attached to the outcome, and the consequences of the activity are optional and negotiable* (Juul, 2003).
one would play chess against a programmed and automated machine. They would never have fantasised that people sitting in four corners of the world could team up to play a single fantasy game.

Play may be understood as being both consummatory and transformative (Henricks, 2010). To see play as consummatory means that it is “cut off” from the regular events of the world in various ways where “participants focus on the meanings that are found inside events and “enjoy” themselves by confronting and resolving the tensions occasioned by the logics of those events”. To see play as transformative is to see it as a way of relating to the objects and processes of the world” (Henricks, 2010, p. 31).

An approach that views play as both an experiential dimension of games and a culturally contextual dimension of game-playing (Salen & Zimmerman, 2003) provides a fuller understanding of games and their significance in society. Sutton-Smith (1997, p. 17) differentiates these complementary elements as ‘intrinsic’ and ‘extrinsic,’ where ‘intrinsic’ refers to the game related motives for playing and how the rules structure our experience of the gameplay, and ‘extrinsic’ refers to the cultural values of play, how the game and game-playing relate to the cultural world which produces them in terms of their consummatory and transformative representation, ideology and pleasure. In their studies, Ang et al (2010, p. 364) have expanded on two forms of Extrinsic Play: Reflective Play, where players reflect on and externalize various aspects of intrinsic play through communication, sharing, and discussion, and Expansive Play where players transgress the original game boundary and transform or modify intrinsic play (in what Sotamaa (2007) calls ‘out-game rules’) to produce a new pattern of play that goes beyond the original game context.

In a cultural view, game studies go beyond a structuralist analysis of what is a game and the elements and representations of the game, to a view of game as a cultural, contextual, dynamic activity, within which players engage in the construction of meaning. This approach has not superseded the narratological or ludological approaches, but added new dimensions to them.

Recently those working from a narratological or ludological perspective reflect signs of accommodating other points of view as they recognise that taking on board wider dimensions of analysis can help build new disciplinary approaches (Henry Lowood,
or can create ‘hybrid forms’ (Frasca, 1999; Juul, 2005a). A number of recent studies reflect those with a narratological approach taking on board a cultural perspective tangentially (Harrigan & Wardrip-Fruin, 2007) or make their narratological studies more culturally placed (King & Krzywinska, 2006). From a narratological perspective, for example, studies are showing that narratives, because of their quality of ‘transposability’ (Chatman, 1978, p. 20; cited in Juul, 2003), can take different forms and offer different experiences when translated into another medium (Hansen, 2010). Similarly, according to Juul, enthusiastic ludologists now hold that games are a cultural form and are not dysfunctional in providing fiction. “Of all cultural forms that project a fictional world…

video games are probably unique in that it is meaningful to engage with a game while refusing to imagine the world that the game projects – the rules of a game are mostly sufficient to keep the player’s interest” (Juul, 2005b, p. 169). Players are found not always abiding by the rules of the game, but wishing to ‘play’ the way they want to experience and construct their own ‘stories’ and meaning. The game text therefore provides other cultural modalities such as orientational, presentational, and representational (Burn & Parker, 2003; see Kress & VanLeeuwen, 1996/2001) that are crucial in gameplay and meaning making. The representational dimensions of games, such as visual design, narrative, character, and the game ‘world’ are also “less specific to the games, and in many instances find their origins in other media” (Carr, Buckingham, Burn, & Schott, 2006, p. 180).

Since both the ‘fictive world’ of the game as well as the player’s experience of gameplay are integral to the understanding of the pleasures of play, and because the narratives generated and the social dynamics of play and meaning-making are products of culture, this study adopts a combined approach. It recognises that video games possess distinct ideological specialities and peculiar mechanics (Burn & Parker, 2003; see Kress & VanLeeuwen, 1996/2001) and it will employ a textual analysis methodology to identify the characteristics of the texts as they apply to a functional framework of religion. Because it is recognised also that digital games are cultural products and are played within the wider context of postmodern culture, a qualitative analysis of the significance of the game and its gameplaying within a cultural framework of religion also needs to be undertaken. Both the game text and its play dynamics and players’ perspectives on their gameplay experience and its significance in their lives will be examined.
B. World of Warcraft

The MMORPG game World of Warcraft has gained popular interest as well as academic attention in the recent past. Significant studies have come out on the cultural dimensions of WoW (Corneliussen & Rettberg, 2008; Nardi, 2010) as some scholars consider it to be a ‘civilization’ itself (Bainbridge, 2010). This section briefly describes World of Warcraft as well as its socio cultural significance in everyday life when the gaming industry is growing globally, particularly in Asia and India.

B.1. The Gaming Industry and World of Warcraft

Digital games offer compelling experiences from either the dimension of gameplay as well as the story line. The game narratives range from extremely simplistic to staggeringly complex while the gameplay experience enchants players to play either individually or collectively. They are designed to satisfy the psychological needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness in general, and immediacy, consistency, and density in particular (Rigby & Ryan, 2011). The industry also focuses on other human interests such as being a conqueror, or explorer; a director or achiever; a joker or storyteller; or a performer or craftsman (Klug & Schell, 2006). These forces inherent in gameplay experience attract many players to digital games which offer a simulated situation and controllability where the predictable rule system of the game and the unpredictable outcomes come into play (Klug & Schell, 2006).

Though the most important element of digital games is interactivity and control, visual and auditory features also appeal and attract people to immerse themselves in gameplay (B. P. Smith, 2006). The industry has grown to such levels today that game graphics, sounds, animations and interactive tools can reproduce and represent virtual situations of their real life counterparts. Even though older versions of games such as Grand Theft Auto (1997) and Warcraft: Orcs and Humans (1994) were not graphically satisfying, they nonetheless offered immense interactive possibilities. However, their later versions presented a graphically richer and more attractive content for the players. These 3-D environments thus enhance the possibilities of players to engage in a vibrant fantasy
world in a safe manner. Roleplaying games gratify this need of players (Klug & Schell, 2006).

Catering to the pleasures of people with varied interests through the development, maintenance and circulation of different genres in game was another aspect that has propelled the game industry. These games include sports, driving (or racing), simulation, strategy, roleplaying, shooter games and fighter games. Among them there are other sub categories such as action, adventure, action-adventure, first-person action and platform-action. There are also games based for example on music, puzzles, board games (B. P. Smith, 2006). Game designers generally explore the possibilities offered by technology or a story idea, or a game mechanism in designing games (Klug & Schell, 2006).

Digital games and especially MMORPGs attract more people as they offer a persistent and cohesive world to inhabit with immense possibilities for social life. WoW is considered to be one of the most popular massively multiplayer online roleplaying games (MMORPGs) having a large number of digital inhabitants, though there have been fluctuations in its market share. The popularity of WoW has fluctuated, with a record increase ($1.6 billion) in 2011 (Stuart, 2012) and slight falls generated by the new Apple and Android phenomena of gaming apps and other factors over the years (ActivisionBlizzard, 2013; Baker & Orr, 2012; Krawczyk, 2013)\textsuperscript{12} In July, 2013, the worldwide subscriber base for WoW was 7.7 million (Kain, 2013c), compared to a subscriber base of 9.6 million at December 31, 2012, and 10.2 million at March 31, 2012. Despite its chronic subscriber loss, WoW has managed to generate $213 million in micro-transaction sales in December 2013 (Superdata, 2014).

\textbf{B.1.a. Asian Scenario}

Asian countries have shown fairly high levels of interest in the gaming industry, as members of the educated young generation become avid consumers of digital games. Asia, especially South East Asia is becoming a strong market for online gaming. Blizzard has generated a significant revenue, and the fan base in South East Asian countries especially China (Caoili, 2012; Graft, 2011), Korea, Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore (Weber, 2011) in past years. Jin & Chee (2008) see games as agents of social, cultural and economical empowerment for the young generation in Korea.

\textsuperscript{12}
Cao and Downing have identified a Chinese affinity for PvP (Player versus Player) play characterized by community interaction, as it provides the opportunity for role-playing within a social hierarchy and for engaging in coordinated strategies or collective activities (Cao & Downing, 2008). A considerable share of the Asian game market is populated by what is called ‘player workers’ (Nakamura, 2009) or ‘playbours’ (R. Davis, 2009) who make their living by gold farming\(^{13}\) and game item trade. Thousands of Asian workers are playing in order to gold farm, and earning their living from it. Prisoners in China are reported to have been forced to play and earn virtual money which would be sold for real money by the authorities (Vincent, 2011). Sale of game accounts, avatars and game items was a growing industry when \(WoW\) and other online games were becoming popular, although such activities are prohibited by Blizzard. EBay used to be a big market for auctioning virtual materials for real money (Castronova, 2005; Musgrove, 2005) until they delisted all those items from their site (Terdiman, 2007).

In China the locally made online games raise challenges to games such as \(WoW\) whose popularity in China depended not on the cultural, but on the PvP features as well as the opportunity for collecting and trading with the highly valued game items (Cao & Downing, 2008). Blizzard had made efforts to appeal to South East Asian players with upgrades such as \(World of Warcraft: Mists of Pandaria\) (2012), which has South East Asian cultural themes and motifs, and yet they have experienced a decrease in subscriptions in these countries recently (Kain, 2013b). While the decline is attributed to the booming free-to-play games in China (Kain, 2013a), Activision-Blizzard may yet deliver new game content for \(WoW\) worldwide to further appeal to the gaming community (D. Lee, 2013; Starr, 2013) and may continue to improve upon the microtransaction business model (Superdata, 2013).

B.1.b. Indian Scenario

Play and games are part and parcel of Indian social and cultural life. Several of the world’s most popular board games including Ludo (or \(pachisi\)), Snakes and Ladders, and chess were conceived in the Indian subcontinent. Gaming with dice and the playing of board games have had a major role in Indian culture since at least the third millennium BCE. (Topsfield, 2006). During festive seasons people engage in traditional games and

\(^{13}\) Gold farming is playing a MMOG to acquire in-game currency that others purchase in exchange for real-world money. See (Castronova, 2001, 2002; Coleman & Dyer-Witheford, 2007; Freedman, 2008; Scott, 2007; Steinkuehler, 2006).
sports, popular among them are *Gilly danda*,\(^{14}\) *Kabaddi*\(^{15}\) (Craig, 2002), competitive kite flying, wrestling, hunting and polo. The colonial and postcolonial India however demonstrated an affinity for Western sports including cricket (Guttmann, 1994).

Today, the cultural interests of Indian youth are being transformed by the influence of fabulous Bollywood films and commercially played Cricket. Regional cinema and Bollywood films are part and parcel of the sociological and cultural landscape of India and are being studied as a significant cultural text which constitute a part of Indian cultural identity (Dudrah, 2006). The popularity of diasporic themes as well as the global reception of Bollywood movies (Desai, 2004; Dudrah, 2012) prove that these cultural artefacts of India can match the commercial and cultural products of the West (Tyrrell, 1999). Global television networks, mass-media coverage and multinational sponsors, have not only made cricket a big economic driving force of India but also catalysed nationalistic passion and positioned it central to modern India’s identity, culture and society (Bose, 2006). Cricket has been considered as a religion (Ugra, 2005) in India, a country where cricket players as well as film stars are worshiped as gods (Bhabhua, 2011; Jacob, 2009; Santhanam & Balasubramanian, 2009; Vijayakumar, 2012).

New media technologies and video games are perceived and used as educational tools in India (Kam, Kumar, Jain, Mathur, & Canny, 2009) and fascinating research has been done on designing games for classroom purposes, which balance fun and learning in their design (Kam et al., 2008) rather than perceiving them as individuated entertainment avenues. Research has demonstrated that unpredictable, unguided and unsupervised ‘playful’ situations can lead to digital literacy even for underprivileged and uneducated children and the youth in India (Mitra & Rana, 2001). This has been a dominant model for mass media in India as it was envisioned, developed and promoted predominantly for development\(^{16}\) and educational purposes (Bhatnagar & Schware, 2000; Rani, 2006; Rasool, 2012) in an independent India, a model which is purposeful and persuasive and

\(^{14}\) *Gilli Danda* is a sort of cricket played with a two wooden sticks one of which is a 10 inch piece used instead of a ball. It is known differently in local vernacular languages, although the game remains more or less same across Indian states (Craig, 2002).

\(^{15}\) *Kabaddi* is an ancient game of team tag that is now played under formalised rules with a field of specific dimension (Craig, 2002).

\(^{16}\) Development communication model in India is defined as “the art and science of human communication applied to the speedy transformation of a country and the mass of its people form poverty to a dynamic state of economic growth that makes possible greater social equality and the larger fulfilment of the human potential. See (Gupta, 1999, p. 94).
aimed at bringing about adaptation and behavioural changes (Gupta, 1999) until the early 1990s when electronic media were privatised.

Globalising tendencies, however, are slowly changing the mindset and culture of young Indians (Hazarika & Garg, 1995) who have embraced digital gaming already whether they play personal computers or in their digital online mobile devices; at home or public video games centres or even while travelling. With various recent initiatives from the past governments, technology departments, IT industry, and universities, India has managed to narrow the gap of the digital divide (Rao, 2005; Singh, 2010). The Internet and Mobile Association of India Internet reports that the number of Internet users in India has reached 205 million in October 2013 (IAMAI, 2013). Internet has been mostly accessed on mobile phones with the 2G network, while 3G is catching up (Wagstaff & Yee, 2013). The Internet use is also increasing in rural parts of India irrespective of cultural and gender barriers (Best & Maier, 2007). School-going rural children are found to be more intuitive and to engage better with digital games that have traditional content than foreign (Kam, Mathur, Kumar, & Canny, 2009).

The growing entertainment and gaming culture in India raises many questions about popular cultural transformations (Nagarajan, 2001). The recent success of the online game The Great Indian Parking Wars, which is the game version of the Bollywood blockbuster film Kahaani is an example. It captured 50,000 hits within the first 10 days of its launch among online gamers (IANS, 2012). Websites such as Zapak.com and Cartoonnetworkindia.com provide a number of online games including Ben 10 (Cartoon Network), which is extremely popular amongst children in India. (DeMott, 2010). Partnerships of various entertainment sectors creating specific games based on movies and other local cultural content are growing at a fast pace in India (pcmag.com, 2009). A large number of young people play games in public game parlours, which are specially set up cafes with many computers with internet facility where young players pay per hour that they play. Zapak whose chain is spread around the country is an example.

Though WoW has been played in India since at least 2006 the game market in India has not yet caught up with the pace of the global market. Young Indians may take some time to culturally relate to foreign games and their themes as well as their iconography. The rising graph of online market share in these societies indexes the ‘recentering’ of online games in the geo-cultural market of Asia where Korea and China take the lead.
Virtually Religious: Myth, Ritual and Community in World of Warcraft – Literature Review | Jose Vallikatt

(Cao & Downing, 2008). With its cultural peculiarities and orientations India not only presents a large market for the gaming industry and culture but also for qualitative research on the gaming industry in India.

**B.2. World of Warcraft: A Description**

*World of Warcraft*, which is popularly known as *WoW* among players and fans, is a MMORPG designed and produced by Blizzard Entertainment. *WoW* can be considered as the digital interactive version of the pen-and-paper role-playing games such as *Dungeons & Dragons* (Fine, 1983). But technically it is a MMORPG. It is played ‘massively’ because the game allows ‘thousands of players in the same game world at the same time, interacting with each other.’ The game can be classified as ‘role playing’ (RP), because everyone plays the role of a unique character in a persistent online world; as well as ‘real time strategy’ (RTS) where the participants position and manoeuvre units and structures under their control to secure areas of the map and/or destroy their opponents’ assets

(Towle, 2007). Unlike other games, *WoW* is played online connected with a number of people through the Internet because it is an online virtual world shared with other players. Technologically, *WoW* is thus a cluster of entities, concepts, lingo and practices, evolved out of the early text-based Multi-User Dungeons (Mortensen, 2006), and interactional practices borrowed from Internet Relay Chat (IRC) and Instant Messaging (IM) (Ducheneaut & Moore, 2005). It is a game, a virtual world, and an online community (Krzywinska & Lowood, 2006).

**B.2.a. The Narrative World**

From a narrative point of view *WoW* tells a compelling story. The game is set in and around the world of Azeroth, a high fantasy world. The game is focused on the human nations which make up the Eastern Kingdoms, and the Orcish Horde which arrived in Azeroth via a dark portal, beginning the great wars. The Orcs arrived from another world, referred to as Draenor or Outland, a world which will be shattered to pieces by demonic magic during the events of *Warcraft II*. Various versions and updates of the game are

---

17 **Role Playing Games** (RPG) – This genre focuses on an individual or a small party of individuals. In this genre, a party of characters must progress through the story and grow stronger (level up) in order to achieve victory over whatever foes assail them. Character customization, development and advancement are vital. **Real Time Strategy** (RTS) – this genre allows the player to command vast armies, whether in an ancient medieval, fantasy or futuristic setting. This game will almost always incorporate resource management and gathering, base construction and building armies. The player must then make strategic choices as to where to spend the resources that have been gathered. For more details see (Towle, 2007, pp. 3-7).
released by Blizzard building on existing content. A list of the versions and updates is given in Appendix 1. All these versions share the same mythical universe called Azeroth and its history. *WoW* is the fourth version of the game first introduced as *Warcraft: Orcs & Humans* in 1994. *Warcraft: Orcs & Humans* is the first real-time strategy game series of *Warcraft* games which allowed opposing players to command virtual armies in battle against each other or a computer-controlled enemy.

In *Warcraft II* (1995) one side represents the human inhabitants of Lordaeron and allied races, and the other controls the invading Orcs and their allied races. Each side tries to destroy the other by collecting resources and creating an army. The game is played in a medieval setting with fantasy elements. This was followed by two expansions namely *Warcraft II: Beyond the Dark Portal* and *Warcraft II: Battle.net Edition* respectively in 1996 and 1999.

*Warcraft III: Reign of Chaos*, which was released in 2002 tells the story of many years before the events of the games, a demon army known as the Burning Legion intent on Azeroth’s destruction corrupted a race called the Orcs, and sent them through a portal to attack Azeroth. After many years of fighting, the Orcs were defeated by a coalition of humans, dwarves and elves known as the Alliance; the surviving combatants were herded into internment camps, where they seemed to lose their lust for battle. With no common enemy, a period of peace followed, but the Alliance began to fracture. The events of *Warcraft III* occur after a time skip from *Warcraft II*. This was followed by an expansion named *Warcraft III: The Frozen Throne* in 2003.

The first online version of the game was released in 2004 named *World of Warcraft*. Thousands of players could interact and play with and against each other in this version. Those players who were familiar with the previous versions could follow the storyline and narrative as this version just followed the setting and history of the world of Azeroth from previous versions. The game features three continents on the world of Azeroth. In the following expansion namely *The Burning Crusade* (2007) we see the return of the “Burning Legion,” a vast army of demons being one of the main antagonist forces in the Warcraft-universe and whose last invasion was defeated in *Warcraft III: Reign of Chaos*. Two new playable races were added in it. The level cap was raised by ten, making it 70.

---

A whole new planet, Outland, was released, with associated quests, dungeons, raids, zones, creatures, and cities.\textsuperscript{20}

The next version \textit{World of Warcraft: Wrath of the Lich King} (2008) included Northrend having snow covered scenic locales and featured eight zones with content for levels beginning at 68, though players of lower level also could travel there.\textsuperscript{21} In 2010 Blizzard released \textit{Cataclysm}, which narrates the return of the evil dragon Deathwing. Last seen in \textit{Warcraft II}, which took place over a decade before, Deathwing’s return tears through the dimensional barrier within Azeroth, causing a sweeping cataclysm that reshapes much of the world’s surface. In this version Blizzard made some political changes within the character structure of Horde and Alliance.\textsuperscript{22} The latest expansion released in 2012 namely \textit{World of Warcraft: Mists of Pandaria} includes a new continent called Pandaria located to the south of the Eastern Kingdoms and Kalimdor. \textit{Mists of Pandaria} has South East Asian geographies and cultural themes and players can level up from 85 to 90. It introduced a new character class, the Monk, along with a new playable race, the Pandaren.\textsuperscript{23}

\textbf{B.2.b. Gameplay}

To play the game one has to create an avatar, a graphic representation of the player’s character with which s/he plays and does other activities in the game. Players can choose to play for either of two factions namely Horde and Alliance at any one time. Choosing a faction affects a player’s experience significantly. In the latest version \textit{Mists of Pandaria} players can choose from thirteen different playable races divided between these factions. Races in the Alliance faction are Human, Dwarf, Night Elf, Gnome, Draenei, and Worgen, and in the Horde faction they are Orc, Undead, Troll, Tauren, Blood Elf, and Goblin. For newer expansions Blizzard keeps adding new races, zones and other features with special characteristics. Ducheneaut et al. have observed that the majority of players prefer playing races that conform to highly stereotypical canons of beauty as well as playing for the “good” side (the Alliance) than for their “evil” counterpart (the Horde) though each faction is “morally ambiguous” (Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell, & Moore, 2006, p. 315).

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{20} Source: http://us.blizzard.com/en-us/games/wrath/
\textsuperscript{21} Source: http://us.blizzard.com/en-us/games/wrath/
\textsuperscript{22} Source: http://sea.blizzard.com/en-sg/games/cataclysm/
\textsuperscript{23} Source: http://eu.battle.net/wow/en/game/mists-of-pandaria/
\end{flushleft}
Each of these races has unique traits. From these races the gamer can choose any of the ten available classes. Warriors are the toughest fighters; Hunters are the ranging attackers who are privileged with a loyal pet and movement restricting spells; a Mage is master of powerful mystic energies; Priests, the spell casters; a Rogue the most lethal character who relies on stealth for protection and speed rather than armour; Druids have healing abilities; Shaman are the spiritual adviser of the Horde. There are also hybrid classes such as Paladins made of combining two or more of these general abilities. Paladins are the virtuous defenders of the weak made up of a combination of elements of a Warrior and a Priest. Some abilities of the classes are innate, but not all abilities are available at the beginning of play. These abilities for example skills or spells can be acquired or learnt as the players advance with higher levels.

Players can fight dangerous creatures and explore WoW’s continents alone or in a team while undertaking quests. However, advanced raids can only be done in groups
called guilds. The game allows players to form temporary parties of up to 5 people to tackle the most difficult quests and “raid groups” of up to 40 people for high-end “instances” called dungeons\(^\text{24}\) (Nardi & Justin, 2006). Players form guilds in WoW, which are more permanent form of association than the temporary quest groups (Pisan, 2007). A guild is a collection of players who have joined together to create a mutually beneficial relationship with each other (Blizzard, 2004b). Though raiding is a primary objective of forming guilds, the nature of guilds can vary according to the subculture motives, as there exist social guilds, PvP guilds, raid guilds, and role-play guilds. Social guilds sets their goal of social interaction occurring during the game, as opposed to a PvP guild that sets their primary goal of battling with the other faction. Raiding guilds focus on organising 40-member team events of raiding the dungeons that will take a play session of 2 to 8 hours, which is managed by a raid leader coordinating other players who carry out their specific roles. Role-play guilds work on all these levels pretending to truly be their characters. Whether their goal is to PvP, socialize, or raid, these players prefer to play their character forgetting their real-world identity (D. Williams, Ducheneaut, Xiong, Yee, & Nickell, 2006).

Completing quests and killing “mobs” (monsters) gains “experience points” and leads to higher levels progressively (90 is the current maximum), improving the abilities of their avatar and acquiring powerful items along the way. However, guilds not only help to fulfil game objectives but also provide opportunities for learning social skills such as socializing with others including strangers, managing and coordinating a small group, cooperating and collaborating in sociable interaction with the group members (Ducheneaut & Moore, 2005). Graphically, a guild allows its members to differentiate themselves from others with a “guild tag” below their name and by wearing a custom “tabard” (a shirt with a colour and icon selected by the guild officers).

Guilds also have access to a private group chat channel shared between the members. They are usually described as the place where most of a player’s important relationships are formed and player’s social experience is framed (Nardi, Ly, & Harris, 2007). In the community play each individual contributes to the shared experience, and develops efficient communication channels for coordinated play. This requires trusting other

\(^{24}\) Dungeons in WoW refers to an underground adventuring area. There are two types of dungeons in WoW namely micro dungeons and world dungeons depending on the size and grander. These areas, (also known as instanced zones) where guilds and parties have more personal experience, exploring, adventuring, or completing quests.
players in the group. Good communication and coordination are necessary for a team to succeed which is possible only when every player fulfils their specialized roles (Chen, 2008).

B.2.c. **Servers and Geography**

Players interact with the game and other players through an interface similar to that of other online games. Several rows of buttons at the bottom and sides allow players to perform game-related actions such as casting spells or turning on special abilities as well as to know the current status of the avatar in terms of strength, agility, stamina and so on. Players communicate with each other by typing text in the chat box or through an attached microphone. There are various channels available such as private, group chat, guild chat, “spatial” chat (heard by all players within a certain radius), and finally “zone chat,” which reaches all the players in a given zone of the game (Ducheneaut et al., 2006). *Wow* has a structure of providing incentives and rewards, which is a motivation for players. It has a structure of flow in play for players with challenges increasing gradually and rewards always in sight (Ducheneaut et al., 2006).

There are three types of servers each of which can host a community of about 20,000 players (Ducheneaut et al., 2006). On player-versus-player (PvP) servers, players can attack members of the opposing faction at will. On player-versus-environment (PvE) servers, mutual combat is consensual, and players must switch on a “PvP flag” to signal their intentions and enable other players to attack them (Ducheneaut et al., 2006). The ability to attack without warning the opponent in PvP servers engages the pleasures of the players by balancing the fictional and mythic reality of *Wow* and ludic activity of the players. Characters cannot communicate across factions on all servers. The only way to communicate across factions is through gestures (e.g., “smile,” “wave”). The third server type is role-playing (RP) for players who prefer to “stay in character” during the game.

In every server players get the world of Azeroth divided into continents and subdivided into zones. Players can travel freely across these zones, either on foot or by using various forms of public transportation (e.g., boats, trains). However, each zone is home to creatures of a particular level range and could prove deadly to lower-level players. Each race has a capital city (e.g., Ironforge for the dwarves) that plays an important role as a transportation hub and place of commerce (Blizzard, 2004b). Capitals also host an auction house and bank where players can exchange money and trade objects.
in an open market (Ducheneaut et al., 2006). Blizzard adds a couple of races to each expansion of the game and creatively knitting their history to the mythology of WoW, and allowing guilds for PvP combat a culture is formed around the game world of WoW.

C. Games and Religion

C.1. The Question of Religion

A study whose aim is to investigate the religious dimensions or significance of digital video games, or a specific game in particular, needs first to address the vexed issue of what is meant by religion. It is a vexed issue first because of the difficulties there are in finding a common scholarly opinion on or definition of what religion is and secondly because of the ideological and political issues surrounding religion in the context of modern secularisation thinking and practice. Despite a widely recognised resurgence of religion both culturally (de Vries, 2001) as a media concern (Hoover, 2006), and politically following September 11, 2001 (Lincoln, 2003; Sharma, 2009), religion as a concept as well as a practice remains problematic.

Some see an all-encompassing and universally accepted definition of religion as impossible to formulate (Braun, 2000, p. 4; Weber, 1963, p. 1) or, as Jonathan Smith (1998) suggests only slightly more optimistically, as not indefinable but extremely complex. Others, such as David Tracy, see the problem as rooted in the phenomenon of religion itself: “religion radicalizes, intensifies, and often transgresses the boundaries of those other central human phenomena [like art, science, metaphysics, ethics, politics] to which religion is necessarily related” (1984, p. 289). The problem of religion then is predominantly a problem of differentiation.

Defining religion is also complicated by the political context of secularisation, where the phenomena that were recognized as legitimately belonging to the concept of religion have now been filtered through the political lens which contains the power of religious institutions politically, socially and intellectually. According to Horsfield (2012), the necessity of defining religion in the widely practised research area of the social sciences, was part of the political secularisation project of restricting the social power of religion by limiting that which was recognised as a part of the phenomenon (see also Stark & Bainbridge, 1985). Consequently, as Horsfield (2012) notes, religion and its related
aspects have to be justified for every new research project in a way that is not required to the same extent in study of other social phenomena.

For a project that seeks to identify potential religious aspects of a popular secular game that makes no claim to be religious, defining religion thus becomes a challenging task, for the following reasons. First and foremost it is inherently a complex and multi-layered phenomenon. The desire to contain all religious phenomena in one single definition leads to the danger of excluding many aspects and dimensions of social reality pertinent to religion. It also constrains a holistic understanding of the broad phenomenon of religion by delimiting it to a single notion that has originated or evolved in specific cultures. Secondly, the available social scientific definitions of religion suffer from cultural and ideological bias. Theorists most often perceive religion from their own cultural perspective and try to analyse its functions to see if those cultural systems would perform similar functions in theirs. We need to recognise, with Dobbleaere and Lauwers, that available definitions of religion are productions of a historical process formulated within the positions and cultural context of the proponents (Dobbelaere & Lauwers, 1973). Thirdly, it is problematic because of the character of religion itself to subject to reductionist definitions and not able to be fully understood by rational scrutiny alone (Hoover, 2002b, p. 25).

A number of classic definitions of religion offer themselves as possible candidates. The Substantive approach defines religion as what it is. Early understandings of religion put forward by scholars such as Frazer (1959) and Tylor (1958/1970) fall into this category. Substantive definitions find religion as “a matter of beliefs, of ideas that people develop to account for what they find in the world” (Pals, 1996, p. 45). They produce a concept of religion marked by its external phenomena, a canon of institutionalised religions marked by common elements such as sacred texts, space, rituals, material objects and personnel. The Phenomenological approach looks more to the characteristics of the religious experience, accessed through “empathic engagement with the lived experience and perceptions of people in relation to religion and the sacred” (Lynch, 2007b, p. 128). A phenomenological approach opens up the scope to include modern myths including the ones in popular cultures within their definition. Aspects of Eliade’s exposition of religion fall into this category (Eliade, 1963; Eliade & Trask, 1959). A third major approach is the Functional, reflected in the work of scholars such as Durkheim
(1912) and Yinger (1970), where religion is understood in terms of what it accomplishes for the social or individual context in which it occurs, or in terms of the use to which it is put (Arnal, 2000). Commonly identified functions of religion are rites, shared beliefs, and organized groups.

While these approaches have been effective in the study of a range of social phenomena commonly called religious, they are restricted in dealing with the whole range of potentially religious phenomena because of the limitations of their focus and the ideological interests behind those foci. The strong emphasis on empirical data limits their capacity to deal with non-substantial aspects of religion, and their emphasis on the social formations and practices of religion limit their capacity to deal adequately with non-institutional phenomena such as new forms of spirituality, new age religions and non-theistic religions or ephemeral concerns. Similarly, functional definitions are sufficiently flexible to include socio-cultural systems and practices that serve what could be understood as so-called religious functions that fall far outside the conventional canon of religions (Lynch, 2007a), but they lack the discrimination to differentiate between such de facto religious functions and more general mundane cultural activity.

More recently a number of different approaches have been proposed to address some of these deficiencies of the classical definitions. Lynch looks to a revival of Durkheim’s concept of the sacred, but applied to the quality of a relationship rather than a separated artefact or practice:

> The sacred is an object defined by a particular quality of human thought, feeling and behaviour in which it is regarded as a grounding or ultimate source of power, identity, meaning and truth. This quality of human attention to the sacred object is constructed and mediated through particular social relations, and cultural practices and resources. Religions are social and cultural systems, which are oriented towards sacred objects (Lynch, 2007a, p. 138)

A similar perspective is reflected in Taves’ recent work, Religious experience reconsidered, where she uses the concept of “special things” to identify a quality of separateness (Taves, 2009).

Another recent approach to thinking about religious phenomena is that proposed by Birgit Meyer in the context of religion and mediation, with religion being understood as “sensational forms,” where everyday artefacts and sensory practices such as images,
dress, spaces, routines, and various sensory practices evoke and structure experiences of the transcendental (Meyer, 2006, p. 20).

The strength of these two more recent approaches is that they offer more flexible perspectives for accessing aspects of contemporary religious experience and practice that the earlier definitions bypassed, particularly the phenomena of declared religious or spiritual concerns and experience becoming separated from institutionalised forms and dogmas of religions and building more individual and syncretistic systems of spirituality drawn by individually accessed media resources (Lynch, 2007a). A number of scholars (Bloch, 1998; Lee, 2008) in recent years have identified this relationship of media and culture as a significant shift in the nature of social religiosity.

While these two recent approaches offer this potential, they share the characteristics of those earlier definitions, of having strength in particular areas but weaknesses in others. In particular, the openness of their inclusiveness to accommodate a wider variety of sites, beliefs and practices of potential religious significance, leave them vulnerable to a criticism of lacking sufficient definition to differentiate between phenomena that may be a specific new religious form or expression, or simply an artistic, sentimental or experiential one.

The lack of an authoritative single definition of religion across disciplines creates a situation where there is a good deal of freedom on the part of individual researchers to choose which approach is best to take for the particular research purposes in mind. This study will follow a functional definition.

C.2. Media, Religion and Culture

Though it was widely perceived that there had been a significant decline in the prevalence and social influence of religion through the modern period and many scholars advocated this perception (Bruce, 1996 for example has been a strong proponent of this view), others advocated that religion remained of significant personal interest and a significant social influence (e.g. Buddenbaum & Daniel, 1996; Clark, 2007; de Vries, 2001; Horsfield et al., 2004; Mitchell & Marriage, 2003; Morgan, 2005, 2008c). For some, the perception was a self-reinforcing position, with such things as the intellectual exclusion of religion from cultural studies (Stolow, 2005) reflecting a political position of
ignoring religion or hesitating to ascribe legitimacy to it to support an agenda of the secularisation project (Horsfield, 2012; Stark & Bainbridge, 1985).

What has become apparent, however, is that in recent decades the social expression and structures of religion have changed markedly, with a decline in traditional institutional control and determination of religion and an increase in individuals asserting their authority and autonomy in charting their own religious and spiritual lives (Hoover, 2006, pp. 35-38). There has been a growing recognition over the past few decades that these changes in the character and structures of social religiosity are closely connected with changes in the social structures of media. Building on the earlier work of media theorists such as McLuhan and Ong (McLuhan, 1966; Ong, 1982), and their identification of the place of media in the transformation of human cultures, the perception has grown that media are influential also in the transformation of the social institution of religion by such mechanism as decentralising power from institutions to individual media users (Horsfield, 2004) or, as Martin-Barbero (1997, p. 112) has advocated, by “the transformation of modernity into enchantment by linking new communication technologies to the logic of popular religiosity.”

It has been recognised that earlier social research into religion and media, which focused primarily on the media activities of religious institutions, may be insufficient to investigate these transformations in social religiosity through the revival of strongly media-based popular religiosity. Through scholarly collaboration a new paradigm has emerged in the past few decades that sets its focus not on the activities of religious institutions or those that belong to them, but in the intersections of media, religion and culture as they “intermingle and collide in the cultural experience of media audiences” (Hoover, 2006, p. 1).

The approach draws on the work of Clifford Geertz (1973b) and his understanding of culture as a system of symbols with specific meanings, moods and motivations that “induce dispositions in human beings and formulate… general ideas of order” (Geertz, 1973b, p. 98). These symbols, or cultural patterns “lie outside the boundaries of the individual organism…. (and provide) programs for the institution of the social and psychological processes which shape public behaviour” (Geertz, 1973b, p. 92).
A cultural activity becomes religious when one sees it “as symbolic of some transcendent truths” (Geertz, 1973b, p. 98). Religion provides meanings to formulate a conception of the overall shape of reality and powerful symbolic resources for expressing emotions, comprehending the world and enduring it.

Drawing on Geertz’s understanding of religion as a system of symbols that provides its believers with a coherent and communal understanding or valuation of life, scholars in the field of media religion and culture have developed the idea of media as playing a central role in providing the “symbolic resources” through which people make meaning out of social worlds in which “religion and spirituality are important parts” (Geertz, 1973b, pp. 98-104). Hoover develops this concept of the interrelatedness of media and religion by advocating that “religion and media occupy the same spaces, serve many of the same purposes, and invigorate the same practices in late modernity because of their technological ability to transcend time and space” (Hoover, 2006, p. 9).

A view that argues that religion and media now occupy the same spaces and argues for a research approach that investigates this symbiosis challenges the binary opposition between sacred and secular that has been part of religious discourse in the West during the modern period. Much of the scholarly work on the process and critique of secularisation addresses this binary notion (Hadden, 1987; Stark & Bainbridge, 1985). Whereas in many Eastern religious practices (such as some Hindu and other religious practices for example (Raj & Dempsey, 2010b; Srinivas, 2004, 2010)) the distinction between the sacred and secular is very much blurred because of the relative popular understanding of the sacred and the significance given to it (Vidyarthi, Jha, & Saraswati, 1979), in the West understanding has been strongly shaped by Durkheim (1912), who built his understanding of religion on the notion of the sacred, the distinguishing factor that separates the natural order of things from supernatural. Sociological and anthropological approaches have assessed the ‘sacred’ as a separate category of value which any group creates within its cognitive boundaries and by which it categorises itself as distinct from others (Anttonen, 2000).

---

25 Geertz defines religion as (1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic (Geertz, 1973a, p. 90).
In the media religion and culture approach there is greater openness to the view that religion should be understood as expressed and experienced rather than as ascribed (Hoover, 2002a). The core of the culturalist theorisation of media and religion is that it tries to understand religion *emic*ly, in terms of what people themselves think, as well as *etic*ally, how the researcher sees it (Hoover, 2006). This means being prepared to view religion in the broadest possible terms – as it is expressed, practiced, and experienced by people themselves – and struggling with the definitional and differentiation issues that involves. This is reflected in a recognition that the aspiration for the sacred can find expression in a variety of ways, including in mediated experiences that are not overtly religious (Goethals, 1997; Martin-Barbero, 1997; O’Leary, 1996). Respecting the flag, paying homage to a fallen soldier, televisualing the rituals related to the life of national heroes and celebrities, the presentation of mythology of the past in the inaugural or closing ceremonies of mega events such as the Olympics can be seen as examples of sacralising the secular (Lundby, 1997). It reflects more the view of Eliade that “the modern man (sic) who feels and claims that he is nonreligious still retains a large stock of camouflaged myths and degenerated rituals” (Eliade & Trask, 1959, pp. 204-205, italics added).

The media religion and culture approach has focused to a large extent on how new media have helped shape popular religions, in expressions that are more concerned with consumerism, celebrity, and community than with theology or authority: juxtaposing religious materials with non-religious objects (Pike, 2008), erecting roadside shrines and day of the dead altars (Marchi, 2007), putting up virtual memorials and pages celebrating joy and grief in online spaces, the production and circulation of popular religious imagery (Morgan, 2007), and doing virtual pilgrimage (MacWilliams, 2002).

In some studies of religion in the digital world, the dichotomy of sacred and secular is almost unrecognisable. Rachel Wagner, who employs Eliadean concepts of the sacred, perceives virtual worlds as hierophany (as manifestation of the sacred). The “virtual sacred” Wagner argues are “deliberate manifestations of the human self projected outward, blended with the dreams of others, mashed up, modded, prodded, and cycled back to us for further transformation” (Wagner, 2012a, p. 97). This tendency, some writers argue, stems from a genuine desire for deliverance from the pitfalls of secular living, leading Ruf (2007, pp. 256-271) to suggest that exploration of religion and
religious talk in the postmodern age has to be free from “contamination of metaphysical confusion” and the “clutches of secular thought”.

