

The Effort of Being in a Fictional World: Upkeyings and Laminated Frames in MMORPGs

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On the basis of ten months of fieldwork studying a role-playing guild in the game World of Warcraft, this article shows that contrary to the idea that virtual worlds are seductive illusions, technology does not necessarily support players' feelings of being immersed in fictional worlds. Applying Goffman's frame theory, the author explains how role-players in the game actively upkey elements from primary frameworks in order to create and uphold the frame of being in a fictional world. This kind of narrative immersion is rather hindered than facilitated by technology.

Keywords: immersion, Goffman, upkeying, computer games, video games, MMORPG, role-playing

INTRODUCTION

Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs), like *World of Warcraft* (WoW, Blizzard 2004) and *Star Wars: The old republic* (Bioware 2011), engage millions of players all over the world. Just like their predecessors, pen and paper role-playing games, these games offer historically new ways of engaging with fiction. Each player controls a character in the fictional universe and interacts with the game and with other players through their role. It is easy to think that role-players experience stronger character identification and have more powerful sensations of presence, so called "immersion," in the fictional world than consumers of more traditional works of fiction. Role-players do not only observe the pre-scripted events in a plotline, but they also have an agency in a fictional world. Role-playing games could thus be more powerful at affecting us than other forms of culture. In the 1980s pen and paper role-playing games like *Dungeons and Dragons* even caused an agitated debate since they were portrayed as being so immersive that the player risked losing track of reality (Turkle 1994; Martin and Fine 1991).

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The notion of immersion is also tied to the debate about how digital games affect players. Two main camps can be found in this debate. On the wary side, there are those who think that the immersive nature of digital technology can blur our perception of reality and thus they study the effects of playing games that depict violence. On the opposing side, advocates of game-based learning see immersion as having a potential in education and scholars in narratology describe games as a new genre for storytelling with unique immersive qualities. While being in opposition over whether gaming has positive or negative effects, these positions are furnished on a shared logic—the idea that immersion in digital games happens by default and is facilitated by game mechanics and game technology. If and how immersion in games happens is thus not only a question for the game industry. It also taps into the broader issues of how gaming affects players, the potential use of games in education and the artistic possibilities of games.

But, is immersion the default way that a gamer experiences fiction in virtual worlds? Researchers in the game studies field have described gaming as more of an instrumental activity whereby gamers engage with game-mechanics at the expense of experiencing fiction (Juul 2003; Salen and Zimmerman 2004). MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler (2008) even argue that in MMORPGs game mechanics are a hindrance to role-playing.

In this article, I investigate role-players' immersion in MMORPGs. Inspired by Gary Alan Fine's study of pen and pencil role-playing (1983) I use Goffman's frame theory in order to interpret ethnographic observations of online role-playing. Fine showed that role-players handle different layers of meaning at the same time and that the fictional frame was only part of the experience. The question I raise in this article is if this is the case with role-playing in virtual worlds as well or if technology adds features that make these environments more immersive. The article is structured in three parts. First I discuss previous research about immersion and role-playing. Then I briefly account for virtual ethnography and the specific design of the study. Finally I report the results, provide some empirical examples, and discuss what the findings means for the discussion about immersion.

IMMERSION, ROLE-PLAYING, AND FRAME ANALYSIS

In the late 1990s Janet Murray (1997) predicted that technology would mean that boundaries between narrative and dramatic forms would become loosened as well as the boundaries between audience and authors (1997:64). In Murray's vision, psychological sensations arising out of technology-enhanced fiction were called immersion. The feeling of immersion was metaphorically depicted as the feeling of being surrounded by water—a sensation of being in a believable fictional universe taking part in an interactive cyber drama. Murray's book *Hamlet on the holodeck* started a heated debate concerning whether or not it was appropriate to see games as a medium for storytelling (cf. Frasca 2003; Pearce 2005; Murray 2005). The discussion had to do with the fact that digital games are comprised by both rules and fiction.

Games can be seen both as formal rule systems and as a form of representational media with narratives (Copier 2007; Juul 2003; Salen and Zimmerman 2004). Juul (2003, 2005) claims that rules and fiction in games are intertwined in such a way that they can cue each other. According to Juul, this interplay between rules and fiction makes games become what he calls half-real. The player experiences the game between these two nodes.

