THERE BE DRAGONS!

AN ETHNOGRAPHIC INQUIRY INTO THE STRATEGIC PRACTICES AND PROCESS OF WORLD OF WARCRAFT GAMING GROUPS

MIKKO VESA
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Key words: Strategy as Practice, Virtual Ethnography, Temporality, World of Warcraft

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I think it is a fair assessment that this thesis is the product of a rather strange journey. When I started studying World of Warcraft back in 2007, my topic was certain to raise an eyebrow or two in any academic audience. Now that 2013 is drawing towards its end, the world has changed a lot. Particularly in Finland, the computer games industry has rocketed to become the new darling child of the economy, perhaps in some way compensating for the underlying loss of pride that the waning fortunes of our overall IT sector has caused. The effect is that to study World of Warcraft is no longer an odd pursuit befitting nerds and geeks, but rather something more generally accepted.

Yet, beyond the surface approval generated by the success of the mobile gaming industry few stop to reflect on the profound changes that games as a part of the ongoing digitalization of society implies. It is this that I drive at with the title of my thesis. On old sea charts there were all sorts of fantastic monsters drawn to the edges of the charts. They were metaphorical representations for the terra incognita; that which we as humans do not know. In a similar manner there be dragons on the edges of organization studies. New spaces and locations are springing up in virtual space of which we know little. Often the results of geek culture, of which Helsinki is a cradle, these spaces will function as incubators for new ways of organizing, strategizing and working. They will define how young people, such as Generation Y, understand and define what it means to be part of society. Gone are the days when ideas such as strategic or human resource management were defined through collaboration between business schools and corporate management. It is hence that I would like to salute through my thesis all of you out there who retain that pioneer spirit in your hearts; keep on looking for dragons! In my view, it is a truly valuable and brave pursuit often impaired by conservative attitudes in the society that surrounds us but ultimately the one pursuit that will stop moss from growing on our doorsteps.

I have been privileged to be able to pursue this thesis at Hanken School of Economics, and in particular at the Department of Management and Organization. From the first moment I entered the department, there was this bursting excitement for new ideas and intellectual exchange in the air. While many university departments are defined by closed doors and tumbleweed, ours is defined by chatter and the smell of fresh coffee. Dear department, even when we occasionally emulate flagellants, let us not forget that we are amazing and the grass is for once not greener on the other side of the fence.

I would like to thank my supervisors, Professors Eero Vaara and Saku Mantere, who have had the patience to rein in a dragonhunter when needed which those initiated will recognize as being no small feat. I’d also like to thank Professor Ingmar Björkman for his foresight in accepting a future dragonhunter to the department all those years ago. As the years have passed, friendships have formed at the department. A particular mention goes to the Nuuskio Raiders- posse of Henrika Franck, Virpi Sorsa, Kari Jalonen and Philip Gylfe; may we never run out of Plan B! I’d also like to extend my profound gratitude to Markus Wartiovaara, Edyta Kostanek, Linus Nyman and Ling Zhang for their friendship and support in times both good and bad. I would also like to thank the numerous people outside Hanken who have helped with this thesis; in particular Doctor Mike Zundel for his sterling work as my opponent and Professor Sarah Kaplan for her truly professional advice as my pre-reader. A warm thank you
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No thesis would be done, albeit with a slowing effect, without the help of good friends. What little sanity I still lay claim to is thanks to your meticulous efforts; thank you Petter, Lennart, Ninnu, Leena, Ross, Pasi, Valtsu, Aleksi, Mari, Auli, Lina, Mika, Eva, Sanna, Joanna, Tina, Jari, Janne, Aino, Mikko and Paulina! I recognize I am as impossible as ever, albeit more absent minded than before. Also, though perhaps none of you will ever read this, I wish to thank all the fantastic people I’ve raided with over the years and in particular the Force of Will hunter team. It is good to be great, but even better to be the best. I’ll never forget, especially the 80 dkp I paid for that damn Drakefang Talisman^^.

Finally, I’d like to celebrate though this thesis to all the generations in my family who have built this land but who have never had the chance to leave their mark in word or text. Ours is not a history of nobles, great academics or mansions. Rather, it is a history of poverty, struggle and a constant fight to make ends meet. For me to write these words is but a trifle manifestation of the profound changes that have swept our country during the last few generations. I’d like to thank my father for his unwavering support in this project, as strange as it must have seen to him at times. But ultimately, this thesis is dedicated to the memory of my mother and my grandmother. It pains me beyond words, of which I have many, that you cannot be here to share this day with joy and pride.

In Helsinki 5th of November, 2013

Mikko Vesa
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1 INTRODUCTION

The last fifty years have seen the concept of strategy become an ever-more pervasive feature of organizational life. What began as a rapid drive for centralized strategic planning in the large conglomerates of the 1960s has today spread beyond large corporations to organizations such as municipalities and cities (Vaara, Sorsa & Pälli 2010; Kornberger & Clegg 2011), third-sector organizations (McCarthy & Wolfson 1996) and university boards (Jarzabkowski 2008). In a strange turn of events, even the military is increasingly introducing concepts of corporate strategy into their own planning, substituting for the traditional military strategy from which corporate strategy originally evolved (Murray, Sinnreich & Lacey 2011; Heuser 2010; Huhtinen 2012). In addition, as I shall attempt to show in this thesis, concepts of corporate strategy and planning can be found in ever-more unexpected places; such as inside computer-generated virtual worlds.

In this thesis I examine strategizing in virtual worlds. That is, I study what people do when they work with strategy rather than examining which strategies as such lead to success or failure. The study of strategizing reflects a contemporary turn towards practice in management studies (Jarzabkowski, Balogun and Seidl 2007; Vaara and Whittington 2012). More specifically, I aim to show how strategy is made under extreme technological conditions where work, management and strategy is located inside a synthetic reality, i.e., a virtual world. The synthetic quality of virtual worlds is a result of these worlds having been ‘built’ with computer code. Work within such a world results in virtual goods rather than actual, physical goods. Hence, also the work of strategizing that occurs in these virtual worlds is directed towards planning and organizing virtual activities within them. This thesis explores this activity by examining what could be considered an extreme case (Pettigrew 1990): namely, the massive multiplayer online game known as World of Warcraft. It is my understanding that while current development of virtual worlds is spearheaded by the computer games industry, it is also something leading information technology firms experiment with in the development of their internal products (Dodgson, Gann and Phillips 2013). Therefore, studying strategizing in virtual settings, such as virtual worlds, can act as a powerful lens for exposing the way our changing technology has impacted daily management work. It follows that, with increasing sophistication in technology, forms of virtual work also evolve. Whereas previously virtual work was mostly associated with teams connected 24/7 through digital communication technology (Kirkman, Rosen, Gibson, Tesluk & McPherson 2002), I argue that today’s virtual technology is increasingly capable of also hosting the activity of such teams, rather than simply connecting them. What this essentially means is that contemporary work could be seen as occurring inside a virtual (as opposed to physical) world, by teams connected by innovative communication technology.

This implies changes in the way strategy is carried out with regard to its practice, practitioners and praxis (Whittington 2006). These three, which form a common framework used in strategy-as-practice studies, provided the conceptual stepping stones that guided my ethnographic fieldwork. This was important in order to retain my empirical crosshairs on everyday strategizing, allowing me later to analyze and explore a coherent body of empirical material from diverse angles. Hence, this introductory chapter aims to accomplish the following objectives. I shall explore the contributions of both this thesis and the attached essays, followed by an explanation of the structure of this essay-based thesis. But before delving into these two, I shall open up this chapter with a somewhat detailed discussion on what it means to study World
of Warcraft and what I believe management and strategy scholars can learn from such an unusual empirical setting.

1.1. What can management studies learn from World of Warcraft?

This study essentially reports the results of research done on the players of a computer game. For many, this conjures up ideas of young people standing in arcade halls or sitting at home in front of their gaming consoles. Hence, to even the most liberal of readers may come the question: What can we learn from studying the players of computer games - especially with regard to topics such as management and strategy? There are many avenues through which to pursue an answer to this question. But first it is important to recognize that computer gaming in 2013 has come a long way from the arcade halls. Today’s games are the products of an industry that has been developing since the 1970s, and during that time it has often functioned as the pace-setting industry for many areas of digital development, from computer hardware to the possibilities offered by online environments. The empirical context of this study, World of Warcraft, represents one such trend and it is the leading product within a type of games known as MMO (Massive-Multiplayer-Online) games. World of Warcraft is not defined by many of the standard attributes associated with classical computer games, such as the three-lives-and-you-are-out of many arcades or the energy-based build your own village-type such as Farmville often found in social media. In World of Warcraft, players often develop one unique character for years in close collaboration with other players forming persistent collaboration patterns that similarly often last for years. In-game, these collaborations are called guilds, though in this thesis I simply call them organizations. They are organizations because they share a whole range of features which would typically be associated with organizations, such as a member hierarchy with specialized managerial and operations roles, resource allocation systems, rules and regulations, a shared strategy and a very real possibility of failing as an organization (Ahrne and Brunsson 2011).

So, what this leads me to observe is that are a great many organizations like World of Warcraft nested within MMO’s doing a whole lot of organizing and that we, from a management studies perspective at least, know virtually nothing about them. My study into the world of MMO games is hence highly exploratory in the sense that I literally had no clear idea where I was taking my research when I initiated my fieldwork. Extra consideration is therefore required to position the research with regard to strategic management. A researcher deeply embedded in this research setting could be tempted to argue that organizations and organizing within World of Warcraft are conducive to nearly any research design or question. I don't believe this to be true, however. Furthermore, claims that are too wide-sweeping regarding the potential of a new empirical context are likely to dilute the value of those contributions. It is thus my intention to next discuss what I think management studies can learn from a setting such as World of Warcraft; arguing that World of Warcraft is a case particularly suited to three types of study with regard to strategizing.

1.1.1. World of Warcraft as a case of the sociomateriality of strategizing

One area where MMO-type games offer a natural setting is in studies that want to understand the impact of technology on management and strategy (Orlikowski and Scott 2009; Kaplan 2011). While the notion of virtualization has been explored for example with regard to virtual teams (Piccoli & Ives 2003; Malhotra, Majchrzak &
Rosen 2007), these studies still tend to see virtuality as a form of 24/7 communication via digital technology between globally-connected teams. Game environments such as World of Warcraft allow such studies to go one step further, examining what happens when teams are not only connected by digital technology but actually situated inside such digital environments. Hence, it allows us to ask what happens when teams are not connected by virtual technology but rather situated inside virtual worlds. Thus the work of teams, and increasingly organizations, is directed by the way virtual worlds are constructed. This construction allows for the dual nature of both the hard-coded premises generated by computer software in the shape of what one can and cannot do with it; but also the negotiated nature of software as it often iteratively develops as a negotiation between developers and the user community.

It also paves way for new questions regarding identity, as players in MMO games are not represented by their own physical bodies but rather by representational avatars, leading us to indeed ask with whom we as ethnographers are observing and interacting (Williams 2007)? For this reason, MMO games offer a radical lens for the study of sociomateriality (Orlikowski 2010), because the synthetic world created by the underlying computer code makes manifest the way in which technology creates the very space within which management and strategy work can occur and this in itself is an important and understudied question. Hence, my first claim is that World of Warcraft provides a good case for the study of strategizing under extreme technological conditions; particularly fruitful in studies of sociomateriality, technological change, the social mediation of technological environments and the way in which these enable and constrain strategizing in organizations.

### 1.1.2. World of Warcraft as a case of strategizing practices and processes

When examining the value of MMO-type game environments for the study of strategy, it is useful to distinguish the process/content-typology advocated by Buergois (1980). The real strength of MMO games as research targets is their potential in the study of the practices and processes of strategic management. What is more, in the studying of practices and processes, the MMO games can also function as laboratories. Due to the relative simplicity of the games compared to real-world business transactions, it is easier to handle the complexity of data that one gathers in the field and to control for features and variables. They are environments in which it is possible to study the utilized processes and practices under structured and controlled virtual conditions, and thus offer up a possible preview of the future of management; a valuable attribute in a field of study that often seems to lag a step or two behind the practice it studies. It is this focus on practices and processes that I concentrate on in this thesis, as is implicated in the title. Virtual worlds offer rich ethnographic settings for studying the ways in which people organize and strategize under virtual conditions; often creating organizations of astonishing complexity and durability. Some have even gone on to achieve world fame among the game’s ten-million player audience.

Yet, while I found World of Warcraft a vivid virtual environment for the study of management practices and processes, it ought to be pointed out that there are severe restrictions related to the strategy content. In World of Warcraft, strategy seeks to achieve rewards granted by the game itself. By and large, these are only meaningful within the game environment, and thus it is not in my view possible to correlate game performance with economic performance. Similarly, while we could learn a lot about organizing processes by studying a football team, it is nevertheless out in the field to score goals and not create economic value (though the latter might be a part of the
club’s off-pitch activities). Similarly, World of Warcraft organizations hunt down virtual dragons in order to acquire magical swords. The activity of doing so is interesting and reveals much about organization, but to make a content argument regarding the most efficient way to procure magical online swords is of wider interest only to those with an interest in procuring magical online swords. Yet, following Whittington’s (2007) call to problematize the notion of performance, if the performance we seek to explain is not of a monetary economic nature but rather, for example, one of simply achieving set targets then such findings can be useful. Hence, my second claim is that World of Warcraft can be studied as a case of strategizing practices and processes performed in near laboratory-like conditions, allowing the researcher to control for performance-related factors and focus on the sociological aspects of strategy making; often in conditions that can reasonably said to be indicative of future strategic management.

1.1.3. World of Warcraft as a case of gamification and Generation Y

While gaming and the playing of computer games can no longer be solely associated with computer nerds or youth subcultures, it is still true that the largest segments of active gamers can be found in the demographically younger segments of society. When games reach the complexity of World of Warcraft, they offer management scholars the opportunity to study organizational environments that capture the organizing practices of predominantly younger generations. Thus, in a broad sense, settings such as World of Warcraft can be used to study the ways in which management changes when conducted by younger segments of our society, or the so-called Generation Y. Some care must be exercised in such studies, however, because while much of the organizing that is done in World of Warcraft is spontaneous and emergent, it is still conducted within what is essentially a commercial gaming space that is constrained both by the commercial interests of the game’s developers as well as the restrictions imposed on any space which is essentially a game. Still, the rules and norms of the game are subject to a constant iteration between the game designers and the player community.

