

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

This chapter includes four sections. The first section analyzes and discusses the four research questions posed in chapter one and repeated in chapter three. As discussed in chapter four, the themes generated from each of data collection method were triangulated to improve internal validity and to answer the four research questions.

The second section includes a proposal for building an intercultural training tool in a virtual environment. This model is based on the information gleaned from the four research questions. In the third section, I suggest areas for future research. This includes ways to improve this study, as well as new areas of research discovered through the data collection process. The final section summarizes the study.

Research Question Analysis

This section of the paper analyzes each of the four research questions using the data gleaned from observations, document analysis, and interviews. Summary tables are included for easy reference.

Research Question 1

The first research question includes a primary question and two secondary questions. The first secondary question discusses components of subjective culture found in *World of Warcraft* and the second secondary question discusses in what contexts subjective culture were found.

Primary Question

The first research question asked, “How do virtual environments such as those that exist within Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs) manifest components

of subjective culture?” Eight subjective cultural components were discovered through analysis of data from observations, document analysis, and interviews. Each component manifested itself through player interactions in-game or on outside community forums or Web sites.

During these interactions, players utilized text, game language, voice, and emotes to communicate with one another. Each of these guided player behaviors and navigation through the virtual environment in accordance with community expectations, rules, and norms. Players also defined their roles, role-modeled, developed social formations, and formed relationships through player interaction. Just as with real-world culture, subjective culture in *World of Warcraft* manifested largely through personal interactions. In *World of Warcraft*, many of these interactions occurred during in-game holidays, guild events, small groups, and on guild Web sites.

Secondary Question One

The first secondary question asked “What components of subjective culture are found in an MMOG virtual environment?” After reviewing the raw data and the themes generated from these data, it became apparent that subjective cultural components did exist in *World of Warcraft*. Players were not always aware of the impact each component had on their play, but players were expected to learn the components nonetheless. Through the analysis of each research method, eight components of subjective culture became apparent. These components are summarized in Table 1.

Social formations and relationships. Social formations and relationships were built and sustained inside of the *World of Warcraft* virtual environment. Social formations were not only developed by the game designers, they were also constructed by

the participants themselves. By design, players were broken into races (humans, orcs, dwarves, etc), but as time progressed, players intermingled with other races and eventually joined or created guilds. Observation of numerous guilds confirmed that social formations and relationships were present. Not only did structure and hierarchy exist within many of the guilds, but strong friendships developed and were sustained.

Nearly all analyzed guild Web sites included a discussion of guild leadership, rank, and progression. In addition, each website included forums for members to interact with one another outside of the game. These opportunities allowed members to strengthen the interpersonal connections they had made with fellow guild members inside the game.

The guild leaders also confirmed that social formations and relationships were built and sustained inside many guilds. Some guilds had minimal structure, while others, like Guild A, incorporated significant structure into their guilds. Regardless of structure, each guild leader discussed how their respective guilds were organized and how one progressed through the guild. Each guild leader also talked about the importance of building relationships within the guild by establishing respect and trust for one another.

Behaviors. The second component of subjective culture found in *World of Warcraft* was behaviors. Good and bad behaviors were learned and modified as a player continued the game. Good behaviors included being friendly, helpful, supporting, and having fun. These good behaviors were reinforced with supportive and positive written compliments, verbal comments, or modeling. Poor behavior included begging, ninja looting, yelling, swearing, and belittling other players. These behaviors were corrected quickly and expected to stop.

Guild Web sites did not reveal how players behaved, but they showed how players were expected to behave. Each guild website dedicated space to defining rules and managing expectations of in-game behavior. Interviewees confirmed that certain behaviors were allowed while others were not. Guild members were expected to behave respectfully, maturely, civilly, and light-heartedly. In addition, guild leader C stated that guild members were expected to behave “like they would with any other person outside of the game. Learn the strats (strategies), play nice, share the rewards.” How one behaves in *World of Warcraft* impacts how others view that player, how satisfying the experience may be, and how successful the player is.

Norms and expectations. Norms and expectations were also present in *World of Warcraft*. Through observation, document analysis, and interviews, it became apparent that players were expected to help, respect, trust, and interact with one another. It was common for players to greet one another, praise each other for doing well, and say goodbye on a daily basis. In addition, players were expected to refrain from harassing, discriminating, or belittling any player in the game. Finally, players were asked to overcome individual greed and act with integrity, honor, and maturity. Only good behaviors reflected positively on the guild and increased its reputation in the game.

Game language. The use of the written language was very important in *World of Warcraft*. While players on the Blackwater Raiders server were required to use English, a gaming language was also used to converse. This gaming language is an adaptation of shorthand used for text-messaging and includes the use of abbreviations and symbols. Various symbols and abbreviations were observed throughout the study and were also found on community documents such as the *World of Warcraft* manual and Web sites.

