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**PARTICIPATING IN THE VISUAL: AN EXPLORATORY
STUDY OF FANART COMMUNITIES IN THE WORLD OF WARCRAFT**

A Thesis in
Information Sciences and Technology

by
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ABSTRACT

As fan culture becomes increasingly mainstream, it falls to researchers to diversify the ways that they approach it. This research aims to uncover the relationships between fan-generated artwork and in-game and out-of-game communities in World of Warcraft. Much current research into fan culture focuses on the community interactions. Though it mentions fan-generated content, it is rare to find more than a passing mention of fanart and its potential roles within these communities. The study takes a qualitative & interpretive point of view in order to establish the reasons that players create and consume artwork. Through a combination of text analysis, surveys, and interviews this research is intended to provide a broad understanding of players' general knowledge and feelings about fanart as well as how and why fanart affects the World of Warcraft community.

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... I can't believe my advisor *forced* me to play World of Warcraft.

Chapter 1

Introduction

With the emergence and wide spread adoption of the internet, the long-held ideas of a traditional community had to be revised to facilitate the new ways that people were communicating with one another. One specific group of communities that were greatly changed by this new technological development is fan communities. Previously existing as relatively small, contained groups of people dedicated to a particular topic, sharing their ideas in person or through the mail (Jenkins, 1995), the emergence of the internet significantly altered their operations. Fans were able to share their thoughts, feelings, and ideas much faster and easier using telecommunications technology like email and hypertext web pages. Researchers of fan communities were quick to study the effects of these technologies. As Henry Jenkins mentions in his book *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture* (2006), research on fan creativity, online communities, and participatory culture has found its way into many different disciplines such as education, legal studies, anthropology, and philosophy.

The area that is of particular interest to me and one which seems to have avoided most of the spotlight cast on fan communities is the creation of artwork by fans. The same technology that enabled fans to share stories, experiences, and information with one another was also facilitating the sharing of images. Fan artwork, while seemingly not as widespread a phenomenon as fan literature, gained popularity in some of the more visually-intensive objects of fans' affections. One good example of this is video games. And as games became more interactive and allowed players to communicate and play with each other over the internet, the communities that sprung up around these games adopted many forms of fan-generated content, fan art included, to show

their interest and appreciation. Today, massively multiplayer online games (abbreviated as MMOs, MMOGs, or MMORPGs) are practically the embodiment of a community within a virtual space. These communities are special in that not only do the players share a common interest, they share a richly detailed world filled with a wide range of characters and environments to fuel the imaginations of participants. Blizzard Entertainment's World of Warcraft (sometimes abbreviated as WoW) has a very large and active community presence which is encouraged by Blizzard Entertainment who spotlights various community efforts such as fan art and fiction, game guides, player-made movies, custom user interfaces, and WoW-inspired webcomics (Blizzard, 2007). This research focuses on such player-generated content, specifically artwork, in World of Warcraft as a topic that has yet to be investigated covered in depth by researchers of past and present fan communities.

The goal of this research was to look at the role that fan artwork plays in the World of Warcraft gaming community and the relationship it has with groups of people both inside and outside of the game. The core research question behind this study is: **What are the relationships between computer-game-inspired, fan-generated artwork and in-game and out-of-game communities?** There can be any number of reasons for people to produce and view player-made artistic creations but past research into fan communities and online gaming has not revealed what these reasons are. In-game and out-of-game communities refer to the groups of players that come together while playing World of Warcraft and persist even outside of the game environment. In-game groups can be typically be characterized as parties (small and often temporary groups of people who come together as a team during play sessions) or guilds (much larger social structures that encourage persistent relationships among players). Both of these types of groups are supported by in-game mechanics. Some player relationships also extend into everyday life. These are usually real life friends or acquaintances that choose to play the game together but there are also situations where players meet in-game first but are then able to meet in person. The

relationships that I am looking for in this research are the ways that the creation and presence of fan artwork has changed the way that the artists and the consumers of their art both play the game and interact outside of the game. This impact could be represented by players seeking out artists to comment on their art, parties or guilds forming around a popular artist or groups of artists, art being reabsorbed by Blizzard and used within the game, etc.

What I found from reviewing existing literature on fan communities and fan-generated content was that a majority of researchers chose to focus on community dynamics and/or fan-produced literature, particularly as fan communities moved to an online setting where creating and sharing their works became easier. Some other researchers have looked at fan-generated content as a whole, encompassing all art, fiction, games, etc. but within the scope of the research I have reviewed, I have found very little that discusses the impacts of fan artwork. As an expressive exercise, akin to fan fiction but inherently different in its creation and presentation, I want to study the way that fanart is produced and received within a fan community of gamers.

This research was aimed to investigate 3 key areas: players' responses to artists' contributions and where those responses had the most influence; how people feel about fanart; and how many players are aware that it exists and are actively involved in its creation and distribution. By providing a base level of understanding about the role fan artwork plays in the World of Warcraft community, this research was intended to lead to deeper studies into fanart and its effects on community development.

First, this paper will briefly cover past and present research in the area of fan communities and definitions of the idea of fan artwork. Then I will discuss my research question, define all appropriate terminology and cover the theoretical perspective of this research. I will expand upon the methodology for the project and discuss the results of the forum analysis, surveys and interviews. Finally I will talk about the significance of the research and results.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

The intent of this research is to take a close look at the fan communities surrounding massively multiplayer online games (also commonly referred to as MMOs, MMOGs, or MMORPGs), specifically World of Warcraft. These communities are special in that, due to the nature of online gaming, they tend to form strong relationships through a purely digital medium. Because this research focuses on the subjects of online games, communities and fan communities, it is important to look at past research into those areas, which is the goal of this literature review. First I will cover the history of online games, their current iterations, and research about them. Then I will review the concept of community, how that has come to exist online in the form of virtual communities, and some ways of categorizing those communities. Finally I will discuss fan communities, defining them and discussing past research.

2.1 The History of Online Games

The history of video games begins more than 60 years ago and, though the focus of this paper involves the more recent developments of massively multiplayer online games, it is important to briefly look at the games preceding their creation.

Video games were originally conceived and patented by Thomas J. Goldsmith Jr. and Estle Ray Mann in the 1940s but did not truly come into existence until the late '50s and early '60s, when they were released on computers. Since then they have continued to be developed for computers as well as for a wide variety of gaming platforms designed specifically to support them. More recently, and more relevant to the focus of this research, are the *online* video games

that were developed towards the 1970s. Online games were created with the intention of allowing two or more computers to interact over a common network, thereby letting users interact with each other within a game. The first of these was *SpaceWar*, developed by Rick Blomme, which was able to use PLATO (the Programmed Logic for Automatic Teaching Operations network) and enable two users to play together (Ahuna, 2001). These online multiplayer games took many other forms throughout their development: facilitating synchronous or asynchronous communication between players, competitive and cooperative gameplay, and the sharing of user-made game modifications. Eventually a new type of online game emerged, developed specifically to take advantage of persistent network connections between computers.

2.1.1 MUDs

MUDS, or Multi-user Domains/Dungeons, can be considered a natural progression of online games, although they are not necessarily a game (Bartle, 1996). Unlike previous online games they do not actually rely on gameplay mechanics to draw in their audience. They also have a much greater ability to be applied to non-game applications (Bruckman & Resnick, 1995; Curtis & Nichols, 1994; Evard, 1993; Kort). They can be considered the earliest type of *virtual world* (Turkle, 1997a). Through text descriptions, users create one or more characters that they use to interface with the MUD environment. They are also able to socialize with each other and create spaces and objects with which they can interact using more text. In this way a person could choose from a wide variety of environments, many of which do not rely on the traditional gameplay elements that restricted other online games. There are MUDs where users can be a part of worlds inspired by Tolkien, Star Trek, Dungeons and Dragons, all of the above combined, or a world completely of their own creation (Turkle, 1997b). MUDs remained popular through the late '80s and early '90s. In 1994, there were more than 200 sites that were actively running MUDs

(Curtis & Nichols, 1994) and there is still a large MUD presence on the Internet today. However by 1997 a new form of online game had appeared and was growing rapidly in popularity, changing the tradition of primarily text-based MUDs by adopting high quality animated graphics. This was the massively multiplayer online role-playing game.

2.2 MMORPGs

Massively multiplayer online role-playing games easily trace their origins back to MUDs. In fact, drawing a clear line between the two genres can be difficult due to some later MUDs adopting graphical interfaces akin to those available in the newer MMORPGs. However, MMORPGs had definitely moved away from the open-endedness available in their strongly text-based forbearers and replaced it with gameplay elements firmly rooted in role-playing and gaming traditions. The worlds available to players were not only highly detailed graphically, they were persistent, meaning that even when a player logged out the game environment would continue to function unabated, allowing many players to inhabit the same world synchronously and asynchronously.

The game structure of most MMORPGs is akin to traditional pen and paper role-playing games. A player creates a character and chooses various features for it such as class, profession, mental and physical aspects, and a unique name. The player then designs an avatar, meant to represent his or her character, to interact with the world. Depending on the game, avatars can vary greatly in appearance and the abilities they wield (Castronova, 2003). In many games, a player's avatar is a great source of pride because it is the most immediate way of displaying wealth and ability (typically in the form of rare equipment and items) to the game world.

Upon entering the world, the player begins the challenging (and often lengthy) process of leveling up. This is primarily accomplished by completing quests and defeating computer-

controlled enemies. Leveling up is a vital part of playing the game because many MMORPGs offer high level content that can only be reached by characters who are advanced enough. For example, in *World of Warcraft* a player must be at least level 60 to experience roughly half of the content in the game. This is the primary motivation for character development.

2.2.1 History

Massively multiplayer online role-playing games as we know them have existed since 1996 when *Meridian 59* and *The Realm Online* were released as two of the very first MMOs (Castronova, 2003; Steinkuehler). A year later, *Ultima Online* went live and did much to popularize MMORPGs as a new type of game (Cornett, 2004; Day, 2001; Smith, 2004a). Drawing upon storylines and gameplay elements from the previous eight *Ultima* games, *UO* attracted players who enjoyed the previous titles as well as people who were completely new to the series (Parsons, 2005).

Two years after *UO*'s release, Sony Online Entertainment published *EverQuest* which quickly became the most popular MMORPG of its time. When combined with powerful 3D graphics, the gameplay elements derived from *Dungeons & Dragons* and various previous MUDs attracted a wide audience of players. *EverQuest* also encouraged group play due to the difficulty of some of its content. Because it could support more than 1000 players on each server, it was possible to form very large groups of characters to overcome the more difficult quests and adventures present in the game.

Once a market had been established for MMO games, there were a very large number of games released, all hoping to take advantage of this new form of entertainment. There are two large and successful MMORPGs from that first generation worth mentioning: *Lineage* and *Asheron's Call*. *Lineage* was released in 1998 and earned a huge following in Korea, acting in a

similar fashion to *EverQuest* in the United States. *Asheron's Call* was notable in that it did not draw from traditional 'Tolkien-esque' fantasy elements. Instead the developers chose to create their own unique background story for their online world which led to a very new and interesting game experience for players and proved that the current MMORPG craze was not completely reliant on the fantasy fiction of the past.

2.2.2 Current MMORPGs

Presently, there are three big names in the MMOG market. The first of these to be released was *EverQuest 2*, the sequel to the immensely popular MMO game. The sequel updated the graphics and gameplay elements of the first game in an attempt at improving the overall experience. The second main MMORPG of the current generation is *Guild Wars* and it was released by NCSoft who also made the *Lineage* series. *GW* is a unique type of MMORPG in that it does not have a monthly service fee. Instead, once a customer purchases the game they have unlimited access to it. Since the storyline in *Guild Wars* progresses in a way that allows a player to actually complete the game (whereas other games structure quests and achievements in a way that allow players to continue developing their character and never reaching a true end point), NCSoft makes money by releasing new 'chapters' of the game once or twice a year. Also, the level cap within the game is set at 20 which makes leveling up much quicker than in other games. Because of this, NCSoft sought to keep the gameplay interesting by creating a very flexible skill system so that once they hit level 20, players can still try out new combinations of skills that drastically change the way a character plays. It is an interesting approach to the MMORPG concept and it generates a different sort of community dynamic. Finally, the third main MMO and the one on which this research focuses is Blizzard Entertainment's first foray into the MMORPG market, *World of Warcraft*. It quickly became the most popular massively multiplayer game ever

released and it still retains that title, boasting roughly 8.5 million customers worldwide. By attracting so many players to MMORPGs, *World of Warcraft* has drawn a lot of attention from researchers of both games and online spaces (V. H. Chen & Duh, 2007; Chi, 2006; Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell, & Moore, 2006, 2007; Krzywinska, 2006; Lowood, 2006; Mortensen, 2006; Taylor, 2006; Williams et al., 2006). It also has a very large and active community presence which is encouraged by Blizzard Entertainment who spotlights various community efforts such as fan art, game guides, player-made movies, custom user interfaces, and *Warcraft*-inspired webcomics (Blizzard, 2007).

2.3 The Study of MMORPGs

Much research has been done on MMORPGs across various fields. Consalvo and Dutton (2006) divide game studies into two categories: studying the game itself or its audience, however I feel that MMORPG research extends beyond these two simple designations because of studies that overlap both game and audience, as well as others that look closely at the virtual world supported by the game mechanics and players. These overlaps make it difficult to separate MMORPG research by what aspect of the game was being studied. Instead it makes more sense to separate the research by the topics addressed, which is how I structured this review:

2.3.1 Avatar representations and gender studies

The creation of an avatar to interact with a virtual space provides players with a rather unique opportunity. They can represent themselves (as best they can, given the limitations of some MMO games), create something completely new, or amalgamate aspects of themselves and things that they wish they could be (Parsons, 2005). An interesting aspect of this creation process

involves choosing a gender for one's avatar. Given the highly social nature of MMORPGs, many researchers have looked at the motivations behind player choices in avatar design (Damer, Judson, & Dove, 1997; Kolko, 1999; Linderoth, ; Rector, 2006; Schroeder, 2002). To a lesser degree, researchers have also looked at gender-swapping players, who are players who choose avatars of the opposite sex. A majority of this research centers on MUDs, however, without sufficient updated data to form conclusions about MMORPGs (Roberts & Parks, 1999).

2.3.2 Social interactions in MMORPGs

Another very broad category of MMORPG research the social aspects of the games (Ducheneaut & Moore, 2004; Heckel, 2003; Kolo & Baur, 2004; Utz, 2000; Whang & Chang, 2003). Virtual worlds in MMOGs are highly social places and the games are structured to support useful interactions among players. It is this quality that makes the games much more compelling than those structured for solitary play (Bub, 2002).

Smith (2004a) studied conflict in MMORPGs in order to classify various problematic behaviors. After looking at the multiplayer aspects of *EverQuest*, *Age of Kings*, and *Battlefield 1942*, he came up with three categories: cheating, local norm violation and grief play (Smith, 2004a). Cheating is regarded as unfairly using aspects of a game to gain unfair advantages over others. The violation of local norms occurs when a player knowingly acts in a way contrary to the accepted practices in a game. An example of this would be if a player rushed in to take items from a monster that he or she did not help to defeat. In most games, the belief of "to the victor go the spoils" is widely held so any violation of that can distress other players. Grief play is a category of behavior where players enter the game with the intention of disrupting and harassing other players (Foo, 2004; Foo & Koivisto, 2004).

Other researchers study social interactions in games in order to make design recommendations in order to support social activity. An example of this can be found in Ducheneaut and Moore (2004), which looked at player-to-player interaction patterns within *Star Wars Galaxy* and analyzed how they were supported by the game's structure. This allowed for design suggestions to increase the social aspects of the game, such as limiting the macro system so that players are not as able to automate their actions. That would force them to be more involved in what they are doing, increasing the chance that they would interact with other players.

