Language and social interaction in the virtual space of World of Warcraft[*]

Erin Rusaw
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
erusaw2@illinois.edu

Virtual worlds such as the online multiplayer game World of Warcraft have become popular spaces for people all over the world to socialize and interact. As on the rest of the Internet, language, specifically text chat, is the essential mode of social discourse in these worlds. Despite these types of virtual social spaces becoming more and more common, few studies have been done on the linguistic practices of these online communities. This paper offers a descriptive analysis of the sociolinguistic practices of a group of adult World of Warcraft players, and focuses especially on how discourse strategies identified in more traditional language interactions are applied by the players in the artificial environment and linguistic medium of the game.

1. Introduction

As of 2009, more than 11 million people play World of Warcraft (WoW) (Bashiok et al. n.d.). This makes the massively multiplayer online roleplaying game (MMORPG) by Activision Blizzard as populous as some of the largest cities in the world and more populous than the nation of Greece. These players interact with each other in a virtual world where the main method of communication is real-time text chat. WoW is a highly cooperative game, with objectives that require organized groups to complete, and many players form long-term in-game communities, called guilds, which are supported by the infrastructure of the game itself. Despite the communal nature of WoW, however, as in much of the rest of the Internet, people are largely anonymous, represented by game character avatars whose appearance and names generally do not reflect anything about the player behind them. In addition to this dearth of obvious social information about others they meet in the game, WoW players must largely negotiate the in-game social world through the game's text chat,

---

which is a very different medium from speech (Herring 2007), and in particular does not include some aspects of spoken conversation, such as intonation, which carry social and discourse information.

Several studies have addressed the linguistic and sociolinguistic aspects of the online mediums of email and instant messaging (e.g., Herring et al. 2003; Kiesler et al., 1984; Garley 2008; Spears & Lea 1994; Trevino & Webster 1992), and the sociology of MMORPGs (e.g., Chen & Duh 2007; Ducheneaut et al. 2006, 2007; Nardi & Harris 2006), but until now most studies of language in games such as WoW have been focused on possible uses of such games in education and second-language instruction rather than the linguistic behavior of those people who socialize in the game world (Lee et al. 2005; Kardan 2006; and others). For some modern Internet citizens, their major social affiliations are online, and a large part of their communication takes place online as well. In a survey of 30,000 MMORPG players, Yee (2002) found that they spent an average of 22 hours per week in game, and some players report spending over 70 hours per week playing (Ducheneaut et al. 2007). Virtual worlds such as WoW are becoming common social communities, and they have unique sociological and linguistic facets which differ from more traditional communities and social spaces. The goal of this paper is to investigate how WoW players use the medium of real-time text chat to negotiate the social space of the game's virtual world. Because this paper covers a new and empirically underrepresented area of study, its purpose is more descriptive than purely theoretic; my intent is to provide descriptions of the linguistic behaviors of the players and outline the significant sociolinguistic generalizations. However, these data do provide at least one major theoretic result regarding how participants in virtual worlds such as WoW interact through language: although these "spaces" are constructed and artificial, and although their mediums of communication differ from those in the real world, the elements of interaction found in natural language, such as building and expressing power and solidarity and conducting face-work, as well as the covariance of linguistic form and function, are still relevant.

The organization of this paper will be as follows: in section 2 I will introduce the relevant aspects of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) as a linguistic medium, and the classification of WoW text chat in particular. In section 3, I will describe the environment of WoW itself, and introduce the players who are the subject of this study. In section 4, I will discuss the sociolinguistics of Internet language and how the online sociolinguistic landscape differs from that of the real world. In section 5, I will discuss and analyze the in-game linguistic behaviors of the subjects, including some examples, and in section 6 I will outline the conclusions I

have drawn from my findings. Finally, in section 7, I will propose some directions for future studies in this area.

2. Introduction to CMC

Computer-Mediated Communication can refer to any communication that occurs between networked computers, although the term is usually used to refer to text-based forms of communication, such as online message boards, email, instant messaging and even text messaging (Herring 2007). Synchronous CMC in particular has been referred to as a new type of linguistic medium, existing somewhere between spoken and written discourse, and having aspects of both (Baron 1998). Maynor (1994) even refers to it as "written speech". The writing-like aspects of synchronous CMC in fact present some drawbacks for using it for social interaction: text messages lack speech prosody or intonation, which can make the sender's intentions, attitude toward the topic, or even meaning unclear. Compared to spoken conversation, even "synchronous" CMC discourse is disjointed and fragmented, as turns and topics tend to overlap and interrupt each other due to the line-by-line nature of message conduction (Garley 2008). Most sociolinguistic research on synchronous CMC has focused on instant messaging and text messaging, which because of their nature minimize another difference between CMC and spoken discourse, which is anonymity. Instant messaging and text messaging are generally used for interactions between people who know each other "in real life" (that is, offline), whereas in much of Internet discourse, the participants are relatively anonymous, and the nature of text discourse aids in preserving their anonymity, as it does not provide age, gender, or accent information anywhere near as clearly as does speech.

3. Introduction to WoW and the subjects

3.1. The game and in-game chat

World of Warcraft is a massively multiplayer online role-playing game. "Massively multiplayer" in this case means that each game server supports an online virtual world where hundreds of players at a time interact with each other and the game through humanoid avatars. Players can converse with each other through synchronous text chat, or through in-game or third-party voice chat. Surprisingly, even though voice chat is available, the default method of conversation in WoW is by text chat; this may be because not every player has the headphones and microphone required to use voice chat, or to pragmatic difficulties with using voice chat software.