Furthermore, guild leaders used both symbols and abbreviations to answer the interview questions. One example was when guild leader A wrote, “I made it! :P.” By adding the “:P” symbol, the interviewee added a smirking playfulness to the response. Because I knew what this symbol meant, I could interpret its meaning more fully. Players who did not know the game language missed a significant portion of the conversation. However, by asking questions, players learned how to read the language and gained access to more meaningful interactions.

Gestures and emotes. In addition to the written game language, gestures and emotes were used to add a visual component to conversation. Emotes were defined written commands (type /, followed by one word) that would animate or vocalize the player’s avatar. The *World of Warcraft* manual and website had pages dedicated to the use of emotes so players could learn how to liven up their conversations with others.

Players /wave, /thank, /greet, /flirt, /cry, /laugh, /sleep, /salute, /bow, and /goodbye other players as part of their normal conversation. Using emotes was another way for players to interact with one another and provide more meaning to the interaction. Emotes were also used when textual communication was impossible. One example occurred when I was fighting an enemy and my avatar nearly died. A Horde player provided assistance, but because we could not communicate directly with one another, we used emotes instead. He saluted (/salute) me and I bowed (/bow) to him. This non-verbal exchange allowed us to show our respect for one another.

Roles and role-modeling. Player roles can be divided into three categories: active participant in-game, member of a group, and member of a guild. As an active participant, players were expected to help other players in need, provide advice, interact, follow

general guidelines for behavior, and contribute to the economic, social, and political aspects of the game. As an active participant, I learned and taught language, rules, roles, and values. Players typically learned their roles by watching other players demonstrate consciously or unconsciously.

The second role players were expected to fill was a member of a group. Groups typically formed when players wanted to complete a quest and each player had a role depending on the composition of that group. Consequently, when a person moved onto a new group, his or her role often changed. The community documents included discussions about determining role through clear expectations and conversation.

Finally, each member of a guild had a role to fulfill. Guild members were expected to contribute knowledge, help, and items to the guild and its members. In addition, guild members had to positively represent the guild and recruit only top-notch players. Guild leaders had the additional expectation of running the guild, disciplining unruly members, planning events, and leading by example. To reduce frustration and for the guild to run smoothly, members must fulfill their roles and help others perform their roles as well.

Rules. Observations, document analysis, and interviews yielded a similar set of rules that players were expected to follow. First, players were asked to follow similar rules for interacting with one another. This included abstaining from begging and cheating, helping other players, congratulating fellow guild members, and positively representing the guild at all times. These rules were designed to construct a pleasant environment in which all players could play and succeed.

The second set of rules pertained to player behavior. Players were expected to be polite, friendly, and understanding, while discouraging players from belittling, discriminating against, or harassing other players. In addition, players were to respect one another, have a sense of humor, participate in the game, and act with integrity, honor, and maturity. These rules were set in order to create an in-game and in-guild value-system. These values comprised respecting and trusting other players while encouraging them to respect and trust you. Mutual respect and trust created a positive environment in which to play and learn. When players valued these characteristics, they created an environment conducive to sharing, interacting, and growing.

The third common set of rules present in the game was how to progress inside one's guild. Guilds with simple rules for progression often promoted players simply based on level. More complicated guild rules were common for role-playing or militaristic guilds. Rules for two such guilds were called "Code of Conduct," "Official Code," and "Articles of Justice." One militaristic guild even had rules for "executing a court martial," which were used when a player broke one of the "Articles of Justice" (Guild A). Regardless of how formal rules were, they were designed to clearly define the expectations of the group and to create a shared set of values.

Rituals and events. The designers of *World of Warcraft* and guild leaders developed events in the game to create opportunities for players to interact with one another and have fun. All guild events were designed to build community and to let newer members interact with current members. The purpose of these events was twofold. First, guild members had the opportunity to meet one another and have fun. Second, members learned about the culture of the guild and how to contribute to that

culture. Through interaction, players learned the rules, values, and expectations of the guild.

World of Warcraft included many holidays throughout the year, which introduced players to new foods and drink, different clothing, and events. Guilds also held a number of events designed to engage their members and build community. These events included marriages, funerals, snowball fights, storytelling events, leveling contests, fashion shows, races, duels, and instances. Player-focused guilds also developed repositories for players to submit photos, videos of important events, comics, stories, artwork, jokes, histories, and profiles of in-game and real-world players. Some guilds committed to role-playing also developed a number of role-playing events designed to help players learn how to role play and have fun at the same time. Guilds devoted to maintaining a tight bond between members strove to offer at least one guild event each week.

Secondary Question Two

The second secondary question asked, “In what contexts are subjective culture components found?” These contexts are summarized in table 1. Subjective cultural components were pervasive in the *World of Warcraft* virtual environment and could be found wherever the player was located. Social formations and relationships were largely found inside guilds though players also built strong relationships with players from other guilds. In some cases, two guilds formed an alliance thereby creating a new set of relationships for guild members.