While I do not have access to exact statistics regarding the amount of dedicated World of Warcraft players, I can safely say that they number in the tens of millions globally. I would also wager that the largest group amongst these are young university students. What they learn about organizing and strategizing while playing World of Warcraft is likely to influence the way they see such issues when they move to jobs in society at large. Building on this, the whole notion of gaming is one with which management studies should seek to engage in a more profound manner. It is my gut feeling that concepts such as gaming and playing are concepts with which our field of academics is deeply uncomfortable. I believe that due to gaming and playing’s connection with both youth and the care-based professions of nursing, early education and child care, they are seen as weak and poorly suited to the rationality and prestige we’d like to associate with strategy and management.

This is unfortunate. The very earliest notions of strategy within management studies emerged from game theory (Von Neumann and Morgenstein 1947), and Wittgenstein’s notion of the language game has been a powerful influence in the more discursive studies of strategy (Mantere 2010). Both of these strands demonstrate that as humans we are still what Dutch sociologist Huizinga (1955) calls homo ludens: the playing man. The games we play reveal something important about who we are, and organizations are permeated by them. Academic practitioners would certainly confirm the existence of a ‘publishing game’, for example. Overall, this is a trend that is important to understand also because the idea of gamification (Landers and Callan
is gaining ground as a way of structuring work. To understand the ways games influence both management and organizations, we need to be able to study gaming environments. Complex games like World of Warcraft offer promising settings. Hence, my third claim is that World of Warcraft is an optimal case for studying the management and strategizing practices of Generation Y and generational differences at large. This includes the emerging notion of gamification and its impact on issues such as organizational learning (Proserpio and Gioia 2007).

Thus for me, World of Warcraft presents itself as a rich case for the analysis of strategizing in virtual worlds. This analysis can be utilized for a number of research streams, as long as its limitations are recognized. It offers a fresh and practically unexplored lens on the processes and practices underlying strategy work in a virtual world, and thus represents a step that takes us deeper into the impact digital technology plays on, I argue, both contemporary and future management. The study of such environments offers an opportune lens for micro-perspective studies, because many aspects of the virtual world are by nature simplified. Also, being a game, it is accessible by anyone willing to participate in the game as a player. This is what I proceeded to do, maintaining an immersive, ethnographic approach. As outlined above then, a virtual gaming world can be used to study a multitude of research questions. Each of the essays in this thesis approaches a different set of research questions, with this introductory chapter serving to tie the essays together. Before moving on, however, it is valuable to stop for a moment to reflect on what it actually means to study a MMO.

1.2. On the boundary conditions of World of Warcraft

For all its complexity, World of Warcraft is still a game. It is a game played out in a virtual world that has been custom created for the very specific purpose of supporting the game, and hence if compared to, say, a modern business environment it is grossly simplified. The number of virtual world parameters that players can change is quite constrained. Before moving onto consider these constraints, however, it is important not to overplay their importance. Games such as World of Warcraft are different from ordinary computer games in that they are played for a much longer time. World of Warcraft was released in November 2004, and copies of what is essentially the same game can still be purchased in shops today. Hence, the game is subject to ongoing development by its owner Blizzard Inc. and this development work is iteratively conducted through constant interaction with the player base. In essence it could be argued that games such as World of Warcraft are co-created by its official developer and the player community.

In the case of World of Warcraft, this is clearly evident if one returns to examine the customized user interface, presented here in Figure 1. The vast majority of the modifications are done with mini-programs called mods, written by the player community with tools provided by Blizzard. Also worth noting in the process of considering what management studies can learn from a game such as World of Warcraft is that contemporary organizations at large are constrained by their technological choices to an extent which often surprises us. Simply think about what happens at the average office when the internet is down or how processes engineered to support SAP enterprise software can change and structure organizations. Thus, while virtual organizations within World of Warcraft are clearly constrained by their environments, similarly all organizations are increasingly trapped in their technological realities.
But returning to the topic of World of Warcraft, it could be argued that the game constrains in-game activity to two types of games. The first is generally known as PvE (player versus environment) and the other as PvP (player versus player). Raiding is a subsegment of the PvE game. In PvE games, different types and and sizes of teams co-op erate in order to defeat in-game encounters with computer-guided monsters designed by the game’s developers. Yet, even when successful the players leave no permanent trace on the world itself. Monsters will respawn a week later at the latest, and nothing in the physical environment really changes. Yet, the achievements of leading raiding guilds worldwide still resonate across the World of Warcraft player base. A suitable analogy would be sports, where leading teams do not alter the rules of the game, but their success reverberates through the sport. In a similar fashion, choices and tactics employed by top raiding teams will affect how the entire player base approaches raiding.

Thus, the boundary condition of World of Warcraft is such that daily player activity can influence how the game is played, but not the actual rules of the game itself. This returns us to my previous observations on the constraints of studying environments like World of Warcraft in terms of economic notions of performance. In a very simplified sense, the modern firm plays an economic game centred around the creation of wealth for its investors. From a performance perspective, virtual World of Warcraft organizations are incompatible with contemporary business organizations, as they do not pursue the creation of value for investors. World of Warcraft is merely a hobby for most of its players (with the exception of a handful of e-sports professionals), so the ramifications of the outcomes of organizational decisions within the game cannot be compared to similar outcomes in working life.

1.3. Research questions and contributions of this essay-based thesis

As is often the case in stories which are pieced together from a patchwork of plots, so the research questions and contributions of this thesis will require some initial clarification with regard to structure and content. The research questions driving this thesis have been explored in conjunction with the attached essays; and what follows in the first part of this thesis, or kappa as we call it in Swedish, is a methodological and theoretical elaboration of the themes explored in the essays. Hence, I begin by exploring the more fundamental research questions explored in the essays first. I recommend that any reader who finds these particularly interesting first turn to the specific essay in the appendix before proceeding beyond the first chapter of this kappa. This would be useful for understanding the theoretical reflection presented in the final chapter of this kappa, which is in essence a combination of the theoretical insights generated in the attached essays. Table 1 summarizes the research questions and contributions of the attached essays, leading to the research questions explored in in Chapter 4 of the kappa, as summarized in Table 2.

The first essay explores the role and possibilities of ethnographic immersion field work for the purposes of doing strategy research, particularly within the premises of the strategy-as-practice tradition. While the vast majority of empirical studies within strategy-as-practice have utilized qualitative methods (Vaara and Whittington 2012) the role of ethnography is often called into question. Balogun, Johnson and Huff (2003) call for branching outside core ethnographic methods such as observation when doing research, while Huff, Neyer and Möselin (2010) question the whole micro-orientation that comes along with ethnography, as they feel it impairs strategy-as-practice studies from reaching more generalizable conclusions. Yet, Rasche and Chia
(2009) call for more focus on participant observation as a method for practice studies. Beyond these considerations, the question I address in the first essay is: “Have qualitative strategy studies seriously considered the ethnographic approach and what it portends for the study of strategy?”

### Table 1  Summary of research questions and contributions in the attached essays

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text</th>
<th>Research Question (s)</th>
<th>Contributions</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Essay 1</td>
<td>• How can ethnographic fieldwork be conducted in a manner which produces more significant findings both for research and practitioners?</td>
<td>• Outlining a mode of fieldwork called immersive participation; which essentially entails doing participant observation from a role of responsibility in the host organization.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Essay 2 | • What do people do when they organize a virtual organization?  
• Which kinds of bundles of managerial practice emerge in this organizing?  
• What are the performative consequences of these bundles for organizational failure? | • A holistic typology of the types and bundles of practice used to organize a virtual organization  
• Linking the relationship between the use of practice bundles and organizational outcomes  
• The notion of cessation, an outcome of failure to perform recursive reproduction resulting in internally-induced organizational failure |
| Essay 3 | • What is the role of collective commitment in the formation of organizational boundaries?  
• How does collective commitment constrain or enable strategic change in organizations? | • The notion of collective commitment as it can be applied to the formation of organizations and the establishment of organizational boundaries in virtual organizations.  
• Demonstrating how collective commitment is not based on individual or organization-wide understandings, but rather based on organizational sub-group sociality. |
| Essay 4 | • How does temporality manifest itself in ongoing strategy work?  
• What are the factors that shape temporality in strategy work? | • Temporality is the root form of strategy work  
• Temporality is shaped by perceptions of change and complexity  
• The notion of strategy as temporal emergence |
Based on my own fieldwork, I propose that conventional observation and participant observation methods should be enriched by exercising what I call immersive participation field work. Essentially, this means prolonged field work in a naturalized position within the host organization in a role of responsibility vis-a-vis the host organization’s strategy formulation. Hence, the first essay serves as the methodological backbone of this thesis and outlines the methodological contribution I make. What the essay does not discuss is the specific research environment in which I conducted my research. The last section of this first chapter as well as the entirety of chapter four expands on this methodological discussion, in order to explain what it means to do virtual ethnography in a virtual world such as World of Warcraft. The second essay assumes a classical strategy-as-practice research perspective, in the tradition of Whittington (2006, 2007), asking the question: “What are the practices that a virtual organization uses to manage and strategize?”.

Employing a grounded theory-based analysis of ethnographic field data, the second essay goes on to identify a typology of nine practices that virtual organization use in managing their day-to-day activities. These practices are grouped into three practice bundles (Jarzabkowski and Spee 2009) that depict how different practices relate to the lifecycle of a virtual organization. I call these three bundles foundational, toolbox and routine. The contributions of this essay are to first show both the actual practices used in managing a virtual organization and how these can be grouped together using the notion of practice bundles. Second, I show how practices and outcomes are linked, using a performative understanding of practice (Whittington 2007). In conclusion, I argue that the identified practice bundles all contain sources for organizational failure trajectories leading to organizational cessation, hence linking the practice perspective with process-driven notions of the internal selection environment (Burgleman 1994; Lovas and Ghoshal 2000).

The third essay approaches the strategy-as-practice perspective from a different angle, seeking to explore the relationship between organizational boundaries and collective commitment. Drawing mainly on the theory of sociality (Tuomela 2005) this essay seeks to theorize how organizations emerge, beginning with the formation of close-knit fellowships and, as collective interests of fellowships demand more resources than a single fellowship has access to, evolving into proper organizations. Hence, the paper argues that neither methodological individualism (Felin and Foss 2005) nor large structural constructs such as institutions (DiMaggio and Powell 1983) or discourse (Mantere and Vaara 2008) can alone account for the outcomes of actions performed in organizations. Rather, there are in-between actantial structures, which are essentially small close-knit groups based on social bonds such as friendship, common history and culture, that exert power and perform actions collectively. To study such small-group activity is important for strategy-as-practice, as it sheds light on the actual work of strategizing in organizations.

Furthermore, recognizing the role of fellowships allows us to understand why organizational boundaries are sometimes highly porous, yet other times stable. A collective commitment view based on fellowships essentially claims that such boundaries are the results of temporary agreements struck up by different organizational fellowships. The fourth and final essay takes a phenomenological approach to the concept of time, studying the relationship between strategy work and temporality. It asks two questions: “How does temporality manifest itself in strategy work?” and “What are the factors that shape temporality in strategy work?” The essay argues that managers experience strategy work as experiential vectors. Three such vectors are identified: unquestioned, resolute and fragmented, depending on how
managers perceive the complexity of and changes in their strategy work. The vectors contribute to our understanding of strategic management by explaining how managers experience strategy enactment as an in-situ activity, as opposed to ex-post rationalization.

Table 2  Summary of the research questions and contributions of the kappa

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Research question(s)</th>
<th>Contribution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>What does it mean to study a virtual world through immersive participation?</td>
<td>Outlines the application of immersive participation, conceptually introduced in Essay 1, for the study of virtual worlds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>How are practices, boundaries and temporality interlinked in strategic organizations?</td>
<td>A processual modelling of the emergence of strategic organization, based on the notion of strategic organization</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The kappa of this thesis expands and connects the core topics of the essays. In particular, it is a more in-depth exploration of the application of immersive participation ethnography and how I applied it to the study of World of Warcraft. As the article format in the essays focuses on theoretical contributions, I therefore wish to use the space provided by the kappa to explore the rich fieldwork experience I gathered from a practical angle, explaining more in detail how I conducted my research, as well as describing the empirical context.

Contemporary technology shapes the space for the emergence of new organizational forms such as innovation networks, open source communities, user-corporate collaborations and virtual organizations which, in turn, recursively feed back into the corporate world (Dhanaraj and Parkhe 2006; O’Mahony and Bechky 2008). Such organizations are inadequately explained and explored by current studies, which is problematic considering their increasing importance in the construction of the social weave we live in, not to mention their importance in everyday economic life (Schreyögg and Sydow 2010).

In order to study and understand new organizational forms, researchers must be willing to take an extra step. Novel phenomena cannot widely be studied through the use of archival material because there is none. They are also hard to access, because their presence is not readily announced. Most importantly, our understanding of what sets them apart from traditional organizational fare is something that unveils itself fully only through prolonged fieldwork. It is hence that much of this thesis is dedicated to the role the immersive, ethnographic methods I employed played in forming a practical and epistemological perspective for opening up the nature of studying such organizations in depth.

There are two reasons why a deeper understanding of the nature of ethnography is important for strategy-as-practice research. Firstly, as pointed out by Jarzabkowski and Spee (2009), the field of strategy-as-practice has seen only at best a modest amount of methodological debate to date. Within this debate, there are conflicting stances on ethnography as one of the core field work methods conducted by strategy-as-practice scholars. Some feel the use of ethnography should evolve to incorporate adjacent methods (Balogun, Huff and Johnson 2003), others hope to move away from its use at all together (Huff, Neyer and Möslein 2010), while still others promote embracing ethnography with abandon (Rasche and Chia 2009). While this debate on the role of
ethnography, participation and immersion is valuable when contemplating the nature of strategy-as-practice we need more practical insight into the actual implementation of ethnographic strategy as practice fieldwork. Furthermore, there exists a very real possibility that ethnography is used in a rather cavalier manner when discussing methodology, skirting the potentially rigorous demands placed by the ethnographic tradition on the fieldworker.