Whang and Chang (2003) surveyed *Lineage* players' lifestyles and how it affected the way they approached the game. Jakobsson and Taylor (2003) argue for the importance of studying social aspects of MMORPGs in order to understand their nature as well as look at the differences in the way a game is represented versus how it is actually played. They took the results of their research and drew some very interesting comparisons between guilds in *EverQuest* and mafia organizations (as popularized by television and fiction) by using terms such as trust, honor, silence, favors, and reputation (Jakobsson & Taylor, 2003). The idea of trust and reputation come up again in Tulathimutte (2006) who proposes an "RS-Tag" system to improve in-game systems that monitor a player's reputation and ability to be trusted. These systems have been exploited in the past in order to artificially represent players and take advantage of others (Tulathimutte, 2006).

2.3.4 Psychology of MMORPGs

Like the study of social interactions within a massively multiplayer game, this is a very broad and popular topic of research. At times it can be difficult to make a distinction between psychological and social aspects of MMORPGs because both areas draw from each other.

Nick Yee, one of the more prolific researchers in the area, has many papers that delve into the social and psychological side of games. He has studied the motivations for people to play MMORPGs (Yee, 2002, 2005, 2006b, 2006d), the ways that MMOGs can blur the distinction of work and play due to the time-consuming nature of skill advancement (Yee, 2006c), and he has also performed a number of studies to collect the demographics of gamers (Yee, 2000, 2001, 2006a).

Other studies have looked at the varying cognitive load of both playing a MMO game and interacting with other players simultaneously (Ang, Zaphiris, & Mahmood, 2007), the compelling qualities of the games and establishing core and peripheral criteria to identify addiction (Charlton & Danforth, 2007), how to determine player types based on behavioral logs (Thawonmas, Ho, & Matsumoto, 2003), and the importance of trust in online games (Smith, 2004b; Tulathimutte, 2006).

2.3.5 MMO Games as learning environments

Another popular area of research is the use of MMORPGs in educational context (Delwiche, 2006; Papargyris & Poulymenakou, 2005; Steinkuehler, 2004). The motivation for this research is to find a way to take the most compelling aspects of massively multiplayer gaming and leverage them to enhance educational materials. Steinkuehler (2004) aims her research at uncovering the precise gameplay and cultural elements of online gaming that make it so involving. Early findings have uncovered ways that players have to learn socially by picking up information by other players around them, the effectiveness of feedback systems (with death being negative feedback and enjoyable experiences representing the positive), and the progression of task complexity and difficulty in order to prolong player engagement. Papargyris and Poulymenakou (2005) also perform similar research within the games *Earth & Beyond* and *EVE*:

The Second Genesis. Using their data they were able to outline the designed and emergent elements that catalyzed skill development within their chosen MMORPGs, which they treated as virtual communities of practice.

As far as actually using MMORPGs in a classroom, Delwiche (2006) discusses using *EverQuest* to teach qualitative research methods and *Second Life* for video game design and criticism. His results are promising. Despite some initial frustration when getting used to gameplay mechanics, students expressed enjoyment in being able to use games in an educational fashion. They also produced quality research, which is another important thing to consider when thinking about massively multiplayer games being introduced into a classroom environment. Delwiche then goes on to describe both the potential dangers of MMORPGs for learning, such as students developing an addiction to the games, and also the ways that game use could be applied to other areas, such as economic studies or journalism.

2.3.6 Economics and business in MMORPGs

One of the qualities of persistent online worlds is that they often support a very large internal economy (Alvisi, 2006; Bilir & Tallahassee, 2006; Castronova, 2002, 2006; Kerr, 2006; Lehdonvirta, 2005). Some games actively support these economies by providing game areas such as auction houses or markets while in others the economies came about through players who saw a need for such a system and worked to facilitate its growth and development. Bilir and Tallahassee (2006) analyzed the markets present in the MMO *Runescape* and were able to apply economic terms and concept to explain their functioning. They also made suggestions about how to tweak certain aspects of the game to support an even more successful and lively economy. It was also interesting to note that, although the range of player ages was roughly 9-15, their

behaviors illustrated that they could understand and react to complex economic stimuli within the game (Bilir & Tallahassee, 2006).

It has even been suggested that player-run businesses within MMO gaming communities could benefit from traditional business techniques, such as Customer Relationship Management systems (Ho, Matsumoto, & Thawonmas, 2003). This illustrates that virtual worlds are slowly being acknowledged as viable environments for business.

2.3.7 Designing MMORPGs

This type of research tends to fall into two categories which, like most categories in MMORPG studies, can overlap in some ways but are useful nonetheless: the design of technology to support the games and content with which to fill the games. Technology to support MMORPGs can come in the form of server architectures (Assiotis & Tzanov, 2006; K. Chen, Huang, Huang, & Lei, 2005; Fritsch, Ritter, & Schiller, 2005), 3D game engines (Lee & Park, 2004), the identification of scalability challenges in MMOG infrastructure (Gil, Tavares, & Roque, 2005), or mind models to effect more convincing NPC behaviors (Lindley & Eladhari, 2005). The design of content tends to address things like storyline choices (Myers, 2006), game features that facilitate community formation (Cornett, 2004; Ducheneaut, Moore, & Nickell, 2004; Koivisto, 2003), or gameplay elements that lead to more enjoyable play experiences (Bartle, 2003).

2.3.8 Communities and group structures within MMORPGs

The final group of online game research looks at ways players and people come together and interact in the game. From their earliest iteration, massively multiplayer games were designed

for players to interact with one another. They provide the means for players to socialize, form groups and work together as well as the motivation for them to do so (Ducheneaut & Moore, 2004). Research in this area looks at how and why groups of people come together, form relationships, communicate, and work together (Koivisto, 2003; Seay, Jerome, & Lee, 2002; Seay, Jerome, Lee, & Kraut, 2004; Siitonen, 2005; Williams et al., 2006).

Siitonen (2005) was very interested in sorting out various types of online gaming communities, however he was forced to acknowledge that MMO communities are far too fluid and diverse to be able to place them into distinct categories. Instead, communities can be distinguished by varied combinations of preferences: the importance of social networks, the importance of joint task-oriented goals, or interest in a certain game. While incomplete, this sets the framework for a more extensive description of communities.

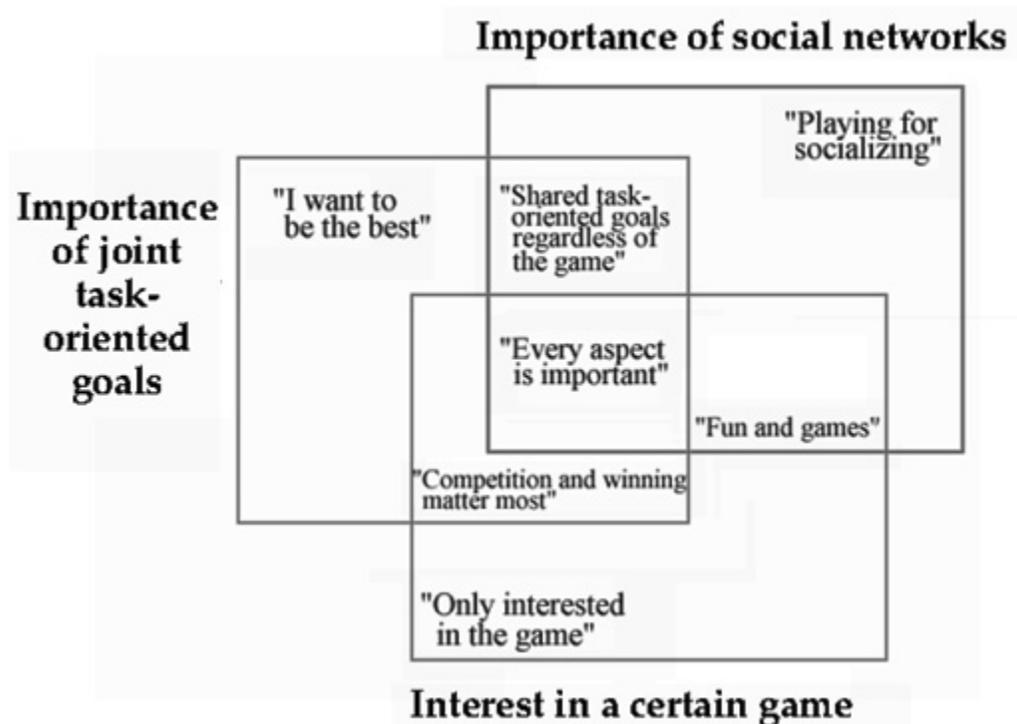


Figure 2-1: Preferences of members of multiplayer communities (Siitonen, 2005).

Most often in massively multiplayer games, the most serious groups come in the form of guilds. Guilds are diverse groups of players who join together, typically under a common name or title, to play and socialize together (Ducheneaut et al., 2007; Seay et al., 2004; Williams et al., 2006). Though sometimes sharing similar traits, it is important to distinguish guilds and game communities. Guilds tend to be smaller and their functions are specifically supported by the game environment (in the form of in-game rosters and private chat rooms) (Ducheneaut et al., 2007). They fall into categories based on primary goals: social, PvP (player vs. player), raid, and role-play. These goals shape the way that the guild functions, for example a raiding guild has to be very organized and coordinated in order to take on the more difficult areas in an MMORPG while a social guild is more focused on simply forming and maintaining relationships in the game (Williams et al., 2006).

This last section of MMORPG research is the area within which I will concentrate. My interest lies in researching the functions of a particular online community associated with a MMOG, and so this next section of the literature review will cover research about traditional and virtual communities.

2.4 Community

Many of the traditional definitions of community focus on members sharing a particular geographic location which serves to facilitate their interactions. The members can have any number of reasons for forming a community, such as common geographies, interests, goals, beliefs, or professions but they are wholly dependent on proximity in order for the community to function. The following sections will go into some of the definitions of community, with the first two examples representing a traditional viewpoint, the second two providing a more modern perspective, followed up by my own definition.

Tönnies (1955) defines two types of communities: *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*.

Gemeinschaft is a community structure where the members are all tightly bound to each other through a variety of relationships. This can be seen as similar to the nostalgic views of small town life, where everyone knows each other because of mutual friendship and dependence (Bell, 2001b). Basically it is a smaller group of people all sharing strong ties with one another; in contrast with *Gesellschaft*, which is where a larger group of people share many weak ties with each other as in a large city. In this case, the relationships between people are shallow due to a fast paced and ever-changing environment but that same environment allows the formation of a large number of these relationships.

Gusfield (1975) defines community in two ways: as a territorial and geographical notion (for example a neighborhood, town or city), or as a description of human relationships, disregarding location completely. He does mention that the two definitions are not mutually exclusive, though, seeing as how modern society has shown a tendency to form communities based on commonalities other than geography.

More recently developed is the idea of a community of interest (Fischer, 2001; Lazar & Preece, 1998; Rheingold, 2000). Though often associated with virtual communities, the term was not originally coined to describe them. Rather, they came about with the development of cheaper and more reliable forms of transportation and communication, which had the effect of making the world seem smaller, relatively, sometimes referred to as “time-space compression” (Harvey, 1989). This served to weaken the geographical limitations of communities thereby allowing them to encompass a greater variety of people. With the diversity achieved by drawing from many different locations, communities could gather enough members to form around ideas or activities whereas before they might not have been able to generate sufficient interest.

Milne (2004) comes to define community as “a social technology for bonding people together through shared characteristics that leads to a sense of belonging”. He chooses to use the

word technology in order to emphasize what he considers the most important aspect of community: that the formation of one is a *way* (or a “how” as he calls it) of creating a sense of belonging in a group of people.

In my own mind, I see a community as a group of people with something in common that distinguishes them from non-members. This “something” can be any number of traits or interests, but it is sufficient to motivate the members to communicate and share with one another. Then through the process of communication and sharing the community develops its own norms and customs that attribute a sense of identity and belonging to its members.

2.5 Online or virtual communities

Online or virtual communities have a tradition of being difficult to define. Part of the reason for this is that they tend to overlap with the idea of a community of interest, mentioned in the last section, and because they are often confused with subcultures, market segments, or cultures of compatible consumption (Bell, 2001a).

To think about online virtual communities, Aoki (1994) uses a definition adapted from the idea of “nonplace communities” which were discussed by Webber (1964) as communities that do not suffer the geographical limitations of the past. In this case they can be called communities of *accessibility*, meaning that geographical distance no longer factors into community operations the same way in which it used to. Aoki goes on to describe online communities as falling into three main categories. In the first, members know each other and have met in person but use computer-mediated communication to streamline routine interactions. In the second, the members have not necessarily met face-to-face but they have common interests which motivate them to communicate digitally using whatever networks are available to them. He also mentions a third type of online community: communities based around anonymity. These online groups require

the nameless quality of the Internet for self-expression (Aoki, 1994; Chester & Gwynne, 1998; Singer, 1996). In this case, it is not possible for members to truly know one another in a personal manner; instead they can only come to know the personalities put forth by an individual. In this way, Aoki organizes communities by their relation to physical communities: they overlap completely, they overlap slightly, or they do not overlap at all.

Hill, Stead, et al. (1995) define a virtual community as a conjunction of the definitions of its component words, *virtual* meaning “in essence or effect only” and *community* meaning “a group of people who share characteristics and interact”. In this case they are counting interactions as being purely physical because the definition they give is that virtual communities are groups where members can affect each other without interacting. Personally, I do not feel that it is appropriate to dismiss computer-mediated communications as not being actual interactions but a lot of early research focused on the lack of face-to-face, personal contact in virtual environments.

Porter (2004) describes an online or virtual community as a grouping of individuals or business partners who all hold a shared interest. This interest leads them to interact in a variety of ways and, in a virtual community, a good portion of those interactions are facilitated by technology. She chose this definition because it highlights components of other definitions put forth in that it includes interacting groups of people, a shared interest, and a form of technology acting as a medium for communication and interaction.

Milne (2004) defines virtual communities according to their differences from geographic or traditional communities. His idea is that geographic communities have physical aspects that work to shape and define them, so that a person can be a member simply through their physical proximity rather than their actions. Online communities, on the other hand, are founded on the basis of interactions among members.

My definition of an online community is very similar to my definition of community presented in the previous section. The distinction lies in the way that an online community forms.

It is still a group of people with a certain commonality that drives them to open up channels of communication amongst members, but in the case of an online community that communication is computer-mediated. Bell (2001a) raises a very good point about virtual communities with which I agree; beyond simple socializing, communities need to be active and adaptive in their lifetime. The simple process of communicating over the Internet about a point of interest does not form a community. Something like that can be more accurately defined as a subculture. Instead a community is formed through the creation and application of social codes or norms; the ways that members decide to conduct themselves and run the community.

2.5.1 Types of virtual communities

There have been numerous attempts to categorize virtual communities according some of their various aspects: the technology facilitating their creation (Döring, 1997; Preece, 2000; Stanoevska-Slabeva, 2002), whether they exist in primarily virtual or physical spaces (Aoki, 1994; Virnoche & Marx, 1997), the community's stated purpose (Krishnamurthy, 2003), or the psychological needs that are fulfilled by the community (Armstrong & Hagel Iii, 1995; Bruckman, 1996; Döring, 1997). While generally appropriate for the field studying the communities, none of these proposed classifications have been able to provide an overarching typology for them.

This was accomplished by Markus (2002), who characterizes online communities by their orientation; social, professional, and commercial. This manages to successfully cover a wide variety of communities.