Behaviors, rules, norms, and expectations were present in all aspects of the game, though largely through interaction with other players. How people behaved and how they were expected to behave could be seen on the general chat lines, in open conversation,

and in guild interactions. Rules and expectations were set both by the developers of *World of Warcraft* and by the guild leaders. These rules and expectations were to be followed not only in the guild, but also when dealing with any other player of the game. In most cases, when a person behaved inappropriately, they were reminded of how to behave either through demonstration or humiliation.

Language, gestures, and emotes were present mostly in textual communication through various chat channels. However, language was also present when players conversed using voice over IP technology like Ventrilo or TeamSpeak. Because emotes are visual, they were only used when player avatars were in close proximity in the game. Emotes were common in inns and cities, while questing, and in social events.

Roles and role-modeling occurred in the game, in small groups, and in each guild. All players had roles to fulfill, which often changed depending on the situation. Role-modeling also occurred throughout the game, but the most meaningful role-modeling occurred inside guilds. More senior members often modeled good behavior, correct communication techniques, and positive game play to less experienced members. Modeling occurred when two players chatted, quested together, or participated in a guild event.

Finally, rituals and events were common occurrences in *World of Warcraft* and occurred in just about any location or circumstance in the game. Game-sponsored holidays were present throughout the entire game. When players entered a city, region, or inn, they recognized that a holiday event was in progress. Guild events were more isolated because they typically occurred in one location. However, because guild events

occurred many times, they usually took place in different locations through *World of Warcraft*.

Table 1: Questions 1a and 1b

Question 1a: What components of subjective culture are found in an MMOG virtual environment?

Question 1b: In what contexts are subjective culture components found?

Subjective Cultural Components	Context
Social Formations and Relationships	Inside guilds, between guild members, and between players
Behaviors	Player interaction on general chat channels, open conversation, and guild discussions.
Norms and Expectations	Player interaction on general chat channels, open conversation, and guild discussions.
Game Language	Textual communication on general chat channels and verbal communication on voice over IP (VoIP) systems like Ventrilo and Teamspeak.
Gestures and Emotes	Textual communication on general chat channels and when players were in close proximity (in cities, on quests, etc.)

Roles and Role-Modeling	Through player interaction in the game, in small groups, and in the guild.
Rules	Player interaction on general chat channels, open conversation, and guild discussions.
Rituals and Events	Guild events and game-sponsored events and holidays.

Research Question Two

The second research question also had a primary question and two secondary questions. The first secondary question discusses the occurrences of experiential learning, while the second secondary questions highlight the contexts where communities of practice occurred.

Primary Question

The second research question asked, “How do players of Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs) learn inside the virtual environment?” Players of *World of Warcraft* learned because of two powerful learning mechanisms were present throughout the game and inside the guilds. These mechanisms included experiential learning and communities of practice.

Players of *World of Warcraft* learned primarily through experience and interaction with other players. The longer a player played the game, the more skills, knowledge, language, and culture could be acquired. Players experienced phenomena and learned

through written or verbal directions and instructions, demonstrations, critical thinking, formal training, and mentor/mentee relationships.

World of Warcraft players also learned through participation in communities of practice. Communities of practice were observed in guilds and in quest/instance groups. These communities formed because members had a common goal to improve skill, practice role-playing, or complete a quest/instance in the game. The success of the community of practice was dependent on active participation, a strong sense of team, respect, and trust.

Secondary Question One

The first secondary question asked “How does experiential learning occur in the MMOG environment?” After reviewing the raw data and the themes generated from these data, experiential learning was found to exist in *World of Warcraft*. Through the analysis of each research method, five common occurrences of experiential learning were discovered. These occurrences included directions and instructions, demonstration, critical thinking, formal training, and the mentor/mentee relationships. Table 2 summarizes these occurrences.

Directions and instructions. Providing directions and instructions was common in *World of Warcraft*. Players often helped one another during quests by explaining how to complete the quest. In addition, players helped one another on the general chat line by providing information to successfully complete a task in game. Finally, Web sites like Thottbot.com, Allakhazam.com, and WoWWiki.com provided players with step-by-step instructions for completing tasks in the game. Players learned how to play the game and

to succeed by reading and listening to instructions and directions provided by other successful players.

Demonstration. Demonstrations resulted in better learning than simply providing directions and instructions. Players often showed others how to fight an enemy, cast a spell, or get from one place to another. In one situation, my research assistant worked with our guild leader to learn how to be a more effective mage. She observed the guild leader perform and then tried the skills while our guild leader watched and provided comment. This process continued throughout the lower level dungeon (Deadmines) instance until she no longer needed feedback from our guild leader.

Many guild Web sites provided examples to demonstrate how to apply to the guild or how to post a role-playing character profile. These examples showed what information needed to be included and how to complete the process. By following the guild leaders' examples, new members demonstrated competence. Some interviewees also confirmed that mentoring occurred in their respective guilds. More experienced players demonstrated how to complete a quest or how to role-play effectively. The newer players developed proficiency by observing the actions of more experienced players.