Beyond expanding on the thesis from a more traditional ethnographic fieldwork angle in Chapter 3, it is my aim in this kappa to link the theoretical contributions of the attached essays by attempting a meta-theoretical synthesis of the findings. Sometimes this expansion involves moving from the abstract to the specific, as when I contrast Essay 1 with Chapters 3 and 4, but other times it rests more on taking a step in the direction of formal theory, as when comparing Essays 2, 3 and 4 to Chapter 4. Chapter 4 is devoted to the discussion of these questions. I open with a discussion of the concept of strategic organization, before moving onto elaborating on the understanding of the concept of strategy that I use in this section, building around the notion of strategy as temporal emergence in particular. I then return to the essays accompanying this thesis, lifting out three core concepts from them (temporality, practice and boundaries) through which I start to elaborate on the specific questions presented above. I conclude with my views on the current state of strategy-as-practice research, and observe some trends that future research within the stream could take into consideration.

1.4. A note on terminology: Virtual organizations and virtual teams in a virtual world like World of Warcraft

In this thesis, a number of different forms of organizing are alluded to. In order to clarify my terminology, I’ve here assembled some definitions that I use when discussing the specific forms of organizing found in World of Warcraft. In essence my use of these concepts entails a hierarchy in which a virtual world, in this case World of Warcraft, is inhabited by virtual organizations with formal rules and hierarchies containing a number of virtual teams.

1.4.1. Virtual world

A virtual world is a self-contained digitally-generated environment. It forms its own environment for the purposes of work and activity, rather than simply connecting the individuals who are present. It is inhabited by representational characters known as avatars; in the case of MMO games, these are the players’ characters. A virtual world is persistent in the sense that within its parameters the avatars return to the same world time and again. World of Warcraft is a virtual world for the purposes of this study, and it forms the loci of this study.

1.4.2. Virtual organization

A virtual organization is an organization that is active inside a virtual world. It is defined by all the normal criteria one would apply to organizations, from formal rules and hierarchies to resource allocation systems and forms of discipline. A virtual organization is likely to be known and recognized as such by other agents active within the virtual world. In World of Warcraft, there are two forms of raid organizations that are virtual organizations: raid guilds and raid groups. The difference between the two is
raid guild members belong to a technical in-game entity known as a guild, while raid group members can be from several guilds. In practice, the distinction between the two is small, and both are persistent forms of organizing. Typically, with regard to the virtual organizations I have studied, these guilds and groups have a lifespan ranging anywhere from six months to four or five years.

### 1.4.3. Virtual teams

For the purpose of this study, virtual teams are subcomponents of virtual organizations. The most important virtual teams are the functional teams located within the raids: charged with tanking, healing and damage dealing. In larger groups, these often have independent middle managers, while in the smaller 10-character raids they tend to be self-organizing. Furthermore, every raid group has an officer team which in essence constitutes its top management. The officer team consists of raid leaders, raid bankers, staffing officers and possible other functions each virtual organization deems necessary. Virtual teams typically do not have their own independent rules, rather they adhere to the rules and practices inherent in the virtual organization of which they are a part. In addition, any given group of raiders selected for a raid is a type of virtual team, as it forms a subset of the virtual organization to which it belongs.

### 1.5. On the structure of this thesis

This thesis opens with a review of strategy research, focusing on the study of strategic practice and process. I slowly covalence from strategy’s historical roots to contemporary research traditions in order to guide this thesis to the research tradition where it largely resides, namely strategy-as-practice. This is an important distinction to make, for practically all of the attached articles and essays from which this thesis draws were developed through conferences, paper development workshops, symposiums or special issues associated or at least aligned with the practice aspect of strategy. The historical perspective is also important in order to understand the role I allocate to strategy as a profound process and a fundamental part of the theory of organization, presented in the final section here.

The second part of this thesis, Chapter 3, is focused on the fieldwork practicalities pertaining to my work. It focuses heavily on the practical work of ethnography that I have conducted. It builds on the review of ethnography, focusing in particular on virtual ethnography. It then moves on to discuss in detail the specific aspects of doing participant observation research in virtual environments, a cornerstone of my fieldwork. The section also discusses the current status of my research target, the massive multiplayer online game World of Warcraft. The section concludes with some notes on my analytical method, a grounded theory analysis of ethnographic material.

The final chapter of this thesis ties together the four included essays in order to develop further a theory on naturally occurring organization. Part of this theory is already presented in Essay 3, focusing in particular on the relationships between forms of cooperation and resulting qualities for organizational boundaries. It explains the process through which organizations are formed, sustained and ultimately collapse. This section of the thesis also binds together the individual, intermediate and organizational levels, drawn from Essays 2, 3 and 4 respectively. Individual temporalities are then blended together into communal experiential vectors that enable the purposive everyday collaboration of fellowships, or collaborative work through practice. Yet, when
the complexities of the tasks at hand increase, the possibilities of accomplishing goals in fellowship formation diminishes, giving rise to more complex forms of organizing in the shape of organizations. These organizations require a specific set of practices to handle the organizing itself, resulting in purposeful management practices of which what is commonly known as corporate strategy is a prominent example.
2 THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

This thesis draws on a number of theoretical foundations. Broadly speaking these can be grouped into three categories: (1) theories of strategic management, (2) theoretical foundations of ethnography and (3) philosophies of social science. Of these, the contributions of the kappa and the attached essays can be most attributed to the theory of strategic management, but they have naturally also been developed under the influences of ethnographic theory and philosophies of social science. Within strategic management, this thesis engages with three different traditions: strategy process research (Mintzberg 1978, Pettigrew 1979, Burgelman 1983), strategy-as-practice research (Golsorkhi, Rouleau, Seidl and Vaara 2010) and strategy-as-wayfinding research (Chia and Holt 2009). These three all share a foundation in seeing strategy as human work, something done within and by organizations. Within the long ethnographic tradition, I draw on organizational ethnography (Van Maanen 1979a), ethnographies of work (Barley & Kunda 2001; Kunda 2006) and virtual ethnography (Hine 2005) of particular virtual worlds (Taylor 2009; Nardi 2010). By and large, these samples reflect the strong interpretive and qualitative research inherent in ethnography. Finally, though not actively engaging with it, this thesis rests on assumptions drawn from larger sociological theories and philosophies of practice (Orlikowski 2010; Vaara and Whittington 2012) and process theory (Tsoukas and Chia 2002; Chia and Holt 2006).

2.1. The strategy process tradition

In the early 1980s, strategy research started to divide into roughly two camps. Following what Bourgeois (1980) termed the content/process-divide, there was a stream of research using econometrics to study the actual content of strategies, using performance as the dependent variable (Porter 1980; Williamson 1991). Differing from this content orientation was the study of strategy process, which examined organizations longitudinally (Mintzberg and Waters 1982) through either archival (Mintzberg and McHugh 1985) or case study methodology (Pettigrew 1990). Process research signified a return to the early classics of the field by Chandler (1962) and Barnard (1938), namely to the study of what managers actually do. Strategy process studies typically focused on issues such as strategic formation (Mintzberg 1978), organizational culture (Pettigrew 1979), internal corporate processes (Burgelman 1983), strategic change (Johnson, Smith and Codling 2000) and the role of middle managers in strategy work (Wooldridge and Floyd 1990).

The first to break the ground for strategy process research was Henry Mintzberg in the 1970s (Mintzberg 1973; Mintzberg, Raisinghani & Theoret 1976). Mintzberg set out to try to understand strategy work as a form of managerial activity or behaviour as it is actually done, in contrast to elegant but unwieldy statistical descriptions, or what he termed ‘inelegant methods’ (Mintzberg 1979:583). Sceptical of the prescriptive strategic planning typically employed in the 70s, Mintzberg (1978) eschewed the “rationalizing for the future” kind of thinking typical of 70s strategic planning and instead studied two distinct aspects of strategy making. He did this by first shadowing managers as they did their actual ongoing managerial work and secondly by utilizing as archival data the actual strategic behaviour patterns that the ongoing managerial work resulted in (Mintzberg and Water 1982; Mintzberg and McHugh 1985).
The lasting legacy of Mintzberg’s work is his definition of strategy as a pattern of action or behaviour. His definition is adhered to by more qualitatively oriented strategy researchers still today (Mintzberg and Westley 1992). Congruently with Mintzberg’s research at McGill, in the UK Andrew Pettigrew developed the use of comparative longitudinal case studies (Pettigrew 1990; 1992) for studying strategy and organizational change (Pettigrew 1987). Focusing on processes rather than patterns, Pettigrew set out to argue that power, chance, opportunism and accident are as powerful in explaining outcomes as design, negotiation and master plans (Pettigrew 1990:268). To understand the actual enactment of strategy, it is not sufficient to simply study achievements and the past, rather researchers should get ‘inside’ the companies through real-time observation, interviews and the collection of current documentation, preferably in a manner that allows for longitudinal comparisons across different firms. Two dominant themes emerged from Pettigrew’s research for future research: first, the research of strategic change, and second, the ongoing predominance of case-based methodology in qualitative strategy studies.

Taken together, Mintzberg and Pettigrew outlined what would become the foundational qualities of empirical qualitative strategy studies for several decades. It could be argued that the strategy process tradition peaked in 1992, when two dedicated special issues were released by the Strategic Management Journal; though the tradition would remain strong in research focusing on middle management studies (Floyd & Lane 2000; Lechner & Floyd 2012) and evolutionary perspectives on strategy (Barnett & Burgelman 1996; Lovas & Ghoshal 2000). In his well-known studies of the Intel Corporation, Burgelman (1994, 2002) used qualitative methods to show how internal selection mixes with external selection mechanisms when seeking to explain organizational survival and success. Hence strategic management should be studied using dynamic, path-dependent models. A classical example of this is the evolution of Intel from a memory manufacturer to a microprocessor manufacturer, itself a process in which middle management diverged, through the skilful use of internal capital budgeting tools, from a top-management strategy to exploit an emerging business niche that would later become the core business of the company.

As strategy process studies evolved, the tradition became more sophisticated in terms of its understanding of processes and links to process theory. Longitudinally, it was argued that processes could be captured either as series of events in time, short episodes, epochs or a biographic history (Melin 1992). In articulating on the different understandings of the process concept, Van de Ven (1992) argued that process is used in three senses. First, it is used in variance theory to explain a causal independent-dependent variable relationship (although Van de Ven points out that this is often an unsatisfactory use of the concept (see also Langley 1999)). Second, the process can be understood as a category of concepts (though he also finds this limiting as locking actions into categories often manifest only a single causal relationship). Third, Van de Ven says process can be understood as a developmental event sequence. In this way, process can be used to explain how things change over time from a historical developmental perspective. Langley (2007) recommends the use of either backtracking or forward monitoring in order to understand the actions and conditions that create the patterns we observe in the present.

2.2. The strategy-as-practice tradition

While certain components of strategy process research are alive and well today (Hutzschenreuter and Kleindienst 2006), starting in the late 90s, some members of the
process community started to show more interest in what could be called micro-strategizing. This was complimented with an emerging interest in the role of language and practice, particularly in European strategy studies. The first step in this direction, which eventually became known as strategy-as-practice, was an article named Strategy as Practice by Richard Whittington (1996). Tracing the evolution of corporate strategy since the 1960s, the paper argues that there is a need to study strategy not as a feature of organizations, but rather as the work of strategizing. The institutionalization of strategy-as-practice happened in waves. Following the 1996 paper, it took some time for the perspective to gain momentum. It spread to major European management conferences during the first years of the millennium, but arguably its first real battle cry was a 2003 special edition of Journal of Management Studies edited by Gerry Johnson and Leif Melin, both researchers with a past in the strategy process tradition, along with Richard Whittington. This special issue in many ways set the standards for the emerging perspective, both with regard to topics and authors who would today be considered foundational for the perspective.

It ought to be pointed out though, that at this time the name of the forming tradition was still contested and indeed the special issue spoke about an action-based view of strategy. In some ways, evolution through special issues has become a standard part of the strategy-as-practice perspective. The second special issue would be released in 2007 in the journal Human Relations edited by Paula Jarzabkowski, Julia Balogun and David Seidl, and would be followed by a special issue on the role of strategic planning in the journal Long Range Planning in 2008, as edited by Whittington and Ludovic Cailluet. Since then, a special issue on the role of discourse is under review at Journal of Management Studies and there is an upcoming special issue on the relationships between materiality and strategy at the British Journal of Management. A special issue of the Scandinavian Journal of Management on the relationship between time and management has also attracted a number of submissions from authors more associated with post-processual, process theory and wayfinding perspectives on strategy, many of whom initially contributed to strategy-as-practice. Today strategy-as-practice is a well-established part of the strategy studies community with its own dedicated working groups at major conferences like the Academy of Management, EGOS, Strategic Management Society, EURAM and the Critical Management Studies conferences.

Alongside the special issues that have and continue to be formative for the development of strategy-as-practice research and the conferences that have served to create the fairly diverse community from which the perspective draws, special attention should be given the books published within the tradition. The first book in the field was Jarzabkowski's 'Strategy as Practice - an activity based approach', published in 2005. By and large the book was the first lengthy treatise that sought to place the emerging perspective in the wider strategy research field and to define the agenda of strategy-as-practice. It does so by emphasizing the importance of managerial activity based on a three-part conceptual framework initially introduced by Whittington (2003): that of practitioners, practice and practices. It is also notable for pointing out that strategizing is a constantly unfolding activity that encompasses the entire organization, and thus strategy cannot simply be understood as top management activity. Continuing from here, 'Strategy as Practice - Research Directions and Resources' (2007) by Johnson, Langley, Melin and Whittington introduce some other core assumptions of the field, like the importance of micro-processes and the perspective that strategy is something that people do and not something organizations have. When the Cambridge Handbook of Strategy as Practice was published in 2010, edited by Golsorhki, Rouleau, Seidl and Vaara, the perspective received a substantially enlarged scope, perhaps heralding a certain level of saturation. In separate sections on questions relating to the philosophy of science, theory, methods...
and application of the perspective, the handbook covers vast areas of knowledge, at times in articles written by authors not typically associated with the perspective.

2.3. Strategy-as-practice in 2013

Over the last decade, strategy-as-practice (SAP) has expanded and today it encompasses a rather heterogeneous community. If we examine articles reviewing the state of strategy-as-practice (Jarzabkowski, Seidl & Balogun 2007; Jarzabkowski & Spee 2009; Golsorki, Rouleau, Seidl & Vaara 2010; Vaara & Whittington 2012) as well as work affiliated with the perspective through the SAPIN website (http://www.s-as-p.org/) it is possible to identify at least six major streams of research (see Figure 1) occurring under the SAP umbrella in 2013. These streams may sometimes overlap, but I point them out because in my view they draw on differing theoretical resources when examining research questions relating to strategizing. The different streams are united by an almost uniform conformity to the use of qualitative research designs and an absence of the notion of performance in an economic sense.