Such an approach does raise the differentiation question identified in the earlier section: if one departs from a binary definition, what then is the sacred and how does one distinguish it? Robert White (1997) argues that the sacred and the secular are “two autonomies but interdependent discourses.” Because the category of the sacred is a construction that draws its meaning from the construction of a category of the human, the two encourage a “continual mutual affirmation in which the sacred evokes the secular and the secular evokes the sacred” (White, 1997, p. 40). Lynch, who has addressed himself to rethinking the concept of the sacred in a secular environment, advocates a way of thinking that reduces the separation of the two. He advocates that “the sacred is encountered in and through culture, not in some privatised, mystical space that is separate from it” and differentiates them not on the basis of sites, locations or material, but quality: “The sacred is an object defined by a particular quality of human thought, feeling and behaviour” (Lynch, 2007a, p. 137). Contemporary scholarship in media religion and popular culture is marked by the premise that religious experience is constructed through engagement with particular cultural practices, including media practices, not separate from them in a defined sacred domain.

C.3. Research into Religion and Gaming

Religion has been a fascinating theme for video game developers. Medieval mythologies and worldviews have been extensively used in many video games to create immersive gameplay and a cohesive environment in many MMORPGs (Gregory, 2014; Krzywinska, 2006a, 2008). In games such as Isles of Derek (VirtueGames, 2005), and Left Behind: Eternal Forces (Jenkins, LaHaye, & Left Behind Games, 2006) and its two sequels, Tribulation Forces (2007) and Rise of the Antichrist (2010), people play with explicitly religious themes. Dante’s Inferno (Visceral_Games, 2010) sets a virtual world of afterlife as created by the 13th century Italian poet Dante Alighieri and looks at Christianity through medieval spectacles. Players can engage with religions of the Greek mythology in God of War (Santa_Monica_Studio, 2005) and in Black and White (Lionhead, 2001) one can play God oneself and gain worshippers. These are only few examples of games that deal with religion directly.
On the other hand there are some virtual environments, including games, that do not have a direct treatment of religious themes but carry religious undertones. Virtual environments such as *Second Life* and games like *World of Warcraft*, *Dead Space* and *Assassin’s Creed* employ a lot of religious themes in constructing the game content and scenarios (see Bainbridge, 2010; Radde-Antweiler, 2008; Wagner, 2011, 2012b).

Scholars in recent years have identified that a prominent space has been established for religious themes in online environments, including digital games (Campbell, 2010). Campbell and Grieve (2014, forthcoming), and are exploring the increasingly complex relationship between gaming and global religious practices. Questions raised include: How does religion help organize the communities in MMORPGs such as *World of Warcraft*? How do religious groups such as evangelical Christians react to violence, gore, and sexuality in some of the most popular games such as *Mass Effect* or *Grand Theft Auto*?

C.3.a. Online Religion

A significant body of research materials are available relating to religious studies aspects of new media technologies (See for example Cowan & Hadden, 2000; Højsgaard & Warburg, 2005; Wertheim, 2000; Zaleski, 1997). Earlier studies on religious aspects in the online world distinguish between two phenomenal practices in the online world, namely *online religion* and *religion online*. When online avenues serve as a space for people to participate in religious activities it can be called *online religion*, whereas *religion online* is a space where people acquire information about religion. This categorisation was primarily drawn on the basis of the level of interactivity offered by religious websites of official as well as unofficial religious institutions (Young, 2004). In this context Rosalind Hackett (2006) challenges the prevailing notion about the Internet as a communication and information tool, expanding its various interactive religious uses such as practising, experiencing, proselytising, seeking, advocating, commodifying as well as healing and problem solving. Today it is found that even traditional religious groups synthesise an information zone and an interaction zone in their sites whereby the boundary of the categorisation above is blurred to a certain extent (Helland, 2005).

Brenda Brasher (2004) has illustrated how the traditional sacred space such as a temple or a church is giving way to Internet based interactive screen spaces, in which postmodern generations prefer to explore and express religion. Earlier studies on religious
aspects of media revolved around the religious activities on the Internet such as the sacred
dimensions of cyberspace (O'Leary, 1996), potential possibilities of exploring faith in
Internet technologies (Casey, 2001) as well as the nature of popular religiosity in
cyberspace (Helland, 2004). While much of the volume of studies deal with religious
aspects from a Christian perspective (Howard, 2009; Hutchings, 2010; Miczek, 2008;
Zijderfeld, 2010) there are specific studies about new media influences on Hinduism
(Helland, 2010; Herman, 2010; Karapanagiotis, 2010; Rinehart, 2004; Scheifinger, 2010),
Islam (Bunt, 2004; Larsson, 2011), Buddhism (Connelly, 2010; Hershock, 1999; Prebish,
2004), Sikhism (Jakobsh, 2006), as well as on new religious ideologies (Dawson &
Hennebry, 2004; Martinkova, 2008) and practices (Fernback, 2002). Studies within this
area have proposed that practising religion within new media technologies has facilitated
individual freedom and raised significant questions about institutional control of religion
(H. Campbell, 2005b; Howard, 2009).

C.3.b. Myth Studies of the Online World

Game designers have exploited mythological themes largely in constructing the story
for games. Elements of myths play a great role in the narrative progression as well as
creating the nuances of gameplay (Krzywinska, 2008; Stern, 2002). For example myths
in *World of Warcraft* create the illusion of a coherent world as well as providing a
rationale for the way each player-character is (Krzywinska, 2005). While traditional
(textual) virtual worlds were built on mythic history consisting of fascinating locales,
monsters, prodigies, and supernatural beings, the digital game space in itself is seen as a
“mythic space,” where myths are conceived of as being located on a different
(metaphysical) plane of reality whose rules are different from those of everyday life. As
they are imagined to be located far away the player needs some devices to reach them
(Bittarello, 2008). Online game avenues such as WoW provide such a mythical space
where players can access a coherent world aided by technology and mythic iconography
where they can interact with other mythic characters, locales and events. These factors
create an almost real world for the player. Thus as Bittarello (2008) argues, cyberspace is
not simply a simulacrum or a false copy of reality, but something that has always been
expressed through various media. Cyberspace thus can be seen as providing a
‘metaphysical space’ for the postmodern generation (Wertheim, 2000).
While helping to create the virtual world, the mythic elements also construct worldviews for players. The mythic history in the game constructs the world and worldview for players while they have something constructive to contribute to that history as they play. The role-play allows players to take on roles in that history and move through it with the help of the avatar they represent. An avatar, which is an alter ego or a persona of the player (Bartle, 2003), offers a sense of synthesis of really being there in the game world (Eladhari, 2007). Some scholars consider the “use of virtual avatar in a game as a ‘spirit in a material (causal) world’ and holds that these virtual forms reinforce a player’s self representation of their physical form as much as of their non-material mind” (Highland & Yu, 2008, p. 280). It is fascinating that many games centre on themes such as life, death, and rebirth, destiny and ‘karma.’ As Castronova comments, “synthetic worlds have begun to offer a new mythology. Perhaps this mythology will eventually be successful, credible, even sublime, so that we will find ourselves in an Age of Wonder” (Castronova, 2005, p. 276)

C.3.c. Ritual Studies of the Online World

Online avenues including digital games, because of their inherent dynamics, work on a number of ritual practices. A number of studies deal with the potential of digital games to become a ritual space (Highland & Yu, 2008; Jenkins, 2008; O’Leary, 1996; Schroeder, Heather, & Lee, 1998). Virtual environments such as *Second life* are used as a liminal space (Wagner, 2011) and as a sacred space for people to gather and perform rituals (Estes, 2009; Radde-Antweiler, 2008) including virtual weddings (Shim, 2010).

Computer mediated technologies are possible spaces for enacting specific shamanistic rituals (Martinkova, 2008), whereby religious rituals can be turned into virtual reality (Jenkins, 2008; Kluver & Chen, 2008). Digital sacred spaces in video games and the gameplay associated with those spaces can evoke real effects of being religious. Rituals in such spaces can be offensive to believers in the real world who raise serious questions about the nature of such spaces (Wagner, 2012b). However many of these ritual practices provide an embodied experience as well as cultural significance to many participants. Some scholars argue that it is possible now to name, duplicate, and validate physiologically the inner experiences of people who engage in such virtual rituals using modern biometric technologies (Highland & Yu, 2008).
C.3.d. Community Studies of Online World

The Internet has helped people not only to share information but also to come together as a community (Baym, 1998; Jankowski, 2002; Preece, Maloney-Krichmar, & Abras, 2003). Multi player online games facilitated ‘communities of play’ (Pearce & Artemesia, 2009). Significant research has been published about game communities, such as how communities are created (Bowman, 2010), how coordinated communication happens (M. G. Chen, 2008), how players learn social skills in games such as WoW (Ducheneaut & Moore, 2005) and the social and cultural dimensions of play (Ang et al., 2010; Ducheneaut & Moore, 2004). A number of studies about identities and community have come out in the recent past (for example, Donath, 1999; Foster, 1997; Pearce & Artemesia, 2008).

Online religious community is a fascinating area of research for scholars. Heidi Campbell’s (2005b) Exploring religious community online: We are one in the network is a significant work in this line (see also Campbell, 2011; Howard, 2009; Jenkins, 2008). Rice sees social network sites as redefining physical religious communities (Rice, 2009).

C.3.e. Religion in Digital Games

Online avenues including digital games are spaces for performing real life activities. Game space can also serve as transcendental space. Hodge found that many players use them for “supernatural release” and to discover new realms of spirituality (Hodge, 2010, p. 165).

We have mentioned a number of religious activities that take place in the Internet and digital games. Bainbridge in his detailed analysis has explored the connection between religion and WoW (Bainbridge, 2010, 2013). Activities of fundamentalism and terrorism can also be seen in these avenues, with violence and offensive acts working broadly in a religious framework, in virtual environments such as Second Life (Wagner, 2011). Hence scholars are increasingly paying attention to various dimensions of religion in play and digital games (Cobb, 1998; Corliss, 2011) as well as formulating a theology of new media, games and play (Hodge, 2010).

C.3.f. Video games in religious practice

Attempts to mix video game sequences with the Eucharist, chants, readings and the like in a Church service have been tried by clergy inspired by the idea of bringing the
video game Flower\textsuperscript{26} to church, an idea first proposed by Andy Robertson in a TEDx talk.\textsuperscript{27} He focuses on how people think about and engage with video games calling for a “priesthood of game critics” to spread gaming’s gospel. The clergy in Exeter Cathedral in the UK used the video game Flower in one of the cathedral’s monthly Holy Ground\textsuperscript{28} services in which the members in the congregation played the game while others watched the game on a big screen placed behind the main altar where the main liturgical ceremony was held.\textsuperscript{29} Robertson (2012) explains “a good priest wants to create a space where people can discover something meaningful” (see also Narcisse, 2012).

Just as previous media such as pop music, advertising, television fiction, cinema, art and literature served as a medium for expressing people’s religious experiences (T. R. Clark & Clanton, 2012; Mazur & McCarthy, 2011; Santana & Erickson, 2008), digital games are being considered as an interactive avenue for religious exploration and participation, in the new media age. Religious motifs and themes present in digital games raise various questions about the transformations and revival of religions in postmodern religious practices. In games and other online environments players find alternative spaces to practise religion detached from the established religious groups (Santana & Erickson, 2008). As Daniel Stout contends, cultural religion is defined by people and it should be studied wherever and whenever it occurs (Stout, 2011).

C.4. The Approach of This Study

The objective of this study is to explore the media, religion and culture conception of the interaction and significance of media and religion today through an exploration of the religious characteristics of the MMORPG, World of Warcraft.

As has been noted, because the issue of defining religion is a long established and highly contested one, with each definition having particular strengths, but also weaknesses and limitations, a single definition of religion is not being advocated here. The focus of this study is not to define a single or new reality of religion, nor to demonstrate that World of Warcraft has become a new religion, but rather to explore the

\textsuperscript{26} Flower (J. Chen & Clark, 2009) is a video game where the player controls the wind, blowing a flower petal through the air using the movement of the game controller. The game primarily intends to arouse positive emotions in the player, rather than to be a challenging and fun game.

\textsuperscript{27} See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RTJUrj44kew

\textsuperscript{28} See http://www.facebook.com/holygroundexeter

\textsuperscript{29} See https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=1Zq-dvlZzg0
way in which the religious may be being reworked in the current media age. In doing so, it is following the general insights of the media, religion and culture approach, elaborated above, as one in which the religious in life is understood as symbols, symbolic practices or systems of symbols by which people formulate a conception of the overall shape of reality and develop ideas, emotional responses, practices, and an ethos for living within it.

The religious is differentiated not by its unique spaces, symbols or material but by its particular quality of being a grounding or special source of power, identity, meaning and truth (Lynch, 2007a, p. 138). It recognises that in building this sense of identity, meaning and truth, individuals today access symbolic resources and practices eclectically from a wide variety of cultural sources, including secular media and secular video games, adapting these resources to serve their own interests and purposes.

As a tool of analysis, it is taking the three essential cultural functions of religion identified by Durkheim and Yinger: myths, rituals and community.

Durkheim identifies religion as:

“a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say set apart and forbidden, beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community, called a church, all those who adhere to them” (Durkheim, 1912, p. 46).

Yinger identifies religion as a domain:

“Where one finds awareness of and interest in the continuing, recurrent, permanent problems of human existence—the human condition itself, as contrasted with specific problems; where one finds rites and shared beliefs relevant to that awareness, which define the strategy of an ultimate victory; and where one has groups organized to heighten that awareness and to teach and maintain those rites and beliefs—there one has religion” (Yinger, 1970, p. 33).

The three major aspects identified in these definitions are ‘shared beliefs’, ‘rites’ and, ‘organized groups.’ Although Yinger locates his definition within the existential anxieties of human life and their ultimate victory he has emphasised that religions are characterised by three universal expressions: “the theoretical, a system of belief; the practical, a system of worship; and the sociological, a system of social relationships” (Yinger, 1970, p. 10). We find the parallels in Durkheim also – a system of beliefs, practices and community – although he defined them centring on the notion of sacred and moral community. A
contemporary understanding of the sacred given by Gordon Lynch (2007a) is noted above. What is understood by sacred in this study is not synonymous with the supernatural, the spiritual nor is it opposed to the profane. Rather, the sacred is envisaged as an object, a motif, or a time or space of special cultural significance that transcends human life in terms of fixed time and space and that gives significant meaning and orientation to one’s life.

The advantage of these identifications of the religious is that they engage religion through analytical categories that are less closely identified with the major institutional systems labelled as religions. Identifying the religious according to particular functions rather than specific supernatural elements or esoteric phenomena allows for a much broader definition and analytical category of the religious in contemporary society. What is important, in Yinger’s terms, “is not the content of belief, but the nature of believing” (Yinger, 1970, p. 10).

Hence I draw these three elements from a functionalist approach, namely ‘shared beliefs,’ ‘rites’ and ‘organized groups,’ and I will deal with them as myths, ritual and community respectively as seen in the game World of Warcraft.

D. Conclusion

World of Warcraft in this study is approached as a ‘system of symbols,’ which makes a ‘cultural pattern’ evolved through the relationship between the players as well as with the game content. The interest in the study of media and religion from a cultural perspective emphasises the need to understand religion not just as what is produced and defined by authorised religious institutions in specified settings, but as what occurs as people construct their own idiosyncratic meanings, and engage in practices within their everyday experience. We will investigate the ‘moods and motivations’ it creates in the players through the lenses of myth, ritual and community. We will investigate the elements that help players transcend time and space in order to construct specific meanings, even including the religious and the sacred. Within the recent resurgence of religion, this process of religious construction occurs as frequently within the media marketplace using the wide range of symbolic resources available within popular culture as it does in religious institutions using traditional symbols and practices. We will investigate how players construct such meanings through the notions of liminality and
solidarity. Does the notion of the ‘sacred’ help them to address existential questions that they may be confronted with in daily life?

This research tries to examine how different elements in different situations make their own justifications to call certain aspects and behaviours “religious”. The objective of this study is also to look at the reality of video gaming from a religious perspective to see what is going on there. I will explore whether *World of Warcraft* exhibits some religious characteristics commonly ascribed to religion and serves some of the functions generally identified with religion. This study thus explores the nature of gaming and contemporary religious meaning-making from the perspective of what has been called “the culturalist turn” in the study of media and religion, one that “decentre(s) religion and media from traditional, institutionally dominated definitions, refocusing on the intersection of institutions, authorities, and production with popular practices, circulation and reception” (Morgan, 2008).
Virtually Religious: Myth, Ritual and Community in World of Warcraft – Literature Review | Jose Vallikatt 56
Chapter 3. Methodology
Virtually Religious: Myths, Rituals, and Community in World of Warcraft – Methodology

Jose Vallikatt
A. Research Questions

This research has four primary research questions.

1. What religious motifs and characteristics of myth, ritual and community can be seen in the game and game-playing of World of Warcraft?

2. How do these three elements interact with each other, and can their interaction be constructed and understood as having religious significance?

3. Do gamers – individually or collectively – see the MMORPG environment of WoW as having religious characteristics or as related to their offline religious behaviour?

4. What implications does this have for thinking about the relationship between new media and changes in social religiosity and the re-culturation of religion in a postmodern media context?

B. Research Approach

The purpose of this research is to explore the extent to which aspects of the WoW text and the actions and experiences that players engage with in the process of playing the text, have similarities to actions and experiences that were previously associated with recognised or established religious traditions.

It is not to demonstrate that WoW has become a religion, or serves as a functional religion for its players, or is seen as a religion by those who play it. To do that would be resolving what is as yet an unresolved sociological, theological and philosophical debate about the essential characteristics of religion and how those characteristics may change under different circumstances without losing their distinctive essence. It was noted earlier that this is a discussion that has been taking place and is ongoing in the wake of post-secularisation and the blurring of cultural boundaries (Hoover, 2002b; Horsfield, 2012; Stark & Bainbridge, 1985).

The scope of the study is therefore restricted to analysing the game and gameplay within the realms of the three characteristics that have been identified as important
functions of religion: myth, ritual and community. To select these three characteristics is not to say that these are what religion always is or only is. It is to adopt one framework for a particular purpose. The outcomes of the study will be made possible but also limited by the focus of these chosen functions.

Because of the nature of the study, therefore, an interdisciplinary and qualitative approach is being followed. It is interdisciplinary as it works at the intersection of media, religion and culture. It involves text, players and their virtual avatars, which all fall within the scope of the study. As secondary data this research relies on interviews and observations conducted in India. Mixed modalities and methodologies are unavoidable and nevertheless inevitable to game studies (Carr et al., 2006) not only because of the nature of this particular study, but also because scholars recommend and advocate the value of combining sociological, anthropological and cultural approaches (Ang et al., 2010; Coavaux, 2010; Lukacs, 2010; Williams, 2005) in researching the digital domain.

This study is qualitative in its approach for a number of reasons. A qualitative approach can go deeper into complex social and cultural issues by making interpretations of patterns of action and interaction possible. It allows social, cultural, and historical contexts to be taken into account within the investigation of outcomes such as meaning and identity (cf. Hoover, 2006, pp. 16-17). It is valuable in contexts, such as this current study, where the nature of the research is uncommon or broad and appropriate theories are only being developed recently (Patton, 2002).

C. Methodologies

A number of research methodologies have been used in this research: textual analysis, interviews, and to a limited extent, field observations.

C.1. Textual Analysis

Because one of the major purposes of the research is to identify religious characteristics of the games as they are presented and played, the primary methodology used was textual analysis.

Textual analysis is a process through which the characteristics of a message are identified and their significance interpreted in terms of the wider social and cultural
issues to which they relate (Rayner, Wall, & Kruger, 2004). Here text is understood to be messages having “a physical existence of their own” (O’Sullivan, Hartley, Saunders, Montgomery, & Fiske, 1996, p. 317).

Textual analysis of video games poses particular problems, though there are a variety of viewpoints on those problems. Carr (2009) argues that because games are a powerful representational medium, they need to be studied in a broad context and therefore require not only textual analysis but also structural studies, though Kennedy (2002) notes that there are limitations in treating games simply as text because representations within the game world and the experience of playing the game are different. Simons (2007) argues that though digital games challenge conventional notions of narrative, traditional narratological methods offer helpful tools for game analysis, while Larsen (2012) notes that though games are driven by rules, narrative tools such as diegetic and representational elements, cause-effect sequences and player tasks are used to progress through the narrative. During the game session the player is able to create a narrative and after the game they are able to construct a ‘real’ story.

A significant issue in video game analysis therefore is that because they are a playable text, not just the meaning but also the content of the text is constantly being constructed by the player in the choices and responses they make in playing the game. While this infinite variety of the text is problematic, it is not considered prohibitive. Rather it shapes the nature of the conclusions that can be drawn from any research rather than the research task itself.

In response to these issues, a number of strategies were used in accessing the text of the game.

C.1.a. Personal Play

My intention on commencing my research was to analyse a game with religious themes and significance. As I have mentioned earlier there are a number of games that provide explicit religious games such as Isles of Derek (Virtue Games, 2005) or Left Behind: Eternal Forces (Jenkins et al., 2006) as well as virtual spaces such as Second Life where a range of religious activities are happening and games like Black and White, where one can play a god mode. I chose World of Warcraft for its having a very “secular” nature yet engaging religious dimensions in the text and in the playing. The game
attracted me with its medieval motifs, gothic iconography and mythic content and I chose it as having the greatest potential for the study. For the purposes of the research, I subscribed to the game and commenced as a game player. I started with the World of Warcraft: Wrath of the Lich King version of the game. When the Cataclysm version was released I continued with Cataclysm.

At the initial phase of the research I played at least three hours every day for three months, after which more time was needed to be given to background research and writing in order to submit the research proposal. As the volume and intensity of the research and thesis writing increased, my time playing the game was reduced. Yet in each semester of the study I continued to play to explore as much of the game as possible. In the final stages of the thesis writing I played a few hours every month.

It needs to be noted that I have never become an avid or “addicted” player – I began as a novice and did not reach what would be considered an advanced status in the game. As my primary goal was research, making progress through the game by levelling up was less a motivation than exploring aspects of the text and its play. Though my primary intention was to explore the game itself from the perspective of the research being done, I did have experiences of becoming fully immersed in the game-play. This is described further below.

I created three avatars for the purpose of the research. My chosen avatars were in the Alliance faction: a human priest, a night elf druid, and a human warrior. Later, I created one avatar in the Horde faction to enter into and experience the world of Hordes. However in order to progress as far into the game as possible, I did not play as much in that realm as in the Alliance.

Unlike most game-playing situations, I began playing the game for the purpose of the research. It was considered that far from a disadvantage, commencing the research as a novice could provide valuable information and insights. In many cases, when starting the game, players are initiated by someone who has some experience. There are also instances where a group of offline friends or a group of players playing a particular game together move to WoW, characterised as virtual migration (Pearce & Artemesia, 2008). I belonged to neither of these. While not progressing as quickly, the advantage of being
uninitiated and un-helped by expert players helped me to approach the game without preconceptions and experience a firsthand initiation into gameplay experience.

By the end of the research, my human priest had reached level 26, my night elf druid level 12 and my human warrior level 11. While compared to advanced players these are not high levels, they reflect the achievement of an individual player through a large amount of effort and immersion in the game. The avatars opened up ways to explore the world, undertake quests, and engage in community play and other activities. My own gameplay experience has been a significant source of data, especially in the analysis of the mythic patterns and ritual activities in the game.

I played the game on my laptop computer running the Vista OS with a good graphics card and an attached keyboard. I listened to the sound effects of the game for most of the time on the laptop speakers, though occasionally I used headphones. After each continuous session of gameplay I made notes regarding the myths, quests and other motifs in *World of Warcraft* encountered in that session. In some instances I took breaks from playing to grab screen shots of the play for further analysis. For this I used the screen grab facility of Windows OS and stored them using Adobe Photoshop or directly pasted to a word file named “*my game log*”. For each shot taken I wrote a comment or notes on the grabs.

The combination of playing an immersive game while also reflecting on it for research purposes took some time to manage. During some sessions I was so immersed in play that I would forget to write notes. In these instances I commonly recollected and made notes after the session. On some occasions I played the game again for the sake of grabbing shots. Though not all shots were used in this thesis they were used in analysing the text.

My observation was mostly focussed on identifying the themes relating to the three lenses namely myth, ritual and community. In recognising myths in the game I have primarily used the criteria presented by Campbell (1949) and Bartle (2003), for rituals Turner (1969), and for community Durkheim (1912) and Campbell (2005b). These served to be the context for the text to be analysed. At the start of each game session the player is placed in a place in the game world, which holds a mythic history. For example, the story of *Battle of Mt Hyjal* is a story of great spiritual renewal and harmony among the races (Blizzard, 2004b, p. 162). This provides a thick text for the player. The avatar’s
movement, actions, and decisions are guided and influenced by this history. Similarly, a range of regular game activities were identified as ritual and classified into various types. They have the potential to provide liminal experiences for players on different levels. The same approach was taken with the dimension of community as well. In a process of examining the nature and characteristics of a religious community within a game context, a number of community play dimensions were classified. Each of these is elaborated in greater detail in the data chapters.

These observations were compared on the same day of playing with classical and popular mythologies and ritual practices to find corresponding materials. These observations and comparative material became part of my textual analysis.

C.1.b. Secondary Textual Material

The text of WoW is fluid and expanding, as it is a playable text. Different players play the same text differently and so their experience is different. So it was necessary to develop a methodology for accessing textual material from other players as well as from beyond those levels that I reached in my personal game playing. This secondary textual information was found in a number of ways.

**Official Website of World of Warcraft.** Game related materials available in print and online have served as an important source of data in this research. Primarily, the printed game manual (Blizzard, 2004b) and the official World of Warcraft site ‘us.battle.net/wow’ have been used in this study to draw direct information about the dynamics and mythic history of the game. The official website provides a range of information such as the game guide, which provides details about races, classes and professions as well as description of the dungeons, raids and scenarios. It contains information about types of servers and different combat styles helpful for players to start the game, along with technical information such as patch notes. One of the important features of the site of relevance to this study is a concise narration of the game story (Blizzard, 2008b, 2013c) which forms the text for analysis in this study.

**Game Community Forums.** The interactive website of WoW provides a space for players and enthusiasts to discuss game related aspects including technical and organisational, under its ‘forum’ link. The site provides a platform for discussing the story line where
players critique the story and suggest creative ideas. These discussion topics are constantly added and updated almost every day and hour.

Two other independent community sites regularly accessed for information are www.wowwiki.com, www.wowhead.com. These sites present an immense volume of information generated by their contributors. They include game-related queries and their answers, technological information, details of games such as the mythology, their screen shots, videos, and even very personal stories of the players. The sites draw from a range of sources to comment on the current online game and its background story. The main story of WoW is modified as a result of discussions on these forum pages about the accuracy of the history of Warcraft universe. The pages not only present a holistic narrative of the world of WoW but also discuss the ambiguities and discrepancies in the flow of the story, the players’ own joys and frustrations with certain ways the story is developed.

I have drawn heavily on these sites for further information about various myths and ritual actions beyond the levels and realms I accessed personally (Wowhead, 2009b; Wowwiki, 2009f, 2009g).

Because these players’ forums present a lot of conversations related to the game in general, it became necessary to limit the information to the specific focus of the study. Relevant pages and posts were identified by keyword search using keywords including ‘myth’, ‘community’ and ‘ritual,’ and provided links to other conversations on the topics.

According to their relevance, these pages were codified and classified and their URL links copied in my notepad. I made notes and comments on those materials while reading their experiences. In this thesis I have kept the forum members’ original screen name, as those sites and pages are publicly available and accessible. The screen name of the major members quoted are: Awatoru, Perderedeus, Riviera, Autry, Quesac, Hermitosis, Pants, Pombe. Quotes from these pages are identified in references as ‘personal blog.’ To distinguish the quotes of these players from scholarly quotations I have provided a prefix ‘Player’ to their name in the text as well as have used an indented single lined italic style for their quotes.

This valuable information about games written by player fans, which this study relies upon are called “walkthroughs.” A walkthrough consists of descriptive text about game
content, extra diegetic instructional manuals, and it will methodically demonstrate how to play levels and scenes (Wilson, 2013). These provide ongoing documentation of progress of games via photos or videos of game sessions, with players’ own commentary mostly posted in message board threads, drawing an enthusiastic audience of players and fans who discuss the game, contribute suggestions, and even concoct their own creative works directly related to the title in question (Mackey, 2011).

While the credibility and accuracy of such user generated webpages are not guaranteed and their reliability is questioned by some scholars (Flanagin & Metzger, 2010), other scholars are now willing to recommend user generated content as credible sources to a certain extent (Kirtsis, Stamou, Tzekou, & Zotos, 2010). Best practices such as being a featured article in the user-generated content platforms is a recognized standard (Moturu & Liu, 2009; Stvilia, Twidale, Gasser, & Smith, 2005). Walkthroughs, are considered to be the “most extensive and thorough pieces of critical game analysis presently available” as they serve as the “documents of deliberative, investigative practices of play and records of the ludic potential of the game system pushed to and beyond its limits; as a mechanism for sharing, exploring, regulating and legitimising gameplay” (Newman, 2011, p. 121). For studies such as these where text is generated through play and popular culture, the player experiences expressed in collaborative content sites such as the websites mentioned above will be considered a rich and justified source of valid data.

C.2. Interviews

An emerging methodology for undertaking research in digital games is ethnography, where it is considered that its interpretive methods and fieldwork research methodologies allow better insight into the meaning perspectives of players (Bainbridge & Bainbridge, 2007; Hine, 2000). Ethnographic monographs are considered to be powerful ways of describing what-is-going-on-there in the game world (Nardi, 2010).

Because one of the aims of this study is to investigate how people construct meaning out of cultural artefacts like digital games, an ethnographic approach was initially considered. But as I considered what should be the focus for investigation, this method was judged to be difficult to implement fully. Cost of play being a factor (my intended Indian participants are paying the monthly subscription for the game in US dollars, which
is a significant sum for a young unemployed player or a student player), the players were not prepared to give up or interrupt their game-playing time for extended virtual interviews. So the originally planned virtual ethnographic study to complement the textual analysis was set aside in favour of a number of face-to-face interviews in India and on-site observations of game-playing in a number of Indian game centres.

Ethical approval was obtained for the proposed interviews through the RMIT Research Ethics process (see Appendix 3) and ethics requirements were followed in the identification of interviewees, in approaching potential interviewees and in all of the interviews conducted.

To find candidates for interview I did an online search in 2009, which yielded few results. I found out that at that time *WoW* was not popular in India and was only minimally played. Game marketing was in its infancy and entrepreneurs did not have much material exclusively for *WoW* on the web. As I searched on the Internet in 2011, a few months before I had to finalise the methodology, I found a Facebook community named “*WoW India*” in which the members appeared to be serious and avid players of *WoW*. I sent a text message through Facebook to 55 of them, introducing myself as a *WoW* player who would like to know about the Indian gaming situation. In a few days I received a number of positive responses. Some welcomed me to join the Facebook group and added me as their friend. In turn I added them as my friends. I maintained meaningful and regular contact with at least seven of them through Facebook and was confident that they would refer me to more of their friends playing *WoW*. Those contacted were living in different metros of India: two each in Chennai and Hyderabad, one each in Kolkata, Bangaluru and Chandigarh.

Twenty-two respondents sought more information about the nature of my research. When they heard that it was about religion, a number of them were apprehensive and refused to participate. Eight of the initial respondents indicated willingness to participate, and also indicated the possibility of getting more players willing to participate in the research once I reach their locations, gave me their contact details. Expecting that I could get a few more contacts through these contacts I left for India.

---

30 http://www.facebook.com/welcomeback/requests/#!/worldofwarcraftindia
In the end I was able to interview 13 people. Though not a large number, it is considered that it is a significant sample as a complement to the textual analysis because all of the players interviewed were avid players and were experienced in the game, with the majority having reached level 60, the highest level at that time. Except for two or three, they generally played with others in a community game-playing arcade such as Zapak Gameplex (explained later in this chapter). As well as being a convenient place to meet the players for the interviews, my visits to the game parlours in the major cities of India served as a valuable complementary source of data to the primary methodology of the textual analysis.

In preparation for the interviews, a form to collect the demographic details the players and a questionnaire for semi-structured interview was prepared to bring out various ideas from the participants about their perceptions and experience of gameplay in terms of religion (see Appendix 4 and 5). A face to face interview with the help of a semi-structured questionnaire was considered not too formal and rigid and provided scope for the interviewer to develop a good relationship with the participant where discussion and expansion of responses was able to occur and particularly interesting responses followed through. While this flexibility of semi-structured interviews allowed a level of freedom in the questions and responses, the structure provided a means to ensure consistency across interviews (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1989).

The interview topics were divided into three major categories namely myth, ritual, and community. Some questions were also asked about their perception of religion and the presence of religious elements in the game to identify whether gamers see religious connections in WoW myths, whether they experience any religious parallels when they play, whether they have any religious background or connections in the offline world or how these relate to their game playing experience and so on. Most questions were oriented towards their everyday gaming practice and contextualizing this within their local religious landscapes, practices and ideologies, where relevant. At the beginning of each interview some general information such as the duration they play, the avatars they have, their religious background etc., were obtained and written down on a preformatted form specifically designed for that.

Except for four interviews, all interviews were done in a game parlour during intervals in their play. Among the four other interviews, three took place in coffee shops.
and one in the player’s home. Each of the interviews lasted for 45 to 60 minutes. They were conducted with a sense of time constraint because the players were keen to return to playing.

All the interviews were recorded on an audio device with an SD memory card. The recorded audios were downloaded to my personal computer and I listened to them carefully to make exact transcripts, which were typed onto my computer. Sections that were relatively inaudible due to the external noise while it was recorded were listened to carefully several times to make exact notes. I read all those interviews several times and tagged important ideas under various topics that would be helpful in the analysis. I compared and contrasted players’ ideas to the others and against the theoretical framework I have drawn.

All the participants were young men between 20 and 25 years of age. All except two were Hindus. One was a Christian and the other was Muslim. Some of them said although they were born in very traditionally religious families and brought up in that life, at present they are either not practising or not believing in God at all. Some said that they are atheists but believe in a power that guides the universe. In referring to their name in the body of this thesis pseudonyms are used to safeguard their privacy and confidentiality.

One of the important things they said in general was that their playing community was dispersed for different reasons, such as migrating for studies or their work into different time zones. But in some cases the game helped them to be in touch with their offline communities. In Somajiguda the festive season was an occasion for all those who had dispersed to different places to come back and to meet in the Zapak centre where they spent a significant amount of time in playing.

General details of each participant are provided in Appendix 2. The information and opinions of players from the interviews is presented in the following data chapters, either as summary statements or direct quotes.

C.3. Field Observation

*WoW* players in India play either in their homes in communities formed in game parlours, which are public spaces located in prominent spots of the city. These parlours,
equipped with broadband Internet connectivity, provide a number of computers loaded with various game software and other accessories. Usually there is one operator who oversees the game centre. Players pay a certain rate per hour depending on the games they play.

Zapak Gameplex is one such network of game parlours spread all around the country. Apart from more than 200 game parlours, Zapak Digital Entertainment Ltd. also operates various online gaming websites such as zapak.com, kids.zapak.com and girls.zapak.com. Zapak follow a subscription model for casual gamers, keeping their prices low so that consumers won’t move to pirated content. They provide online games of various genres, of which a number of games are produced in India with popular Indian themes.

In my field observation I observed a range of people playing in these centres, ranging from children of 10-12 years to 30 years old adults. I did not see any women players in the game centers.

During my field visit to India I visited a total of eight game arcades in Chennai, the capital of the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu; Kolkata, capital of West Bengal in eastern India; Delhi, the national capital; Bengaluru the capital of the south Indian state of Karnataka; and Hyderabad capital of the south Indian state of Andhra Pradesh.

It was in the Zapak game centres of Bengaluru the capital of the south Indian state of Karnataka; and Hyderabad capital of the south Indian state of Andhra Pradesh; that I found the most avid players of *World of Warcraft* in India who were also willing to participate in the research. I interviewed 6 people in Hyderabad and 2 in Bengaluru game centres. Meeting them for interview in the game parlour during the intervals of their gaming sessions gave me the opportunity to observe the ambience of the centre, the behaviour of players during and after their play, and to watch those I interviewed playing, in some cases for several hours.

My observations were recorded in a field research and travel diary, and excerpts of the diary in the form of information and reflections are also introduced in the following chapters as part of the research or in setting context for the research. An extract from my diary during my visit to Hyderabad shows how the context in which game-playing takes place is relevant for considering its potential religious dimensions.
It was festive season in Hyderabad... People were celebrating Vijayadasami (Dashara) the Hindu feast that celebrates the victory of good over evil. Here in South India the mythology has a different emphasis. It gives priority to Goddess Durga over Lord Ram. How fascinating it is to learn that a goddess is worshiped as shakti, the source of ultimate power. The nine days preceding Dussehra are equally divided for worshipping the three Goddesses namely Lakshmi (Goddess of wealth and prosperity), the next three days to Saraswati (Goddess of learning and arts) and the last three days are dedicated to Durga (Mother Goddess, Shakti).

These ten days of festive celebration is a blend of sacred and secular. Shrines are extended temporarily for the feast... they are decorated with most vibrant colours... devotees stop on the road as they go on for shopping or visiting their friends or relative... parks are full with families with children... Outside I hear the sound of crackers and amplified chants and sacred music everywhere...

I was on my search for participants for my research... I visited many centres... But finally I ended up in Somajiguda... I find a vibrant playing community... As early as 9 in the morning when I reach the centre there are few players playing... Above the teller’s counter was a little shrine of Lord Ganesh... in front of that incense sticks were burning. By 10 am the centre was full... I observed one player coming to his PC and venerating a tiny image of Lord Ganesh stuck on the monitor... They also play Warcraft III the previous version of the WoW. A game can be finished in 45 minutes... I had to wait until they finished playing to get an interview... But then when I interview one of them others have to wait for him to join next play. The ambience is so energy filled... they yell at each other... because they play in a big hall they do not need the facility of IRC... they communicate loudly in that room to co-ordinate the game...

... as I step out of the game centre I find the procession of Goddess Durga... people worship the statue of ten handed Durga... they sing hymns... ring bells... drink holy water... and eat ‘prasada’... on the other side of the street I find road side vendors selling gods... people buy gods and other materials to celebrate their sacred feast... (Vallikatt, 2010, Travel journal, October 18).

D. Conclusion

The methodologies used in the research were designed to uncover information relevant to the primary research questions: What religious motifs and characteristics of myth, ritual and community can be seen in the game and game-playing of WoW, how do they interact with each other and how do gamers see these motifs and their religious character. The principal methodology of textual analysis is complemented by interviews with players in game-playing locations and observations of the dynamics of those situations by the researcher. The following chapters present the findings of the investigation.
Chapter 4. Myth in WoW
A. Context

Among the three lenses I use as analytical tools for the text of WoW in this study, the first one is myth (the other two being ritual and community). Though the texts of digital games are interactive and playable in character, their content is also strongly narrative, and this defines them as ‘mythic texts’ of our times (Barthes, 1970; Sharrett, 1999).