There are also some sociological reasons for players preferring text chat, but these will be discussed later in the paper. Although text chat is the major form of communication for WoW players, the text chat itself takes up a relatively small physical space on the game's default graphical user interface (GUI), as seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1. A World of Warcraft game screen with text chat in lower left corner.

The relatively small portion of the computer screen taken up by the text chat box also reflects a reality of social interactions in WoW (and similar games): players' attentions are nearly always split between navigating through the virtual world, giving their character relatively complicated commands to perform actions in the game, watching in-game reports on the status of their characters and their allies or enemies, and conversing with other players. Further splitting the players' attentions are the multiple "channels" available within the text box itself.

Each player in the game World of Warcraft has access to multiple text chat channels, which range from temporary to relatively permanent, and which can range in size from 2 players to hundreds (although channels of that size are rare). Most channels are restricted, and can only be accessed by members of a particular group. No chat from unrestricted public

channels appears in this data. Of the group channels, there are two main types: objective-based group channels (Raid, Raid Leader, Raid Warning, and Party) which are chat channels that are created when players form a temporary group to reach some game objective (between 5 and 25 players), and social-group channels, which only members of a specific social group can use. This restriction can either be enforced by the game itself (Guild, Officer), as in the case of official groups called guilds, or by secrecy, as in the case of player-created channels which no one is aware of besides the members (Private1, Private2), or by password-protection. Most chat channels are not attached to their virtual "physical" environment inside the game, that is, players can chat with any friendly player in their game, regardless of their physical location.

Often, these channels' memberships are nesting, which is the case in present study, where the participants belong to the "Guild" chat channel, which has many members, the "Officer" channel, whose members are a subset of the "Guild" members, and the "Private1" and "Private2" channels, whose members are a subset of the "Officer" channel. In addition, the subjects are also often members of temporary objective-based group channels, "Raid" and "Party", whose membership frequently changes, and can be from within the "Guild" channel membership or from outside of it. A Venn diagram of the chat channels included in this study can be seen in Figure 2:
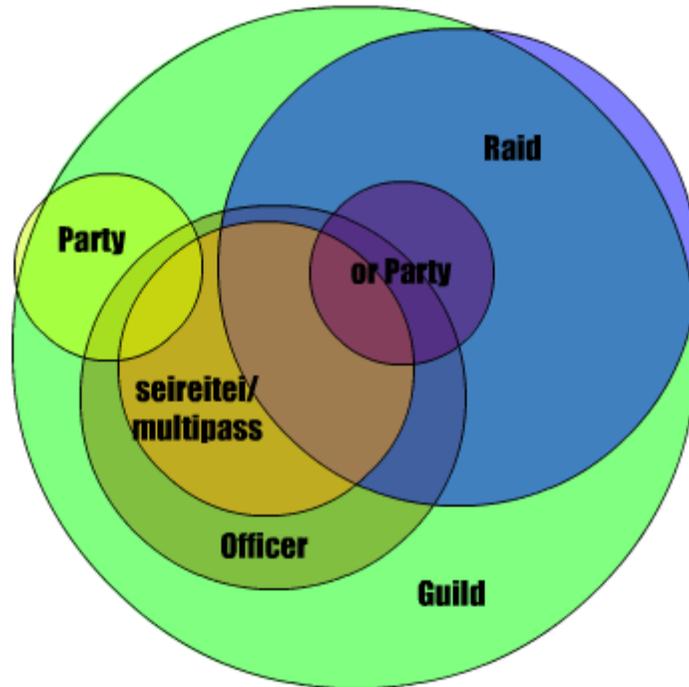
Figure 2. A Venn representation of the membership of various WoW chat channels

The effect of this chat setup is that each player is a member of multiple simultaneous conversations. Example (1) shows a typical transcript of a single player's chat window at any given time, with different channel tags (in brackets) indicating separate chat channels, and individual users indicated with a single initial:

(1) [Officer] C: well when i went to curse it was fucked up
     [Guild] E: not it
     [Officer] C: probably overloaded
     [Guild] I: I think she hates you
     [Guild] E: we all hate u
     [5. Private1] F: b/c our modem sucks
     [Guild] E: pssh
     [Guild] E: we were totally gunna 3man DLK
     [Guild] E: n now ur all yelling at me
     [Guild] E: wtf
     [5. Private1] G: well
     [Guild] I: we were, but then E said no
     [5. Private1] D: basically X is waiting to see what Y does, but
              Y was asked by his raid leader to go with him and try to
              get into [other guild]
     [Guild] I: lamer

> [5. Private1] G: if I'm not missing any of us
> [Officer] E: Hmm don't we have 23 ppl online?
> [5. Private1] D: and they won't come back because [other
>   guild] has started playin on this server again apparently

Because of the way the channels can have nesting memberships, these conversations are sometimes parallel; since all of the members of Private1 are also members of Guild, the conversation in Private1 may parallel that in Guild. Often members of channels will make commentary on the conversations in other channels they and their conversants belong to. Socially, nested chat channels can offer some degree of social power to small social groups who are coherent enough to maintain their own chat channel(s), because of information they can receive through such channels, and simply because of the influence small, connected, organized groups can have on larger, disorganized groups they are part of.