Figure 1 Current research traditions within strategy-as-practice

In examining the research traditions under the strategy-as-practice umbrella, the first and arguably still most important role is that which the perspective inherited and partially still shares with strategy process research (Whittington 2003; Whittington 2012). Conceptualizing the differences between process and practice, Whittington’s (2007) essay on the sociological eye outlines five particularly pertinent characteristics for strategy-as-practice research:

- The search for connections and relationships between strategy and society in general
- Recognition of the embedded characteristics of strategy work
- The pursuit of irony
- Problematization of performance as the key dependent variable of strategy
- Respect for continuities

The implication is a simple change in agency. Rather than studying strategy processes as a feature of an organization, it is instead studied as micro-processes of strategizing and hence attributed to individuals and teams inside organizations. Hence the rallying call for strategy to be seen not as something organizations have, but as something that people do (Whittington 2006). Beyond the focus on micro-activity, the legacy of strategy process research remains strong. Methodologically, the qualitative techniques
developed by strategy process researchers remain widely employed. Several research areas, such as strategic change (Balogun & Johnson 2004), strategic episodes (Johnson, Prashantham, Floyd & Bourque 2010), planning (Whittington and Cailluet 2008) or middle management studies (Mantere 2005), are direct hand-me-downs. Mintberg’s (1978) classical notion of strategy as a pattern in activity or behaviour is often built directly into these studies, with processual explanations drawing on longitudinal data regarding strategy work in organizations.

Studies such as these often pursue the shift in agency by looking inside strategic management processes (Hendry 2000; Jarzabkowski & Wilson 2002; Hoon 2007). Such studies have explored the role of middle managers in delivering organizational restructuring (Balogun 2007), the way formal strategy is discussed in management groups (Sminia 2005) and the role and skills required of strategic champions (Mantere 2008; Nordqvist and Melin 2008). The dynamics between top and middle management teams have been studied, explaining recursive and adaptive activities in inter and intrateam work (Paroutis and Pettigrew 2007) and centre-periphery strategizing (Regner 2003). Overall these studies highlight the strategic role of middle management (Balogun 2003), for example, through middle management’s ability to act as intra-organizational boundary spanners (Balogun, Gleadle, Hailey and Willmott 2005).

Studies of actual strategy work in committees and workshops has challenged the hierarchical conceptualization of top and middle manager relations, pointing towards the important role of discussion in shaping strategy (Hoon 2007; Silince and Mueller 2007). Challenges with strategic integration (Jarzabkowski and Balogun 2009) have also been surfaced, conceptualization through notions such as strategic failure (Maitlis and Lawrence 2003) or escalating indecision-based biases (Denis, Dompierre, Langley and Rouleau 2011). Associated with these interests on strategy meetings and managerial work, there have also been micro-studies looking at the distinct micro-practices of strategy work. They have examined tools such as SWOT and BCG (Jarratt and Stiles 2010), numbers (Denis, Langley & Rouleau 2006) as well as meeting room technologies such as PowerPoint (Kaplan 2011).

The second theoretical foundation contributing to strategy-as-practice is that from which the name derives, namely sociological practice theory (Reckwitz 2002). The name is at times a source of confusion since, as this review attempts to show, the study of strategy-as-practice constitutes a much wider umbrella than mere practice theory. Furthermore, from the practitioner’s perspective, much of the research conducted under its sphere is not particularly practical. But, much of the early reasoning for why strategy practice studies is different from strategy process studies (see for example Whittington 1996; Johnson, Melin & Whittington 2003; Whittington 2006) is built on constructing theories of practice as developed by, for example, Bourdieu (1990; see Vaara & Fäy 2012) and Schatzki (2005, 2006; see Jarzabkowski and Spee 2009). Alongside these, other sociological theories have also been introduced, including structuration (Giddens 1984; see Jarzabkowski 2008), activity theory (Engeström 1999; see Jarzabkowski 2004), discourse (Fairclough 1992; see Laine & Vaara 2007) and systems theory (Luhmann 1995; see Hendry & Seidl 2003). What follows is a conceptualization of strategy as an embedded activity (Granovetter 1985), organized by humans through social practice nested in cultural and historical traditions. Note once again that strategy is not approached through an appraisal of economic performance. If strategies are ultimately effective, while interesting, it is not something for which strategy-as-practice studies tend to develop normative prescriptions. Rather, strategies are interesting from the perspective of how the social practice is enacted in organizing human activity, i.e., as the faces, places and objects of strategy work. In an attempt to
transform this into research interests relatively early in the evolution of strategy-as-practice studies, Whittington (2003) identifies six resulting questions:

- How and where is strategizing and organizing work actually done?
- Who does the formal work of strategizing and organizing and how do they get to do it?
- What are the skills required for strategizing and organizing work and how are they acquired?
- What are the common tools and techniques of strategizing and organizing and how are they used in practice?
- How is the work of strategizing and organizing organized itself?
- How are the products of strategizing and organizing communicated and consumed?

Important conceptual development followed from this a few years later, through the ‘3Ps’ framework of practices, practice and practitioners (Jarzabkowski 2005:7-10). Practices are seen as the actual places and artefacts used in the enactment of strategy, from away-days to meeting rooms to power point presentations. Practices can also be discursive in the sense that they cover professional jargon, local language as well as symbols and systems of power. Practice refers to the actual flow of action and time in which strategy happens. In practice theory, the ideal is to move away from dichotomies such as process/content or formulation/implementation that has for a long time been typical of strategy research. Rather, practice is granted ontological priority (Miettinen, Fredericks and Yanow 2009). Finally, the term ‘practitioners’ refers to the people who do the actual strategy work itself. As pointed out by Jarzabkowski (2005), much positivist strategy research marginalizes the actor and ignores the fact that actual people enact strategy. This insight has also led strategy-as-practice studies to accept and even prioritize the fact that strategy happens everywhere in organizations, that valid strategic agency can be found far beyond the boardroom. The 3Ps framework is as close to a paradigmatic idea that strategy-as-practice has developed. Yet, as pointed out by Orlikowski (2010), in actual strategy-as-practice research, the notion of practice has taken three different shapes: an empirical phenomenon to study, a perspective for studying routines and the lived world, and lastly, a philosophy that is committed to the ontological primacy of practice.

The function of practice theory and other sociological perspectives has often been more to conceptualize strategy-as-practice than to supplement theoretical traditions, as this kind of research designs. There are some notable exceptions however, like Jarzabkowski’s (2008) paper on the role of structuration in the social dynamics of strategy shaping. Her dissertation also ushered in a strong tradition of activity theory in strategy-as-practice (Jarzabkowski 2003, 2005). As explained in the 2003 paper, activity theory constructs its conceptual framework by looking at four distinct aspects of the process: collective organizational structures, primary actors, practical activities and strategic practices. Beyond activity theory, Jarzabkowski’s notion of level-spanning recursive and adaptive practices is well established (Jarzabkowsksi 2004). Summarizing the state of strategy-as-practice research, Jarzabkowski and Spee (2009) conclude that the perspective denotes a broad understanding of the concept of practitioner, with agency located both at the individual level and group practitioner
level. The perspective mainly focuses on the micro aspects of strategizing, despite often expressing a theoretical interest in strategy's more macro dimensions. They observe that there remains more space for the study of embodied strategy practices, as well as material practices, such as the technologies of strategy making. Similarly, the work of David Seidl has introduced notions from Luhmann's systems theory (Hendry & Seidl 2003), particularly with regard to the episodic nature of strategy work and the role of strategy meetings in the formation of strategy (Jarzabkowski & Seidl 2008). These studies are interesting, because they form a distinct interpretation of Mintzberg's notion of patterns (1978), bringing a more micro-approach to the way strategy processes themselves are enacted in organizations.

The third venue of research which has made itself manifest within strategy-as-practice is the study of text in several different shapes. Strategy work by nature occurs in text, from speech to printed plans and the tools through which strategy is designed. Perhaps originating in the idea of discursive practices, strategy scholars have rapidly realized the value of diverse textual approaches to strategy: discursive (Vaara 2002), narrative (Barry & Elmes 1997; Vaara & Tienari 2011), critical (Knights & Morgan 1991) and rhetorical (Mantere and Sillince 2007). Hence, there is talk of not only a practice emphasis in strategy studies, but also a linguistic turn (Vaara 2010). Linguistic methods are naturally well suited to studying strategy because discursive practices abound in strategy work, from boardroom talk to text documents to more macro-level aspects such as the professional discourse of corporate strategy.

Linguistic perspectives on strategy-as-practice often study aspects that derive from critical schools of thinking, such as ways in which power (Tienari & Vaara 2012), legitimacy (Vaara, Tienari & Laurila 2006; Joutsenvirta & Vaara 2008) and subjectivity (Laine & Vaara 2007; Mantere & Vaara 2008) manifest themselves in organizational life through the use of discourse. Discourse offers a potentially independent and linking platform that is similar to practice for examining strategy from a non-dichotomous perspective. The meaning and acting out of text in strategy work is something easily bypassed by macro-studies and even more in process-oriented studies, with linguistic methods providing techniques for analyzing even very micro aspects of strategy. Text-based empirical material also potentially allow the researcher to step back at times from the immersion inherent with more ethnographic methods and develop a relationship with the text as an object rather than relying on potentially subjective experiences such as ethnographic insight. Yet the linguistic tradition itself can approach strategy on many social levels. According to Vaara (2010), the linguistic tradition can be split into three forms depending on the level of analysis: macro bodies of historical strategic knowledge, meso-level narratives of organizational strategy and micro-level conversations consisting of rhetorical speech acts.

Studies of language have been a part of strategy-as-practice research from the very early days, exploring aspects such as the relationships between strategy discourse and strategic decision making (Hendry 2000), recontextualization in the development of management thinking (Thomas 2003) and ethnomethodological studies of strategy talk aimed at constructing a shared definition of the future (Samra-Fredericks 2003). The challenge of strategic change was studied through discourses of disrupted identities (Beech and Johnson 2005), while strategizing activity was positioned as a discursive practice in a Foucauldian power/knowledge framework (Ezzamel and Willmott 2008). Strategy has also been framed as acts of managerial consumption, drawing on the ideas of de Certeau (Suominen and Mantere 2010). But beyond these, a number of distinct linguistic research streams linked by an empirical interest have developed within strategy-as-practice studies. These consist of research relating to corporate
Restructuring (Vaara, Tienari & Laurila 2006), mergers and acquisitions, legitimacy (Vaara & Tienari 2011) and strategy work in public organizations (Vaara, Sorsa & Pälli 2010; Kornberger & Clegg 2011).

As always in strategy-as-practice, boundaries between the different traditions under the umbrella are porous and some of these studies could well be grouped in several of my six categories. A central paper on corporate restructuring was the recipient of the Roland Calori Prize, a treatise by Eero Vaara (2002) on the discursive construction of success/failure in narratives of post-merger integration. The paper identifies four types of discourse that narrators employ in recounting their experiences. Often in these studies, the role of media text has on discourse is examined, as in the case of cross-border acquisitions (Tienari, Vaara and Björkman 2003). Furthermore, the importance of examining strategy talk for understanding a myriad of strategic micro-practices was brought to the fore through studying strategies as discursive constructs through the case of airline alliances (Vaara, Kleymann and Seristö 2004). Often restructurings such as mergers and acquisitions bring to the fore national identification and cultural differences, for example, in the shape of metonymies (Riad and Vaara 2011). Rhetoric is often what one comes across in micro-studies of discursive strategic practices, as pointed out earlier. Strategic intent has been studied as a rhetorical device (Mantere and Sillince 2007), and top managers’ ability to build commitment to multiple strategic goals has been explained as being constructed through rhetoric micro-practices (Jarzabkowski and Sillince 2007). Similarly, strategic ambiguity can be used as a rhetoric micro-practice for enabling the coexistence of different, at times even conflicting, goals within organizations (Jarzabkowski, Sillince and Shaw 2010).

The fourth influence in Figure 1 is cognitive perspectives. Cognitive approaches to strategy-as-practice represent studies in which managerial perceptions and interpretations are typically studied through the lens of sensemaking (Weick 1995). These studies often place the psychology of individual managers on the foreground, in a classical sense (Starbuck 2003) almost obfuscating the distinction between strategic management and organizational behavior. Such studies often focus on the strategic change as an empirical context, examining how managers interpret and deal with change (Vaara 2003). At times this research borrows from other traditions of cognitive psychology, such as cognitive frames (Kaplan 2008). In studies of organizational mergers and acquisitions, sensemaking is utilized to get at the more irrational features of integration challenges (Vaara 2003). The formation and trajectories of managerial sensemaking schema have been studied (Balogun and Johnson 2004), as well as the relationship between intended strategies and unintended outcome (Balogun and Johnson 2005; Balogun 2006). The role of sensemaking and sensegiving in ongoing, daily middle management efforts to understand and sell strategic change demonstrate that there are distinctive competencies involved in such efforts (Rouleau 2005). Organizational level responses to corporate change have also been studied through a sensemaking lens (Stensaker and Falkenberg 2007). Ultimately, the way management performs sensemaking rests on being able to both set the scene and perform the conversations required to accomplish it (Rouleau and Balogun 2011). In addition to the sensemaking view, cognitive frames have been used for studying organizational strategy making (Kaplan 2008). It has been argued that the use of cognitive perspectives is important for practice studies because it helps in re-humanizing the study of strategy (Hodgkinson and Clarke 2007).

In the fifth box I have indicated critical management studies (Alvesson & Willmott 1992). Often overlapping with linguistic perspectives, strategy-as-practice through its de-emphasis of economic performance makes room for issues of importance for critical
scholars such as power, participation, emancipation and legitimacy. Drawing on the thinking first articulated by Knights and Morgan (1991), strategy is seen from a Neo-Marxist view, with strategy being a discourse through which elites manifests class, control and domination in contemporary organizations. While these forms of studies have been conducted in strategy-as-practice, there is as of yet no strong tradition of activism in this sphere. As becomes critical scholarship, this stream points out that in strategy-as-practice many core assumptions such as the understanding of what strategy does or does not mean differs from the mainstream it seeks to upset (Carter, Clegg and Kornberger 2008).