Critical thinking. Critical thinking occurred as a result of immediate feedback received by the game or other players. In most cases, this happened when the player died and had to examine what went wrong. When I was given feedback by the game and others (mentors, other players), I learned through doing and through reflection. When in a group, I consulted with other players to determine what faltered and devised a new strategy to succeed. Through teamwork and reflection, we learned how to succeed in the

game. Furthermore, we learned to apply some of these strategies to other situations in the game.

Community documents also included reflections from players in the form of advice to other players. Sites like Thottbot.com, Allakhazam.com, and WoWWiki.com included postings from players who had trouble completing a quest and how they ultimately completed it. In many cases, players incorporated trials and errors, as well as strategy used for success.

Reflecting on quest failures also occurred in guilds. Guild leaders C and R both said they thought about their experiences often and made adjustments the next time around. When asked whether they reflected after attempting a quest, the leader of guild R wrote, “Oh yes, definitely. And when I do the quest again with friends, an alt, or to help a guildie, I always try to put those considerations into action.”

Formal training. Some guilds provided formal classes to their members to help teach players how to become a contributing member of the guild. These classes were often simply reading the guild rules and guidelines, but could also include discussions with senior members of the guild. During these discussions, players learned how to quest, communicate, and contribute to the well-being of the guild. Formal training provided guild members with an opportunity to learn guild values, expectations, and accepted behaviors from the more experienced members of the guild. Through active mentoring, players observed, practiced, and adjusted their behaviors and actions.

While less common, some guilds had formal role-playing classes. These classes were designed to help new guild members learn how to role-play. Guild leader V wrote, “I try and share with people who are new to role-playing some basics and lending the

understanding that we all have to start somewhere, to make them feel more comfortable.” Senior role-players led discussions with new role-players either in game or on the guild website. New players practiced speaking in-character while the senior role-player observed. As the conversation progresses, the senior role-player provided feedback and interjected to further demonstrate the art.

Becoming the mentor. Players learn through reading, watching, and practicing skills. Being able to demonstrate a skill or provide accurate advice to another player is an indication of concept mastery. My research assistant and I observed many instances where the mentee absorbed what she or he had learned and used it to mentor another player. In one situation, a senior guild member took us both through the lower level dungeon (Deadmines). She not only showed us how to be successful, she also showed us how to move, attack, take the game seriously while having fun, interact, behave, and use game language effectively. Once we mastered these skills, both of us became the mentors. We applied the personal and leadership skills we learned to our own experiences when leading other players through quests.

Table 2: Question 2a

Question 2a: How does experiential learning occur in the MMOG environment?

Common Occurrences	Context
Directions and Instructions	Players learned how to play the game and to succeed by reading and listening to instructions and directions provided by other successful players.

Demonstration	Players learned by observing other players demonstrating a skill and by reading or viewing demonstrations on guild websites.
Critical Thinking	Critical thinking occurred as a result of immediate feedback received by the game or other players. Critical thinking also occurred on community documents and in guild discussions.
Formal Training	Some guilds provided formal classes to their members to help teach players how to become a contributing member of the guild. Classes included reading documents, talking with senior members, and learning how to role-play.
Becoming a Mentor	Once a player mastered a particular skill, being able to demonstrate that skill or provide accurate advice to another player was an indication of concept mastery.

Secondary Question Two

The second secondary question asked “How are communities of practice utilized to help participants learn and build skill?” The data and their resulting themes showed that communities of practice did exist in *World of Warcraft* and that players utilized them

to learn and build skill. Through the analysis of each research method, six components of communities of practice were discovered. These components included common goal, the guild as a community of practice, the quest as a community of practice, active participation, sense of team, and respect and trust. Table 3 summarizes these components.

A common goal. According to Wenger (2002), members of a community of practice share a common goal, problem, or concern (p. 4). The simple requirement is that they are bound together because they interact and learn together, as well as survive and move forward (Wenger, 1998). Players of *World of Warcraft* had many different goals including reaching end-game, raiding the other factions' cities, role-playing, fighting other players, and playing the economics of the game. Players typically formed groups or guilds around these interests to insure a uniform guild purpose. Each guild then created a mission statement to express this common purpose. The mission statement was included on each guild website and members were expected to adhere it. Some common guild missions included being a role-playing guild, being helpful and supportive to all guild members, and fostering a team-based environment. Members who did not agree with the mission of the guild often left the guild to join one that served their purpose or created a new guild with a distinct statement.

The guild as a community of practice. The *World of Warcraft Game Manual* (2004) defines a guild as “a collection of players who have joined together to create a mutually beneficial relationship with each other” (p. 145). According to the manual, players in guilds grouped together, built relationships, offered assistance to one another, and practiced their skills together (p. 145).

How the game manual defines a guild matched the reality of most guilds.

Players shared a common purpose, worked in teams to progress, shared information, practiced skills, and provided advice and guidance. This reality also matched the definition of Wenger's community of practice where people create and share knowledge, develop individual and team skills, share a common goal, and work together as a team (Wenger, 2002).

