

# 9

## Constructing a Powerful Identity in *World of Warcraft*: A Sociolinguistic Approach to MMORPGs

BENJAMIN E. FRIEDLINE,  
LAUREN B. COLLISTER<sup>1</sup>

**M**illions of people worldwide spend their free time engrossed in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-playing Games (hereafter MMORPGs). These games are attractive not only for traditional game-like elements such as slaying dragons and exploring mythical lands, but also for the social atmospheres that arise from player

interactions within digital worlds. Since the mid-1990s, multiple papers have been published on digital gaming that have been crucial in developing theory on a variety of topics such as the participants (Bartle 1996), the online cultures (Taylor 2006), and the motivations for involvement (Williams et al. 2006) in digital games. This research alludes to the existence of relationships between language and power in virtual communities (e.g. Steinkuehler's [2005] work on the difference between beta-vets and newbies in *Lineage II* [NC Interactive 2011]), but does not directly explore how participants acquire power in digital games, nor how a participant's power relates to the language they deploy within the digital world. Hence, the purpose of this paper is to understand how power is situated and deployed through language in *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004).

This chapter reports results from a qualitative study of language and power within *World of Warcraft* and is divided into six sections: (1) game studies and *World of Warcraft*, (2) theoretical framework, (3) methodology, (4) results, (5) discussion, and (6) conclusion. Using a framework of power developed by Kiesling (1996, 38–102), we argue that the power in these interactions is realized through the interaction between linguistic and cultural artifacts that position players in power roles within the gaming community.

## Game Studies and *World of Warcraft*

*World of Warcraft* (hereafter *WoW*) is a MMORPG created by Blizzard Entertainment (2004) and first launched in 2004. (In this same volume Abboud and Douglas also examine *WoW*.) As of the writing of this chapter, it is the most popular MMORPG in the world, with over twelve million active accounts (Blizzard Entertainment 2010). As players journey through the game, they participate in practices that are standard to the MMORPG genre, such as completing quests and slaying monsters which reward items and experience points, collecting materials to create items such as food or clothing with a number of crafting professions, teaming up with other players to fight in dungeons and raids<sup>2</sup>, and – not least of all – interacting with other players via in-game

chat channels such as party chat or guild chat. In the course of these activities, relations of power emerge among members of the gaming community.

From the standpoint of game studies literature, an avatar's power in the gameworld is often connected to the amount of experience that the player has acquired. R.V. Kelly writes:

The total number of accumulated [experience] points then determines your level in the game. So, when other players scan your approaching avatar, they can see by glancing at your level whether they're dealing with a newbie who might *need* help or a grizzled veteran who might *provide* help. These same experience points are also what you use to upgrade your character [...] Over time, you're able to grow yourself into someone more formidable than the pipsqueak you start out as. (2004, 27–28)

In connection with this view, game studies suggest that there is a relationship between an avatar's (or player's) level of experience and the language that the avatar's player deploys within the gameworld. Steinkuehler (2005, 50–56), for instance, connects language usage with game experience in her study of *Lineage II* players. She notes that the beta-vets often use specialized vocabulary (e.g. *poms* for potions of mana) to signal their veteran status in the gameworld and to distinguish themselves from newbies who were not familiar with in-game lingo. Similarly, research on *WoW* guild structure by Williams and colleagues (Williams et al. 2006, 355) demonstrates that players in guild leadership roles may obtain their positions by sharing expert knowledge with guild mates and serving as 'advisors' to less experienced players. This research indicates that expert players can effectively obtain a powerful in-game position by sharing their specialized game knowledge through language.

Despite the fact that they allude to the existence of a relationship between language and power, these studies were never intended to answer broader questions regarding language and power in virtual discourse. In fact, previous research has largely been concerned with describing the interaction between individual player identities and large-scale social structures in online games. To our knowledge, no previous research has sought to directly explore the relationship

between language and power within the context of an online game such as *WoW*, which is the impetus of this paper.

## Theoretical Framework

Linguists have long recognized that language usage is deeply embedded in sociocultural contexts. As such, language itself is inherently a social practice which is governed by the norms for spoken language within a particular linguistic community. These norms define not only *what* can be said, but also *who* is likely to say what in conversational interactions. For instance, Labov's (1966) study of the social stratification of (th) in New York City shows that (th) use was highly correlated with socio-economic status in that those with low socio-economic status were less likely to use the prestige variant (i.e. /θ/) than those with higher social status. Brown and Gilman (1960, 253–76) also illustrate this point in their description of the usage of the *Tu* and *Vous* pronouns in European romance language – that is, powerful people (superiors) use *Tu* and receive *Vous* from those with inferior social status. These studies are important insofar as they evince a connection between an individual's power (economic, social, etc.) and their respective language usage; yet they have limited utility for studies on language and power because they do not define what power actually is, nor explain how it interacts with individual identities and creative language use.