A.1. Myth

Contemporary popular culture draws on many mythic themes such as Santa Claus, Dragons, novels and movies like *The Lord of The Rings* (Tolkien, 1937, 1955); *Harry Potter* (Rowling, 1997-2007), *Star Wars* (Lucas, 1977-2008) and *Avatar* (Cameron, 2009). Not only do mythic narratives permeate the periphery of our cultural environment and the daily discourse of ordinary people (for example, a biblical verse or an inspirational quote texted through a mobile phone, as well as of stories ranging from cancer sufferers to adventurous achievers in the newspaper) they also deeply influence present day political rhetoric (Bush, 2002; Cherry, 1998; Ellwood, 2008; Hay, 1969; Obama, 2009; Russell, 2009).

The concept of myth is a difficult one to define (Honko, 1984; Kirk, 1984). The classical study of myths tended to focus on traditional historical stories that reflected central values within the society or culture, including beliefs about (1) creation and origins; (2) social foundations such as kingship or gender roles; (3) heroes and their ideal and real selves; (4) the ultimate destiny of individual life and of the world; (5) warnings about wrong behaviour; and (6) descriptions of essential rituals, pilgrimages and other religious practices (Ellwood, 2008). Works by scholars such as Campbell and Eliade reflect this strongly anthropological focus (Campbell, 1949; Campbell & Moyers, 1988; Dardel, 1984; Eliade, 1963) Honko notes however that the concept of myth potentially encompasses “everything from a simple-minded, fictitious, even mendacious impression to an absolutely true and sacred account, the very reality of which far outweighs anything that ordinary everyday life can offer” (Honko, 1984, p. 41). However, writers such as Barthes (1970), consider that media artefacts can become mythic texts.

Later in the twentieth century, critical cultural theorists such as Barthes (1970) expanded the understanding of myth beyond that of “traditional” stories in a religious or
historical context, to contemporary narratives that, through their repetition within popular
culture, sanctify or normalise various social ideologies and power structures in a way that
e encourages people to conform themselves to their values. From this perspective, popular
culture and media artefacts thus can be as complex and dense a source of mythology as
traditional culture (see also Sharrett, 1999; Lowe, 1995).

In this view, the concept of mythologies becomes synonymous with ideology and
signifies those ‘illusory’ representations that are circulated in everyday life which
construct for us a world and define our place in it and in particular the body of beliefs and
representations that sustain and legitimate current power relationships. According to
Sharrett (1999, p. 10) mythic speech is “an operation of an ideology, a series of narratives
that conflate nature with culture, tending to have us assume that certain attributes are
given and immutable.” For Barthes, popular culture texts are more than just valueless
neutral symbols and cultural artefacts, but signifiers of rich and varied cultural meanings,
the mythologies of our time (Barthes et al., 1974).

All cultural texts, including those of digital games, therefore are capable of carrying
mythological significance, though from a cultural perspective the meaning of the text is
open to many interpretations in addition to the one the author constructed for the reader.
It is within this wider framework that myths are approached in this study, though for the
sake of containment in such a potentially rich mythic-narrative text as WoW, the analysis
draws heavily on a number of patterns by which mythic narrative has been identified: that
of the mythic pattern of hero quest as described by Campbell (Campbell, 1949) and that
of myth as a sacred story, as outlined by Eliade (1963; 1959).

A.2. Myths, Hero Quests and Game

The mythic structure of the epic hero quest, as illustrated by scholars such as
Campbell (1949) and Rank (1990) is focused on a hero’s journey in search of
improvement. It commonly involves three phases: a separation from the comfortable,
known world; an initiation in to a new level of awareness, skill, and responsibility; and
then a return home. Rank (1990) argues that heroes in the myth are a symbolic fulfilment
of repressed wishes persisting in the adult mythmaker or reader (Rank, 1990, pp. 6-9) and
draws a pattern of the hero\textsuperscript{31} completing the quest starting from early childhood through to young adulthood. Campbell (1949) reads myths symbolically, seeing the real subject of hero myths as the mind. The figures in the myth symbolise parts of the myth maker’s or reader’s mind: the ego and the archetype of the collective unconscious. The possibility for the symbolic fulfilment of the repressed wish is a reason for the effectiveness of myths (Segal, 1990).

The hero pattern presented by Campbell sees the hero myth - \textit{separation-initiation-return} - at work particularly in rites of passage. Generally this pattern\textsuperscript{32} involves the adventurous journey of the hero starting with a ‘call to adventure,’ passing through the ‘rite of initiation’ to enter a dreamlike world which leads the hero to achieve the object of his quest before ‘returning’ to his homeland, bringing with him a ‘spiritual boon’ (Campbell, 1949, pp. 28-29). The hero is tested during the journey but arrives at the epiphany that allows for a return to and restoration of the ordinary world. Campbell defines heroism as “separation not only from the parents and anti-social instincts but also from the unconscious” (Segal, 1990, p. xvi).

In this context we shall consider many popular cultural practices as having a mythic nature. A number of scholars have identified digital games, especially in the MMORPG genre, within the terms of an epic hero quest – the work of Fine (1983), and Bartle (2003) in this line are significant. In play, the player is transformed into the hero who embarks on the adventurous journey, in which the player becomes master of the two worlds: the virtual and actual. Playing digital games is like a “hill climbing activity through identity space” (Bartle, 2003, p. 440) where their virtual self and true self become the same. The transformation of player into hero occurs in the intersections of identification between the player and avatar, a process that happens when games are viewed as “extension of life”

\textsuperscript{31} The hero is the child of distinguished parents, usually the son of a king. His origin is preceded by difficulties and associated with a prophecy, in the form of a dream or oracle, cautioning against his birth, and usually threatening danger to the father (or his representative). As a rule, he is surrendered to the water, in a box. He is then saved by animals, or by lowly people (shepherds), and is suckled by a female animal or by a humble woman. After he has grown up, he finds his distinguished parents in a highly versatile fashion. He takes his revenge on his father, on the one hand, and is acknowledged, on the other. Finally he achieves rank and honours (Rank, 1990, Cfr. p. 57).

\textsuperscript{32} The mythological hero sets forth to the threshold of adventure where he encounters a shadow presence that guards the passage. The hero has to defeat or conciliate this power to pass through the threshold, or be slain by the opponent and descend in death. Beyond the threshold the hero journeys through a world of unfamiliar and face various tests, sometimes aided by magical helpers. Finally when he overcomes the supreme ordeal he gains the reward. The triumph may be represented as a sacred marriage, father atonement, or apotheosis. If the powers have remained unfriendly to him he steals the boon he came to gain; intrinsically it is an expansion of consciousness and therewith of being. The final journey of return he is either blessed and protected by the befriended powers or he flees away. At the return threshold the hero re-emerges from the kingdom of dread and the boon that he brings restores the world (Campbell, 1949, Cfr. p. 211).
(Fine, 1983, p. 207). One of the motivations to play, according to Fine (1983), is the desire to immerse oneself in a strange environment and test oneself to see if one would survive in such real situations.

Bartle’s analysis of players’ gameplay experience in the pattern of Campbell’s ‘hero’s journey’ will serve to be a general framework for looking at game play in Wow as a mythic participation. An advertisement of a game or a friend’s invitation to play, according to Bartle, can be considered as the call to adventure, the first in the phase of “Departure.” One can accept or reject this invitation (Refusal of the call) to play. The beginners get help from friends or a website or the game manual (Supernatural aid). Once the player has made the ultimate decision to play (The crossing of the first threshold) s/he has to create an avatar, a character – a new you – (The belly of the whale). In the “Initiation” phase the player is faced with a number of obstacles (The road of trials). The player has to have necessary knowledge to progress (The meeting with the goddess). However the challenge of the game is controlled by the rules of the game whose author is the designer (Atonement with the father). It is where one strives to “win” – to be recognized by the virtual world in its own terms as being a success. Once completely immersed in the game, the player does not want to “Return” (the third phase, Refusal of the return). Arriving back to the mundane world is something of a shock (The crossing of the return threshold). But then, the player often comes back victorious. S/he is now (Master of the two worlds) the actual and virtual and enjoys the Freedom to live. You can finally be yourself (Bartle, 2003, pp. 435-443).

One of the things to be explored in this analysis will be the extent to which the mythological pattern of the hero’s journeys emerges and operates within Wow. This important aspect of hero’s journey is stimulated through the game dynamics of quests and the challenges involved in progressing one’s avatar and ‘writing’ one’s own game narrative through the mythic world towards higher levels. The avatar is not only a mere graphic representation to move around the mythic world and interact with other characters and NPCs in the game, it is also seen as a powerful agent that supports the player’s narrative progression. Such an agency helps the players to identify themselves with the character.
A.3. Myth: Sacred Story

Dundes argues that myths need to be understood not simply as inconsequential or irrational stories, but as stories with sacred significance (Dundes, 1984). Similarly, for Eliade, “myth is a story that is the most precious possession” of a culture because it presents a “sacred tradition, primordial revelation, or exemplary model” (Eliade, 1963, p. 1).

Sacredness, although conceived variously by different scholars, is a common denominator of most myths, either because they narrate events that are seen as taking place in primordial time or the fabled time of the “beginnings”; or because they deal with the supernatural or dramatic breakthroughs of the sacred or “supernatural” into the world; or because they express and confirm “society’s religious values and norms… provide patterns of behaviour to be imitated, testify to the efficacy of ritual with its practical ends and establish sanctity of the cult” (Honko, 1984, p. 49).

Mythic narratives of origins and significant events do more than just recount and explain those origins and significant events. They project normative meaning onto the present and in the process they incorporate present events into that meaning. It is because of this linking of the present with the past that Eliade describes mythology as “at once a true history” (Eliade, 1984, p. 141, original emphasis).

Through the cultural perspective of Barthes and others, it is widely recognised now that contemporary society operates with both religious and secular myths that are both exploratory of the unconscious, transcendent in character, and as much about our present experience of life as they are about the past. They tell us where we are, confirm deep religious and human values and norms, reinstate the patterns of human behaviour, provide plausible reasons for the present state of affairs of the world, and deal with great existential problems of human beings. As such they become sacredly significant.

B. Text

B.1. Into the Belly of Games

In 2008, when I first stepped on the threshold of RMIT University’s Enquiry situated at 124 La Trobe Street, it was like entering an unknown place. I had already registered for...
a research PhD with the intention of exploring the religious dimensions of post-modern
digital games. The receptionist provided me with a map of the campus and directed me to
building 6 where I was supposed to meet Prof. Peter Horsfield whom I had already
chosen as my supervisor. With the map I started my first quest in the university.

The process of fixing a research topic, and relevant methodologies and research
questions in the first few months in the university almost offered small myth-like quests
almost every day. As noted earlier I was keen on investigating the religious expectations
of the player in a secular situation. So I decided to choose World of Warcraft, which
attracted me with its medieval motifs and gothic iconography for my research. I started
with the World of Warcraft: Wrath of the Lich King version of the game. When the
Cataclysm version was released I continued with Cataclysm.

B.2. World of Warcraft: A World of a Million Stories

As noted earlier, World of Warcraft is a massively played online roleplaying game
that has medieval mythology and magic as its main motif. It presents a grand narrative of
stories and sub stories along with various game activities to be done. In order to enter the
world the player has to log in the game with a user name and password. At first the game
it asks you to create a character for yourself from among the various choices of different
classes. This character, which is the graphical representation of the character you chose to
be in the game is called an avatar.33 I created an avatar, a human priest in the faction of
Alliance, and I named it Purohit, the Sanskrit equivalent to ‘priest.’ As one logs in, it
instantly places the avatar, at a starting point in the game, which is often a beautiful
scenic locale. Each race is assigned with a particular place from which they start the
game each time they log in. Human priests always start from Northshire in Stormwind,
and Night Elf from Darnasus, Hunter from Northrend, and Orc Shamon from Durotar.

33 An Avatar, in video gaming, is the graphical representation of the player. However, some scholars consider it to be
not merely a graphical representation but an ‘alter ego’ (Ducheneaut et al., 2006) or a ‘persona’ (Bartle, 2003). The
word originates from Sanskrit avatāraḥ meaning descent, from ava- away + tarati he crosses over through; originally
the word was used to signify the incarnation of a Hindu deity, however, later the word got its significance also as ‘an
incarnation in human form’ or ‘an embodiment (as of a concept or philosophy) often in a person’ (http://www.merriam-
webster.com/dictionary/avatar). In internet and media studies avatar has become a prominent focus of study (Damer,
1998; Schroeder, 2002) as it is a powerful element of identity and representation (Eladhari, 2007; Gunkel, 2010; Kafai,
Fields, & Cook, 2010; Yee, 2008), and how this identity is negatively or positively affecting the person (Peña,
Hancock, & Merola, 2009), their embodied experiences (Clinton, 2004; Taylor, 2002) and how they affect the social
life of players (Shim, 2010).
I chose to be a priest, because from the official website I learned that they are masters of healing and preservation, having the capacity to restore their wounded allies, shield them in battle, and even resuscitate them from temporary virtual death. I felt that this fits very well with my own personal mission. Though priests possess a variety of protective and enhancement spells to strengthen their playmates, they can also inflict reasonable degrees of harm on their enemies, using the grand powers of the Holy Light to smite and purge them and decimate their minds. They can heal and buff allies and dispel buffs on enemies. The priest, capable of fulfilling multiple roles, is a powerful class, and is in high demand in a guild. Looking at my newly created avatar, I had an embodied feeling of wearing a new skin. I could move around, do many things and talk to many people within the world in that avatar though it was nothing more than a graphic representation on the computer.

In the initial days of my play I learned to move my avatar around in a totally unknown and unpredictable place, and to advance in the game. I learned to attack monsters, meet people and talk to them, install patches and looking for specific information in the web forums about the game. However, I was equally concerned about knowing the story of WoW, to know the mythic and ritual motifs of WoW, and to know

---

34 A buff refers to a temporary beneficial spell or effect placed on a player. It increases an ability for a short period of time advantageous to the player in combat.
why the present state of affairs in the world of *WoW* is the way it is? What do these specific motifs communicate and mean?

### B.2.a. In The Beginning Was No World: Mythic History of *WoW*

The mysteries of the world remain the fundamental questions humans have always asked, and that myths of all civilizations have been trying to answer. So is the case with Azeroth, the mythical and virtual world of *WoW*. *WoW* presents a greatly crafted background story, which serves as the history for the present happenings in the world. This story can be read from the official website of *WoW* (Blizzard, 2008b). While this gives only a very concise summary of the story (people call it mythos or lore) of *WoW*, player communities have contributed immensely to build a concise and coherent history of the happenings of *WoW* (See Appendix 1) by way of compilations and walkthroughs in various community forums such as wowwiki and wowhead.

To welcome and locate the newly logged-in player into this history, *WoW* would present a short video (known as a cut-scene) providing a brief narrative story about the problems and causes of the present situation of Azeroth. For example, in the cut-scene of the Cataclysm (Blizzard, 2010) the expansion of *WoW* has a main antagonist, Deathwing the Destroyer with his new massive elemental armour reforged and being fitted to him in Deepholm. The 2 minute 30 second video presents extreme close up shots of the molten metal being forged and the awe inspiring and enchanting voice over “Pain... Agony...” It presents the dramatic visuals of Deathwing emerging from Deepholm wherein earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and floods devastate the world of Azeroth, the mythical universe of *WoW*. The full voice over invites the player’s attention to the impending tragedies, which only the player and his compatriots can defend:

---

35 The whole history of *WoW* can only be drawn from various versions of the game. Community forums draw the history on the basis of various sources such as games, novels and comics (Wowwiki, 2010b, 2010c).

36 Wowwiki (www.wowwiki.com), launched on November 2004 by Rustak and Alexnder Yoshi, is a user generated web-based database of information about World of Warcraft. The site covers the entire Warcraft series which includes not only the games but also RPG, reference books, strategy guides, novels, and comics including manga. The site claims that it is “lore-neutral” as they record all known information and try to present all sides of any valid controversy about the *WoW* content.

37 Wowhead (www.wowhead.com) is a community site created by Guillaume and Joshua in December 2005 with the intention of providing World of Warcraft players with tools to make their gameplay more enjoyable. Our user community contributes to the content by way of comments on database entries and screenshot submissions. The site also features forums, where users can ask questions, discuss important *WoW*-related topics, recommend and share favorite addons, and much more. The site discourages illegal transactions such as selling of virtual items, real money trading (RMT) and power-leveling services but encourages players to abide by the World of Warcraft Terms of Use.
New players are often unfamiliar with the older versions and their mythic contexts. In order to have meaningful engagement with the game’s narrative content the players refer back to history of the *WoW*, which they access from the game manuals of previous versions of the game, numerous walkthroughs in previously mentioned online community forums.

The players who played previous versions of the game such as *Warcraft III* (Blizzard, 2002a) before they moved to the online version of *WoW* were familiar with the background story of *WoW*. Therefore, some of them do not bother much about following the story of the current version they play. This varies according to the motivation and interests of one’s playing. Player Abin, a research participant, does not “read the stories behind each quest” because he knows the grand mythos of *WoW* as he used to play *Warcraft III*. Nevertheless, he was very interested in the story and he got it from *Warcraft III*.

The online version of the game, *World of Warcraft* has its prehistory linked to *Warcraft: Orcs & Humans*. The history starts with a generation before the events of *World of Warcraft* when the cunning demonic Burning Legion prepares to launch their long-awaited assault on the mortal world (Blizzard, 2002b). It points to the historical facts about why *WoW*’s world is the way it is, including the reasons for the way races are characterised, the modalities of the game, the way many things are and are not possible.

It provides the fascinating story of the world before creation, which was in chaos. There occurred the genesis of powerful beings to bring stability to the various worlds and ensure a safe future for the beings that would follow in their footsteps (Blizzard, 2008b). It is the colossal metallic-skinned gods namely the Titans from the far reaches of the cosmos who set to work on the worlds they encountered out of which they created the world of Azeroth:

“They shaped the worlds by raising mighty mountains and dredging out vast seas. They breathed skies and raging atmospheres into being. It was all part of their unfathomable, far-sighted plan to create order out of chaos. They even empowered primitive races to tend to their works and maintain the integrity of their respective worlds.

Ruled by an elite sect known as the Pantheon, the Titans brought order to a hundred million worlds scattered throughout the Great Dark Beyond during the first ages of creation. The benevolent Pantheon, which sought to safeguard these structured worlds, was ever vigilant against the threat of...
attack from the vile extra-dimensional entities of the Twisting Nether. The Nether, an ethereal dimension of chaotic magics that connected the myriad worlds of the universe, was home to an infinite number of malefic, demonic beings who sought only to destroy life and devour the energies of the living universe. Unable to conceive of evil or wickedness in any form, the Titans struggled to find a way to end the demons' constant threat” (Blizzard, 2008b).

This is the story of beginning of all the invasions, wars and catastrophes in WoW. To make an account of it we have been travelling backwards through the history from the point of reference to the first online version, WoW starting from Cataclysm. This history is crucial to the players if they are to experience the cohesive world and feel that they are part of it.

The history of Warcraft Universe continues through the events of Warcraft III. There had been a long reign of peace in Azeroth during this time, though, the races were weakened during that period. Many institutions of the Alliance had been disgraced, disused, or disbanded. It was at that time the demonic force of The Burning Legion raised another threatening invasion. The Burning Legion is an enormous army of demons and corrupted races that seek to destroy any trace of order in the universe shaped by the metallic gods, namely Titans. Their mission is to undo the works of the Titans and restore the universe back to its chaotic and disorganized state. They abrade all life from the worlds they invade and keep themselves alive, consuming the primal energies of magic to survive.

Much of Azeroth’s history revolves around three invasions of the Legion (Blizzard, 2004b). Azeroth is the only known planet, which they have never conquered. One of the major battles fought on Mount Hyjal in the history of Warcraft III (2002), became a background for the online version of World of Warcraft (2004). The myth behind Battle of Mt Hyjal is a story of great spiritual renewal and harmony among the races. And the legend about the battle of Mt. Hyjal goes like this:

Under Medivh’s guidance, Thrall and Jaina Proudmoore – the leader of the human forces in Kalimdor – realized that they had to put aside their differences. Similarly, the night elves, led by Malfurion and Tyrande, agreed that they must unite if they hoped to defend the World Tree. Unified in purpose, the races of Azeroth worked together to fortify the World Tree’s energies to their utmost. Empowered by the very strength of the world, Malfurion succeeded in unleashing Nordrassil’s primal fury, utterly destroying Archimonde and severing the Legion’s anchor to the Well of Eternity. The final battle shook the continent of Kalimdor to its roots. Unable to draw power from the Well itself, the Burning Legion crumbled under the combined might of the mortal armies (Blizzard, 2004b, p. 162).

The mythology of Mt. Hyjal is crafted fascinatingly by embedding many other myths such as World Tree and Well of Eternity and its history is extensively described in the Warcraft novels such as Well of Eternity (Knaak, 2004), and Stormrage (Knaak, 2010).
After the MMORPG *World of Warcraft* version four, other versions were released. They are *WoW: Burning Crusade* (2007); *WoW: Wrath of the Lich King* (2008); *WoW: Cataclysm* (2010); *WoW: Mists of Pandaria* (2012). In each of these versions they modified the history with additions, for example, in *Cataclysm* Blizzard presented a new menace threatening Azeroth – the Deathwing fitted with the massive elemental armour emerging from Deepholm.

*Mists of Pandaria* presents the story of Garrosh Hellscream’s thirst for power, which corrupted him thoroughly bringing the Orcish supremacy on Azeroth and destroying half of the sacred Pandaren Vale of Eternal Blossoms. Garrosh prepared his followers, the ‘true Horde’ with the pilfered essence of the Old God Y’shaarj. With the power of a primordial world-twisting force at his command, Garrosh can rebuild the Horde in his image: strong, obedient, and, most importantly, ‘pure.’ The task of the player is to rise up to defend Pandaria from the shadow of an evil (Blizzard, 2013b; Wowpedia, 2013).

These stories do not form the complete mythic content of *WoW* but they are a sample of the narrative. In the ever unfolding and constantly changing history of *WoW* the history of races also changes. It requires many other studies to analytically describe these mythologies in detail, as the mythic content of *WoW* is so enormous and the opinions of other players about it forms a massively growing body in the form of walkthroughs.

Knowing the lore is not the only source of enjoyment in the gameplay, though those who play for narrative enjoyment need to know the history. Player Abu argues, “To a certain extent a good story is always needed.” Though the intentions and motivation of play varies from player to player, many players are fascinated by the story of the game. For example, Player Abu thinks that the story of *WoW*, as in the case of any mythic narrative, helps to explain the reasons for the present situation of the world. He says:

“*Warcraft has a story and that is predominantly hero turning bad... all of them [the characters and events] enter your world..., the story actually tells how and why the current war is like this. Why is the war, why they are fighting over. That story was a great story and unexpected story*” (Player Abu, 2012).

The myths of *WoW* are craftily designed. Fractions of these mythic narratives are embedded into the different simple and complex quests, and while in play, players get the experience of participating in the grand mythology by taking on a role and playing the part of heroes themselves. Let us now see how each player with his/her avatar is placed in the mythic environment of *WoW*. 
B.2.b. The Mythic Environment

The characterisation of each avatar is embedded in the grand mythology of *WoW*. Because my avatar *Purohit* was a human priest, every time at login *Purohit* was placed near the Northshire Abbey located in Northshire Valley in the foothills of Elwynn Forest of the Kingdom of Stormwind. Northshire Abbey is the home of the human religious order of clerics known as the Brotherhood of Northshire. Their religious dimensions will be discussed in detail later. However, their history is as follows. During the course of the First War, the Clerics of Northshire, led by Archbishop Alonsus Faol, aided the armies of Stormwind in their fight against the Horde. A band of human warriors, convinced by enemy agents to fight against the crown (known as orcish onslaught in the history of *Warcraft I*), initially attacked the Abbey. Archers and brigands defended the abbey against the orcs. In the Second War, when the Alliance of Lordaeron reclaimed Elwynn Forest, Northshire Abbey was rebuilt, though the area is greatly infested by kobolds, wolves, and the growing presence of bandits known as the Defias. Players can find trainers for mages, priests, warriors, and paladins, as well as a couple of quest givers in the Abbey.

Various activities and rituals the players take part in during the game are mythically and thematically related to the history of *WoW*. Collecting game materials and owning
pets, taking a role while raiding the dungeons have a relation to that history, the armour and magic used and potions consumed have a causal relationship with that history. Players like Yiddi observe that there are various types of myths in *Warcraft* such as “major myths, background myths.” Player Yiddi adds, “all the raids have a story behind them. They all have a reason and objective, that is fascinating.”

**B.2.c. The Mythic World and Its Population**

From among the two great factions namely Horde and Alliance the players can choose thirteen different playable races. Though all the activities of the players are mediated through their *avatars*, each of the avatars comes with only a specific set of skills and abilities characterised by the race they choose. For every expansion, Blizzard keeps adding new races with special characteristics. For example, *Pandaren*, which is available to both factions is the new race added in the latest *Mists of Pandaria* version. From these races the gamer can choose any of the ten available classes, each of which has their own unique abilities. Some abilities are innate; not all abilities are available at the beginning of play.

Each new race, quest, and other motifs, however, is provided with its own ficto-historical background. They form secondary myths and legends in the overarching mythos. For example the Draenei, a race of Eredar are instructed by the Naaru in the ways of the Light, and they have developed an extraordinary society in their new home and have come to know the Shamanistic Orc clans native to Draenor. Similarly, Naga are mutated Highborne, an elite part of the ancient Night Elf culture. They have serpentine features such as tail, scales and fins. *Warcraft* also has two dominant storylines drawn from *Warcraft* games, the story can only be understood if using the proper storylines of one of the campaigns in the previous games namely the Orc Campaign from *Warcraft: Orcs & Humans*, and the Human Campaigns from *Warcraft II: Tides of Darkness* and *Warcraft II: Beyond the Dark Portal*.

Apart from the inherent skills attributed to specific avatars, which a player can enjoy during solo play, in community combat play, a player also has to fulfil certain social roles, such as being an attacker, protector, damage dealer, healer etc., which highlights the fact that players are playing in the game’s fantasy world. This fantasy is heightened because of the powerful narrative themes such as myth, magic, and characters as well as the immense possibility for engaging in activity such as combats and quests. All this is
unfolded through the rich history of *WoW*, which provides them with a convincing real life gameplay experience. This is one of the specific reasons why many prefer role-play fantasy game such as *WoW* to other strategy games. Player Karik, a research participant says:

“*WoW* is different; it takes lot more work and more active than other games. Like killing monsters, killing bosses, looking for drops and weapon and so on, which are not in other games. Unlike other realistic games, Call of Duty for example, in *WoW* you have a different style of gameplay... you play... like heal a person or damage and stuff like that... You have to do your own role” (Player Karik).

Similarly, Player Chandan thinks that role-play “is one of the interesting parts of the game. Unlike other games, in *WoW* you follow the certain story line. So you actually get to take a part of the story.”

The naming of quests, places and NPCs has strong mythic undertones. Most names of NPCs have a Nordic connection, which also inspire players to choose their avatar names with this kind of mythic flavour (Hagström, 2008).

In the arch narrative of *WoW* real life stories can also be immortalised by Blizzard by being mythologised. Contemporary events from real individuals’ lives are used in the design of game motifs such as quests and NPCs (non playing characters) in the game. *Crusader Bridenbrad*, an NPC as well as the epic chain quest celebrates the life of Rob Bridenbecker, a real life hero who battled cancer to death (Wowhead, 2009a). Similarly, ‘*Kyle's Gone Missing!*’ is a quest celebrating another *WoW* fan Ezzra Chatterton who lost his battle with cancer (Chuang, 2007). Memorials are built by Blizzard in *WoW* to pay Blizzard's tributes to real people who have passed away (Wowhead, 2012). Thus these mythic themes help “to enrich and thicken the world by lending cultural diversity and dramatic tension” (Krzywinska, 2008, p. 128), which has profound effects on gameplay.

**B.2.d. Geography of the World**

The locales and architecture of the structures are carefully crafted and are thematically related to the myths of the game. In the origin-mythology of *WoW*, the world of Azeroth was limited to only one massive continent known as Kalimdor. At the Dark Continent’s centre there is a mysterious lake of incandescent energies possibly created by the Titans. The lake, which would later be called the Well of Eternity, was the true heart of the world's magic and natural power (Knaak, 2004). Drawing its energies from the infinite Great Dark Beyond, the Well acted as a mystical fount, sending its potent energies out across the world to nourish life in all its wondrous forms. And right in the middle of the
Well is the World Tree. But the well was corrupted and the tree came under attack from the inimical forces. The battle of Mount Hyjal\textsuperscript{38} was fought to defend the tree. The particular ways in which \textit{WoW}'s landscapes are designed provide clues to the state of affairs of the game world.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{well_of_everting.png}
\caption{Well of Eternity}
\end{figure}

\textit{Azeroth} is a vast and richly detailed 3-D environment. Its representation resembles the real world and its landscape contains four continents surrounded by ocean as detailed in the origin mythology of \textit{WoW}.

\footnote{Battle for Mount Hyjal is also a 25 person raid instance in the Caverns of Time. Defeating enemies on Hyjal Summit yields a reputation with The Scale of the Sands.}
Maps are a key element of the interface in *World of Warcraft* both mythically and technically. The map of the world gives reference to the world although at the beginning of the play for each avatar the map was nothing but an empty plane. On discovering new places the map shows up those areas which each avatar discovers. This gives more impetus to the player to explore as many places as possible to discover what is in *World of Warcraft*. The player finds various locations in the world by travelling in the guise of quests. As Azeroth is a semi-unified, semi-endless surface, maps not only provide a sense of space and distance but also create the illusion of a cohesive world inhabited by numerous players (Aarseth, 2008; Krzywinska, 2008). The elements of the interface make *World of Warcraft* a fascinating playground which provides a consistent graphical world and smooth playability (Bainbridge, 2010).
B.2.e. Quests: A Narrative Tool

Undertaking quests is one way of engaging in the activities of the world. A quest is a task involving activities such as delivering something to another person, finding some objects, collecting particular things from monsters, travelling, discovering geography and architecture, killing, looting and collecting materials, earning gold and so on. There are NPCs (non playing characters) in the game who are quest givers. Quest givers have a yellow exclamation mark above their avatar. The player can converse with these NPCs and accept up to 25 quests at a time. There are thousands of quests in WoW, which a player can choose. Some quests can be executed only as a team while there are many which can be done individually. As the player clicks on the quest giver a pane opens on the left side of the screen with a quest description and the rewards gained on completion.

Quests are basically aimed at increasing the experience points and looting items, which can be converted to virtual currency, but they also increase the intensity with which players relate with the mythology on semantic and structural levels. The quest named ‘The return of Baron Geddon’ which is played at level 80, for example, is strongly

Figure 4.5 – Map: Locations discovered is shown in green while other areas are yet to be discovered through game play.
related to the Battle of Mount Hyjal. The quests are personalised – addressing your avatar by name – and after completing it, the player receives a reinforcing message. The quest completion remark is something like this: “Well done, <name>. We cannot afford to lose any further ground in Hyjal. By stopping Baron Geddon we will have dealt a huge blow to the enemy.”

![Image](https://example.com/image.png)

Figure 4.6 – Purohit meets Deputy Wilhem to take up a quest in front of Northshire abbey.

A description of a quest is really a call for action, and it will narrate gameplay events in “historical terms” (Krzywinska, 2006a, p. 338). Player Chandan described this experience like this: “Once you start playing game and you are part of the story, the story goes on and you are actually part of the story.... You start liking this character after you start playing and just becoming the mythological character in itself.”

Most quests contain the following elements: a quest giver, a description, objectives and rewards. These correspond with the three phases of the epic hero quest format namely separation, initiation and return. After accepting the quest the player has to travel some distance and face difficult challenges, often involving an encounter with deadly monsters. After achieving the quest goal they will have to return and get the reward. For example the objective of the chain quest ‘The Tower of Althalaxx,’ undertaken after

---

level 28, has the task of freeing the trapped Highborne souls in Night Run and Satyrnaar. The reward of the quest is a 2300 experience point. This quest is a cluster of quests, upon completing which the player receives the reward and some choices as well as the experience points. The myth itself is segmented between each section of quests and the player can follow the whole myth if only s/he undertakes each quest. A summary of the entire quest description is as follows:

"... travel north to the Tower of Althalaxx to find Balthule... who is uncertain about a 'cult of warlocks...' who is moved into the tower where the player gets a letter... to be delivered to Delgren, outlining the situation at the tower. [But then the player is asked to retrieve a soul gem that Delgren believes holds the secret to the cult's power]. Soul gems contain a trapped soul. Delgren shatters the gem, freeing the ghost of Sargath, who explains the situation to Delgren. It seems that Athrikus Narassin still has two soul gems, one in Night Run, and one in Satyrnaar, both under the control of Satyrs. Upon returning to Delgren, he declares that it is time to confront Athrikus himself... though the player has to go back to Balthule who in turn directs him/her to return to Delgren the Purifier and tell him of your deeds. Delgren tells that the player is destined for greatness, and that s/he will right many wrongs plaguing the lands. He offers you a gift, as well, in thanks for your courageous deeds".

Krzywinska suggests that the players understand the quest format in both narrative and functional gameplay though the one is not reducible to the other (Krzywinska, 2008). Thus various quests that use mythopoetic language such as ‘a prayer etched onto a golden tablet’ (quest of Prayer to Elune, Level 48), ‘an ancient prophecy written on two tablets’ (quest of Prophecy of Mosh’aru, level 40), ‘jumping off a high cliff to prove one’s bravery’ (Horde quest of A Leap of Faith⁴⁰), employs thick text which deepens the meaning of the gameplay. These quest texts are clearly “a call to action and a means of narrativizing gameplay events in diegetically historical terms, [but] the language used is highly mythological in nature” which evokes the supernatural world of mythology. “The narrative fragment deepens players’ understanding of the game world’s state of affairs, which makes the narrative a rich text or thick text” (Krzywinska, 2008, p. 129). Many ritual practices in the game evolve from quests, and have direct connections with its myths. We will elaborate on quests more when we discuss ritual dimension of WoW.

Apart from the routine quests and raids, Blizzard periodically organises festivals such as The Hallow’s End and Easter egg hunt. These cyclical events, which serve to break the monotony of repetitive raids, resemble and coincide with the real life festivals that are in some way connected to traditional religious mythology. Blizzard has been very creative in constructing its own rich lore connected to the game’s overarching mythos. The lunar

---

⁴⁰ ‘Leap of Faith’ also is a new priest spell that comes with Cataclysm, learned at level 85. It pulls a party or raid member to the priest's location whereby priests can rescue fellow players who have pulled aggro, who are being focused on in PvP, or who just can't seem to get out of the fire in time.
festival is held by the druids of Moonglade in “celebration of their city’s great triumph over an ancient evil,” and Peon Day is based on an “old” legend wherein, as described on the official Web site: “The leaders of the two races: Orc and Human each called upon a lowly worker and assigned him a great task... Thus, on the anniversary of that day, we celebrate in honour of them and of all the peons and peasants everywhere.” These will be discussed in detail in the section of rituals.

B.2.f. Religion in WoW

Religious motifs such as shamanism, magic, sorcery are explicitly present in WoW. There are many major and minor religions in WoW. The Elune Religion, the Religion of the Holy Light, Druidism, and Shamanism, the Mystery of the Makers, the Followers of the Old Gods, Loa-worship, The Earthmother, the Cult of Forgotten Shadow are the major religions in WoW (Wowhead, 2009c; Wowpedia, 2009; Wowwiki, 2009d). These fictional religions with real in-game practices often comprise a significant piece of the race’s individual histories within the game. They may have a significant impact on the faction, race, and class choices made by players. This mythic structure includes NPCs such as clerics, archbishops and council of bishops.

The Alliance has a systematic structured religion in the game: the Holy Light. This religion includes a church, basic teachings, and something to worship (the Light). Missionaries of this religion are sent to preach the wisdom and good news to entire nations (Wowwiki, 2010a). Humans, Draenei, Night elves, and some Dwarves follow the Holy Light. In addition, users of the “Light” include classes such as priests, paladins, and blood knights. Humans follow the Holy Light to gain spiritual awareness and guidance. They worship in the Cathedral of Lights located in Stormwind (Wowwiki, 2010a). Humans value the three teachings of the Holy Light, also known as the three virtues namely respect, tenacity, and compassion. Practitioners of the Holy Light believe in the “betterment” of the universe and strive to bring happiness to others, hence the virtue of respect. Tenacity helps them to truly affect the universe in a positive fashion. Compassion is helpful for one’s connection with the universe and one’s surroundings. Humans learn this virtue last because it allows those who are able to grow, to grow on their own. Once they learn this virtue, they are able to truly help those around them (Wowwiki, 2010a).

The Hordes have much more obscure and ill-defined religious practices. The religions of the Horde are scattered and lack any significant form or structure. Shamanism can be
considered as a popular religion of the Horde. The fundamental principle of shamanism in *World of Warcraft* (WoW) is “personification of the elements of nature” (Bainbridge, 2010, p. 68). The Horde races do believe that anything that has lived, or is alive, is associated spiritually with nature. However, Tauren live their lives in honour of their ancestors’ spirits, through which they meditate. Although they do worship trees, water, and earth, they hold ancestral worship in much higher esteem. Trolls are also gaining a much greater appreciation for Shamanism and nature worship after giving up their cruel practices of cannibalism and sacrifice. The goddess Elune, or Mu’sha to Tauren, plays a major role in the Horde’s divine nature worship. Trolls, however, have trouble with peacekeeping because of their dark past. Arcane magic, although considered evil, is ever-present in Azeroth, and is a power that brings evil to the world. Elune has tried many times to drive away the power, but it has corrupted far too many individuals to be completely silenced (Wowwiki, 2010c).

Worshipping The Holy Light resembles a holy association with something much like Shamanism. In spite of this, Shamanism and nature worshipers believe that spiritual power comes from countless spirits that unite everything, while followers of the Light believe that the light is from lone individuals and their connections with their surroundings and the universe. These various forms of Horde religion are often assumed to be evil by inexperienced players who may ascribe this quality to the Horde as a whole (Wowwiki, 2010c).

**B.2.g. Iconography, Greetings and Music**

The iconography and graphical representation of *World of Warcraft* includes churches, abbeys, and cathedrals, several altars dedicated to different gods, graveyards and memorials. Each race is distinguishable by their iconographic symbolism. For example, Paladins, the warriors of the Holy Light, who uphold all that is good and true in the world are pictured with a holy book and a hammer. The character is created mixing elements of the warrior and the clerics of the Holy Light. The architecture in Darnassus, the hometown of Night Elfs for example, has crescent moons imprinted on it. It is their capital and where the moon temple of the goddess Elune is located.