It is important to note that *immersion* is sometimes used for describing other aspects of the gaming experience other than the feeling of being present in a fictional world (McMahan 2003; Burke 2005; Grimshaw, Charlton, and Jagger 2011). McMahan (2003) argues that immersion has been used for describing both the player's commitment to the story as well as to the player's devotion to strategic dimensions of a game, described in terms of diegetic and non-diegetic aspects of games (cf. Jørgensen 2011). An example of this is Brown and Cairns (2004) model where the gaming experience is constituted by engagement, engrossment, and total immersion. The last level in their model is described as a state where anything else other than the game world fades into the background for the player. However, this psychological state of losing track of the immediate physical surrounding does not by default mean that the player is immersed in a diegetic sense. For Brown and Cairns it is the detachment from everything else other than the game that is the defining feature of immersion. This interpretation of immersion makes the concept become similar to the notion of flow (see Jennett et al. 2008). As a reaction to the confusion of the immersion concept, Calleja (2007) breaks down the experience of playing digital games into different "frames of involvement." The narrative/diegetic dimension of the game experience stands out as something separate and is not merged into the more general experience of strong involvement. It should be noted that in this article I use the term *immersion* in its classical sense, having to do with the experience of fiction, the narrative and diegetic elements in games.

Researchers who are interested in how to accomplish immersion have made a number of suggestions about what features create the feeling of being in a fictional world such as the nature of visual design including 2D versus 3D perspective and realism (Grimshaw, Charlton, and Jagger 2011; Thabet 2008), the nature of sound and music (Whalen 2004; Grimshaw, Charlton, and Jagger 2011), what degree of agency and control the player has (Brown and Cairns 2004; Lankoski 2011; Jennett et al. 2008), usability, and how easy the game controls are to master (Brown and Cairns 2004; Grimshaw, Charlton, and Jagger 2011). The interest in immersion here boils down to a number of very concrete design suggestions that are in line with the classical view of immersion as a psychological sensation that is tied to properties of the technology.

In MMORPGs thousands of players are logged into the same virtual realm and can interact with each other and the game world. While a majority of players focus on strategic aspects of these games, there is a subculture that uses the game world as an arena for role-playing (MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler 2008; Taylor 2006; Williams, Kennedy, and Moore 2011). These players seem to embody some of the visions from

the 1990s about how technology would facilitate new forms of narrative experiences. This practice is, according to MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler (2008), an attempt on behalf of the players to become immersed, something that rarely happens. The authors point out that the game mechanics are designed in ways that make it hard to create coherent narratives. For instance, quests are designed so that many players can do them at different times. This means that the single player's adventures never change anything permanent in the fictional world. Another example that the authors bring up is that players can talk with each other through chat channels and, even if they do so in character, their avatars can be on different continents in a fictional world where telecommunication does not exist.

If one looks at MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler's findings in relation to Fine's study of pen and paper role-playing games, it seems as if two *frames* are in conflict for the players.

Fine (1983) used Goffman's frame theory in his ethnographical study. According to this theory, we make sense of the world around us in accordance with the nature of the immediate situation at hand. Metaphorically, social episodes are surrounded by what Goffman calls frameworks. A framework is the more or less shared definition that participants in an activity have of the situation. It is the unspoken answer that participants give to the question: *What is going on here?* (Goffman 1961). The meaning of a spoken sentence, an object, an action or an event is dependent on which frame is currently established. According to Fine (1983) role-playing is constituted by three different frames. The outer rim of role-playing is the primary framework, the commonsense understandings we have of reality, players sitting around a table playing a game. Then there is a second frame, which Fine calls the *game context*, where the participants' actions are governed by the game rules so that they constrain their actions in order to uphold the game, in other words, take their turns, follow the game's structure for interaction, etc. Finally there is the inner fantasy frame, where actions are governed by the participants' mutual agreement to pretend that they are make-believe characters. The game activity is, in this view, laminated or layered (Goffman [1974] 1986:82), meaning that many different frames are at work at the same time. Players shift between these different frames when making sense of actions, utterances, and events in the gaming activity. The inner frame in Fine's description, the fantasy frame, is a special kind of frame; it is a *keyed frame* ([1974] 1986:40–82). Keying means the transformation of something that is already meaningful on its own terms into something that the participants will see as something different. For example, playful fighting is a keying. Even if the elements in the activity have structural similarities with a real fight, we would say that the participants in the activity were playing and not fighting. A keying transforms how we make sense of events and, even if the activity is only slightly different from the original activity, it completely changes what we would say is going on. Elements in an activity can be both *upkeyed* and *downkeyed*. An upkeying is a transformation of an activity where the participants add another layer to the situation that increases its distance from what we would call literal reality ([1974] 1986:366). A real robbery,

which is seen as a practical joke by some of those involved, would be an upkeying. The other way around, a practical joke understood as a literal assault would be a downkeying.