Kiesling's (1996) work on power among fraternity men builds on these early studies and provides a framework for defining power and analyzing the relationship between language and power through the lens of a 'power role'. According to this framework, power is:

- 1 Socially and culturally situated in every society.
- 2 Passed from generation to generation and resistant to change.
- 3 Relative to the relationship between the hearer and speaker.
- 4 Relative to pre-existing socially determined roles.

- 5 Relative to the position that a participant wishes to create through language.

This description of power indicates that a definition of power is relative to the society in which power is situated, which is one of the key ideas in Kiesling's power framework:

Power is one of the most basic productive social relationships; importantly, power relationships are real and meaningful to the speakers, as shown in the details of talk. Through language, people place themselves in relatively enduring power roles, as defined by a community of practice. Essentially, the framework suggests that people place themselves in certain power roles by using language to index these roles; however, every speaker cannot simply use any strategy or form to index any role. They are limited by ascribed traits, previous roles they have filled in the community, the roles available in the situation, and their competence in a certain strategy or form. Thus, there is a balance between using language to place oneself in a power role, learning the language expected of a person in a certain role, and creating a new definition of a role. Moreover, people have multiple roles, and may move from one role to another – even with the same audience in the same speech situation. (Kiesling 1996, 40–41)

Hence, Kiesling operationalizes power in society through a construct known as a *power role*. Power roles connect language and power in that the language used by participants in a power role is related to the respective power that an individual holds within the community. This framework predicts that powerful language can only be accessed by those in certain power roles or by individuals who wish to create powerful identities through the use of language. In addition, the framework recognizes that access to power roles is contextually constrained and that not all linguistic forms are accessible in all speech situations.

Importantly, the power framework makes predictions about language and power in the real world that can be extended to the study of power relationships in virtual communities. As such, the present study extends previous work on digital games by more

fully investigating the relationship between language and power in online games. In particular, the following research questions will be addressed:

- 1 How do participants perceive power roles within *WoW*?
- 2 How do participants perceive powerful language within *WoW*?
- 3 What is the relationship between power roles and powerful language within *WoW*?

## Methodology

The method of this study was a participant-observation ethnography that took place over a period of six months in 2007. The two researchers involved in this study joined different communities within *WoW*; Lauren Collister joined a Roleplaying (RP) server and Benjamin Friedline joined a Player-versus-Player (hereafter PvP) server. In-game demographic information and player opinions were obtained via an online survey given to participants, and conversation data were obtained using the built-in chatlogging feature in *WoW*. Both researchers also kept ethnographic journals during the course of the study.

The survey participants were in-game acquaintances of the researchers or members of the researchers' guilds who consented to be included in the study. Little is known about the background of the participants in terms of gender, occupation, race, or age, outside of what was shared via in-game chat or through the questionnaires. Character names have been changed in all cases (excluding the names of the researchers' characters), and any sensitive information has been removed from the data.

## Results

### *Participants' Perceptions of Power Roles in WoW*

In an attempt to understand how participants in *WoW* perceived power roles (Research Question #1), we asked participants in an online survey to reflect on the characteristics of powerful players. Several items required likert scale responses which asked students to agree or disagree with statements (1) to (4) below:

- 1 My gear makes me powerful.
- 2 My experience with the game makes me powerful.
- 3 My crafting abilities make me powerful.
- 4 Male avatars are more powerful than female avatars.

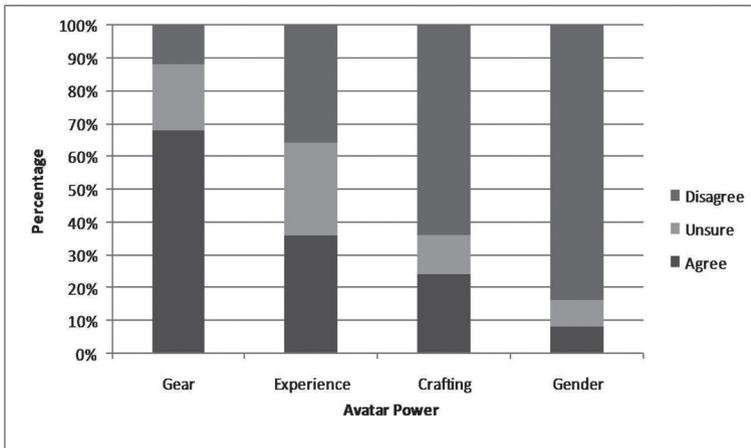


Figure 9.1 What makes an avatar powerful?

As depicted in Figure 9.1, participants believe that gear and experience correspond to power in *WoW*. Seventeen of 25 respondents indicated that having good gear placed someone in a powerful position. For instance, 'purple items' (items with names written in purple) are epic, or exceptionally rare, and having them makes a player's avatar more effective in combat within the gameworld.