A quest as a community of practice. Through observation, analysis of documents, and interviews, it became apparent that each individual quest or instance was also a community of practice. Each group had a goal of completing the quest, gaining experience and skill, having fun, and helping one another. In addition, each member participated, practiced skills, shared knowledge, developed individual capabilities, experimented, and utilized critical thinking. Through interaction, players worked together and learned from one another. When the quest or instance was completed, there was no longer a common goal to hold the group together so members typically went their separate ways.

Active participation. According to Wenger (1998), within a community of practice, members must participate. Wenger stated that "participation combines doing, talking, feeling, and belonging" (p. 55). The need or expectation to participate and feel a sense of belonging is significant in *World of Warcraft*. Members of the game, a group, or a guild were expected to participate in the game and contribute to the well-being of each group of which they are a part.

In our guild, members were expected to play often, participate in discussions, help one another complete tasks, practice skills, give items to other players, and contribute to

the knowledge of the group. Because each member of the guild paid close attention to these expectations, the guild thrived and members continued to benefit. Those members who did not actively participate also did not receive as much help from other guild members. Inactive players typically left the guild or were asked to leave the guild.

Sense of team. People within a community learn through interactions with other members, experimentation, observation, and critical thinking (Leemkuil et al., 2003; Lunenburg, 1998). As indicated earlier in this chapter, experimentation and critical thinking are common in *World of Warcraft*. While individuals often experimented and thought critically on their own, better strategies for success typically arose when people worked as teams. When individuals acted as individuals, the team failed; however, when individuals acted as members of a team, the team succeeded. One guild leader confirmed this, “You joined as a team. You live as a team. You work as a team. You *die* as a team. There is no middle ground. You cannot win as a team if you fail as individuals.”

Respect and trust. Wenger (2002) informs us that knowledge is dynamic and resides in the minds of people. As a result, there must be mutual respect and trust in order for interactions to occur and knowledge to be shared. Trust and mutual respect are the “social fabric for learning” in the community (p. 28). Each guild encouraged members to work together to establish respect and trust so each member could successfully complete quests and have meaningful learning experiences.

Players outside the guild could also be labeled respected or not respected. When a player did something unacceptable by the overall community, word spread about that particular player. In one case involving one of our guild members, this person was caught begging for gold in one of the cities. Word quickly spread and our guild

leadership was informed of the situation. Because our guild is respected on the server, most people saw it as an isolated incident. Furthermore, because guild leadership dealt with the player quickly, the reputation of the guild was not tarnished. However, respect for the individual player diminished, impacting his ability to find group members outside the guild.

Table 3: Question 2b

Question 2b: How are communities of practice utilized to help participants learn and build skill?

Community of Practice Components	Description
A Common Goal	Goals included reaching end-game, raiding the other factions' cities, role-playing, fighting other players, and playing the economics of the game. Players typically formed groups or guilds around these interests to insure a uniform guild purpose.
The Guild as a Community of Practice	Players in a guild shared a common purpose, worked in teams to progress, shared information, practiced skills, and provided advice and guidance.
The Quest as a Community of Practice	Each group had goals, participation, skill practice, shared knowledge,

Active Participation	experimentation, and critical thinking. Members of the game, a group, or a guild were expected to participate in the game and contribute to the well-being of each group of which they are a part.
Sense of Team	Players developed a sense of team while playing in groups and interacting with fellow guild members.
Respect and Trust	Each guild encouraged members to work together to establish respect and trust so each member could successfully complete quests and have meaningful learning experiences.

Research Question Three

The third research question asked, “Where do participants learn?” Participants of *World of Warcraft* learned in four primary places including the virtual environment, group, guild, and community documents outside of the game. As Kolb (1984) suggested, learning occurred when players shared concrete experiences, reflected, drew

hypotheses, tested hypotheses, and had more experiences. This cycle occurred in all four places players learned.

The first place learning occurred was in the virtual environment. Observations, document analysis, and interviews confirmed that players learned how to play and interact with one another while navigating the game's virtual environment. Learning occurred by observing other players, monitoring interactions between other players, participating in the game, completing tasks, earning reputation, building skill, and being an active member of the game's community.

Second, players learned while participating in groups. Participation was key to learning in groups because only through participation would players expand their knowledge, skills, and identity (Wenger, 1998). Groups were formed to travel to a new locations, complete quests, or to tackle an instance. When a group formed to complete a quest or instance, failure often occurred. As a result, the group utilized group knowledge and expertise to devise a strategy to succeed. This reflection and critical thinking continued until the group was successful. This process was typically facilitated through text or voice by a more experienced member of the group. The other group members group learned from that experience and transferred their new knowledge to another situation with a different group.

The third place players learned was in the guild. As a community of practice, the guild encouraged members to solve problems, make informed decisions, contribute to the team, have fun, feel a sense of belonging, build networks, follow rules and guidelines, and learn communally (Wenger, 2002). The data showed that most of the learning in the game occurred through interaction with guild members. More senior members of the

guild often demonstrated skills or techniques that less-experienced guild members then emulated. There were numerous observed instances where senior guild members modeled in-game skills and expected behavior. Junior players were expected to observe and learn the modeled skills and behaviors. For instance, I learned how to treat and praise other players in the guild by watching more senior members of the guild demonstrate these behaviors.