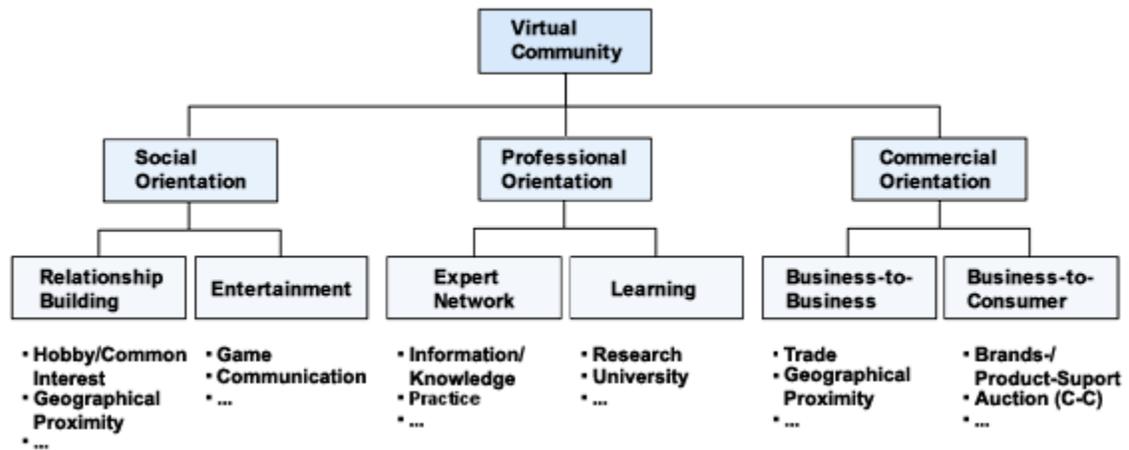


Figure 2-2: One suggested typology of virtual communities. (Markus, 2002)

Markus' classification scheme was later improved upon by Constance Porter. Porter (2004) proposes a multi-tiered classification that takes into account both how a community was established and what sort of relationships it supports. This is a slight improvement upon Markus' scheme because of the use of organization-sponsored communities, as opposed to the idea of commercial orientation. The difference is that an organization-sponsored community takes into account communities sponsored by non-profit organizations or government agencies.

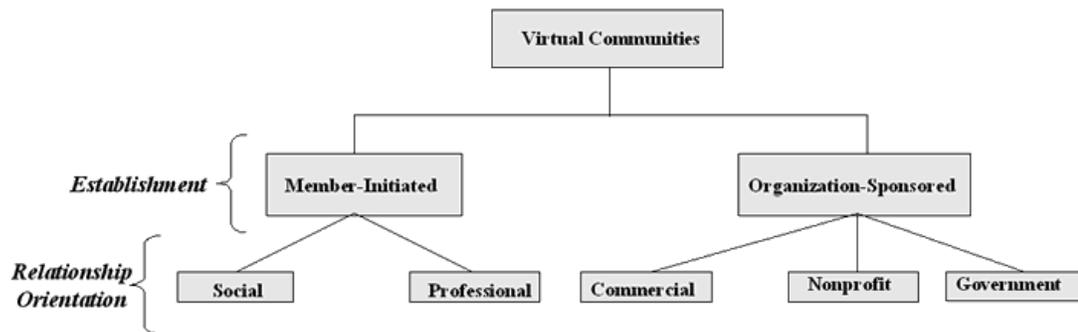


Figure 2-3: Another typology of virtual communities based on Markus'. (Porter, 2004).

This classification goes hand in hand with Porter's definition of virtual communities, mentioned earlier, as a group of individuals or business partners all sharing a particular interest and interacting in a significant way using various types of technology.

2.6 Fan communities

A fan community is one form of a community of interest, where the thing that separates members and non-members is their shared attraction to a particular topic. This topic can be any of a wide range of things: celebrities, music groups, television shows, literature, sport teams, games, etc. The academic definition of a "fan" has been as difficult to pin down as the definition of "online community". Fandom can be an expressed interest in a topic where it becomes a small part of someone's identity (as in "Oh, I've seen that show a couple of times now and really enjoyed it. I'm a big fan.") or it can take on a more cult-like status where it becomes one of the primary ways a person defines them self (drawing on 'fan' being a derivative of the word 'fanatic'). For the purpose of this research, I am defining a fan as someone with enough of an interest in something (be it person, show, game, etc.) that it leads them to congregate with other people having the same interest. It is this level of fandom that leads to community formation. Within the two typologies mentioned previously, fan communities can be described as socially-oriented and relationship building (Markus) or member-initiated and social (Porter). Though they thrive in both the physical world and in digital mediums, increasingly widespread access to the Internet has allowed fans all over the world to connect in new ways (Prandstaller, 2003).

Most studies of fan communities tend to focus on member behaviors and community functions (Baym, 2000; Burnett, Dickey, Kazmer, & Chudoba, 2003; Costello & Moore, 2007; Cromer, 2000; Hills, 2002; Horwitz, 2006; Howell, ; Prandstaller, 2003). However, Jenkins (1992) makes the important observation that fan communities are not solely based on the

consumption of pre-existing texts. These communities create a wide variety of texts and artwork, particularly in an online setting where it is generally easier to share these creations with other fans. Bearing this in mind, there have been studies that look at fan creations, specifically literature and fiction (Bacon-Smith, 1992; Jenkins, 1992; Lancaster, 2001). These studies use literary analysis to see how fans are reinterpreting the objects of their interest as a way to form their own culture.

Only in one paper did I find a study concerned specifically with fan-generated artwork (van der Moolen, 2007). The research was founded on the basis that fanart creates an interesting legal situation, given that Blizzard Entertainment holds intellectual property rights to the visual style of the World of Warcraft which is often appropriated and re-imagined by fan artists. Though the subject of this paper does not translate to the research being performed here, van der Moolen did include some limited research into player motivations for creating fan artwork as she mentions an interview with a fan artist featured on the European version of Blizzard's official World of Warcraft site. She also mentions a useful description for the concept of emergent gameplay which is defined as "[...] the creative use of a game by players, bringing forth behaviours that emerge from the interaction with the game mechanics" (Timmer, 2006). This includes behaviors both in and outside of the game environment; therefore the creation of fan artwork can be considered part of it. Emergent gameplay shows that the players of the game are actively involved in negotiating the content provided to them by the game developers and finding new ways to consume it.

2.7 Critiques of Existing Research

As shown, massively multiplayer online games have been the subject of a wide variety of research in almost all phases of their development. Given their current and growing popularity it is almost certain that researchers will continue to use them as platforms for study.

One topic missed by much of the current research is the reflection of community interactions in the game environment. With MMORPGs like World of Warcraft that have a very strong community presence, how does that affect the way that players are treated in the game? Does the popularity generated by a highly rated video or piece of fanart translate to increased notoriety while playing World of Warcraft? What other effects do fan-generated content have on communities both in-game and out?

Also after reviewing existing literature on fandom it seems that most researchers choose to focus on a particular fan community; fan-generated content as a whole, encompassing all art, fiction, games, etc; or they look specifically at fan fiction. I have found very little that discusses the impacts of fan artwork on a community. As an expressive exercise, akin to fan fiction but inherently different in its creation and presentation, I wanted to study the way that fanart is produced and received within a fan community.

Chapter 3

Methodology

The guiding question for this research study is: “What are the relationships between computer-game-inspired, fan-generated artwork and in-game and out-of-game communities?”

There are four parts to this question that bear further definition in order to understand the scope of the research. Since some of the terms build off of each other I will define them in this order: computer game, fan-generated artwork, in-game/out-of-game communities, and measurable impact.

3.0.1 Computer games

The first phrase that requires explanation is ‘computer games’. Though computer games of all sorts have inspired various forms of artwork since their inception, this research is particularly focused on the type of games that have a large online community presence. These are generally massively multiplayer games (MMOGs), which garner sizeable community followings because of their highly interactive and internet-based nature. These two things spur the formation of online communities of interest, allowing fans of the game to come together not only to share their common enjoyment of the game but also to share other aspects of their lives. Many MMOs boast huge online communities that have moved beyond simply discussing the games. Given the sizeable time commitment of MMOs, they are often treated as a viable social activity and it is that social aspect that pushes people to create a community around it. The specific MMO that I am looking at in this research is the World of Warcraft. One of the reasons I chose this game because it is currently the largest massively multiplayer game in existence and it is well-known for having

a very active community of followers, particularly in the official forums¹. The other reason that I chose Warcraft for this research is because its sizeable community of followers is known for its artistic talent. The creators of the game, Blizzard Entertainment, support many of the artistic endeavors by fans by holding monthly contests that encourage artists to submit their work, to be displayed in the Fan Art Section² of the web site. They accept many forms of fan submissions, from very serious artistic works to light-hearted comical portrayals of the Warcraft universe.

3.0.2 Fan artwork

The next concept that requires explanation is fan artwork. Fan artwork is a specific type of fan-generated content. Fan-generated content can take any number of forms, such as literature, video, artwork, and in the special case of certain video games it can even be programmed software or “addons” that modify the way a game is played. Fan artwork is any form of visual art that draws its inspiration from characters, environments, and stories within the object of fandom. While in some areas works of literature fall under the heading of art, that particular classification does not apply to this research. Existing fan-centric research has chosen to treat literature as a separate topic and, given the design of this research, it is preferable to draw distinctions between various types of fan-generated content. Fan artwork covers a wide array of mediums, from two

¹ The official forums are discussion boards created and moderated by Blizzard Entertainment on the World of Warcraft web site: <http://www.worldofwarcraft.com>. There are approximately 35 forums that serve such purposes as gameplay discussion, tech support, customer service, guild relations, suggestions, and general discussion. These forums are very popular because the game developers monitor the discussions, or at least some portion of them, and so it represents a way for players to make their voices heard.

² The Fan Art Section of worldofwarcraft.com and blizzard.com hosts a number of images created and submitted by fan artists. They are separated into two galleries, one for general fanart and the other for comics. The comics are generally humorous interpretations of the Warcraft universe and are submitted and displayed on a monthly schedule, as each month Blizzard chooses one winner to receive a signed copy of the game and a gift card for two free months of play time.

dimensional sketches and paintings (traditionally or digitally created, and sometimes a mixture of both) to fully three dimensional works (sculptures and computer-generated 3D models).

For the purposes of this research, I have chosen not to include fan videos and machinima³ under the heading of fanart. Far from being a judgment of merit, this is instead because videos are created, experienced, and shared differently in a fan community than images. These differences, while interesting in and of themselves, are not immediately applicable to fan artwork and so it seemed logical to set aside videos. In the future, I would like to look at the role of machinima within video games as a whole since it is a fascinating form of emergent entertainment within games and virtual worlds.

3.0.3 Communities, in-game & out-of-game

In-game and out-of-game communities refer to the groups of players that come together while playing World of Warcraft and persist even outside of the game environment. In-game groups can be typically be characterized as parties (small and often temporary groups of people who come together as a team during play sessions) or guilds (much larger social structures that encourage persistent relationships among players). Both of these types of groups are supported by in-game mechanics. Parties can consist of up to five players and, once joined, each party member can communicate openly with his or her group using a special party-specific chat room. Members can also easily view status information for each group member, such as health, which is necessary for the smooth functioning of the group. Guilds must have a minimum of 9 players in order to be created. Like the party system, they have a special chat that allows all guild members to communicate amongst themselves. In addition, there is also a ranking system applied to members

³ Machinima is a term that describes movies and 3D animated features that utilize in-game modeling engines to create films, as opposed to using traditional 3D animation software.

that allows guild leaders to promote/demote players based on their behavior and achievements, the ability to design a special tabard (a vest) decorated with the guild symbol, and guild members can easily find each other by viewing a roster of players or looking for special indicators on the in-game map. Guilds are the most likely type of groups to extend into out-of-game environments, such as forums. In fact many large and active guilds have their own forums for their members to use in addition to the public forums provided by Blizzard Entertainment. Some player relationships also extend into everyday life. These are usually real life friends or acquaintances that choose to play the game together but there are also situations where players meet in-game but are then able to meet in person.

3.0.4 Relationships

Finally, the relationships that I am looking for in this research are the ways that the creation and presence of fan artwork has changed the way that the artists and the consumers of their art both play the game and interact outside of the game. This impact could be represented by players seeking out artists to comment on their art, parties or guilds forming around a popular artist or groups of artists, art being reabsorbed by Blizzard and used within the game, etc. The lack of existing research covering fan-generated art limits the possibilities that I can list here because my own research is going to have to uncover them but the following is a listing of some of the potential relationships that I have predicted:

3.1 Anticipated Relationships

3.1.1 Art/artist ↔ Game/developer (Blizzard Entertainment)

One of the reasons that I chose World of Warcraft to conduct this study is because of the sizeable fan community and fanart collection. I believe that the size of this collection is in part due to the actions of Blizzard Entertainment in encouraging artists to submit their work to World of Warcraft's main website. This has been a common theme with Blizzard Entertainment across many of their past games, though World of Warcraft is their only massively multiplayer game and so it commands the largest and most active following of people. Because the fan artists are encouraged by the developers, there exists a relationship between them and the artists. Blizzard determines what fanart gets displayed on their web sites through their submission policy, thereby maintaining a level of control over what artwork can be associated with them. One of the goals of this research was to explore what this control means to the fan artists as well as identify any other influences that they feel from Blizzard.

3.1.2 Art/artist ↔ Art-consumers & gamers

This is the relationship that lies at the heart of this study. From the beginning, my goal has been to study how fan-generated artwork affects communities of people who create, view, request, and share it. In this case it felt important to differentiate between the people who simply view the art and those who go so far as to request it. For myself, the difference speaks of varying levels of commitment to fan-generated art or possibly of how fans see themselves in a community, whether they can be the person who asks for the artwork rather than someone who passively observes from the background. The distinctions were of interest and they are some of the items addressed in the research.

3.1.3 Game ↔ Art & artists

The game itself has an obvious effect on the artwork produced simply because it is providing the inspirations for it. Fan-generated content is the result of a fan interpreting the material presented to them and World of Warcraft is providing the characters, environments, storyline, and even the art-style that fuels that interpretation. I think that the influences of the art-style will be a very interesting aspect to this research because Blizzard Entertainment has chosen a distinct style to differentiate it from its competitors. One of the ways this decision can affect the artists is by potentially limiting fan artwork to emulations of this style. This is very dependent on each artist, as there are many pictures in Blizzard's Fanart gallery that do not match the style. It is also possible that fan-generated art could have an effect on the game, being reabsorbed and implemented by Blizzard, but that remains to be seen. I am aware of fan-generated efforts that were implemented in the game but those were software "addons" and not artwork.

3.1.4 Communities (Art, Game, Social)

Within the World of Warcraft community, there are three sub communities of interest to this research: those involved with art, the game itself, and the social side of Warcraft. None of these communities can truly be considered distinct from each other but it is likely that being a member of each of the communities has some influence on the players. My expectation was that the art communities would be a bit exclusive, in that a person has to be an artist in order to participate, while the art viewers would be spread across the gaming and social communities.

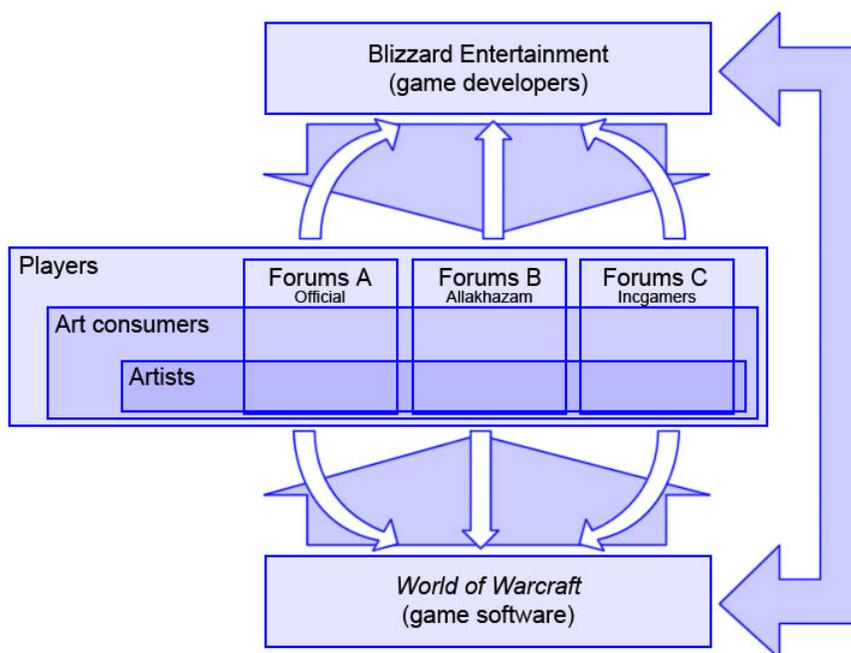


Figure 3-1: An overview of the groups involved in this study and my assumptions about their relationships.