To attain these purple items, players must defeat the most difficult enemies in the gameworld, a feat which requires great co-ordination and skill. Gear quality is related to a character's capacity – that is, the sum of the abilities available to the character – and is indicative of the player's abilities as well<sup>9</sup>. In addition to gear, some (9 out of 25) respondents thought that having experience with the game made one powerful. Knowledge of game mechanics (e.g. how to complete a particular quest) and game environment (e.g. where to find a rare item or creature) were also linked to power within *WoW*. This is a form of power employed within the gameworld – having knowledge that can be passed on to others or used to further the purposes of the individual or group gives a player an advantage in the game.

Participants' responses also indicated that certain characteristics within the gameworld were not important for determining a player's power. As displayed in Figure 9.1, few participants agreed that crafting abilities or avatar gender made participants powerful in *WoW*.

Participants in the survey were also given a chance to respond to open-ended questions such as: Describe a powerful person on your server and explain why they are powerful. In response to such questions, one theme that emerged was that power was often linked to an avatar's class (tank, healer, or damage-dealer). This relationship between power and character class may be drawn based on ethnographic observations and participants' comments to a survey question pertaining to character class and power. According to one participant,

Lots of people think hunters are overpowered, but socially not so much. Many people don't like them as a class, and tanks and healers are less common and more desirable than dps (damage per second) in general.

Based on this comment, we might describe social power from the standpoint of a supply-and-demand model. On many servers, damage-dealers are abundant, whereas fewer people play healers and tanks. We found that 60 per cent of our survey respondents reported having a DPS character as their main character, while 25 per cent had healers and 15 per cent had tanks, respectively. Although this survey was conducted in 2007, it is still relevant to the

contemporary version of the game – that is, even with the advent of the ‘dungeon finder’ system which automatically matches players with parties, healers and tanks are still in high demand because they have a shorter wait for their dungeon queue due to there being generally fewer of them at any given time. In connection with the power framework, the results of the survey reveal that having the right gear, having knowledge and experience with the gameworld, and being ‘in demand’ by playing the right class are salient power roles within the *WoW* gaming community. However, it is important to point out that these findings provide only part of the picture of language and power within *WoW*, in that they describe the concrete manifestations of power without addressing the question pertaining to the relationship between language and power within the game. The next section discusses participants’ perceptions of links between language and power in *WoW*.

### ***Powerful Language in WoW***

The second research question concerns how participants perceive powerful language within *WoW*. Participants’ responses to a survey question regarding how powerful participants speak within the game can be placed into two distinct categories. The first category is collaborative or polite language (cf. Brown and Levinson 1987). This category is best explained in the words of one participant who describes his/her guild leader, a powerful person, thus: ‘He is appropriate and kind to others in the group. He encourages participation and is never abusive.’ Several other participants have similar ideas regarding the collaborative nature of powerful speech. These participants note that powerful people speak politely with directness and precision while at the same time respecting the needs of other players. Alternatively, the second category is aggressive language. Participants describe players who employ this type of language using words like controlling, abusive, or mean. For instance, one survey participant describes the actions of players who use this strategy as ‘making fun of [somebody] in front of everyone around them’.

## ***An Analysis of Language and Power in Virtual Discourse***

The final research question concerns the relationship between powerful language and power roles in the game. In order to address this question, we provide linguistic analyses of four excerpts from our ethnography of *WoW* as exemplars of the workings of power within the gameworld. Each example is presented as it appeared in our chatlogs taken directly from the game, with names changed to pseudonyms to protect the identity of the players involved. We purposefully chose excerpts from structured collaborations in the gameworld in order to observe how players interact with each other. Nardi and Harris's (2006) work on interaction in *WoW* informed our choice of these selections and the analyses that we performed. These interactions involve opportunities for players to collaborate to learn something about the game or to achieve a mutually desired end result; furthermore, all of the environments require collaborative efforts from multiple players. The interleaved collaboration, which is so essential to gameplay in *WoW*, is the ideal situation to observe linguistic interactions for displays and uses of power, since it is in these arenas that players with power resources can demonstrate their abilities and linguistic behaviors. The four excerpts we analyze are from: (1) a maximum level battleground (PvP environment), (2) a low level questing session, (3) a maximum level raid, and (4) a general conversation in the Trade chat channel. The first three of these excerpts involve structured collaboration which foster interactions between players for the continued mutual enjoyment of the players, while the fourth involves an exploitation of an area in which structured collaboration could take place.

### **Aggressive Language in a Battleground**

The first example occurred in a level 70 battleground<sup>4</sup>. The participants' characters in this battleground were all at the maximum attainable level within the game at the time of our study, meaning that they had amassed hours of time within the gameworld to hone

their skills and abilities, acquire the best possible equipment within the game, and learn all there was to know about the game and its mechanics. According to how survey participants defined power, having one or all of the aforementioned attributes or items may place a participant in a power role within the game.