Finally, players of *World of Warcraft* accessed a wealth of information about game play outside of the game itself. Players could access the *World of Warcraft* manual and website, as well as walkthrough documents such as Thottbot.com, Allakhazam.com, and WoWWiki.com. These sites provided information about races, classes, professions, quests, and instances. Players not only retrieved information, they also contributed to these sites by adding their own experiences to them.

In addition, many guilds compiled a database of knowledge that other guild members could access outside of the game. The guild Web sites examined for this study included information about guild rules, expectations, and values. Players could also learn about guild successes, upcoming guild events, and tips for success. Some guild sites set up libraries for members to check out guild information and shared knowledge. The library often included stories, pictures, jokes, comic books, and movies.

Table 4: Question 3

Question 3: Where do participants learn?

Location	Description
In Virtual Environment	Learning occurred by observing other players, monitoring interactions between

other players, participating in the game, completing tasks, earning reputation, building skill, and being an active member of the game's community.

In Groups

Group members shared information, thought critically, and reflected on their experiences.

In the Guild

The guild encouraged members to solve problems, make informed decisions, contribute to the team, have fun, feel a sense of belonging, build networks, follow rules and guidelines, and learn communally

Outside the Game

Players accessed information on the *World of Warcraft* website, on walkthrough documents, and on guild websites.

Research Question Four

Research question four asked, "How do experiential learning and communities of practice help players learn subjective cultural components?" While many players did not consciously realize they were learning culture while playing *World of Warcraft*, players did learn components of subjective culture.

Experiential Learning

Players of *World of Warcraft* learned primarily through experience and interaction with other players. As a player played the game longer, she or he learned more skill, knowledge, language, and culture. Players experienced phenomena and learned through

written or verbal directions and instructions, demonstrations, critical thinking, formal training, and mentor/mentee relationships. Directions, instructions, and demonstrations helped players learn rules, roles, behaviors, and expectations.

Critical thinking played an important role in learning *World of Warcraft*.

Through immediate feedback provided by the game and other players, players reflected and devised strategies for success. They then tested their strategies and modified their approach if necessary. When their approach was successful, players often sent a posted note on Thottbot.com, Allakhazam.com, and WoWWiki.com. These postings provided direction for other players to follow.

Role-modeling also occurred throughout the game, but the most meaningful role-modeling occurred inside guilds. More senior members often modeled good behavior, correct communication techniques, and positive game play to less experienced members. Modeling occurred when two players chatted, quested together, or participated in a guild event. As an active participant, I learned and taught language, rules, roles, and values. Players typically learned their role by watching other players demonstrate consciously or unconsciously.

Communities of Practice

World of Warcraft players also learned through participation in communities of practice. Communities of practice included a common goal, active participation, a sense of team, respect and trust, and were observed in guilds and quest/instance groups. As stated earlier in this chapter, both guilds and groups were considered communities of practice because both had common goals, active members, and some level of respect and

trust. This environment became conducive to learning, including learning subjective cultural components.

People within a community learned through interactions with other members and in teams. Through teamwork and reflection, players learned how to succeed in the game. Furthermore, we learned to apply some of these strategies to other situations in the game. Players also learned how to behave while actively participating in the game and in a guild. Observation, guild Web sites, and guild leaders indicated that mentoring opportunities existed for players to watch other players behave and to practice those behaviors. Through observation, practice, and participation, players learned how to behave acceptably.

Players also learned subject cultural components once respect and trust were established. Once established, players were more willing to share thoughts, ideas, and personal information with other players. This openness helped players discuss and observe values, behaviors, language, roles, and expectations. Once these discussions and observations took place, players began to learn the culture of the game, the group, and/or the guild.

A Model for Intercultural Training in a Virtual Environment

This section proposes a model of intercultural training in a virtual environment. Because this study showed that experiential learning, communities of practice, and subjective culture do exist in one MMOG virtual environment, it is possible that they also exist in other MMOG virtual environments. In addition, players learned subjective culture through experience, observation, and direct input from other players. Therefore,

it is theoretically possible that intercultural training could be conducted in a virtual environment.

The Process

The first step is to identify participants who would benefit from intercultural training in a virtual environment. These people would be comfortable with technology, able to learn away from the classroom, and have the time to commit to an intensive training program. Very detailed information would then be provided in advance to help prospective participants decide if intercultural training in a virtual environment is appropriate for them.

Next, participants would be sent training materials electronically and given access to the program's knowledge repository. This would provide participants with relevant program information that they can refer to at any time throughout their program and after program completion. The third step is to enroll participants into the program and assist them with entering the virtual environment. Upon entrance, participants would be given a general tour to familiarize them with the virtual environment, their avatars, the interface, and the functions that can be performed.