Classes each have a particular greeting system. For example Night elves have a range of vocal greetings such as “*Elune be Praised!*” and “*Ishnu Alla*” to invoke the goddess
Elune, and to use as their cheer while they wave to another player. The worldview of night elves and tauren are very much related to nature.

*World of Warcraft* has significantly enchanting background scores and attractive diegetic sound effects. The producers have taken great care to create the religious and mythic mood of the game in the relevant episodes of the game. Many compositions resemble the religious Gregorian chant. The soundtrack ‘Sacred’ (2008) composed by Jason Hayes, Tracy W. Bush, Derek Duke and Glenn Stafford evokes a mystical and nostalgic mood.
B.2.h. **Death and Eternity**

In my search for religious elements in *World of Warcraft* I also attempted to visit exotic locales populated by ferocious monsters, even when I was not supposed to visit such dangerous places due to my low level and my priestly character. A monster attacked me unexpectedly and before I could figure out what to do (which key to press) I was dead!

When an avatar is dead the whole colourful scenario turns into grey-scale and the player finds their corpse in a graveyard-like place guarded by a ghost angel. This is a way *World of Warcraft* allows the player to experience the “visual aesthetics of death” (Klastrup, 2008, p. 162). A couple of options were open for an avatar to be resurrected. They could be resurrected with the help of an NPC resuscitator for which they have to pay in virtual money. The second option is to find the corpse: the avatar’s ghost has to travel all the way to where it died in order to find its corpse. In that situation, although the ‘soul’ could travel around (still in the grey scale scenario of course), the player is not able to do any activity or interact with any other players or NPCs in the game.
Death is a reality in *WoW*, but not the end. It is a particular type of death as an intermediate state. Player Muji feels frustrated when he is dead. “It is really insulting to die.” However, death is an intrinsic part of the gameplay experience, and can be considered trivial or nontrivial depending on the context. The phenomenon of death in *WoW* mythically leads the player to experience the transient nature of human life. It is also a temporary liminal experience of being cut off from the world *WoW* (Klastrup, 2008). Player Yiddi relates death to religion and metaphysical phenomena:

> “All these things are very religious themes. Dealing with dying and resurrection I sometimes feel embodied resurrection. Especially with my class, we have inbuilt resurrection, once we die we can instantly resurrect and we can walk on water.” (Player Yiddi, 2012).

### B.2.i Personal Myths: Fandom

This section would be incomplete if we did not discuss some of the activities players engage in outside the game context. Producing machinima and using *WoW* for personal religious talk are two major examples of this. Machinima are moving images grabbed from real time play sessions and manipulated later to narrate a player’s own mythic narratives (Lowood, 2006; Lowood & Nitsche, 2011). Players upload these videos in online video sharing platforms such as YouTube or on their own personal blogs. A machinima of Jesus’ temptation uploaded by Ralema567 (2008) is a fascinating example of how religiously players engage with the game resources. The author, in making this narrative authentic to the sacred text of the Bible, uses his avatars and chose appropriate landscapes of *WoW* together with a recorded voice over of the biblical text (Matthew 4:1-11). Among the several people who have commented on this video, a player named Hadezul2 responded with a request for doing David and Goliath in the same fashion; yet another (llevijr) makes a prayer to Jesus on the video blog page of YouTube.

Such machinima not only provide religious narratives but also immortalise a player’s avatar and their *WoW* experiences through their creative ability. A YouTube video named *World of Warcraft - The Modern Myth* uploaded by Perderedeus (2010) is a good example of this. The author presents it as a tribute “farewell to the Azeroth of old” because “Cataclysm is coming, and things are changing.” The language used here is itself apocalyptical. It is an aspiration to leave the past behind and look forward to the new heavens and earth. The machinima uses the music ‘A Modern Myth’ (*A Beautiful Lie*, 2005 by 30 Seconds to Mars) as the background. The lyrics are eschatological:
“Did we create a modern myth
Did we imagine half of it
What happened then, a thought for now
Save yourself, Save yourself
The secret is out, The secret is out.
To buy the truth, And sell a lie
The last mistake before you die
So don't forget to breathe tonight
Tonight's the last so say good-bye
The secret is out [x4] Good-bye [x17]” (Perderedeus, 2010)

And the user comments and conversation are striking:

Maurotaku: I like TSTM, and I almost cried watching this...lol. Very well done, +faves to always remember how it was... And now let's face the Cataclysm.
Largo: After seeing the changes to Azeroth, from Taurajo in The Barrens to Shadowfang Keep, the icy tendrils of nostalgia and want of the past is beginning to creep up on me. Thank you for sharing all of this with us. See you in Azeroth, brother.
SchwarzerWind: It was all so touching, but when it got to Magni still standing there in Ironforge like he never left, that was when the tears came.
Hallowilibra: Also, for being your first vid, it's damn good. I see the old shit and I remember how it was the first time i saw it all in 04'. :) Thanks again. I watch this all the time. :) Thanks!
Skylendor: I still watch this video when I miss old Azeroth.
thinius3626: I will cry!!!!!! This new world is so retarded =( 

These examples demonstrates what Bainbridge (2010, p. 5) argues that a player’s “identity is also defined by religion, as a member of one sect in conflict with another” and they reason “historically, labouring to understand the present as a consequence of past events.” Thus the myths of WoW are not stories of the past, but are opportunities for players to create their own relevant stories of the present as well as to participate in those myths as an active character (Dardel, 1984).

Finally, we see that WoW becomes instrumental in generating copious religious talk among many players, who use the WoW platforms. Apart from the conversations about various in-game religious aspects in many player forums (Carter, 2007; Poisso, 2010; Wowwiki, 2010d; Ziebart, 2008), players are making WoW platforms to impart their personal religious perspectives concerning the religions of WoW.

Silaine (2013), a player, hosts a weekly event in WoW named Shadow Sermon in which he deals with a wide range of topics from The Cult of the Forgotten Shadow to the Light, politics, philosophy, and faith. The events take place within the throne room of Lordaeron at 8 OR 9 PM server time. He runs a channel for religious roleplay focused around the Cult of the Forgotten Shadow which is intended to connect with other people and to announce various events. He uploads these religious sermons in the official
Blizzard forum site and many others comment on it. This shows that players are engaging with the mythical ideas of the game not only in the context of the game but also in their real world.

**Conclusion**

This section has demonstrated that mythic elements of *WoW* such as icons, architecture, sounds and music, story, the interface that mythically presents the dynamics of the game within the framework of the grand narrative of *WoW*, and above all the quests, provide players with the sensation that they play a significant role in the state of affairs of the *World of Warcraft*. This provides them with the satisfaction of becoming a hero and making meaning out of this secular game inspired by medieval mythical, ethical and religious themes. We have seen that myths in *WoW* are very dear to its huge fandom.
Chapter 5. Ritual in WoW
Virtually Religious: Myth, Ritual and Community in the World of Warcraft – Ritual

Jose Vallikatt
A. Context

The second lens through which the religious characteristics of World of Warcraft are examined is ritual. This section outlines a number of aspects of ritual in both religious studies and media studies that provide perspectives on how ritual is identified and analysed in the textual analysis, which follows.

A.1. Ritual

Originally, rituals were most closely associated with religion and many theories of religion – essentialist, functionalist and phenomenological – considered ritual to be essentially religious until developments in ritual theory began to conceptualise it as connected to social activity in general (Bell, 1992).

Within this cultural perspective, rituals were seen through the lens of social cohesion and equilibrium and seen as functional for social communication. The ritual view of communication proposed by James Carey (1992) for example, sees the highest manifestation of communication in the construction and maintenance of an ordered, meaningful, cultural world that can serve as a control and container for human action. According to this view, events, acts and behaviours connected with media can share the characteristics of rituals, where the main purpose is not simply the transmission of information but to present, engage in and consolidate worldviews and social roles, (Carey, 1992).

Other theorists have extended Carey’s work in conceptualising a ritual dimension to media. Dayan and Katz (1992, p. 26) have noted integrative media events of contest, conquest and coronation that perpetuate the social order, revitalise social norms and reaffirm existing traditions and customs, and cause paradigm change, while Katz and Liebes (Katz & Liebes, 2007) have identified disruptive media ritual events such as disaster, terror and war. Couldry identifies media rituals as “any actions organized around key media-related categories and boundaries whose performance reinforces, indeed helps legitimate, the underlying ‘value’ expressed in the idea that the media is our access point to our social centre” (Couldry, 2003, p. 2). Grimes (2006) extends the analysis further with other examples and classifications of media rituals such as ‘ritual actions in virtual space’, ‘subjunctive (or “ludic”) ritualising,’ ‘ritualised behaviour towards electronic
object,’ ‘media document of ritual act’ (pp.4-7). Finally, in a consumerist world, consumption itself is considered to be a ritual practice (Hubbard, 2011; Otnes & Lowrey, 2004; P. R. Smith & Zook, 2011).

Grimes (2004) extends this consideration of rituals in media by making distinctions between rite, ritual, and ritualization. Rites are socially recognised sequences of action rendered special by virtue of their condensation, elevation, or stylisation. Ritual is the general idea of actions characterised by a certain “family” of qualities such as being performed, formalised, patterned and condensed. Ritualisation is activities not normally viewed as rites but treated as if they were or might be (TV watching, for instance). It is the act of deliberately cultivating or constructing a new rite, with the degree of ritualisation increasing as the number and intensity of the behavioural qualities increase (Grimes, 2004, pp. 27-28). In a later work Grimes (2006) provides many examples and a classification of various media rituals. The examples that are particularly important for this study are ‘ritual actions in virtual space,’ ‘subjunctive (or “ludic”) ritualising,’ ‘ritualised behaviour towards electronic object,’ ‘media document of ritual act’ (pp.4-7).

This range of perspectives is presented not in order to create a taxonomy of occurrences by which ritual may be identified, but to illustrate that there is significant support for analysing a game text such as WoW to identify ritual practices that share a lot in common with religious rituals and with how the functions of religious rituals have been understood. It is in this intersection of culture and religion that this study analyses rituals within the game. In this study, ritual is understood as “the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers” (Rappaport, 1999, p. 24). In line with Rappaport’s definition, the features of ritual to be considered are performance, formality, invariance, elements of acts and utterances, and encoding by characters other than the performers.

A.2. Ritual Process

The concept of liminality developed by Victor Turner (1967b) has been a framework for many media research studies, which see a ritual process at work in the way media events or an individual’s behaviours in a media context can transcend the mundane activities of everyday life into special and meaningful moments.
In his understanding of the ritual process, Turner draws on the theoretical framework developed by Arnold van Gennep (1960) who articulates a three-step structure of rituals, namely ‘separation’, ‘margin’ (or limen), and ‘re-aggregation.’ Turner (1967b) similarly identifies three phases in the distinctive character of ritual practices. The first phase is *separation* from the secular or profane world demarcating a “sacred space and time.” The second is the *liminal* phase, where the subject feels dissolved or invisible, as if in between two phases, which Turner calls “betwixt and between.” A person in this state is called a “transitional-being,” or “liminal persona” (Turner, 1967a, pp. 95-97). The ritual event provides new symbolic forms. In the third phase called *reaggregation* people return the new symbolic forms experienced in the liminal phase back into secular life.

The person who is set to undergo a ritual process is first stripped of the social status s/he possessed before the ritual, guided to the liminal period of transition, and finally given his/her new status and reassimilated into society. The liminal individuals *have* nothing: “no status, insignia, secular clothing, rank, kinship position, nothing to demarcate them structurally from their fellows” (Turner, 1967b, p. 98). They are “neither here nor there; [but are in] betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremony” (Turner, 1969, p. 95). The group of liminal individuals is not a typical social hierarchy but a communal group in which all are equal.

The ritual process affects the spatio-temporal realities of a person who is in the liminal phase. The function of ritual, according to Turner, is to allow individuals who are in the liminal space symbolically to reproduce the liminal time in order to overcome the limitations of time. Liminality reifies the social order and fixed relationships within the community, bringing about a state called “*communitas*,” which is a relatively unstructured society based on relations of equality and solidarity (Turner, 1982, pp. 46-47).

Liminality according to Turner is a “temporal interface” through which “meaning” can be generated “between established cultural subsystems, though meanings are then institutionalized and consolidated at the centres of such systems” (Turner, 1982, p. 41). They are “collective representations” – “symbols having a common intellectual and emotional meaning for all the members of the group,” but are the antithesis of quotidian, ‘profane’ collective representations (Turner, 1982, pp. 53-54). Even though only
temporary, liminality presents a state that allows for the creation of a new ordering of reality and a moment of truly creative action. Thus rituals lead to social solidarity.

Turner’s three phases and some of their characteristics, form one of the lenses through which ritual in the *World of Warcraft* game text is identified and analysed.

A. 3. The Ritual Logic

Gazzard and Peacock (2011) argue that many activities in digital games work within and because of a “ritual logic.” This ritual logic of digital games is characterised not only by the features of the definition by Rappaport (1999) mentioned above but also because, through their ludic nature, they take the participants into a world apart, a magic circle. Elements of this ritual logic are that it occurs in a defined space; it involves initiation of the participant; and above all through the rules of the game it has a programmed logic within which the player achieves the specific goals. As Bronkhorst (2012) argues, a ritual becomes ritual only to achieve pre-determined outcomes without having any room for chance.

The liminal quality of rituals is linked to ritual logic in various ways. First it helps people to transcend the mundane and move into the realm of the sacred by temporarily entering into a different time and space where “people ‘play’ with the elements of the familiar and de-familiarize them” (Turner, 1982, p. 27). Building upon the framework of Turner, other scholars argue that liminality provides opportunities for ludic invention (Raj & Dempsey, 2010a). Correspondingly, play should be understood as a serious and productive activity and potentially charged with “profound religious meaning and significance” (See also Dempsey & Durayappah, 2010, p. 74; Harman, 2010; Raj, 2010, p. 34).

Secondly, if play is considered as an “identity ceremony” (Henricks, 2010), the playing arena can serve as a ritual space, a space where each player experiments with his/her own identity: personal and social, actual and virtual, profane and sacred (Bell, 1992). The playing arena can be a space where the players display their commitment to the world, reinforcing their social status through successful play both within and outside of the game world. Because identity and space are integrally connected, players who

---

41 I am indebted to Gazzard and Peacock (2011) for this title.
engage in a ritual space and in ritual activities through play can be seen to be exploring their ritual identity, with their identities socially established through the multilayered “social meanings” created through the possibility of game communities (Nitsche, 2008, pp. 191-195). Thus game space can be a “safe space… to discover new realms of spirituality” (Hodge, 2010, p. 165). In such a space, the purpose of play is to step out of the “real” to the temporary sphere of “pretence” through which players can transpose themselves between profane and sacred, building a union of sacred and profane as well as blurring the boundary between the two.

B. Text

B.1. Rituals in WoW: A Descriptive Analysis

There are many activities in WoW that reflect the characteristics of rituals. The game dynamics of WoW, looked at from a ritual perspective, are condensed, elevated, or stylized to such an extent that they have the characteristics of a rite as elaborated by Grimes (2004). The game is built around quests that help players move around the game world and engage in various game activities. Every quest in the game has a pattern which includes quest-giver, background story, objectives and rewards (Rettberg, 2008). The avatar of the player meets and converses with the quest giver to take up the task. The quest givers are NPCs, usually marked with a yellow exclamation mark above their head. On clicking the NPC the player is given a quest description, which makes up part of the lore. For example a quest ‘to protect Aysa while she meditates’ that can be done in the initial levels of play has the quest description as follows:

It's a pleasure to meet you, <class>. I am Aysa, of the Tushui. I've spent much time in thought since Master Shang told me we would be searching for Huo, the spirit of fire. I know where he resides, but not how to reach him. The answers are close, however. Come with me to the Cave of Meditation nearby. It is a place of great wisdom. I will meditate there, open my mind, and the path shall find us.

From a ludic point of view the quests are rule-based activities that ask players to fulfil certain tasks such as exploring the places, getting familiar with some skills of using the hardware keys, or acquiring the skills of using certain weapons. But quests such as this one not only allow the player to explore the Cave of Meditation and the surrounding areas to gain 250 XP points as rewards, but also immerse the player into the rich history of the game world, which is often expressed in thick religious terminology. The combination of
these elements and the quest with its set rules and pathways all serve to ritualise the activity, the terminology, the disposition of the players and activities associated with it are highly stylised and elevated.

All the quests in the game have a background story. Some are short while some are very elaborate and detailed. *In Search of The Temple* for example is a simple quest to search for the Temple of Atal’Hakkar as requested by Brohann Caskbelly, whereas *Ritual Bond* and *Ritual Materials* are complex quests with elaborate details about the actions done in them. Some myths in *WoW* have ritual counterparts validating the connection between the myths and rituals, a pattern elucidated by Raglan (1955). That means the activities in these rituals are strongly guided by the mythic story of the game. Through participation in the performance of these rituals, the player engages and immerses themselves in the history of the world of *WoW*. Grimes (2006) describes such activities as ‘subjunctive (or “ludic”) ritualising’.

An example of this type of subjunctive ritualising is the quest of *The Defilers’ Ritual* (level 84), which has the task of stopping the Neferset Ritual. It is based on the mythology of a foul ritual of corruption performed by Neferset, a force that corrupts the river in Uldum. The ritual is believed to be offered underwater at Murkdeep Cavern. The task of the quest is to stop Neferset so that the river is cleansed once again. Though by doing this quest the player receives 55,200 experience points and 250 reputation points to advance in the rule based game system, it also motivates the player to engage with the mythology of the game and to take on a significant role in the history. Without the player fulfilling this ritual, ‘peace in the world of Azeroth’ cannot be established. From a ludic point of view every quest challenges the player within its limiting rules to achieve a specific goal. This goal-oriented behaviour is the objective of rituals in the real world as well. Rituals, especially religious ones are intended to offer the devotees specific rewards when they are performed in a particular way (rules) stipulated by the religious texts. As the quests in the game have the objective of achieving pre-determined outcomes without having any room for chance (Bronkhorst, 2012) they can rightly be called rituals and the player experience can be called ritualistic.

Another WoW myth related to ritual is about healing the giant tree for which Fandral plans to have a ritual. The background myth is as follows:
Ysera, the great Dreaming Dragon Aspect, rules over the enigmatic green dragon flight. Her domain is the fantastic, mystical realm of the Emerald Dream — and it is said that from there she guides the evolutionary path of the world itself. She is the protector of nature and imagination, and it is the charge of her flight to guard all of the Great Trees across the world, which only druids use to enter the Dream itself” (Wowwiki, 2009a).

Fandral intended to use the Idol of Remulos to achieve this, against Bearmantle’s better judgement. Before the ritual could be completed, however, Tyrande arrived, having been warned by Elune that Malfurion’s life was in greater danger than before. Fandral was also responsible for the corruption of Teldrassil, by secretly grafting a branch of Xavius's own Nightmare Tree onto the new World Tree in its infancy. When Malfurion finally broke free of the Nightmare, he revealed Fandral’s madness and betrayal to the rest of the druids” (Wowwiki, 2009a). Many quests and raids related to the arch myth of Mount Hyjal and the giant tree invite the players to participate in the mythic and ritual history of Azeroth. Quests such as Hero’s Call: Mount Hyjal, (level 80) The Fires of Mount Hyjal (level 81), Wings Over Mount Hyjal (level 81), Elemental Bonds questline

---

42 Emarald Dream, also know an as Dream of Creation, is a vast, ever-changing spirit world, that exists outside boundaries of the physical world (Walkthrough from www.wowwiki.com/Emerald_Dream).
43 Great Trees are saplings of the World Tree and portals to Emerald Dream. They can be found in several places like Feralas, Ashenvale etc. (Walkthrough from www.wowwiki.com/Great_Tree)
44 Idol of Remulos was given to Broll Bearmantle by Remulos, to help him channel his druidic powers. The idol is shaped like and connected to a green dragon, and connects Broll with the Emerald dream (Walkthrough from www.wowwiki.com/Idol_of_Remulos).
(level 85), and raids such as An Artifact From the Past (level 70 raid for both Alliance and Horde) are examples of this.

From a mythological point of view, it is interesting to note that these stories are described in various sources outside the game like Land of Conflict – A Warcraft RPG Source Book (Baxter, 2004) and Warcraft fiction such as Stormrage (Knaak, 2010). Fans have drawn these myths from these sources and put them together in the official sites and other forums to present a consistent story. Thus, though the game does not have a consistent linear chronology, players organise the myths in a timeline. By telling and retelling the stories, a cyclical organization of time is created with a sense of “eternal recurrence,” (Krzywinska, 2008, p. 134).

Raids and quests are constituted of various components such as attacks, killings, collecting materials, administering spells, and protecting the group members with specific skills attached to other characters. Many of these actions especially spells and other protective skills are administered ritually. These ritually administered spells are necessary to keep the character fit with stamina and energy. Ritual of Refreshment for example is a level 70 Mage spell that creates a Refreshment Table. This table allows players to get a stack of [Conjured Mana Biscuit], similar to a Soulwell. Each click of the refreshment table gives 20 biscuits to the player, with each biscuit restoring 7500 health points and 7200 mana\(^{45}\) points over 30 seconds. The table will last for 3 minutes or until 50 stacks of biscuits have been handed out (Wowwiki, 2009e). The logic behind this ritual is similar to the religious idea of spiritual nourishment through physical eating (such as the Christian Eucharist, or Prasada, holy edibles earned from a Hindu temple). Because health and mana are required to keep the avatar fit to fight the evil in the world, players must inevitably take advantage of these ritual acts. While the ludic value of these activities is to provide characters with virtual stamina to advance in the game, which in the rule-based logic specifies the number of biscuits, the specific amount of health and mana acquired within a specific time period or number of attempts, the immersion in the play to gain these requirements also fits the rationale and religious terminology of rituals. The parallels with real life rituals are fascinating: the religious faithful gain spiritual stamina through faith experience (which sometimes can be embodied experience); in gameplay

\(^{45}\) Mana is a magical power available to casters which they draw upon when casting spells. Casters usually start with a full bar of mana which is then depleted as they cast spells. Graphically the amount of currently available to mana of the avatar is shown in the mana bar.
this virtual stamina is physically experienced by the avatar as they are rewarded with the promised health and mana after successful completion of the ritual.

Another game strategy to restore health and mana, as well as to gain combat buffs is the skill of cooking special food. Primary professions such as engineering, mining, alchemy, enchanting (Wowwiki, 2009h) and secondary professions such as cooking, fishing and first aid (Wowwiki, 2009i) can be learned for a player’s own benefit. However virtual cooking becomes a ritual behaviour that enhances the virtual life of players in many ways. Cooking in WoW is not merely a game activity or hobby but is essential to life itself (Bookofwarcraft, 2009). It can be considered ‘sacramental’ as it nourishes a player’s inner life. Though these activities may appear secular or regular activities having offline counterparts, within the ritual logic of the game they acquire special significance. Most of our “sacred rites still concern our animal functions – eating, drinking, moving about, reproducing, dying, mating, and fighting” (Grimes, 1995, p. 44). By replicating the mundane activities of life in a ritual mode WoW can be seen as reiterating and reinforcing the value of rituals in real life, albeit in a virtual manner. By immersing themselves in such activities on a regular basis, players can validate the meaningfulness of such activities to the extent of having embodied experience, though technologically facilitated.

B.2. Players Seeking Ritual Identity

It is worth analysing the quests called ‘ritual materials’ and ‘ritual bond’. These two quests revolve around a theme of ritual with the very motif of these quests being to cooperate with and collect materials for a ritual in game. The ‘ritual material’ involves gathering materials from the nearby wildlife for a ritual act. The types of items to be gathered are whiskers from the moonstalkers, hair from the doe, and fur from the bears along the water at the northeast. The ritual motive becomes a ‘thick text’ because specific instructions about collecting these things are inscribed in the quest description. With the moonstalkers a player needs to pluck only from the sleeping ones, and they need to move away quickly. Hair from the doe has to be plucked avoiding stags. Players have to wait near the bears until they catch a fish, then get the sample quickly and get away before they finish eating. In all the cases the player must not harm the animals.

---

46 Walkthrough from http://www.wowhead.com/quest=13566
The ‘Ritual bond’\(^{47}\) involves breathing in incense in front of Keeper Karithus, and then choose the blessing of the Great Stag Spirit, the Great Thistle Bear Spirit, or the Great Moonstalker Spirit. This is a reward quest for accomplishing the former quest and the two are mythically connected to make it ritually consistent and cohesive. In order to achieve the quests the player has to journey through the rich visual landscape looking for ideal spots and animals, carefully manoeuvring the situation and waiting for the ideal moment, perhaps meditatively! Here there is no strategy, but patient and reflective waiting. Acting at the right moment provides the player with its rewards. These game activities involve the ritual elements identified by Grimes of ‘ritual space, ritual objects and ritual time’ (Grimes, 1995), and there is possibility for players to internally and externally develop a ritual mood. Internally the quest motif that is integrally connected to the mythology of the game invites the player to participate in the history of the world ritually. Externally the game rules bid the player to perform certain acts in a formal manner thus acquiring a ‘ritual identity’ (Grimes, 1995; Henricks, 2010) as they become an integral part of the ritual. The ritual description as well as the reward is addressed in the name of the player who played a unique ritual role in it. This thickens the game text in ways that leads the player to feel part of the history and action of the game. In the Ritual Bond quest the quest giver remarks:

“I have one more task for you while we wait... a favour to grant you, really, should you recognize it. The great wildlife spirits roam around us waiting and hoping for someone that will aid in stopping the destruction. They are with us as we speak even now, and with the materials you brought me, I can grant you sight. Speak to these spirits, choose one, and return to me with their blessing” (Wowhead, 2009d).

Greetings designed by Blizzard are part of quests as well, with guilds formulating their own codes and greetings for internal communications. Some times these greetings, such as ‘ishnu allah,’ ‘elune be with you,’ acquire a ritual nature as they are uttered repeatedly in a formal way, reflecting Grimes’ category of ‘ritual sound and language’(Grimes, 1995). Expressions created or accrued from real life conversations by players in the course of play such as ‘rofl’ (rolling on the floor laughing), ‘lol’ (laughing out loud), ‘gj’ (good job) are also used repeatedly and become part of the game play experience and ritual process as players use them in their daily conversations during play. These expressions become part of the ritual identity by which every player is initiated and accepted into the game playing community, establishing and maintaining its social order (Ducheneaut, 2010).

---

\(^{47}\) Walkthrough from http://www.wowhead.com/quest=13569
Travelling is a further basic element of almost all quests. After receiving the quest task from the quest giver through a conversation, the player proceeds to achieve the quest goal. It is during these travels that players explore the world of Azeroth. As the players embark on each quest journey into the unknown the great mysterious world of Azeroth is revealed to them. Rettberg identifies this as an ‘experience of epiphany’ (Rettberg, 2008) both from a ludic point of view and as an embodied experience. It is only through these ‘patterned, formalised and performed activities’ (Grimes, 2004) that a player can explore the world, level up, and achieve game goals. This is how ritual logic works in the gameplay of WoW.

During the gameplay, players taking up these stylised and formalised patterned activities effect what Grimes call ritualisation – an act of deliberately cultivating or constructing a new rite (Grimes, 2004). Each of the activities in the game when they are performed in a formal way then can be understood as working within the ritual logic. For example, most players have a dedicated specific time and space for playing, which they have set apart from their other daily activities. Several of the players I interviewed, such as Yiddi and Monk, engage in community play while physically being alone in their living rooms. Those I interviewed in Somajiguda and Bengaluru mostly play in the game parlours, as they prefer the social dimensions of community play and enjoy community during and after the play sessions. Whether they play alone or in groups, the time and space they have kept apart can be understood as a ritual time and space. In one interview situation I observed that the player has his room mood-lighted while he plays on a big screen with adjusted headphones, and he was oblivious of my presence near him.

While game activities may have the formal features of ritual - being punctilious and repetitive, having stereotyped elements and decorous gestures and postures and the regularity of time and space - a formal act becomes ritual only when it is performed (Rappaport, 1999). The written or oral text of the formalities of a quest, or the instructions about performing that act is not in itself a ritual. It becomes ritual only when the player actually performs the act according to that instruction.

**B. 3. The Ritual Culture of WoW**

Everyday playing and the regular patterns such as log-in and doing the daily quests in view of acquiring resources and experience points are examples of ritualised behaviours
of the game: typically “stylized, repeated gesturing and posturing” and consisting “of a sequence of actions having no obvious adaptive or pragmatic functions” (Grimes, 1995, p. 43). A beginner has to be slowly introduced into the culture of Azeroth. This is acquired through the various activities they do. Quests, which are played solo at the beginning and in groups after a few levels, constitute a significant element of getting familiar with the culture of WoW. The player needs to be inducted not only into the hardware skills but also into the ways of behaving in the World.

Each time they log into WoW the player’s avatars are virtually placed at the starting point of the avatar’s respective zone from where each player starts the journey. In the early levels players have to learn the basic skills of exploring the geography, finding and accepting quests, killing, looting, collecting etc. As they advance in the game, they learn social skills like making friends, chatting with them, playing in teams and joining guilds to gain social capital (Ducheneaut & Moore, 2004, 2005). Grimes calls this decorum. Decorum is the characteristic of a culture’s patterning when it becomes “part of a system of expectations to which its members are supposed to conform” (Grimes, 1995, p. 47). Players have to behave in particular ways conforming to the expectation of the gaming community and respecting the code of conduct stipulated by Blizzard.

Player Yiddi said that the daily quests as well as the random dungeon finder introduced by Blizzard for acquiring XP points “are rituals.” as the players do spend some time doing the same things everyday. While these are individual activities they are enforced through community play within the dynamics of the gameplay. To be successfully incorporated into a team of players each player has to have a certain gaming reputation and a certain number of XP points, which they gain from these repeated quests. Hence repeated quests can be considered as rites of passage through which they prove themselves part of the gaming community. Player Monk shares how these regular quests became a ritual act for him, even for his offline life:

“I used to come back from school, do my daily raid; then my daily dungeons. By that time it would be late evening. Then I play some random dungeon and by the time it is 1 a.m. or 2 a.m. and all the players come online then we used to do the daily content and try to destroy that. This has been a repetition for so long” (Player Monk, 2012).

Not every pattern of behaviour constitutes ritualization, but “every instance of ritualization presupposes a process, a dance-like quality of interaction between the ecosystem and people” (Grimes, 1995, p. 44). Players who achieve the topmost level of
the game do so through a gameplay process that works within this ritual logic. Though reaching the highest level is a game objective, high-level players reported being in this space probably for a liminal experience. For example, Player Monk, being a student, shared with me that he balances his goals of play and study. During a ‘season of play’ he used to play eighteen hours a day at the risk of his academic progress, but during the ‘season of exams’ he would focus on study for few months, after which he would return to play again. Similarly there were several players who would stop playing for some time when they were fed up with the usual game, but would return to the game when a new patch or expansion was released. Players have told me that patterns emerge not only in the game content but also in their play behaviour. Thus repetition within the game, and the repeated gameplay sessions can cause ritualization in the game. The liminal and transcending experience found through engaging with a ritual space and time is among the motives that players have for engaging in play.

Many of the players I interviewed reflected on this aspect of ritual as part of life, not just as exclusive to gaming. Many motifs in games indeed are drawn from life. While Player Abu accepts “rituals are usual in everyday life,” Player Yiddi thinks, “it enhances life. Life without rituals will be little boring.” Other players, such as Player Chandan try to minimise the repetitions by creatively planning the whole game content to be completed and “clearing the instances” before a new patch is released. Chandan said they “clear it on the last day before the new patch had come [and that] would actually keep [them] fascinated.” The game continually provides a new experience although you are doing the same quests and dungeons as it is played with/against the numerous “guilds in the world” (Player Chandan, 2012).

B. 4. The Ritual Process in WoW

Gameplay is a process that involves players in the ‘other worldly,’ as players transcend the mundane activities of everyday life through special and meaningful moments. Game play involves a ritual-like process that comprises separation, initiation and re-aggregation, identified by Turner (1967b) which are experienced in elements such as logging in to the game, turning to be the character avatar you choose to play, doing a set of duties and activities offered or required by that avatar’s race and class, undertaking
quests, meeting other avatars and engaging in party raids and quests, and setting achievable game objectives.

Logging and taking your avatar involves wearing a new skin. This provides the player with instant separation from the real to the virtual. As the player grows in levels their avatars get the opportunities for personal grooming, purchasing special attire, armour and pets to show their avatar off to the best of their ability. In each of these activities the players not only feel increasing separation from the ordinary to the more immersive role in the specific history of Azeroth but also improved social status among other players. Though avatars are the carriers with which a player can fulfil all the possibilities in game, they are also limited, and controlled by the game rules: they are limited to individual skills, special ways of moving around and certain exclusive spells. Some spaces are forbidden, and some spaces they cannot cross because of the peculiarities of the game’s programming. Yet, from a ludic perspective these limitations imposed by the rules offer challenges and possibilities to achieve the goals of the game. Having rules such as these is a characteristic of rituals.

Various examples of crossing the threshold, or rites of passage, can be seen in WoW’s gameplay. These are various landmark events in the game that elevate the player to the next phase. In the course of play each player will come across events such as discovering new places, learning skills, levelling up, acquiring experience points, meeting and gaining friends, being accepted as a guild leader and so on. The players are then imbued with a feeling of fulfilment and a sense of accomplishment. When new locations are visited for the first time a note appears on screen “<place name> discovered.” The locations in the map become manifested as the players discover them, while remaining locations are shown as a barren land yet to be discovered. The avatar’s level indicates a score that proves how many thresholds it has crossed in its virtual existence. The avatar description pane on the top left of the screen which shows the level, experience and mana is a constant reminder of the phases the player has successfully completed as well as those yet to be conquered.

Repetition is an aspect of game playing which makes the activities of WoW akin to rituals. Quests tend to have a repeating pattern which involves taking up the quest, travelling to the quest location, achieving the quest goal and receiving the reward. Players need to kill monsters in order to loot materials or collect drops. These are resources
which can be used either to obtain other relevant materials or to groom their avatars to enhance their social status. They receive graphic signs such as armour, tunics or badges after completing specific quests. Players do raids or they farm in order to collect reputation badges, which increases the social status of the player in the community. These visible signs acquired by players and guilds are proof that they have completed specific levels in the game. In the Onyxia Quest chain the head of the slain demon can be exhibited by the guild to claim that they have successfully achieved this quest goal. Similarly, those who complete the Defias Brotherhood quest chain may choose armour suitable for their respective class and race. In the game, the more players kill, acquire skills, fulfil quests, and do raids, the higher the level they reach.

Visually, these properties set their avatars apart from those who do not have them. These are visible marks and testimonies that they have crossed certain thresholds in the game which makes them separate from the other players as well as provide dignity in the community. Most of these insignia are “soul-bound,” as Rettberg describes it, as they are not transferable to others (Rettberg, 2008). The only way to receive these items is to complete the specific quest. The visible marks won by an avatar after completing specific quests speak of their avatar’s history, experience, and status. In online community forums of WoW, players ask questions about their doubts, and request tips about clearing ritual quests, as they may not have adequate information about them. Expert players then provide answers, reflecting ‘canonical authority’ to explain and interpret these stories, and to give methods and tips for completing the quests. Being an authority in WoW not only gains a player special status in the game community within the gaming context, but also establishes a reputation outside the gaming sessions. While I was interviewing Player Muji he received several calls on his mobile from other players who were asking about particular things in the game that they were uncertain about. I observed him responding to these calls graciously and with authority.

---

48 ‘Badges’ refers to reputation items received by players either as a drop item from bosses being killed (Badge of Justice), or earned items from daily quests (Argent Crusade Commendation Badge). They can be spent at special vendors to buy other materials.

49 In numerous community forums of WoW such as wowhead.com, wowwiki.com, us.battle.net expert players suggest tips and other relevant information about doing quests.
B.5. Integrating Rituals

Blizzard has integrated virtual counterparts of real life festivals into the game. These festive game events are not directly related to the game’s mythic lore and history but the designers have tailored them creatively to fit within the main mythology. Participating in these virtual festivities offers the players the possibility of engaging in activities that have a strong resonance with offline life in a virtual way. Examples of such rituals are the periodic events organised by Blizzard in the virtual space of *WoW*. *Winter Veil* occurs at Christmas-time; the *Lunar Festival* corresponds to Chinese New Year; *Love Is in the Air* aligns with Valentine’s Day; *Noblegarden* is around Easter season; and *Hallow's End* corresponds to Halloween. Some festivals such as Peon Day on September 30 have no direct real-world referent that I could find.

Though corresponding to real life festivals, Blizzard has adapted them to fit in with the myths of the *WoW*, to deepen it into a rich ritual text. The lore behind Hallow’s End for example, is that the day was once used for a festival near the end of harvest for humans of Lordaeron. Hallow’s End marks the day the group of undead, who would later be known as the Forsaken, broke free of the Lich King’s dominance and once again regained their free will. They celebrate this occasion by setting fire to a Wickerman (a graphic effigy construct resembling a humanoid) after a short speech from Sylvanas herself, and by smearing the ashes across their faces (Wowwiki, 2009b). These ritual themes in the game have other real life ritual and religious parallels such as the Hindu festival of *Ravana Dahana* which is a festival of burning huge effigies of Ravana symbolising triumph of truth and goodness over evil. It also resembles the Burning man festival in Nevada’s Black Rock Desert (Gilmore & Van Proyen, 2005).

The activities associated with this festival include quests and contesting activities such as shopping and trading. Quests like *Seasonal Boss: Headless Horseman* is a dungeon to participate in a high-level encounter against the Headless Horseman, granting a Loot-Filled Pumpkin containing special holiday loot as a daily reward. *Light My Fire* conveys the spirit of the season when players visit the Wickerman celebration just outside the city gates of Undercity and Stormwind to obtain quests which includes lighting their faction’s Wickerman or travelling to the opposing faction’s city to put a damper on the holiday by dousing their Wickerman (Blizzard, 2013a).
Among the activities *Shade of the Horseman* is an adventurous one where players douse the flames of the Headless Horseman and bring him down. *Candy Buckets* is a tricky contest which involves grabbing a handful of candy from colourful orange buckets placed in various locations in capital cities throughout Azeroth and beyond, reminiscent of Halloween rituals. The activities include trading of Tricky Treats for candy, masks, wands, pets, a temporary mount and so on from hoarders located in various places (Blizzard, 2013a). Blizzard in their festival related updates include temporary materials like quests, items such as fireworks and costumes, and decorations. The *Magic Broom*, for example is a rare mount drop from the Headless Horseman, found in the graveyard wing of Scarlet Monastery during the *Hallow’s End* seasonal event. This magic broom can be used by the players only during Hallow’s End. Used as a flying mount the broom facilitates the player’s riding skill. Participating in these activities will of course earn various rewards and skills that add to the social status of the player as well as gaining some financial capital with which they can buy pets and other items. They not only offer experience and capital for future engagement in the game activities but also are required pre-requisites for advanced play (Robert, 2013).

People also use *WoW* as an avenue for organising real life ritual events within the game space. Ritual activities such as marriages (Shim, 2010), family meetings and even scientific conferences (Bainbridge, 2010) are organised in the online spaces. *WoW* has built memorials in some locations and dedicated them to immortalise real life heroes. Langman and Lukács propose that arenas like *WoW* create spaces which encompass “the dialectical tension that characterise contemporary carnivals” allowing the players to “witness, experience, and participate in transgressive behaviour” (Langman & Lukács, 2010, p. 69).