In the excerpt below, the participants (members of the Alliance) were attempting to secure bases such as a lumber mill, a mine, and a stable to gain resources to defeat the enemy faction, the Horde. The player Nomercy had many of the characteristics of a powerful character, including epic (purple) PvP gear, which could only be obtained through engaging in PvP combat and winning many battles, giving Nomercy gear and experience as sources of power. In addition, Nomercy was a paladin healer – the only healer out of fifteen players in this battleground<sup>5</sup>. As stated above, the apparent paucity of the healer class on this server may have made healers more in demand; because of this, Nomercy had another source of power.

### Example 1: Aggressive language in a battleground

- 1 [Battleground Leader] Nomercy-Crushridge: GROUP 1 GOING TO MINE GROUP 2 AND GROUP 3 GOING TO BS (= *blacksmith*) THEN PUSH TO FARM IM THE ONLY 1 WHO GO TO STABS (= *stables*)
- 2 [Battleground Leader] Nomercy-Crushridge: CALL INCS (= *incomings*)
- 3 [Battleground Leader] Nomercy-Crushridge: AND GG (= *good game*)
- 4 [Battleground Leader] Nomercy-Crushridge: I GO STBS
- 5 [Battleground Leader] Nomercy-Crushridge: COME ON NO 1 ELSE AT STBAS (= *stables*)
- 6 [Battleground] Highbon-Stonemaul: Inc stables
- 7 [Battleground] Geedbrow-Perenolde: stables needs help
- 8 [Battleground Leader] Nomercy-Crushridge: why are you going to Im (= *lumbermill*)

The most evident display of Nomercy's power is his use of the CAPS LOCK key. Typing in all capital letters is usually perceived as using a raised voice, or textually yelling at others (Collister 2008), which imposes his will on the others and, therefore, is a threatening act (Goffman 1967). In addition, he uses direct language to convey his orders to the other participants in the battleground, dividing players up into groups and telling them exactly where they should go. Nomercy also uses public embarrassment by asking the question, 'why are you going to lm?' in line 8. Here, Nomercy sees that several participants are not following his orders to assist at the mine or the stables, but are instead going to the lumber mill (lm). Nomercy does not actually want to know the answer to the question, but rather he wants to embarrass the two to three aberrant individuals who have disregarded his orders and gone off on their own. Nomercy's language displays aggressive strategies because he attempts to control the actions of others by yelling (i.e. CAPS LOCK) and through public humiliation.

### Collaborative Language in Party Chat

The next conversation example occurred in party chat<sup>6</sup> on the PvP server. The three participants, Terrified, Dysfunction, and Agerionos, were attempting to defeat a large group of enemies in order to get an item needed for a quest. When it comes to power roles in *WoW*, the individuals in the following conversation are not in a very good position. They have only attained 30 out of the possible 70 levels of experience (pre Lich King expansion) and may not have had much experience playing the game. As such, they have limited access to power roles through gear or experience with the game, yet the players use language to create power within their group conversation while questing, even though they are powerless in terms of many of the things that make a player powerful within this world.

#### Example 2: Collaborative language in party chat

- 1 [Party] Terrified: ag where did u get ur pet? (= *a small bird that follows Agerionos*)
- 2 [Party] Agerionos: one of my friends gave it to me

- 3 [Party] Terrified: it's awesome
- 4 [Party] Agerionos: its from a valentines day event
- 5 [Party] Agerionos: thx (= *thanks*)
- 6 [Party] Terrified: two mages so if things get out of control u each have sheep (= *a magic spell that transforms an enemy into a sheep, temporarily disabling it*)
- 7 [Party] Agerionos: yep
- 8 [Party] Terrified: brb
- 9 [Party] Agerionos: k (= *ok*)
- 10 [Party] Dysfunction: hold
- 11 [Party] Dysfunction: hold age (= *agerionos*)
- 12 [Party] Agerionos: k
- 13 [Party] Dysfunction: Terr is cutting virus scan off
- 14 [Party] Dysfunction: let Terr mark the target and we both pry (= *pyroblast, a magical spell*)
- 15 [Party] Agerionos: k

Even though these characters derive little power from the sources described earlier in this paper, they all stand to benefit from a successful interaction – they will reap the rewards of a quest completed. Since they must work together to complete the quest, the participants must co-operate with each other, and one of the best strategies for co-operation at low levels is by using collaborative linguistic forms. Players would prefer to interact with someone who is friendly, and many players might not agree to help someone who shouts or gives unnecessarily harsh orders. Without the gear or experience to 'excuse' the exercise of power via the use of aggressive language, collaborative language is a viable alternative for inexperienced players.

As illustrated in Example 2, Terrified uses collaborative language to create power within this interaction. This conversation begins with a compliment about Agerionos' pet from Terrified. This positive comment makes Terrified seem friendly, and is perhaps intended to

boost Agerionos's willingness to work together with him. Shortly thereafter, Terrified issues an indirect order in line 6: 'two mages so if things get out of control u each have sheep.' The mages both presumably know that they possess the magic spell *sheep* (this spell transforms a monster into a sheep), so they do not need Terrified to tell them; however, what Terrified is really saying here is to use the sheep spell if things get out of control. By first creating solidarity among the party members with a compliment, and then issuing an indirect order, Terrified demonstrates the use of power through collaborative linguistic strategies.