This elucidates the power effects of strategy. For critical scholars, the performative effects of strategy work are seen as a joint act of fact and value representation (Kornberger and Clegg 2011). Furthermore, strategy-as-practice research is criticized for overemphasizing and possibly idealizing the feasibility of managerial control and ignoring the unequal, hegemonic structures produced and reproduced by strategy (McCabe 2010). Drawing mainly on critical discourse analysis (Chouliaraki & Fairclough 1999; Wodak & Meyer 2009), strategy-as-practice also has a more critical tradition of language studying the power effects of corporate strategy (Samra-Fredericks 2005). Critical discourse analysis is considered well suited to studying three aspects of strategy: strategy as shared meaning, strategy as text, and strategy as truth (Phillips, Sewell and Jaynes 2008). Studies argue that corporate language policies have significant power implications that might be easily overlooked (Vaara, Tienari, Piekkari and Säntil 2005). Subjectivity in strategy work is established through the empowering and disempowering effects of organizational strategy discourse, through the way sensemaking and giving is politically accomplished in strategic development (Laine and Vaara 2007). Certain discourses lead to nonparticipation in strategy work, such as mystification and disciplining, while others promote participation in the form of self-actualization and dialogization (Mantere and Vaara 2008). Taken as a whole, the corpus of text that strategy generates can be seen as its own genre, with specific communicative purposes and lexico-grammatical features (Pälli, Vaara and Sorsa 2009). Strategy forms a directive genre consisting of central discursive features such as self-authorization, special terminology and discursive innovation (Vaara, Sorsa and Pälli 2010). It has however been pointed out that strategy discourse should not be seen purely as a discourse that dominates organizational settings, as it simultaneously constructs and is influenced by the organizational context (Kwon, Clarke and Wodak 2009).

A particularly important question for critical discourse analysis is the ways in which legitimization is accomplished. Forums such as public media follow distinctive discourse types, like rationalistic or societal discourses, when dealing with questions relating to the legitimization of mergers and acquisitions (Vaara and Tienari 2002). Similarly, when dealing with global industrial restructuring, specific discourses become manifest, such as normalization, authorization and moralization (Vaara, Tienari and Laurila 2006). Discursive legitimation should not be seen as a distinct phase or stage of a merger process, but instead as a dynamic interplay between legitimation and organizational action that can lead to unforeseen consequences (Vaara and Monin 2010). Similarly, in the case of contested projects, social actors can engage in a constant struggle to either legitimize or de-legitimize corporate initiatives (Joutsenvirta and Vaara 2008). Specific strategies apply to the use of rhetoric in the case of negotiation around plant closure (Erkama and Vaara 2010). Critical perspectives have been powerful for examining multinational corporations, because critical studies reveal the various textual strategies used by multinational corporations to legitimate their actions and possible controversial consequences (Vaara and Tienari 2008).
The final and sixth theoretical tradition that I distinguish under the strategy-as-practice umbrella, process studies, requires some additional explanation. First, I must point out that by process studies I do not refer to the strategy process tradition that initiated this theoretical overview (Chia & MacKay 2007). Neither do I refer to the perhaps somewhat more mainstream North American process research tradition (Langley 1999, 2007) which considers process in a more methodological manner as a way of conceptualizing research findings (Hernes & Weik 2007). Process studies also has an uneasy relationship with strategy-as-practice regarding the way practice is conceptualized (Simpson 2009; Rasche & Chia 2009). Rather, the process studies tradition draws heavily on philosophical traditions associated with twentieth century thinkers such as Heidegger (Chia & Holt 2006), Ricouer (Franck 2012) and Whitehead (Bakken & Hernes 2006). Of all the traditions that could, reluctantly even, be associated with strategy-as-practice, it is the process studies tradition that has sought most vigorously to break with the inheritance of the older strategy school.

This has taken place through a number of ontological challenges regarding the nature of fundamental organizational concepts and their attributes, including strategy. Perhaps drawing its main inspiration from Tsoukas & Chia’s (2002) paper on organizational becoming, the process studies school highlights topics like the ontological priority of change (rather than organization) and the constant formation that takes place around phenomena such as organizational knowledge (Tsoukas & Mylonopoulos 2004). Often such questioning of the taken-for-grantedness of stability in organizations is done through a phenomenological lens, reaching for the experiential world of the subject (Yanow & Tsoukas 2009; Vesa & Franck 2013). Hence as Chia states, “Change is reality in itself, and organizations are nothing more than temporary arrestsations in a sea of flux and transformation” (2002:863). Hence, strategy is not seen as a deliberate and purposeful activity through which organizations orchestrate their activity. Rather, strategic intent is considered to be immanent in the very practice of strategy itself. It is important to realize that the process tradition represents a real conceptual challenge to strategy-as-practice studies. As a matter of fact, there are clear indications that the process tradition marks a shift away from strategy-as-practice, with establishment of its own track at EGOS, for example. Yet, it remains to be seen if the intellectual sophistication of the process studies tradition will carry on into the future.

2.4. Positioning of this thesis with regard to the current state of strategy-as-practice

Having reviewed the roots of strategy-as-practice in the strategy process tradition and the current state of what is a fairly dispersed academic umbrella, it is now time to ask the how do the contributions of this thesis position themselves within the strategy-as-practice tradition. First, as my studies were conducted according to ethnographic methods, my fieldwork was largely guided by the strategy-as-practice conceptual framework. Yet, in drafting the essays which accompany this thesis, I have consciously undertaken to broaden my analysis both vertically regarding strategy-as-practice's knowledge of strategy, but also horizontally by linking common and less-common perspectives with frequent strategy-as-practice notions. My first essay revisits the practice of ethnographic fieldwork in strategy-as-practice studies; a method that has been called for in much research (Rasche & Chia 2009; Johnson, Balogun & Beech 2010). I argue that in order to extrapolate a deeper understanding of what goes into the black box of strategizing we need to develop more immersive methods. I reflect on how
the field could do so, drawing on my own field work. In short, the essay is my attempt to operationalize my fieldwork learnings for a broader strategy-as-practice audience.

The second essay examines in-depth the organizing and strategizing practices of virtual organizations in World of Warcraft and responds to two calls. First, it builds on Schatzki’s (2006) notion of practice bundles and Jarzabkowski and Spee’s (2009) call for further studies of practice bundles by explicating a typology of practice used for managing a virtual organization. Second, it attempts to construct a bridge between strategy-as-practice studies and strategy process studies through the notion of cessation, an internal source of evolutive failure stemming from a failure to perform practice. The third essay pushes into new territory by conceptualizing the role of collective commitment in the formation of organizational boundaries, building on Whittington’s (2007) call for problematizing the notion of performance in strategy studies. The fourth and final essay is firmly situated in the process studies school and attempts to explain how managers doing the actual work of strategizing experience strategy work not as ex-post time but rather as ex-ante experiential vectors.

2.5. Ethnography

In a classical sense, ethnography originates from two different sources. The first is the anthropological tradition of continental European and UK anthropology which historically focused on ethnographies of distant and remote cultures. This tradition, for example, includes the work of Malinowski (1932) and the emergence of participant observation methods in the 1920s, with other seminal contributions from Evans-Pritchard (1940), Lévi-Strauss (1963) and Radcliffe-Brown (1965). The second source relates to the development of social studies at the University of Chicago, which culminated in a social anthropological tradition focusing on such things like urban studies (Deegan 2007). Early contributors to this school were, for example, Robert E. Park and Ernest W. Burgess. Later this work would develop into symbolic anthropology under the influence of symbolic interactionism, with the work of Howard Becker (1963) and Clifford Geertz (1973, 1983) serving as examples.

It has been noted that organization theory should, and indeed historically did, employ a robust study of work to support theory generation (Barley & Kunda 2001). And indeed, following the behavioural trends that swiped organizational ethnography off the table in the 70s (Yanow 2012), we are now seeing a resurgence of work study in organization studies (Phillips & Lawrence 2012). Ethnography is particularly well suited to detailed and situated studies of work. Early classics in the field, like Barnard’s (1938) ‘Functions of the Executive’ or even Sloan’s (1963) ‘My Years with General Motors’ are ethnographic to the extent that they are based on the personal experiences and reflections of managers. When Chandler’s (1962) ‘Strategy and Structure’ appeared, qualitative, albeit historical, methods were already being used.

Though not a part of mainstream organizational studies from the 1960s onwards, ethnography maintained a consistent presence in the field. The main tradition through which this carried on was the ethnography of work and organizations, drawing mainly on the Chicago-born urban studies tradition. Studies at this time examined topics such as the development of job satisfaction in early-career patrol officers (Van Maanen 1975), ways in which technological change alters occupational structures (Barley 1986) and the relationship between an increasingly technical work force and organizational structure (Barley 1996). These ethnographers were also instrumental in carving a place for ethnography in organization studies both methodologically (Van Maanen 1979a, Van
Maanen 1979b; Barley 1983) but also from the point of view of establishing and maintaining the domain of organizational ethnography as an independent academic tradition (Barley and Kunda 2001; Van Maanen 2011). I believe the stage is set for a revival of ethnography in strategy studies. What this means for the field is far more complicated.

If one skims beneath the surface, the claim that ethnography is still used in contemporary organization studies is rather vague. As a rule, ethnographers conceptualize the meaning of their pursuits differently. Ethnography clearly entails methodological considerations (Van Maanen 1979a), but while ethnography entails distinct forms of fieldwork and documentation (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw 1995; Hammersley & Atkinson 2007) it is also entails distinct analytical headwork (Van Maanen 2011) leading to the composition of distinct genres of text where the final product itself can be considered ethnography (Watson 2011). Van Maanen (2010) identifies three genres of ethnographies that are eminent in contemporary organization studies: structural, poststructural and advocacy genres. Structural ethnographies respond to the increased call for organization studies to make broader theoretical contributions by linking fieldwork findings with wider theoretical and social issues (see Barley & Kunda 2006; Anteby 2008). Post-structural ethnographies prefer to pursue work with a linguistic emphasis (Vaara 2010), treating textual acts as persuasive fictions and resting on postmodern notions of flux and change (Latour 1993; Tsoukas & Chia 2002). A final example is advocacy ethnographies, attempting to address major wrongs in the world based on normative and value-based judgements (Gusterson 1996). All these genres deviate from classical ethnographic norms, where the ethnographer pursues extended fieldwork in order to extract and report on indigenous forms of knowing (Geertz 1973). Certainly the old form of ethnographies, as portrayed for example by Malinowski’s ground-breaking ‘Argonauts of the Western Pacific’ (1932), in which the fieldworking ethnographer reports objectively in a spirit of naturalism on the practices of local communities, is gone. Indeed, the notion of the field as the site from which the ethnographer reports is increasingly understood to be a social construct drafted by the ethnographer (Van Maanen 1988).

Yet, even with the death of the authentic ethnographic narrative there are still today some norms that tie together a complex tradition. Firstly, ethnography follows what Van Maanen (2011:222) calls the ‘I-witnessing ideal’. Ethnographers work first hand, face-to-face with informants in the field, through observation or, as perhaps more appropriately in contemporary ethnography (Van Maanen 1979a), participant observation. This exposure to the field should be longitudinal, reaching what Fine (2003:53) called an ‘expected participant in social life’ status in the local community under study. How the expected participant ethnographer behaves exactly is much more contested. A fairly common approach is to advocate remaining on the periphery of social life (Adler & Adler 1987) in order to be unobtrusive, but there are also calls for more immersive approaches that advocate insider research in which the researcher is actively engaged in the actual ongoing daily operations of the organization (Alvesson 2003; Brannick and Coghlan 2007).

These conflicts in themselves are not surprising, because as ethnographic research is conducted in close contact with field informants, there are numerous sites, research designs and ethical considerations that need to be addressed, making the construction of one unified ethnographic stance infeasible. But beyond the commitment to first-hand interaction, ethnography is also characterized by distancing itself from positivist paradigms in organization research (Donaldson 2003) on the grounds that ethnographic methods are typically proficient at studying situated and often subjective
local communities. Ethnographers almost exclusively employ qualitative methods, and indeed, many methods such as observation, participant observation and the tradition of constructing field notes has spread from ethnography to the other social sciences. It should be noted though, that ethnography as an extremely diverse tradition can as a field work method be used akin to positivist case studies (Eisenhardt 1989; Yin 2009) to make exploratory studies based on which theoretical propositions can be drawn for testing. Be that as it may, ethnography is by and large an interpretative tradition which attempts to understand the lived experience of others (Samra-Fredericks 2003; Van Maanen 2011) or, at times, indeed the lived experience of oneself as auto-ethnography (Spry 2001). Typically ethnography is seen as a interpretive genre of research (Hatch & Yanow 2003), in organization research often drawing on the semiotic tradition associated with symbolic interactionism (Geertz 1973; Barley 1983). This interpretive stance can then be employed for a number of purposes, as Van Maanen’s listing of current genres in organizational ethnography points out. To finish, it should be noted that ethnography is a strongly empirical tradition that is becoming increasingly aware of its need to generate theoretical claims in its analysis and disclosure (Fine 2003).

Beginning in the 1970s, many forms of ethnographic methods, while not directly ethnographic, were employed by studies in the strategy process research tradition (Mintzberg 1978; Pettigrew 1979, 1990; Burgelmann 1991, 2002). While methodologically labelled as case study research, many of the elements such as observation and gathering of empirical field notes and materials are nevertheless typical ethnographic research methods. Similarly, ethnography was employed in the study of strategic change through a sensemaking lens (Gioia and Chittipeddi 1991; Gioia, Thomas, Clark and Chittipeddi 1994).

But it wasn’t until the early 2000s that ethnographic methods began to have a real impact, with the inception of the strategy-as-practice research tradition. As pointed out by Johnson et al (2003:11), “Progress in anthropology involved ethnographers directly engaging with – indeed living in – the world of action and practice. Something similar is true for management studies”. Hence, with the swift emergence of the strategy-as-practice field, we see a quick broadening of the scope both methodologically (Balogun, Huff and Johnson 2003) and conceptually (Jarzabkowski 2004; Whittington 2006; Rasche and Chia 2009). Researchers now began to study organizational phenomena through in-depth participation, as in the case of research into the sensemaking aspects of post-acquisition integration (Vaara 2003), the managerial everyday interpretation and selling of strategic change (Rouleau 2005) and the role of frames in strategy making under uncertainty (Kaplan 2008), to name but a few. Ethnography also opened the door to a detailed study of failure in organizational strategizing (Maitlis and Lawrence 2003). Ethnography-within-strategy studies is starting to show increasing sophistication, for example around the question of the reflexivity of the self in such studies (Samra-Fredericks 2010). Nevertheless, virtual ethnography remains grossly underexplored in extant strategy studies.