As Fine's (1983) study showed frame analysis makes it possible to empirically study how fiction is negotiated within the game activity and how role-players handle incongruities between game mechanics and fiction. Using frame analysis on digital games can thus demystify the immersion concept. As an analytical tool, frame analysis makes it possible to study how player's experience fiction in the "natural" game environment.

DESIGN AND METHOD

During a period of approximately ten months, I followed the role-playing guild *Solstice* in the game *WoW*. In-game ethnography presupposes participating observers since it is hard to gain access to online game activities without taking part in them (see Mortensen 2002). In my case it meant that I played on an almost daily basis with other players from the guild. The period of data collection took place in the middle of a longer period of fieldwork during which I followed players' everyday life in the game. This meant that I had known some of the players in *Solstice* for a long time and could easily adopt an inside perspective and avoid trust issues that can emerge in virtual ethnographies (cf. Hine 2008). I also had a vast experience of online games and had played *WoW* before the study was conducted, something that made me a complete-member researcher (Ellis and Bochner 2000:740). Like other MMORPG ethnographies, such as Sundén and Sveningsson's *Gender and sexuality in online game cultures* (2012), I made use of my own subjectivity and experience for interpreting the local culture that I observed. During the fieldwork my main analytical interests became the specific communicative practice that was part of everyday life in *Solstice*. In order to give a detailed empirical account of this practice I decided to rely less on reflexive autoethnography (Hine 2008) and supplement data with captured video from events in the game (for a discussion about combining ethnography and video analysis see Jordan and Henderson 1995). This was done in order to get a more detailed view on the naturalistic interactions in the virtual environment (Schroeder and Bailenson 2008) and to find out how the members produced their social order in this specific context (Hindmarsh 2008). In total 7 h of role-playing was captured. This approach also made it less suitable to present the results in an autobiographical genre.

Apart from several casual conversations with the guild members and former members of the guild I also conducted three more structured interviews, two with the guild's leader and one with a member of the guild. While some of the informal conversations happened over voice chat systems, the interviews were conducted via text chat. Since text chat was the regular communication channel in the guild, and voice chat only happened occasionally, it made sense to keep the interviews as close

to everyday game life as possible. The interviews specifically addressed the issue of the guild's communicative practice.

According to ethical guidelines for Internet research, the guild members were asked to give their informed consent and were informed about their rights to leave the study at any point. To preserve the confidentiality of the informants, the name of their avatars and the guild name have been changed.

RESULTS

The Guild Solstice

In *WoW*, players use different resources to act out their characters. They position their characters in different ways and can make gestures such as waving, kneeling, dancing, etc. Furthermore, they type things they want their characters to say. This “talk” appears in speech bubbles above the character. Players can also type descriptions of what they want their characters to do. These descriptions, called emotes, are shown in the chat window to players whose avatars are close. While these forms of communication are supported by the game's design, most role-players on the game server where the study took place followed specific conventions for communicating, conventions that with some local variations seem to be rather general for role-playing in MMORPGs (MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler 2008).

The guild I studied, *Solstice*, was a small guild with very devoted members. Many of the members had a background in other forms of role-playing games. *Solstice* followed the conventions for how role-playing is done in these environments. For instance they avoided so-called power emotes, in other words, emotes that interfere with characters in such a way that the actions of one player become scripted by another player (like: *Robin runs his sword into the man in green so he dies*). Another convention was to only act on the knowledge that their character was supposed to have, not what the player knows. Using player's knowledge that the character knows nothing about, like the name of a stranger, is called meta-gaming and is also something that skilled role-players despise (see Waskul 2006:29).

