

The Art of Playing a Role in an MMORPG: An Ethnographic Exploration of *World of Warcraft* Role-Playing

Ondřej Dušek

Charles University, Czech Republic

Abstract

This article presents a typology of role-playing within the massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) genre, focusing specifically on role-playing in *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004). Presently, there is a lack of broader research into the various ways in which players interact with each other in MMORPGs. Although players of this genre can overwhelmingly focus on the mechanical aspects of the game, this paper argues that role-playing in MMORPGs exists and takes place as a minor activity. Utilising participant observation, this text investigates this phenomenon, offering an ethnographic analysis of how role-playing in *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004) takes place and what events and narratives role-playing participants create in the virtual world of the game. Based on the analysis of field notes and other material obtained through a total of 96 hours of participant observation, this paper presents a typology of role-playing in *WoW*, including day-to-day role-playing, private story role-play, and public role-playing events. This paper highlights how players negotiate the limitations of the game mechanics and game software to enable a wider range of role-playing performances. Through this, this study provides a detailed account of role-playing in *WoW* and offers opportunities for further research on role-playing in MMORPGs.

Keywords

World of Warcraft; WoW; role-play; role-playing games; RPG; MMORPG; ethnography



Introduction

An integral part of role-playing games (RPGs) is playing a role—taking on an identity that overlaps the player's own, which is typically that of the player's character. The player's character is no mere extension of the player in the game world but an individual with their own personality, goals, feelings, and behaviour, which the player acts out. However, the massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) genre is different in this regard from other forms of RPG, such as tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs) or live-action role-playing (LARP), despite being seen as their successor (MacCallum-Stewart & Parsler, 2011). According to MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler (2011), MMORPGs remove RPG elements such as spontaneously acting out a separate identity, which is essential for role-playing in the previously mentioned subgenres. MMORPGs do not require players to act out the role of their character; thus, the significance of role-playing in MMORPGs fades (MacCallum-Stewart & Parsler, 2011). Despite this, some MMORPGs like *World of Warcraft (WoW)* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004) or *Guild Wars 2* (ArenaNet, 2012) have communities which do engage in role-playing. The existence of role-playing in MMORPGs has long been confirmed by previous studies (Linderoth, 2012; Maltsev, 2019). However, there is a lack of broader research on role-playing within MMORPGs, specifically on the various ways in which players interact with each other in a virtual world during role-play. This is of significance as this world, which may offer players various possibilities to support their creativity on the one hand, is simultaneously limited by the MMORPG's mechanisms on the other.

Overall, this paper analyses role-playing in the MMORPG subgenre, utilising *WoW* as a case study. Beginning with a discussion of role-playing in RPGs and MMORPGs respectively, this study uses participant observation to demonstrate how role-playing takes place within *WoW*, what interactions and stories emerge, and how these stories fit into the overarching story of the game. Based on these findings, the research presents a typology of role-playing in *WoW*.

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Role-Playing in RPGs

Defining "role-playing" is no simple task. However, researchers have constructed several definitions of role-playing that do overlap to an extent. Van Ments (1981) writes that role-play is:

[N]ot a single well-defined activity but a whole species of activities ... At one end of the spectrum is the intensive "acting out" of personal emotions. ... At the other ... is the situation where "taking the part" is closer to the concept of advocacy. (pp. 27-28)

Meanwhile, Mann (1956, as cited in Zagal & Deterding, 2018) defines role-playing as “a situation in which an individual is explicitly asked to take a role not normally his own, or [of] his own in a setting not normal for the enactment of the role” (p. 20). Nevertheless, as Zagal and Deterding (2018) state, though many suggestions have been made, there remains no broad consensus.

In the context of gameplay, we can use the term “magic circle” to help define role-playing. Whilst originating from Huizinga (2000), the term is understood within game studies as “the idea of a special place in time and space created by a game” (Salen & Zimmerman, 2003, p. 95). The magic circle of a game is a set of meanings that are set apart from reality; entering into it means the player accepts the limitations and rules of the game. If the game activity includes role-playing, the player accepts and performs a role different from their own and pretends to be this role for as long as they inhabit the magic circle (Salen & Zimmerman, 2003). Pretending a role involves not only displaying behaviour, emotions, and way of speech, but also social status and abilities. For example, a player may perform the role of a grouchy sorcerer or a lively knight. Caillois (1998) calls this phenomenon the “as if” behaviour and employs the term “mimicry” (p. 30) to describe it. However, “as if” behaviour can further encompass acting, portraying, and even spectating. Role-playing is thus not dissimilar from a theatre play, though it lacks an audience and a script. Instead, players accept the identity of an imaginary character and interact with the game world and characters of other role-players through improvisation (Stark, 2012, pp. 10-11).

According to Caillois (1998), games with a focus on role-play—such as contemporary RPGs—resemble a child’s play with toys rather than a game with strict rules and a conclusion characterised by the player’s victory, loss, or general completion of the game (Dormans, 2006). These games lean towards a “principle, common to diversion, turbulence, free improvisation, and carefree gaiety that can be designated by the term *paidia*” (Caillois, 1998, p. 34). *Ludus*, the other principle identified by Caillois (1998), which binds play with arbitrary, imperative, and tedious rules, is also compatible with mimicry. However, *paidia* more closely corresponds with mimicry’s initiation of free activity and the tendency to omit authoritative rules. Indeed, as Dormans (2006) states, *paidia* is not entirely dependent on rules or objectives but, most importantly, any binding rules are set by the players themselves.