In games like World of Warcraft, there are game objectives that require large groups of people working in a group to complete (in WoW, groups of 25). Organizing that many people is a considerable leadership feat, and several things make it even more difficult. First is the fact that group leaders have no actual authority over their subordinates. They do not occupy the same physical space as the people they are trying to lead, and have no way of knowing if their group members are paying attention to what they say, and cannot effect any real consequences on group members who don't follow directions. Even removing disobedient group members is sometimes not an option, because the large numbers of people required for such objectives can make it difficult to gather enough group members to succeed. The most important method players trying to lead groups of people in-game have to enact authority over their subordinates is the use of language. Leaders who do not effectively communicate with their subordinates cannot effectively have any authority over their groups.

3.2. Social Life: WoW Players and Guilds

Because of the popularity of WoW, many studies have addressed aspects of the social lives and interactions of players and guilds in the game (Yee 2006; Williams et al. 2006; Nardi & Harris 2006; and others); in order to provide a basic understanding of the specific group of players who are the subjects of this paper, I will use the findings of these previous authors to create a sociological sketch of players and groups of this type. The subjects of the current study are 10 adult (ages 18-30) players who form the command structure and inner circle of a "casual raiding guild", which has a guild population of about 100 players (players joining and leaving

the guild makes an exact count difficult). The subjects spend around 20 hours a week in the game, and their guild has existed for around two and a half years at the time of this study. Some of the subjects know each other outside of WoW, and some have never met in person. According to Williams et al.'s (2006) survey of 129,372 characters across 5 WoW servers, a guild of between 36 and 150 players is "large" on their scale of small, medium, large, and huge. Guild of larger than 35 members, Williams et al. claim, "suddenly exhibit the need for leadership" and "formal organization" (2006). This is important to note, as we will later see that leadership is one of the major roles the players in this study enact through their language use. Interestingly, the player group in this study to some degree behaves as a smaller guild operating within the large guild, in that they mostly comprise a "founding unit" of friends, like most small guilds in the Williams et al. survey, and although they may enact authority and organizational or leadership roles in the space of the whole guild, within their group they exhibit the small-guild ethos of "egalitarian organization and a dislike of military-style hierarchy, often reinforced through humor and sarcasm" (Williams et al. 2006) These non-hierarchical roles, and the language used to act them out and maintain them, are the flip side of the leadership roles the same players must fill. In the analysis section I will show how the subjects mobilize their linguistic resources to express each role at the appropriate time.

Finally, it is important to recognize the role that the WoW guild plays in these players' lives. Some authors have described MMORPGs as providing a new type of "third place" for those who play them (Yee 2006; Steinkuehler 2005, 2006). Indeed, WoW and the guild are in many ways a third place for the subjects of this study. The game provides a modern version of a civic space for people in the now-global neighborhood to interact outside of their work and family groups; the guild itself provides a space similar to a club or sports team for friends who may not be able to get together "IRL"[1] to play together in an organized, goal-directed way; and the nature of in-game interactions, working with both close friends and nearly total strangers, requires players to navigate a "third space" of identity.

4. The sociolinguistics of Internet language

The nature of much of the Internet is that of a space where identity and social roles are constantly being built, erased, and rebuilt. A social space

---

[1] In real life.

where most people you interact with cannot see or hear you, where names are chosen, changed, and discarded at will, makes the Internet a place where you can be anyone you want to be, if you can convince others that is who you are. Especially in spaces like WoW, where each player is a paying customer of Activision Blizzard, and thus everyone has truly egalitarian privileges with respect to the game mechanics, the only identity, power, and social groups you have are those you build. In their seminal paper "The pronouns of power and solidarity" (1960), Brown and Gilman say that "One person may be said to have power over another in the degree that he is able to control the behavior of the other. . . There are many bases of power: physical strength, wealth, age, sex, institutionalized role in the church, the state, the army, or within the family." When they wrote these words, Brown and Gilman could not have foreseen the social landscape of the modern Internet, where millions of people converse every day with anonymous (or nearly so) strangers with no sure way to ascertain their interlocutors' physical strength, wealth, age, sex, or role in "real world" institutions. This same landscape also removes many traditional avenues of displaying belonging and solidarity with a group, such as clothing, physical expression, class identification, regional or group dialect, occupation, similar upbringing, or even speech intonation. In online society, where so many of the "real world" bases of power and solidarity are unavailable, one of the only means by which a person may control the behavior of another or create and maintain group identity is through language itself.

This situation is especially obvious in the social space of MMORPGs, where achieving game objectives can require the organized participation of fairly large groups of people; building and organizing such groups requires the generation of both power and solidarity. Although previous studies have been done on conversation, discourse, and identity in other synchronous CMC mediums (Baron 2004; Garley 2008; Ling & Baron 2007), and other semi-anonymous CMC communities (Herring et al. 2009; Kiesler et al. 1984; Spears & Lea 1994), neither of these examples can easily generalize to a linguistic community like a WoW guild, where communication is synchronous, and the social community can be quite divorced from the "real world". Steinkuehler (2006) applies discourse analysis to a single line of text chat from the MMORPG Lineage, and discusses how the line of discourse connects the "speaker" to social and virtual world of the game, but the discussion of a single line of text does not allow her to investigate the construction of identities and interpersonal relationships which are the focus of this paper.