In some cases though, *Solstice* members tended to have a very local set of rules that all members were supposed to follow. For instance, when other role-players I played with stepped out of character (OOC), to say something player to player, they switched chat channel and/or used double brackets to mark that something was to be considered “OOC”. In *Solstice*, the players tried to uphold specific communicative conventions where they deliberately avoided these canonized ways of switching between frames. Instead they encouraged each other to talk as much as possible in-character (IC). They even upheld the IC frame in *raids* and *instances*. Instances are clearly defined places, dungeons, caves, or suchlike, which a group of players enter together in order to take on some of the harder challenges. Raids are instances with larger groups (more than ten players). Velvet describes the guilds communicative rules:

Solstice takes the definition “RP guild” to a place where it’s just important to do everything in character. There’s no “((brb bio)),” there’s “Ah, I strapped my armor upside down. Give me a second to see to that.” We talk, raid, instance, and quest IC even in party chat, because even in Stratholme days we realized that if party chat is OOC, we never actually role-played (nor felt) the instance. So we kicked party chat into IC, and discovered the awesomeness of being totally IC.

An utterance like ((brb bio)) means: I will be right back, I need to visit the toilet (biological break), and the double brackets mark that this is something said player to player and should therefore not be merged into the sociodramatic frame. Velvet points out that in *Solstice* they instead attempt to come up with diegetic explanations as to why their character is distant while the player is away from the game.

Having a local communicative policy that breaks with some of the canonized ways of talking in online role-playing games also meant that the guild became a constrained and exclusive community. One of the members, Buttercup, described this as a deliberate method for keeping people who could potentially spoil the experience away:

And *Solstice* is probably one of the most dedicated RP guilds on our server. We have strict rules, we can type, we arrange events, we have a guild HQ, and we generally have a very un-including atmosphere.—It’s typical. Good RPer’s shun others, because they don’t want to get involved with the looming, and obviously dangerous “bad RP.”

This local agenda was something that the guild trained new members to uphold. A former member of the guild said that as a new member she was corrected when her utterances did not have punctuations and that she was asked not to type certain so-called “emotes,” descriptions of the character’s actions, which were thought to be illogical.

Doing Instances in Character

One of the most significant things with the guild *Solstice* was that they did instance runs in character. In these instances, there are a number of monsters and enemies that require group-coordination if players are to conquer them. My observations from playing with groups outside *Solstice* showed that the regular way of doing instances was to instrumentally focus on the strategic dimension. Players cared about defeating the enemies and getting their rewards. The agenda in *Solstice* was different. Velvet describes the philosophy behind doing instances in character:

It’s a completely different experience to the pale, miserable game most people call WoW. I can’t tell you how heartbreaking Stratholme [an instance] is when you role-play, actually walking the still-burning streets, seeing the ash piles where people used to stand; seeing the “Orphanage” sign dangling on the destroyed building. Even a seasoned adventurer feels sorrow there.

The catch is, to get to that point, you need to cut out all OOC, even in party chat; otherwise you lose the feel—just as if someone were to turn on the lights and put on loud stupid 1980s music while you are watching *Lord of the Rings*.

Who would choose a “game” over feeling as if they ’re a part in *Lord of the Rings*? Actually imagining the scent of the air in Seradane, gaping in awe at the statues in the Valley of Heroes (God, I love that bombastic music as you walk in!), at the heartbreaking beauty of Eversong woods? All the childhood dreams of walking into your favorite book are there.

Velvet positions her own approach for doing instances as something special, something that deviates from how things are “usually” done. She sees her own approach as superior and implies that most people probably would if they actually knew what they missed. But she also points out that the gaming experience only can be achieved through a deliberate effort:

“you need to cut out all OOC, even in party chat; otherwise you lose the feel”. A resource for constructing this diegetic frame seems to be Velvet’s own cultural experience from the fantasy/medieval genre: “All the childhood dreams of walking into your favorite book are there.”

Normally the interaction in instances is goal oriented and the players coordinate their interaction OOC. When attacking a group of enemies, the convention in the game is to mark the enemies with certain icons. This way the players can sort out who will handle which enemy. If a player playing a hunter is to lure a certain enemy marked with a blue square icon into one of his traps, the leader can in the instance express this as “Hunter trap blue.” In *Solstice* there is a different way of communicating. Buttercup explains:

We go “Jeffrey . . . Could you handle that ogre on the left—yes, the far left? Lure him away from the rest of us and keep him occupied with your traps” or “Okay, Danton, what we need you to do is keep your eyes open, so you can distract the bla bla . . .”

When doing instances in character, the players need to control their communication in such a way so that their utterances can make sense in accordance with the make-believe frame. The Excerpt 1 illustrates how a simple question about the distribution of a certain kind of item generates interaction in character.