Similarly ‘BlizzCon’ is an annual real life gathering, which reinforces *WoW*’s motifs. These offline game conventions organised by Blizzard keep the offline community alive and *WoW*’s game culture progressing. Players and fans attend these conferences eager to meet other players, the offline meetings reciprocating the online play. Players acknowledge that such gatherings enhance family bonds. Player Riviera writes in the discussion forum:

50 ‘Locales of hope’ in Kalimdor, a mountaintop near Crossroads in the Barrens is a shrine dedicated to Michael Koiter, a real-world artist who died in 2004 at the age of 19 while helping to create *World of Warcraft*.
“…when some of us started our own guild, it became more family oriented between all of us......for all the members in the new guild are connected somehow......cousins, wives, husbands, RL friends, brothers. I keep in contact by text and email and facebook with several of the guild members. Most of us plan on meeting at the next blizzcon (Riviera, 2011).

The primary motives for engaging in various activities in a digital game space may be the degree of pleasure and fun derived from playing. However, these become formal, repeated and patterned over the time, in other words they share features of real life rituals. Even more fascinating is that they also enhance the social lives as well as the intellectual and emotional search of human beings.

B.6 The Ritual Logic

Play itself can be understood as a social ritual, and discourse about and around WoW has become part of the ritual conversation of its participants. This was readily observable particularly in the effervescent environment of the game centres I visited in India. A number of the players I interviewed played in Zapak gameplexes, an established network of game parlours in the main cities across India. In two centres, Devasthana in Bengaluru and Somajiguda in Hyderabad, I observed high spirits in the community of WoW. In my field notes I wrote,

...I saw vitality, and enthusiasm of these young players. They were almost like living there. Playing, eating, drinking and dreaming WoW. Six of them were playing on each computer. One was directing others to play as a raid leader. Instead of using the in-game chat facility to co-ordinate the game they were yelling at each other. The raid leader was making strategies for the dungeon. This creates a very vibrant community feeling. They were achieving a common goal together (Vallikatt, 2010, October 4).

While in Bengaluru I observed an energetic community. In Somajiguda, Hyderabad, the effervescence in the community was highly ritualistic in character. On all days I visited the game centre I saw them arriving at a regular time (between 9 and 10 a.m.), after the initial socialisation they sit in their preferred seats, and do various sessions of gameplay which would last for 45 to 50 minutes. In between they take a five to ten minute break to have a coffee or a snack mostly taken in their own seats where they play. During breaks they discuss the style of play and its outcomes, suggesting strategies to their friends for improvements. One of the possible reasons for the difference between the Bengaluru and Hyderabad playing communities could be demographic. The former was comprised of students from various parts of India. Though they spoke different languages and had different religious and cultural backgrounds, the game united them as a ritual
community. The members of the playing community in Somajiguda shared a similar religious, cultural and linguistic background.

My visit to the Somajiguda centre coincided with Dashara, the great festival of Hyderabad and I witnessed the sacred and secular merging mutually in colourful and playful ways. Ritual boundaries between the actual and virtual, sacred and secular were indistinguishable in Somajiguda. I wrote in my travel journal:

Figure 5.2 – Temporary Pandals of Devi Durga and devotees gathering in front of them in Hyderabad

Figure 5.3 – Shopping Lord Ganesha on the roadside during Dashara festival
From the guest house in Ramnagar I walked down to the bus stop to catch the bus towards Somajiguda. The way to the bus stop was encroached temporarily for Pandals (make shift shrines erected for Devi Durga). Through the fringes of those pandals and people worshiping in front of them I could hardly pass to the bus stop. People in festive mood were moving through these passages either for their daily business or visiting others. They stopped in front of the Pandals for a moment of meditation completely oblivious of the secular world outside but hindering other pedestrians and small vehicles on the road. After a few moments of silent prayer in front of the roadside shrine with their hand joined and heads bowed they approached the priest who was administering the effigy of the Goddess (made of plaster of paris for temporary purpose). The priest gave them the prasada the sacred edible that would be eaten by them and some holy water...

The mood was nothing much different as I stepped into the game centre from the street. At the game centre in Somajiguda I observed rituals too. The centre manger had his kiosk under the small shrine of Lord Ganesha. Incense was burning in front of it. I moved to the players to introduce myself. They were busy doing their daily ritual dungeons. Others were chatting before they get into gaming. I observed miniature statues of Lord Ganesha over their computer while they were playing. (Vallikatt, 2010, October 18).

Play becomes ritual not just because players engage in repetitive acts or because the game asks them to engage with ritual motifs. Most acts associated with play gain their effectiveness as they function within three-stepped ritual logic: separation, initiation and re-aggregation. Young players are usually initiated into the game by experienced players, either on a one to one basis, or in the group environment. In the game parlours I visited in India the players don’t only play WoW nor do they all belong to same age group. The parlours offer a subscription to a range of games from racing games to shooter games to fantasy RPG games. In the parlours I visited I observed children of 10 years old playing in one corner of the game centre, while on the other side there were young adult players playing World of Warcraft. The play experience and the ambience of the game parlour can be understood as an initiation or preparation environment.

Monk, a player I interviewed, shared his experience of being initiated into WoW by senior friends of his. Initially he was not able to keep up with the game’s dynamics and strategies and he planned to stop playing. But with the help of a friend he was able to progress and become an expert in the game. He said to me:

“It was a bit desperate... All my friends were already levelled up by that time. Once I reached level 24 or 25 I reached a difficult point where I felt very hard and annoying so I created a new character and begin on that. Then I realised that I was playing a lot and had a bunch of level 25 which is not good. Then one of my friends told me how to be persistent and advance the game. Then I thought okay, I should level up. Before I got that piece of advice, I thought this game is absolute bullshit. I do not want to play anymore because levelling up was desperately annoying. But then I deleted all my character and then took one characters and levelled up to maximum” (Player Monk, 2012).

This mentoring into the game provides players like Monk with social acceptance not only within the game but also within the physical community he is part of. The experience of initiation can be a hard and painful liminal experience, but once a player has crossed the threshold it can enhance their identity and acceptance.
If players from outside a playing community wish to join guilds they have to accept the norms, code of conduct and status quo already defined by that guild and every member of the guild usually has to agree to accept new members. This again reflects a rite of passage, a proof of social acceptance in real life. Similarly real-life social etiquette is followed in online behaviour on various levels, and usurpers can be expelled from the team instantly with the law-enforcing power given to each member (Ducheneaut, 2010).

Ritual logic can be seen in the game in its establishment of hierarchies and superiority (Bronkhorst, 2012). It can also blur the hierarchical boundaries in a ritual fashion (Raj & Dempsey, 2010a). *WoW* can be a context for perpetuating real life social inequality or for remediying such inequalities on the basis of gender, race, religion, language and technological skills. Player Yiddi shared that he had faced a racist attack for being an Indian while playing in a US server, and at other times he had experienced a lack of regard for individual playing styles.

“Nobody does keep a decorum ethics of dealing. People do whatever they want to do in wow. For example, in the random dungeon fighter tool there is this option for people vote to kick anyone out of the dungeon. So they kick the less experienced people out of the dungeon. They can really be mean on chat sometime as well. In terms of games progression it is good but from a player perspective it is not good” (Player Yiddi, 2012).

Other researchers have identified instances where new players have experienced difficulty in advancing in the game because of bullying from experienced players (see Kowalski, Limber, & Agatston, 2012; Rivers, Chesney, & Coyne, 2011). While it is difficult to judge the sincerity of philanthropic behaviour of players in a virtual world, just as it is in real life, some such actions may lead to good real life relations. One player, Quesac (2011), has blogged about how he helped a low level female player to find a way to get to Outlands in the game. So while gaming rituals can reinforce social discriminations, they can also offer possibilities to empower other players by mutual help and thereby blur the boundaries of social hierarchy. Player Hermitosis reflected this in his interview:

“I personally think it’s (addiction to play) about feeling powerful and adventurous in a world where people tend to normally feel powerless and insecure. Another element is the very real network of support that you find in other players... the kind of support and camaraderie that many people rarely find regularly in the real world, which ceases to exist the second you log off” (Hermitosis, 2009).

If the challenge and the potential of the game is to cross the threshold from the mundane and from social conventions through the liminality offered by the game, a call
from beyond in the voice of another unknown player can resonate in a player’s heart to transform and transcend the ordinary.

From the above analysis and discussion I propose that many activities in *World of Warcraft* can be seen as having ritual characteristics and the potential to become sacred rites. However, as in all ritual situations, online or offline, this potential depends on the significance each player or group of players gives them. Although players sometimes do not appreciate the routine pattern of the game, nevertheless the structured dynamics of gameplay work within the logic of rituals; there is no escape from it. Game and game-related topics become part of the everyday conversation and are ritually changing the language itself. Player Palani, who is an avid player, made this curious observation:

“*I will tell you one more thing. I saw two people who were talking... Every word they were using was in context with *World of Warcraft,* I was feeling like they were speaking a different language... See, the relevant thing is there are millions of people who are playing *World of Warcraft* and they will have their next generation speak in terms of *World of Warcraft*...*” (Player Palani, 2012).

I asked Palani if he thought that ritual language has become part of the cultural conscience of his generation. His answer was an emphatic yes. He thinks that gaming practices are parallel to traditional religious ritual practices. From his traditional Hindu family perspective, he compared his ritual practices:

“Yeah... Like I know my *Ramayana* very well. My parents were very devoted to religion. The first thing my parents were doing each day was waking up and praying. But now days the first thing I do is getting up and start playing. I was trying to get the spirit of... they are becoming other religion” (Player Palani, 2012).

**Conclusion**

Though some may perceive ritual activities in *World of Warcraft* to be founded on fun, frolic, pleasure and frenzied dance, and having no deep significance, the capacity of these acts to enhance the social life as well as the intellectual and emotional search of human beings makes it numinously significant. Having ritual characteristics does not make a game activity necessarily a religious ritual. However the ritual logic created by its features makes *World of Warcraft* a camouflaged modern ritual where many younger people find significant satisfaction that might once have been offered by the traditional religious institutions of the society.

The potential of virtual worlds to provide experiences of liminality through magic, visual stimulation, skills, spells, chants, warfare, and motifs of death, resurrection, and
life, enhances the life of players, it can be argued, ritually. The myths in *WoW* enrich their practices to give a meaning that transcends their lives. Through the thick text of *WoW*, players can transcend the core aspects of life and its cultural meanings even to the extent of blurring the boundary between actual and virtual, sacred and profane. The extent to which this is actualised depends on the extent to which and the manner in which each player absorbs and immerses themselves in the game.
Chapter 6. Community in WoW
A. Context

The third analytical lens for this study is community. After considering some theoretical issues, I will describe and analyse various aspects of community in WoW.

A.1. Community

Community is a phenomenon that can be understood in a number of ways. While traditional definitions of community have emphasised structural and institutional aspects attached to notions of physical co-presence, geographical boundaries and shared beliefs and a focus on functions such as solidarity, interaction and otherness (See for example, Day, 2006; Purcell, 2005; Somerville, 2011), more recent studies have focused on cultural and relational characteristics rather than territorial and geographical notions. This focus reflects Durkheim’s (1893) observation that modern societies develop community around interests and skills more than around locality. When understood in these terms, where the focus is on “quality of character of human relationship, without reference to location” (Gusfield, 1975, p. xvi), community is characterised by membership, influence, integration and fulfilment of needs, as well as shared emotional connection (Cohen, 2000; Fish, 1980; Goldstein, 2001).

Debates about the deterioration of community in the post-industrial and mass communication eras reflect these different understandings. Community can now be viewed as being detached from its original environment, the local place and attached instead to various ‘shared spaces’ (Driskell & Bateman, 2002). Central to the discussion was whether Community, a pre-industrial phenomenon shaped by enduring, genuine, and intimate relationships rooted in family, kinship and creation of bonds arising from shared understanding, language and customs, was being displaced by Society a phenomenon of the industrial era founded on a superficial, transitory artefact, which was contractual in nature and where all relationships were impersonal and individualistic (Tönnies, 1957).

51 Dictionaries define community as deriving from communis, originally meaning “people with common interests living in a particular area” or “a body of persons or nations having a common history or common interests” (www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/community), in which common denotes “belonging to or shared by two or more people or groups” (www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/common).
Separating the concept of community from attachment to a local space has opened the way for consideration and investigation of alternative communities formed around more generic, non-residential shared spaces. Mass media has been one of those major sites. New constellations of community have been investigated forming around media such as radio and television (Jankowski, 2002) and other shared images and cultural practices (Morgan, 2007). Media have been considered for the important role they play in constructing communities (Rodriguez, 2008) and building national identities through fictional narratives, literature and televised philosophy (Anderson, 2006; Castelló, 2007; Matheson, 2006).

Modern approaches to understanding community have therefore laid the foundation for understanding technologically mediated communications, especially networked communication, not as destroying community but as significantly changing and redefining the shape and working of communities. Virtual communities existing in cyberspace do not require a local space, just a space for gathering (Driskell & Bateman, 2002).

A.2. Online Community

Cyberspace or the online world is a special kind of social place constructed technologically where human interaction, communication and commerce can take place through interconnected computers via phone lines and data networks. These computer networks allow one-to-one and many-to-many forms of communication. Through the countless millions of transactions enabled via the Internet, computer-mediated communication has fostered the building of virtual communities – understood by many as a new form of real life communities (Jones, 1998; Preece et al., 2003; Smith & Kollok, 1999; van Dijk, 1997).

Technologies including Usenet and MUDs, which facilitated the first networked communities transform the traditional notion of body, place and space (Baym, 1998; Kolko & Reid, 1998; Stone, 1995). The Internet cannot be considered merely as communication technologies. Rather it offers social “spaces” that facilitate face-to-face meeting and communications where “meet” and “face” are understood in different terms. According to Stone (1995, p. 85), they are “passage points for collections of common beliefs and practices that unite people who were physically separate”. In similar vein,
Rheingold (1993, p. xx) proposes that virtual communities are “social aggregations that emerge from the Net when people carry on public discussions with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in Cyberspace.”

Some physical communities can maintain an online counterpart. These can be named ‘communities online’, while the term ‘online communities’ is generally used for those communities that are born purely in the virtual domain. These online communities can be avenues and portals for self-presentation, representation and social connection and the exploration of identity in the networked digital age (Papacharissi, 2011). They can also unite people with common beliefs and practices even though they may be physically separate. Hence they are “incorporeal” communities that are not wedded to geography or contained by national borders (Bugliarello, 1997).

The composition and functioning of virtual communities differ from real life communities in a number of fundamental ways. Members are not constrained by geographical boundaries (aspatial), nor do the interactions necessarily take place in real time (asynchronous). Members of online communities are not physically co-present to each other (acorporeal, or incorporeal as Bugliarello (1997) calls it) and are potentially free from social stigma such as race, gender, or physical appearance (astigmatic) - though the anonymity of members in virtual communities can make online space unsafe and people may not be held accountable for their actions and words in that space. Interactions are capable of being more anonymous than in real world communities (anonymous) (Smith, 1995).

Online communities can be seen as advantageous in a number of ways. They can build relationships between people who are spatially and temporally separated. They can offer a safer meeting ground and thus facilitate aggregations of larger numbers of people than in the real world. They can allow members to experiment with and explore new identities and personalities, leading to more uninhibited interaction than in the real world. They can bring together people from all walks of life regardless of their social status, class, race, gender or age. People in the same virtual community may never meet in real life, yet they can share a genuine relationship through their computer modems.

Recent studies have demonstrated that social network sites also serve as communities where people join together for various purposes (Johnson, Zhang, Bichard, & Seltzer,
2011; Parks, 2011). The members of such communities can experience belongingness through intense communication in a way that parallels real physical communities (Wellman & Gulia, 1999). Therefore some consider the present day online community can be considered as “an expression of communicative force within the modernity” (Delanty, 2010, p. 158) and the renaissance of lost communities (Rheingold, 1993) of the past.

Though mass media have been criticised for fragmenting traditional societies, new media are sometimes proposed as “conglobating” masses into virtual communities.

A. 3. Online Religious Community

Online communities are commonly formed around specific communicative purposes such as education, health, commerce and politics (Hildreth & Kimble, 2004; Lazakidou, 2012; Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Preece, 2000). The cyber world has also witnessed the mushrooming of many communities with religious purposes.

Christopher Helland (2000, 2002) differentiates religious activities in cyberspace as ‘religion-online’ and ‘online religion’. Religion-online presents information about religion, while online religion is an interactive religious environment for the web practitioner (see also Dawson, 2000; Schroeder et al., 1998).

Religion-online refers to activities, commonly originating in the physical world, that aim to provide information to both believers and non-believers. Many studies have been made of church websites based on this distinction (see for example Vásquez & Marquardt, 2003; Young, 2004). Helland argues that the more established, mature religious organizations have adapted to the on-line environment and have changed the manner in which they allow for on-line interaction. People increasingly find online avenues for ‘doing religion’ (Helland, 2005).

Online religion refers to those activities that attempt to re-create a sacred atmosphere, in effect mirroring the physical religious structure. Scholars have analysed a number of real life rituals digitally enacted on the Internet. The 1994 cyberspace enactment of the Samhain ritual is one example (Davis, 2004). Websites for Hindu virtual puja for its

52 CyberSamhain is the digitally enhanced version of the ancient Celtic celebration of the dead just as Halloween. Mark Pesce, a web scientist and co-creator of VRML (Virtual Reality Modeling Language), publicly performed
various denominations such as Saibaba and Matha Amritanandamayi, Catholic rosaries, the Jewish siddur, and the Islamic dua are other examples. These phenomena of online religion have captured the attention of scholars (see for example, Beckerlegge, 2001; Brasher, 2004; Campbell, 2005a, 2005b; Casey, 2001; Cowan & Hadden, 2000; Young, 2004). These studies have employed the theories of religion proposed by Victor Turner and Emil Durkheim as an analytical tool (for example, Copier, 2005; MacWilliams, 2002).

Community is an integral element in Durkheim’s definition of religion. For him religion is essentially a social phenomenon, a product of the collective life and an embodiment of the moral requisites of human social existence. In his *Elementary forms of the religious life*, Durkheim (1912) argued that religion creates society as a moral community by evoking the feeling of the sacred and the sensation of the divine in its members (pp. 154-56). It is the idea of sacred and its associated beliefs and rituals in a society that unifies it as a moral community.

These religious beliefs and states of common consciousness generally, are revivified periodically by a variety of rites, focused around those things held “sacred” by the community. These rites are highly emotional collective experiences, which serve to overcome the divisions among individuals and subgroups. Individuals learn about the sacred and religious beliefs through participating in rituals and community events, which revive collectively shared experiences. Thus, while religion seems to dwell entirely in the innermost self of the individual, the living spring that feeds it is still to be found in society.

However, what is held sacred is constantly open to historical interpretation and reinterpretation. New communities can be formed and fostered around “new sacred images” and ‘consecrated things and ideas’ constantly created by the society (Durkheim,
Though developed early in the twentieth century, Tole (1993) considers that Durkheim’s sociology provides a useful perspective for understanding the permanence of religion in the modern period, especially the larger role played by religion in generating the overarching values and predetermined meanings around which the privatized, institutionally differentiated and culturally pluralistic societies of modernity are integrated and their national identity sustained.

Studies of online rituals and communities suggest that what has been known sociologically as religion can exist in technologically mediated online sites. Existing as an interactive audio-visual medium for experiencing a sense of sacred presence, online activities and religious sites can create a mythscape which provides an immaterial mental geography that originates in sacred oral or scriptural traditions (MacWilliams, 2002). Ritual practices in online space can also effect social unification. Couldry (2003, p. 10), for example, notes the capacity of media to produce ‘social whole’ and support social convergence. Similarly, Meyer (2006, p. 9) suggests that mass produced images which occupy a central position in postmodern society have gained a “quasi-religious status, in that they generate the effervescent sentiment of sharing and taking part in a larger social ensemble”. Others see cyberspace as potentially presenting a sacred time and space for religious travelling and gathering, for practising virtues and purifying vices (Brasher, 2004) and for creating religious identities (Lovheim & Linderman, 2005). Cobb (1998) extends this even further, believing that “the sacred is present in computers” and arguing that “cyberspace can aid humanity’s spiritual progression” by serving as an “important way station” on humanity’s journey toward a greater spiritual evolution” (p.98).

In the light of changes in social religiosity taking place under the impact of online community formation, Campbell (2005b) proposes three models of religious community: Mystical Community, communities as story, and community as network. In a different study (2005a), she argues for two distinct online community spaces, the Spiritual and the Sacramental. Spiritual space offers an experiential and experimental locus facilitating spiritual enlightenment or innovation, often in non-traditional concepts. On the other hand, the Sacramental space in itself is virtual “holy” ground, enabling people to describe online activities as part of their spiritual life.

Both acknowledge technology’s ability to reproduce individual and communal religious practice. The extent to which these communal phenomena – the sharing with
others in a common task or activities that calls one out of oneself into a wider context of shared meaning and imperative – are present in the playing of World of Warcraft, is the focus of the following analysis of the WoW text.

B. Text

B.1. Community in World of Warcraft

World of Warcraft, being a multiplayer online game, is inherently social (though solo play is possible in the initial levels and PvE servers). The gameplay dynamics of WoW inevitably facilitate it as a social and cultural phenomenon, by allowing hundreds of thousands of players in its game world.

Scholars have observed a number of types of collaborative play in WoW, ranging from simple combative encounters with strangers to highly organized groupings with well-known friends (Nardi & Justin, 2006).

B.1.a. That's What We're Here For: The In-Game Community

I have been playing WoW for several years now for research purposes. Most of my travel within the game’s scenic geography was also a search for religious imagery spread across the landscape, architecture and iconography, as well as a search for its mythic themes by undertaking its various quests. I discovered places such as Elwynn Forest and Westfall in Stormwind. I passed near the Fargodeep Mine, which is infiltrated by kobolds, and Stone Cairn Lake proliferated by deadly murlocs. As I progressed through the initial levels, I engaged in activities such as meeting NPCs to take up quests, travelling, hunting monsters to collect materials and gaining a few virtual coins. I have sold collected materials to increase my virtual currency, purchased a few skills and had a grooming for my avatar, Purohit.

Aspiring for a quicker levelling up, faster exploration of the world and greater experiences, I attempted quests that were beyond my character’s capacity. Each time I was killed by the kobolds, the whole game scenario turned grey signifying that my avatar was in a dead state. I found my soul in the nearest graveyard guarded by a tall white angel. My avatar then had to travel back in ghost form to the spot where I was killed to
find my corpse and be resurrected instantly the moment I reached there. This neither helped me advance in the game nor enabled me to undertake more challenging quests.

![Figure 6.1 – Purohit talks with a community of players. Chat is visible lower left hand side, while each conversation is seen in callouts above the avatars.](image)

Until this time most of my journeys in the game world were in order to search for religious themes (sometimes taking notes while occasionally trying to avoid the immersive pleasures of the game). Repeated deaths disappointed me of the hope of levelling up. Having to search for the corpse to be resurrected each time frustrated me. Two of the options available to me were to own powerful weapons to kill the ferocious monsters or to approach the spirit healer at a graveyard each time to get resurrected, for which I had to pay in virtual money.

A third option was that a player character near the corpse could resuscitate my dead avatar. For that however I needed social capital. For Purohit, my priest avatar, strength lies not in weapons but in healing spells. The priest is a highly beneficial class, responsible for the staying power of any group. The priest’s role is to be a healer or act as a back-up healer if things go wrong. They are also expected to buff and dispel (act of
removing buffs) others. A buff increases an ability for a short period of time advantageous to a player in combat. This means that a priest avatar is a very supportive member essential for success in team play. So if I wanted to be a powerful healer I needed a set of spells for which I needed money.

An easy way to get money initially is to kill monsters from which materials like teeth or claws can be collected. These can be sold to the vendors for copper or gold coins. As I was hunting monsters and collecting materials, a hunter passed by me. As the first step of socialising I waved at him and initiated a chat even though he was a complete stranger to me. We greeted each other but I returned to my pre-occupation with killing monsters. Whilst I was killing them with the relatively powerless weapon of a priest, he killed a few too. I was bewildered for a moment. What was his intention? Was he killing for himself the animals, which I had spotted already? But he did not seem to collect materials from the animals he killed. Was it ethical to collect materials from monsters killed by another player? While I remained in confused astonishment I found him fleeing from the scene. He is known as a “kill assist” who does a favour to other battling players who may be a complete stranger to him. Indeed that is the culture in *WoW*.

Unlike some other games there is no built in tutorial to initiate players into *WoW*. As soon as one logs in with the newly created avatar one can start playing. Meeting other players or a group of players and being welcomed by them to party with can evoke mixed feelings of either encouragement or suspicion in a player. On one occasion, I was idling near the Lion’s Pride Inn, a major hotspot in Elwin Forest. This was a busy place as many players were visiting the inn and doing various activities there. Instantly, I got a whisper from Palbobbiewarj, a player, and we started a conversation:

```
[Palbobbiewarj] whispers: you looking for a guild??
[Purohit] says: I am only a beginner
[Cordell] whispers: split up
[Palbobbiewarj] whispers: we can help you
[Purohit] says: I do not know how to play in teams
[Palbobbiewarj] says: that’s what we’re here for, is to help new members:P
```

Online chat facilities in the game, as mentioned above, are communicative channels through which community is made possible and concretised. These channels include whisper, general chat, voice chat, and VoIP chat.\(^{59}\) Whisper, also known as a ‘Tell,’ is a

private message sent from one player to another, often denoted by pink coloured text in the chat window. General chat is the most common chat channel and is localized into each zone. VoIP chat interface allows player to click the portrait of the speaker for easy assisting or healing. With that facility players can talk to a party, raid or chat channels. The IRC (Internet Relay Chat) is basically envisioned to co-ordinate players in collaborative play. Although these technologies are built into the game for communicative purposes, on a social plane it allows players “to share a common non-physical space” and motivation for participants to “spend time and effort in virtual places beyond their specific goal or purpose” (Jakobsson, 2006, p. 62).

On the socialising plane, players talk and chat with others through text messages, greet them with gestures and words, trade materials with other players and make teams to play with and oppose another team. Often the community is helpful in initiating new players to the game and will provide help in hostile territories with monsters too high-level for them to fight. A player might request help from a more advanced player and be escorted to safety. Requesting tips for play in the chat channel is common social behaviour, as players are in constant need of information on how to play. In a conversation in the chat channel Momoko, a player, helped me with selling materials.

[Momoko] says: That guy over there have some for sale if you had the money
[Purohit] says: I am only a beginner
[Momoko] says: let me see
Momoko points at Cadric Rothgar
[Momoko] says: and that guy
[Purohit] says: bye
Momoko points at Janos Hammerknuckle
[Momoko] says: and that guy :P

After some time I visit Momoko again...

[Momoko] says: don’t want my gold :P
[Purohit] says: Do you buy leather?
[Momoko] says: Pardon
[Purohit] says: I mean I have some items to sell, how do I do that?
[Momoko] says: go to any of those green labelled guys over there next to the caravans and sell them to them.
[Momoko] says: you just right click on them and then right click on the items you want to sell.
[Purohit] says: that was a good advice
[Purohit] says: thanks.
After gaining some experience in gaming and undertaking quests the players in *WoW* automatically level up to advanced levels where they can be members of groups, namely parties and raid groups. To raid the dungeons in advanced levels, inevitably players have to form parties and raids groups. The number of participants in a raid depends on the enormity of the dungeon and the difficulty of the monsters to be killed. Raids are designed in such a way that they need certain characters such as fighters, healers, damage dealers and so on.

In this way many of the players I have interviewed think that the game dynamics are highly social. Player Abu is certain that to play the “game of *Warcraft* you need to be in some guilds.” Players not only understand the social collaborative aspects of game dynamics, but also accept them as guiding principles for their offline life. Yiddi explains it as follows: “*World of Warcraft* encourages a lot of things. For example in a group to progress you must have a tank, [that] is someone who takes all the damage; and DPSs (Damage per Second; damage dealer is commonly abbreviated as DPS) who deal damages; [and] priests who heal. So I guess the game is asking us to fit into whatever we think it is comfortable” (Player Yiddi, 2012).

The role each one plays is significant in the progress of play, and that is part of the reward of the social play as well. Player Monk shared that community play enhanced his competencies both inside and outside the game. He says that social play builds up the community through mutual help:

“*The community is very vast. Some are playing like they have artificial intelligence, but then some are so bad and you even teach them like... this is done like that... So you play at your level they can play sometimes better than you. And that way the community improves and the game expands... more people play...it is more of fun*” (Player Monk, 2012).

The functional purpose of party gaming and guilds is to allow players to achieve difficult goals by aligning themselves with a network of other players. Raids however, are not mere collaborative play, but involve more than that. First of all, each member of the raid has to be competent enough and has to contribute diligently to win the raid. Secondly, the players have to build mutual trust in order to do raids collectively. Gathering a set of trustworthy players is the dynamic of forming guilds. Trusting other players especially when one has not known them in real life is indeed part of the pleasure of play (Smith, 2010), even when one might be risking one’s own safety, anonymity, and freedom. Opportunities for betrayal and revenge between players can occur during the
gameplay. Thirdly, it is about dedication and commitment. A player must not give up on a raid in the middle of its course. When a healer quits, for example, the team is short of a big talent and that would affect the team’s success and reputation. It is this dedication to the guild that makes the teamwork. It is this very trust and other virtues associated with it that makes the community.

Players Chandan and Muji whom I interviewed are raid leaders with a lot of community experiences that they cherish:

“He [raid leader] takes the team to an instance. He has to formulate all the strategies. He has to explain to all the participating people in whatever items they have to drop of the box. What are the items to be distributed and a lot of tasks... So in that regard I have the experience of my own. I had to choose random people and I was able to do that. That was really a learning experience. I had to take random people and do something” (Player Muji, 2012).

Here, the raid leader who is a strategist also has to have significant leadership qualities and demonstrate a substantial amount of giving and taking trust to other members of the team. Working with random people whom the raid leader may not know in real life, is really a matter of trust. I asked if it was a difficult task to find people to raid with him, and in his answer an important aspect of an individual’s role in community is included:

“Actually, people do not know me, but they know my character... So, you had to develop an identity for your character” (Player Muji, 2012).

A player’s individual identity is enshrined to a certain extent in the performance of the avatar. It is not the avatar’s appearance that is important, but the quality of the person and whether they respect and collaborate with other players that matters.

The raid leader needs to be socially sensitive to the members as s/he organise the team with different classes and solicit co-operation from everyone in killing the monsters and succeeding in the raid. To kill “bosses” who are more powerful than the other monsters, the raid leader has to function like a commander of the army who develops strategy and who positions his fellow players to achieve the goal. Because the bosses react and respond differently in each instance, the tactics and strategies need to be suitable and workable for that particular dungeon. So players with less experience and coordination capacities must trust the wisdom and skill of the raid leader. Such coordinated work in

60 Boss is a quite general phrase used for several special types of mobs. Bosses are harder to kill than the “normal” elite mob of the same level, and almost all bosses are immune to crowd control. See http://www.wowwiki.com/Boss.
the game makes players mutually obligated to each other. Player Pants! comments to this effect in the blog:

“... apparently doing some actions require a certain number of people to participate together. I imagine that the group dynamics make you feel you have an obligation to the other players to go together on whatever raid gives you the magic sword” (Pants!, 2009).

In the real world, dedication and mutual trust are vital for constructing meaningful communities where human beings assert their identity. Social trust determines the preconditions of the process of constructing meaning and the continuous reflexive process of identity formation. Being part of an online community such as a guild or party gives a player a sense of ‘kinship’ and that implies a great amount of commitment and moral obligations to the group (Linderman & Lovheim, 2003).

Within the game, individuals are generally drawn to a guild or party by common friendships and shared play styles and play values, and they often create their own communicative platforms such as web sites or other mechanisms for intragroup communication (Pearce & Artemesia, 2009). The ‘kinship’ attachment of community members also is graphically characterised by unique identities such as a specific logo, a mission statement, ethics of play and social conduct. Among various interests groups forming guilds in WoW religious groups also are involved. Most of these groups hold onto particular values and follow regulatory norms (Nardi & Justin, 2006). The members of these communities develop a high level of loyalty to their fellow members and would protect each other from outside harassment, though guilds can also be a site of intense drama and dispute. Conflicts and power struggles are possible on personal or communitarian issues in such communities.

Player Pombe feels what attaches him to the game is precisely the commitment:

“What I actually find keeps me playing longer than I want now is the social commitment. If I’m just soloing content by myself, I have no problem saying “it’s time to log”, but if I’m in a group of 10 or 25 other folks doing some raid content it’s a lot harder to logoff because you know you’ll be inconveniencing them” (Pombe, 2009).

Players thus make a community of people who are committed to each other and who abide by the value system of their group. Raid leaders have to perform excellently to show leadership qualities which satisfy the whole community. In a raid, bosses usually drop higher quality items, which are rare and valuable. A successful win acquires not

---

61 A drop is any item obtained from the environment, such as an item looted or “dropped” off of enemy mobs or found in chests. A drop is also known as loot. See http://www.wowwiki.com/Drop
only XP points but also materials called “drops.” Because these items are collectively looted, it also depends on the efficiency of the leader to distribute these items among the players. Leading a good raid will gain the leader credibility among members of the group. I asked Player Muji how these sorts of real world social interactions can be possible in a virtual world. His answer was:

“I will tell you that. It is like survival of the fittest. You have to be the fittest. How that works out in Wow. You cannot be favourable to anyone, you cannot be tyrant..., you cannot be partial. Even if Wow is a virtual game it is an extension of life. I am living my real life even if I play (Player Muji, 2012).

Many activities including quests in Wow are not solved or resolved by reading the quest description and other manuals. A lot of learning is done through asking other players about it. I have explained above how I myself learned from other players. Similarly, Player Muji whom I met in Kolkata claims that he is consulted frequently by other players about many details of the game ranging from playing tricks to technological specialities not only during game play but also outside the play sessions. This mutual give and take adds to the social capital of the players.

As Wow is essentially a social and cultural phenomenon, as is evident from these descriptions, learning the social skills and etiquette and gaining social capital is part of the gameplay. These skills include meeting and greeting other players, interacting and collaborating with them, engaging in team play by mutual trust and by complying with the norms of particular guilds or parties (Ducheneaut, 2010). However, the initial trust and collaboration can lead players to engage in matters pertaining not necessarily to the game but also to their real life. When asked if communities formed within the game are exclusively for the purpose of the game, Player Muji has this reply:

“Anything... We socialise. We talk everything possible, we talk about our personal problems... we talk about world problems... a lot of things...” (Player Muji, 2012).

Wow thus becomes a platform for many such collaborations, spontaneously taking place between strangers, and this helps in developing new kinds of social relations within online gaming contexts (Ducheneaut & Moore, 2005; Nardi & Justin, 2006). People come to play on the virtual battleground of World of Warcraft, but then they are exposed to the enormity of the eventful world of Wow as they play more and more. The cohesive world and history of the game supported by its mythic themes enrich the meaning of what they do in the game world. Their in-game practices validate the mythic motifs. This raises a few questions for reflection. Why should a player who opts to ‘play’ Wow then begin to
interact with other players to the extent that they share some of their personal stories in
the virtual ground? Why should players communicate anything at all in a world they
initially entered simply in order to play? Why do strangers from various corners of the
world when coming together to play on the grounds of WoW feel like they are working
together and resonate with each other even about their personal matters? Why do they
extend these online relationships to off line life?

B.1.b. We’ve Played Together Ever Since: The Offline Community

We have been discussing how communities are formed within the game sessions for
the purpose of the game play. What makes WoW an extraordinary social phenomenon is
that players take these communities into contexts outside the game. Many players extend
the game relationships to their offline life. The Indian player Yiddi, like many others, has
found a friend, from Trinidad, online and maintains that friendship outside of game.

“I would never thought of meeting a friend from Trinidad you know in real life, she added me on
Facebook and we maintain the contact” (Player Yiddi, 2012).

Many online relationships are not just temporary but extend over considerable periods
of time. Player Quesac describes the story of helping a fellow player who was finding it
difficult to advance in the game:

“They [Mafia on Jaedenar guild] didn’t care about people who weren't level 70… This one girl
experienced such an event (“lowbies” being ignored) when she reached 58 and asked how to get to
Outlands… I invited her to group, watched her dot on the map and gave her turn by turn directions
on how to get here. We've been good friends ever since. She lives in Calif while I live in Pa so we've
never met, but we talk/text and played together regularly ever since for the last 3 years now”
(Quesac, 2011).

Such mutual help may start as mere social friendship but can lead players to very
personal and intimate relationships. There are many players who have found friends or
partners in WoW. While Quesac maintains a meaningful friendship, Autry’s story is a bit
more eventful:

“A little story about this… [When] I was one of the leaders in a guild [there was an invited paladin
healer] who I got along with as far as day to day stuff, but really didn’t care for his sarcasm or sense
of humor. Overall, I thought he was a jerk. After I got to know him a little better, the sarcasm and
sense of humor finally ‘clicked’ and I understood it was just a different kind of humor than I was used
to and that he ended up being one of my favorite people in the guild. Anyways... after a few
expansions, some chatting in game, on vent, then yahoo, the phone, then webcam, then RL meeting...
We've been married over a year” (Autry, 2011).

Not all interactions in WoW, nor relationships formed, may be safe, pleasant or
productive. Just as players extend the relations formed in the game to outside of the
game, it is possible that issues in real social life can be projected on to the online game as
There is racism, proselytising, and virtual abuse in the games playground. Player Yiddi had shared some experiences that he had personally encountered, such as ditching less experienced people out of the dungeon, being mean and abusive on chat channels, religious and racial discrimination (Player Yiddi, 2012).

However, amidst all these real issues, there are many who consider the game community to be better than the real world.

The story of Laura Dale (2014) is particularly interesting here. She, being transgender, says *World of Warcraft* provided “a space to discover that [she] felt more comfortable when treated as female.” Though she underwent shocking moments when other guild mates found out about her real identity, she says that:

“Without *World of Warcraft* and MMOs like it, I don't know if I would ever have had the courage and confidence I needed to come out. I don't know if I would have had the self understanding to commit to a life that is now wide open in front of me” (Dale, 2014).

Player Muji thinks that the online community is as real and meaningful as the offline community. He says: “Whenever they call me they greet me same way because it is like extension of life. I have never been able to differentiate that time [online play time] from real life. The community is real.” He also considers that the gaming community offers better bonding than traditional communities such as the family, religion and so on. He continues:

“The game community is better because I relate to people of my age. There is a bonding when you talk to people of your age. But in family there are members older and younger and there is always this age gap. Although I am religious and I practice but I do not like... participate in religious community. I go to mosque but I am not in an active community like that” (Player Muji, 2012).