The essential rules of role-playing are social rules which, according to Bowman and Schrier (2018), develop a social contract for the RPG. This contract assumes that, during play, a player pretends the identity of their fictitious character while still retaining their own identity. The player thus communicates with others in-character (IC) or out-of-character (OOC) as needed. These two concepts, otherwise known as

“frames,” are different planes of social reality that collide during play (Linderoth, 2012). Fine (1983) introduced three distinct frames in role-playing: (1) the reality (players as themselves), (2) the game context (interactions following the game structure, e.g., rolling a die), and (3) the fantasy (pretending to be a different identity). During a role-playing session, these frames become intertwined, and their boundaries are actively negotiated by players (Waskul & Lust, 2004).

World of Warcraft

Released in 2004 by Blizzard Entertainment, *WoW* has existed for over two decades and has accumulated a total of ten expansions, with the most recent, *The War Within* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2024), released during the writing of this article. The *WoW* universe is enormous and potentially tempting for role-players. Its rich lore mainly revolves around the well-established world of Azeroth, set tens of thousands of years in the past. The world contains entire mythologies, civilisations, and a series of historical events which led to the emergence of two main factions: the Alliance and the Horde. The player automatically joins one of these factions by choosing a race and making a character.

The presence of role-playing in *WoW* is assured through the existence of dedicated role-playing servers. According to MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler (2011), Blizzard supports and encourages role-playing in *WoW*. However, at the same time, the developers leave it out of their control and regulation. Blizzard’s premise is that players can create their own world within the game, moderate their own activities, and tell their own stories. However, these should stay in accordance with the overarching story of *WoW*. In other words, Blizzard leaves the governance of role-playing up to its players; they do not interfere unless the End User License Agreement is broken.

The freedom of role-playing is additionally enhanced by *WoW*’s openness to modular add-ons. Add-ons may modify the play by adding a feature that did not exist in the original game (MacCallum-Stewart & Parsler, 2011). There are numerous add-ons which have been created for role-playing within *WoW*, such as *Total RP 3 (TRP3)*, which adds elements such as custom items and character profiles (see Figure 1), or *Cross RP*, which makes role-playing with members of the opposing faction easier.

The screenshot shows a user profile interface for a game. At the top are four tabs: 'Characteristics' (selected), 'About', 'Miscellaneous', and 'Notes'. Below the tabs is a 'Names and titles' section with a character icon, input fields for 'Title', 'First name', 'Last name', and 'Full title', and 'Save' and 'Cancel' buttons. The main section is titled 'Characteristics' and contains three sub-sections: 'Basic Information' with fields for 'Race', 'Age', 'Eye color', 'Height', 'Class', 'Residence', 'Birthplace', and 'Body shape', plus a 'Relationship status' dropdown; 'Additional Information' with an 'Add an additional field' button; and 'Personality Traits' with an 'Add a personality trait' button.

Figure 1. A *TRP3* profile. Screenshot by the author.

Moreover, *WoW* offers role-players many tools of communication. Speech is typically communicated via text chat, which is divided into several channels, like */say*,¹ */whisper*,² and */yell*³ (Linderoth, 2012). Players may additionally use emote commands to illustrate the actions of their characters, such as */smile*, which lets nearby players know in the text chat that a character smiled, or */wave*, which triggers a waving animation. There is also the */emote* command for a custom emote (see chat log 1, second post of Saul), which allows role-players to write up lengthy columns of text (MacCallum-Stewart & Parsler, 2011).

Research Methods

For my research, I utilised virtual ethnography as described by Boellstorff (2012), who assembled a list of principles of observation and data collection inside virtual worlds. I further utilised participant observation following a point raised by Linderoth (2012) that “in-game ethnography presupposes participating observers since it is hard to gain access to online game activities without taking part in them” (p. 487).

¹ A channel where players within a small radius can see what someone has said.

² The equivalent of a direct message to another player.

³ A channel with a much larger radius than */say*.

Wilde (2023, p. 57) confirms this, adding that researching a game without experiencing it might lead to misunderstandings about the subject of study. However, it also needs to be emphasised that my research is not autoethnographic as the foci of my study were other role-playing participants and the reality they co-created. Whilst it is true that this research is grounded in my own experiences in the game world, analysing my own behaviour and feelings was not the objective (for a detailed discussion of autoethnographic versus ethnographic research within MMORPGs see Wilde, 2023, pp. 56-59).

As part of my research, I joined a *WoW* role-playing server as an ordinary role-player and participated in the ungoverned or self-governed activities of this subculture. Two American role-playing servers, Wyrmmrest Accord and Moon Guard, were selected, as they are two of the most active. I additionally followed the community in other online spaces such as Discord servers and X. The reason for this covert approach was that in this research, the observer does not enter a closed group but a virtual public space, where they may interact with several random participants at random times and unintentionally record even activities of passersby who do not interact with the observer. There was no practical way to publicly inform everyone about the research. To ensure the research was ethical, identifiable nicknames of all players and names of their characters were excluded from all the material and replaced with pseudonyms. All private information about other players, such as names, surnames, or countries of residence, remained unknown to me. Private OOC conversations about topics other than role-playing were deleted from the logs. While *WOW* players could hypothetically be identified through the appearance of their avatars, this is highly unlikely as there were no extensive customisation options to create a unique-looking character at the time of this research. These procedures were deemed satisfactory by the defence committee at Charles University in Prague for the research to maintain good ethical standards. The methodology was retroactively approved without reservations by the Commission for Ethics in Research at Charles University for the purpose of publishing this article.