This figure illustrates my initial assumptions about the groups of people that are involved in this research area as well as the possible relationships between them. The four main entities are Blizzard’s development staff, the game software, and the three forums that I chose to study. Horizontally overlaying those forums are the three groups of people into which the members fit. The ‘players’ category encompasses all of the members, the ‘art consumers’ category represents a sub community within the forums whose members seek out fan-generated artwork, and ‘artists’ are the World of Warcraft players creating artwork within the community. The reason for the overlapping rectangles representing these three groups is to show that art consumers and artists are still a part of the player community, and all of them are represented in each of the forums within this study.

The vertical arrangement of objects in this diagram shows my assumptions about the various influences that are in effect within my research. The two biggest influences on the players using the forums, shown as the large arrows, are Blizzard Entertainment and the game software.

The game garners influence because it provides the material for fan artists to interpret and re- envision when creating their artwork. Blizzard Entertainment also has a lot influence because of their efforts to encourage fans in their artwork. In order for artwork to be displayed on Blizzard's main site, it has to conform to a number of specifications before it will be accepted. Also, as the owners of the characters and environments used in the game, Blizzard had the right to demand that artwork be taken off of other gallery sites if they decide that it is not an appropriate portrayal of their intellectual property. In this way, the developers are able to police the work of fan artists however they deem necessary. The large two-headed arrow on the right side of the diagram represents the influence of Blizzard on the game and vice versa. While the power of the developers over the game software should be clear, the game's influence on the developers comes in the form of player actions within World of Warcraft. Things ranging from the exploitation of software glitches to inappropriate social interaction force Blizzard to take action and modify the game to fix these problems. Finally, the smaller arrows represent the influence that the forum communities have on the game and the developers. These influences are one of the areas that will be explored more thoroughly in this research but, within the actor-network view of the social shaping of technology, I am assuming that the relationship between these groups cannot operate in only one direction.

3.2 Theoretical perspective

The guiding theoretical perspective for this research follows a three-layered approach, utilizing each layer for different aspects of the theories and approaches that are useful to this project.

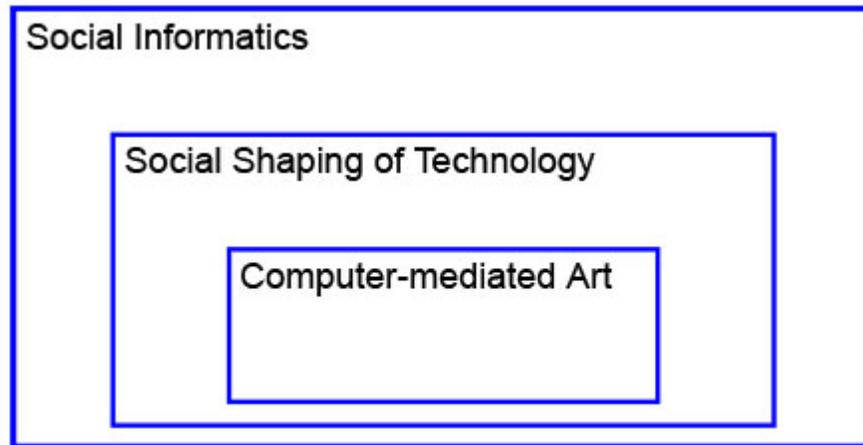


Figure 3-2: The layered theoretical approach to studying fanart communities.

3.2.1 Social informatics perspective

“Social Informatics (SI) refers to the body of research and study that examines social aspects of computerization, including the roles of information technology in social and organizational change, the uses of information technologies in social contexts, and the ways that the social organization of information technologies is influenced by social forces and social practices” (Kling).

Social informatics was chosen as an overarching view for this research because of two very important aspects. One, it is a trans-disciplinary, intellectual framework (Sawyer, 2005) which is important because this research falls between several disciplines, drawing from each but never managing to squeeze into a single one. Second, social informatics research embraces the ensemble or web view of technology, in which neither technology nor social-context is “black boxed” (Orlikowski & Iacono, 2001). The avoidance of deterministic frameworks is essential to this research since I will be looking at a combination of individuals (gamer artists and art viewers), technologies (the World of Warcraft software, graphic design programs, and the ICT that facilitates the distribution of artwork and its discussion) and communities (art, game, and social-oriented groups of players).

3.2.2 Social shaping of technology

“The SST perspective highlights that the material characteristics and actions of any technology are shaped by the social actions of the designers, the specific uses of that technology and the evolving patterns of use over time” (Tapia, 2006).

The social shaping of technology (SST) approach expands on the base laid by social informatics. Similar to social informatics, SST is structured to avoid deterministic views of social or technological influences. Because it is such a broad view of the sociology of technology, there are numerous approaches that one can take to using SST. For this research I will be utilizing the actor-network approach, which does not privilege any type of influence when discussing the development of a technology. People, technologies and social phenomena are all described as actors, thereby homogenizing them enough that we no longer focus on them and can instead study the relationships that exist between them.

The ability to seek out the relationships that exist between elements of the Warcraft fan community is the reason I am using SST in my research. In order to study the relationships between fan-generated artwork and in-game and out-of-game communities in World of Warcraft, I have to be able to acknowledge the influences that are at work but also look beyond them to see how they form relationships with each other.

3.2.3 Computer-mediated artwork

Computer-mediated artwork (CMA) is a term that I have adopted in order to best describe how I approach artwork in this research and how that artwork is managed in a primarily virtual community. It is intended to encompass the manner in which recent technologies have affected traditional art. The base for CMA originates from research in the field of computer-mediated communication (CMC) which not only studies informational exchanges across computer

networks but also looks deeply at the social effects supported by the communication technologies facilitated by computers.

By adopting this mindset, CMA goes beyond simply discussing analogue and digital means of artistic creations. It delves into the ways that computer technology has changed the ways that artists and other involved parties create, distribute, view, and discussing art. This term is very applicable in fan communities which have expanded naturally into virtual environments. Because of their online setting, the media that is produced within the community has to work its way into becoming part of the digital locale and, while this does not necessarily limit the inclusion of traditional media, it definitely encourages art creation facilitated by computers.

Chapter 4

Research Design

One of the popular reasons for studying MMOs is the large populations contained in a game environment. Although the requirement of most graphical environments that all users don an avatar does not allow a researcher to invisibly (naturally) observe player actions, they can still passively study many interactions. Within World of Warcraft, these interactions come in three main forms: game actions, emotes (expressive in-game animations), and text chat. There has also been the recent addition of voice chat, but that remains private to the participants in the chat channel and, as such, is unobservable by the researcher.

In the case of my own research, though, the game environment was not nearly as useful as the forum communities that exist outside of the game. A significant portion of the study data came from this source. I made the decision because the game environment does not provide the means to have lengthy and persistent discussions, which affects the topics and seriousness of conversations. A game as complex and highly-populated as World of Warcraft pushes many players to utilize forums so that they can engage in more in-depth dialogues about the game itself as well as a variety of other subjects. The forums not only allow the persistence necessary for meaningful conversation but also the linking of other websites, images, and movies, something impossible to do within the in-game chat.

The process of researching a massively multiplayer online game leads to the necessary intersection of various methodologies. Though it can easily be seen as a way of performing observations on a given community, studying MMOs also calls for the inclusion of significant amounts of content and text analysis. This is because many of the interactions in a graphical online space are naturally represented as text, not to mention the player communities that also

extend to online forums. It is only through the full analysis of this text that a researcher can observe the individuals acting in online environments.

Because I did not have a strong base of literature about fan artwork, I chose to do the forum analysis first in order to get an idea of how people were discussing and sharing fanart in the most readily available medium. Forums are easily accessible and usually provide a good base of people with whom players can communicate about any manner of topics. The official World of Warcraft forums seemed to be the most logical destination for new players looking for any sort of information on the game and about the game. The other forums chosen were also useful sources of information about the game but they also had a variety of forums targeted at the more social aspects of gaming which would be more conducive to discussions about fanart. The forum analysis provided me with information that was used to formulate the survey and once I had finished looking at the forums and collecting survey data, I began the semi-structured interviews.

4.1 Online Content Analysis

Content analysis made up a large portion of this research study. In a qualitative sense, content analysis refers to analysis of communication in many different forms. They can range from straight text, to voice communications, to images. It can be very useful in finding patterns within groups of data and documents (Stemler, 2001; Stemler & Bebell, 1999) which is why I chose it, since I began my research by studying forum communities. I chose three of the largest World of Warcraft discussion forums and searched for any mention of fan-generated artwork. Forum threads in three main sites were collected and analyzed:

The Official World of Warcraft forums (<http://forums.worldofwarcraft.com/>)

These are the forums provided to players by Blizzard Entertainment and they make up one of the most popular discussion groups for the game. Also, being the official forums, they are

frequented by Blizzard employees and game developers, making this one of the few sites where players can obtain information and opinions from game staff. The level of forum activity for this site is not available to members for tracking but as the official forums of World of Warcraft they were an obvious and necessary inclusion in this study.

Allakhazam's Magical Realm (<http://wow.allakhazam.com/>)

This site hosts a wide variety of information about the game: categorizing quests, enemies/boss characters, map data, character class descriptions, and more. They also provide forums for a number of popular MMORPGs. For World of Warcraft, they have 13 boards: General Discussion, Trade Discussion, Horde, Alliance, and the rest are specific to each character class. The General Discussion board is for users of the web site to talk about information on the site or about the game and, as such, was the most applicable to this study. The two faction-specific boards, Horde/Alliance, also proved to be decent sources for fanart discussions.

The General Discussion board's activity level is one of the highest that I have seen, averaging 1433 new topics and 39145 new posts per month and the inclusion of the Horde and Alliance forums, Allakhazam averages 1570 topics and 41000 posts each month.

The Unofficial World of Warcraft Site (<http://wow.incgamers.com/>)

Incgamers is a company that runs a number of specialist gaming websites. Their World of Warcraft site offers a similar assortment of information to Allakhazam's site. They have more extensive forums, covering topics such as community, guild, professions, off topic, technical help, and fan fiction. Though the activity level of the Community board seems low, relative to Allakhazam, with 144 new topics and 2117 new posts per month, this can be attributed this to the fact that Incgamers has 37 forums, almost three times as many as Allakhazam, which means that activity is unevenly distributed among the topic-specific boards.

The forum topics were collected, saved and organized according to their main focuses, as will be explained in the Data section.

4.2 Surveys

The surveys were distributed across several World of Warcraft themed sites and were aimed at collecting demographic data about the players who participate in fanart communities as well as general information and opinions about those communities. The survey consisted of twenty three questions, many of which asked participants to pick from a range of choices in order to express things like the frequency with which they view fanart or the degree to which various factors affect a fan community. It also provided me with a means to obtain interview participants by identifying people who were active in fan communities and giving them the option to be contacted for further discussions.

4.3 Semi-structured Interviews

The interviews served as a follow up to both the surveys and content analysis and the interview guide was written using the first round of data received from those sources. The people to be interviewed were gathered through the survey and independent research on the internet. The survey respondents provided a varied audience, all of whom were at least players of World of Warcraft. The internet research was done in order to locate people who might not be exposed to the forums used to distribute the surveys. Examples of these types of people are professional artists, fanart site webmasters, and employees of Blizzard Entertainment. Through email contact, I was able to recruit some types of interviewees that otherwise would have been unavailable to me given my previous plans to only take persons who responded to the survey.

Conducting the interviews was done with the use of an interview guide, which served to keep the interview on track but it did not represent a rigid structure that needed to be followed. I made it clear to each interviewee that we could stop at any point in order for them to explain

something further or ask me questions for their own benefit. I originally listed each interview as taking 30-45 minutes, as an incentive to keep conversations moving and to stay on target with the discussions but I found most people that I interviewed were more than willing to talk longer. This was extremely beneficial because I discovered that many off-topic comments gave me more insight into people's reasons for creating and viewing fan-generated artwork. With only the information petitioned from the interview guide, these insights might have been lost.

4.4 Qualitative & interpretive justification

As previously stated, there is an insufficient amount of literature concerning fan artwork in the context of online communities on which to base this research. This leaves me unable to reach a clear understanding of how communities produce and react to fan artwork or the reasons behind its existence. Without this base of information a quantitative research methodology is inappropriate. Collecting data about how much fanart is produced and how many people access and share it could reveal certain things about the community but I do not think it could uncover such personal information as the motivations of World of Warcraft players. By adopting a qualitative and interpretive point of view I am trying to collect data that will allow me to explore the relationships between the interested parties surrounding fan artwork based around MMORPGs. The reasons for and effects of creation and consumption of fan artwork is highly dependent on the individual performing these actions. To this end, an interpretive epistemology is appropriate to this research particularly when looking at fan-generated content as part of emergent behavior in players. If fan artwork is one of the ways that a person understands and responds to the object of their interests, then an interpretive point of view will allow me to take into account the subjective nature of the data I gather.

Chapter 5

Data

5.1 Forums

This section consists of data gathered through passively observing forum discussions. The data was gathered over the course of 4 months from three main World of Warcraft forum sites:

1. Blizzard's World of Warcraft boards (<http://forums.worldofwarcraft.com>)
2. Incgamers (<http://wow.incgamers.com>)
3. Allakhazam's Magical Realm (<http://wow.allakhazam.com>).

Using the search features provided by each website as well as manual searching and browsing, I found 49 instances of discussions about various aspects of fan artwork, containing approximately 2777 posts. Each of these 49 instances is referring to a forum thread specifically created about fanart or a related topic. These typically consist of the creator posting a discussion point, which can be accompanied by related artwork though it isn't necessary, that was then followed up with posts by other forum members. In the other instances, an existing forum thread about a non art-related subject contained a subdiscussion related to fanart or fan-generated content in some way. In these cases the discussion was contained to a smaller number of posts than the total amount in the thread and inevitably gave way to the original conversation topic.

Over the course of the observations, the majority of topics discussing fanart fit into three groups and so the forum posts have been divided up into three categories intended to describe the origins of the forum discussions; what the intention of the topic was meant to be upon its creation. The groups are outlined in the following sections. Each contains a brief description of the

category, subsections summarizing major themes within the forum discussions, and relevant artwork and direct quotations.

5.1.1 “Hey, everybody!” (General Sharing and Inquiries)

The first group, general sharing and inquiries (“Hey, everybody!”), was the most common type of forum post related to fan-generated art, having 36 topics. Within this grouping there were many subcategories into which the topics could be divided, such as posting fanart for appreciation, advertising the services of an artist willing to take commissions, alerting the forum to updates on Blizzard’s Fan Art Program site, or requesting feedback on an individual artist’s work. The biggest differentiating factor among all of these subcategories was whether the original poster was an artist (or considered themselves an artist) or not. When the person creating the topic is an artist, the subjects of the post tend to be:

5.1.1.1 Advertisements for commissions

Topic: “Professional Quality Character Artwork for MMO Gamers!”

A professional comic book artist, Bob Rivard, was offering his services to do commissions of World of Warcraft characters. Though the URL he posted at the time is no longer working, his personal site contains some examples of his work: <http://www.bobrivard.com/>. He received almost all positive feedback with a couple of people complaining about the prices. Commission prices certainly do separate professional artists from most fan artists. Funnily, this was addressed more by some of the members of the message board than by Bob himself.

“I dropped a few Benjamin’s on the last package I got (portrait and signature art), so I feel like your prices are completely fair for custom work.”

“Your prices are definitely fair, I’m just poor. Best of luck to you.”

“If you want something for \$30, go commission some anime from DeviantArt or whatever. Think about how much time goes into creating artwork of this standard. Prices are more than reasonable in my opinion. :)”

The discussion also strayed into some questions about the job of being a freelance artist, which revealed not only a general interest in the profession but also the presence of another would-be-artist looking to become involved in a similar venture.



Image 5-1: One sample of Bob Rivard’s World of Warcraft commission art.

5.1.1.2 Requests for feedback

Topic: “To fan art or not”

This artist posted their own work in the hopes of getting feedback before trying to submit their work to Blizzard’s Fan Art Program. The responses were mostly supportive but the artist began to have second thoughts about submitting the picture when presented with some constructive criticism by another forum member, who said “It is pretty much up to the standard of fan art that Blizzard publishes. I would reframe it like this, because the breasts are misplaced and misshaped...seriously. Live drawing classes for the win.”