2.6. Virtual ethnography

As explained earlier, the empirical context of this research is World of Warcraft. In this section on virtual ethnography, I will not discuss the “why’s” of strategy research in virtual worlds, as I have already outlined the cases I feel contribute to the field in Chapter 1. Nor will discuss the exact “how’s” of my research, as the next chapter of this thesis will introduce the game world and the specifics of my research at great length. Rather, in this section it is my intention to introduce the idea of virtual ethnography
and show how, in a broader sense, it fits in with how management and organization studies need to respond and adapt to a changing technological workplace. It ought to be noted that many qualitative methods draw their legitimacy from prolonged exposure to actual fieldwork. Thus, we as researchers have learned what strengths certain methods possess, as well as developing a sensitivity for mediating specific shortcomings. Virtual ethnography, as a fairly new adaptation of an old practice, still somewhat lacks this legitimacy gained through heritage.

Virtual ethnography is conducted online. Generally speaking, studies of the internet can be grouped into three understandings of the technology: the internet as a medium for communication, the internet as a network of computers, or the internet as a context for social construction (Markhan 2006). In organization studies, the notion of virtual teams as 24/7 organizations interlocked by digital communication technology rests on the medium for communication idea (Maznevski & Chudoba 2000). Similarly, virtual teams display the network of computers idea by showing how time and distance is collapsed as digital technology connects actors dispersed across geographically distant locations and time zones. But the capacity that the internet has for creating indigenous social structures and communities remains largely understudied in organization and management studies.

Perhaps this is so because, as pointed out by Orlikowski & Scott (2008), there is a deep general silence about technology in our field. While I see this is starting to change, most studies published in our field still today do not factor in technology as an environmental context in and through which much organizational interaction is accomplished. Early studies of computer-mediated communication employed laboratory testing derived from psychology. It was applied to conference-like situations to test the effects of communication mediated across computers. The findings were conflicting, pointing out that such communication not only reined in the effects of hierarchy, but also prompted more aggressive behavior. Thus, computer mediated communication was not seen as inductive for creating communities.

This approach was challenged by virtual ethnographic studies. The notion of online communities was developed by early virtual ethnographers to show the rich and socially patterned interaction on the Internet, the argument being that the high applicability of ethnographic methods to internet studies was in itself an indication of there being real culture on the internet (Hine 2008). Within management and organization studies, studies of the online community often lean heavily towards information systems research. A particular crux of such studies is open source software development, with regard to community governance (O’Mahony & Ferraro 2007), company-community relationships (Dahlander & Magnusson 2005; O’Mahony & Bechky 2008) and open source licensing (Nyman & Lindman 2013). It has been argued that there is a technology-driven shift in the way we organize; we are moving away from a command-and-control hierarchy and moving towards organizing around information (Zammuto, Griffith, Majchrzak, Dougherty & Faraj 2007).

But this is but one aspect of a rich flora of technologically-mediated organizational transformations available for study. Many researchers of organizations already use what is called for digital ethnography (Murthy 2008), mobilizing computer mediated communication tools such as online questionnaires, digital video, social networking websites and blogs for the purpose of study. Virtual ethnography is distinct from digital ethnography in that it is based on participative research of online internet communities (Hine 2005); much like the kind I conducted in the virtual world (Castronova, Williams, Shen, Ratan, Xiong & Huang 2009).
When reflecting on the ethnographic specifics of conducting immersive participant observation in a virtual world, three considerations stand out: the presence, authenticity and the ethical dilemmas involved (Hine 2008). Participant observation in online virtual worlds is conducted through an avatar; and similarly each avatar then interacts with the other avatars (Williams 2007). The studied environment is an often textually-mediated graphical world. In ways it is paradoxical indeed, for ethnography with its close links to anthropology is in its virtual version deployed in a manner where the human body is insubstantial, so to speak. Rather, the researcher’s embodiment is that of an online avatar. Hence, in virtual ethnography the conventional physically embodied sense of presence changes.

Researchers are therefore represented by technologically conjured representations. For me, I was represented by two different World of Warcraft characters I used in my game participation. Every virtual ethnographer needs to solve the questions of presence when conducting research. Often the possibilities available will be dictated by the environment, like, for example, in the available selection of different character types in World of Warcraft. Furthermore, participation in virtual worlds often implies skilled presence; be this the conventions on how one writes in communication channels with idiosyncratic abbreviations or the specific skills required to successfully assume a given role in a game-like activity, such as World of Warcraft raiding. In ethnography at large, the question of presence is one that researchers will always need to tackle. In virtual ethnography, we require what Hine (2008:267-268) calls “innovative practice in a recognizable tradition”; a way of solving the problem of presence through which our participation in online communities is accomplished. Yet in many cases virtual ethnography is not purely an online activity, but rather a mixed online/offline activity which can mix virtual elements with real-world interviews, observation, archival research and participation, depending on the exact context being studied.

In virtual ethnography the researcher meets members of online communities, as the concept implies, online. This has given rise to concern regarding the authenticity and trustworthiness of online informants. Essentially, there are two ways of mitigating the authenticity problem in online studies. The pragmatic one is to pursue immersive ethnographic research in which the researcher builds up a personal knowledge of the community or situation under study and uses this knowledge base to assess the authenticity of information that he or she collects. This approach can be augmented by pursuing a mix of online and offline studies, where the offline encounters with potential informants can be used both to build trust and validate potential findings. It should also be realized that the question of authenticity is a reflexive relationship. Just like the researcher might struggle to validate information gathered from online communities, so members of online communities might struggle to validate that a researcher is, in fact, a researcher. This presents an ontological challenge: questioning what it in fact it means to be ‘real’ (Markhan 2004). Online representations are still run by people inhabiting the real world, and a physical body or a face-to-face encounter is not necessarily likely to produce more truthful or real empirical material. People online can be dishonest or veil their real motives, but so do people interacting in the physical world.

Many of these concerns highlight the specific ethical concerns associated with studies of the internet like virtual ethnography. Although there is wide recognition of the potential the online world poses for covert research (Hine 2008), it is highly problematic. Often for participants, online environments convey a false sense of security regarding the safety and privacy of interaction. As researchers, we must strive to make sure that our participants have given their informed consent and we should be
transparent regarding the nature of our research. I did this myself by being forthcoming about the nature of my research in the gaming groups I studied, often running a discussion thread on the group’s discussion forums in which I reflected on my experiences and findings. This also offered an acid test for testing the plausibility of my thinking from a practitioner perspective. I also used online resources, such as my university homepage and Webropol to authenticate myself as a researcher. Furthermore, I was as forthright as I could be regarding the amount, length and technical level of my participation.

I think it is important to stress that it is a participative ethnographer’s responsibility to learn the ropes of what it means to be a part of a local community so as to not harm it through our presence. In a game world, this means taking the time to become a skilled player. Furthermore, during the early part of my fieldwork I played roles that were in high demand but were generally not popular, thereby providing the groups I researched with access to valuable and scarce resources. This does not imply going native, but rather investing the time and effort to maintain a skill set relevant for local practice. The ethical responsibility of a virtual ethnographer extends to the anonymization of all data presented. In virtual ethnography this means anonymizing the virtual avatar names and organizations where the study is conducted, in addition to anonymizing offline names. The guiding ethic should be to cause no harm to informants, and while gaming in World of Warcraft is not in my view a particularly sensitive area, it is important to remember that many online communities represent minorities that can feel severely exposed in society. To me, the final ethical responsibility of a virtual ethnographer is to not overplay the novelty of findings (Beaulieu 2004). It is tempting to focus on how unique and different a novel setting is, but such claims should rest on solid analysis. Especially with regard to ethnographic methodology, researchers should keep in mind that virtual ethnography is not anything new, per se. It is in fact time-tested techniques applied to a new technological setting, which in itself can be inductive to new organizational forms such as online communities.

2.7. Ethnography and grounded analysis

In order to capture the ethnographic indigenous aspect of knowledge, I have in my analysis followed methods suitable for inductive analysis. In practice, this has meant the use of grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss 2008). Grounded theory, originally developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) is a method through which qualitative empirical material can be analyzed and categorized for the purpose of generating theoretical propositions. It is typically associated with pragmatist approaches to social sciences (Corbin and Strauss 2008), which also has its ethnographic proponents (Watson 2011). Thus, to make my approach clear, I used ethnographic field work and grounded theory for analytical work (see Charmaz and Mitchell 2007; Timmermans and Tavory 2010).

In my analysis, I proceed typically across three stages of abstraction. I started out by generating a vast quantity of codes, arranged into concepts. In my approach, codes and concepts carry both in-vivo tags and content; even when abstracted to the level of concepts, they are vessels of indigenous knowledge and I strive to keep them clean from the interference of scientific thought. Codes and in particular concepts are developed through the use of constant comparisons across the ethnographic material at my disposal. When moving to the generation of categories and exploring the possible theoretical connections between the categories, the constant comparison is enriched with theoretical comparisons. This way I can more readily bring in the pertinent
research questions of management and organization studies, and can turn fine-grained ethnographic description into theorizing (see also Yanow 2012:36-37).

In the use of grounded theory for the purpose of analyzing ethnographic field material, being somewhat non-dogmatic in one’s approach opens up new possibilities. One that I in particular benefited from was the utilization of theoretical sampling on my data. Ethnographic field work has the tendency, certainly true for my case, of generating immense amounts of field material. Often much of it might pass through with relatively little attention. However, for the purpose of generating theory through grounded theory, this vast cache of ethnographic material can be used as the empirical foundation for theoretical sampling without the need to revisit the field. Guided by ethnographic insight, the richness of the data allows the researcher to constantly find new sources of material for analysis on the way to reaching saturation in the generation of categories and theoretical connections.

2.8. A note on practice theory

In this thesis I make frequent calls for practice. Hence, before reading this thesis further, it is valuable to the reader for me to define the position this work takes on the concept. The emphasis on practice is one of the more prominent ‘turns’ in management and organization studies of the last decades. For the purposes of strategy, the strategy-as-practice turn identifies an academic movement that started to gain momentum in the early years of this millennium, particularly in the UK and mainland Europe. Early on, this movement could be seen as an outgrowth of earlier strategy process research, but with a renewed interest on activity, micro practices and the actual work that goes into making strategy (Johnson, Melin and Whittington 2003). It was, in effect, a call for studying what people do when they make strategy (Whittington 2006). Within strategy-as-practice, this often meant calling on prominent practice theories of sociology, such as those of Bourdieu, Schatzki, Giddens or Garfinkel.

At the current point of time, it cannot be said that the use of the practice concept within strategy-as-practice studies would be uniform. As observed by Orlikowski (2010), current conceptualizations of practice fall into roughly three categories: phenomenon, perspective and philosophy. In the phenomenon-based approach, practice is seen as a phenomenon of investigation. The idea is that there is a substantial gap between common, everyday life and the claims scientific knowledge makes about it. Such a gap can be traversed through the use of field methods that bring the researcher close to the actual lived lives of research subjects. On the other hand, if one follows a practice perspective, one moves away from a mere focus on the everyday and holds that practices are important because they shape the reality in which everyday life occurs. Hence, ignoring practice runs the risk of giving a skewed picture due to an ignorance regarding the recursive agency built into practice through its everyday use. Lastly, practice as a philosophy take a step further than the perspective outlook by positioning that practice is in fact the ontological a priori condition of all social life. Social reality is constituted in and through practices, hence going beyond the ‘practices matter’ of the phenomenon approach and the ‘practices shape reality’ of the perspective approach to claim that practices, in fact, are reality.

In this thesis the meaning of practice is a pragmatic one, reflecting what Miettinen, Samra-Fredericks and Yanow (2009:1312) define as an approach in which the notion of practice is simply used to understand social and organizational life. What happens in everyday life is in itself considered constitutive of social life and institutions. Compared
with Orlikowski’s (2010) threepartite division, I see my take on practice as being partly phenomenon and partly perspective. This ties in with what is often called bringing out the indigenous perspective of local culture (Geertz 1973), and hence this form of anthropological practice study epistemologically prioritizes everyday practice for the purposes of generating theory and explanation. This does, however, turn this thesis away from more philosophical practice underpinnings, as they often contain elements of macro-structural determinism that is alien to contemporary ethnographic research. Moreover, from an ontological angle the undercurrent of this thesis is closer to process theory (Tsoukas and Chia 2002, Langley 2007). This means that in my analysis I prioritize grounded theory and inductive analytical methods that are capable of capturing the essence of the empirical everyday, but are also capable of refining out of the empirical everyday the theoretical propositions of value for management and organization studies.
3 FIELDWORK AND WORLD OF WARCRAFT AS A RESEARCH SITE

In this section I will discuss matters relating to my fieldwork, focusing on discussing my work from a practical angle. This will be the closest I touch upon traditional ethnographic description in this thesis, even though it to great extent defines how I see myself as a practitioner of human sciences. Yet, the conventions of article writing do not readily transform into the writing of conventional ethnographies and as this thesis is based on essays I steer clear of, in particular, extensive ethnographic text.

For me what defines ethnography is its dedication to the empirical world. In ethnographic research, the emphasis of research is on the detailed study and analysis of specific local settings and the collecting of empirical observations through which we can understand and elucidate the way a given social setting works. In ethnographic research, if it does not exist beyond the local, it is not included in what is studied. This should not be understood as a behaviorist stance, but it does imply skepticism with regard to for example the notion of testing a hypothesis or the particular value of generalizable knowledge statements. To the best of our ability, ontological and epistemological primacy is given to our host communities. This does not mean that we could not study the invisible, such as cultural or organizational taboos or values, rather it means we should not assume their existence based on our own personal assumptions or deductive hypothesis. Hence, ethnography is a practice in which the use of self-moderating reflexivity is a necessary quality of the fieldworker. Naturally, the ideal of entering the field with a blank mind is in many ways a myth; yet an ethnography in which the local does not have a voice is no ethnography.