The transcripts are organized in four columns: the number of the turn, the name of the character making an utterance or performing an action, the player-produced text and, finally, events in the game. There are three kinds of player-produced texts. Things can be said in the “say” chat, a chat channel that is based on the characters’ proximity, in other words, players whose characters are close to the player “talking” can see the message. Things can be said in “party,” a chat channel for the people who are in the same group, in this case all the players in the instance.

TABLE 1. Excerpt 1

Nr	Name	Player Produced Text	Events in the Game
1.			The fight is over and Crow receives a Sunfury Signet
2.	Crow	Say: Anyone need these signets?	
3.	Buttercup	Say: I do.	
4.	Buttercup	Emote: <i>Buttercup smiles at Crow.</i>	
5.	Danton	Say: Buttercup's flirty with the Scryers.	Crow trades the Sunfury Signet with Buttercup.
6.	Buttercup	Say: Thanks.	
7.	Buttercup	Emote: <i>Buttercup eyes Danton up and down.</i>	
8.	Fredric	Say: Oh, me too. [Referring to line 2, Fredric also needs the signets.]	
9.			Danton starts a fight with some enemies.
10.	Buttercup	Say: The Aldor were boring me.	The group is fighting during the conversation.
11.	Buttercup	Emote: <i>Buttercup laughs at Danton.</i>	
12.	Fredric	Say: They have such interesting books.	

Finally, players can produce their own emotes, text that indicates the characters' actions.

The players Buttercup, Danton, Fredric, and Crow (the author) are doing the instance Mechanar. Danton and Crow have been in this place before, but it is the first time for Buttercup and Fredric. The dialogue concerns a specific item, a Sunfury Signet. These signets are items that only some players have a use for. In the official game lore, the two factions Scryers and Aldor are in opposition. Players need to align themselves with one of these factions. Sunfury signets can be traded for valuable items in the game, but only for players that are aligned with the Scryers. They are useless for other players. In Excerpt 1, the players have just finished a fight.

This strip of interaction starts in turn 2 with Crow [the author] asking if anyone needs the Sunfury Signets. Buttercup simply states that she needs them in the following turn. These two turns can be said to make sense in both an instrumental rule-oriented frame and in a keyed sociodramatic frame. Then Danton in turn 5 says: *Buttercup's flirty with the Scryers*. A statement that in some of the following turns is taken up as an invitation to give more accounts concerning the characters' choice of faction. In turn 10, Buttercup says: *The Aldor was boring me*. Instead of saying what rewards from the Scryers she wants, she embeds her choice in her characters' back-story. Her statement gives a small clue to the other players of what sort of person Buttercup is supposed to be. The same goes for Fredric's statement in turn 12 in which he claims that he is after the books. The Scryers do not have any "books"

as rewards, they have specific recipes, plans, and patterns that enable the player to learn new abilities, but they are represented as scrolls and not as books. Fredric, whose character is supposed to be a professor at a mage academy, here produces an input based on his own imagination. In turn 14, Buttercup takes up Fredric's introduction of books and develops the idea by introducing the idea of a library. The rather simple task of sorting out who needs the Sunfury Signets becomes embedded in a strip of role-played interaction. By drawing on their knowledge of the game (Scryers versus Aldor), as well as other cultural knowledge (books and libraries as signs of high intellectual capacity), they elaborate on the given situation. Instead of motivating choice of faction from the instrumental agenda, wanting a certain reward, the players give IC accounts where their choice has something to do with the characters' imagined taste or personal preferences.

The observations from doing instances with *Solstice* showed that the players developed things that happened in the game so that they made sense on a socio-dramatic level. Like the interaction illustrated in Excerpt 1, the players expanded the situations that the game forced on them. They collectively constituted a diegetic frame in which they embedded their game actions, they upkeyed things that had their origin in the unkeyed. This resulted in their interaction becoming a more plausible work of fiction. For example, when someone died in an instance and then was resurrected, the revived player spent some time role-playing her/his character as feeling sick and nauseous; sometimes typing emotes for throwing up, leaning against a pillar feeling dizzy, etc. In short, the players made resurrection a more believable occurrence from a diegetic point of view. It should be noted that resurrections have a fictional representation in the official game lore. A resurrecting spell is portrayed with animations of white light and holy symbols but there is nothing suggesting "resurrection sickness." In my interpretation it was important for players in *Solstice* that "death" mattered in the diegetic frame. Death was an element used in many of the plots that the players created and had to "matter" if these plotlines were to become dramatic.