Fourth, participants engage in trust building exercises. Because trust and respect are essential for people to feel comfortable sharing with one another, these exercises will continue until trust is established. For the fourth step, participants meet on the virtual island designed specifically for the program and accessible only to the participants. This provides each participant with assurances that they are not being watched and that they can practice their skills without feeling embarrassed or anxious. The island would

contain locations for participants to watch films, work in small groups, practice skills, and reflect and journal in a calm location.

The fifth step is to break the participants into communities of practice based on the goals of each individual. While some information would be discussed in the large group, most of the simulations, exercises, and role-plays would be conducted in the small groups. A facilitator would be assigned to each group to assist with any problems, demonstrate skills, and provide immediate feedback for each participant throughout the duration of the program.

The next step includes providing opportunities at the end of each session to reflect and take notes. This process allows the individual to think critically about what went well and what did not. After reflecting, the small group can share ideas and strategize about how to improve their learning during the next session. Because the training is individualized, participants may take as much time as they need to feel comfortable with the concepts and skills they are learning.

Finally, upon mastery of key concepts and skills, each participant has a debriefing session with their facilitators and their small groups. This provides trainees with an opportunity to share their personal experiences with one another and to solidify any learning that occurred throughout the training. Once trainees leave the virtual environment, they continue to have access the program's knowledge repository and to the facilitators should have they have any follow-up questions or concerns.

Important Characteristics

The success of the above process depends greatly on the characteristics put into the training program. Below are a set of important characteristics derived from the

literature, observations, document analysis, and interviews. These characteristics are instrumental for the success of the virtual intercultural training program.

- An appropriate virtual environment. Because *World of Warcraft* is a fantasy-based game, another virtual environment that provides a more realistic setting should be selected. Since many educational institutions are utilizing *Second Life*, this environment may be a more suitable venue to host the virtual training center.
- Grounded in theories of intercultural training. The virtual intercultural training program would be developed using established intercultural training principles. In addition, experts in the field of intercultural training would be called upon to help construct the virtual training environment.
- Interaction. Interaction is the cornerstone of this program. Within the community of practice, members must participate. Wenger (1998) defines participation as a “social experience living in the world in terms of membership in social communities and active involvement in social enterprises...participation combines doing, talking, feeling, and belonging” (p. 55). Once people participate, they can expand their skills, knowledge, and identity. As this study indicated, experiential learning and communities of practice only occurred when players participated and interacted with one another. Without this interaction, learning is minimal and participants would become disinterested very quickly.
- Reflection. People within a community learn through interactions with other members, experimentation, observation, and critical thinking (Leemkuil, Jong, de Hoog, & Christoph, 2003; Lunenburg, 1998). As some interviewees noted, they reflected on situations in order to improve themselves and the guild. This

reflection is key to critical thinking and problem solving, so the design of the program must include opportunities for trainees to reflect on situations and experiences they have had.

- Individualized programming. The program would not be designed as a “one size fits all” program. According to the literature, the rationale for undertaking intercultural training differs from person to person. Each participant has his or her own needs and goals including improving one’s attitudes and perceptions, preparing to enter another culture, and bettering one’s self (Ferdman & Brody, 1996; Grove & Torbiorn, 1986). The training should reflect this reality and the virtual environment allows for customization.
- Group work. According to Wenger (2002), communities of practice are held together by passion, commitment, and group identification, but will stay together only as long as the community remains relevant for its members. One guild leader talked about his guild falling apart because there were too many different goals held by the members. Successful guilds were held together by group identity and a common purpose. Because the training should be individualized, participants with similar training goals should be grouped together in a specialized community of practice. In these groups, players share information, practice skills, and provide feedback to one another.
- A strong student and instructor support system. The instructor should continually encourage student motivation by providing immediate and sensitive feedback, presenting interesting topics, and appropriately designing the virtual environment. In addition, participants need to have access to the instructor to help guide them

through the training and to discuss any concerns. Participants learn through interactions with the instructor. The instructor guides new members as they slowly adapt to the new community culture (Kimble, Hildreth, & Wright, 2001). As I researched *World of Warcraft* I learned how to play the game, communicate with other players, and gather necessary information by observing and interacting with experienced players of the game.

- Scaffolding. Scaffolding occurs when an expert demonstrates a skill while the participant observes. The participant then practices the skill while the expert watches and provides feedback (Vygotsky, 1978). This program would include opportunities for players to observe the facilitator demonstrating intercultural skills. Each participant would then be given the opportunity to practice these skills while the facilitator provides feedback.
- Respect and trust. Trust and mutual respect are the “social fabric for learning” in the community (Wenger, 2002, p. 28). For participants to open up and learn key concepts and skills, they need to develop trust and respect for other members of the program. This means that time is required for trust and respect to develop.
- Role-play. Role-playing is an important aspect of intercultural training. Culture-specific role-plays allow participants to act as members of another culture and then to interact with participants of a different culture (Gudykunst et al., 1996). This allows participants to view a situation from a different perspective. Virtual environments like *World of Warcraft* allow opportunities for participants to engage in powerful role-playing situations and view the world from a different

perspective. These opportunities should be used to allow participants the ability to experiment and practice skill.