5. Analysis

5.1. Solidarity

Much of the discourse that takes place between the players in this study is doing the work of building solidarity between the players. Construction of their specific social group generally takes place in a process like this: first, several of the players participate in some kind of event in the game. These events are commonly cooperative adventures to complete game objectives, like dungeons or raids, but they may also be cooperative fighting against players of the opposite faction, or even major social events within their guild, like members joining or leaving, or major arguments between guildies. Second, the players use a relatively private chat channel to generate a running commentary of the event they are jointly participating in; these channels may be "Party" if they are in a party fighting through a dungeon, "Officer", or the channels they created for their social group, Private1 and Private2. This private running commentary is a very important tool for the players to build camaraderie and solidarity within their group, and in particular, comedy, cleverness, and language play are highly valued for creating a positive social experience for the participants to share. The final step in this social group construction is a type of recall- at later times, the subjects will repeat a pun, quip, quote, or phrase from a previous event they shared participation in, or even specifically ask the others to remember some part of the event or commentary. Those players who participated in the original event and commentary are able to "get" the joke, or to participate in the recall. Through this method, the players in the group create a shared history, a shared slang, and feelings of belonging to a group that has gone through many experiences and trials while maintaining positive attitude and social coherence. Below are examples of chat between the subjects using discourse to generate shared history and practice, and using it to foster solidarity and belonging.

In (2), subjects A, D, I, and C are in a party playing in the 5-man dungeon (a.k.a."instance") "Underbog". Note that during this conversation the players are simultaneously fighting game monsters, and in fact two of the players' avatars are killed and revived during the course of the dialog, which is the cause of D's comments "hmm" and "that hurt" in lines 2 and 3.

> (2)
>> 1 [Party] A: whats would call this instance on a very damp
>>   cloudy morning?
>> 2 [Party] D: hmmm
>> 3 [Party] D: that hurt
>> 4 [Party] D: lol

5 [Party] D: underfog?
6 [Party] A: correct
7 [Party] D: and what if this instance was full of craaaazy
       errors and zany antics
8 [Party] D: it would be called...
9 [Party] I: underdog?
10 [Party] C: . . .
11 [Party] D: BLUNDERBOG!
12 [Party] A: o gosh
13 [Party] C: hahaha
14 [Party] A: what would this instance name its webpage?
15 [Party] D: undercom?
16 [Party] C: underblog
17 [Party] D: underbog.com
18 [Party] A: haha gj C
19 [Party] D: oooh nice
20 [Party] D: and what if this instance was a prot warrior
       ability instead
21 [Party] C: thunderbog?
22 [Party] I: sunderbog!
23 [Party] D: lol
24 [Party] C: what if it was an ad campaign for Florida?
25 [Party] C: LOL
26 [Party] A: i cant seem to get that one C
27 [Party] C: funinthesunderbog
28 [Party] D: o_O
29 [Party] C: lol i'm reaching
30 [Party] C:
31 [Party] A: what if it was in california
32 [Party] A: ?
33 [Party] D: omg, that joke makes me wanna runderbog
34 [Party] C: hahaha
35 [Party] A: WOW
36 [Party] D: schwartzeneggarbog
37 [Party] A: no
38 [Party] A: lol
39 [Party] C: yes. . .i'm sure thats it
40 [Party] D: or however you spell it
41 [Party] D: lol
42 [Raid Warning] A: Undersmog

A begins the stream of commentary on their current activity, playing through Underbog, with a pun designed as a riddle, which serves to both entertain the other members of the party and to engage their participation

in creating the commentary. D responds by answering the riddle, and then responds with another riddle, which I and C attempt and fail to answer, so D has to respond again with the solution/pun. This does not kill the mood of the commentary though, and the players begin to show their appreciation of each others' riddles through text emoting, like the typed smiley face and frequent "lol"s. This is only an excerpt of this particular string of riddles; the riddle conversation goes on for over 100 lines, and eventually all 4 of the subjects in the group participate as both riddle askers and answerers. These pieces of language play are now available for the four players to recall in the future in order to express solidarity and group belonging with the others who participated in this particular event; for instance, when putting together a party for a future Underbog expedition, one of the subjects may say that they are looking for others to go with them to "Blunderbog".

An important aspect of this process is shared in-group knowledge. Even in the example, the riddle D poses in line 20 is a recall of an aspect of game mechanics that the others share knowledge of by virtue of belonging to the group of those who know the names of protection ("prot") warrior abilities. In fact, this entire exchange takes place specifically during a time in the dungeon when the party's fifth member, who belongs to the same guild, but does not belong to the subjects' social group, is away from the computer. The subjects quickly cease riddling once the fifth party member returns, keeping the commentary and its contents private, in-group knowledge. I will discuss this type of in-group/out-group distinction in the commentary-and-recall process a bit later. The next two samples are snippets of dialogs in which the subjects recall previously shared commentaries by using in-group slang.

    (3)
        1 [Raid Leader] I: congrats
        2 [Raid] A: starg

In this example, A recalls an earlier dialog in which one of the subjects had used language play to create a new slang word for congratulating others- "starg" is "grats" typed backwards, "grats" being more general WoW slang for "congratulations". The joke is in the idea that readers will process "starg" as a new word pronounced [staɹg] rather than "grats" backwards.

    (4)
        1 [Raid] G: I is bambi
        2 [Raid Leader] I: I am bambi too

In Example 3, G recalls a similar wordplay in which one of the subjects had innovated the term "bambi" for a disenchanter (an in-game profession) from the standard slang "de'er" ("de" being a standard abbreviation for "disenchant"). Notice that these two instances of recall are typed into the Raid chat channel during raids, rather than in one of the more private channels. Even though only the few players who are in the subjects' social group will "get" the recall, the player who types it in both cases chooses to do so in a fairly public channel. A raid channel will contain around 25 players, so this chat turn is broadcast to maybe 15-20 players not in the subjects' in-group, who will not understand what A or G are saying.