From March 2022 to August 2022, I spent a total of 96 hours online in *WoW*, divided into 47 game sessions. The main source of collected data were field notes produced during and after each game session. The second type of collected material were raw chat logs of the ongoing role-play, containing all text posts from the relevant text channels. Additionally, I captured screenshots from each session for illustration. The materials were securely stored in folders and interconnected through their filenames for easy organisation. For the research, I role-played a character from each faction (Vala – Horde; Saul – Alliance), though a third character (Kuga – Horde) was used on occasion, due to earlier established IC contacts.

Typology of Role-Playing in *WoW*

As part of my analysis, I inductively derived a basic triad of role-playing in *WoW*, which accounted for all captured interactions. This triad denotes:

1. Day-to-day role-playing
2. Private story role-play
3. Public role-playing events

In this section, I introduce each part of the triad and define their observed characteristics with the help of authentic chat logs. The following text is further interwoven with narrative story segments retold by the researcher to provide the reader with more context on what was happening during the role-play.

Day-To-Day Role-Playing

Although role-playing in *WoW* may take place at any time in the open world of Azeroth, there are particular locations where role-players frequently gather in significant numbers to casually participate in role-playing activities. These locations are called RP hubs, a term frequently used by the role-playing community. An RP hub may be a city, a small town, or any location that has several returning role-players. The main RP hubs of the observed servers were Stormwind and Orgrimmar, the capital cities of the Alliance and the Horde, respectively. In and around these locations, role-players gathered and various IC interactions emerged (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Role-players interacting in front of Wyvern's Tail. Screenshot by the author.

Players often initiate their character's interactions with others by walking up to them. A walk-up can be a plain salutation or any other action that begins a role-play between two or more characters and indicates the direction in which the interaction will develop. During my participant

observation, role-players walked up to my characters via a friendly greeting or by pointing out an odd feature of my character.

Chat log 1 (walk-up via a greeting):

Clyde: "Hi!"

Clyde smiles at Saul.

Saul (researcher): "Guh- Oh! Hey there."

Clyde giggles, beaming a wide smile to Saul. He sure was quite a sight. "How're you today?"

Saul raises his left eyebrow as he eyes the cheerful man up and down, letting out a snicker before answering. "I'm uh, I'm a-okay, I think. Sleep could have been better but it is what it is, aye?... Uh, what about yaself, hm? Ya look, uh, as if ya were ready to take off to the skies from all that smilin'"

Clyde giggles heartily, it was a giggle but he was big enough to wear [sic] it sounded like a rumbling chuckle no matter what. "Thanks! I'm doing great! I had a nice conversation by the cathedral, I got some booze, and now I'm here!"

Chat log 2 (walk-up via pointing out a feature):

Maya: "What knicked your eye, fella?"

Vala (researcher) raises his eyebrow inquisitively at Maya.

Maya poked beneath her left eye as she gestured towards the other vulpera.⁴ "That one. How'd you lose it?"

Vala stands up straight and folds arms, peering at this vixen with a sour gaze. "Picking out the imperfections right away? Well, well, well, that's not very polite when you meet someone new, is it?"

Maya furrowed her brows before chuckling with a flick of her nose. "Imperfection? Nawh. I consider scars and such trophies of battle. Yours just caught 'my' eyes. Nyahahah."

All these walk-ups had one important common attribute: They were unplanned and completely random, the general feature of day-to-day role-playing. A role-player who enters an RP hub rarely knows what kind of encounters they are going to have and how these are going to develop, though each of the participants may steer the role-play one way or another. This is not to say that interactions in an RP hub cannot be preplanned, as some role-players did mention in their *TRP3* profiles that they preferred their role-play to be discussed OOC first before a walk-up.

In my participant observation, most walk-ups grew into friendly interactions. These interactions involved befriending, sharing personal life stories, attending social activities, or conversing on diverse topics. For example, Clyde shared his rum with Saul (researcher), and they

⁴ A vulpine Horde race added in 2020 as a playable race.

talked about their adventures. These role-plays were often concluded by bidding an IC farewell and possibly a general invitation to another meeting. In many cases, like Maya's, several repeated meetings occurred, where the friendship developed further, and the characters even began making closer physical gestures, such as nudging or hugging. It is worth mentioning, though, that while Vala (researcher) and Maya grew closer and became long-term friends, Maya's player and I did not say a single word to each other OOC.

All these random role-playing sessions had a conversational nature, and characters primarily remained in one location. However, in a few cases, an interaction unexpectedly developed into a more dynamic role-play, which provided an unpredictable experience.