In order to make the offline community alive and *WoW* culture to progress, Blizzard also organises offline events such as game conventions namely ‘BlizzCon’. The convention features game-related announcements, previews of upcoming games and content, Q&A sessions and panels, costume and other contests, and playable versions of various Blizzard games. Players and fans attend these conferences with enthusiasm to meet other stalwarts. There is a sort of reciprocity between these offline meetings and online gaming in *WoW*. Online games are used to maintain offline relationships which may be geographically distant and temporally infrequent. I mentioned previously how Riviera organised his friends and family who are geographically separate into a playing guild (Ref. P. 119) (Riviera, 2011).
The pleasure of play in the online world occurs precisely in the tension between perceiving the online world as virtual playground, but at the same time as an “extension of real life.” “Real money, real love, real aspirations and real drama propel the game” (Johnson, 2010, p. 88). Thus, as the players oscillate between the virtual and actual in play, they experience reality in totally different ways. This raises avenues to be explored and questions to be answered in relation to religious experience, which has been seen as helping to transcend spatio-temporal limitations of human existence.

It is clear from the above that the online community of WoW shares characteristics of real life communities in many respects. The reciprocity between the offline and online life of WoW communities prompts us to consider that the technologically mediated communities address a human need for emancipation and social life based on sharing, mutual support and community belonging, which were once seen as the province of social institutions like religions.

3.1.c. Look, We’re a Community Here: The Out-Game Community

We have seen two major aspects of community building around WoW. One is the community within the game for the purpose of gameplay. The other is the extended offline community in which relationships formed in the game are extended beyond gaming contexts. A third dimension of community building is the very physical gaming locality of the community formation. WoW has not only instituted a culture of play but also a context for communities of play.

For many players WoW has become a context to gather as they play along. Casey Monroe (2009), the former head of community and content for wowhead.com, writes in his blog that gaming is essentially a social phenomenon:

“As I write this post, I’m sitting in the room with six other guys. Two of them are playing BlazBlue: Calamity Trigger. The rest of us are watching, shouting, and offering commentary. But all of us are “gaming” (Monroe, 2009).

Monroe experiences this physical life as a “gaming” context though they are not explicitly playing a game. Playing, watching, commenting and reporting within the exuberance of an effervescent context all constitute play in a broader sense. The time spent in that play is significant, productive and meaningful. They consider gaming as an exclusively social phenomenon. It is the context of a community that provides this exuberance.
A number of *World of Warcraft* (WoW) players gathering physically in a place for the purpose of playing the game and having a sense of physical community even while they are dispersed is signified here by out-game community. I found such communities at Devasthana in Bengaluru and Somajiguda in Hyderabad. In both places these players were gathering in the Zapak gameplexes for playing. Both at Devasthana and Somajiguda where I would arrive as early as 10 in the morning, players would already be sitting together having their regular chats preparing for that day’s raids. Some of them would be busy doing quests individually to gain experience points. These centres had from 50 to 70 computers all of which would be occupied almost all the time. Though not all of them were playing WoW, the players meet each other and make friends.

Though they were spending most of the time in play, they also had some down times in and around these game parlours fostering a community culture typifying new Indian gaming communities of WoW. Player Chandan, whom I met in Somajuguda Zapak Centre, comments about their community:

“See here in Somajiguda we have a good playing community. Even in this game centre all of us know each other. Lot of people playing together... And they get along with each other... WoW has become an avenue for community life” (Player Chandan, 2012).

Building communities around WoW, at least in these two Indian contexts, was more physical than virtual. That is to say, though they have online communities with players in other cities and countries, these local playing communities were playing together and therefore already had a sense of community before they moved to WoW. Abin, one of the players of Somajiguda community, told me that a number of players were playing *Warcraft III* in that parlour, and when the online version of WoW was released they decided to join together in the new game. Though they play online among themselves as well as teaming up with other players elsewhere, they maintain the physical community in the parlour. I was also fascinated to watch them playing a 45 minute session of *Warcraft III* during which they engaged in an offline collaborative strategy. As these players were sitting near each other in a row playing on different computers in the parlour, they communicated not on the built in chat channel but physically within the room. I observed this type of play in the Bengaluru game centre as well, when a group of six players sitting in a row were combating the monsters online and raiding the dungeon. They were addressing each other verbally with their avatar names rather than their real names. In both instances the immersion, intensity and emotion of the players rose...
gradually to an observable pinnacle point, which we could call the effervescent social mood of gameplay.

Game parlours also become an avenue for initiating new players into WoW. The game parlours offer various games, including WoW, and very young players play relatively less expensive or challenging games, some of which are not online. However, as these young players also are part of the physical community they are exposed to WoW and other games. When these players are ready and interested in playing WoW, the elders in the community initiate them to WoW. Many players I interviewed were initiated to the game by their friends. Player Monk was introduced to the game in this way: “I had a few friends who were playing WoW and at that time I used to play Warcraft III and they initiated me to WoW” (Player Monk, 2012).

The loyalty to the out-game community affects the choice of factions they opt to play for. Because there is no communication between the main factions of WoW, Alliance and Horde, friends do not like to play in opposite factions. They desire community experience in play. Player Yiddi comments:

“I always like to be a Horde. Hordes are more brutish and savages but evil I do not think evil is a right word, they are more violent but not evil. They are fighting for their values and ideologies but not evil. The reason why I play Alliance is because my friends play Alliance” (Player Yiddi, 2012).

Similarly, when I interviewed Player Monk, he was temporarily away from his Kolkata playing community as he had relocated to Bengaluru for studies. He did not seek to be part of the physical community in Bengaluru, but continued playing online with his friends in Kolkata. That is, while playing online with his teammates, he also wanted to remained attached to that physical community which he was part of and which indeed had initiated him into WoW. Thus, many players maintain a sort of kinship both to the online and offline communities that are mutually enhancing.

In my observation of Devasthana and Somajiguda, there were distinct differences between the WoW players and players of other games. It was visible in the way they behaved in the game centre during and after game sessions, the way they made cliques and conversed, and in their physical and emotional bonding. The WoW players also seemed to have dominance over other players in the centre, evident from the body language of the players. In Devasthana the WoW players were deeply immersed in the game, and engaged in animated conversation during and after the game sessions. Their
language and behaviour to others was not polished and did not demonstrate the usual respect for others characteristic of students in India. My conclusion was that it was because the community was made up of students who had migrated from various places and who were younger.

The community in Somajiguda in contrast was very warm. Although they focused on their personal goals of play, they were warm hearted to other players and towards me. They were happy to talk about my research goals and about other gaming communities in Delhi and Mumbai where they have friends. One reason for this could be that, culturally, all the members in the playing community were from Hyderabad itself and were not a multicultural aggregation of immigrant students.

*World of Warcraft* then is not just a game, but a world which virtually provides all real life opportunities to its inhabitants. “It not only structures social relations, it is the space within which the relations occur and the tool that individuals use to enter that space” (Mayer, 1999).

**B.1.d. Do Unto Others: The Ethical Community**

The final perspective in analysing the text is in the ethical nature of community in *WoW*. The in-game community and the offline community do make *WoW* essentially a social phenomenon. The out-game community is the visible and lived expression of the online community. However, it is the ethics practised in the gaming community that makes *WoW* special.

In the previous sections we have seen how *WoW* has become a collective phenomenon. It is played and talked about by many millions of people from all across the globe. If we compare the membership of *WoW* with the population of many countries it is enormous. About 80 countries in the world including New Zealand, Sweden and Switzerland are less populated than *WoW*. Immense amounts of digital data are uploaded on the web about *WoW* such as discussion pages, walkthroughs, Warcraft art, videos of play sessions, novels, fan art. Apart from the complete guide presented by the official Blizzard site of *World of Warcraft* several thousand wiki pages have been created where thousands of people contribute to enrich the database about *WoW*. There are numerous community and forum pages created where participants discuss it very seriously. Studies
have been published from various branches of knowledge including religious studies, psychology and law about WoW, demonstrating its social significance and research value.

The fact that many thousands of people from across the globe and from a variety of cultural backgrounds discuss and contribute to the creation of the Warcraft culture, demonstrates that it is a product of collective human life. On Blizzard’s platform a big team of game designers and concept developers draw ideas for the game from various present day cultures: Tolkien style medieval mythology as well as gothic, and more recently East Asian iconography and themes (Bernauer, 2011; Langer, 2008). Players and others also contribute immensely to the game content by way of ideas and themes, including for example the quest contributed and inspired by Ezzra Chatterton who lost his battle with cancer (Chuang, 2007) and the epic chain quest, Crusader Bridenbrad which celebrates the life of Rob Bridenbecker, a real life hero who also battled with cancer until his death (Wowhead, 2009a). Thus, though the game is heavily mythic in character, it draws its “eternal” themes from everyday life as well as from the myth.

The themes and motifs in WoW present a dichotomous ideology, which places the players into a large world of choices. While playing, people enact the eternal theme of the conflict between the opposing powers of good and evil (Blizzard, 2008b). The economy of events – chaos, fights and battles – are oriented towards establishing moral virtues of order and goodness in the WoW world. Most quests carry a subplot that is part of the arch-mythos of WoW. In undertaking these quests and raids to kill the monsters that disturb the peace of the world, players participate in the worldview presented by WoW. A player’s choice of faction, Alliance or Horde, will affect their experience of play considerably. A player’s behaviour in the game is affected by the capabilities they have as an avatar and the decisions they take. Player Muji indicated that he has an affinity towards Alliance because it gives him a feeling of being good and righteous. Players Yiddi and Monk prefer to play Horde because “they are fighting for their values and ideologies” and for “their perception of evil and being more aggressive.”

The number of pages created and the discussions carried on in the community forum websites give an indication of how much the history and myth of the world of WoW matters to the players. While the official website of WoW provides the minimum necessary information about the historical myths of WoW, the user-generated content appearing in websites (for example, wowhead.com, wowwiki.com and wowpedia.com to
name a few) builds a consistent time line drawn from various Warcraft related sources, including previous versions of the game and Warcraft fiction. Players who are inclined towards the stories and role-play develop a semantic delirium when they have to grapple with missing links or discrepancies in this history. Such confusions and their significance to some players are evident in comments such as “However, we as players know that it was the Well of Eternity that gave the night elves their appearance. We know Elune is real. So, what does this mean?” (Awatoru, 2010). Though they play in a virtual world they ‘know’ that it is ‘real.’ This knowledge of the real can be compared with the religious nostalgia that Eliade (1963) refers to, because they wish to integrate the primordial history that existed before the creation of WoW into their current play.

There is an absolute dedication and immersion of many players in the economy of the WoW world. On one occasion, my avatar Purohit was preoccupied with looting the monsters when the friend who had killed a few monsters for me called out: “hey c’mon, horrific war is battled there... let us go and help them.” He then fled without waiting for me to follow. To whom is he committed so intensely? Why should he be so committed?

This sort of effervescent mood created during the game play can permeate the offline life of some players, like Muji. His ultimate disposition and dedication to the game content reaches its pinnacle when he says he cannot make any distinction between the virtual and real life. He continues:

“I am like a theory crafter. What is there in WoW? Even if I do not play I think about the game, say for example most of the time I think about developing strategies... to obtain the best possible goal to enhance my character” (Player Muji, 2012).

Muji’s total immersion in the game is the reason why other players in his community have relied on him. He has earned the respect of the players both in online life and offline life. Thus WoW can be seen as enhancing the personal integrity and moral capital of the players. This can be a very challenging situation as it demands “responsibilities” from players for the “consequences” their decisions would bring about in the virtual playground (Huff, Johnson, & Miller, 2003).

In order to achieve wellbeing, peace and order, any community formulates laws and regulations. WoW is regulated in various ways. First and foremost the game itself is programmed by rules. The game dynamics inherently prevent certain things from being carried out in the game, for example there are prohibited places, skills or spells, and there
are differences in servers that allow various modes of play such as RP, PvP and PvE. These server types largely govern the difficulty of the game and the moral codes which are necessary for player interaction (Blizzard, 2004b; Sicart, 2009). PvP servers allow players to kill those of opposing factions. Cheating (bypassing obstacles along the path to proceed more quickly in the game), a phenomena closely monitored by the gamer community, server operators and game providers (Kücklich, 2007), is not allowed in WoW, though many players manage to do it. PvE servers are a safe place to play, while PvP servers provide virtual combative play. In PvP play, lower level players are at risk of being attacked and abused.

Secondly, as the game is essentially social, players have to abide by commonly accepted social etiquette that is prevalent in real life, such as greeting others, treating others with modesty and so on. These codes of conduct are unwritten and are not directly offered by the game, but are projected from real life. Generally, the players in WoW are helpful to each other. Benevolence, respect and collaboration are not only prevalent among guild mates or party members, but also among strangers who meet for the first time in the game.

The game’s inherent social dynamics demand that players be virtuous in order to succeed in the game. One cannot inhabit WoW without being involved in making ethical choices, which start the moment a player logs into the game. These choices are restricted as well as fostered by the choice of avatar one plays with. This conflict between the ethical principles of the real person and the virtual person heightens the drama that unfolds through the gameplay. A person whose aim in the real world is to further their own personal advantage is placed in a conflict if they choose to play, for example a priest in the virtual world of WoW. A person who is benevolent in real life similarly would experience conflict if they played contradictory characters and situations in the game. For Player Muji, teamwork and dedication in the game is core to success and playing is “synonymous to the work” and similar to “running a multinational company.” Dedication is a moral value attached to a work ethic (Player Muji, 2012).

Blizzard (2008c) has put in place policies about in-game behaviour and activity and they ask players to keep those in mind while playing the game. The vision behind these policies is to “keep World of Warcraft fun filled and a fair environment for everyone.” Blizzard warns that disciplinary action may be taken against disruptive players who are
negatively impacting others’ play experience or the service itself. Violation of any of the given policies may result in account penalties, as outlined in each policy section (Blizzard, 2008a), which Blizzard is successful in guaranteeing to a certain extent. However, each clan and guild has also to stipulate their own code of conduct by which everyone has to abide (Pisan, 2007). Guilds in the virtual world, being social aggregates played by real persons, bring along all the social problems and challenges of the real world with them. Guild members under the leadership of the officer would face tough times if one or more members were to challenge the norms of the guild. Posts about such issues in the public forums will have many other passionate WoW community members joining in to advise (Torres, 2011). The community of WoW is thus sustained by its moral laws and its social relations.

**Conclusion**

While many might be sceptical about the vitality and genuineness of online communities, we find that there are meaningful communities in cyber space. In addition, it is imperative to consider some aspects of these online communities as we think about the ways the postmodern generation redefines connections, community and social life. It is also fascinating to observe that these communities are not utterly chaotic; rather they function within a social system, even adhering to ethical norms. The following chapter will provide some analysis regarding the significance of myth, ritual and community in play and in the social religiosity of the postmodern generation.
Chapter 7.
The Virtually Religious
Introduction

*World of Warcraft* in this study, from a Gertzian perspective, is approached as a ‘system of symbols,’ which makes a ‘cultural pattern’ evolved through the relationship between the players as well as with the game content (Geertz, 1973b). In the previous chapters I have investigated the ‘moods and motivations’ *WoW* can create in players through the three functional elements of myth, ritual and community. In this chapter I engage more analytically with these elements to discuss the religious dimensions of *WoW* both in the game and as experienced by the players. In this analysis I am guided by my four major research questions.

1. What religious motifs and characteristics of myth, ritual and community can be seen in the game and game-playing of *World of Warcraft*.

2. How do these three elements interact with each other and can their interaction be constructed and understood as having religious significance?

3. Do gamers – individually or collectively – see the MMORPG environment of *WoW* as having religious characteristics or as related to their offline religious behaviour?

4. What implications does this have for thinking about the relationship between new media and changes in social religiosity and the re-culturation of religion in a postmodern media context?

A. Myths Played in *WoW*

A.1. The Dynamics of Myths in *WoW*

My research confirms that the producers of *WoW* have created a metanarrative that functions like classical mythologies in order to engage players immersively in the game. Myths behind each different versions of the game explain the causes and conditions of the present state of affairs in the mythical world of Azeroth. Myths including the gods creating the world of Azeroth, the Battle of Mount Hyjal, the World Tree and the Well of Eternity all serve not only to explain the causes of the events but also to set a whole life-like world for the players.
The mythical narrative in *WoW* is carefully crafted as to present its history functioning similarly to many classical mythologies such as Greek, Indian and Christian. Players get to know many details of the story through undertaking various quests and advancing in gameplay. If the player starts playing the game from a later version they would not know many of its past aspects. To know the past story they have to either refer back to the game manual in the official website of the game, or read the walkthroughs in player’s discussion forums, or have other players retell the story for them. Thus two temporally distinct histories are at work in *WoW*. One is the story evolved through gameplay and the other is the pre-cosmic one.

It is within the pre-cosmic history that the Warcraft Universe is created and situated. It can be observed and is admitted by the producers that the mythology of *WoW* is eclectic (Totu, 2010) and contains significant elements of supernaturalism – of gods, the origins of the cosmos, the corrupt nature of its races, eternal war to establish order and peace. The mythologies in *WoW* serve to fulfil the purpose and functions similar to those in all religious traditions as classified by Ellwood (2008). They include myths about (1) **creation and origins** (for example the origins of Azeroth told in *Warcraft: Orcs & Humans*, of gods such as Titans, and Elune); (2) **social foundations** such as kingship or gender roles (e.g. myths associated with Elune); (3) **heroes and their ideal and real selves** (e.g. myths of Medivh, Thrall and Jaina Proudmoore as well as the anti heroes such as Malfurion, Tyrande and Neferset); (4) **the ultimate destiny of individual life and of the world** (e.g. myth of the battle of Mt. Hyjal as well as *World Tree* and *Well of Eternity*); (5) **warnings about wrong behaviour** (e.g. the doom of Azeroth, in the Cataclysm version, or assault of demonic Burning Legion on the mortal); and (6) **descriptions of essential rituals**, pilgrimages and other religious practices (e.g. myths behind quests such as *Ritual Bond*, *Ritual Materials*, and *The Defilers’ Ritual*) (Blizzard, 2002b, 2008c, 2008d, 2010).

The function of myths in *WoW* is to create a world of its own with a real-life illusion, invoking what Eliade refers to as ‘*religious nostalgia*’ (Eliade, 1984, p. 151). The importance of this constructed mythology and its ability to evoke nostalgia was most evident in players who paid greater attention to the story. This emerged in this research as players reported that the real-life religious connections of the game mythology make the
game interesting and engaging for them. This is reflected in Player Deep’s preference for games with mythic themes, for example:

Deep: “We can’t find them [mythic characters] in real, but can see them in game you know... I like games having myths...
Vallikatt: Do you think that myths have an important role in our life?
Deep: Yeah, I believe that.
Vallikatt: Can you describe that?
Deep: Like in Hinduism, I believe in all myths.”

Similarly, when asked if he found the game mythologies have real life connections, Player Karik replied:

“Yes often I do. These stories are similar. Most stories tell the story about hero go[ing] up against some who is antithetical to the world and bringing him down. [Though] it is a fantasy world we experience a real feeling in similar real world stories” (Player Karik, 2012).

As noted earlier, for some players, building a consistent timeline was important and the discrepancies in the mythology were seen as matters of historical error and semantic confusion. Concerns about these confusions are reflected in comments in various forums. Blogger Awatoru writes, for example:

“Elune supposedly takes the shape of a night elf female, and created night elves in her image. However, we as players know that it was the Well of Eternity that gave the night elves their appearance. The night elves also believed Elune lived in the Well. So, what does this mean? We know Elune is real. Cenarius is her child, and he even resembles a night elf - somewhat. Cenarius's appearance lends credence to the night elf creation myth” (Awatoru, Personal blog, 2010).

Similarly, in Rossi’s blog article about the problem of the perennial war between the Horde and the Alliance lore and game’s impossibility of establishing peace between them Thieren expresses his disagreement in a posted comment:

“I actually disagree. There is very little incentive for the Alliance to ever trust the Horde on anything. One attempt at genocide has historically had severe repercussions, but lining up three attempts within living memory is actually beyond the scope of RL history... Trusting the Horde at this point is not only unrealistic, but likely political suicide” (Thieren, Comment posted in Rossi, 2014).

This brought an immediate response from vaitanis22:

“@Thieren What's the alternative though? The Horde hates, fears and mistrusts the Alliance as much as the Alliance does it. To be victorious in a total war they’d have to break all of the Horde races, probably to extermination in the case of the Orcs, Trolls and Forsaken at a staggering cost in Alliance lives, or they'd just be back in a generation or two” (vaitanis22, Comment posted in Rossi, 2014).

These responses reflect a process of constructing the feel of a cohesive mythological world with a proper history that is virtually real. As has been noted by others, the boundaries between the virtual and the real are continually being crossed in games such as this. War and conflict in *World of Warcraft* is very much historicized by presenting a world at war that is similar to our real world (MacCallum-Stewart, 2008). The plausibility of a
persisting and coherent world, though it exists only virtually, offers a thick text that is immensely rich with religious and spiritual motifs (Krzywinska, 2008). These endorse also Eliade’s contention that an effective mythology is “considered at once a true history” (Eliade, 1984, p. 141, original emphasis).

In addition to the primordial history, the ‘religious nostalgia’ evoked by the game is expressed in a yearning for the player’s role in the history of $WoW$. The player’s avatar is characterised by features such as gender, race, class, and faction that have specific roles to fulfil in that history. It is play that takes the history of $WoW$ forward for each player. Metaphorically, it recovers the peace of the primordial history, maintains it in the present history of the $WoW$ and leads the present phase of history to the next one. This was reflected by the player mentioned earlier whom I met by chance yelling out to me at the end of our casual chat, “Hey c’mon, horrific war is battled there... let us go and help them.” In these brief instances, the myths in $WoW$ can be seen as fulfilling the same metaphysical and cosmological functions of myths in classical understanding, as described by Campbell (1964).

Religious nostalgia is also stimulated and heightened by various religious themes that are constantly present in the game by way of iconography, architecture, music, and greetings. They include items such as sacrifices, rituals and atonement, cathedrals and religious persons, as well as religious symbolism such as the Moon, light and altars. For Krzywinska, Blizzard’s design aesthetics which blend mythic motifs and a geography of religious space and objects connect $WoW$ with the real world, provide the players of $WoW$ with the illusion of a historically real, persistent and cohesive world that is accessible to its subscribers whenever they wish to enter. The anytime explorable world of Azeroth, available as online maps such as worldofmapcraft.com and mapwow.com and supported by Google, provides added reality feeling to this imagined universe. While the narrative format in the form of myths disguises the technological underpinnings of the game, the use of these inter-textual and intra-textual signifiers invite players to engage with this world through their game-play. Together these factors contribute in constituting a persistent and cohesive space enabling players to live virtually in historic time as well as to frame the conditions of play “beyond the programmed mechanics and rules” (Krzywinska, 2008, p. 138).
A.2. Religions in *World of Warcraft*

Of significance to this study is the extent of identifiable religions and religious movements in *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*), many of which have similarities to real-life religions. Some of the parallels elucidated by Bainbridge (2010) are supported by my analysis. The Elune religion is one such example. If Durkheim’s theory of ‘God as symbol of society’ is applied to Elune worship, Elune could be understood as the representative of Night Elves themselves. Iconographically, Blizzard has created every Night Elf with silvery eyes with a reflection of the Moon (the symbol of Elune) “helping them see themselves in Her” (pp. 62-65). Similarly many motifs of “darkness” in the Horde faction resemble some shamanistic practices of today. The Undead, the Trolls, and the Orcs, for example, clearly meddle with cruelty and display a dark and somewhat evil past. The characters themselves are designed with more hardened, sharp, and evil-looking faces. With a religion that resembles spiritualism with a strong emphasis on the personification of nature, they hold high ideals of affinity with elements of nature and environmental protection. Interestingly these ideals have prompted players such as Monk and Yiddi to identify Horde not with evil but as a powerful faction with superior values.

Similarly, the religion of the Holy Light practiced among Humans, Dwarves, and the Undead which has a priestly class draws its mythic significance from the symbolism of light, which in the game carries spiritual connotations (Bainbridge, 2010). The three virtues practiced by the Holy Light - respect, tenacity, and compassion - share similarity with the core foundations of many mainstream religions. Bainbridge observes that the religion of the Holy Light “is the most secularised of the *World of Warcraft* religions, making the fewest demands of faith... [It is] expressed as an ethical code essentially devoid of supernaturalism” (Bainbridge, 2010, pp. 72-73). What is important is that the producers of *World of Warcraft* consider that the existence of religion and religious practices are a sufficiently important part of society to be incorporated in a constructed cosmology virtualised as a game. My research supports the view that many players take this mythic cosmology, including the supernatural characters and religious motifs, as serious and meaningful. They enjoy being part of that mythic world by taking a role in its history through role-play.

Though these virtues are reiterated as the ideals of the religion of the Holy Light, within the game text the ambience of the game and the game dynamics offer possibilities
of practising these virtues. In my interviews, a number of players expressed and highlighted that these values are lived by the game communities and players have to abide by these values for the successful completion of raids and quests. Players also said the experiences with these virtues cross the boundaries of the virtual and real, as many of them felt their offline lived values of religion are influential in their online game communities. This leads us to explore how players may create their religious identities in the gaming space.

A.3. Religious Identities

The possibility of creating various identities is a major motivation for playing *World of Warcraft*. Players experience and immerse themselves in the mythic story presented in *World of Warcraft* by identifying themselves with various roles offered by the game text. Though this text is bound by the rules of play and environment, it is flexible in offering a range of possible identities to choose from and allowing people to play multiple identities, some of which are explicitly religious. Players who think themselves weak in real life can be powerful in the game. The quest for identity in the game indeed starts from the first decision to join a particular faction and choosing a class, gender, and race for the avatar from within the faction.

The mythic environment of *World of Warcraft* can help players explore their identities in two main ways, namely participating in a mythic story and creating their own mythic narratives through play.

Participation in the mythic narrative occurs when they first take on a role and become part of this mythic history. However, the game text can also be manipulated in the course of play to be different in every situation the players enter. *World of Warcraft* presents a collection of stories that are knit fabulously in a metanarrative. Because of this, each player can effectively experience their own story through their avatar as they play, while at the same time having their unfolding story incorporated into a long and shared mythic history. To experience more dimensions of the story and play experience, players often create many characters, often in both factions. To explore development of this aspect of the game further, in the *Mists of Pandaria* version Blizzard tried a different approach of offering several different paths to level up, where quests were located in hubs scattered around zones and player did not need to finish one zone to move on to the next. This way players
could skip an area to move to the next if the content did not interest them at the time (Stickney, 2014). Not only would this lead players to create their own narrative path, it also makes the game more social as it would prevent quarrels and arguments in the distribution of drop items.

Secondly, participation in the game depends not only on following a single, defined game path. Players are able to involve themselves in a range of individual activities such as an idle journey through the rich landscape, solo quests aimed at collecting materials, laborious participation in a heavy raid of the dungeon or a casual, or formal or intimate conversation with a fellow player through the chat channel. Through these activities players are able to construct their own mythic narrative. The examples of players uploading large numbers of machinima, and using WoW as a platform for various out-game activities such as giving sermons, organising events in the game world, and honouring real life heroes with memorials and thematic quests, are ways of expressing personal mythologies and “making real” one’s personal myth and mission on earth (which parallel Campbell’s (2004) observation that these are religious mechanisms for a person to find God, meaning, happiness, fulfilment, and the ultimate purpose of creation).

Players’ comments demonstrate that there is surrogacy and identification between the goals of the player and the character they play. They find a strong resonance with the avatar they play in the game because they become “part of the story…, and the mythological character in itself” (Player Chandan, 2012). Their descriptions about their playing experiences suggest that the gameplay affects their cognitive and experiential faculties. The use of the first person narrative form when players describe their gameplay (for example, “I was killed,” “I destroyed the dungeon,” rather than “my avatar was killed”), feeling personally desperate about levelling up in a difficult phase, being killed by someone, or addressing other players in the same room with their avatars’ names while playing, are all indications that they are part of the story and are playing their destiny.

Personally, it was interesting that my first impulse when I began playing the game for the purpose of this research was to create a human priest avatar. When I reflected on this later, I found that the selection matched my real life identity and my choice to be a priest in the virtual sense offered me the opportunity to explore a different set of skills in a different world.
When asked about the relationship of the game mythology with other classical ones, Player Chandan acknowledged that his religious background has some significance in his play. Similarly, Player Monk acknowledged that for him the game is more real than life, while Player Muji described *WoW* as “an extension of life,” and Player Yiddi described the game as “a second life.” These self-reports from the sample of players interviewed support Fine’s position on virtual identities (Fine, 1983) and Krzywinska’s opinion that “the game world has a material presence beyond the sphere of the player that resembles in some respects the way that a so-called primitive mythologically based worldview functioned” (2008, p. 126).

Similarly, there was evidence to indicate that a player’s choice of factions can also be influenced by their religious upbringing. Player Muji observed that he saw religious undertones in *WoW* although he does not take it as explicitly religious in character. In his view, *WoW* “builds various sorts of viewpoints,” which “follow religion to some extent.” He thinks that the concept of struggle between good and evil is a religious idea. Others such as Player Chandan perceived war between the factions within the game as resonating with the eternal dichotomy of good and evil presented in classical mythologies. Some like Player Deep explicitly reflected that they do not want to “mix up [their] religious and gaming values.” A question arising from my interviews was whether players who reported a dissonance with religion were more inclined to play with Horde, while those who were more open to religion tended towards the Alliance faction. There were suggestions of this in my interviews, but there was insufficient evidence to reach any general conclusions. Kafai et al., (2010) suggest that the identification of player and avatar stems from the individual’s internal pressures as well as social forces involved in play.

My research supports Bowman’s (2010) observation that the opportunity for role playing in games such as *WoW* can help players relieve the pressures of social roles imposed on them by the real world by playing alternative roles in a risk free environment, including ‘classical roles’ of a hero or a helper, a fighter or a healer. Even in the context of digital gaming, these archetypes can provide inspiration for everyday human life. These responses and behaviours aroused within a digital game are consonant with what Campbell, in his study of religion, has called the “archetypal plot of everyone’s life” (2004, p. 112). They are also consonant with what more recent religion scholarship...
argues about sacredness in secular culture: what Lynch has described as “an object... which is regarded as a grounding or ultimate source of power, identity, meaning and truth” (Lynch, 2007a, p. 138), or as what Meyer calls the “sensational forms,” which evoke and structure experiences of the transcendental (Meyer, 2006, p. 20).

It is argued that the “monomyth” that Campbell talks about in relation to traditional religions (Campbell, 1949), can be seen in today’s popular entertaining culture, enabling players to go beyond established spatio-temporal and cultural boundaries by transposing their virtual identities into their real life. Wagner (2009) contends that any virtual world and online community is possible only if it also offers something real in this world. My research confirmed this, finding that the mythic participation in digital games does not remain just a fantasy realm. The exploration of the new possibilities of identity does in some way address how the players live their lives offline. Player Chandan commented: “See, the game becomes interesting when it is a little realistic. When it is all something unbelievable you ignore it. You do not find it enjoyable unless you relate in some way or other to it.” Other players supported Chandan’s view, saying that they either adopted or projected the lived values of religious and cultural environments in the game. For example, Player Muji said:

“... It is from my religion of course. And some of the ideologies are indeed connected. You know that you have to be good to people. And every religion says about it like protect the weak. So in WoW also most of these things... like you know you have to protect the weak!”

This explains the satisfaction that players such as Quesac (2011) report when doing something like helping a marginalised fellow player or being sympathetic to the social inequalities occurring in WOW. Players report that the community of WOW is very empowering as the game offers a space for shared experiences and the satisfactions of these experiences extend beyond the game to a sense of fulfilment in life (Stuart, 2013).

The fascinating thing coming out of these comments, and one of the important findings of this research, is that players of WOW report contending with the meaning and purpose of life by playing a digital game that relies heavily on mythic content and form and the satisfactions they report gaining from game-playing parallel what have historically been gained for many from participation in religion. In this process meaning is negotiated between two realities, namely the virtual and the actual and in the players’ experience the boundary line between these two realities isw greatly blurred. Real-life religious phenomena can be seen as following similar strategies and fulfilling similar
functions. The observations made by some of the players interviewed indicate that from a player perspective, myths cannot be understood solely as mere fabled stories used in the construction of a game, but as powerful agents that enable them to organize the way they perceive facts and understand themselves and the world. In that these game myths can be seen as fulfilling a similar pedagogic and hermeneutic function for their players, this thesis proposes that games need to be understood as functionally serving a similar “religious” purpose.

A.4. The Quest for Purpose

Quests, though an integral part of the gameplay experience, are more than just a game activity. The immersive quality of the game was found in some cases to significantly affect players’ offline life also. A number of players interviewed indicated that they saw themselves as being transformed into a hero and taking a significant role in the history and events of the game. This was understood in a number of ways. On one hand through these quests they became part of the story in the game. On the other they were striving to secure a place in the playing community in the external world, to be a real hero who conquers the real life hazards within the competitive spirit of the game quests. Player Chandan highlights this aspect when he says “… you get to compete with lot of other players... you are playing with your own intelligence, your own capabilities. So a sense of competition is there.”

This ‘competitive spirit’ involved in the quests of WoW makes the game more than merely a narrative text, but a playable text through which each player seeks a distinctive personal identity. Player Muji, going beyond Player Chandan’s perspective, recounted that playing provides a sense of achievement and fulfilment as he considers his personal destiny is to conquer the world:

“How many people in this world have super power? None of them have. Like, when I play the game I get the feeling that I become powerful. The ultimate goal in life is to become the supreme most powerful person. So that which is not achievable in real life is possible in this game.”

For guild leaders like Players Muji and Chandan a feeling of accomplishment and satisfaction comes from “making and maintaining a guild” and “playing raids.” Part of the accomplishment is the social and spiritual satisfaction of “taking care of” a group you are entrusted with (Player Chandan), gaining and giving social trust, and honouring “dedication to your work” (Player Muji). These comments support what Henricks (2010)
and Sotamaa (2007) have also argued about games being very ‘productive’ and ‘transformative’ enterprises.

It has been noted above that the dynamics of most game quests follow the hero quest pattern proposed by Campbell (1949). The consequences can also be understood within the religious framework of players having the experience of being ‘born again.’ Player Monk shared his story of conquering WoW as the following:

“I had a few friends who were playing WoW and at that time I used to play Warcraft III and they initiated me to WoW... I used to come back from school, do my daily raid. Then my daily dungeons. By that time it would be late evening. Then I play some random dungeon and by the time it is 1 am or 2 am and all the players come online then we used to do the daily content and try to destroy that.

All my friends were already levelled up by that time. Once I reached level 24 or 25 I reached a difficult point where I felt very hard and annoying so I created a new character and begin on that. Then I realised that I was playing a lot and had a bunch of level 25 which is not good. Then one of my friends told me how to be persistent and advance in the game. Then I thought okay, I should level up. Before I got that piece of advice, I thought this game is absolute bullshit. I do not want to play anymore because levelling up was desperately annoying. But then I deleted all my characters and then took one character and levelled up to the maximum.”

Player Monk’s engagement with the game can be understood as a journey toward mastering two worlds and fits many aspects of the pattern of the hero quest described by Campbell. Player Monk was invited by his friends to join them in WoW (Call to adventure). He did not tell me how quickly he accepted the invitation or whether there was hesitation on his part (Refusal of the call). Monk ultimately decides to play (The crossing of the first threshold) and creates an avatar – a new Self – (The belly of the whale). At the same time he was familiar with the previous version of the game, but the advice he received from his friends helps him start the game (Supernatural aid). In reality he is in the physical world with the routine, mundane task of going to school. But every day he returns to play, separating himself from the world to join the epic journey in virtual time, space and community. Several of his activities such as quests, raids and dungeons are ritualised. As he is “initiated” he faces a number of obstacles, such as not being able to proceed from level 24 or 25 (The road of trials). These challenges are controlled by the rules of the game whose author is the designer and with which he needs to come to terms (Atonement with the father). He is then helped by a friend who gives him true wisdom (The meeting with the goddess). He decides to delete all his avatars and focus his attention on one. When he follows that wisdom he progresses decisively in the game. As he does so, he feels that the game world “is better than the real life, real life is absolutely boring.”
With this feeling of the online world as ‘better than life’, many players find it hard to stop gaming (*Refusal of the return*). Player Monk’s account reflects this hesitation to “Return”. Coming back to the mundane world is something of a shock (*The crossing of the return threshold*).

“I feel very much annoyed when someone hinders my play especially when I am in the peak of the game. And I prefer solitude when I play and I want my full concentration on the game” (Player Monk, 2012)

On his return to the real world, he feels victorious. He claimed that his level 80 character was “one of the best...[and] it came to the top twenty of those hundred thousand characters.” Monk sees himself now as *Master of the two worlds* – the actual and virtual – and enjoys the *Freedom to live* (cf. Bartle, 2003, pp. 435-443): he is very proud in his real life of what he has achieved through what he calls “quite a good hard work” and feels “good every time” he plays.

Player Monk’s account supports the perspective identified by scholars that fantasy environments and the mythical avatars of online games can provide people “the chance to express multiple and often unexplored aspects of the self” (Turkle, 1997, p. 12), and “help one to know oneself better” (Bruckman, 1992, p. 35). Players’ experiences, reflected in Monk’s account, are not only semantic or ludic but also very intimate and embodied (Squire, 2006).

Virtual games like *WoW* can be considered therefore as social environments where players not only escape to play distracting games, but also explore life-related identities and meaning that have spiritual dimensions. Player Chandan sees play as a “copy from real life.” That is, real life is seen as being mythologised in the game, and many of the myths in *WoW* seen as resonating with real life events. Players not only play within the mythic story of the game, they also take it as serious and hard work which they engage with ‘devoted’ attentiveness: to cross the threshold, to be a master of the game and to secure a place in the players’ community. Engagement in this way can transform the player’s life “inside out” (Player Monk).

It may be this personal transformative satisfaction that some players get from online games that prompt them to prefer the social play offered by the game’s virtual communities than traditional religious practices. The heightened mood I observed in the Somajiguda game centre at the festive season of Dashara, the traditional celebration of
the victory of good deified in the goddess Durga illustrates this. Inside the game centre were young players temporarily cut off from the mainstream religious celebration of Dashara, however talking to me about their perspectives on religion. While they reported their rejection of religious practices and its rituals, it was illuminating to see them engrossed by the myths, rituals and the community of gaming.

A.5. *WoW* as Mediator of Meaning

Ellwood (2008) advocates that young people need “a larger story to fit their smaller story in.” Interactive mythic games such as *WoW* offer that larger story. Just as classical myths of religions have been a prominent agent of providing meaning for their adherents and communities, my analysis of the extensive presence of myth, ritual and community in *WoW* suggests that digital games to a great extent can fulfil this same role for players today. It can be argued that it is the same yearning to explore and experience deeper mysteries of life that is expressed by players through gameplay.

The proposition of this research is that the semantic play of the actual and virtual, the mythic and the real is one factor that makes playing the game a transcendental experience. As Campbell (2004) has proposed, the “other world” described in myths is “the inner world” itself and what is spoken of as “future” is “now.” In playing, players are not simply participating in an old story, they are creating their own story and in doing so they induct both past and future here and now in the present. While engagement with the story form of classical myths was largely linear in its use of symbolism and created mental pictures in the readers or listeners mind, the online interactive world of *WoW* enables the construction of a non-linear, three-dimensional digital space that extends beyond narrative in nature. The text of *WoW* can be seen as fulfilling a deifying function of providing interactive narrative content of images and virtual activities that relate the everyday to the eternal, just as literature and religion can also do (Barthes, 1970; Campbell, 2004).