Dysfunction also uses collaborative language to create power within this interaction. Dysfunction enters into the conversation for the first time after Terrified's departure and adopts Terrified's stance as the leader until Terrified returns. Initially, Dysfunction uses direct orders (line 11: hold age) with explanations (line 13: Terr is cutting virus scan off) but later, gives direct orders without explanations to Agerionos (line 14). The use of direct orders with explanations is a collaborative strategy because it mitigates the threat of the orders, showing reason behind the actions rather than ordering actions by virtue of one's position. Dysfunction still defers to Terrified's position, casting himself as speaking for Terrified, and justifies this position because he has knowledge that Agerionos does not (regarding Terrified's virus scan). Having established his position, Dysfunction can give direct orders without explanations later after already demonstrating the required politeness, while still maintaining that Terrified is the leader of the party.

In this example, we see how two players without the typical sources of power associated with power roles harness collaborative language to achieve success in the game environment. Collaborative language is a strategy available to players without the sources of power that players such as Nomercy (from Example 1) have, and can be used by anyone in the game to promote harmonious social interaction.

### **Collaborative Strategies in a Raid**

The following example comes from the data from the RolePlaying server. The setting is a raid in which ten people must work together to fight extremely difficult enemies. Raids are an example of end-game

content in *WoW* – in order to be part of a raid, a player must be at the maximum level, have the best gear available, and be competent in the intricacies of playing their class. In this particular raid, Jeremiah is the raid leader – he is not only the leader of the guild hosting the event, but he also has the best gear and the most knowledge of this particular raid (Karazhan) of anyone in the group. In addition to these sources of power (his gear and his experience), Jeremiah is also in the role of the main tank, a very important position for any raid which automatically indexes power based on the vitality of the person in the role. He has ample sources from which to draw power; however, Jeremiah instead chooses to employ collaborative linguistic strategies to preserve the goodwill of the team, such as the one below in Example 4. This example directly follows a wipe, or a failure to defeat a boss, which resulted in the death of everyone in the raid.

Players in the Ulduar raid environment (Blizzard Entertainment 2004)

### Example 3: Collaborative strategies in raid leadership

- 1 [Raid Leader] Jeremiah: So now that we've seen the fight it should be a bit easier the second time
- 2 [Raid Leader] Jeremiah: Oh, and Opalyn totally needs to give us shadow protection
- 3 [Raid Leader] Jeremiah: Tam pointed that out to me and suggested we yell and swear at you, but I thought a friendly reminder would be better
- 4 [Raid] Tam: I totally did not say that.

Instead of using an aggressive order such as 'do better next time', Jeremiah instead says 'So now that we've seen the fight it should be a bit easier the second time'. Jeremiah includes himself in the plural first person pronoun 'we', meaning that he, too, will do better next time after seeing the fight and failing initially. In line 2, Jeremiah gives an order that could help the raid be more successful in their next attempt, namely a spell that protects against shadow damage that the player Opalyn, a priest, had forgotten to cast. Jeremiah does not fault Opalyn, which could be perceived as an act of aggression,

but gives an indirect order instead. Giving orders is a potentially aggressive linguistic strategy, as demonstrated in Example 1, so Jeremiah follows his order with a deflection by saying that another player (Tam) would have employed an aggressive linguistic strategy ('we yell and swear at you'), but he (Jeremiah) instead chose to employ a collaborative one ('a friendly reminder'). Tam, the supposed aggressive language user, immediately denies his involvement in the issue, but it does not matter – Jeremiah has already set himself up as in opposition to people who use aggressive language, whether Tam is one of them or not.

### **Spamming and 'Bully Power'**

The final analysis in this paper explores the 'bully power' language that some participants within the gameworld link with powerful language. This example is difficult to explain for three reasons. First, members of the *WoW* community differ in their assessments of spammer<sup>7</sup> language. For some members, spammers are powerful and use powerful language because they control the trade chat channel (usually used for trading items) and annoy a lot of people. For others, however, the same spammers are said to be weak and use weak language that annoys people and reflects their antisocial stance within the gameworld. Either way, most players view spammer behavior as being deviant in some way – that is, going against the established norms of the gameworld for their own benefit or gratification (Mortensen 2008). Linguistically, it can be hard to identify what 'spam' actually is. There are many different ways that a player can spam the trade channel, and a player may use multiple spamming strategies (e.g. player harassment, flaming, inappropriate topic selection). Last, many of the spammers do not have any of the material things (e.g. gear, experience, ability) that are linked to power roles within the game. We know this because you can check to see what types of equipment spammers have by looking up their names on the *World of Warcraft Armory* website (Blizzard Entertainment 2011) as well as see their level by clicking on their name in the chat box. The question is: what is it about spammers that makes their language usage ambiguous in terms of power in the gameworld? We suggest that spammers attempt to access power by using language

forms which usually index aggressive linguistic strategies; however, the spammers themselves do not have access to these strategies. In this way, they are being deviant and going against the socially established norms of the game. We have outlined these norms in the above section, and spammers deliberately flout these norms of language use as one strategy to express deviance. By looking at a spammer, Wafflezz, and his group of spammer friends in action, we can see evidence of this behavior.