One early morning, Saul was sitting on a park bench when a young Kul Tiran woman approached him. She introduced herself to Saul as Yoba and wanted to befriend him. Shortly after the introduction, an older gentleman named Vin, who already knew Yoba from before, walked by and wished to say hello. The man told the pair that he had planned to go swimming at the harbour early this morning and offered them both to come with him. Yoba enthusiastically agreed and immediately started teasing Vin that she was sure she's the faster swimmer. Saul hesitated because he wasn't such a good swimmer himself. However, in order not to tear the party apart, he said that he would join as well. The trio headed to Stormwind Harbor, stripped down to their underwear, and braved the icy morning water. In response to Yoba's teasing, Vin proposed a race to the coast of the neighbouring Westfall region and didn't need much convincing from the others to make the race happen. Yoba was the first to arrive, followed by Vin and lastly Saul. Now that the trio was this far from the city, they decided to continue further along the coast and have a little swimming adventure. Thus, Vin, Saul, and Yoba kept swimming and the older man continued his swimming competition with Yoba. On this trip, the group came across several shipwrecks with human and elven flags and examined them, wondering if a battle had taken place at this location. The three swimmers continued past the lighthouse to Stranglethorn Vale,⁵ where they stopped again at an island inhabited by petrified trolls. None of them knew what had happened on the island, so they explored it briefly and came up with theories.

Chat log 4 (speaking about the petrified trolls):

Yoba: "Oh...he's stoned."

Saul (researcher): "Yeah. As hell."

Vin: "I wonder how it came to be."

Yoba: "Seems like he was fightin' somethin'."

Saul: "What do you know? Maybe it's the best statue in Azeroth."

Vin: "This brings back memories."

This role-play is a good example of how far the nature of random day-to-day role-playing can go. In the beginning, it was an ordinary first

⁵ A neighbouring zone of Westfall.

meeting. However, another role-player turned up and the interaction gradually changed. It developed into a trip for morning refreshment, a swimming race, and an exploratory adventure out in the world, with all characters speculating and independently sharing their own situated meanings about what they observed in the world around them.

The pinnacle of my day-to-day role-playing was the development of long-term relationships. Role-playing characters encounter various situations in their fictional lives, which resemble the lives of humans in the real world, where people gain life experiences and learn. It is only natural that role-players let their characters grow and change mentally, physically, and otherwise in the long term, based on their role-play sessions.

During participant observation, my character, Vala, got an opportunity to develop as well. His development was enabled by another role-player's character called Milsa. Milsa was an uncommon character, as she was a steadily blazing and dancing fire magician. However, as her *TRP3* profile implied, her true identity was a fire elemental—she was a powerful living embodiment of fire in the form of a Vulpera. This character helped my character, Vala, attain a higher purpose.

One day, Vala asked his friend Milsa about fire powers, as she once told him about her true identity, a fire elemental. He explained to her that he was getting irritated by how almost all of Orgrimmar's inhabitants had a magical ability, while he could not counter a potential magic threat with his ordinary axe. He wondered if there was a chance he could gain some of these abilities. Milsa hesitated at first, but then, as a friend, told him as kindly as possible that she could help him, but he must not use acquired abilities for attack, only for self-defence, or she would turn him into ashes. Vala agreed, so Milsa grabbed Vala's axe and etched several runes into its blade. In her own words, Vala would now gain abilities such as a fire shield or dispersal in flames and relocation. She also noted that his abilities could improve if he served her and spread her fire by carrying it and sharing it with those who needed it, suffering from cold or hunger. Her power would grow as well as Vala's. Vala chose to think about the offer and continued on his way. Though only a few days later, he returned to her and accepted the offer, as he wished to give his life a higher purpose.

My PC was not mechanically influenced by Milsa's actions in any way; those stayed within the magic circle of role-playing. Instead, Vala, as a character of his own, was influenced. From an ordinary caravan guard, he became a flame bearer.

The series of sessions with Milsa provides an example of how a character may develop in role-playing through interactions with other characters. My character gained a title, new abilities, and a purpose. This development was a result of a collaboration between myself, as Vala, and Milsa's player, who initiated the interaction, set up the rules for Vala's participation, and acted it out. From that day, Vala carried a bottle with Milsa's fire (as a custom item created in the *TRP3* add-on) to give aid.

Private Story Role-Play

Unlike day-to-day role-playing in RP hubs, private story role-play does not happen randomly. It is arranged and prepared in advance and can take place anywhere within the game world. It is based on a wholly player-invented story around which all events and developments revolve, and to which particular role-players (friends) are invited. The role-play I participated in was prepared by a player of a character called Eric. In addition to myself, one more player was invited. The planning of the role-play took place both OOC and outside the game on Discord, where a date and time for the beginning of the role-playing session was agreed on. Since the complete role-playing scenario was longer than a regular day-to-day role-playing session, it was divided into three sessions.

At the agreed time, Eric sent an IC letter to Kuga (researcher) summoning him to the city of Dalaran.⁶ This letter read, "Eric has finally got word from blue dragon Kalecgos! Friend Lyra should follow Kuga to Dalaran, yes? Been summoned by Kalecgos. Will help Eric and his friends." Eric's player included Kalecgos, a lore character of *WoW*, in the role-play (see Figure 3). In the usual course of playing *WoW*, Kalecgos is a non-player character (NPC). Until this point in my research, NPCs had been mostly ignored in the observed role-play. However, role-players sometimes utilised the *TRP3* add-on to temporarily take the role of an NPC in a way that a gamemaster (GM) of a TTRPG would. OOC, Eric was essentially the GM of this role-playing session, and he chose to utilise this option.