As the artist seemed to lose confidence about the piece, extended discussions about its merits filled the topic, some simply pushing to submit the picture to Blizzard and others trying to find other ways of stating the criticism to put it in a better light.

In the end, the artist revised the picture according to some suggestions but the forum thread seemed to end on a sour note as he/she stated that they would not be working on any World of Warcraft fanart in the future, following a few snarky comments at the original critic.

5.1.1.3 Just displaying art

Topic: “Har Har.... now I am famous...”

An artist (actually the same artist who provided the constructive criticisms in the last example) posting the link to a piece of art that was recently added to Blizzard’s Fan Art Program. This is understandably a point of great pride for a fan artist because it is akin to a direct acknowledgment from Blizzard Entertainment. The fact that players can look forward to such positive feedback is one of the reasons that the fanart community within the World of Warcraft is so strong.



Image 5-2: The artwork of a warlock and minion submitted to Blizzard’s fanart site.

In the instances where forum topics were started by people who did not identify themselves as artists, the majority were meant to display art that the person found interesting. The form of art being displayed varied from sketches and paintings, cartoons and comics, to movies and machinima.

5.1.2 “Hey, Blizzard!” (Solicitations for the Attention of Game Staff)

The second group, soliciting the attention of the game staff, does not contain nearly as many topics as the previous category but it indicates a very interesting role for fanart and fan-generated content. In 4 of the 6 threads included in this group, a person used fan-generated art as an example for Blizzard to follow or as a substitute for an artistic decision implemented in the game.

5.1.2.1 Substitutions

Topic: Unshackle the Artists

A forum topic featuring fan-made 3D models as a replacement for current in-game models used for the druid character class. This was not the first time the researcher encountered a similar discussion on World of Warcraft forums. Druid characters have the unique ability to shapeshift into different forms that provide them with various abilities. The perceived “problem” with this game mechanic is that from the time a player initially receives their new form until they hit the maximum level of 70, the shapeshifted form looks the same. It does not change as a result of character progression or the armor worn by the druid. This seems to be at odds with the way Blizzard usually handles character progression in the game; typically as a character advances in levels and experience it is reflected in their appearance. Their armor becomes more complex and

detailed, the spells or abilities are flashier and more powerful, and they are able to ride fantastic creatures to increase their walking/running speed. For a druid who spends a majority of time in a single shapeshifted form, none of this applies. The armor details are not applied to a shapeshifted form, the abilities granted by that form have the same animations as when initially obtained and, instead of getting a mount, druids get another shapeshifting form that is able to run faster.

This was the first instance of this particular discussion where fan-created art was suggested as a replacement for the models that already exist. The artist included alternate 3D models for three of the druid's forms: cat, bear, and travel forms.





Image 5-3: The original druid cat form (top) as compared to the suggested replacement (bottom).

The responses to this topic were quite varied, with most people accepting that there should be a change but some rejected the fan submissions outright:

“I’m not sure that this thread will generate any blue response, I’m sure everyone is aware of the fact Blizzard can’t just steal that guy’s models, but this is really just the issue that we want cosmetic feral changes. I just like watching the responses and views for this thread get into the 10’s of thousands. Keep it coming.”

Others only wanted certain forms changed:

“Blizzard, please change dire bear into the proposed skin. OMG it gives so much eye candy. I won’t go for worgen instead of cat form, but travel form does look kickass. So yeah, all other classes get new gear and stuff to change the way they look, but our forms stay in the same skin for eternity? Is it really that hard to squeeze that in the game???”

And some forum members used the topic to brainstorm their own ideas about how the forms should change. One forum member linked to a related topic entitled “Screenshots of your animal form”. As people posted more screenshots of their druids in shapeshifted form, people

realized how similar they all were and began to make a joke out of the situation. This resulted in a 75 page long thread containing 1500 posts, the majority of which were repostings of the original screenshot of the druid in bear form:



Image 5-4: The now-famous druid in bear form.

Every posting had some text along with it, such as “this is me when I first got bear form”, “this is me in my epic armor”, and “this is me when I turned level 70”, all of which were meant to point out the absurdity of the situation.

5.1.2.2 New Content

Topics: Hellfire armor; Coolest armor possible; and Tier 3 sets data

The other main focus of the topics that used fanart as art suggestions for Blizzard’s design team was a digital painting portraying something called Hellfire armor. These three forum threads are all concerned with a fan-created painting by Randal Dumoret (a.k.a. Belith) portraying a female warlock in a unique set of armor. This armor does not exist anywhere in the game, it is

only one picture, but in a short period of time the researcher found three discussions about it. It seems that many players saw the fanart through Blizzard's gallery and thought that it must be available in-game.

“I'm new to WoW and I was wondering is there such an armor called “warlock hellfire armor”? I was on Blizzard's site and saw the awesome drawing of it and was wondering if that's real or just an artist concept. Thanks and hope to see you guys online once I get to a higher level.”



Image 5-5: The Hellfire Armor (left) as a fan-made creation vs. the actual tier 3 armor set, the Plagueheart Raiment (right). Players overwhelmingly preferred Hellfire.

The insistence that such an aesthetically pleasing armor set be implemented in the game may not seem of great importance and is hardly new territory for forum discussions but Blizzard's design staff has many things to take into account when they design items in the game (a topic addressed further in the next forum thread).

To complicate matters further, another player liked the armor so much that he mimicked it in the form of a 3D model and took a video of a character going through some basic walking animations while wearing the specially modified armor set. This made it even more confusing to players who thought the armor was real because it looked like it did truly exist.



Image 5-6: Screen captures of the video showing the modified Hellfire armor being worn.

Topic: Stubborn Artists

One of the last two topics was an open letter to Blizzard Entertainment insisting that their design staff take more forum input about weapon and armor design. Through the process of browsing and searching World of Warcraft forums, the researcher has noted that the design and aesthetics of weapons and armor are a very large and complex topic of discussion amongst

players. This has to do with the ways that items are obtained within the game. As players progress through the game content, gaining levels and abilities that allow them to access more difficult areas in the world, the strength and power of items must scale up as well. When a player approaches the level cap⁴, the choices of gear are much more restricted, adhering to a tiered structure of overall quality and rarity. The difficulty encountered by the game designers is that, while enhancing the effectiveness of a weapon or armor is a matter of increasing its stats, there is no concrete way to make the next tier of items “better looking” than the last. The aesthetics of an item are a function of many different factors, all of which are dependent on individual preferences. The specific item mentioned in this letter to Blizzard is a mace used by the Paladin character class which was changed in the past from a primarily bronze/brass color scheme to one that is mostly black and purple. The author argues that for a class of character that is described as a “Holy Warrior” (wowwiki.com) the darker colors, which he/she feels give a much more sinister impression to the weapon, are completely inappropriate and clash with the overall ideals of a paladin.

The final topic in this category is the posting of someone’s online art gallery with the demand that Blizzard hire them as a part of their art design team. An argument arises about whether the person’s artistic style could possibly have a place within the design team, given that World of Warcraft has adhered to a very specific style for years now. Some of the most obvious aspects of this style are the vibrant color schemes and the exaggerated proportions of the characters, often credited to artistic the influence of Samwise Didier. The drawings of Wen-M however are intricately detailed, showing something of a gothic influence, with facial and body proportions more reminiscent of Japanese cartoons and anime.

⁴ The maximum level that can be obtained by a character within the game. For the original *World of Warcraft* the level cap was set at 60. With the release of the expansion pack *The Burning Crusade* the level cap was raised to 70.



Image 5-7: A picture taken from Wen-M's DeviantArt gallery that illustrates his particular style (top). When compared to this picture from Blizzard's official web site (bottom), the difference in styles is apparent.

5.1.3 "Hey, Artists!" (Petitioning artists for fanart or advice)

This final grouping of forum threads features a special type of request. It is different than when the artist simply offers his or her services. These forum threads indicate a greater intensity of want or need, as the player is taking action to look for an artist. It means that a player has

sensed a lack or something in their gameplay and the materials provided by Blizzard and is seeking a solution through the artist. In the forum threads where a player is requesting artwork, two subcategories have been shown:

5.1.3.1 Specific art of a player's character

Topic: Do Fan Artists accept commissions and Artists Wanted

These two topics are both requests for a single character, drawn to certain specifications. There was a distinction in the way each player went about making their request, though, in that the first person assumed that an artist would read the forum and so he/she just put the request in their first post. The poster provided a brief description of the character: race, class, suggested armor and weapons, and a specific type of pet. Given the specificity of the offer itself as well as the payment methods (in-game currency which can only be sent to other players on the same server), the thread starter did not receive any kind of serious response.

The second person was more interested in finding a way to contact an individual artist for a commission. They received a lot of helpful feedback pointing them in various directions: looking up artists from the official Blizzard fanart site, contacting artists whose email addresses were provided by forum members, and checking out links to online galleries of artists who have made WoW-related artwork in the past. At the conclusion of the thread, it was not evident if the petitioner was able to contact an artist but the information given was more than sufficient.

So in this case, the first two players wanted a more informal arrangement and were willing to pay with a small amount of in-game currency whereas the second seemed much more serious in his/her offer, trying to arrange for structured communication and a real payment plan. The more formal approach seemed to get much better information, though whether he or she received their artwork is unclear.

5.1.3.2 General requests for more art of a certain type

Topic: To any artists

A request to fill the fan artwork section of Incgamers with more portraits of blood elves in general as well as a specific picture of the three high-ranking blood elves within the in-game city of Silvermoon. No offer of payment, just the observation that there is a lack of art for this race. This type of commitment to a particular race is a neat observation to make within the World of Warcraft community, as it hints to fanart being used as a way of expanding upon the game content. In this case the person desires more fanart to consume as a way of achieving satisfaction that might not be present in the game itself, due to Blizzard attempting an equal portrayal of all character races in its game content.

The other threads in this category mirror the threads from the “Hey, everybody!” section, in that they are just requesting feedback. It is uncertain whether there is truly a distinction between topic creators who specifically want feedback from artists and those who will accept it from any forum member. Through observation alone there is no way of determining the intentionality of that type of phrasing.

5.1.4 Summary

Through the forum observations, I have begun to see certain patterns in the potential uses/roles of fan-generated art within an online gaming community. First and foremost it is a means of creative expression by artists who enjoy the game. Along with that comes the opportunity to contribute something to the World of Warcraft community by sharing the artwork on forums or submitting it to Blizzard’s fanart gallery. It can also be used to illustrate shortcomings of the game environment and draw the game designers’ attentions to them. The

forum observations have not shown any notable agency of this type of action, but that does not discount it. It is possible that when the game was newer, the community smaller and more manageable, and the environment more malleable, the designers would have more freedom to accept artistic designs from fans. However as the community grew larger and the world became more concrete, it was no longer feasible to accept as much input from the community because accepting one design decision would have been akin to opening the floodgates of user feedback or, more appropriately, demands. Finally, fanart has shown itself to be the way for players to experience more game content from people other than Blizzard Entertainment. By commissioning artists for individual pieces, a player is able to choose what parts of the game of which they would like to see more, thereby providing a more engaging experience for themselves.

One thing I have found is that there is what I perceive to be a lack of discussion of the artwork. I believe this to be a result of the way that Blizzard handles fan-generated artwork. Though they work to encourage and support community participation in the creation of fanart, putting it up in their private gallery is similar to placing the pieces in a display case where they can only be seen and not touched. The gallery does not have any discussion elements to it. There is no section for players to make comments and no real information about the artist that someone could then use to make contact. One could argue that the World of Warcraft discussion boards should be sufficient means to discuss the artwork displayed on the main site but the forums are rather strict in how information can be displayed. Unlike many forum scripts, Blizzard does not allow the embedding of images into a post. Pictures can only be accessed by clicking a URL. Even then, due to concerns about account privacy and in order to prevent hackers from disguising viruses and spyware as harmless links, the forum user is directed to a page listing a number of warnings. These warnings urge a person to double check the link to make sure it leads to a trustworthy site, caution against downloading any unexpected files and remind players that Blizzard is not responsible for the content of links outside its domain. In order to view the link, a

player then clicks a button to continue. In such a stringent environment, the sharing of pictures is quite difficult and so discussion of them ends up being rather rare. This is evidenced by Blizzard's main gallery holding almost nine hundred (900) pictures and yet in my forum analysis I was only able to find forty nine (49) mentions of fan-generated artwork across three (3) major World of Warcraft forums. And those nine hundred pictures (900) are hardly indicative of the amount of fanart available on the web. DeviantArt.com, a popular art community, offers free gallery sites and through their search engine I got approximately twenty one thousand (21,000) hits when just using the search string 'World of Warcraft'.

Why such a disparity between artwork created and its discussion? In my final analysis, I attempt to bring all of my data together to come up with some explanations.

5.2 Surveys

The survey for this research was hosted on <http://www.surveymonkey.com> and aimed at collecting broad data about World of Warcraft players and fan art communities. An interesting problem arose with the survey in that sixty six (66) people consented and *began* to complete it but only twenty nine (29) went on to *finish* it. I am not entirely sure how to explain such a low completion rate. When asking permission to post the survey on forum sites, I was warned that surveys do not always get the best reception with more and more researchers attempting to study the World of Warcraft population. In this case, it could be that people began the survey just to see what the questions were like and then decided that they were not interested or that it did not apply to them. The problem of participants who did not feel qualified to take the survey arose in more than a few instances. I believe that the phrase "fanart community" served to confuse some participants who believed that I was only collecting data from people intimately and actively involved with the creation and distribution of fanart. It may be significant that even though there

were players who viewed and discussed fanart on a regular basis, they still did not count themselves as part of a community. When asked, the majority of participants (85.7%) did not count themselves as part of a fanart community.

The survey questions fit into several categories, according to the information they were collecting: demographics, information about fanart communities, and opinions as an artist or consumer. First, the demographics section will cover the range of people who participated in the survey. In the information about fanart communities section I will discuss people's experiences with fan artwork, where they go to find it and how they perceive the relationships between artists, players, and game developers. The last section addresses such topics as the reasons for creating or viewing fanart and the important parts that make up an online community for it.

5.2.1 Demographics

Of the twenty nine (29) participants in the survey, the average age was twenty five (25.2) years old, with the oldest being forty two (42) and the youngest being nineteen (19). The majority of people were men (69%). Sixty two percent (62%) of the participants said that they were single and the other thirty eight (38%) were married and/or living with a partner.

Fifty percent (50%) of the survey respondents are full-time students, thirty five percent (35%) work part-time, and forty five percent (45%) have a full-time job. Although this is a limited survey, the presence of a large number of students is noticeable. From what I know of student populations, what I have determined from this is that people engaged in World of Warcraft fanart benefit from having large amounts of free time and relatively few commitments. However, this observation clashes with the presence of a number of persons who are married and/or full-time employees. Why is this? I would hazard to say that when a person who does not have a large amount of free time and must deal with many different commitments in their live,

they redirect their time and energy into the leisure activity that takes the most of their time. World of Warcraft, as with other MMOs, takes many hours to get into and so it makes sense to use other free time to further that interest, instead of dividing a limited amount of time amongst various hobbies.

On average, the people who took the survey said that they played twenty three (23) hours of World of Warcraft each week, ranging from three (3) hours to as much as sixty five (65) hours each week. This data supports the idea that when people play World of Warcraft, they might need to consolidate their free time. When asked about the number of main characters they have in World of Warcraft, thirty one percent (31%) have only one, thirty five percent (35%) have two, nineteen (19%) have three, eleven percent (11%) have four, and four (4%) have five or more. The number of main characters a person has seems to depend on their play style so these numbers are a bit difficult to explain. Casual players can have more than one character if they enjoy the different class mechanics. Often, a more serious player will concentrate on advancing one character in order to access the end-game content before beginning another. As I said before, this will vary according to a person's preferred style of play.

5.2.2 Information about Fanart Communities

5.2.2.1 Fanart experiences

Most people view it online from time to time, no one said they do it daily and only two said they never have. Very few have discussed it on online forums, in IM or email, or during gameplay. About half of the respondents had talked about fanart IRL/offline. As for the frequency with which they view fanart it makes sense that a person does not do it daily, first because they may not even have the time to play the game every day let alone search for artwork and,

secondly, because large volumes of fanart are not released on any regular schedule. Blizzard seems to update their fanart gallery roughly every seven (7) to nine (9) days. This is accompanied by a news post on Blizzard's main World of Warcraft site. Other websites that host fan artwork may not have predictable upload schedules, especially sites like DeviantArt that provide artists with their own galleries in which to post art.