In Excerpt 2, the object of upkeying is the game system, the rules. Just as in the case with the signets above, an item that some players need has been dropped. Since this item, an Arcane Tome (Figure 1), is considered to be more valuable than the signets, the loot rules for need or greed are applied. When this happens, the game shows the players a window where they can select either need or greed, depending on whether they have any use for the item or if they just want it for its value. Once all players have pressed need or greed (or passed) the game generates a random number, a process called rolling, referring to a dice roll, and the highest roller in the need category wins. If no one selects need then the highest greeder wins.

Normally players simply press need or greed and then carry on with the task of getting to the end of the instance. As Excerpt 2 shows, these players handle the situation differently. The abstract, computer-generated "roll" is re-framed and integrated in a short role-play scene where the players pretend to actually throw dice in the middle of Mechanar.

TABLE 2. Excerpt 2

Nr	Name	Player Produced Text	Events in the Game
1.			An Arcane Tome drops from a mob. Crow and Danton pass and are thus not candidates to win it.
2.	Fredric	Say: Oh!	
3.	Danton	Say: Heh, fight Buttercup for that one.	
4.	Buttercup	Say: I'll dice you for it!	
5.	Danton	Emote: <i>Danton smiles</i>	
6.	Fredric	Say: Very well.	
7.	Buttercup	Emote: <i>Buttercup flicks out her dice, smiling.</i>	
8.			The game generates the following text. Buttercup has selected Need for Arcane Tome. Fredric has selected Need for Arcane Tome. Need Roll — 8 for Arcane Tome by Fredric. Need Roll — 33 for Arcane Tome by Buttercup. Buttercup won: Arcane Tome. Buttercup receives loot: Arcane Tome.
9.	Fredric	Say: Well played.	

The observations from doing instances with *Solstice* showed that strategic discussions were particularly demanding to upkey. The rules became apparent in situations where the players had to coordinate their actions to succeed with the collaborative tasks in the instances. In Excerpt 3 below, Fredric initiates a plot where his character has a scientific interest in some pink cubes. At the same time as this is going on, the players have to avoid getting too close to a relatively dangerous enemy who is walking close to the spot where they are standing and also sort out the strategy for attacking him (Figure 2).

In turn 5, Crow, Buttercup, and Fredric are positioning themselves so that they can role-play looking at the cubes. When they do this, they get a bit too close to Gatewatcher Iron-Hand (Figure 3). Danton, who knows that Fredric and Buttercup are here for the first time, warns them not to get too close. This is done totally in character by means of the utterance in turn 6 and with the emote in turn 7. Fredric and Buttercup develop the IC dimension of Danton's warning. In turn 8, Fredric suggests that his character is stuttering, getting nervous from Danton's utterance in turn 6 to stay alert. In turns 10 and 14, Buttercup's role-plays become annoyed about Danton's warning.

Again, a situation that most groups would handle by saying something like "don't aggro him" or "don't get too close to mini-boss" is upkeyed, so the utterances make sense on a make-believe level. In turn 18, Danton turns to talk about the strategy for taking down Gatewatcher Iron-Hand. Still in character, he asks the players to "Stay



FIGURE 1. An Arcane Tome Has Been Dropped and a Window for Need or Greed Has Opened

far away from him.” Then Danton in just one utterance makes a statement OOC in turn 19. The choice of the “party” chat-channel and the use of double brackets mark that his words are not supposed to be considered on a sociodramatic level.

Although the utterances about the pink cubes belong in a role-play frame, Danton’s utterance in turn 18 points to the laminated nature of *Solstice’s* instance runs. In order to clarify the strategy, Danton breaks the sociodramatic frame and steps OOC before the fight. This clarification is a response to his utterance in line 18. In these two turns, something said OOC refers to the content of something said IC. The utterance (*Especially when he does a raid warning*) can only be understood in relation to the instruction to stay far away from the enemy. Since it makes sense for the participants to talk OOC about the content of an IC utterance, this strip of interaction can be described as being laminated. Things said in character are sometimes supposed to be “unpacked” by the players and understood as strategic instructions.

Both Buttercup and Velvet pointed out that framing strategic instructions in character could be frustrating. It takes more time than instrumental play and tactics can be confusing. Buttercup explains:

I find it frustrating that explaining tactics IC can take a very long time—and one might wipe a lot because communicating during the fight is thwarted.—We don’t use Vent [Ventrilo, a voice chat program], or party chat to alert anyone, or warn about any event going on during a boss fight and so on.