Kuga and Lyra met up in Dalaran and continued their way to the Dalaran Inn, where they met their friend Eric. After a brief welcome, Eric got straight to the matter of things. Kalecgos, the dragon aspect with the visage of a half-elf mage, had a task for them revolving around Eric's brother and his mechanical heart. The group moved to the Dalaran Tower to meet the dragon aspect, who elaborated on the situation. The mage student Eric had a brother who was once cursed into an arcane golem. The golem was destroyed and its heart, a marvel of magic and technology, which contained the soul of Eric's brother, was lost. Kalecgos' spies had found out where the heart was located. Other individuals and groups might have been interested in stealing the heart, including some other dragonflights.⁷ This heart was unique in its ability to preserve a soul, and the thieves would want it for themselves. Kalecgos wished to return it to Eric, the rightful owner. For gathering the heart and getting it safely to Dalaran, Kalecgos promised that Kuga and Lyra would be granted rewards from the Blue Dragonflight. After this briefing, the group retreated to Dalaran chambers to prepare for the journey.

Chat log 5:

Kalecgos (Eric's player): "We should attend to the information I gathered about your request."

⁶ The capital city of the Magocracy of Dalaran.

⁷ Dragon organisations established by dragons of their respective colour. The main dragonflights are Blue, Red, Bronze, Green and Black.

Eric: "Did... did Kalecgos find it?..."

Eric would seem a bit anxious, his voice going lower than normal as he seemed to give Kalecgos his full attention.

Kuga (researcher) listened intently to what Kalecgos had to say. Though he couldn't help but shoot a little concerned smile to Lyra following with a shrug.

Kalecgos: "Indeed, it was quite the task to find this Heart of yours, I must admit. I trust these two are up to the simple task?"

Lyra seemed to be wearing somewhat of a scowl. The same kind of scowl a father would have when his child was misbehaving. Up until Kuga and himself were mentioned. Then, he snapped to attention and cleared his throat. "I retain the faith Eric has in our capability. Certainly he would have chosen others, were he not convinced..."



Figure 3. Lyra, Eric, and Kuga are conversing with the Kalecgos NPC. Screenshot by the author.

Eric's player played both Eric and Kalecgos in this scene. Some of his emotes and direct speech were attributed to the NPC using the NPC speeches feature of the *TRP3* add-on, which put the name "Kalecgos" at the beginning of the post instead of "Eric." The remaining role-players interacted with the NPC as if it were another player's character. The inclusion of the lore character Kalecgos in one's own role-playing story may be controversial, as it closely interacts with a major lore element and may cause collisions with the overarching story of the game. However, our interaction had no effect outside of our role-play.

Essentially, we created a piece of little, local lore.⁸ Furthermore, the Kalecgos NPC was merely a quest giver, not a close acquaintance.

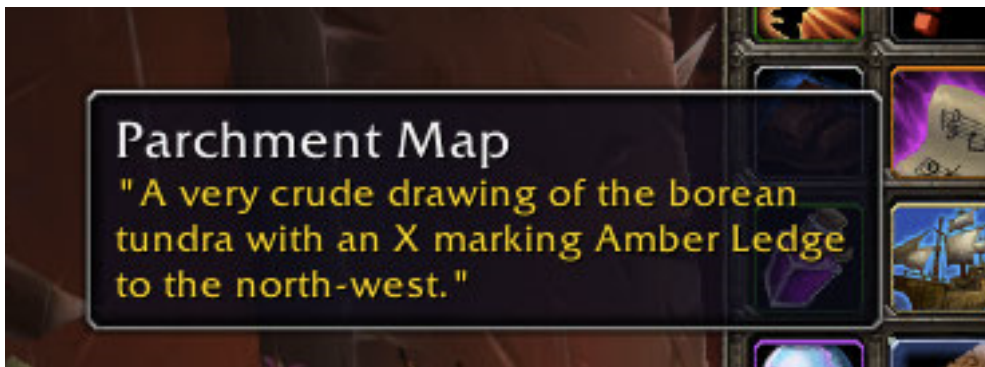


Figure 4. Description of the map created in TRP3. Screenshot by the author.

At the beginning of the second session, Eric gave Kuga a map as a custom item created in the *TRP3* add-on (see Figure 4), which revealed the location of the desired heart. Kuga and Lyra had to travel to Northrend⁹ and trek up to a settlement called Amber Ledge, where the heart was hidden in a crate. As part of the role-play, Eric was not supposed to join the two on this journey, so he wished them well and sent them off. The player of Eric then warned us OOC that he would log off. From that point, the further development of this role-play depended entirely on Kuga and Lyra, including the decision to find the heart or not. This rule opened a door to an immense space for improvisation.

Lyra and Kuga loaded themselves with equipment before boarding an airship to the Horde fortress of Warsong Hold in Northrend. They proceeded to one of the exits of the fortress and Kuga looked at the map from Eric to assess which way they should go. They set off across the valley, which was filled with herds of rhinoceros. There were also mages and dragon cronies cruising nearby. Given the information they had, those could pose a threat to them.

Chat log 6:

Kuga (researcher): "Th-that one looks... I-like the alpha male, uhm."

Lyra: "That large rhino? H-hey!"

Kuga: "Y-y-y-yes... Th-they... s-stomp a lot."

Lyra: "Perhaps we should not stand in the middle of the herd... Look out! Let's keep our distance from the large gray ones. They seem to be watching the herd."

[moments later, when the characters noticed the mages and dragon servants.]

⁸ A term from Linderroth's (2012) research denoting a piece of player-made lore that involves only a closed group of a few players or a guild within their RP.

⁹ A continent located in the north of Azeroth.

Kuga: "As Eric said - Dragon spawns. Likely looking for the heart."