#### **Example 4: Spamming and bully power**

- 1 [Trade] Wafflezz: People who arent Wafflezz name themselves Rabbitboy
- 2 [Trade] Voodooom: why you guys talk in trade your supposed to talk in general
- 3 [Trade] Vermicol: I must be Wafflezz, I'd never been stupid enough to take a name like Rabbitboy
- 4 [Trade] Wafflezz: Yah!
- 5 [Trade] Rabbitboy: WAFFLEZZ
- 6 [Trade] Marioboy: don't start that again ... we always talk in trade ... dunno why either
- 7 [Trade] Nishary: stop spamming trade wafflezz
- 8 [Trade] Wafflezz: O HAI RABITBOY
- 9 [Trade] Rabbitboy: HOW LONG ARE THE Q's (= *queues for battlegrounds*)
- 10 [Trade] Frog: we talk in trade because we can talk to all cities
- 11 [Trade] Parasite: AI SPIE WAFFLEZZ
- 12 [Trade] Wafflezz: o me too
- 13 [Trade] Parasite: =O
- 14 [Trade] Wafflezz: i spie a wafflezz

Wafflezz, a notorious spammer on the server, begins this interaction in trade chat (a chat channel that can be viewed by a large

number of people) by insulting another chat participant, Rabbitboy (line 1). Rabbitboy eventually responds by directly addressing Wafflezz in CAPSLOCK (line 5), both of which are considered aggressive linguistic strategies. Wafflezz responds in kind in line 8, and the spammer group of Wafflezz, Rabbitboy, and Parasite continue their conversation with each other using these aggressive strategies while ignoring the protests of other chat participants (lines 2, 6, and 7). The spammer group also converses using a different online language form – that of LOLcat<sup>8</sup> – which further differentiates them from the rest of the group.

Wafflezz and his spammer group are notorious for their annoying antics in trade chat, and, from the observations of the authors and the survey responses, every server has its own version of Wafflezz. The deviant linguistic strategies of spammers are quite similar: they violate the purpose of the chat channel they are using, they use CAPSLOCK to draw attention to themselves, they make fun of other people trying to use the channel, and they ignore protests of others against what they are doing. Spammers are doing exactly what the raid leader Jeremiah was doing in Example 3 above, except in reverse. Spammers are powerless characters who are expected to use collaborative linguistic strategies like those players in Examples 2 and 3; however, they attempt to use aggressive linguistic strategies despite the fact that they do not have the requisite sources of power to gain access to these strategies.

## Discussion

These interactions reveal that power within *WoW* is realized through the interaction between linguistic and cultural artifacts that position players in power roles within the gaming community. Nomercy is a high-level avatar who uses aggressive strategies to bend others to his will in battleground chat. Terrified, Dysfunction, and Jeremiah rely on collaborative strategies in order to facilitate harmonious group interactions in party and raid chat. Wafflezz uses aggressive language in trade chat, to the dismay of players who believe that the trade channel is for trade purposes only, in order to express deviant behavior. What is interesting about these examples is that there are

links between the language that these players use and the power roles that they have available to them. In conjunction with Kiesling's power framework, players with greatest access to power roles (e.g. gear) are those who have the most legitimate access (according to how survey participants perceived power) to powerful linguistic strategies. For instance, Nomeracy has the right to utilize aggressive linguistic strategies because he possesses epic-level gear and has lots of experience with the gameworld.

On this view, Jeremiah would also have a right to use these powerful aggressive strategies; however, he chooses to create power through collaborative language. In *WoW*, whether one has power does not determine the kind of language that will be used, but the range of available language. The speech situation narrows down the language that will most effectively suit the desired outcome. In a raid, much like when questing, all of the players must work together so that they all may reap the rewards of a job well done – in this case, they will receive epic (purple) gear, obtain money, get experience in the gameworld, and be able to brag to their friends about their victories. Such collaborative behavior may be less likely to happen if the raid leader were aggressive and harshly criticized players for their failure to perform. So while Jeremiah has access to aggressive linguistic strategies, he chooses not to employ them in order to have a better chance to achieve success in the raid. This finding is consistent with work on guild organization and leadership by Williams and colleagues (2006, 355–6), in that these data further show that guild leaders have much to gain by sharing their expert knowledge with novice players.