The subjects also use their access to private channels to generate solidarity with each other in other ways, especially by doing face-work. Players in the subjects' small in-group will virtually never criticize, correct, or second guess each other in Guild, Raid, or other more public channels, and also tend to save their criticism of other players for the private channels. To maintain their own face, when a player is unsure about something related to the game or some group strategy, he will nearly always ask for information in the private channels rather than in the relevant objective-based channels like Party or Raid.

In (5), G has just invited a new player to a raid, and the new player reveals after joining the Raid chat channel that it is his first time being in a raid.

(5)
    1 [Raid Leader] I: are you ready for summons D
    2 [Raid] G: howdy
    3 [Raid] D: always
    4 [Raid] G: lol
    5 [5. Private1] C: first time being in a rai
    6 [5. Private1] I: lol G this is his first time being in a raid
    7 [5. Private1] G: lol
    8 [5. Private 1] C: oh G
    9 [5. Private1] I: what did you set us up with
    10 [5. Private1] G: he raided pre bc
    11 [5. Private1] C: what have to you done to us
    12 [5. Private1] I: you bastard

Here, I and C jump chat channels from Raid to Private1 in order to criticize their friend G and the newly invited player.

5.2. Power

The result of both the social and structural separation of the dialog the subjects use to generate solidarity with each other from the rest of the guild members and players they interact with is a sharp in-group/out-group divide, where the in-group players have access to slang and social capital with each other, and have the ability to save face by maintaining a public image of players who do not need to be corrected or or need to request information. The subjects can also use the recall method, or discussion in their private chat channels, to coordinate with each other when decisions about guild politics or raid strategy are being made. It is important to remember that players have no way of learning of the existence of chat channels they cannot access, short of being told by someone who does; the busy and disjoined nature of more public chat channels with dozens of participants also makes it easy for in-group slang or recall to not be overly obvious in the wider dialog. The subjects use the solidarity of their in-group to generate power over the larger number of guild members and related players who are part of the out-group. The social and linguistic resources of the in-group, including the private chat channels, place them in a privileged position, from which they control the larger guild or raid groups.

The most interesting thing about this position of power is that it is generated almost entirely by linguistic means. The subject players do have the ability to remove other players from the guild or raids, but doing this is generally undesirable as a method of control, since it detracts from the goals of the guild and the group. 25-man raid groups are difficult to bring together with any regularity; the subjects are usually striving to have enough players to fill their raid groups, so guild and raid members are in a sense a precious commodity. Besides removing members, the subjects' group has no other avenue of power over those they are trying to lead and organize-they have no literal institutional or physical power over their guildies, and they cannot enforce any kind of real consequences on those who are uncooperative. Their main asset is the solidarity they have with each other, and privileged information, both of which are generated and maintained through chat.

Although the subjects' small group collectively fills a general leadership role within their guild, raids and parties generally only have one leader at a time. In this group, it usually either player I, or G, the guild master, who assumes this role. When trying to enact this type of authority, I and G also use specific linguistic strategies, as well as their access to privileged knowledge, to position themselves as group leaders. When trying to express authority, players like I and G make several changes in their chat

style. They take turns that are longer than their normal chat turns, and they follow standard grammar more closely, as opposed to their normal chat style, which tend to involve shorter turns, sometimes only 1 word long, more turns that are simply responses to the conversation, for example laughing at other players' statements ("lol" "haha" as turns), and turns that only express emotion ("=P", "*sniffles*" "aahh").

In example (6), G first declares, as the raid leader, that the raid has been "called", or ended, before even traveling to the dungeon that was its goal. He then declares that the guild members who have joined the raid will still receive credit for having attended a raid, and then transfers the authority position in the dialog to I, who has instructions for the other members.

(6)
1 [Raid Leader] G: alrighty...here's whats up
2 [Raid Leader] G: we'd be short a couple people, which really isn't an issue
3 [Raid Leader] G: because we can down the instance a couple people short
4 [Raid Leader] G: however...
5 [Raid Leader] G: F and H's Internet
6 [Raid Leader] G: is "taking a shit on their connection"
7 [Raid Leader] G: so...with "shits" going on peoples Internet connections combined with being short a couple people
8 [Raid Leader] G: we're going to have to call the raid
9 [Raid Leader] G: but you all get 1 point
10 [Raid Leader] G: for showing up
11 [Raid Leader] G: and I has some words
12 [Raid Leader] G: to say, lol
13 [Raid] I: ah yes some words
14 [Raid] I: anyone who hasn't yet created an account on the [guild] forums
15 [Raid] I: we will need you do to so
16 [Raid] I: and I would like you to post on the "mains" and "alts" areas at the very least
17 [5. Private1] E: heroic magisters terrace?
18 [5. Private1] E: o0o
19 [Raid] I: so we can identify where credit is due for raid points
20 [5. Private1] E: or ZA
21 [Raid] I: since they are player specific and not character specific
22 [Raid] I: also it wouldnt hurt to read up about how the DKP system is going to work

I and G take relatively long turns in this example, which together with their increased attention to grammar and standard language forms, makes their monologues seem more coherent and thought out than normal chat conversation, and helps them construct the authoritative role of the provider of information. However, as Garley (2008) points out, the downside to taking long chat turns is that your audience does not know when you are typing, and so is more likely to interrupt you as the time since you last entered text increases. In order to prevent this, G holds the floor in the Raid channel by using the pre-increments "alrighty. . .here's whats up" (line 1) and "however" (line 4) (Garley 2008). I and G also hold the floor between turns by breaking some of their sentences up into turns in places that are clearly not the ends of complete thoughts or sentences, as between lines 7 and 8, and lines 14 and 15. The pre-increments and odd breaks make it clear that the player is not finished typing. Compare this chat style with the style I and G use in examples (7) and (8), in chat conversations where they are not constructing an authoritative role.