One of the conclusions of this investigation is that the significance attributed to the myths in *WoW* by the players elevates them to a sacred dimension, in that they can transcend core aspects of a player’s life. We could also argue that the goal of play itself is
redemptive and preservative and serves an eschatological function as participation in the game brings forth the past and future into the here and now.

In that WoW provides various mythic motifs as rich playable text, and serves as a space for participating in the history of a constructed world through individual and social role-playing within it, the game becomes a mythology in the cultural terms in which Barthes uses it (Barthes et al., 1974). From the perspective of this study, it can be argued further that on entering the game of WoW, the player is consciously or unconsciously immersed in a mythic universe of a religious nature.

What emerges as significant from the above discussion is that to be understood fully, WoW needs to be seen not only as an imaginative game but as a system of symbols from which players draw meaning for their life and through which they interpret the world (Geertz, 1973b). This supports the understanding of recent media and religion scholarship that in contemporary life popular media are increasingly becoming the primary source of symbolic meaning and religious reinterpretation (Hoover, 2006, p. 36 ff). Though not religious in the classical or traditional sense, popular media can be understood as religious in character when religion is understood culturally as “a system of symbols that provides its believers with a coherent understanding or valuation of life, a meaningful ordered world in which interaction and interdependence are enabled” (Morgan, 2008a, p. 5) (see also T. R. Clark & Clanton, 2012; Mazur & McCarthy, 2011; Pike, 2004; Santana & Erickson, 2008).

B. Rituals Practiced in WoW

As noted earlier, the deftly constructed interactive dynamics of WoW’s gameplay elevate the game from being a mere fantasy-based narrative to a highly intensified activity space. The game requires players to undertake various activities in relation to the corresponding mythology it presents. By inviting every player to take a role in the history of WoW, the game asks each player to behave in a particular mode and respond to the game’s mythic environment within the rules required.

62 According to Hindu mythology the great war of Mahabharat is ‘played’ to establish Dharma, righteousness. When Arjuna hesitates to fight war against his own kinsmen and teachers, Lord Krishna advises him that the war – the current state of affairs – is the lila of God and it is Arjuna’s dharma to fight. The objective of both war (lila), and play is to preserve Dharma (religion). And that is redemptive.
In my textual analysis of ritual in the game text, I identified a variety of types of rituals in detail. They included undertaking simple and complex quests, raiding dungeons, doing dailies such as collecting materials, and participating in various in-game activities such as festivals. Apart from those quests that are ritually themed (such as Ritual Bond and Ritual Materials) the play as a whole, quests and other smaller activities function as rituals or provide a context of ritual meaning for players.

B.1. The Interaction of Myth and Ritual

Quests are thematically integrated into the metanarrative of WoW. They are activities and tasks that invite players to delve deeper into the history of Azeroth by taking an active role in it. In doing so, players defend the cause of the character they have chosen by overcoming various challenges in the fantasy environment. The mythic background to the quests intensifies the activities associated with it into a thick ritual text where myths and rituals are inseparably connected. This charges the rich text of WoW with potentially heavy meaning. Therefore, we could argue that WoW recreates in its constructed worldview a pre-rationalist form of mythic and ritualistic religious world, and the chance to participate in such a pre-rationalist world of myth, ritual, magic, and epic quest is part of its attraction to those whose real life is marked by expectations and requirements that are largely rational and disenchanted.

Many rituals in real-life myth-based communities are associated with an inward journey, when one leaves the outer world and enters an inner world of myth and spirit. From a ludic point of view, each game quest can be seen as a journey into the mysterious and the revelatory. Rettberg (2008) proposes that it is these aspects of aporia and epiphany, mystery and revelation allegorically and playfully understood, that for some invites comparison between the gaming experience and religious quest.

B.2. The Ritual Process in WoW

WoW provides a rule based environment, with specific objectives to achieve under given conditions, that lend a ritualistic character to players’ activities. Though Bronkhorst (2012) has advocated that a ritual becomes ritual only if it achieves pre-determined outcomes without having any room for chance, and although the outcomes of player
activities can be highly unpredictable, there are predetermined objectives to achieve whose rules are known to the players.

Research on ritual in online gaming has identified two important perspectives: one where the online game is seen as a ritual in itself (Estes, 2009; O'Leary, 1996; Radde-Antweiler, 2008; Schroeder et al., 1998; Wagner, 2011); and the other where the online game is envisaged not as a ritual in itself, but as a place where ‘ritualized play’ takes place (Danet, 2005; Highland & Yu, 2008; Wagner, 2012b). My research has confirmed that both these dimensions are applicable to WoW. In the first place, when players approach and use WoW for liminal experiences whereby they transcend the mundane aspects of their own life and enter into the alternative space and time of WoW, gameplay can be considered as a ritual in itself. This liminal space of WoW not only serves as a liminal space but also provides the players with a culturally text rich with meanings to engage with as well as to organise their search for the inner being. In that, WoW maintains a sacred significance. Secondly, WoW is definitely a space where ritualised play occurs. The very need for play, the process of gameplay, regular activities within the game space are all examples of when WoW becomes a space for ritualised play. Above all, it is the ritual logic of the game, as Gazzard and Peacock (2011) have effectively described, that deems it to be persuasively religious.

As noted in the Myth section, the process of play can be seen to incorporate Turner’s three-step structure of ‘separation’, ‘margin’ (or limen) and ‘re-aggregation,’ characteristic of a liminal, ritual experience (Turner, 1969). Player Monk’s description of his play was particularly rich in its correspondences to these elements of the ritual process and two forms of liminal or threshold-crossing experience: his initial abandonment of playing the older version to shift to the new WoW, and the challenges faced in getting beyond the threshold of Levels 24 and 25. In various stages of their game-playing, most players face similar challenges of threshold-crossing, a key characteristic of Turner’s concepts of liminal experience and rite of passage. These can involve aspects such as discovering new places, learning skills, levelling up, acquiring experience points, meeting and gaining friends, and being accepted as a guild leader. Successful completion of these phases commonly offers players a feeling of fulfilment and sense of accomplishment.
In cementing these forms of experience within the game, the game structure offers players graphic signs after completing specific quests, such as armour, tunics or badges. The avatar’s level also indicates the crossing of many thresholds in the virtual existence. The avatar description pane on the top left of the screen, which shows the avatar’s level, experience and mana, is a constant reminder of the phases the player has successfully completed, along with those yet to be conquered. Through the graphical interface of WoW players can also track their friend’s achievements, view match history, avatars, and other details through the official website battle.net 2.0. These formalised and repetitiously performed acts serve also to communalise ritual achievements, as many real life rituals do.

B.3. WoW as Collective Cultural Liminoid

WoW’s role as what Turner calls a collective cultural liminoid (Turner, 1969) can also be noted. Although WoW might have been started as a commercial enterprise exploiting a popular thirst for interactive entertainment, it has been observed that Blizzard has clear social, cultural, economic and political ideologies behind its development (Bainbridge, 2007). Some comments in an interview given by Blizzard’s creative development team indicates shared liminoid experiences among the team (Blizzard, 2009). Quests such as Crusader Bridenbrad (Wowhead, 2009a) and Kyle's Gone Missing! (Chuang, 2007) are reported as emerging from a collective liminoid quality to later become a liminal experience to millions of players of WoW. Some of the festivals organised in WoW, such as Hallow's End, Winter Veil and Lunar Festival are attempts to integrate mainstream cultural symbols into the game’s history by attaching rhythms of the real-world time to those of game time to counterbalance the gaps of temporal stasis found in the game (Krzywinska, 2008).

This collective liminal culture of gaming can extend beyond the online context of gaming. In the Somajiguda game centre, the personal identities of players playing in the centre underwent this transition as they addressed each other by their avatar’s names. When asked later if they had known each other earlier, most of the players replied that they did not know anything personal about their playmates, not even their real names! Yet they were comrades in play and felt good about that. Similarly Player Palani described a new culture evolving in Hyderabad, where in the everyday language between
players the terminology of *WoW* had found a significant place. He added: “See, the relevant thing is there are million people who are playing *WoW* and they will have their next generation speak in terms of *WoW*...” (Player Palani, 2012).

In the liminal phase of Player Monk’s play, a sense of spontaneous sociability, solidarity and equality can be seen developing outside his normal day-to-day social interaction, something that Turner (1969) has described as “communitas.” Such *communitas* was seen in the game centres of Bangalore and Somajiguda, a *communitas* of players playing in the same physical space metaphorically “waging a war” with the purpose of “establishing order in the chaotic Azeroth.” Juxtaposing this with the Hyderabadian community celebrating Dashara, the festival of the victory of truth and light, evokes challenging questions. The mythic and ritual motifs which have been perpetuated by religion down the ages can be seen taking on new physical virtual forms, illuminating Wertheim’s claim that what was once seen only as theologically possible is increasingly being viewed as technologically feasible (Wertheim, 2000, p. 263).

**B.4. The Sacred Significance of Rituals in *WoW***

Geographic separation facilitated by a fantasy world and the virtual reality of *WoW* offers to many players a ready-made space with special significances distinct from the regular “normal” world they typically reside in. My observation of play in Somajiguda while waiting for players to be interviewed demonstrated this: the immersion is so intense that players become oblivious of the regular world during each session of their play, which usually lasted for an hour. The online space of *WoW* provides an altered state of existence that contrasts starkly with “real” life.

There I observed also the so-called sacred and secular merging mutually in colourful and playful ways, in ritual celebrations occurring concurrently both outside and inside the game centre. In the liminal space created by the ritual boundaries between the actual and virtual, sacred and secular became indistinguishable in Somajiguda. Yet in this digital playground I observed also a disciplined state of human social organization, an “ordered” community that resembles the ordinary world, albeit in a different space and time. *WoW* is a symbolic space in itself, symbolic of movement, departure and return, of past and future in a living present, of self-reflexivity and wholeness, and is symbolic of how we might live our everyday life.
One of the issues to be addressed in considering the potentially sacred significance of \textit{WoW} is the issue of play and the extent to which an activity whose constructed mythic, ritualistic and community world is primarily play-oriented can be taken seriously as a potential source of sacred meaning. While Durkheim has expressed the opinion that “a rite is no rite if it is pure entertainment” (Durkheim, 1893, p. 284), more recent scholarship has re-addressed the close connections that there are between religion and play. Huizinga has argued that the cultural distinction between playful and serious life prohibits us from seeing ritual “as seriousness at its highest and holiest” (Huizinga, 1949, p. 37). Similarly Dupre argues that the objectivism of our worldview has “adversely affected the very possibility of transcending the closed circuit of spatialised, rectilinear time… The modern mentality undermines the inclination to take certain aspects of play – acting with absolute seriousness – as ritual practice requires” (Dupre, 1992, p. 205).

Raj argues that ritual levity in religious contexts has the capability to transcend time and space (Raj, 2010). Pintchman and Shim similarly argue that humorous ritual practices of traditional religions and ritual enactments in virtual space share many similarities - both have the capacity to equally transform secular and virtual activities into holy rites on sacred grounds (Pintchman, 2010; Shim, 2010). As playfulness can help devotees to elevate themselves to the level of the spiritual or sacred in a sacred rite of a religion, so also can devoted ritualistic patterns in digital games transcend the limitations of body, mind and the mundane life to what can also be considered as meaningful states of sacred significance.

A number of examples emerged in interviews where players saw play as a serious business. Player Autry (Ref. see page 142) shared such a perspective when she used expressions such as ‘I am bored...,’ ‘waiting for the maintenance to end’ and ‘as far as day to day stuff,’ all of which allude to the monotony of mundane life outside the ritual space. She also alluded to various forms of levity in the play context, from “sarcasm or a sense of humour” developing into more serious levity when “humour finally clicked” and became a “different kind of humour.”

That does not mean that \textit{WoW} can or does provide religious satisfactions for all its players. Whether it does or not of course depends on the individual player’s processes of signification, immersion and imagination. But it is not excluded from doing so simply because it is a game rather than a dedicated sacred space. As Grimes notes, religious
rituals and interactive media should be neither equated nor segregated, but seen as sharing a common boundary (Grimes, 2006, p. 12).

C. Community Participation in *WoW*

*World of Warcraft* is a social phenomenon, played by millions of people and talked about, discussed, and seriously studied by thousands. In the textual analysis undertaken and reported above, I outlined how after a certain level *WoW* can only be played in teams, forming small parties, raid groups and quest teams. I found also that four types of communities can be identified: the in-game community, the community within the game for the purpose of gameplay; the offline community, the extended offline community in which relationships formed in the game are taken out of gaming contexts; the out-game community, the community formed in the physical gaming locality; and the ethical community, the community characterised by ethical values.

C.1. Social System in *WoW*

The design and the dynamics of the game have constructed *WoW* not just as a structured game but as an integrated and independent social system. Roles taken by each player are complementary and a weak player or a deficient avatar can immensely affect the team’s success and reputation in raids. A capable raid leader who knows the strategies of the game and the trust placed upon him/her by the participating players is a very important element for success. The textual analysis and interviews reported in Chapter 5 indicate that the social roles taken by players, the social nuances embedded in *WoW*, the hierarchical system in guilds and the coordination made possible by intense communication between players serve to establish and maintain the game as a stable social order in a game context, something which Chen (2008) and Ducheneaut and Moore (2004, 2005) have also demonstrated. The social system, though seen and experienced virtually in *WoW*, involves real people as players and raid leaders in particular have to employ social etiquette and inclusive values in order to maintain their playing communities. Player Yiddi explained that formation of raid teams challenges the leader to employ diplomacy and politics. Similarly Player Muji described that in managing guilds one “cannot be favourable to anyone,” or behave like a “tyrant.” For a successful progression in the game, players have to demonstrate ethical values which for some of the
players I interviewed (for example Muji and Deep) are often informed by their offline religious practices. Muji identified that values such as “protecting the weak” came from his religious upbringing. Similarly for Player Yiddi the collaborative play of *WoW* in the guise of role-play was an opportunity, even though it is experienced virtually, for employing their values derived from actual and offline life:

“I guess the game is asking us to fit into whatever we think it is comfortable. If we think we are more supportive and we like to help other people we become priests. If we are protective then become tank and if neutral class we could do damage.”

These comments and other players’ experiences endorse what Koo & Seider (2009) argue, that video games can be guideposts for moral development in various ways.

For some of the players I interviewed, gaining the trust of other players in collaborative play is very important and part of the enjoyment of play. Player Muji said that he was able to build an identity for his character (avatar) over weeks and months to such an extent that he was successful in gaining the trust of players who were strangers to him and who knew him only through his avatar. Raid leaders like Player Muji and Player Chandan reported getting satisfaction from investing “hard work” into the game and gaining trust and social respect in return. Scholars such as Bainbridge (2010) and Chen (2008) report similar findings from their studies.

Although Players such as Chandan and Monk reported a heightened sense of competition among individual players when teamwork was involved, they also indicated that mutual support among players was integral to the game, something I observed in the game playing in the communities I visited in Devasthana and Somajiguda. It becomes evident from this study that along with experiencing the joy of playing in a mythic realm (presented through stories, item materials, iconography, geography and serene and cataclysmic environments), and the interactive participation of the game (quests, raids and interactive elements such as chat) a major portion of the pleasure of playing reported by players I interviewed comes from the unforeseen and unpredicted social relations formed within the game space. Forming social relations and gaining the trust of friends and strangers is a challenging but enjoyable aspect of the game for them. As Smith also notes in his study of avatar trust (Smith, 2010), forming and maintaining social relations within the given rules of the game that limit one’s freedom is also an experiment with social rules of life.
C.2. Liminality, Communitas and Community in *Wow*

Two of the types of *Wow* communities were particularly noticeable in my visit to India, the in-game community and the offline community. One was the non-physical, geographically separated online community formed within the game and the other the physical community playing *Wow* together that gathered in the game centres in Somajiguda and Devasthana. While the online mode of *Wow* creates communities of network, the communities in game centres are cultural communities facilitated by *Wow*. In both types, a strong bond between members can be identified. Among the players I interviewed, a group who were playing the previous (offline) version of *Warcraft* moved as a group to *Wow*, gaining other friends nationally and internationally through play. In Somajiguda these players met at the public game centre and continued to be a community of *Wow* players.

These community gatherings – whether online or offline – create their own culture with specific sets of meaningful symbols drawn from *Wow*. This liminal environment, with its own alternative forms of structure and symbolism, reflect Turner’s concept of ‘*communitas,*’ temporary communities that reflect a relatively structure-less society based on relations of equality and solidarity and opposed to the normative social structure (Turner, 1982, pp. 46-47). In my field visits, I observed players deconstructing the traditional order of their society. This was especially noticeable in the Devasthana and Somajiguda game centres. In the darkened room of the Devasthana game centre, the players of *Wow* could be seen immersed in a “flow” state within the symbolic world created by *Wow*, oblivious to what was happening even to the player sitting next to them let alone the outside world. Similarly, in Somajiguda while the larger community outside was at the crest of the spiritual festivity of Dashara, the players inside the game centre were at the heights of virtual quests. In both situations the thick text of *Wow* provided a heightened symbolic world where the players felt ripples of intense mutual connectivity.

In a highly hierarchical and multi-layered society such as India, playing a digital game such as *Wow* may have many real life implications. *Wow* provides a platform for people from various strata who would otherwise be differentiated on the basis of caste, community, religion, region and language, to come together as equals. The joy of coming together was reported by a number of my interviewees. However, *Wow* is also a space where players (such as Yiddi and Monk, for example) can experience “real moral
wrongs” (Powers, 2003, p. 191) such as racial abuse or clashes based on castes in the game space. Players have to make choices not only within the game space but in real life as they deal with real people behind the avatars. This research then supports Reynolds’ view that various activities and social practices in *World of Warcraft* “breathe moral content into the individual decisions made by actors as they perform within a space given meaning and value by the mutual engagement of all participants” (Reynolds, 2010, p. 11).

### C.3. The Ethical Community

From an ethical point of view, though *World of Warcraft*’s design challenges the ‘ethical affordance and constraints’ of its players, as Sicart (2009) has pointed out, players and guilds can configure their own ethical norms for social wellbeing within the virtual world. Players such as Chandan have acknowledged that guilds themselves have their own strategies to overcome unethical and anti-social behaviour: “But when it [racial abuse] goes extreme the hierarchy of the guild comes in” (Player Chandan, 2012) and the guild master is required to take appropriate action. This player behaviour is in agreement with what Sicart argues, that players are not “mindless subordinates to the game system… (but) moral, responsible agents” (Sicart, 2009, pp. 183-184).

Most often members in a guild, as well as *World of Warcraft* players in a public game centre, are found upholding a common basic value system and norms that makes social cohesion a high priority, even though they are disconnected from the structures of mainstream society. From a functionalist perspective, the absence of formal structured order could represent a debilitating breakdown of social cohesion. But as Turner (1969) suggests, these spaces can present the positive potential for *communitas* that reaffirms solidarity, values and social bonds arising from people sharing a common experience. This research contends that the norms, regulations and modalities stipulated by Blizzard, and the way players engage with them, create social aggregates that have a commonly accepted value system; a liminal space that typically reaffirms the social order through coming to terms with new phases of life and social activity.

Some players I interviewed reported having played together in Kolkata as a community, but they were now physically dispersed across different cities in India. However, they reported holding together as a playing community through online gaming, sharing values that continued to bind them as a community and proud of their group
identity. They were remarkably consistent in enumerating these values, such as mutual respect and tolerance, avoiding factions and friction, and a desire to help others, especially new players. It can be argued that these values also support the moral shaping of community in the off-line world.

Many players who reported no longer being involved in practices of traditional religion, reported finding a secure and meaningful space in the context of WoW for religious exploration. They appreciated the sociological settings of the game better than those provided by traditional religions. Player Monk, for example, reported finding WoW more engaging and meaningful than any traditional religious communities:

“I like to be known as a Hindu because that carries my entire family background. But personally speaking I would be more of an atheist... And it is basically those kinds of... you know sociological gatherings and other things can be done without religion.”

It is striking that Player Monk agrees that these things can be “done without religion.” He reported being exposed to rituals, social gatherings and charities, mostly through religion, before he was introduced to WoW and still esteems these aspects of religious life. However he expressed distaste for the social, economical and emotional extravaganza of religions. He found WoW a better alternative for community gathering and mutual support, including as a liminal space and communitas. Similarly Player Muji reflected that:

“The game community is better because I relate to people of my age. There is a bonding when you talk to people of your age. But in family there are members older and younger and there is always this age gap. Although I am religious and I practice but I do not like... participate in religious community. I go to mosque but I am not in an active community like that.”

From these experiences and opinions of players of WoW, it can be argued that the way WoW reflects social morality, reaffirms human society and creates social cohesion through its mythology and practices associated with its mythology, parallels what had been a major function of religion within societies. Certainly some of the players interviewed reported finding more significant meaning in WoW than what they have traditionally been offered by mainstream society and religion. While not claiming that WoW is a new religion I propose that WoW can exhibit the same influences.

C.4. Play and Social Cohesion

Finally, what is the significance of play in the building of community and what is its religious significance? The central argument of Huizinga’s play theory (1949) is that play
is a creative force in the building of community and culture. Moreover, as Rodriguez (2006) interprets Huizinga, ethical questions about civility and fairness are often intimately connected with the act of playing. As *WoW* forms communities of play, it needs to be understood as a collective cultural force and a playground whose core subject is “the emergence, sustenance and transformation of the community” (Rodriguez, 2006, p. 1).

As noted earlier, in many traditional religious contexts, play was recognised as a space for gathering and sharing ideas. The traditional Buddhist setting of Satsangh and *gyan chaupad* (spiritual snakes and ladders), is one example of this. Extending this concept one can argue, as Rice does (2009) that hyper-connected communities of digital games such as *WoW* can and do redefine physical religious communities. The example given above of Player Muji finding the religious context of *WoW* more satisfying than his traditional religious community is one indication of this.

It is no more simply the geographical confines or physical proximity that defines religious communities in the digital era. Wider cultural and relational characteristics are also influential (though Durkheim (1893) observed in the late nineteenth century that modern societies develop community around interests and skills more than around locality). This study proposes that in addition to physical spaces and places, meaningful communities with a religious perspective sustained by a shared mythology and nurtured by ritual practice can be formed around technologically mediated phenomena as well, including media activities, shared images, and cultural products such as *WoW* (Jankowski, 2002; Morgan, 2007; Rodriguez, 2008). In fact, if Rheingold’s argument is to be accepted, we may find that online communities may represent the renaissance of lost communities of the past (Rheingold, 1993).

D. *WoW*, Popular Culture and Religion

I believe it has been demonstrated in the previous sections that the elements of myth, ritual and community are strongly present in *WoW* and that in the functions they serve for their players these elements operate in a way that is similar to what have been recognised traditionally as the major functions served by religion. This section explores the third and fourth major research questions, that is, do players of the game note these religious characteristics and significance, and if they do what implications then do these findings
have for thinking about the relationship between new media and changes recognised as taking place in social religiosity.

In exploring these implications, the perspective being pursued is not whether *WoW* is to be understood as a new religion or as being essentially religious. Rather it is whether *WoW* provides spiritual or metaphysical satisfactions or resources which religions once provided and whether *WoW* becomes a space within which similar religious satisfactions are experienced.

In Chapter 2 I outlined the reconsideration that is taking place in how media and religion interact by looking at the interaction from a cultural rather than an essentialist or institutional perspective. What is key in that approach is that rather than being seen as subordinate to or separate from traditional religion, media need to be seen now as playing a key role in providing the symbolic resources through which people make their own meaning out of their social worlds, worlds in which religious and spiritual dimensions are important parts, even if they are not recognised as such. This approach assumes a rethinking of religion in the modern world in a way that recognises that aspiration for the sacred or transcendent aspects of life is widespread and finds expression in a variety of ways, including in publicly mediated phenomena or experiences that are in themselves not overtly or substantively religious.

In my interviews, players were given the opportunity to discuss their attitudes towards and involvement in religion in general and whether they saw parallels between *WoW* and religious belief and practice. In their comments, some of the research participants reflected an essentialist understanding of religion, such as “one’s relationship with his own god” (Player Abu) or where one behaves like “good devotees and pray” (Player Palani). Others saw religion as an institution fulfilling various social functions when they define it as a place which “keeps people in place” (Player Abin), and as something which “gives you path” (Player Abin). Players reported other functions such as “religion gives you social life” (Player Abin); “Religion provides a group of rituals to follow [as well as] a lot of mythologies forced by basic human nature like good vs. evil. Religion is required for the morals we get from the story” (Player Karik); ethical, such as “without religion you can never know what is right and wrong” (Player Muji) and “it is a way to live your life in a good way helping others...” (Player Deep). These reflect a general functionalist
perspective. Player Yiddi’s description was more phenomenological, as “basically one’s way for justifying how the world is and why it is.”

Coming through some of the interviews was an appreciation for aspects of religion, for religion’s role of “keeping people in place and bringing peace most of time” (Player Abin); as being “good as far as it doesn’t bring unhappiness” (Player Palani); as well as a regard for the basic goodness in religions without their institutional features. Player Yiddi who acknowledged undertaking religious practice, reflected the view that,

“[religion] might actually have some benefit, so doing that ritual for five minutes a day will not harm me, so why not just do it. But I do think that I get some spiritual or material benefits.”

Similarly Muji suggested that,

“Without religion you can never have a path. You can never know what is right and wrong. You will be like a mindless person walking around in a circle. Religion is a direction.”

Though some players noted that they came from traditionally religious families, they indicated that either they did not practice religion or they held a dismissive or negative view towards it. Among the views were that the problem with religion was not inherent to religion itself but because of the irrelevance of the way it is practised. These included: religious practices are “something which is ‘had-to-be-done’” (Player Abin), or its “rituals are imposed upon you without anyone explaining why we have to do it” (Player Chandan). Some considered religion as “pure waste” and many of its sociological functions can be “done without religion” (Player Monk). To this group “practising religion and not practising doesn’t make any difference” (Player Abin).

In this context, where some players expressed an open dislike for religious practices, it is fascinating to ask the question, why then do they play WoW, which offers significant mythic content and functions similar to religions.

It is here the significance of WoW as a social and cultural force can be seen. Almost all the players whom I interviewed agreed that WoW transforms their lives. What is interesting about this is the similarity of their comments to changes frequently described as being produced by religions for their followers. Player Muji, for example, said: “WoW gives me direction. It gives me this lesson that if you want to be famous [successful] you have to work well. Whatever credibility you have for people to like yourself... you know you have to work for that... Whatever I do in the game helps to work in real life.”
Similarly Player Yiddi said, “There is diplomacy and politics in play. Our perspective of life also changes.” Some of the players reflected that the game motivated them to achieve what they saw as great goals in life: “the ultimate goal in life is to become the supreme most powerful person. So that which is not achievable in real life is possible in this game” (Player Muji). *WoW* thus is reported as helping to transform players’ lives in constructive and productive ways.

**D.1. The Quest for Identity and Meaning**

In different ways, the players reported that their engagement with *WoW*, whether they believe in a God or not or whether they practice a religion or not, was related to questions of identity, meaning and purpose of life. Quests can be seen to acquire a phenomenological, theological and spiritual dimension when related to a person’s questions of self and meaning. This endorses what Middleton and Walsh propose, that the game space can become a signifying system through which social order is communicated, reproduced, experienced and explored and a player becomes “a self-formed master not only of their own destiny but of the destiny of the world” (Middleton & Walsh, 1995, p. 20).

Quests in *WoW* emerge from this research as a space for a player’s inner search. Player Chandan can be understood to be achieving the quest objectives of his real life when he describes that the game gives him more fulfilment than the educational degree he is forced to take because he can meaningfully engage with a specific set of view points of the game, game activities, and other players from various places. Player Muji reflected a similar view, when he said, “gaming is like running a multinational business” and described “gaining social trust” by investing his own “soul and heart” through hard work in creating an identity for his avatar and speaking of his avatar’s identity as his own identity being secured. Player Monk similarly enjoyed immense satisfaction and sense of fulfilment when he found that his level 80 avatar was one of the “top twenty of those hundred thousand characters.”

The translation of the deeper significance of the game into players’ real lives is apparent in a number of ways. Along with deeply relating to the meaning of the “background myths [of quests] and the story behind all the raids,” players like Yiddi reflect that in playing the game they are literally undertaking an epic quest of their own
life. Playing with their avatar in a mythic world and participating in its plot conflates with the plot of their own life. Player Chandan’s comment that he cannot escape being part of the story reflects that the game is both symbolic and real. This partly explains why discrepancies and unreasonable motifs in the history of the game become for some in the wider WoW community such a contested issue outside the game. Similarly, attempting to immortalise their great virtual quests by uploading numerous machinima videos in public spaces such as YouTube can be understood as a mythologising of their own lives. Hosting live programmes of spiritual sermons and uploading their transcripts to the official community forums reflect a similar conflation of the game with people’s real lives.

Rettberg (2008) has observed that the aporia and epiphany, the mystery and revelation involved in play, make WoW an experience equivalent to a religious quest. Metaphorically, through quests players can accomplish the “promise” offered by the game. Each quest is a journey into the mysterious, an encounter with its challenges to gain its reward. Players experience this call to adventure in the game and pursue it for the sake of unfolding the mystery:

“There is always a force of better rewards in game. The only reason you play WoW is the delayed gratification. You do not get rewards instantly. You work for something and when it is done you get the reward. That is what keeps you driving on. You want to achieve 80 with a better gear and that gear is your motivation to play” (Player Yiddi, 2012).

In transcending core aspects of their life through the thick text of the game’s myths and quests, new cultural meanings are constructed that can have the character of spiritual or religious significance. Through the oscillation between the virtual and the actual in gameplay, facilitated through the avatar in a fantasy environment, players can be understood as undergoing a sort of metamorphosis, or being possessed by the spirit, which is at the heart of many religious rituals.63

Quests can also be understood as devices for players to transcend their temporal existence by becoming their own mythical hero. The game space becomes a display ground for each player’s commitments to the world and an arena to gain social status and identity as an achiever and overcomer. Thus, what Dupre (1992) argues about the interrelations of ritual and play in religion can be seen occurring in the gaming sessions

---

63 This is especially true in some of the Hindu ritual performances such as Theyyam (a ritual dance considered sacred) (Yarrow, 2001)
Virtually Religious: Myth, Ritual and Community in World of Warcraft – Virtually Religious | Jose Vallikatt 184

of players. The game’s interface “mysteriously merges the illusion of play with the deeper reality of life.... Only in the ek-stasis of becoming what we are not, does freedom allow us to become what we are. The drama [unfolded through play] then unmistakeably shows how the quest for identity leads through the alienation of [role-playing]” (Dupre, 1992, p. 209). When many players say that the game is an escape from real life, they are reflecting this transcending nature of play in religion.

The fact that WoW is used as such an engaging space to explore, experience, and express one’s identity, autonomy, place and worth in the world, justifies the observations of media, religion and culture scholars such as Hoover (2006). What emerges from this study is that, as Hoover observes, these are part of the important communal elements of a new “quest culture” which was very much part of religion, spirituality, and transcendence previously (Hoover, 2006, p. 37). For the players, WoW becomes literally “a second life” (Player Yiddi) or “an extension of life” (Player Muji).

Many religions objectify the search for meaning and purpose of life and one of the strategies of this search is quest accomplished symbolically or realistically. Pilgrimages, which follow a journey structure, are an example of quest in its real form. Learning the scriptures as part of a pilgrimage actualises the journey (or quest) symbolically. The purpose is to explore the other side of your existence, which is called being “born again” (John 3: 3, 5) or dvijā.64

Earlier, I compared Player Monk’s account of his play to that of Campbell’s hero quest. His account can also be likened, metaphorically but also possibly literally, to the principle of jīvanmukti65 in Hinduism. Monk, who plays with multiple avatars of various classes and multiple identities, can be seen as being in virtual transmigratory existence that fetters him in the world of sorrows (karma). He is disappointed because, with his different avatars, he cannot advance because of his ignorance (avidya) or lack of skills.

---

64 The Hindu notion of Dvijā literally means ‘twice born.’ The first birth is into the realm of matter (bhu), while the second is into the realm of the spirit. This second birth can form dīksā (rooted in da = to give and kṣī = to destroy; some other comment its root is diks’ = to consecrate). That is, dīksā is initiation to allow one to daks, or to grow/increase into the div, = light, spirit. Basically, it is to be understood as the Upanayana rite of passage exclusive for Brahmin class of India. Socially it divided the society into hierarchies. See more in (Lipner, 1994, pp. 67-87). The economic law of Kautilya also was based on this social gradation and the status of being Dvijā. See for more (Borale, 1968, p. 85 ff)
65 The principle of jīvanmukti, according to Vedanta world-view signifies being liberated while living. It implies liberation (moksha, or nukti), the release from bondage of the cycle of transmigratory existence (samsara). One has to undergo this cycle predominantly due to ignorance (avidya), which causes desire-filled action (karma) continually binding them to the transmigratory cycle. One gains release through immediate knowledge (vidya or jnana) of partless, pervasive, unchanging and self-luminous reality known as brahman. Brahman is realised to be one’s true self (atman); this self is not tied to the body or intellect and is free from all limitation and sorrow (Davis, 2010; Fort, 1998).
Monk finds a friend who gives him the right knowledge (*vidya*) that enables him to earn a place in the community through virtues such as fearlessness, love, charity, solidarity, respect for others and the world – the religion of the Holy Light in *World of Warcraft* teaches its adherents to follow similar virtues. Traversing the virtual landscape in a holy pilgrimage provides guidance to his actual life, leading to development as a person and growing toward wholeness, insight, and responsible living. He has to ‘play’ to achieve that status – play becomes his *Dharma*, his religion.

The game may lead the player to the knowledge that the self is never embodied and the body is not ultimately real in an Advaitic sense. The world, actual and virtual, is only a reflection in a mirror: it appears (*maya*) and exists, but it is not finally real. Thus, the player overcomes real challenges of attaining liberation through the knowledge and experience of what is also said to be provided by religion, what Fort describes as the Advaitic problem of “not the presence of a body, but identification of the quality-less self with the conditioned body” (Fort, 1998, p. 5). When Monk visits Teldrasil in Azeroth, escaping from his material life without the trouble of travelling, he can be understood to be overcoming the “limitation of embodiedness” through his virtual avatar, an idea which is quite consistent with the Advaitic notion of world devaluation (Fort, 1998). The net result of these processes is crossing the return threshold with confidence, the hero’s return as the victor of two worlds.

As Slevin (2000, p. 7) puts it, when players are online “they have a foot in both worlds.” This is the transformation each player experiences while playing. But the return journey is more fascinating and important. When the player logs off from the game, a number acknowledged that playing had changed them substantially.

“My attitude towards people was pretty poor, sorry to say. Once I quit [the game] I realised how the game changed me. It changes you inside out. It makes you totally different person because what you tend to behave with other people in game that you try to behave in real life” (Player Monk).

What emerges from this study then is that digital games, especially MMORPGs, do offer a space and opportunity for many players to experience the feeling of renewed life (being born again) and its purpose materialised through various accomplishments in the virtual game experienced as reality. In understanding the religious parallels of this, it needs to be recognised that most religious phenomena themselves are virtual in nature, presented, communicated and appropriated through beliefs, rituals and imagined communities. If religious experience is a constant boundary crossing of actual and virtual
realities, what an immersive game such as *WoW* adds, as Wertheim proposes, is to make this amalgamation of dual existence technologically possible (Wertheim, 2000).

**D.2. The Sacred and the Religious in *WoW***

If the sacred is understood as Eliade (1959), and Lynch (2007a, p. 138) subsequently, have proposed as the “ultimate source of power, identity, meaning and truth” the special meaning and significance attributed to *WoW* by the players make *WoW* a ‘sacred’ thing.

The transcending nature of the game and game-playing emerged in player interviews. Player Yiddi considered that the myths in *WoW* have “a reason and objective, which is fascinating.” Player Karik said, “though *WoW* is a fantasy world, we experience a real feeling in similar real world stories.” Player Muji reported, “even if *WoW* is a virtual game it is an extension of life. I am living my real life even if I play.” Players reflected that *WoW* is a place where players can learn and demonstrate noble aspects of real life that one may not be able to demonstrate in real life: “In real life you do not give anything... at least you learn to do something in the game” (Player Deep). They also consider that the game provides opportunities to visualise invisible characters in real life mythologies: “We can’t find them [mythic characters] in real, but can see them in game you know... I like games having myths...” (Player Deep). They reflect that the rituals in *WoW* “enhance their life” (Player Yiddi and that both the in-game and out-game communities substantially contribute to their life (Player Chandan). Each of these indicates the extent to which players attribute the significance of the game to their real life. This includes the significance of the game to religious aspects of their lives. This was particularly apparent in comments from Player Yiddi:

“All these things [in *WoW*] are very religious themes. Dealing with dying and resurrection I sometimes feel embodied resurrection. Especially with my class, we have inbuilt resurrection, once we die we can instantly resurrect and we can walk on water. And I think that *WoW* has purposefully incorporated these elements like walking on water can only be done by God to make us feel that we are a power in the game.”

As the research participants joined in the interviews and as the questions were raised, it was fascinating to me to observe them beginning to think about the way religion and religious motifs were integrated in *WoW*. Most participants admitted that they had never thought that there are any elements of religion in *WoW* and now they recognise religious possibilities also in *WoW*. One day as I was leaving the Somajiguda game centre after interviewing a few players, Player Abin followed to greet me. After the courtesy
expressions of farewell he added, “there is so much similarity between gaming and religion. Religion is like a game.” The religious aspects of WoW may be an important aspect of its attraction and appeal to its millions of players, although they may not be consciously aware of it.

D.3. Re-culturation of the Religious in WoW

While arising from a particular cultural context, WoW can also be seen as transforming religion, particularly in its character as a cultural production that in a competitive social environment offers people an alternative location and genre within which to explore and satisfy fundamental human needs. It is within the view that culture is a constructed and actively competitive social environment that the media, religion and culture approach sees cultural and media developments facilitating a rethinking of religion beyond existing dualistic definitions of religion, and a relocation of religious practice away from discounted traditional religious institutions into more accessible and attractive media practices. My research supports this. Players reported that they cherished the freedom and flexibility of the game over the strictness and rigidity of institutional religion, a direct challenge to traditional religion’s claim to authenticity and credibility. A number reported preferring WoW because it allows them “to be a free radical” (Player Chandan) as well as offering them more meaning and engagement, opportunities to form communities of their own liking, and putting into practice values they attained from their religious or cultural contexts. The world of WoW “is not as rigid as religion. Religion enforces rules. WoW does not enforce anything. You can move on your own pace” (Player Muji).

In this new religious scenario, players find they can claim their own autonomy rather than be submissive to institutions of religion dominated by hierarchical order. Such a view connects with recent developments in thinking about media and the changing nature of religion, where the challenge to traditional religions today is not so much about the nature or content of their symbols but the power and authority of their institutions and leaders (Pike, 2008).