Following this dedication to the empirical world comes the requirement that the ethnographer exposes her or himself to the world in question. Such exposure has to be empirical in a first-person form, meaning personal observation and interaction with the research phenomenon. Ours is not a pursuit of questionnaires, modeling or deductive hypothesis. It is rather a pursuit of directly observable empirical material through the act of placing ourselves in the middle of it all; be this the village of classical cultural anthropologists, the hoboes of Chicago school urban studies or as in my case, a group of semi-professional dragon killers in a digitally generated computer world. But, for us to truly know ethnographically what we are talking about we have to be involved somehow in the actual doing of that which we are studying.

Such involvement can take many forms. The most common ethnographic field method is the practice of observation. It is a matter of simply placing yourself in the middle of it all. This is often associated with the ideal of unobtrusiveness, meaning that in observation work one should strive to interfere as little as possible with on-going daily activity so as to capture it as it would have unfolded were the researchers were not there in the first place. Observation techniques have since moved on to many other forms of organizational research, an example of which would be the use of observation data in case studies to triangulate on findings from other sources such as interviews or archival data. However, in contemporary ethnography the pursuit of observation alone should not really be viewed as sufficient unless specific conditions pertaining to the local site prevent the use of more immersive methods.

In contemporary ethnography, we should aim to use participant observation methods. This means that beyond simply localizing ourselves in the setting that we are studying
we also attempt to engage with the activity that is taking place. Furthermore, this participation should be our primary source of empirical material. Doing so has a number of advantages. Being immersed in daily routines and practices allows us as researchers to understand the unfolding activities of the local communities to a much greater extent, and allows us to understand what is going on from a more internalized point of view. At times, being able to participate will confront us with many challenges. It might mean that we need to learn certain special skills or languages, and often getting access that allows for participation is demanding. But as ethnographers this is a challenge we need to accept. Furthermore, both ethnographically valid observation and participant observation requires prolonged field presence. Ours is not a trade of observing ten boardroom meetings in order to draw conclusions; ours is one of being in the field for months if not years. Hence, it is quite possible that from a management and organization studies perspective, we will always remain a minority, but hopefully an important one.

It is not my intention here to delve deeper into the foundational questions of ethnography, as these topics are covered to a great detail in both the previous chapter and in Essay 1, which also presents my own field methods from an onto-epistemological angle. To condense, it is my argument that for the study of management and strategy, researchers could benefit from pursuing very in-depth studies. I call this approach immersive participation. Immersive participation for the purposes of strategy studies means that we as researchers should strive to become strategy practitioners ourselves in order to access the privileged knowledge associated with strategy. Such a view on ethnographic studies is to an extent polemical, and there are those who would argue that it violates both scientific and ethical principles. I believe that this is not necessarily so, and argue my case accordingly in Essay 1.

The two oldest and most revered traditions of ethnography, cultural and urban studies, influence my work. Cultural ethnography does so from a methodological angle, in particular through the participant observation tradition established by the Polish-born Englishman Bronislaw Malinowski (1932). On the other hand, contemporary organizational anthropology grew out of Chicago School studies of urban life. In some ways my research target, the massive multiplayer computer game World of Warcraft, is perhaps a modern-day incarnation of the strange and the exotic; a computer world inhabited by magical creatures and shaped through epic lore. It is in many ways a generational adventure, with few representatives of older generations involved. It requires learning the exotic skills and customs needed to survive and function in a computer-generated game world. Yet, it is also in many ways a manifestation of a modern subculture of youth, not unlike some of the seminal studies of the Chicago urban ethnographers.

In my own work, I naturally hold particular opinions with regard to many contemporary ethnography-related issues. I see myself as heavily influenced by the semiotic traditions of Clifford Geertz and symbolic interactionism, and yet one perhaps cannot be a contemporary ethnographer without a stance on the internal debate that shook the field after the writings of Clifford and Marcus (1986). Personally, I defend the original pragmatist assumptions of ethnography, as I do think it is the task of the ethnographer to get into the field, find out what you can and report on it as well as you are able. I do support reflexivity and transparency; though I believe more in the latter. Reflexivity is defined as being aware of one’s own embedded dispositions, aims and knowledge. While I feel this is valuable, I believe reflexivity is a deeply personal issue and there are no real guarantees of anyone’s ability to fully attain such awareness. Reflexivity makes for better ethnographic research, as it ought to strip researchers of
possible feelings of superiority and arrogance while conducting our work. But, it is
difficult to estimate what such awareness leads to.

Thus for me, transparency is a stronger virtue both during fieldwork and when writing
ethnography. Being transparent about what we actually do, feel and think about our
work allows the reader to make independent judgments relating to the claims that we
make as researchers. Hence, I am also critical of making ethnographic research too
collaborative. While collaboration can help out bringing out multiple voices, which in
theory is an ideal state, it always begs the question: whose voice is actually being
brought out? Thus, for me the fairest ethnography is one written in the voice of the
researcher because it allows those who are interpreting the work to consistently
understand the words judged. Possibly this is my take on the postmodern in
ethnography: for me, the ethnographer is just one voice amongst many, a voice that is
unable to muster any specific authority and one that is subject to all the same
shortcomings as any other voice might be.

Transparency should however not come at the expense of ethical considerations. For
organizational ethnography, all normal ethical considerations apply. Some particular
considerations apply as well. First, in organizational ethnography we do not always
have direct permission to observe and record all the members of our host
organizations. Typically, we negotiate for access with the management of the
organization. It is quite likely that during fieldwork we will be even extensively in
contact with members of a local organization with no ties to the access-granting
management. The identity of such subjects must be protected at all times. Furthermore,
in the study of organizations facing substantial competitive pressure, our participant
observation becomes subject to certain demands. Namely, it is our responsibility to
ensure that our field presence does not in any way damage the operational activities of
our host organization. This means we must ensure that our input in host organization
activities is comparable to that of a hired professional who would otherwise be
conducting the work. Otherwise, our presence in the field is detrimental to the best
interests of our host, which I find to be an ethnical burden.

3.1. My fieldwork

All ethnographic work rests on prolonged field experience. It is how ethnographers gain
access to the indigenous knowledge we seek to emanate. In my specific case, there are
several particular qualities to this work due to it being focused on communities and
activity located within a virtual world. Hence, in its core everyday aspect my fieldwork
consisted of sitting in front of a computer screen playing a dedicated character in a
computer game.

Despite this, in designing my fieldwork I attempted to pursue a number of
ethnographic principles. Though I was an experienced player by the time I started my
in-game sojourn, I did a number of manoeuvres through which I tried to introduce
elements of uncertainty and learning into my own work. I initially developed an entirely
new character for my research in order to get away from the routines I associated with
my older characters. I also intended to do my research on new game servers, where I
would not have existing social contacts; though I ultimately ended up not changing the
server. The reason for this was practical. As often is the case with prolonged fieldwork,
it can be taxing on the researcher. In my case, the extensive amount of time I put into
preparing my fieldwork, a good three months of full-time playing, caused me to develop
a sciatica in my back that put me on sick leave for nearly two months. On my return, I
concluded I had lost so much time that I would need to bend a few corners, and used my existing contact network to gain research access. I did, however, retain the new character I had developed for the purpose, which turned out to be valuable.

Initially in my studies I actively avoided positions of responsibility in the groups I studied. I did this in order to ensure that my field observations would be as neutral as possible. Hence, my approach was based on the idea that I would participate in the groups as a silent rank-and-file member who is simply out to do my job. I did what I could to make sure the groups I was a member of were successful, at times for example taking on character roles that were highly useful for the group but unpopular amongst the players. I thought this would be reasonable seeing my in-game activity was work, while it was free time for the other players.

Learning the ropes of playing a new character class in a fairly competitive group did prove to be rather informative. The performance pressures were often high, and other players’ perceptions of me were at times drastically different from what I was used to while playing my older, well-established characters. I was able to develop a fairly accurate picture of the pressures that new members face when undergoing socialization into established groups, through after my first round of fieldwork I came to understand that by steering away from positions of responsibility I was also getting a rather narrow picture of the decision making and strategy development happening within the groups. Hence, I ended up completing a total of three rounds of fieldwork in five different raid organizations. The attached table introduces the groups, and my role inside them. A key insight for me was that in order to fully understand the strategic decision-making, the ethnographer has to strive to become a part of the organizational core in which the decisions are made. This should be done from a participant role that incorporates actual decision-making and the responsibility of coping with the outcomes associated with managerial work.

But returning to the question of my day-to-day routines, researching this sort of environment placed demands on the ethnographer. First of all, it is a somewhat nocturnal pursuit. Prime raiding hours in the time zone I was located would often see me in front of the computer from 8pm to 1 am. Furthermore, due to the way World of Warcraft is designed, I would have to spend roughly one hour game-time preparing for a single raid evening in order to gather all the special in-game resources required for a successful raid performance, though the amount of preparation time declined as the game matured due to conscious game redesign by the developers. During Round 1 of the fieldwork, I would do 3-4 raids each week, and during Rounds 2 and 3, I would do 2-3 raids per week. I took notes on each raid, though the exact techniques I used for this varied immensely. Early on I would make hand-written notes while playing, but I started experimenting with automatic recording techniques quite quickly. Hence, I would record scripts of all the in-game chat channels I had access to and would also record the Voice Over IP-conversations the raid members engaged in on public channels. Eventually I started to collect screenshot galleries, and towards the end, I also shot some in-game video recordings, though not in huge quantities as direct video recording demanded fairly massive amounts of hard disk space. Pictures X and Y show some samples of the screenshot, and Picture Z gives an anonymized sample bit of an in-game chat log.

In my case, the fieldwork did not limit itself to the actual playing. I would, particularly once I got the recording systems working, dedicate the next day to going over the transcripts in order to write a personal research journal. This way, I constantly debriefed myself on the previous night’s raid, writing down any observations, analysis,
emotions and even frustrations I experienced during the raid. This practice proved beneficial for two reasons. First, it allowed me to process what at times was a heated raiding environment and hence retain a certain professional coolness that can be expected from researchers. Secondly, in hindsight it gave an important reflexive, human dimension to my analytical effort. When examining large sets of observations, a personal field journal helps to recall the joys and frustrations of events that occurred in the past. It helps to combat the urge to overly rationalize what we see in the data, reminding us of the fact that much of what appears self-evident at the time of its occurrence is not so self-evident in hindsight.

Table 3  Fieldwork conducted for this thesis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Round #</th>
<th>Research focus</th>
<th>Group (s)</th>
<th>Personal role(s)</th>
<th>Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Strategizing practices in virtual worlds: what are they, who enacts them, what kinds of tools are used?</td>
<td>Group Alpha (Casual, friendly)</td>
<td>Trial member, Full member. Low-profile rank-and-file participation</td>
<td>January- April 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Group Beta (Competitive, performance centred)</td>
<td>Trial member, Full member. Low-profile rank-and-file participation</td>
<td>May- October 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Raid group formation and sustenance, strategic decision making practices, organizational cores and boundaries</td>
<td>Group Gamma (Casual, performance centred)</td>
<td>Trial member, Full member and Officer in charge of recruitment and staffing</td>
<td>April – August 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Group Delta (Competitive, performance centred)</td>
<td>Group founder and main raid leader</td>
<td>September 2009- November 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Strategic learning, iterative practices, deep organizational processes</td>
<td>Group Epsilon (Casual, Friendly)</td>
<td>Group founder, active normal member</td>
<td>December 2010- August 2011</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Hence, once I was done with the initial preparations, my fieldwork consisted of a routine cycle of in-game preparation, in-game raiding, and office debriefing. In total I spent some 39 months doing fieldwork, 35 of which were focused on raiding activities. The remainder was spent on preparation or the 'levelling up' of characters as new World of Warcraft expansions were rolled out (see Table 3 for details). The fieldwork is intersected by shorter periods of analysis, during which I refined my understanding of
the pertinent research questions as well as my understanding of what it means to conduct ethnographic strategy research. Much of this is covered in Essay 1 which deals with the epistemic qualities of knowledge statements in ethnographic strategy-as-practice research and the resulting methodological implications. The claim I made earlier for the need to pursue immersive participation ethnography ties directly in with what I started pursuing myself in Round 2 of my fieldwork, namely the active involvement of the researcher in the actual organizational decision-making through positions of responsibility.

In summary, while for me World of Warcraft proved to be a bountiful source of ethnographic insight into strategy work in virtual environments one should not approach such environments with impunity. Much specialized knowledge and skills are required to truly tap into the game world, and understanding organizing through activities that take place inside the game world are just as demanding as similar research in more conventional settings. Virtual worlds, once accessed, provide excellent opportunities for recording substantial amounts of observations, but ethnographers would also benefit greatly from recording more processed and personal observations, for example, in the form of a fieldwork journal. This is especially true if, as in my case, the ethnographer intends to do several rounds of fieldwork designed to hone, angle and possibly foreshadow problems.

3.2. World of Warcraft as a research target

Virtual reality is certainly one of modern mankind’s recurring pipedreams. As Paul Ricoeur (1984) points out in the second volume of ‘Time and Narrative’, our capacity for the concept of fiction is relatively modern. On medieval sea charts “there be dragons” had a literal sense in capturing people’s imaginations and creating an understanding of the unknown. But as enlightenment spearheaded the age of reason, the dragons of the old sea charts were banished into corners yet unexplored and hence feasible locations of dragon’s dens. Ultimately, as the world of the unknown shrunk, there were no more monsters lurking in dark waters, with the possible exception of certain loch’s making good income from the purses of tourists. But be this as it may, dragons, at least in our imaginations, have throughout history shown astonishing tenacity and refused to die. Thus, an entirely new realm of creative work has brought us back to dragons and their elusive futuristic cousins, the death stars: namely the realm of fiction. And the world loves fiction.

It is thus not surprising that the world of technology would have an intimate relationship with the fictional. In conjuring up visions that reality is incapable of, film studios have used technology to conjure up visions of King Kong atop the Empire State Building to furry-footed hobbits destined to overthrow dark lords. Much of both the fictional narration, but also the technological production of fiction, has one substantial hurdle. It is fiction yes, but it is a one-sided fiction into which we cannot immerse ourselves. Once you close the covers of the book or once the DVD runs to the end, our little sojourn to where there be dragons ends. Furthermore, it is an act in which we are not contributing. But what if this could all change? It is here that our search for virtual reality commences; in the search for interactive and collaborative spaces inhabited by dragons.