In (7), G informs some of the other subjects about a new guild member who is bringing friends from her previous guild.

(7)
       1 [5. Private1] G: she was in a pvp guild first
       2 [5. Private1] G: and maybe 2nd
       3 [5. Private1] G: the new guild raids kara
       4 [5. Private1] G: but whatever
       5 [5. Private1] G: more members, works

In this example, G's turns are shorter than in (6), in which he averages 3 more words per turn, and his maximum turn length is 15 words, compared to only 7 in this example. Additionally, G's language style in this example is more casual than above: his syntactic structure is basic and non-standard (for example, how many sentences are in example 7? What is the subject of the final clause, "more members, works"?) , and he uses virtually no punctuation. In (6), on the other hand, G uses plenty of punctuation, and much more complex syntax ("we'd be short a few people, which really isn't an issue/ because we can down the instance a couple people short"). In order to perform an authority role, G uses a more complex and standard language style than when he is performing the role of simply "friend" or "group member".

In (8), I talks strategy with C, D, and F in a dungeon:

(8)

1 [Party] I: lol
2 [Party] I: thanks D
3 [Party] I: it was sarcasm
4 [Party] I: lol
5 [Party] I: alright
6 [Party] I: I'll tank em
7 [Party] C: but i thought i was SUPPOSED to have aggro
8 [Party] D: tanking in cow form is bad
9 [Party] I: I'll aoe tank
10 [Party] I: not really
11 [Party] I: my threat is super low
12 [Party] I: you'll die
13 [Party] F: but before i do
15 [Party] I: prepare yourself

In this example, I, performing the role of friend/party member, also uses shorter turns than in example (6) and spends several turns simply emoting (lines 1, 2, 4, and 5). Like G, he also uses less complex and less standard style than when he is performing an authority role. Compare line 16 from example (6) to lines 12 and 14 here. It is also important to note that the different roles these players perform are correlated with the different channels they are typing in: in example (6) the large Raid channel requires a more standard language style, in order to enact an authoritative role in the group, while in examples (7) and (8), the smaller channels Private1 and Party allow a more casual style, which reflects the more egalitarian social structure of the group.

5.3. The big picture

In order to provide a bigger picture of how all of these discourse strategies, i.e., creating and referencing a shared narrative and slang to build in-group solidarity, switching channels in conversation in order to do face-work or generate power for the group, and using different language styles in different channels in order to enact different social roles, are used by the subjects, example (9) is presented as an extended piece of multi-channel chat in which the subjects mobilize the strategies that have been discussed in the previous sections to navigate the evolving situation.

In (9), after calling the 25-man raid, F and H leave home to go buy a new modem, and the rest of the subjects organize a smaller, 10-man raid for a dungeon called Zul'Aman, which they enter after F and H rejoin the game. In this excerpt, color is used to distinguish between chat channels.

(9)

1 [Raid Leader] I: blaaargh
2 [Raid Leader] I: they need to hurry up
3 [5. Private1] D: I need 500 rep for honored...
4 [5. Private1] G: F nd H are on their way
5 [Raid Leader] I: they said they'd be back in 15-20, right before we called gruuls
6 [5. Private1] G: with a new modem
7 [5. Private1] I: how long
8 [5. Private1] I: I need a time estimate
9 [5. Private1] E: they went to BUY a new modem?
10 [5. Private1] G: 10-15
11 [5. Private1] E: yyyyy
12 [5. Private1] I: fuck they said 10-15 when they started
13 [5. Private1] I: its beeen 30
14 [5. Private1] D: are there any mobs I can kill that give me rep?
15 [5. Private1] E: no
16 [5. Private1] D: arg
17 [5. Private1] G: lol
18 [5. Private1] E: 6 daily
19 [Raid Leader] I: the update on F and H is
20 [5. Private1] D: what % are we at
21 [Raid Leader] I: they purchased a new modem
22 [5. Private1] E: n the instance
23 [Raid Leader] I: they will be home in 10-15
24 [Officer] I: update on H and F is that they bought a new modem and will be home in 10-15 minutes
25 [Officer] G: well
26 [Officer] G: they'll be ready to go in 10-15 approx
27 [5. Private1] D: should we start the raid so we can summon them out when they get on?
28 [Officer] G: they'll be home in 5-10
29 [5. Private1] I: I'm already here
30 [5. Private1] I: in a raid
31 [5. Private1] E: i read that blizz intended it like where we just landed on the beach n starting fighting off the people
32 [5. Private1] I: with [guild members]