These results are representative of a general trend in the acquisition of language and power within *WoW*, in that participants acquire legitimate access to powerful language through the attainment of better gear and higher levels of experience. In connection with the earlier quote from R. V. Kelly, the transformation from 'pipsqueak' into veteran player is accompanied by access to more powerful linguistic forms. When a player enters the gameworld for the first time, they do not have the material artifacts within the gameworld that can place them in a power role. (See Bealer in this volume for a more in-depth discussion of the interactions between player identities and game environments.) On the one hand, in the earliest

stages of a character's career in *WoW*, one would expect them to use collaborative language to access power because they do not have the requisite gear or experience – the capacity, in other words – to utilize more aggressive forms of powerful language. On the other hand, veteran players can either use collaborative language or the more powerful aggressive forms of language because gear and experience reinforces their use of powerful, aggressive linguistic forms. This shows a link between the player's real world actions (e.g. learning to play the game) resulting in actions happening to the avatar (e.g. better gear, higher level).

Importantly, our results further reveal that participants can use powerful language to create power roles within virtual interactions. Wafflezz contrasts with Jeremiah and Nomercy because he does not possess the relevant in-game artifacts that place one in a power role; yet, many survey respondents would agree that Wafflezz is deploying powerful language when spamming the trade channel. Wafflezz's behavior is significant from the standpoint of the theoretical framework because it illustrates the bidirectional relationship between language and power roles that is inherent in Kiesling's theoretical model. Specifically, access to power roles need not be restricted to those who have material artifacts as long as a player is competent in a strategy or form within a given speech situation, which opens the way for deviant behavior. Wafflezz uses powerful language to place himself in a power role within the gaming community despite the fact that he does not possess any of the relevant material sources of power that typically index power within the online community. Put another way, Wafflezz makes use of his competence in spamming language and the roles available within the trade chat context to create a power role within the community, despite the fact that his avatar lacks the relevant sources of power such as gear and experience that are typically associated with a powerful position within the gameworld. (For an alternative reading of this phenomenon, see Travis's chapter in this same volume.) This strategically deviant behavior shows that it is not the case that players like Wafflezz misunderstand the norms of the community; on the contrary, they possess exceptional knowledge of interactional norms and purposefully flout them in order to take on a deviant identity.

When taken together, these data suggest that Kiesling's power framework can be extended from face-to-face conversations to incorporate virtual discourse. As a digital game, *WoW* situates players in a world that may seem altogether different from the real world. Specifically, avatars in the gameworld are immortal, in possession of magical talents, and level up over time to acquire more potent abilities. People in the real world may age or get a promotion in their job, but people in the real world do not level up and instantaneously acquire new skills and magical abilities that make them more powerful. Despite these differences between the real and the virtual, the power framework provides a viable model for interpreting the relationship between language and power in virtual discourse in that culturally defined power roles (whether real or virtual) encode norms for linguistic behavior (and vice versa). As such, an understanding of how community members view language and power within virtual conversations permits an ethnographer to explore the workings of power in online games such as *WoW*. The data for this study come from one game in particular, but power constructs and deployments may be similar for all MMORPGs. The sources of power may be different based on the construction of the game, but players will bring with them many of the same experiences and skill sets as they have to *WoW*.

Kiesling's framework would also predict that the power constructions that we have identified in *WoW* would persist over time, despite significant changes to the gameworld such as the most recent expansion: *Cataclysm* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2010). According to Kiesling's work, power structures are passed from generation to generation and are resistant to changes that occur within the community. The Gear Score Calculator is one example of a change to the game that does not appear to change the way that players perceive power – that is, the Gear Score Calculator generates a number, or 'gear score', which indicates how good or bad a player's gear is (the higher the number, the better the gear). Players will frequently display their gear score as evidence of their power and ability in the gameworld.

One aspect of identity and power that we have not addressed in this chapter is gender. At the outset of the study, we had anticipated that there would be some effect of gender on the power of

a player. Interestingly, the respondents to our survey indicated that they did not see a correlation between the avatar gender and the power of the player. The result regarding avatar gender and power may seem a bit surprising, but may indicate a dissociation of player identity with avatar identity. Also, since we did not have data on the real-world gender of most participants in our study, it was not possible to link physical gender with digital linguistic behavior. Therefore, we did not incorporate gender in our analysis since it was difficult to characterize the interaction of gender with power in our study. Since gendered use of language has been linked with power in language and gender studies (cf. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003, 38) more research is needed in this area as it relates to the gaming world.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, we have extended research on digital games to include the formation and linguistic deployment of power within the MMORPG *WoW* using Kiesling's power framework. We argue that power in *WoW* comes from three primary sources: gear, experience, and demand. These sources provide the basis for which a powerful identity (i.e. power roles) may be constructed, and consequently the types of linguistic strategies (collaborative or aggressive) that may be used. Those characters (excluding spammers) who did not possess the adequate sources of power to use aggressive linguistic forms instead utilized collaborative strategies in order to accomplish their tasks in the gameworld. We note that even though a player possesses adequate sources of power, the simple possession of these sources does not require them to use aggressive, threatening linguistic strategies, but merely gives them the option to do so; in contrast, players who use linguistic strategies for which they do not have the required sources are perceived as annoying and deviant. This analysis reveals power to be a complex interaction of resources, activity, and identity that manifests itself linguistically in unique ways within digital gaming cultures. This research has only just begun to untangle the complexities involved in power and interaction within digital communities; future research could enhance the proposed

power framework by exploring language and power within other digital game environments under the same theoretical model.