In other words, upkeying tactics take a great deal of effort for the players; it requires them to be creative and come up with ways of expressing something that can be said rather straightforwardly player to player, so it sounds believable character

TABLE 3. Excerpt 3

Nr	Name	Player Produced Text	Events in the Game
1.	Fredric	Emote: <i>Fredric gasps at the pink boxes of interest.</i>	The characters are in a room with some normal enemies and one large enemy, Gatewatcher Iron-Hand, who is walking up and down some stairs at the far end of the room. Along one side of the room there are some pink boxes, see Figure 2. A fight starts that goes on for 40 seconds.
2.			
3.	Buttercup	Emote: <i>Buttercup eyes them too, looking mildly interested. She smiles at Fredric.</i>	The fight ends. Fredric approaches the pink boxes. Crow and Buttercup run after Fredric. Danton holds back. Crow sees Gatewatcher Iron-Hand pass and moves a bit away from it, but is still close to Buttercup and Fredric.
4.	Fredric	Say: My goodness!	
5.			
6.	Danton	Say: Hey, stay alert!	
7.	Danton	Emote: <i>Danton points at Gatewatcher Iron-Hand.</i>	
8.	Fredric	Say: S-sorry.	
9.	Crow	Says: What Fredric?	
10.	Buttercup	Emote: <i>Buttercup turns to huff at Danton.</i>	
11.	Danton	Say: Got a big one here . . .	
12.	Fredric	Say: It's pink and powerful looking!	
13.		Emote: <i>Danton smiles at Fredric.</i>	
14.	Danton	Say: Like Samuel [Referring to another member in the guild].	
15.	Buttercup	Say: We've never been here before, show some understanding, you big-sworded goon.	
16.	Buttercup	Emote: <i>Buttercup grins wickedly at Danton.</i>	
17.	Crow	Say: Mages . . . power struck . . . I would not dabble with them . . .	
18.			Gatewatcher Iron-Hand, passes again, the group is turned facing him.
19.	Danton	Say: This fellow . . . Stay far away from him.	
20.	Danton	Party: ((Especially when he does a raid warning.))	
21.	Buttercup	Say: Alright.	
22.	Danton	Say: I think he might be one painful feller.	



FIGURE 2. Turn 4 in Excerpt 3

to character. Buttercup explained that there was a clear difference between doing an instance for the first time and doing something they had done before.

SOLVING CONFLICTS BETWEEN RULES AND FICTION — CREATING LOCAL LORE

The observations from doing IC runs with *Solstice* led me to specifically ask Buttercup and Velvet how the guild handled the kind of conflicts between rules and fiction that Juul (2003, 2005) describes. In MMORPGs, there are a number of incongruities that have to do with the fact that quests and instances have to be re-playable so that all players can enjoy them. At the same time, the fictional level suggests that the players who defeat a boss change history in the game world. Handling the fact that the same enemy is still there the next time the players do the instance or that a certain quest like helping someone escape from captivity can be done over and over again, then becomes problematic. Many role-players tend to employ *rules of irrelevance* (Goffman 1961) and simply avoid discussing these things. I once observed how some role-players met at an inn and got into a quarrel because one guild claimed that they had just killed the legendary dragon Onyxia, while the other guild said that they had done that weeks ago. During the argument a participant said OOC in double brackets that this was an unsuitable theme for role-play. Velvet describes how *Solstice* handles these incongruities:

Again, that differs. Some people in the guild do not discuss those things and that's it. Andor claims we defeat a boss, but not kill it; hence its there next time. I claim that instances are "time pockets," where time is frozen in a loop. Each time we change things in that loop, it increases the chance of it unfolding, of the change



FIGURE 3. Gatewatcher Iron-Hand Walks Close to the Characters

becoming permanent. This way we can kill Onyxia ten times, and feel that we are doing something worthwhile each time.

This way we suggested solutions for death and such (“adventurers can be pulled back to their bodies because their life spark is very powerful, but each death weakens it; any death could be your final one, when your soul is too weak to find its way to the body again.”).

Buttercup confirms this policy; re-appearing enemies are integrated into a shared idea about how death works in the game world.

Bosses return by the same basics as players do. Their spirit lingers in the world and can thus be resurrected.—That’s how I see it, anyway. . . . We don’t get rid of bosses as much as we remove them for a little while. Thinking “every bit helps,” kind of.