33 [Officer] J: does ZA give badges? I can't remember
34 [Officer] I: yup
35 [Officer] D: 1
36 [Officer] D: a boss
37 [Officer] G: it didn't always give per boss, but now it does
38 [5. Private1] E: n we need to do the quests to fight back the people n unlock more area for us to enhabit
39 [Officer] J: one per boss?
40 [Officer] G: patch
41 [5. Private1] D: I assume I'm healing?
42 [5. Private1] I: yeah
43 [5. Private1] I: unless you hate healing
44 [5. Private1] D: naw, its cool
45 [5. Private1] E: we love u
46 [5. Private1] D: hey, how much haste is equivalent to bloodlust?
47 [5. Private1] E: well i do
48 [5. Private1] J: alot
49 [5. Private1] I: lol... a lot
50 [5. Private1] I: I dont know how much exactly
51 [5. Private1] I: its a big number
52 [5. Private1] G: more...then you can get
53 [5. Private1] D: 300?
54 [5. Private1] G: *than
55 [5. Private1] J: more than that
56 [5. Private1] G: you neeeeeed a lot a lot of haste
57 [5. Private1] J: i got a trinket that is 260 haste rating
58 [5. Private1] J: n 260 is 16.49 haste
59 [5. Private1] I: G did you get the list of everyone that came
60 [5. Private1] G: yeah
61 [Party] I: I dont think theres a "run away just because an impenetrable door is blocking me" in team
62 [Party] F: oh there is
63 [Party] D: lol
64 [Party] F: in between the e and the a
65 [Party] F: they shorten it
66 [Party] F: its a silent rule
67 [Party] I: so its a contraction
68 [Party] I: te'am

In the first few lines (1, 2, and 5), I, the raid leader, does criticize F and H in the Raid chat channel, instead of a private channel, but since they are not around to hear the criticism, it's possible that I is actually providing some degree of performance for the larger group in the raid channel, first showing that he is as impatient and frustrated as they may be at the delay (lines 1 and 2), and then indirectly providing information about the reason for the delay, or justification for it (line 5). This type of performance could serve to dispel anger about the delays that other raid members might direct at him as the raid leader. Simultaneously, G, who has just gotten off the phone with F and H, provides information about their estimated time of arrival to the in-group in the Private1 chat channel (lines 4, 6, and 10). G's choice of chat channel in which to provide this information builds his solidarity with the in-group by providing them with new, important information first, and generates power for the in-group, since they now control a new piece of information regarding getting the raid started. During this exchange, I demonstrates his awareness of his performance in the role of raid leader by telling G he needs a time estimate (line 8), presumably to help him control the raid group, and by expressing a more harsh complaint about F and H's timing than he was willing to express in raid chat (lines 12 and 13). E also complains about the F and H's delay in Private1 (lines 9 and 11).

Next, D takes advantage of the Private1 channel to prevent too much face damage due to some requests for some information about gameplay (lines 14, 46, and 53). I uses the information resource G provided him in Private1 to act out his role as authority and provider of information, first in the raid chat channel and then in officer chat (lines 19, 21, 23-26, and 28).

In line 27, D uses Private1 to attempt to coordinate with the other in-group players so that their raid is organized and ready to begin as soon as F and H return, and I informs him that he is already leading a raid which is waiting outside of the dungeon (lines 29, 30, and 32). By holding this exchange in Private1, D and I are able to coordinate their raid organization activity, seemingly without any confusion or questions from the perspective of a raid member who is not also in the Private1 channel. They also negotiate whether or not D will be acting as a healer for the raid in similar privacy (lines 41-44), and E praises D for taking on the necessary (but possibly not preferred) role of healer (lines 45 and 47). The effect of this exchange within the social group is that D demonstrates his commitment to the group by volunteering for the necessary healing position, and is rewarded with praise from his comrade, but the effect as viewed from an out-group perspective is that the guild leadership provides necessary personnel for the raid without even having to mention it, solicit

volunteers, or convince anyone, which makes them seem more effective as a leadership group.

Finally, after F and H return and the raid enters Zul'Aman, D, I and F, who are all in the same party within the larger raid, begin their in-group commentary of the raid with I commenting on some break from the plan the raid had been forced to make due to their progress being blocked by an impenetrable door (Line 61). F and I then collaborate on some language play, which in the future may be used as in-group slang or recall (lines 62-68).

6. Conclusion

In this study I investigated how adult players of the MMORPG World of Warcraft use language and dialog to build social roles and social groups within the game and within their guild. I surveyed previous work on MMORPGs and computer-mediated communication, but discovered that despite the increasing popularity of MMORPGs as a "third space" for social interaction, virtually no study has been done of the sociolinguistic practices of MMORPG players. The study reported in this paper is the first step in investigating how modern people navigate the new social and linguistic frontiers in online virtual worlds.

Although the subjects in this study are interacting in a space and a medium which are artificial, and quite different from the natural world, their interactions retain important, recognizable sociolinguistic elements from natural language interactions. The subjects in this study use synchronous text chat in WoW in order to build social roles for themselves in the virtual world of the game, where their "real life" identities are obscured. The players use a dialog method of collaborative running commentary, language play, and recall of earlier commentary or language play, to construct their roles as members of a tight-knit social group. They also use those methods as well as facework and information sharing enabled by their shared private chat channel to build solidarity with each other, and use that solidarity and strong social bond to generate power over the larger group of players who make up the rest of their large guild. When performing an authority role within the guild or objective-based groups, lead players I and G use the information and face benefits they receive from their social group to construct their identities as providers of information and capable, knowledgeable organizers.

These social roles are created almost entirely through language use, with little support from the mechanics of the game, or the social constructions

and identities of the "real world". The function of enacting a specific role is performed by the subjects through the structure of their linguistic output, including their choice of channel, and grammatical style, and the use of in-group slang or "recall". In this way, language is even more important to identity and social interaction in virtual worlds like WoW than it is in the real world; on the Internet, you really are who you say you are.