When asked how they usually hear about new fanart, eighty percent (80%) of the respondents said that they see it in the official Blizzard gallery. About forty six percent (46%) said that they hear about it through online forums, either the ones on worldofwarcraft.com (48%) or others (44%).

Sixty six percent (66%) of survey respondents had never created their own fanart. Twenty nine percent (29%) did so occasionally and 1 respondent did so regularly. Of that thirty four percent (34%) of people who had created fanart, thirty three percent (33%) had submitted it to a web site and twenty two percent (22%) had distributed it online in another way. With only half of the artists submitting their work to web sites, the question arises as to their motivations for creating art. Ninety two percent (92%) of people said that they had never commissioned a piece of art before. I am curious to see whether this is a result of lack of desire for the art, lack of knowledge as to where to get commissions, or being unable to afford them.

About forty percent (40%) of respondents, not necessarily the artists, had distributed other people's fanart online with varying degrees of regularity. Given the restrictions on Blizzard's site and other galleries that require a person to own the artwork that they are uploading, I interpret this to mean that people are sharing pictures through email or photo-hosting services, such as Photobucket or Flickr.

5.2.2.2 Popular fanart sites

Of the fanart sites listed, Incgamers, Fanart-central, and WoW Stratics seemed the least popular, with only twenty percent (20%) of respondents visiting with any degree of regularity. Blizzard's main site and the World of Warcraft site were the two most popular choices, as only seven percent (7%) said that they never went there. This is unsurprising given that any World of Warcraft player visits these sites on occasion, if only to update their account information, and Blizzard's encouragement of fan artwork which leads them to host their own gallery of works for not only World of Warcraft pieces but for all of their games. It also backs up the reason for the previous information about how often people are viewing fan artwork. If they are using Blizzard's sites, then they cannot expect new artwork daily as the galleries are updated every week to week and a half.

5.2.2.3 Community participation

When asked if they considered themselves to be part of a fanart community, eighty five percent (85%) of people answered no. Of the fifteen percent (15%) who answered yes, one of the answers as to which community they are a part of did not make immediate sense. It simply said "writers". I interpret this to be either a misunderstanding of the question or the person meant that they are a part of an art community where they do the writing for game-based comics. I am not certain what other forms of art would require a writer. I did notice in my browsing of the IncGamers website that there were a few mentions of fan artwork on the Fan Fiction board, where artists were looking for places to discuss and share their work so it is possible for some overlap.

The other responses indicated that people belonged to the fanart communities within the Warcraft and Warhammer 40K universes, as well as the website <http://www.conceptart.org/>⁵.

5.2.2.4 Relationships between the fanart community and game developers

Many people said that they do not know or do not visit fan sites often enough to say. Forty six percent (46%) felt that the community/site was visited by game developers to some degree of frequency. Given that most people visit Blizzard's official gallery and main site, this is reasonable. Blizzard employees, or "blues"⁶, are known to frequent the discussion boards there.

5.2.2.5 The relationship between the fanart community and the game

Responses to this question were few and varied. One person pointed out that another MMO, Warhammer Online, was giving out keys to the beta test as rewards for winning fanart and fan fiction contests. In this way, it would seem that Mythic Entertainment is taking the same route as Blizzard in encouraging its community to produce art and stories.

Another response was that "critiques are welcomed". I interpreted this as referring to the comics section of Blizzard's fanart gallery. Many of the comics are intended to humorously point out some of the shortcomings or odd logic used within World of Warcraft.

The third person to respond to this question said:

"I most often visit the Fanart section of the World of Warcraft homepage. The selections are officially sponsored by Blizzard as well as chosen by members of

⁵ As described on the site: "We are a web community of artists who are here for one purpose. We want to help each other learn about art, provide the best place to showcase work, further our art educations, and to meet other artists from around the world. We are a community funded from within, and with the support of our sponsors and professionals on the site."

⁶ Blizzard employees are commonly known as "blues" because their forum names and posts show up in a blue text, as opposed to the white text of a normal forum user.

the website team. So it's a fairly close relationship. Also Blizzard has used art initially created as fanart from Penny Arcade⁷ in many of their print publications, such as guides to the game.”

The artwork from Penny Arcade has come up multiple times in the course of this research. Apparently while the two owners were participating in the beta testing of World of Warcraft, Krahulik completed the aforementioned artwork and displayed it in a newspost on his site. Blizzard Entertainment saw the artwork and took steps to license it for use on their site and in the Brady strategy guide for the game. Though this is an example of fanart being absorbed into the game, in a manner of speaking, I think that Penny Arcade's status in the gamer community complicates matters. Krahulik is an established artist who has done work for other game companies in the past. Blizzard approaching him to license his artwork does not seem as surprising as if they pursued a contract with a player who had submitted artwork to their Fanart Gallery.

5.2.3 Opinions as Artists or Consumers

5.2.3.1 Important aspects of online fanart communities

Survey respondents were asked to rank aspects of online fanart communities from most to least important, with the least important being represented by zero and most important represented by four. The top three aspects were a simple method of uploading/sharing pictures (3.9), quality artwork (3.8), and active members (3.6). Having members who are World of Warcraft players (2.6) along with a large membership (2.4) were only deemed marginally important. The least important aspects to people were offline components (2.2), support from game designers (2.2) and support from game companies (2.1).

⁷ Penny Arcade is a very popular webcomic written by Jerry Holkins and illustrated by Mike Krahulik. Its main focus is around two characters, Gabe and Tycho, and their interests in video games and game culture.

5.2.3.2 Reasons to view, discuss, create, or share fanart

Among the suggestions put forth in the survey, the top answer to this question was that “Fanart is just cool” with seventy three percent (73%) of the respondents. Describing it as “just cool” is hardly descriptive so I interpret the answer to represent a general approval of the artwork. That such a high percentage (73%) of people chose that response also tells me that it might have been too easy or simple of an answer for participants. This pushed me to inquire deeper into fan’s motivations during the later interviews.

The second most popular answer with thirty five percent (35%) was that fanart let’s people customize or show their characters in ways that the game does not allow. While I expected this to be one of the roles played by fanart within the game community, I feel that it is a direct result of some of Blizzard’s design choices. Within the game environment of World of Warcraft, a player does have a certain amount of freedom to design his character but there are also strong limitations, more than many other popular role playing games and MMOs. A person can choose from sets of eyes, faces, hair and facial hair, skin colors, and accessories such as piercings to give to her character but these sets offer limited variety and are mainly focused on the face, which gets covered by hats and helmets. Other MMOs such as Guild Wars allow players to customize their physical features but also clothing and armor by using dyes to change its color. In this way, they are able to differentiate between other people wearing the same armor sets. Since this type of variation is missing in World of Warcraft, I can see why players would use fanart as a means to get around these limitations.

The remaining three choices were evenly selected (23.1%) and said that fanart gives them something to discuss, fills in the gaps left by Blizzard’s official art, and there was also an “other” category. As far as filling in the gaps in the official artwork, I see why players would choose this as a reason. Much of the artwork produced by Blizzard is meant to be promotional items and so

they choose to represent characters that are recognizable within the Warcraft storyline. They cannot predict what every player might want to see, however. As mentioned in the forum data, one person requested pictures of blood elf characters situated in the city of Silvermoon because he really liked the characters and locale and felt there was a lack of artwork featuring those subjects. The person most likely could not expect to receive artwork on par with Blizzard's high production value but the fanart still helped to satisfy his desire for more blood elf art.

The reasons listed under the category of other are as follow:

“Creative outlet for the artist. Shows some vision or depiction of the game that I've never thought of before.”

“Enjoying another aspect of the fantasy.”

“I'm just amazed with what some people are able to do, always been a fan of people who can draw, even if it's made with a computer. It's still a creation far beyond anything I can make. I love watching them, to see how others see their toons⁸ and the game itself.”

“Is something I find interesting and worth the time invested to look at it.”

“Helps me improve my own work.”

Given these answers, fanart seems serve the role of enriching people's experiences with World of Warcraft. As fans, it gives players more to experience outside of the game. For artists, it proves to be an inspiration and outlet for creativity.

5.2.3.3 Reasons for creating fanart

Of the seven (7) people who did not select that they do *not* create fanart, the top answer (24%) to this question was that artists create fanart for the sheer enjoyment of it. Twenty percent (20%) said that it allows them to portray their characters as they choose, outside of the game. Twelve percent (12%) of respondents agreed that they want to have their own art in Blizzard's

⁸ “Toon” is a slang term used to describe a player's in-game avatar or character.

gallery, they draw the characters as a way of practicing, and they have created art because of other people's encouragement. There was only one response in the other category, saying that this person creates fanart in order to "express my love for my character that I have spent lots of time working on." Though I did not include it in the list of choices, I expected to see this answer. Players of World of Warcraft and many other MMO games are driven to devote many, many hours into the game, be it actual gameplay or just thinking and planning the direction that one wants to take his or her characters. It only seems natural for a form of commitment to develop out of that time investment.

5.3 Interviews

The interviews allowed me to follow up on the type of survey questions that asked the participant to choose from a list of answers and/or fill in their own, such as their own reasons for viewing or creating fanart and the ways that they use to find or distribute it. I was also able to gain more insight into a person's motivations because I was hearing about it in their own words, rather than having them select from a list of my own creation.

5.3.1 Participant backgrounds

5.3.1.1 Jeffrey

Strictly a consumer of fan-generated artwork, though he admitted to being an artist for most of his life. In middle school he said that he enjoyed the work of one of Blizzard's artists, Samwise Didier, and would attempt to mimic his style based on the game manuals from various Blizzard titles. Jeffrey said that when he entered college he gave up the hobby, which he regrets,

but it does still drive some of his other activities. He played World of Warcraft for about 10 months, getting two characters to level 70 in order to do end-game raiding.

5.3.1.2 Travis

Travis is an art director for a video game company, and worked as a 3D artist for 15-16 years. As a hobby and small business Travis makes custom character portraits using screenshots taken within the game environment. He told me that in his job he handles a lot of art direction, as opposed to more hands-on work, and so his hobby allows him to stay creative. He played World of Warcraft casually for a time but not long enough to get a character to level 70.

5.3.1.3 Russell

A long-time player of MMORPGs, going back to Ultima Online, and a consumer of fanart, Russell said that he mostly enjoys galleries of in-game screenshots, preferably without the user interface blocking the view, as well as fantasy artwork of high production value.

5.3.1.4 Mark

An experienced World of Warcraft player who is very heavily into the role-playing elements afforded by MMOs, Mark is very interested in fan-generated art as a way to enhance role-playing in both World of Warcraft and other games such as Dungeons and Dragons. He told me that many times he will seek out fanart as a way to help himself as a writer, which makes him unique within my research as he is using one fan-generated creation to inspire another.

5.3.1.5 Charles

Having only ever played one MMO, World of Warcraft, Charles finds himself looking at fanart because he enjoys good artwork that he can relate to his interests. He indicated a lot of experience within the World of Warcraft player community, though not with fan-generated artwork. Charles favors the more technical side of gameplay, striving to play his characters to their greatest abilities.

5.3.1.6 Silvia

Silvia is an experienced MMO player with backgrounds in EverQuest, Asheron's Call 2, and World of Warcraft. After high school she attended several semesters at an art college and now creates fanart as a hobby when she is not busy with school and work. Her husband is also an artist and a former World of Warcraft player.

5.3.2 Producers and consumers of World of Warcraft fan art rarely limit themselves to one game at a time

Jeffrey told me that he was a follower of many types of games and the fanart that accompanies them. He became interested in the World of Warcraft art soon after he began playing the game and still stays current with it even though he has cancelled his account. Though he never did it often, on a few occasions he used the World of Warcraft armory site in conjunction with the information provided by the Blizzard fan art page to look up the characters of various fan artists. He said that no contact ever came of it but he was interested to see what type of character they played and how advanced they were in the game content.

Travis began making screenshot portraits back in EverQuest, with a screenshot of the character and a small story of where he met the character and what they were doing. After seeing other artists post their character sketches and art on the forums, he began posting his own works and people started to request their own. When looking for fanart, he browses Blizzard's main site and forums. The fanart allows him to get inspiration about new ways of doing his own art and the forums let him advertise some of his stuff. He said that posting some of his pieces on a forum will usually get him 100-200 hits on his web site with a couple of commissions resulting from the traffic.

5.3.3 Fan artwork serves as inspiration for other creative activities

According to two of my interviews, these activities can include writing and more artwork. Travis, the art director, said that he most enjoys creating fanart as a means to stay creative in ways that his job does not allow. He uses the art as an exercise. He also said that he used to write short stories in conjunction with his activities in World of Warcraft and EverQuest and his artwork and, more recently, he has not had time to keep up with the writing so he funnels his energy into his hobby of doing custom portraits.

Mark was heavily into both the writing aspects of fandom and the art. In his case, he felt that he lacked sufficient artistic talent to become a fan artist but greatly enjoyed writing. Numerous times during our interview he mentioned putting together short stories, character descriptions, or scenarios which he would then use in his Dungeon and Dragon sessions and that artwork really helped to inspire him. "Usually when one or two pictures hit me the right way, I save them and look at them later and I might write a short story about them to see how the character feels." Working this way, he has over one gigabyte of artwork saved to his computer which he can then access whenever he needs.

5.3.4 Blizzard supports their fans

In all of my interviews, I asked the person how they felt about Blizzard's support of the game and fan communities. Jeffrey said that they are very supportive, enough to provide an example to other game developers as to how they should treat their customers.

Travis said that a lot of the success of the fanart program has to do with Blizzard's endorsement and involvement. When he played EverQuest as it first came out, Sony was very strict about people using their logos and artwork to decorate unofficial sites hosting fanart and stories. People were getting emails from Sony demanding that they take down the copyrighted materials, which made for an unfriendly environment for the fans who wanted to express their enjoyment of the game through artwork. Blizzard did not make this mistake and by encouraging its customers to express themselves, they were able to leverage that creativity as another means of community development:

“You're kind of adding to the spirit of the game by creating your own kind of art because artists are always passionate about what they do. And if they're passionate about World of Warcraft, or whatever game they're playing, it'll show in their work. I think Blizzard saw that and they supported it and they gave the people who spend a lot of time and effort on a piece a place to showcase it, right on the main web page.”

Russell said that it seems great the way that they handle their fans. He expressed familiarity with the art and comic contests run by Blizzard and indicated his approval of the ways that they motivated the community to not only produce but also share their works.

In the interview with Mark, he reaffirmed what the others said in that he thought that Blizzard was very supportive of their fan community. He talked about it in terms of intellectual property and compared Blizzard's actions with Wizards of the Coast (WotC), a large publisher of role-playing games. As he put it, WotC cannot claim ownership of generic fantasy characters such as orcs but they do own *certain* creatures, he named beholders as an example. When they find fan artwork that uses these creatures, Wizards of the Coast takes actions to have the art taken

down. Blizzard is different in that, unless someone is trying to sell artwork of a character to which they have a copyright, they allow it and encourage it by hosting the pieces on their site:

“They don’t stop it, they don’t compete with it... and they never have. It’s a lenient policy that allows fans to contribute as much or as little to the game or its environment as they want.”

Silvia expressed a similar opinion:

“They seem pretty hands-off in many respects especially in game but are very supportive of the fan base.”

This type of policy provides Blizzard with a number of benefits. I also feel that they could get the community even more involved if it weren’t so large, currently more than 10 million customers. Blizzard already has a number of community managers (CMs) who handle daily interactions with their players and fans but if they were to ask for even more involvement in matters of game design it would require many more employees to gather, sort, and process all of the information.