Lyra: "There are several of them. And they're quite heavily armed and armored... Let's go to the rendezvous point on the map and hope we're not too late."

As seen in chat log 6, we framed the world around us as potentially dangerous. Our characters met NPCs along the way, which were marked by the game as either neutral or hostile, and, in the context of the overarching story of *WoW*, had a given purpose which was not related to our role-play. However, this fact carried no importance to us. We framed the purpose of all the human and dragon NPCs in the area in relation to our search. Our characters thus agreed that they should remain unseen and carefully sneak all the way to Amber Ledge after making sure no one was looking their way. For the player of Lyra and myself, this added an element of tension, danger, and excitement to our role-play despite it being nothing more than pretend play conducted by us and our improvisation. Even the /whisper chat was used for this purpose, replacing the /say chat to create the illusion that our characters were truly whispering so that no one around could hear them.

Lyra and Kuga eventually managed to sneak up to a warehouse with many piles of crates, of which one was supposed to contain the heart. As players, we took a quick time-out to determine if and how the characters would find the heart. We decided to use a dice resolution. For each pile of crates, we would simulate a twenty-sided dice throw with the /roll 20 chat command, and the rule was to beat the number 16. Our first throw yielded the number 18, which meant that our characters found the heart in the first pile. After that, they immediately retreated from the settlement and took a flight to Orgrimmar. Lyra and Kuga then returned to Eric at a library in Dalaran, gave him the object, and Eric confirmed that this was indeed what they were looking for. Eric thanked the two and sent them to Kalecgos to claim their reward.

Public Role-Playing Events

The third type of role-playing occurred at public events that were organised by players OOC and attended IC. Three events were captured during the research: World's Faire Carnival (WFC), Hearts of Tenacity (HoT), and Tournament of Ages (ToA). All these events were cross-faction and cross-server, meaning any player could attend with the help of an anchor, i.e., a player from the server where the events took place. Each of the three events had a designated real-world time zone and time period of when they would occur (e.g., a specific week), and a designated place in the game world. The events also included a backstory that implied that they take place annually and revealed why they existed. For example, WFC celebrated the victory of the people of Azeroth against the Old Gods, while ToA celebrated the triumph in the war against the Lich King. HoT had a more personal justification; it celebrated the love of not only the two main organisers, but also the love of others. Here, ToA was based on events of the overarching story, while the story of HoT was made up by the organisers.

The main space for the organisation of these events was Discord, where basic information about each event, its purpose, plot, IC and OOC rules, program, activities, competitions, FAQs, and other information were published. The administration of the Discord servers contained a hierarchy of members, who were organising and helping to run the event. There were volunteer coordinators—the head of the organisation—followed by staff, and competition judges who directed and supervised the event. Apart from Discord, social networks and *WoW* forums were used to promote the events through posts and artworks. What follows is my personal account of the course of these events based on my participant observation. However, due to the size of the events, I could not note all the simultaneous happenings and numerous competitions.

For each observed event, role-players gathered at a designated time and place. An opening ceremony began, which included a performance, such as a concert by IC bands, a dance performance, or another visual spectacle (see Figure 6). A website called Watch2Gether (2024) was used to play actual music on YouTube while the role-players pretended the performance in-game. The chosen in-game venues usually had pretend components as well. At HoT, according to the organiser's emote (see chat log 7), the stage had a curtain with a screen behind it, which projected a video clip during the opening performance. In reality, as shown in Figure 5, it was a stone pavement.



Figure 5. The podium as it was in-game. Screenshot by the author.

Chat log 7:

(HoT organiser's emote): As the curtains pull back for the first time on this unique stage, a giant screen split in half down the middle is displayed. Standing about 12 feet tall and stretching from one side of the stage to the other. The screen is cast in full greyscale showing nothing but black and white imagery as a certain magi's magic illuminates that of mind memories upon the screen for all to see with a very aged feel. While the two screens depict different scenes, there is a very strong similarity to them.

The ceremony included an opening speech by one of the main coordinators, who came on stage and used the /yell channel. This was necessary because the events were held in wide open spaces with several hundred players, which produced a lot of textual noise.

Chat log 8 (chosen posts):

ToA organiser: Ladies and gentlemen, heroes of Azeroth and beyond, WELCOME to the Argent Tournament Grounds, and the Tournament of Ages!

Participant 1: Woo!

Participant 2: Yeah!

ToA organiser: Each year we come together to celebrate our triumph over the Lich King. Here is where the heroes of Azeroth trained to prepare themselves to topple the LICH KING! And time and time again they have proven stalwart against the greatest evils known to our people! In times of pain and suffering, strife, and doubt, we have surmounted the odds and rallied together. Each year we come here and celebrate new heroes, new allies! We build new friendships and solidify old ones! We build memories, find love, and watch as some of Azeroth's finest heroes battle it out in games of raw power and skill! So Alliance, Horde, and all in-between! We welcome you to the Tournament of Ages with a question: WHAT DO YOU FIGHT FOR?

Participant 3: For Azeroth!

Participant 4: BEER!

Participant 5: Azeroth!

Participant 6: For Trollbane! For Stromgarde! For the Alliance!

Participant 7: Family!

Due to the visual effects performed in-game by performers, music played via a shared Watch2Gether (2024) room, speeches by the organisers, and the large audience that enthusiastically cheered, clapped, and responded via chat speech and emotes, the atmosphere had a feeling of a real-world public celebration. After the opening ceremony, the audience dispersed across the event area. Role-players were walking around, talking, getting to know each other, spectating or participating in competitions and activities, or visiting booths.



