

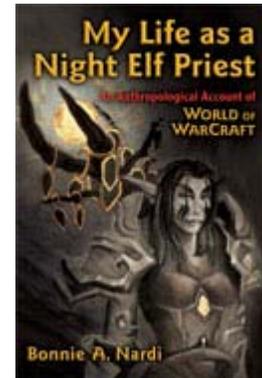
My Life as a Night Elf Priest: An Anthropological Account of *World of Warcraft*

Bonnie A. Nardi

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The University of Michigan Press, 2010

Q&A with Bonnie Nardi, author of *My Life as a Night Elf Priest: An Anthropological Account of World of Warcraft*



World of Warcraft rapidly became one of the most popular online world games on the planet, amassing 11.5 million subscribers—officially making it an online community of gamers that had more inhabitants than the state of Ohio and was almost twice as populous as Scotland. It's a massively multiplayer online game, or MMO in gamer jargon, where each person controls a single character inside a virtual world, interacting with other people's characters and computer-controlled monsters, quest-givers, and merchants.

Bonnie Nardi has given us a fresh look not only at *World of Warcraft* but at the field of game studies as a whole. One of the first in-depth studies of a game that has become an icon of digital culture, *My Life as a Night Elf Priest* will capture the interest of both the gamer and the ethnographer.

Bonnie A. Nardi is an anthropologist by training and a professor in the Department of Informatics in the Donald Bren School of Information and Computer Sciences at the University of California, Irvine. Her research focus is the social implications of digital technologies. She is the author of *A Small Matter of Programming: Perspectives on End User Computing* and the coauthor of *Information Ecologies: Using Technology with Heart* and *Acting with Technology: Activity Theory and Interaction Design*.

The University of Michigan Press: For those unfamiliar with multiplayer online world games, explain briefly how they work.

Bonnie Nardi: You enter a 3D world that looks like a cartoon, a medievally-themed cartoon in the case of *World of Warcraft*. You create an animated character and move it through the world engaging game activities such as slaying dragons, buying and selling at an Auction House, and crafting things like magic potions. You can join a guild or club with other players and chat with them as you play.

UMP: What role do the games play in the lives of those who play them?

BN: With millions of players playing these games there is no single answer to that question. As in real life, people vary. Some common reasons to play include seeking challenge, enjoying the company of others in the activities provided by the games, flirting, immersion in the beautiful worlds rendered by the graphics, and escaping to a world in which one can succeed and experience a continual flow of rewards. Usually players are “polymotivated”; that is, they have more than one reason for playing.

UMP: Do people relate to each other in-game the same as in “real-life” or is it different?

BN: That depends on the game activity. If you are in a guild, the interactions are much more like real life because you see the same people over and over and you don't want to alienate them with bad behavior. You have some responsibilities toward guildmates for certain activities such as raiding that require a lot of preparation, being on time, and teamwork. On the other hand, if you go into a battleground (for games like capture the flag), you are assigned into a group of players randomly and you won't meet them again. Some pretty hair-raising things happen in battlegrounds because there are no sustained relationships to look after. People swear a lot, they criticize others harshly. They cheat by not actually playing and just being present to get the points. They subvert the game by not caring about winning, ruining it for those

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who do want to win. The odd thing is that when you do happen into a good group of players, the cooperative effort to win the game is magical; you mesh with people who are good at their game skills and want to win just like you do. It's all over in 25 minutes though.

In raiding, guilds assemble at a fixed time to enter into certain difficult contests provided by the game. You can't just sit there and not play – your raid leader would kick you out immediately. You can't be mean to others like you can in battlegrounds. If you are going to use off color language, it better be funny. There's certainly a lot of that, but it's for the purpose of entertainment, not just because you are 12 years old and you realize you can say bad words and no one will stop you.

Real life and game life are not entirely separate. Many people play with friends and family. They treat them as they would in real life. On the other hand, online games sustain lightweight friendly relationships that do not have the durability of real life friendships. People come and go. Even people you really like and enjoy may just disappear without a word. The game space protects that. It's where you can choose a kind of hyper autonomy. You play when you want to, with whom you want to, selecting game activities that you like. If you get bored with the game or too busy, you can leave. That's easy because "It's just a game." That is the gamers' mantra. It's meant to separate game play from real world obligations and preserve a space of freedom.

UMP: What cultural differences did you note in your studies of *Warcraft* players in different countries?

BN: I have only studied *World of Warcraft* in North America and China. I want to say up front that play in both locations is remarkably similar. People like the graphics, and the sociability, and the challenge. The game is designed to provide these experiences and it does.

There are some differences though. In China people often play in Internet cafes or *wang ba*. That means there is a significant face to face component to game play, and that it occurs in a public space. Sometimes people meet new people in *wang ba* and other times they go with their friends. If you see someone playing *World of Warcraft* you can even ask someone to change seats so you can sit down next to the WoW player. No one minds at all. Play combines the real and the virtual.

Another difference in China is the reluctance of Chinese male players to play female characters. In North America, male players often play female characters because they like the way they look. In China such players are called "lady boys," which roughly translates as transvestite. These players are derided. Thus very few choose female characters. Female players nearly always play female characters (in North America and China). In China, female players must sometimes explain that they are not "lady boys." They seemed to take this in good grace and shrugged off the annoyance. Chinese male players like Night Elves just as much as North American males ☺

UMP: What was the most surprising thing you noted in your time spent studying the social structures in-game?

BN: The most surprising thing to me was the variety of social relations the game sustains. These relations range from a few minutes in a battleground team with complete strangers to finding one's true love. Of particular interest is WoW as a space for lightweight but satisfying relationships structured around shared interests. Engaging, engaged social relations occur outside the pressures of real life. In-game you can feel surprisingly in tune with others for shared activities such as raiding or arena play (small quick contests that require a lot of skill) and yet you do not develop bonds of mutual obligations beyond the game. If you choose to leave the game, that's fine. In real life you can't just dump your friends without repercussions. Certainly people take play seriously but the consequences remain within the magic circle of a fantasy space. As psychologist Brian Vandenberg says, "It matters that it doesn't matter."