World of Warcraft

“The gamer’s mindset—the fact that they are learning in a totally new way—means they’ll treat the world as a place for creation, not just for consumption. This is the true impact videogames will have on our culture.” —Will Wright, The Sims creator, 2006

World of Warcraft (WoW), a massively multiple online role playing game (MMORPG) in the dungeons and dragons genre, is the most successful personal computer game ever released. As of 2009, it had more than 11.5 million active subscribers worldwide, amounting to 62.2% of the online gaming market. A common misconception is that online video games are populated predominantly by teenage boys, but only about 25% of MMORPG players are teenagers and the average WoW player spends about 23 hours a week in game. About 84% of players, according to the Daedalus survey (Yee, 2005), are male.

Biggs and Tang (Teaching for Quality Learning at University, 2007) introduced the metaphor of “Robert and Susan” higher education student archetypes. Susan learns in a deep way using skills at a much lower cognitive level, like note-taking and memorization; he is happy do the minimum to get by. WoW has its own Roberts and Susans in its pool of hardcore raiders, casual players, and those inbetween.

Although it is a game, WoW, its communities, and its cultural artefacts share a number of commonalities with lifelong learning in online higher education: both are occupied predominantly by the same age demographic; both have Robert and Susan types; both have structures that support ad-hoc groups where alliances shift, merge, and collapse dynamically as people come and go; both encourage the formation of communities of practice (Wenger, 1999) through their design and purposes; and, finally, both, with varying degrees of success, encourage learning and collaboration resulting in an ongoing learning journey.

Research Questions
What do I hope to discover?

Three initial research branches:

1) What encourages players to persist in learning and working, although many tasks are boring and repetitive, and to continue improving long past their current goal? How does this relate to Hagel and Brown’s “lessons” (How World of Warcraft Promotes Innovation, 2009)?

2) How does the social structure around the game resemble a community of practice? How much of a role does social knowing play in the development of expertise and the dissemination of learning? What features would be useful to adopt when designing learning communities?

3) How is the “Robert and Susan” metaphor applicable to World of Warcraft and what does that gain us in understanding how to successfully encourage lifelong learning and build communities of practice?