Figure 6. Performance at the opening ceremony of ToA. Screenshot by the author.

The competitions included activities like rap battles, storytelling contests, fashion parades, dice-based sparring, orc wrestling, and lore quizzes. In practice, these competitions depended on participants' creativity, knowledge, and ideas. Combat-based activities were typically resolved with several dice rolls simulated by the `/roll 20` command. There were also competitions such as carpball, an imitation of football, in which participants interacted with a kickable in-game item. ToA included a duelling tournament, where role-playing was put aside, and the duelling system of *WoW* was used instead.

Booths could be established by one or more players, who needed to sign up in advance. Accepted booths were assigned a spot in the event's area. During the event, booths sold a variety of products or services, with some including a small activity in which a customer could win a prize. Booth staff utilised usable in-game items to represent and illustrate their booth (e.g., a banner). Others had a booth placed around real 3D objects and other elements of the in-game world that resembled the equipment of the booth (see Figure 7). However, it was also common that all accessories of a booth were purely imaginary and represented only by text in an emote.



Figure 7. Booth staff (left) tending to customers (right). Screenshot by the author.

When a booth opened, staff announced this through an OOC note on their booth's Discord channel and occasionally promoted their booth in the /yell channel of the in-game chat. When a customer arrived at the booth, a staff member would approach and provide a menu to players through an OOC link sent via the in-game chat. Menus were represented graphically, either through pictures or Google presentations with several sheets where all the products and services were depicted via writing and graphics (e.g., illustrations or real-life photos). In the game itself, these products were imaginary and mostly had no in-game form besides an emote expression. The payment was imaginary as well; there were no actual exchanges of in-game currencies. Chat log 9 depicts an example of an interaction with a booth at WFC.

Chat log 9:

Kuga (researcher): "Uhm, He-hello."

Lizzie: "Evening dear."

Kuga: "A-apologies b-but... according to the map th-this is where one can purchase confectionery.... is-is that true by any chance?"

Lizzie nodded, "It is, menu's a bit limited given short notice. But we have that. Can I interest you in a menu?"

Kuga sighs in relief. "O-oh, splendid. A me-... Oh! Yes, yes, yes, I would like a menu, please!"

Lizzie grabbed a nearby menu and handed it to them. "Here ya are dear!" ((The player of Lizzie sent the menu link))

Kuga grabs the menu in his paws and studies it thoroughly. "Th-thank you, uhm.... let us see..."

Lizzie nodded and waited with a warm smile.

Kuga raises his brow more and more as he studies it, starting to be just a little bit more nervous. "Th-this... this all sounds very nice b-but I am not very familiar with these foods. Uhm, is there a dessert you would recommend, perhaps?"

Lizzie seemed to beam at this and bent down a bit. "Aye. So you seem like you have quite a sweet tooth. I'd recommend Vivian's Delight. Large Chocolate Cupcake, rather fluffy when you bite into it. Thick pink strawberry frosting. Very sugar and taste of strawberries and chocolate"

Kuga: "O-oh... actually, it is not for me b-but for a... special someone I am waiting for, you see, uhm. I think I will have a... Vivian's Delight, yes."

Lizzie: "A special someone? Ah, then I must make it my best work yet! Wait here." *The old pregnant worgen seemed suddenly full of energy*

Lizzie carefully grabbed one of the chocolate cupcakes, putting it on a plate. She walked over to the plate where the dumplings were and pulled out a small bowl of blueberries, walking back over to the cupcake. she grabbed the nearby sprinkles lightly sprinkling the cupcake till the frosting was lightly covered and dropped a few blueberries on top. She walked back down with the plate. "One Vivan's Delight made with extra love and care."

Some booths provided elaborate services that utilised other platforms or programs. In one booth, an artist was offering to create a portrait of the customer's character. This portrait was painted by the player of the artist character, and the player of the customer was able to watch the actual process of the portrait being painted on a Twitch stream. The IC and OOC frames intertwined, and participants could obtain real digital products. For example, Kuga bought a personalised badge (see Figure 8) in ToA, which was created in Photoshop.



Figure 8. Kuga's purchased badge. Image downloaded from the ToA Discord channel.

Another typical component of these events were the previously mentioned performances. During a character's performance, their chosen song was played in the shared Watch2Gether (2024) room. At the same time, the character would sing, dance, or do other movements that were either simulated by the actual movement of their avatar—within the boundaries of the game—or described through emotes.

Singing in-chat was precisely timed to the audio playback through the Story Teller add-on, which allowed the player to gradually post the lyrics in the chat. Various elements from the game were used in performances to enhance its visuals, including items such as fireworks or fog. Class abilities were also cleverly utilised for visual effects, such as the paladin's ability to temporarily spawn glowing wings on their back or the monk's attack, which draws a green spiral.

Discussion

This triad demonstrates the different forms of role-playing in *WoW*. Day-to-day role-playing is based on role-players' IC presence and engagement in an RP hub, and emerges from random interactions with strangers or acquaintances. Some of these exchanges may result in unexpected outcomes, repeated meetings, and long-term IC relationships, with little need for OOC interaction. Outcomes that emerge from these interactions may result in long-term character development. An example of this can be seen through the long-term friendship of Vala (researcher) and Maya, which enabled Vala's character development despite Maya's player and me remaining fellow role-players without any OOC interactions. Instead, we met repeatedly to build this IC friendship and make the relationship more meaningful for our individual characters' stories.