The religious characteristics of WoW, and its potential contribution to the transformation of religion today that the Media Religion and Culture approach talks about, also connects with DeVries and Weber’s (2001) thesis about the ‘return of religion’
in technologically advanced societies. Bainbridge sees a similar contribution in the recovery of an approach to religion that was more strongly mythological and pre-rational in its character: “It is also possible that the reality of supernatural in the WoW world has caused religion to return to its magical roots, which ironically may bring it closer to modern science” (Bainbridge, 2010, p. 72).

The major focus of this investigation has been the elements of myth, ritual and community in WoW and their potential religious significance. They are not claimed to be the only functions or significance of WoW: it obviously has numerous other functions and significance, such as entertainment, interactivity, immersiveness, and above all commercial values as well. The purpose of this thesis was to approach these three elements of WoW through the analytical perspective of three traditional religious functions, to see if that lens could provide further insight into the cultural significance of a major computer game. My analysis has found these elements working together do function in a way that parallels the functions that religions previously were recognized as providing in society, that players largely recognize these functional aspects of the game and see them as important, and that as part of an expansive, competitive, attractive and influential realm, mediated popular culture is contributing to changes taking place in the way in which religion is constructed and engaged with within contemporary culture.

E. **Challenges and Limitations of the Study**

The originality of this study is that it has explored the interplay of myth, ritual and community in WoW, demonstrating the potential religious role that the game has. While previous studies have explored the significance of different aspects of WoW in a religious context (e.g. Perkins, 2011; Zijderveld, 2008), this study has analysed the three elements together, providing a more holistic view of WoW as a religious entity.

One of the limitations of the study is that the scope of ideas from interdisciplinary topics and including the three major functional elements verges on being too broad. Integration and accommodation of all of these three elements may have prohibited this study from going into the nuanced details of each of them - each of these elements could have been developed as separate research projects in themselves and it is hoped that this greater detail may be part of future study of WoW. However, as these three elements are widely recognised as being characteristic of religion, had I excluded any, it would have
remained an incomplete attempt and would not have been able to consider the dynamics and interplay of the three together. They serve to be very intricately interwoven and unavoidably integral elements in the dynamics of religion.

A second limitation is the extent of the conclusions that can be drawn from the small number of players interviewed and the lack of any extensive ethnographic study of their actual play. While it was originally intended to undertake a more extensive ethnographic study, practical logistics and the size of the study restricted the number of players interviewed and the extent of participant observation undertaken. However I believe the benefits of linking a detailed analysis of the text with players’ personal accounts of their experience of the text provides unique insights that advance the research agenda.

Third, it is recognized that this study is predominantly qualitative and hermeneutical in its approach. It was impractical to make a quantitative study within the given framework and with the intended objective of the study. The game content was enormous, in a way not unlike the text of religious scriptures, not only because of the multiple levels of the game and complex content within levels, but also because of the numerous ways players are able to generate their own (playable) content through their everyday play. This made the detailed analysis a huge task and this study does not exhaust the interpretive possibilities. It is hoped that the particular analysis given here can be used as insights for future studies. The findings also reference individual experiences of players drawn from interviews, walkthroughs and personal blogs. Because these data depend heavily on player’s constructs of themselves, individual traits of the participants, and their varying levels of articulation, the question of the extent to which opinions expressed and utilised can be generalised or universally applied is a genuine one and is identified in different places through the thesis. Nevertheless, they open up many questions and possibilities for further investigation.
Chapter 8. Conclusion
This study has been an attempt to explore the possibility that *World of Warcraft* might fulfil the religious functions of creating worldviews, finding meaning, and exploring identity through an analysis of the game’s mythic content, ritual practices and online communities. In studying the interaction of myth, ritual and community in *WoW*, the study has found that they are present and interact in subtle ways to create special significance and specific meanings to players of the game in similar ways to those provided by religions. These three characteristics are obviously not understood to be the entirety of what religion is about.

The study has explored how *WoW* provides meaning and contexts by becoming an alternative space with a religious effect, through the overarching research question of whether the gamers individually or collectively see the MMORPG environment of *WoW* as having religious characteristics, and by investigating how they engage in online and offline religious behaviour. What is proposed through this study is that *World of Warcraft* is a space that offers immense opportunity for players to transcend the ordinary in their lives through the myths, ritual and community it offers. Even though some of the players would not want it to be called religious, the sense of enchantment that players feel towards *WoW* shows that it is an important element in players’ lives where they could explore their religious identity, even at the level of the metaphysical. It is through *WoW*, in many cases that players discover part of their authentic selves, through the exploration of their identity and the meaning of life. We can argue that this exploration of their identity is related to what has previously been described as a religious life.

Approaching religion from a functional perspective, as this research does, it has been demonstrated that this leads to a number of significant implications in understanding evolving social religiosity in the global and postmodern context.

**A. Myth, Ritual, and Community**

This study has found that the elements of myth, ritual, and community are present in *WoW* as they are similarly in religions. The myths of *WoW* construct its world by describing its own history and presenting a plausible world, although on an imaginary level, in the same way as the myths of a religion construct its history.
We have found that while the myths in *WoW* serve various purposes within the game, one of the consequences, if not intentions of the myths in *WoW* is to create a world of its own with a real-life illusion, invoking what Eliade refers to as ‘religious nostalgia’ (Eliade, 1984, p. 151). This is made possible not only through incorporating a variety of *WoW*’s own in-game religions such as Elune worship and shamanism but also through various religious themes that are constantly present in the game by way of iconography, architecture, music, and greetings.

The myths in *WoW* not only provide a back-story to set a context, they also deliver powerful messages and motifs for players to live by. What has become apparent through this research is that the mythic themes in the game significantly affect players’ outlooks on their own lives and the world. We have found that there is surrogacy and identification between the goals of the player and the character they play in the process of gameplay, as they become a part of the story and as they become the mythological character itself.

The eclectic content of *WoW* has the potential to become an inspirational force for some players. The players find *WoW* to be an avenue for radicalising the search for the self, manifested in attempts to immortalise real heroes by mythologising them within the game and creating machinima to narrate their own mythic story. The dominant eschatological themes of *WoW* cannot therefore be considered trivial, for it is there that players confront and deal with their own destiny.

Because in *WoW* the boundary line between the actual and the virtual become greatly blurred, myths cannot be understood solely as mere fabled stories used in the construction of a game or of relevance to a separate domain of a religious mind, but as powerful agents that enable players to organize the way they perceive facts and understand themselves and their world. Myths and mythic participation in *WoW* thus become explanations that mirror player’s own exigencies of life, and myths of this sort will continue to influence the world and our civilisation as inspiring realities. The players interviewed, as representatives of their generation, find their motivating symbols in these media myths, which they believe make their life meaningful and sustainable (Martin-Barbero, 1997).

A further finding of this research is that the ritual of play endows the player with what Turner (1969, 1974) has described as a liminal phase. If play space is demarcated as a
specially defined alternative space (Huizinga, 1949), the digital play virtually turns into a liminal space. Similarly, the collective cultural liminoid (Turner, 1969) of gaming does not remain within the online gaming contest but can extend beyond it, as was seen in public gaming parlours such as that in Somajiguda. The mythic background to the game quests intensifies the activities associated with it into a thick ritual text where myths and rituals are inseparably connected.

This implies, as is being concluded in this study, that working within a ‘ritual logic’ (Gazzard & Peacock, 2011) the online game can be seen as a ritual in itself as well as a place where ‘ritualized play’ takes place (O'Leary, 1996; Wagner, 2011, 2012b). Through playing WoW, players transcend the mundane aspects of their life and enter into the alternative space and time of WoW, constituting gameplay as a ritual in itself. The very need for play, the process of gameplay, the regular activities within the game space, are all examples of how WoW becomes a space for ritualised play.

**WoW** is not merely a structured game, it is an integrated and independent social system. This study has identified four types of community around **WoW**: the in-game community, the offline community, the out-game community, and the ethical community. Formulation of such communities of play around the online collaborative environments of **WoW** is transforming physical communities that are traditionally limited by geographical confines. These transformations do therefore challenge the conventional religious community for its power and influence in society. This study has identified that meaningful communities with a religious perspective can be formed around technologically mediated phenomena such as **WoW**, and can be seen as a manifestation of a longing for lost community.

It is concluded that **WoW** potentially creates ‘communitas,’ the temporary community that reflects a relatively structured-less society based on relations of equality and solidarity and opposed to the normative social structure. Gaming becomes a space where players deconstruct the traditional order of their society, as was apparent in the public game parlours in the Devasthana and Somajiguda. This is due to **WoW**’s capacity to create intense moods of ‘effervescence’ (Durkheim, 1912) similar to religious ones. The exuberance of these communities allows them to experience collective cathartic relief. Just as a larger community might engage intensely in a traditional religious experience,
the players in a gaming context engage in similar practices, within a heightened symbolic world, where they experience intense mutual connectivity.

This research has argued that the collaborative play of *World of Warcraft* creates social aggregates that have a commonly accepted value system – a liminal space that typically reaffirms the social order through coming to terms with new phases of life and social activity. Various activities and social practices in *World of Warcraft* as they function within a rule-based system – induced internally and externally – even bear an ethical characteristic which morally shapes the community in the off-line world. *World of Warcraft* then could be described as reflecting social morality, reaffirming human society and social cohesion through its mythology and the associated practices. Once again, this parallels what once was a major function of religion which, in Indian society, along with the family, has been a major in moulding the ethical value system of young people.

Whether it is connected to that religious background or not, one of the findings of this study is that the players and guilds in *World of Warcraft* maintain a very formal code of conduct and norms in *World of Warcraft*. While the players may hold various political positions and ideologies, these do not compromise with the set norms and values of the game. This suggests a dormant desire of players for structure, system and order even in a predominantly entertaining space such as *World of Warcraft*.

Thus, players find a prototype of their own life in the myths of *World of Warcraft* and a guide, which gives them direction in life. The rituals of *World of Warcraft* were found to structure the everyday lives of players and strengthen their social bonds and sense of social cohesion. They provide means for expressing and confirming deep sentiments and emotions by organising communities around media artefacts. A successful completion of a game session provides players with the opportunity to experiment with the hero within everyone. Along with the various cathartic experiences involved in activities, the thick text of *World of Warcraft* was found to offer players the equivalent experience of being ‘born again’ or being *dwija*. From the research, it can be argued that *World of Warcraft* recreates in its constructed worldview a pre-rationalist form of mythic and ritualistic religious world, and that the chance to participate in such a pre-rationalist world of myth, ritual, magic, and epic quest is part of its attraction to those whose real life may be lived in a largely rational, disenchanted real world.
B. Religious Identity and Search for Meaning

It was found that the mutual interaction of myth, ritual and community in *WoW* helps players explore their identities. The mythological motifs of *WoW* unlike other MMORPGs allow the players to inhabit a real-like world where many real world activities are possible. Players’ verdicts that play and real life are mutually corresponding underscores the conclusion that *WoW* becomes an identity space for them. Some aspects of this identity search have a religious significance as well. This research has confirmed that by participating in a mythic and ritualistic environment players can explore new possibilities of identity, which does to some degree connect with how the players live their lives offline.

This study found that through the avatar character, players engage in an immersive kind of play, intermingling their actual and virtual identity, their self and their avatars. This is of religious significance. If religion can be perceived as a space which virtualises the deeper mysteries of human existence (Horsfield, 2005), then *WoW* can be seen as fulfilling this role since it presents a world which addresses human situations related to the meaning of human existence, celebrating joys and overcoming sorrows, finding answers to enigmatic questions of human life which involve despair, change, fragmentation and conflict. It does this by conceptualising technology itself “as mythic rejoinders to exigencies that are of the utmost importance in human life” (Stroud, 2001, p. 461). Players perceive *WoW* as an identity space where they can explore the destiny of life meaningfully, again a function that has traditionally been associated with religion.

C. Play, Popular Culture and Religion

An important idea that linked *WoW* and religion in this study was play, understood also as an interactive space for meaning making, identity exploration, transitional ritual space and a collaborative space for building community. In digital spaces such as MMORPGs gameplay is significant in shaping the attitudes and behaviours of the players. MMORPGs are substantially different from other play situations such as physical games, theatre and even digital games played individually. This play dimension in popular culture has significant implications for social religiosity in many ways.
It was found that role playing in games such as *World of Warcraft* can help players relieve the pressures of social roles imposed on them by the real world by playing alternative roles in a risk free environment, including ‘classical roles’ of a hero or a helper, a fighter or a healer. Through play a person can explore various identities where the mythic content provides a thick text with rich meaning and inspiration for everyday human life.

A further conclusion of this investigation is that the significance attributed to the myths, ritual and community in *World of Warcraft* and their part in the gameplay can elevate the game to a sacred dimension by transcending the core aspects of a player’s life. The interactive and roleplaying elements of the game allow players to take part in the grand narrative of *World of Warcraft* where they can explore various dimensions of “the hero within”. The liminal space of *World of Warcraft* not only serves as a ritual space but also provides the players with a cultural text rich with meanings to engage with, and in which to address their search for inner being. At the same time *World of Warcraft* can be a creative force in the building of community and culture. Community play not only builds social aggregates but also becomes an environment where ethical questions about civility and fairness are raised and contested. These aspects elevate *World of Warcraft* to the level of a sacred space, understood as a place where people explore the ultimate source of power, identity, meaning and truth (Lynch, 2007a), or as “sensational forms” which evoke and structure experiences of the transcendental (Meyer, 2006).

The ludic dimension of play does not necessarily deem *World of Warcraft* to be profane. It has been shown that playfulness and light-heartedness are core elements of many religious practices, where play can be seen as a mysterious intervention of the supernatural in finite human life and a device with which humans encounter the numinous. Gameplay also presents players with mystery and revelation. In this sense quests in *World of Warcraft* can be understood as equivalent to religious quests. The goal of play can be redemptive and preservative. It can also fulfil an eschatological function, since participation in the game brings the past and future into the here and now.

As many religions also employ the notion of play as central to their religious outlook, *World of Warcraft* can be found offering pleasures similar to those that religions once presented to the followers with a certain level of ‘sacredness.’ Human life and its events are presented as God’s playthings in many religions (and particularly in Indian religions with the notion of *lila*). That *World of Warcraft* encourages discovering one’s destiny internally and externally through
play has significant implications in understanding the re-culturation of religions in our present time.

This is not to say that *WoW* can provide religious satisfaction for all its players, but it is not excluded from doing so. It depends on the context of play and on the significance each player attributes to *WoW*. The virtual quality of *WoW* provides players with the opportunity to experience an other-worldly here and now. While being embodied, they experience the disembodied, their actual and virtual selves becoming identically one. *WoW* is a symbolic space in itself, symbolic of movement, departure and return, of past and future in a living present, of self-reflexivity and wholeness, and symbolic of how we might live our everyday life. The increasing digital ‘play culture,’ manifested through interactive media and numerous technological ‘apps,’ not only raises fascinating questions to think about in relation to the significance of religion but also provides orientations to re-form the spiritual quest of the secular person.

### D. Transformations of Religion

A number of several significant implications have been identified in these findings. First of all, a number of scholars have identified a longing in the postmodern generation for the enchantment of myth, ritual and community, functions traditionally attributed to religion. Along with religion, however, people are increasingly turning to media spaces such as *WoW*, which can provide “quasi-religious experiences” in many forms (Stout, 2011, p. 58). Religion and *WoW* have been found to deal with similar themes ranging from creation to salvation, from propitiation to pilgrimage, from defending to dying and ultimately resurrecting. The practices of both are perhaps surprisingly comparable. And both *WoW* and religion organise people around them, creating and maintaining social cohesion. Thus one can observe fascinating parallels between the two.

Secondly, the perspectives of players on religion have significant implications for thinking about contemporary religion. Some Indian players acknowledged that they continue to adhere to their offline religious practices, meaningfully engage with them, and find life enhancing spiritual experiences from them. Several others, while wanting to maintain their religious identity, detested what they identified as the corrupt elements of religion. Others claimed that they do not believe in institutional religion and its practices and that religious practices do not make any substantial difference in their life. From the
perspective of their offline experiences, the inclination of most of these players was that
*WoW* offers a ‘flexible text and context’ in comparison with the rigidity of religious texts
and provides a social environment in which players can make their own personal mythic
narratives and be the authors of their own quests. In the Indian context, where there are
numerous versions of altered religious texts (Richman, 2008), identifying with the mythic
text of *WoW* is not completely incompatible with Hindu popular religiosity.

Thirdly, while the play is about personal quests and the individual’s search for
meaning, in the Indian context the players interviewed have not become so egoistic and
individualistic as this might suggest. The sense of community bonding was found to be
very strong and mutual support very much appreciated. Players also tend to respect the
decorum of the group and abide by the norms and regulations stipulated by the guild.

However, what came out strongly in this study that players appreciate in *WoW* is that
it opens up an interactive platform for them to be what they are, at their own convenient
time and place, and in their own preferred fashion, an opportunity they would rarely find
in traditional religion. This has some significance with regard to the autonomy of the
individual. In the Indian context, religion is rejected not so much for its social control, but
rather for its lack of relevance and its relative failure to be meaning to the players’
context.

This study does not claim that anyone uses *WoW* for exclusively religious purposes in
India. Nor is it perceived as a religious artefact. To do that would be to limit *WoW* as a
religious object in an unresolved sociological, theological and philosophical debate about
the essential characteristics of religion. What has been observed is that *WoW* is fulfilling
a similar role for this segment of the population that religions do for others. It is
fascinating to observe the desire among players for the archaic motifs of myth, ritual and
community and to see players seeking these motifs for the sake of transcending their
mundane life, and finding those motifs on some occasions cathartic and redemptive.
Therefore, to use the terminology of Albanese (1981), *WoW* could be called
‘extraordinary religion,’ because it helps people to move beyond their everyday culture
and concerns. This is not an attempt to glorify *WoW* by claiming that *WoW* is exclusively
a religious system and facilitator of a positive ethical consciousness in society. Like any
other religious system *WoW* also can be used for positive or negative intentions. Several
incidents in relation to this have been reported in the thesis.
Many commentators have noted that religion in the modern global media age is undergoing a lot of transformations. It is observed in the Western world that institutional religions are losing power over society while in the East religion is affected significantly by values of globalisation and cultural transactions. However, it has also been noted that nostalgia for the sacred and experience of the numinous is increasing. When people increasingly turn to media products and artefacts for such experiences we can see that media provides what scholars call ‘cultural religion’. It may not be religious in traditional sense, but is effervescent and meaningful and numinous.

This study suggests that part of the reason for that may be that virtual spaces like *WoW* offer players not a space to participate in an old story, but rather a space that facilitates their creating their own story within an old one. *WoW* is a context in which players are elevated to levels where they transcend their lives by participating in a mythic fantasy world, which provides them with meaningful texts, and in social settings where they build meaningful relationships.

Thus, it is argued, the technological era is not declaring nor producing the death of religion. Rather it is supporting Wertheim’s suggestion that the concept of transcending bodily limitation that once was seen as “theologically possible,” is now increasingly conceived as “technologically feasible” (Wertheim, 2000, p. 263). Though *WoW* is a product of technology, art and industry the players relate primarily to its cultural content and consider it ‘an extension of life’ or ‘a second life.’ In that way myth, ritual and community in *WoW* become functional tools for some to sacralise their lives and technology can be seen as its sacred sanctuary.

Both in the East and the West the mass media have played a significant role in the transformation of religion. It is possible to speculate that digital games such as *WoW*, which dwell on mythological content, may one day help society to take a U-turn and return to the nostalgia of the past in which religion also may have a prominent place, albeit with an altered face. Perhaps people will break free from the burdens of a highly individualised and industrial life to enter into a more playful imaginary life that transcends other aspects of their mundane life.
E. Further Research

One of the features of this study, although it was not a perceived goal, is that it employed a methodology combining narratological and ludological approaches to provide a different perspective to look at religion. The combination of theories in textual analysis and rule-based game studies opens up possibilities for further research into social studies of metaphysical phenomena such as religion. Although this study does not present a tested framework for that, it encourages looking at religion through such fresh perspectives. This methodology could be explored further as a framework for future studies.

This study has investigated how the three elements of myth, ritual and community function in WoW. There is immense scope to investigate each of these elements with a more narrowed focus in order to consider wider implications. Moreover, each of these elements could be studied with broader audiences to make more generalised conclusions.

As MMORPGs have significantly changed the notion of play, play becomes a legitimate area for further research in relation to religious rituals. Not only do rituals have religious implications, they also have social significance as they structure social life. For example, play is said both to reinforce hierarchies (Bronkhorst, 2012) as well as break hierarchical boundaries (Raj & Dempsey, 2010a). This would therefore be a serious topic for a prospective study.
Appendices
Appendix 1 - History of events in *World of Warcraft* as developed in various versions of the game.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year of game release</th>
<th>Version of the game</th>
<th>Mythic year</th>
<th>Major Events in <em>World of Warcraft</em></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The pre history</td>
<td>-25,000+?</td>
<td>Argus taken by Burning Legion/Pact with Sargeras</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-16000</td>
<td>End of the Aqir-Troll war</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-15,000</td>
<td>Vrykul curse of flesh after the Loken instigated war among seed races, itself following the indeterminately dated Old God defeat and Titan triumph (source: Anguish of Nifflevar)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-10,000</td>
<td>War of the Ancients and the Sundering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-9,500?</td>
<td>Rise of the Druids of the Pack</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-9,000</td>
<td>The World Tree and the Emerald Dream</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-7,300</td>
<td>Exile of the High Elves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-6,800</td>
<td>The Founding of Quel'Thalas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-2,800</td>
<td>Arathor and the Troll Wars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-2,700</td>
<td>The Guardians of Tirisfal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-2,500</td>
<td>Ironforge - the Awakening of the Dwarves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-1,200</td>
<td>The Seven Kingdoms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-1,000</td>
<td>Qiraji war (War of the Shifting Sands)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-823</td>
<td>Aegwynn and the Dragon Hunt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-500</td>
<td>Satyr War (I forget the source on this one)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-230</td>
<td>War of the Three Hammers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>— Kil'jaeden and the Shadow Pact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>— The Last Guardian (novel by Jeff Grubb) (2001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Lord of the Clans (novel by Christie Golden) begins (2001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Event</td>
<td>Page</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Warcraft II: Tides of Darkness</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>Warcraft II: Beyond the Dark Portal (Expansion)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Warcraft II: Battle.net Edition (Expansion)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Warcraft III: Reign of Chaos</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Warcraft III: The Frozen Throne (Expansion)</td>
<td>21</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>World of Warcraft</td>
<td>25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>World of Warcraft: The Burning Crusade</td>
<td>26</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**1995**
- Warcraft II: Tides of Darkness (PC game) (1995)
- Tides of Darkness (novel by Aaron Rosenberg) (2007)
- World of Warcraft: Ashbringer (comic by Micky Neilson) begins (2008)

**1996**
- Warcraft II: Beyond the Dark Portal (PC game) (1996)
- Beyond the Dark Portal (novel by Aaron Rosenberg and Christie Golden) (2008)
- Lord of the Clans (novel by Christie Golden) ends (2001)
- Of Blood and Honor (novel by Chris Metzen) (2001)

**1999**
- World of Warcraft: Ashbringer (comic by Micky Neilson) begins (2008)

**2002**
- World of Warcraft: Ashbringer (comic by Micky Neilson) ends (2009)
- World of Warcraft: The Comic (comic by Walter and Louise Simonson) ends (2009)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Authors/Creators</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>— Death Knight (manga by Dan Jolley) ends (2009)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>— Shaman (manga by Paul Benjamin) (2010)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>World of Warcraft: Cataclysm (PC Game) begins (2010)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>— Curse of the Worgen (comic by Mickey Neilson and James Waugh) (2010-2011)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>— World of Warcraft: Cataclysm (PC Game) ends (2011)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>World of Warcraft: Mists of Pandaria</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 2 - List of Players who participated in the research

Names used here are pseudonyms for ethical reasons.

Abin: is a member of the Zapak centre in Somajiguda. He plays more than 3 hrs a day. He has a druid and rogue in Horde faction and both of them are levelled to 80. His motivations for playing are community play and the story.

Abu: is an IT professional who spoke very seriously about the game. He was passionate about the mythic dimension of the game. He plays 2 hrs a day mostly. He has a hunter levelled to 20 and a Shaman at 53. He loves the story and the environment of WoW.

Chandan: a sales professional is also a raid leader in their playing community of WoW. He plays 10 to 12 hours a day mostly at the game centre in Somajiguda. He has 6 avatars at the level of 80. He enjoys the community play, raids and story. He also believes games help him live better.

Deep: plays 6 hrs a day and has three avatars levelled in the 80s, a hunter, a rogue and a shaman. He has been playing for the last 4 years and mostly at the Zapak centre in Somajiguda. His motivations for play are community play, raids and the environment of WoW.

Karik: is an engineering student who has been playing 3 hrs a day for the last 6 months. He mostly plays at the game centre in Somajiguda and has a rogue and a hunter at level 80 and a paladin and death knight at level 50. Community play, fights and the environment of WoW are his motivation.

Monk: is a law student residing in Bengaluru but originally from Kolkata. He takes breaks from his study to play and on those occasions he plays 16 hrs a day. He has 3 avatars, two of which are levelled to 80. He plays for Alliance with his night elf druid, and a shaman. His priorities for play are the story, fights and community play.

Muji: is a serious player from Kolkata and was interested in my research from when I first contacted him. He claims to be the first person in India to have started playing WoW, and a godfather, having initiated many players into it. He plays at his home computer and spends 5 hours per day on the game. He has four avatars at level 80 and two at 72. Other
than being an efficient guild master, he also claims that his friends call him ‘moowiki’ because he is an encyclopaedia of *WoW*. During the interview I had to halt as he received calls from his friends, one regarding the latest patch and the other regarding overcoming a dungeon.

**Palani:** Ever since I contacted Palani asking him to participate in research, he was excited about the project. This spirited man took me around Hyderabad, all the time talking about gaming, *WoW*, and the gaming culture in Hyderabad. He took me to various gaming centres, the last of which was Somajiguda where I found a strong gaming community. I found him making new friends while I was interviewing my participants. Palani has a warrior avatar at 80 and a paladin at 26.

**Yiddi:** is a player from Kolkata and a business student in Bengaluru. I interviewed him at his apartment. He plays 8 hrs a day, at home. He has a Shaman levelled to 80 and he plays for Alliance. His motivation for playing is community play and the environment of *WoW*.
Appendix 3 - Ethics Approval

RMIT University
Human Research Ethics Sub-Committee
Office of the Pro Vice-Chancellor

6 September 2010

Mr Jose Vallikatt
c/o School of Media and Communication
RMIT University

Dear Jose,

Re: Human Research Ethics Application – Register Number (CHEAN B-2000338-05-10)

The Acting Chair of the Design and Social Context College Human Ethics Advisory Network (CHEAN), Dr Marg Liddle, assessed your amended ethics application entitled: ‘Interaction of Myth, Community and Religion in World of Warcraft’.

I am pleased to advise that your application has been approved as Low Risk (Risk Level 2) classification by the committee. This approval will be ratified at the Committee’s meeting on 7 October 2010 and will be reported to the University Human Research Ethics Committee for noting.

This now completes the Ethics procedures. Your ethics approval expires on 31 December 2011.

Please note that all research data should be stored on University Network systems. These systems provide high levels of manageable security and data integrity, can provide secure remote access, are backed on a regular basis and can provide Disaster Recover processes should a large scale incident occur. The use of portable devices such as CDs and memory sticks is valid for archiving, data transport where necessary and some works in progress. The authoritative copy of all current data should reside on appropriate network systems; and the Principal Investigator is responsible for the retention and storage of the original data pertaining to the project for a minimum period of five years.

You are reminded that an Annual/Final report is mandatory and should be forwarded to the College Ethics Subcommittee Secretary by mid-December 2010. This report is available at http://www.rmit.edu.au/browse?id=6sqx7sd0wkp or can be located by following the link under Policy at http://www.rmit.edu.au/dsc/chean.

Should you have any queries regarding your application please seek advice from the Chair of the College Human Ethics Advisory Network (CHEAN) Associate Prof Heather Fehring on (03) 9925 7840, heather.fehring@rmit.edu.au or contact Lisa Mann on (03) 9925 2974, lisa.mann@rmit.edu.au.

On behalf of the DSC College Human Ethics Advisory Network I wish you well in your research.

Yours sincerely,

Lisa Mann
Secretary
DSC College Human Ethics Advisory Network

cc. Assoc Prof Peter Horsfield, School of Media and Communication
Appendix 4 – Informed Consent

 Prescribed Consent Form For Persons Participating In Research Projects Involving Interviews, Questionnaires or Disclosure of Personal Information

 Portfolio: Design and Social Context  
 School of: Media and Communication, RMIT University, Melbourne  
 Project Title: Interaction of Myth, Community and Religion in World of Warcraft

 Name(s) of investigator(s):  
 (1) Jose Vallikatt
 (2) Peter Horsfield

 Phone: +61.03.9925.3534

 1. I have received a statement explaining the interview/questionnaire involved in this project.

 2. I consent to participate in the above project, the particulars of which - including details of the interviews or questionnaires - have been explained to me.

 3. I authorise the investigator or his or her assistant to interview me or administer a questionnaire.

 4. I acknowledge that:
   (a) Having read Plain Language Statement, I agree to the general purpose, methods and demands of the study.
   (b) I have been informed that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time and to withdraw any unprocessed data previously supplied.
   (c) The project is for the purpose of research and/or teaching. It may not be of direct benefit to me.
   (d) The privacy of the personal information I provide will be safeguarded and only disclosed where I have consented to the disclosure or as required by law.
   (e) The security of the research data is assured during and after completion of the study. The data collected during the study may be published chiefly in the thesis but it could also be published in a student report, paper for publication, conference, etc. Any information which will identify me will not be used.

 Participant’s Consent

 Participant: ___________________________ Date: ___________________________
 (Signature)

 Witness: ___________________________ Date: ___________________________
 (Signature)

 Participants should be given a photocopy of this consent form after it has been signed.

 Any complaints about your participation in this project may be directed to the Executive Officer, RMIT Human Research Ethics Committee, Research & Innovation, RMIT, GPO Box 2476V, Melbourne, 3001. The telephone number is (03) 9925 2251. Details of the complaints procedure are available from the above address.
Appendix 5 – Plain Language Statement

Invitation to participate in a research project Project information statement

Project Title: Interaction of Myth, Community and Religion in World of Warcraft
Investigators: Jose Vallikatt, Doctoral research student, Media and Communication, RMIT University.
Project Supervisor: Peter Horsfield, Assoc. Prof. Media and Communication, peter.horsfield@rmit.edu.au, +61.03.9925.3534
Dear ................................,

You are invited to participate in a research project being conducted by RMIT University. This information sheet describes the project in straightforward language. Please read this sheet carefully and be confident that you understand its contents before deciding whether to participate. If you have any questions about the project, please ask one of the investigators.

1. This project is part of the research in media studies conducted by Jose Vallikatt to secure a doctoral degree and is supervised by Assoc. Prof. Peter Horsfield in the school of Media and Communication in the RMIT university, Melbourne, Australia. This project has been approved by the RMIT Human Research Ethics Committee after having thorough scrutiny. The researcher is funded with an external fellowship by the Media Religion and Culture Project, Chicago administered through the Media and Religion Research Project at the School of Media and Communication, RMIT.

2. This study is conducted on regular online video gamers and I believe your voluntary participation in this study would contribute to the body of knowledge. You have been selected at random, and your contact details are obtained from other online gamers who might know you through online gaming or my personal contact.

3. Central to the project is the question of how do myths and community interact in WoW, what are their relationships to the re-culturation of religion in postmodern media context and what implication does this have for thinking about the relationship between new media and changes in social religiosity?

4. You are invited for a semi-structured interview on your gaming experience especially in the context of social religiosity. The interview will be audio recorded. If you volunteer to play the game in your usual environment of gaming and allow me to video record it I will be pleased to do it which I believe will substantially contribute to this study. This is solely done for the purpose of data analysis and it will not be published in any form to reveal your identity. Each interview will last for approximately 60 to 90 minutes and I am planning to approach 30 – 35 participants like you.

5. There are no perceived risks involved in this study as this study is just intended to make a general perspective about how video games affect the social religiosity of
gamers. Your personal details will not be disclosed when publishing the research results. Your opinions or comments will be published under pseudonyms. However, if it is considered desirable, some still shots from the video recording may be reproduced in thesis with your specific consent.

6. There is no direct benefit to you by your participation, other than you are contributing to the existing knowledge by your participation.

7. The data you provide will be analysed and the interpretations and conclusions I reach at the end of the study are directly based on these observations. The findings of the research will be disseminated chiefly in the thesis but it could also be published in a student report, paper for publication, conference, etc. Your comments and opinions will be given pseudonyms when publishing research results and anonymity is safeguarded. Only the research supervisor has the accessibility to the research data and therefore confidentiality is highly ensured. During data collection and analysis hard copy data will be stored in a place with appropriate security provisions. The research data will be kept securely in cabinet at the office of the primary supervisor at RMIT for a period of 5 years before being destroyed.

8. Any information that you provide can be disclosed only if (1) it is to protect you or others from harm, (2) a court order is produced, or (3) you provide the researchers with written permission. You will be signing an informed consent form attached to this plain language statement.

9. You have the right to withdraw your participation at any time, without prejudice as well as the right to have any unprocessed data withdrawn and destroyed, provided it can be reliably identified. You can raise any questions at any time.

10. If you have any questions regarding this research please contact the supervisor with the contact details mentioned at the beginning of this statement.

11. The participation is purely voluntary and there is no ethical issues raising potential risks other than mentioned earlier.

Yours sincerely,

Jose Vallikatt, Research student, School of Media and Communication, RMIT, Melbourne

Assoc. Prof. Peter Horsfield, Senior Supervisor, School of Media and Communication, RMIT, Melbourne
Appendix 6 - Interview Questionnaire 1

Project: Interaction of Myth, Community and Religion in World of Warcraft
   College Of Design and Social Context
   School of Media and Communication

Name(s) of investigators: Jose Vallikatt, Peter Horsfield

1. Name 2. Code
3. Location 4. Age 5. Sex
6. Career 7. Religion
8. Since how many years and months are you playing WoW

9. How frequently are you playing (Hrs/week)

10. Where do you play? □ Home □ Work □ Game centre
11. Size of the screen you play □ □ Inches
12. Audio quality □ Surround □ Speakers □ Head phone
13. Do you play any other game □ Yes □ No

14. How many Avatars do you have?

15. What is the level of topmost avatar?

16. What faction you play for

17. What Class of Avatar

18. Your motivation to play WoW □ Fights □ Community play
   □ Raids □ Anonymity using avatar
   □ Story □ Resemblance with life
   □ Environment □ Helps you live life better
   □ Other □ Specify
Appendix 7 - Interview Questionnaire 2

Game playing
1. How do you describe *World of Warcraft* and your gameplay experience?
2. Have you felt to play more and more the game day after day and why?
3. Do the music and graphics of game help you? What way?
4. What is your response when someone/thing hinders your gameplay?
5. Do you play because you want to know the story completely or for the purpose of adventuring to level up?
6. What do you feel when you find it difficult to level up at a certain stage?
7. What will happen once you achieve the highest level of the game? You drop or will you still play?
8. Who initiated you to play, how would you started the play?
9. Was there any occasion where you did not want to level up but remain in the geography for some reason? What reason? Why?
10. Which aspects of *World of Warcraft* do you like – Myth/stories, Community play, quests and fights

Myths/stories
11. What myths do you see in *World of Warcraft*? How important are these myths to your experience in playing the game?
12. Do you see the game myths as having any real life implications, or are they just fantasies?
13. What is the dichotomy between good and bad?
14. Comparing the mythology in religions and in *World of Warcraft* do you really see some parallels?
15. What sort of identification you feel with the avatar you play?

Rituals
16. Do you feel that there is a pattern or repetition in the gameplay?
17. How important is that repetition of game ritual to your participation and enjoyment of the game?
18. Does that repetition bore you or interest you?
19. Do you think the pattern repetition in quests is inevitable to game?

Ideology
20. Have you ever felt ‘controlled’ by a powerful force in the game? What is that force?
21. If you have avatars in both the factions –alliance and horde which one you enjoy most, and why?
22. Do you feel conflicts or contests of ideology when playing both the factions? How do you cope up with that?
Community
23. How important is collaborative play and participation in game?
24. What is your experience with guilds?
25. What are some of the important aspects of connecting with other players in your experience of the game?
26. Can you name any significant experiences you’ve had in playing with other players?
27. Have you connected with other players you gained through play outside the game? In which way?
28. How do you compare your connection with other players with your connection with other people in your offline life?

Impacts of the game
29. Why do you really play? What does actually motivate to play?
30. How do you compare with this sense of accomplishment with your ordinary life?
31. What are its connection of your gaming to your offline life?
32. Has playing the game affected your offline behaviour? In what ways? Does it make your offline life seem boring? Has it given you useful skills and insights for your offline behaviour?
33. Do you think that you have changed physically or mentally or emotionally after started playing the game? What changes?
34. How does the information/experience help you to mould your offline life attitudes?
35. Do you think that embodied game (physical sports) is better than video game where there is no much physical exercise, why?
36. Can the embodiment in video game be substituted with embodied experience of an on-ground game?

Religion
37. What is religion for you?
38. Do you practice any religion? If no, is there any specific reason why you don’t? If yes, why do you practice it?
39. How much do you consider religion relevant in your life? Have your religious belief helped you in any way? What way?
40. Has there been an evolution of perspectives about religious life in you and in what way?
41. Do you prefer the institutional structure of religion or free-flow religion? Why?
42. How do you perceive the religious motives like dying and resurrecting in wow?
43. Do you think the class of priest, magic and in game religions is inevitable to game?
44. Do you think that people who play wow bring in their religious identity into game?
45. In the Indian context where people have a lot of religious and fanatical fights can wow be used as simulated fights for religious purposes.
46. You have a personal idea about God and spiritual/religious life and try to practice it rather than fitting yourself in the traditional norms? Can you share that idea?
47. Would you like to take active role including leadership in religious activity or you like to be passive participant?

Non-religious activities
48. Apart from organised religious beliefs or activities, are there repetitive actions, patterns or rituals that you engage in that are meaningful for you?
49. Apart from belief in a god, do you think that there is a ‘controlling force’ in the universe? How do you understand that force?

Religion and WOW
50. Do you see any religious characteristics in WoW? What are those characteristics?
51. Have you ever felt any parallels between your religion and WoW?
52. If you are not religious, how do you deal with the religious elements of WoW?
53. Do you think that in its mythology, its ritual practices, and its community activities, WoW you get some sort of satisfaction which religion used to give once.
Bibliography

Books, Chapters and Articles


http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/editorial.html


Campbell, H. (2005a). Considering spiritual dimensions within CMC. *New Media and Society, 7*(1), 110-134.


Virtually Religious: Myth, Ritual and Community in World of Warcraft – Bibliography | Jose Vallikatt 240


Interviews and Blogs of Research Participants


Gamography

Blizzard (Producer). (2002a). Warcraft III. [Video game]
Lucasfilm (Producer). (1986). Habitat. [RPG game]