## Notes

- 1 The authors would like to thank of Scarlet Crusade and its associates and friends and guild mates from Darkspear.
- 2 A raid is a high-level dungeon that requires the participation of many players (10–40) to complete due to its high level of difficulty.
- 3 For more about character capacity, see Ragnhild Tronstad's chapter in *Digital Culture, Play, and Identity: A World of Warcraft Reader*.
- 4 A battleground, as its name implies, is an event on all *WoW* servers that focuses on PvP combat.
- 5 Parenthetical expressions in transcripts are the authors' explanations of in-game jargon which may not be known to readers unfamiliar with *WoW*. Text inside of parentheses did not appear in the original utterance.
- 6 A party refers to a group of up to five players who are working together to perform a task.
- 7 A spammer is a player who constantly posts messages to the general or trade chat channel. Sometimes the spammer posts the same message many times, which fills the other players' chat boxes. In other cases, spammers talk about controversial subjects in order to get a reaction from other players and/or make other players angry.
- 8 Additional information about LOLcat can be found on this website: <http://www.icanhascheezburger.com>.

## References

- Bartle, Richard. 1996. 'Hearts, Clubs, Diamonds, and Spades: Players Who Suit MUDS.' Accessed June 8, 2011. <http://www.mud.co.uk/richard/hcdfs.htm>.
- Blizzard Entertainment. 2010. 'World of Warcraft Subscriber Base Reaches 12 Million Worldwide.' Last modified October 10, 2010. <http://us.blizzard.com/en-us/company/press/pressreleases.html?101007>.

- 2011. 'World of Warcraft Armory.' Accessed June 8, 2011. <http://www.wowarmory.com>.
- World of Warcraft*. [PC]. Blizzard Entertainment: Austin, 2004.
- World of Warcraft: Cataclysm*. [PC]. Blizzard Entertainment: Austin, 2010.
- Brown, Roger, and Albert Gilman. 1960. 'The Pronouns of Power and Solidarity.' In *Style in Language*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok. 253–76. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Brown, Penelope, and Stephen Levinson. 1987. *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Collister, Lauren. 2008. 'Virtual Discourse Structure: An Analysis of Conversation.' M.A. Thesis, University of Pittsburgh.
- Corneliussen, Hilde G., and Jill Walker Rettberg, eds. 2008. *Digital Culture, Play, and Identity: A World of Warcraft Reader*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Eckert, Penelope, and Sally McConnell-Ginet. 2003. *Language and Gender*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Goffman, Erving. 1967. *Interactional Ritual*. New York: Doubleday. I Can Has Cheezburger?. 2011. Accessed June 8, 2011. <http://www.icanhascheezburger.com>.
- Kelly, R. V. 2004. *Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games*. North Carolina: McFarland & Company.
- Kiesling, Scott. 1996. 'Language, Gender, and Power among Fraternity Men.' Ph.D. Dissertation, Georgetown.
- Labov, William. 1966. *The Social Stratification of English in New York City*. Washington, DC, Center for Applied Linguistics.
- Mortensen, Torill Elvira. 2008. 'Humans Playing *World of Warcraft*: or Deviant Strategies?' In *Digital Culture, Play, and Identity*, ed. Hilde Corneliussen and Jill Walker, 203–24. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- NC Interactive. *Lineage II*. [PC]. NCSOFT: Seattle, 2011.
- Nardi, Bonnie, and Justin Harris. 2006. 'Strangers and Friends: Collaborative Play in *WoW*.' In *International Handbook of Internet Research*, ed. Hunsinger, Jeremy, Lisbeth Klastrup and Matthew Allen, 395–410. New York: Springer.
- Steinkuehler, Constance. 2005. 'Cognition and Learning in Massively Multiplayer Online Games: A Critical Approach.' Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison.
- Taylor, T. L. 2006. *Play between Worlds: Exploring Game Culture*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Tronstad, Ragnhild. 2008. 'Character Identification in *World of Warcraft*: The Relationship between Capacity and Experience.' In *Digital Culture, Play, and Identity: A World of Warcraft Reader*, ed. Hilde

- G. Corneliussen and Jill Walker Rettberg. 249–64. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Williams, Dmitri, Nicholas Ducheneaut, Li Xiong, Yuanyuan Zhang, Nick Yee, and Eric Nickell. 2006. 'From Tree House to Barracks: The Social Life of Guilds in *World of Warcraft*.' *Games and Culture* 1(4): 338–61.