7. Future Study

This paper addresses only a very small slice of the large and complex social world of WoW players; here I focus on the core members of a casual raiding guild, but social constructions in MMORPGs range from extremely small and disorganized groups of players strictly role-playing fantasy characters and storylines to enormous, regimented guilds of hundreds of players with highly organized ranking systems and schedules. Many MMORPG players are not native English speakers, yet participate in English-speaking virtual worlds, sometimes with native English speakers, and sometimes with non-native speakers of other languages. This is a potentially complex and interesting topic of investigation that is unfortunately beyond the scope of the present research. MMORPGs like WoW bring together vast numbers of strangers from across the globe, people who may share nothing in common outside the game, and invites them to talk and cooperate with each other, to bond and spend their free time together. There is much work still to be done understanding this new online world.

REFERENCES

"WoW -> Info -> Basics -> World of Warcraft Guide"
    http://www.worldofwarcraft.com/info/basics/guide.html (Accessed December 5, 2009).
Brown, Roger, & Albert Gilman. 1960. The pronouns of power and solidarity. *American Anthropologist* 4: 24-39.
Baron, Naomi S. 1998. "Letters by phone or speech by other means: the linguistics of email." *Language & Communication* 18: 133-170.
Baron, Naomi S. 2004. See you online: Gender issues in college student use of instant messaging. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 23: 397-423.
Bashiok, Karune & Nethaera. n.d. BlizzCon 2009 in Review.
    http://eu.blizzard.com/en-gb/community/blizzcast/archive/episode11.html (Accessed December 6, 2009).

Bhatt, Rakesh. 2008. In other words: Language mixing, identity representations, and third space. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*. 12/2: 177-200.

Bolonyai, Agnes & Rakesh Bhatt. 2009. Code-switching and the optimal grammar of bilingual language use. Submitted.

Chen, Vivian Hsueh-Hua & Henry Been-Lirn Duh. 2007. Understanding social interaction in World of Warcraft. *Proceedings of the international conference on Advances in computer entertainment technology*. 21-24. Salzburg, Austria.

Ducheneaut, Nicolas, Nicholas Yee, Eric Nickell & Robert J. Moore. 2006. "Alone together?": Exploring the social dynamics of massively multiplayer online games. *Proceedings of the SIGCHI conference on Human Factors in computing systems*. 407-416. Montréal, Québec, Canada.

Ducheneaut, Nicolas, Nicholas Yee, Eric Nickell, and Robert J. Moore. 2007. The life and death of online gaming communities: A look at guilds in world of warcraft. *Proceedings of the SIGCHI conference on Human factors in computing systems*. 839-848.San Jose, California..

Garley, Matt. 2008. LOL, what a tangled web we weave: Strategies for coherence in instant messaging discourse. *Proceedings of the Sixteenth Annual Symposium About Language and Society. Texas Linguistic Forum* 52: 44-58. Austin, Texas.

Herring, Susan C. 2003. Gender and power in online communication. In J. Holmes & M. Meyerhoff (eds.) *The Handbook of Language and Gender*. 202-28. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.

Herring, Susan C. 2007. A faceted classification scheme for computer-mediated discourse. *Language@Internet* 4, article 1. http://www.languageatinternet.de/articles/2007/761

Herring, Susan C., D.O. Kutz, J.C. Paolillo, and A. Zelenkauskaite. 2009. Fast talking, fast shooting: Text chat in an online first-person game. *Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences*, vol. 0: 1-10. Los Alamitos, CA, USA: IEEE Computer Society.

Kardan, Kaveh. 2006. Computer role-playing games as a vehicle for teaching history, culture, and language. *Proceedings of the 2006 ACM SIGGRAPH Symposium on Videogames*. 91-93. Boston, Massachusetts.

Kiesler, Sarah, Jane Siegel & Timothy W. McGuire. 1984. Social psychological aspects of computer-mediated communication. *American Psychologist* 39: 1123-1134.

Lee, Mark J.W., Ken Eustace, Allan Bytheway, Geoff Fellows & Leah Irving. 2005. Rochester Castle MMORPG: Applying instructional gaming to collaborative learning and teaching practice at a west Australian high school. *Proceedings of the 2005 Conference on Education and Technology*.

Ling, Rich & Naomi S. Baron. 2007. Text messaging and IM: Linguistic comparison of American college data. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 26: 291- 298.

Maynor, Natalie. 1994. The language of electronic mail: Written speech. *Centennial usage studies*.

Nardi, Bonnie & Justin Harris. 2006. Strangers and friends: Collaborative play in World of Warcraft. *Proceedings of the 2006 20th anniversary conference on computer supported cooperative work*. 149-158. Banff, Alberta, Canada.

Spears, Russel & Martin Lea. 1994. Panacea or Panopticon?: The Hidden Power in Computer- Mediated Communication. *Communication Research* 21: 427-459.

Steinkuehler, Constance A. 2006. Massively multiplayer online video gaming as participation in a discourse. *Mind, Culture, and Activity* 13: 38-52.

Steinkuehler, Constance A. 2005. The New Third Place: Massively Multiplayer Online Gaming in American Youth Culture. *Tidskrift for lararutbildning och forskning* 3: 16-33.

Trevino, Linda Klebe, & Jane Webster. 1992. Flow in computer-mediated communication: Electronic mail and voicemail evaluation and impacts. *Communication Research* 19: 539-573.

Williams, Dmitri, Nicolas Ducheneaut, Li Xiong, Yuanyuan Zhang & Nicholas Yee. 2006. From tree house to barracks: The social life of guilds in World of Warcraft. *Games and Culture* 1: 338-361.

Yee, Nicholas. 2006. The demographics, motivations, and derived experiences of users of massively multi-user online graphical environments. *Presence: Teleoperators & Virtual Environments* 15 :309-329.