I think it was . . . Jeffrey—he commented on the Lich in Andorhal. We were talking about killing it, when somebody said ‘He’ll just be back anyway . . .’ then Jeffrey replied that taking him out for a little while is the right thing to do for now anyway. Every little bit helps.

Another incongruity between game mechanics and fiction is how characters that are in different places in the game world can still communicate with each other. *WoW* has several chat channels so that players can coordinate different activities such as getting a group for handling a specifically difficult challenge, buying and selling items and talking with friends who are doing things in other parts of the game world. For obvious reasons these channels have nothing to do with the proximity between characters. Making this instrumental feature of the game make sense in a

diegetic frame, *Solstice* has, in a shared fantasy, integrated certain communication devices that allow distance communication. Members role-play that they have a watch that is said to work like a phone. Buttercup describes this:

But to get the “constant-RP” atmosphere that we want in *Solstice*, chatting IC was also important to our guild leaders. So . . . In *Solstice*’s case, we have “watches,” crafted by Samuel. They work like communicators; you can speak into them, and they’re merged with a nostalgic part of us.—It’s also possible to roughly locate other guild members with these devices.

Seeing as there’s so much gnome and goblin crafts in Azeroth, this isn’t so crazy, really. . . . thereby we solve the ‘position’ tag in the guild member list.

Time pockets, weakening of souls and communication watches are ideas created by *Solstice* and not supported in the game mythology. The players create a local lore in their guild, explanations about how the fictitious world works. In this way, the players upkey strategic and instrumental parts of the games in such a way that these features make diegetic sense, thus, avoiding conflicts between different frameworks. Velvet describes how this way of re-writing the game lore has also been used for diegetic re-framings concerning other players’ behavior:

Storm once filed a full three-page research about a disease called Goldshire Fever, claiming that it was a malady causing peoples’ loss of sanity, speech deficiencies, and a weak mind; Northshire Abbey, she said, was a sort of hospital for those poor people who end up saying “lol” and dancing naked on mailboxes. She said we should treat them with pity and care.

As mentioned, many players do not follow role-playing policies and behave in ways that role-players find annoying, throwing AoE spells, using leet-speak saying things like lol (laughing out loud), and undressing their characters in public, etc. According to Velvet, the player in *Solstice* made an effort to re-frame this behavior so these people could be understood as insane. The introduction of communication devices, time pockets, and Goldshire Fever are things that expand the back-story of *WoW*. The players edit the lore and become a form of co-authors. Their contributions grew to be a local frame of reference for the members in the guild.

THE STRUGGLE FOR IMMERSION

In this study, I have shown how a small group of devoted role-players crave an immersive experience in the *WoW*. They take actions to make the fictional world come alive. These players are not pleased with the multi-layered experience described by Fine (1983). Instead of accepting the different logics on which each frame rests, they yearn for a game experience where the “game context” has become invisible. Where other role-players might have used *rules of irrelevance* to omit incongruities between rules and fiction, these players sometimes create plausible explanations for why the game or other players behave in a certain way.

They systematically make upkeyings in order to get the feeling of being immersed. These players incarnate Murray's (1997) vision of the reader of future narratives. The players participate in the digital environment like actors in improvisational theater, they co-author and expand the game's back-story and, as Murray stated, they *actively create belief*. Since Murray (1997) the literature on immersion (Grimshaw, Charlton, and Jagger 2011; Thabet 2008; Whalen 2004; Brown and Cairns 2004; Lankoski 2011; Jennett et al. 2008) has approached this sensation as a psychological state, mainly arising from specific properties of the technology. In the public debate and in the more normative oriented discourse about positive vis-à-vis negative effects, immersion is taken to be the default game experience. This study gives a rather different view about what goes on within these game worlds. Even the players who want to be immersed have to struggle in order to gain this sensation. The immersive experience that the members of *Solstice* have can hardly be seen as being facilitated by the technology. This study gives an empirical account to MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler's (2008) suggestion that the way technology structures the game experience is a constant hindrance for role-playing.

A shortcoming of this study is that it only captures a specific kind of gaming. It is hard to draw conclusions about the kinds of experience that solitary players get from playing single player games. Yet, the results suggest that it might be interesting for future studies to ask about what roles personally constructed narratives and the active urge to be in a fictional world have for the single-player game experience.

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