- Provide a safe learning environment. The virtual environment should be designed so that trainees are comfortable and do not have to put themselves in a vulnerable position. A safe environment helps build trust and respect, which aid participants in interaction and sharing information.
- Focus on developing skills. Subjective culture refers to “invisible, less tangible aspects of a group of people, such as their values, norms of behavior, attitudes, and worldview – the things people generally carry around in their mind” (Cushner and Brislin, 1992, p. 43). In order to learn subjective culture, one must develop the skills through practice as opposed to strict memorization. Therefore, the training should focus on developing conceptual, analytical, motivational, communication, and comparative skills. Additionally, specific cultural information (i.e., food, clothing, etc) should be kept to a minimum.
- Appropriate training spaces. Inside the selected virtual environment, spaces would be developed for training to occur. These spaces could include simulations of actual physical locations (a market in Singapore, a club in St. Petersburg, etc.), group discussion and debate areas, and role-playing theatres. Trainees would enter one of these spaces with their training group and practice skills that develop intercultural competence. In addition, reflection rooms would be developed so trainees could reflect on and journal about their experiences and learning.
- External documents. In addition to the virtual training center, a repository of all materials, videos, and transcripts should be made available to the participants

outside of the virtual environment. Many community documents related to *World of Warcraft* served as repositories for information and knowledge. These documents allowed players to refer to them before and after completing the task at hand. Therefore, these documents were invaluable reference tools used by most players.

Areas of Future Study

This section comprises a dialogue about how the current study could be strengthened in a future iteration and what new areas of study could be undertaken in the future.

The Current Study

Through the course of this study, two things became apparent that would strengthen this study. The first would be increasing the number of MMOGs examined. This study included only one MMOG: *World of Warcraft*. Expanding the number of games examined would provide more insight into the culture of MMOGs and would improve the validity of the results.

The second area that would strengthen the study would be increasing the number of interviews and perhaps changing the method of interview. This study had only six interview participants and the interviews were conducted via email. While these six people did provide a lot of information and the email interviews were convenient, telephone interviews of more people would have yielded more information. Telephone interviews would also provide the opportunity for more detailed answers with better opportunities for follow-up.

Future Studies

A number of potentially interesting areas of study presented themselves in this study. First, since *World of Warcraft* is only one of a number of MMOGs, it would be exciting to conduct a similar study on another MMOG. This study would act as a comparison to determine whether the conclusions drawn in this study were specific to *World of Warcraft* or if they apply to all MMOGs.

Second, an exciting MMOG called *Second Life* has become very popular in the past year. Many educational institutions have purchased virtual islands and are developing virtual campuses and classrooms in the game. A future study could examine culture and learning inside *Second Life* and within one or more of the educational institutions present inside the game.

Finally, it would be extremely interesting to develop a cultural training center inside an MMOG like *Second Life* to help new players of the game learn the culture of the game. Principles of experiential learning and communities of practice could be employed to help players learn how to interact with one another and how to adapt to the new culture. A study could be done to determine the effect training had on players compared to no training for other players. Assuming this study was successful, the cultural training center could expand to develop training modules for cultures in the real world.

Conclusion

Research on video games and their genres has increased significantly in the last ten years. In addition, there are now a number of associations dedicated entirely to gaming including the Digital Gaming Research Association (DiGRA) and The Academic

Advanced Distributed Learning (ADL) Co-Lab at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Furthermore, the Journal of Computer Game Research became the first academic journal dedicated to game research and more established journals of education and technology now include scholarly articles devoted to game research.

This paper provided a brief summary of the research that has been done related to video games and MMOGs while providing new empirical research for the growing field of game research. Conducting this study was fascinating and eye-opening. As both a player and a researcher, I was able to observe the culture of the game without significantly altering the experience of other players. By the end of the data collection, my research was a second thought to most members of the guild. My research assistant and I had succeeded in becoming participant observers without intruding on the play of others.

It was also intriguing to discover the culture of *World of Warcraft* by directly observing it, analyzing it on community documents, and hearing directly from *World of Warcraft* guild leaders. I suspected that culture was present in *World of Warcraft* and that learning did occur, but I did not expect to see so many similarities to learning real-world culture. The guilds were similar to micro cultures inside the overall game culture. As one guild leader wrote, "In reality, guilds are nothing more than social experiments." Much like the real world, players experiment, interact, and learn together in a quest to improve themselves and those around them.

The results of this study confirm the possibility of using an MMOG to deliver intercultural training due to the presence of experiential learning and communities of practice. According to Pusch (2004), "new generations of people entering the

(intercultural) field who have greater comfort with technological systems of the future may well invent virtual avenues to effective intercultural interaction” (p. 30). MMOGs may very well be the technological system of the future for providing intercultural training, but only through research can this possibility be explored.