Private story role-play involves the planning, scheduling, and role-play based on a story developed by one or more participants who also set up rules and open improvisation options. Conversely, public role-playing events are broadly organised events that form a large—though temporary—RP hub for members to engage in various activities and socialise IC. This is often facilitated through the use of external platforms, such as Discord or Twitch, for communication or the enhancement of role-play. Across the triad, players governed and directed their role-play themselves with no assistance from Blizzard Entertainment. Besides RP hubs, different locations within Azeroth were used for role-playing and the presence of NPCs was mostly ignored. However, in some circumstances, they were given situated meanings or were temporarily played by a role-player. My research details an instance of a player taking on the role of an NPC to interact with characters when leading a private story role-play. Here, Eric simultaneously played both his own character and an NPC (Kalecgos), thus offering another interactive element besides his own character.

How role-players treated the in-game lore and overarching story in relation to their role-play was in accordance with previous studies by Linderoth (2012) and Maltsev (2019). Role-players were mostly creating their own stories and interactions with slight or no relation to the overarching story, though still following the established lore of the world. At most, elements of the overarching story were only discussed, briefly utilised, or used to provide context for role-players' events or the origins of their character. For instance, public role-playing events like

ToA or WFC were a celebration of victory against a grand evil. In another notable example, Vala's servitude to Milsa was based on the lore that mortals could bind themselves to an element and borrow its power for the price of serving the element.

A significant finding of my study is the way role-players bend the boundaries of the game they role-play within. *WoW*'s engine sets fixed limits on what is possible in the game, which might make *WoW* role-playing seem difficult. Nevertheless, many *WoW* players still role-play. Players cross the boundaries of the game's design to experience their own adventures in the way they desire. To achieve this, they utilise a wide selection of means to make their experiences more immersive. Anything that did not exist directly in-game existed only "as if" via text, add-ons—such as *TRP3* or *Cross RP*—or through the use of external programs and platforms which fabricated an intersection of the IC and OOC frames, such as the usage of Watch2Gether (2024) to simulate an in-game performance.

Detailed actions, such as taking an apple out of a pocket and taking a bite of it, are not actually feasible in *WoW*. However, they can be described in detail via the `/emote` command. Add-ons such as *TRP3* allow players to make their own desired items for their role-play (see Figure 4). Public role-playing events showed the biggest usage of external platforms, with role-players being spectacularly creative with what they decided to use to enrich their role-play. Here, websites were used for reproducing music to participants, many of the booths used real works of art and images to make their menus more appealing, and some of them sold personalised artworks for imaginary currency. While players created the artworks, IC it was played out as if their characters were the artists.

Furthermore, role-players often utilise in-game items as part of their role-play. With public events being cross-server and cross-faction, the boundary of *WoW*'s language system—in which, by default, members of the Horde cannot understand what Alliance characters say in the chat and vice versa—is temporarily erased with the consumable item *Elixir of Tongues*. In addition, firework items were used for firework displays at the ceremonies of public events, and class abilities enhanced singing performances.

All examples observed during the research and described in this text are only the tip of the iceberg, but they provide documentation of how much role-players can make their MMORPG role-play more engaging and bring it closer to an unlimited multimedia experience.

Conclusion

This study reveals several forms of role-playing in *WoW*, categorised into three types—day-to-day role-playing, private role-playing, and public role-playing events—which have emerged from participant

observation. While there are clear differences within the typology regarding variables like randomness, planning, and organisation, they all happen within the world of *WoW*. They respect the set legalities of the world and add their own concepts to it. They follow the lore of the franchise, whilst maintaining a distance that does not distort it.

Across all three types, role-players seamlessly switched between frames of reality, and their sessions were either ungoverned or governed by themselves through an OOC agreement or a prepared list of rules for participants of an event. This study loosely follows up on MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler (2011), confirming their claim that role-playing in MMORPGs may indeed be difficult, due to the limitations of the game and its mechanics, such as the limits of what their in-game avatar can freely do. However, in going deeper, my research demonstrates that players who decide to role-play in *WoW* have adopted various means of overcoming these limitations through bending and manipulating the set boundaries the game provides.

In my study, I have provided a detailed account of role-playing in *WoW* to fill the research gap concerning role-playing in MMORPGs. Whilst previous research was more superficial and often focused on one specific type of role-play, such as role playing plus player vs player (Maltsev, 2019) or guild role-play—where members of a guild remain IC during most of their communications (Linderöth, 2012)—my research demonstrates the most common and accessible ways of role-playing and how players cooperate on the refinement of their role-playing experience in *WoW*.

The findings raise numerous questions and opportunities for future research. Regarding the former, the individual activities in public role-playing events could present a further opportunity for study. More so, future research could consider how much guild role-playing differs from the presented typology and, from this, whether this typology is universal across different MMORPGs. Furthermore, role-players themselves could be an interesting subject of future study. Though my research did not have the capacity for interviews, this would be a fruitful opportunity for future research, offering insight into the reasoning behind the role-player's mannerisms and behaviour. Nevertheless, this text aims to offer an opportunity for game studies researchers to delve deeper into this phenomenon. Role-playing in MMORPGs undoubtedly exists, though the forms may be different in other games.

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