5.3.5 Jeffrey misses the World of Warcraft community

On the subject of the World of Warcraft community, both for fanart and in general, Jeffrey said that he misses it. In his experience, a comparable community is not present in most other games. Other MMOs lack the very large population and he feels that console games do not have the infrastructure to encourage meaningful online interactions and so often the community will focus on advanced reflexes and gameplay instead of social interactions or the structured teamwork present in end-game gameplay. He indicated that having content such as fan-generated art and contests provides information for the main website and in doing so, makes it worth

keeping tabs on. This often funnels people from the main page into the forums which helps to provide an audience of interested individuals to populate the forums.

5.3.6 Charles thinks the game community is far too large for easy classification and study

As he mentioned in our interview, Charles feels that the World of Warcraft player community is simply too large to make generalizations about how it functions, let alone apply values to it. The most public areas of the community, the Blizzard discussion forums, are full of trolls⁹ and other internet unsavories but one cannot use that to describe the entire player base of 11+ million people. He pointed out that with “a driving theme and strong moderation” there are a number of worthwhile groups that exist. I agree with his observation of needing strong moderation in order to encourage intelligent discussion but the other half of that statement is what interests me. His choice of words, “a driving theme”, is akin to an idea I have of how to describe fanart in World of Warcraft.

Silvia had similar feelings about the size of the player base. “There is a lot of diversity, for sure. Lots of awesome people, but also lots of dumb little kids too.” Her most worthwhile relationships were within her guild. “I enjoy the family feel of my guild.” She said that it was within the guild that she shared most of her artwork, which consisted of pictures of her own character and some other guild mates. Her husband also did some character portraits for her character and the guild members. I think that a guild community fits Charles’ idea of having a more focused community in order to bring out more meaningful relationships between players and the description of a guild as a family is often accurate, depending on the goal of the guild.

⁹ Trolling is when a person purposely communicates in a way intended to provoke others. On a forum, this could take the form of posting blatantly false statements or arguing over information that is known to be true.

Chapter 6

Analysis

When browsing the forums and looking for patterns in the discussions of fan-generated artwork, I observed that fanart acts as a strong discussion point for people. It comes up when talking about particular characters or environments; people actively seek out art or artists and want to talk about them; and it is used to spur discussions about elements of the game like gameplay or aesthetics. In a forum environment, its strongest role is to enhance, facilitate, accompany, or direct conversation. This function of artwork is very logical. Artwork serves as a good method of gathering someone's attention. In my interview with him, Mark mentioned that artwork is special in that it can be experienced and assessed very quickly and the aesthetics of a piece act as a built-in measure of quality. Then when taking into account that in a forum environment, most of the interactions are occurring through text¹⁰ it is understandable that the use of images can bring a new dimension to a discussion.

The surveys enabled me to get more detail about what fanart means to people and the habits they have surrounding it. I was surprised to find that so few people who regularly look at World of Warcraft fanart actually consider themselves to be part of a fanart community, which brings up two questions for me: Does this mean that fan-generated art alone is not enough to generate a real community identity? Could it be that the derivative nature of the artwork lends itself to more of a secondary role in a pre-existing community of people? Though I was not able to gather any information that would let me make a judgment as to whether it's the derivative

¹⁰ I say "most interactions" because with more people using high-speed internet and having access to free picture hosting services, there is a rise in the popularity of "images memes" or "macros". These terms refer to when an image is posted to a forum in order to express an emotion or make a statement. These images typically contain large, explanatory text overlaying the picture itself.

nature of the art that is responsible for this, I do think that the structure of the World of Warcraft community has a lot to do with it, given the sheer size and diversity of the population and the fact that the community has its strongest base in the game itself. Everything else to come from that serves to enrich the community in some way, shape, or form but no single element is as powerful a way to bring people together as the game.

The interviews provided very detailed and intimate information about how individuals think about fan artwork. Everyone has their own reasons for creating, viewing, and sharing fanart and these reasons are heavily influenced by a person's past experiences with artwork, games and communities. As I was interviewing people, I found that it was difficult to adhere strictly to questions and discussions about World of Warcraft artwork, as the lines between that and fanart for other games became rather blurry. The interviewees easily skipped from discussions of Warcraft art and way it is presented within the game community to the way another game does it, or how "this one web site" encourages all sorts of game art, and so it appears that people who involve themselves in fanart either do not discriminate very much between games other objects of fandom.

The diversity of the population, in respect to the people's roles in a fanart community as consumers, producers, and/or distributors, is a large reason for fanart's level of community significance being what it is. The World of Warcraft is made up of an extreme assortment of personalities: hardcore gamers and role-players, loners and social butterflies, teenagers and senior citizens. As such, it is unsurprising to find that no single non-game interest takes precedence. If the game were to somehow cater specifically to an audience of artists, then fan-generated artwork could take on a greater level of importance in normal gameplay. As it is, Blizzard Entertainment has created an environment that is largely receptive to most of its players and their multitude of interests and so such pursuits as fan-generated artwork are embraced and encouraged.

I feel that there are two other reasons for the lack of a community for fanart for the World of Warcraft. The first is because the game developers and community managers chose not to construct an environment that is conducive to that type of interaction. This is seen in the fact that people are unable to comment on pictures in the main Fan Artwork gallery and the lack of an artwork-themed discussion board on the main forum site. I think the reasoning behind this is that Blizzard already has very many community aspects to manage. I would not say that they discouraged the creation of an art community specifically, but they do limit the interactions that people can have through their game and web site. They took note of the art potential of their game community by implementing the Blizzard Fanart gallery and holding the monthly comic contests. To go further by enacting special forums or a separate site for the creation, sharing, and discussion of fanart, they could be pushed by the community to do the same for other sorts of player interests. Overall this would result in more work for the community managers without necessarily generating any extra income for Blizzard. While they do like to provide for their community, Blizzard's first and foremost concern are their games.

I also previously mentioned how restrictive the forums are in terms of posting images and links to other sites. This works against the formation of any group of people who might have the desire to get together and talk about some of the excellent artwork being displayed. The other part of the argument has to do with the way that fans get together to produce and share art. It never seems to revolve around a single, specific subject like World of Warcraft. Many of the people I interviewed mentioned interests in not only the game but the general fantasy genre, including other games, book, and movies. It was this facet of the data that pushed me to find a new way of describing fanart without relying on community structures. This comes up as the term 'focus' and will be discussed in detail in the following sections.

6.1 Updates to the Original Model

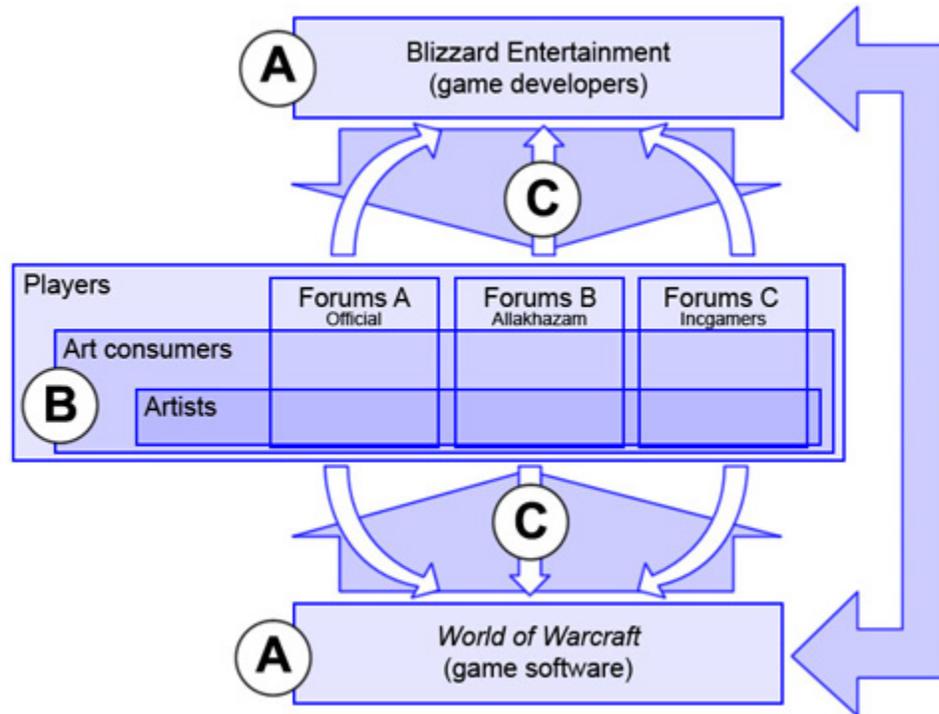


Figure 7-1: The relationships as originally laid out in the initial stages of this research.

My first assumptions about the relationships that exist in the between World of Warcraft and its fan community were appropriate in overall structure, provided that all of these interactions were occurring inside of a bubble, but extremely oversimplified. The relationships that I assumed existed followed the logic that most entities would have an equal influence on the others. I believe that the only relationship to “survive” initial contact with the data is the one between Blizzard Entertainment and the World of Warcraft game itself (section A in the figure), as these two entities can never truly be separated. As such it might be more appropriate to group them.

The next section of the figure to be addressed is the World of Warcraft fan base (see B of the above figure). I assumed that art consumers and artists would necessarily be sub-divisions of

players, but the data has shown that there are World of Warcraft fan artists and consumers who do not even play the game. In this case, they could be fans of previous Blizzard titles or Warcraft games who have kept up with the lore, players of other MMO games who were drawn to it because of the shared game genre, or just people who enjoy the fantasy-style of the artwork. The important idea to grasp is that though these groups exist within the World of Warcraft community, they overlap and spread outside of it.

As mentioned previously, I had assumed a symmetry to the relationships in this community of people (section C). The game environment and, through that, the developers, has the single largest influence on the player community. There is a derivative aspect to fan-generated artwork as it always has its foundations in something already created, in this case that would be the game. I could find no evidence to reveal the opposite relationship, in which the fanart had some influence on the game environment or Blizzard. I believe this is part of Blizzard Entertainment's policies on how to deal with fan creations: they will not stop you but neither will they officially endorse a fan. These policies have not been publicized in any venue of which I am aware but through the actions of the company, they can be assumed.

6.2 The New Model

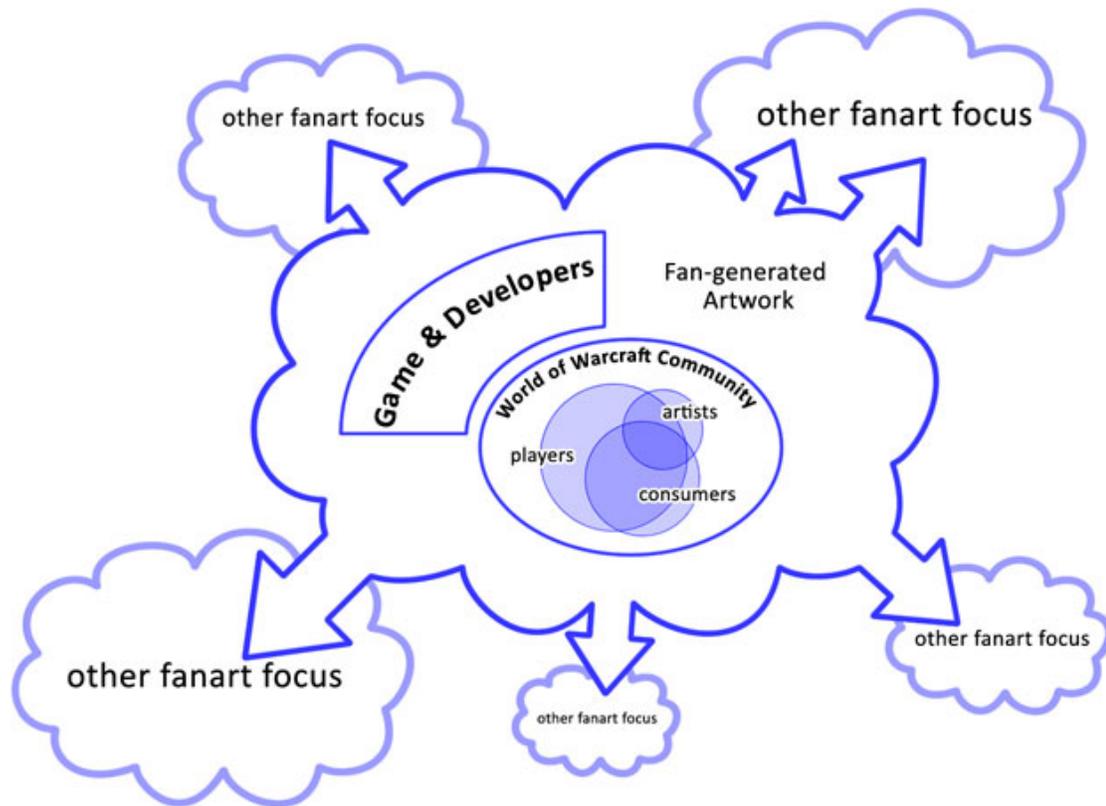


Figure 7-2: The redesign of my initial figure to show the findings of my research.

As you can see, my understanding of fan-generated artwork within World of Warcraft has changed rather drastically. What I saw was not indicative of a community of people. Rather, it appeared that World of Warcraft was just one of many possible subjects for fan artists and art consumers. To be sure, the community that already exists within World of Warcraft has a large effect on fan-generated art but it is not an exclusive influence. Existing within the cloud structure of World of Warcraft are the game, its developers, players, artists, and art consumers that existed in the initial model of my expectations. The overlapping circles are meant to represent the

crossover between categories of players. It differs from my original figure in that I no longer consider all artists and consumers to fall within the World of Warcraft player base. Some of the people I contacted did not play Warcraft or had not played it for some time which is why I decided to place a fraction of the artist and consumer base outside of the player group.

It is also significant to note the space within the center cloud that is not taken up by the World of Warcraft community. Broadly labeled Fan-generated Artwork, it represents the crossover space between focuses. Fans that create and view artwork are not limited to one subject. My initial model could not take into account the people who view World of Warcraft fanart because they like the fantasy-style represented in the Dungeons and Dragons universe, or the artist who draws World of Warcraft art not because they play but because they have a particular fondness for the style of one of the artists on the Warcraft development team. That is why I chose the cloud-like structure, to show that the edges are far from solid and that they can blend with other fanart focuses.

6.3 Fanart in a Community as a Focus

It would seem that fanart for World of Warcraft does not generate its own distinct community identity as much as it provides a *focus*, be it temporary or long-lasting, for people generally interested in fanart. This focus varies in strength from person to person and can be pictured as a resting place of interest or attention. Whereas my original intent was to study the fanart community that I assumed existed within World of Warcraft, I instead found that World of Warcraft is simply one point of interest for those fans that pursue artwork.

The data shows that fan-generated artwork within World of Warcraft cannot be pictured as a single cohesive element. The edges are blurry and constantly shifting, as they are determined by an individual's preferences, history, and background. I believe that a community can exist

around artists and art consumers but it must do so under the general heading of “art”, rather than a limited area such as “World of Warcraft”, hence the idea of a focus. In talking about fan communities, the object of any fandom can be seen as a focus, be it weak or strong.

6.4 Visualizing a Fanart as a Focus

During the course of this research what I found is that while looking at fan-generated artwork within the World of Warcraft community, it does not fit to think of it as its own community. The data I collected shows that artists and art fans in World of Warcraft do not consider themselves to be part of a distinct community. Rather, the game can be seen as a focus for people interested or participating in fan-generated art. An appropriate visualization for this activity is a relatively uniform scattering of iron filings on a piece of paper. Each iron filing represents something like an artist, art consumer, or a website that involves itself with fan artwork. If we were to place a magnet under the paper, it would draw some of the iron filings towards itself, though not all of them. When you remove the magnet, the filings settle back onto the paper so if we were to reapply the magnet in another spot, filings would be drawn back together, some of which come from the initial spot and some of which are new. This represents what it is like to study fan artwork. When I am looking at fan-generated art within World of Warcraft, I am seeing a range of people who are interested in and drawn to it but in no way are their interests limited to only the World of Warcraft. By removing the magnet and placing it in another spot, another focus, new filings are pulled inward to represent people interested in the subject of that focus, as well as some of the other filings that represented the World of Warcraft focus.

This visualization represents the effect of a researcher looking at fanart in a pre-existing community setting, as I did. In World of Warcraft, the fan artists and consumers do not make up

their own community. Instead, I found that no person limits themselves to a particular type of fanart, at least not one as specific as a single game, character, or object.

Chapter 7

Conclusions and Implications

Henry Jenkins and Nancy Baym were able to successfully research and write about communities of fans that exist around popular television shows. In my research, I assumed that a similar type of fan community must exist within World of Warcraft but I feel as if I misread the Warcraft community from the start. If I had chosen to study how fans experience, reinterpret, and analyze the *game*, I could have put together something similar in findings to other researchers but I chose to look at one *type* of fan production. If a researcher were to take a general look at fan-generated art it would have to be at a much higher level where it could encompass multiple focuses in order to provide a picture of how fans create and experience artwork across many subjects of fandom. Within the scope of this research I found it more useful to stay within the bounds of the World of Warcraft community, seeing the Warcraft art as simply one focus in many for each fan. In doing this, I was able to assess the relationships surrounding the artwork.

In studying fan-generated artwork one of the first ideas to become clear was that very little about fanart is actually clear, especially when trying to look at it within the single focus of the World of Warcraft. There are no solid delineations between the fan artists who create images of World of Warcraft and those who do so for Warhammer Online. There are artists playing EverQuest who are drawing characters from Guild Wars. Fans of Diablo are perusing an assortment of fanart for the StarCraft and Warcraft universes and it's leading them away from video games completely and into the worlds created by J.R.R. Tolkien, Robert Jordan, and Frank Herbert. How can any one person try to encompass such a scope? And yet there are structures that exist, though they vary widely from subject to subject. If anything, this research has shown that in

a tangle of blurred lines, overlapping entities, and many-headed arrows, patterns emerge to be identified and described.

7.1 Implications

In this section I will discuss in detail the implications of this research: Who should care about what was uncovered here? Are there ways to leverage this research in order to improve pre-existing online communities? Just what is it that fan artists and their works bring to the table?

7.1.1 Artists

The artists interviewed over the course of this research have agreed that creating art for a community of interested people is very rewarding. Though the forum analysis brought up a couple of examples of artistic criticisms (Topic: “To fan art or not”), the responses were largely positive, showing community support for artists that choose to devote their time and talent to fanart.

7.1.2 Virtual communities/community managers

Any manager for an online community should take away from this research that they stand to benefit from providing their members with as many ways to experience content as possible. When a community is structured in a way that encourages fan-generated artwork, it provides one more layer of complexity for its members. This research has shown that fanart not only makes for a strong discussion point on forums but also provides a specialized way for artistic

community members to participate and, in doing so, they enrich the community with their creations.

Though the Blizzard fanart galleries are structured only to display the artwork, any other community looking to take advantage of the benefits granted by its presence should consider implementing some sort of discussion area for the art. This could be in the form of a comment section for each piece of art or a separate Art discussion forum. Either or both of these would allow community members to more actively and easily discuss the artwork, strengthening the community-building effects.

7.1.3 Gamer designers & developers

Each person that I interviewed praised the way that Blizzard approaches and deals with fan-generated creations. I would encourage any game developer that wants a strong online community presence to adopt a similar mindset. Hosting a fanart gallery on the home page and holding art contests, as Blizzard does, give people one more reason to visit the site and contribute. With a smaller game community it might even be feasible to take community input about game design elements, thereby anchoring the players to the game even more by allowing them to have a hand in its creation.

Also, considering that persons interested in fan artwork have shown that they do not limit themselves to a single game or area, the people participating in fanart may not necessarily be a player of that particular game and so fan-generated art can provide a hook to bring in new customers and community members.

7.1.4 Future research

Two aspects of my research have shown themselves to be potentially useful in future investigations into fan culture:

7.1.4.1 Computer-Mediated Artwork (CMA)

As far as terminology, I believe that the term computer-mediated artwork can be very useful in discussing artwork that is shared over the Internet. Currently there are many options for creating and sharing art aside from the traditional mediums and methods of the past. Given my own background as an artist and a long-standing member of online communities, my own perceptions of art have always run along these lines. For any researchers looking at fan creations, I think it is important to understand the setting in which fans are creating and sharing content and computer-mediated artwork sums that up. It encompasses the traditional artistic mediums, the newer digital ones, the combinations of the two, and the myriad ways that those pieces of art can be shared. CMA is intended to help a researcher clarify how they must approach art in a digital environment for an audience lacking experience in that area.

7.1.4.2 Focus versus Community

Since I did not find the community presence that I expected within World of Warcraft fan-generated artwork, I chose to use the word focus as a means of describing the fanart. I feel that this term could be useful in other studies of fan culture as it describes a way of looking at an influence within a fan community that, for whatever reasons, does not create strong enough community bonds in and of itself.

It appeared that if a person wants to study a *community* of fan art and artists, there is a need to choose multiple subject areas. Most likely this will be dependent on the main subject area, whether it is large enough to contain the necessary social connections that facilitate community development as well as having the technological support for relevant social interaction. Though I did not see much cross-discussion of fanart for other games when I was looking through the forums, it came up quite a bit in my surveys and interviews. In future research, I would like to take more time to see just how wide a variety of subjects are encompassed if I were to start with discussions of World of Warcraft fanart. It could be that one subject is not enough to form a solid community but a larger one, for example a potential category of MMORPG fanart, might have enough connections and depth to be seen to contain community functions, but I suspect that it has more to do with the unique aspects of a massively multiplayer game.

For example, there are a large number of specialized fanart sites, many of which profess to be “communities of fan artists” and cover a wide assortment of fandoms. Two such examples are the websites Elfwood and Fanart Central. Elfwood is an established community for artists interested in both fantasy and science fiction but it also has a section called the Fanquarter where artists can post their fanart. Fanart Central is similar in purpose but it specializes in just fanart. These sites serve to collect art for any number of fandoms and so create a community by serving the needs of fans as a whole. Aside from these two more generally-focused sites, many fanart communities are smaller sites of independent owners, Yahoo groups, or Livejournal communities. Their levels of activity vary greatly as does the size of their member population. Within these smaller fanart sites, I did not find any that cater specifically to World of Warcraft.

Why there do not seem to be any World of Warcraft specific communities? It is possible that people are simply too busy playing the game. In order to get the most out of the game, a significant time investment is required. Even upon reaching the level cap, which takes over 100 hours, there is a huge amount of content created specifically for level 70 characters. A

subscription-based MMORPG is always developing and most of the time there is an element of progression underlying all of it, requiring players to invest a certain amount of time and effort in order to access more of the game. Other forms of media such as books, television shows or movies tend to develop at a much slower rate and do not require such progression by the consumer. The developers of MMORPGs release new content regularly and so the fans do not have to take it upon themselves to generate it for themselves as a part of a community.

It is also feasible that the population size of the World of Warcraft is restrictive to the development of one solid community. If I were to conduct similar research and choose a game with a much smaller player base, the results might be less difficult to categorize. Having fewer people would make it more possible to fully encompass the scope of fanart's effects on a small community. In addition, a smaller community would provide a more focused view of how the members handle fanart. In my own experience I have found that smaller online communities tend to form their own fanart identity. This typically happens when a smaller community has a few members with artistic talent who are encouraged to provide artwork for that group of people. Having these artists to draw upon opens the community to discussions about the artwork they enjoy or their own backgrounds in art. Though I cannot speak outside of my own experience on this, for me, artistic sharing and discussion led to the creation of some very firm bonds with people that I never met in real life or even in a 3D virtual environment. Exchanging or jointly creating artwork was a very special sort of interaction that cemented me to that particular community. Given that none of the communities in which I have had these experiences were nearly as large as the player base of World of Warcraft,

7.2 Conclusion

Some of the things that I can safely conclude from this research are:

- The development of World of Warcraft fanart has been strongly impacted by the size of the player base and Blizzard's methods of community management. It also is affected by the structure of subscription-based massively multiplayer games.
- Studying fanart in an environment like this forces a researcher to move beyond one group of fans, those of World of Warcraft in this case, and place fanart in context with broader subjects.
- Looking at fanart from a broad perspective shows that fans rarely operate solely within one fandom. Their interests extend into other media of similar genres and beyond, guided by both personal preferences and the effects of being members of various groups or communities.

As fan culture becomes increasingly mainstream, it falls to researchers to diversify the ways that they approach it. As I found, studying fan-generated works does not always come down to studying a community of people. While there is much to be found by analyzing relationships in fan culture, it is not always enough to study the communities of fans that exist. In order to gain a greater understanding of fandom, we also need to look at the individual elements that come together to form them. This means looking closely at the fans, the medium they use for communication, the object of fandom and who has control of it, and the content generated by the community. Researchers like Henry Jenkins and Nancy Baym have been pushing for academics to start seeing fans for what they really are: intelligent, creative and motivated groups of people who are changing the ways we think about and produce media. What I am pushing for is a more complete picture outlining fans and their creations.

And, let's face it; you can't look at art without finding pictures.

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Appendix A

Survey Questions

In thinking about WoW fan-created art (fanart) have you ever...

	Yes, daily.	Yes, regularly.	Sometimes.	Once or twice.	Never.
Viewed fanart online?	<input type="radio"/>				
Discussed fanart online in forums?	<input type="radio"/>				
Discussed fanart online during game time?	<input type="radio"/>				
Discussed fanart online in IM/email?	<input type="radio"/>				
Discussed fanart online IRL/ offline?	<input type="radio"/>				
Created your own fanart?	<input type="radio"/>				
Submitted your own fanart to a website?	<input type="radio"/>				
Distributed fanart (created by others) online?	<input type="radio"/>				
Distributed fanart (created by you) online?	<input type="radio"/>				

If you view fanart online, which sites to you visit to view fanart?

	Go daily.	Go regularly.	Go sometimes.	Go once or twice.	Never been there.
Blizzard.com	<input type="radio"/>				
World of Warcraft.com	<input type="radio"/>				
Allakazam.com	<input type="radio"/>				
Incgamers.com	<input type="radio"/>				
Deviantart.com	<input type="radio"/>				
Fanart-central.net	<input type="radio"/>				
Wow.stratics.com	<input type="radio"/>				

Do you consider yourself to be part of a fanart community?

- No.
- Yes. Which one?

Think about a fanart community online. Please rank the following elements in terms of their importance to the community.

	Not important	A little important	Fairly important	Very important	Most important
Active members	<input type="radio"/>				
Offline components	<input type="radio"/>				
Quality artwork	<input type="radio"/>				
Members who are WoW players	<input type="radio"/>				
Size of membership	<input type="radio"/>				
Support from game designers	<input type="radio"/>				
Support from game companies	<input type="radio"/>				
Simple methods of uploading/sharing pictures	<input type="radio"/>				

Which of the following are the biggest challenges to fan artists?

	Extremely challenging	Somewhat challenging	Not challenging
Potential copyright infringement	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Relationship with game companies	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Lack of outlets	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Lack of access to traditional art mediums	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Lack of access to technical equipment for digital artwork	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Which of the following are the biggest challenges to fanart communities?

	Extremely challenging	Somewhat challenging	Not challenging
Managing artists	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Managing artwork	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Intellectual property concerns	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Potential copyright infringement	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Relationship with game companies	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Managing community-building software (forums, galleries, etc.)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Think about the fanart community you visit most often. What percentage of the members are..?

	100%	50%	10% or less	none
I don't visit fanart sites.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
players, art consumers, and artists (all 3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
players and art consumers (2 out of 3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
players and artists(2 out of 3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
art consumers and artists (2 out of 3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
just players	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
just art consumers	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
just artists	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Think about the fanart community you visit most often. What is the relationship between the fanart community and game developers?

- I don't visit fanart sites.
 I don't know.
 There are no developers visiting the site.
 Some game developers occasionally visit the site and make comments.
 There are members of Blizzard's staff who visit regularly.

Think about the fanart community you visit most often. What is the relationship between the fanart community and the game itself?

- I don't visit fanart sites.
 I don't know.
 Yes. Please use the comment field below to elaborate.

If you chose yes, please elaborate.

How do you usually hear about WoW fan artwork?

- Forum posts (on the official WoW forums)
 Forum posts (on other forums)
 Discussions in game
 Official Blizzard Fan Art page
 Other online art galleries
 Online chats or instant messaging
 Discussions in real life
 Other

Have you ever commissioned an artist to create fanart for you?

- Yes
 No

As a consumer (of fanart), what are some of the reasons that you view, discuss, create, or share it? (Please select any that apply.)
Fanart...

- I don't look at fanart.
 lets me customize my character in ways the game doesn't.
 is just cool.
 gives me something to discuss.
 fills in a the gaps left by Blizzard's official art.
 Other (please specify)

As an artist, what are your reasons for creating fanart? (Please select any that apply.)

- I don't create fanart.
 I like to do it.
 It allows me to portray my character(s) however I want, outside of the game.
 I want to have my art in Blizzard's gallery.
 Other people have encouraged me.
 I draw characters as a way of practice.
 I like to enter WoW art competitions.
 Other (please specify)

How old are you?

What is your gender?

Which of the following best describes your marital status? (Select only one.)

- Single
 Currently married or living with a partner
 Separated or divorced
 Other (please specify)

What's your employment status? Check all that apply.

- Unemployed
 Student
 Part-time work
 Full-time work

How many MAIN characters do you play within World of Warcraft?

- 1
 2
 3
 4
 5+

How many TOTAL characters (including mains and alts) do you have in World of Warcraft?

- 1
 2
 3
 4
 5
 6
 7
 8
 9
 10+

In an average week, please estimate the number of hours you play MMO games.

Which other MMO (Massively Multiplayer Online) games have you played? Please check all that apply.

<input type="checkbox"/>	EverQuest
<input type="checkbox"/>	EverQuest 2
<input type="checkbox"/>	Guild Wars
<input type="checkbox"/>	Eve Online
<input type="checkbox"/>	Dark Age of Camelot
<input type="checkbox"/>	City of Heroes
<input type="checkbox"/>	Ultima Online
<input type="checkbox"/>	Final Fantasy XI
<input type="checkbox"/>	Star Wars Galaxies
<input type="checkbox"/>	Other (please list other MMORPGs)

If you previously indicated experience within the World of Warcraft fan artwork community and would be willing to be interviewed for more detailed information about your opinions on and involvement with it, please include your email address in the next field. A consent form will be sent to you by the researcher (mcolibraro@ist.psu.edu) along with more information about the interview process.

tl;dr

Are you willing to talk more about fanart and MMOs? I'd like to interview you via IM, email, Skype, Ventrilo, etc. If interested, please provide a valid email address.

Appendix B

Interview Guide

Introduction

- Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research.
- I am conducting research to look at the roles played by fan-generated artwork within community structures both inside World of Warcraft and outside of the game. My specific research question is: What are the relationships between computer-game-inspired, fan-generated artwork and in-game and out-of-game communities?
- In this interview, you will be asked about general experiences in playing MMORPGs as well as specific experiences with World of Warcraft and WoW-themed fan artwork.

Role within the fan art community

- How are you involved with fan artwork in World of Warcraft?
- If a producer/artist
 - How many pieces have you produced total? Recently?
 - Where do you host your artwork?
 - Do you work for commission, or for your own reasons?
- If a consumer
 - What type of artwork do you look for?
 - Do you have any favorite artists or styles?
- Distributor
 - How do you obtain fanart to distribute?

- Do you own a website/gallery?
- Where do you go to find/share/discuss fanart?
 - Do you use primarily online sources or do you also participate in physical communities of artists/fans?
- Have you ever commissioned art or produced art for another person?
- Have you ever contacted the artist of a picture you liked?
 - How did you get information about them?

Reasons for involvement

- What do you get out of your involvement with fanart?
- Do you think other people share these same reasons?

The World of Warcraft community

- How do you think the WoW fanart community compares to ones present in other games/media?
- Do you think that fan artists are supported by Blizzard Entertainment?
- How does this involvement affect the way the community operates?
- Can you think of a time when Blizzard has formally acknowledged or used user-made fanart for an official purpose?

Conclusion/thanks

- Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview. If you have any questions about the progress of the research or if you come across any information you think would be useful to me, feel free to contact me at mcolibraro@ist.psu.edu.