Computer games in their earliest 1960s incarnations have always been interactive in the sense that what we as players directly impact and manipulate events on the screen, be it shooting alien monsters in Space Invaders or eating energy tiles in PacMan. A
representation of some sorts of ourselves (an avatar) is on the screen and we somehow
guide its actions. The computer program responds according to pre-scripted rules.
From the very early days of computer games the idea of multi-player games has gained
ground. Partly because playing with your friends is a social experience, and partly
because playing a human opponent provides for much more variance in the gaming
experience compared to what can be accomplished in computer code. Could this
phenomenon be pushed even farther? What if you could cohabit a computer world with
your friends?

This kind of computer game saw its inception in the late 70s, in the form of MUD’s
(Multi-User Dungeon). By today’s standards they were modest; the graphics consisted
mainly of ASCII characters and the players were a very limited core of computer
enthusiasts who had access to dial-up modems for connecting to these worlds. Over the
years, these games started to evolve, but it would not be until 1997 that they would see
their first commercial success in the form of Ultima Online. It features a birds-eye view
with 2D graphics, and drew on the popular Ultima series of computer games to provide
a setting rich in lore. Ultima Online was what is called a sandbox game, intended to be a
self-sufficient world in which the players could primarily create whatever they wished.
The game supported a number of such features, allowing the players to craft their own
houses in the virtual world and become accomplished virtual craftsmen. The game also
supported player-versus-player combat, and through its role as the first major
commercial launch, it served as a test bed and growing ground for many conventions
and controversies that later games of the genre would have to contend with. Ultima
Online was also the game that popularized the rather terrible acronym the genre
became known by: MMORPG, which stands for Massive Multiplayer Online
Roleplaying Game (or MMO, as I refer to it). From a commercial point of view, Ultima
Online was still fairly much a fringe product during its time. It is estimated that the
game peaked at around 250,000 subscribing players. However, in recognition of the
staying power of Ultima Online’s original sandbox approach to game design, it ought to
be noted that the game still exists today, although it is unlikely to make any headlines.

The game that truly launched the MMO genre was released a few years after Ultima
Online. Appearing in 1999, Everquest by Sony Online Entertainment would be the first
major hit in the MMO market, peaking at nearly half a million subscribers in 2004. It
would introduce a whole number of genre-staples later copied by practically all major
releases. Everquest, unlike Ultima Online, was not a sandbox world. Rather, it was
designed using ideas from pen-and-paper role-playing games. Characters in the game
were level-based and as you fought your way through Everquest you’d gain more
experience points and become more powerful. In the process you would acquire special
gear that would further augment your characters power and social prestige. Action in
the game was focused on adventuring; playing together with other players in order to
defeat challenging in-game monsters. Players in the game were connected through
dedicated features such as in-game chats and the possibility to form player guilds.
Thus, the big distinction between Everquest and Ultima Online was that in Everquest
the focus was on doing things with other players, while in Ultima Online it was on living
amongst other people. This is not to say that the distinction is definite, but it is
indicative of how the games were developed.

It is thus that we arrive at World of Warcraft. It is not the only MMO out in the market
currently; there are others and many of them are built around valuable intellectual
property such as Star Wars, Middle Earth or Howards’s Conan the Barbarian. But it is
without a trace of doubt the pulse-setting MMO today. It alone accounts for over 50% of
the global MMO player base and has been a multi-billion revenue hit for its creator
Blizzard Entertainment since its launch in 2004. World of Warcraft has faced shifting popularity during its history. Upon launch, it rapidly shot up to 4 million players, which at the time was unheard of and exceeded industry estimates concerning the maximum player base possible for the entire MMO genre. It has since slowly crawled up in popularity, reaching a peak of 12 million subscribers in late 2010 before dwindling to around 10 million at the time of this writing. The game has had an enduring shelf life, having gone through three major expansions to date, with a fourth named “Mists of Pandaria” due to be launched in September 2012. It is hence here, in World of Warcraft, that I decided to commence my search for dragons in late 2007.

In all honesty, the choice of World of Warcraft was anything but coincidental for me. I have been an avid gamer since the 80s, as well as a fan of the paper-and-pen roleplaying games on which many of today’s MMOs draw their inspiration. I first played in the MMO genre back in 2000, adventuring in the magical world of Britannia now and then for a three-year period in Ultima Online. I started playing World of Warcraft when it was released in Europe in February 2005, and during 2005-2006 I was what you might call a hard-core gamer. Hence, I was fairly familiar with the game by the time I decided to conduct my studies. This, as I shall later explain, brought with it a number of boons, but also many methodological challenges that needed to be explored.

But returning to World of Warcraft, it is no doubt valuable at this point to explain in more detail what the game is about. It is a computer game that operates on Windows and Mac platforms; it is not available for game consoles such as Xbox or Playstation. Joining the game requires a computer with a client, an active subscription to the game (currently valued at €12.95/month) and a broadband internet connection. Potential players are first confronted with a character generation/selection screen. If you do not have a previous character, you will need to make one before you are allowed to enter the game. You must choose a race, gender and class for your character. The races are split into two competing groups: the more tribal and shamanistic horde consisting of races such as orcs and trolls, and the more civilized and gentrified alliance consisting of races such as humans and dwarfs. The two groups, known as factions, are in a constant state of conflict over the world. The choice of gender is purely a matter of aesthetics and does not impact in-game performance in any way; though World of Warcraft is in no way immune to the prevailing stereotypical portrayals of fantasy characters.

Finally, the most important choice in terms of your technical prowess is that of class. There are a total of nine classes to choose from, ranging from paladins to warlocks, hunters to druids. What is important in your choice of class is that it truly determines the playing style available to you. For instance, one class engages in close combat, while another is capable of wielding healing magic. Yet another class is a multi-talented hybrid that performs well many roles without truly excelling in any. Upon completing these choices, there are still a few things that need to be done before one can enter the game. The character needs to be given a unique name and some details relating to the look of the character's face need to be decided upon. To finish, you need to decide which type of game server you wish to play on. World of Warcraft is not able to accommodate all of its millions of players in one big mass; rather the player base is split onto several servers, each typically capable of hosting perhaps 5,000-10,000 player accounts. Typically, you will want to choose a server that either your friends play on or that has a specific set of rules pertaining to player interaction that suits your preferences. After this, all one needs to do is to press “enter game” and you enter the World of Warcraft.
What you will see next, once the game client finishes loading, is a 3-dimensional computer world. It is thematically located in the fantasy genre of fiction, with the exact representation around you depending on which race you selected for your character. Let us assume, for example, that you created a Night Elf character. Then you would start your World of Warcraft journey on Teldrassil, a leaf tree of massive proportions that elfish druids have conjured up on the northern shores of the continent of Azeroth. Teldrassil is the location for many Night Elf villages set in lush locations of trees, bushes and other vegetation. Ambient background music adds a further touch of magic and the unreal to the whole experience. An important part of a characters early life in World of Warcraft is based on the idea of questing. As you travel around the world, you will meet several computer-generated characters who require you to perform certain tasks for them, for instance collecting plants for herbal remedies, killing hostile creatures that have overrun a village or escorting a lost person to safety, to name some of the typical quest plots. Completing the quests will grant your character both experience, money and possibly new pieces of equipment.

From a playing perspective, the world around you is portrayed in 3D. The artistic style of the graphics in World of Warcraft could be characterized as toonish; a conscious choice on the part of the games designers intending to prolong the graphical appeal of a game type with an unusually long lifespan in a world quickly evolving home computers. On the screen you will find many features that are critical for gameplay. In the middle of the screen bottom, you will see rows of small icons. These represent the abilities and spells available to your character, nearly all of them dependent on your choice of class. On the bottom left, there is a window reserved for scrolling text, which will contain the game’s technical messages such as how much money you receive upon completing a quest, and all the chat channels you can access. On the top right, there is a map-like overview of your current immediate environment. In addition, there a number of special buttons you can click to access information about available dungeoneering groups, player-versus-player combat scenarios and guild information, although most of these only become important to you as you progress through the games content. When you start out, your character is at level 1, and at the time of writing the maximum level obtainable is 85. As you start to adventure, the first levels come rather quickly, but as you progress the speed slows down considerably. I would estimate that if you were to create a new character in World of Warcraft now and play a few hours most evenings, it would take you anywhere from one to two months to reach level 85.

The level game is only one aspect of World of Warcraft and this distinction is important for understanding what I have done in my research. Upon reaching level 85, what could be called the quest engine of the game quiets down. At this point, two broad choices open up for the character. You can either focus on what is known as PvE (Player versus Environment) or PvP (Player versus Player) content. In PvP content, you typically play in arenas, where your team of two, three or five persons is pitted against a roughly similar team of similar size with the winner being determined by the last team standing. If you chose PvE content, you effectively become known as a raider and focus on what is known as raiding. In this type of game, you team up with several other players to start combating monsters that vastly outpower any single character. As you begin, you will prepare for real raid encounters by exploring dungeons filled with different sorts of dangers in groups of five, and once your personal skill and gear supply is sufficient you can seek out raid guilds that run 10 or 25-person raids.

What makes the raid environment very different from the earlier game experience is that it is a much more demanding form of content. As you work your way up the levels in World of Warcraft, you might run into an occasional challenge where the tasks
(quests) given to you are difficult to complete, but most of the time you will just push ahead without many issues. In raiding, the story changes substantially. Raiding requires carefully co-ordinated groups, in which the exact role and number of different classes is thought out in advance. Typically, the roles required in a raid can be split into four groups: tanks, healers, ranged and melee. Each of these roles has a specific task that they are capable of executing in the raid environment. Tanks are typically the heavily-armoured shield carrying warrior-types whose main job is to be in the frontline of any action in order to soak up attacks and the harmful monster attributes being fought. Healers are typically spell-wielders, whose magic is instantly capable of mending wounds and restoring energy to other players, and a classical task for the healers is to make sure the tanks, who are optimized to endure damage, stay alive throughout a given encounter. Ranged refers to character classes that have long-distance damage dealing abilities, such as bow-wielding hunters or mages who shoot magic missiles. Melee refers to damage dealers whose specialty is to deal damage from close quarters, such as rogues. Beyond this, all classes bring with them special abilities and cross-raid boons which, when correctly combined, increase the chances of success.

Raid encounters, however, are challenging to learn. It can take anywhere from one 3 to 5-hour evening of raiding to several months for a given group to learn how to defeat a certain foe. The encounters themselves, from a story-line perspective, follow traditional fantasy staples, being typically scripted as dragons, demons or mad wizards. This is the graphical representations the player will see in-game as well, but of course at the same time it is important to keep in mind that beyond the graphical representation of a given encounter, what the players are actually doing is learning how to respond to a computer code. Over the years, Blizzard has released hundreds of different raid encounters, and has developed a keen understanding of what makes an encounter relatively easy or complex. Typically, each expansion will contain raiding content that is easy, and some that is very challenging. Being able to defeat the challenging content quickly, possibly as a world’s first or server’s first, is considered quite prestigious, and popular internet sites exist that are dedicated to tracking such achievements. The relatively large differences amongst World of Warcraft’s 10-million player base also pose a number of challenges for the game designers with regard to which style of raiding to support: the more casual or more hardcore groups?

But beyond merely being a more demanding format for gaming, raiding also entails a whole number of practical considerations that renders it an interesting object of study from such an unlikely angle as management and strategy studies. Namely, there is a whole lot of organizing, strategizing and learning that goes into keeping a raid organization floating. Simply consider this: for the most intensive form of raiding, there needs to be 25 concurrent players participating in the raid. Typically, a raid guild will schedule 3-4 raids per week. Considering that we are talking about a voluntary hobby, this means that the raid organization will typically need to have a membership base ranging from 40 to 60 people, depending on how much they raid and how strictly they enforce attendance requirements. Furthermore, as raids are subject to fairly strict practical rules concerning group composition, what members are online when is not arbitrary. You simply cannot raid with 10 tanks and 3 healers, although the reverse might be feasible.

Maintaining the membership base is perhaps the most critical management job that needs to be done in raid organizations. In typical raid organizations, you’d have one or two senior members who are specifically tasked with the job of monitoring the membership pool. It’s a hobby, after all, and most of the players are students in their twenties. It is a fact of life that people simply come and go. Hence, most raid
organizations are typically constantly recruiting, and this is a process that needs to be managed. Often organizations have a ladder system for membership, with fresh recruits going through periods as trial members before being fully accepted. Often such trial periods are used to evaluate how well a candidate fits into the specific raid organization in terms of technical playing skill, and socially, with regard to how well the person gets along with the senior members and follows the rules of the organization. At the other end of the membership spectrum, typically most raid organizations will have a formally established leadership structure that includes jobs that could be considered managerial, such as recruitment and guild treasures, as well as tasks that relate to the operational leadership of raids. The hierarchy of the organization might or might not be associated with perks; in some organizations leaders have first picks on new and powerful equipment acquired through common raid activities, while in others gear is allocated either based on the use of some form of virtual currency or simply assigned based on assessments where said gear is likely to benefit the organization the most.

An interesting feature of the potential complexity of managing a raid organization relates to the use of virtual currencies for the purposes of resource allocation. Quite simply, when you find a magical sword in a vanquished dragon’s horde, whom should you give it to? One of the solutions that World of Warcraft raid organizations have inherited from Everquest (in which early elite raiders have their roots) is known as the Dragon Killing Point (DKP) system. The basic idea of this currency is a zero-sum game; when you attain a member rank you are awarded a sum of points and after this point when you participate in a raid you gain a share of the DKP used by other members to purchase gear upgrades. Gear allocation itself is typically done through competitive bidding, sometimes with restrictions where certain classes or functions that clearly benefit more from an item are given bidding priority. Maintaining the DKP system is a job for one raid group manager, as it easily involves a fair bit of bookkeeping and requires number updates on a separate web page. It is not unusual for organizations to introduce specific twists to the system in order to guide member behaviour. Sometimes different pools of points are kept for different power levels of gear, and the actual gaining of DKP points might be calculated across the entire week rather than one specific raid evening. Sometimes there are even systems that introduce some kind of inflation into the point system in order to encourage members to spend points on smaller upgrades rather than waiting for an ultimate prestige item.

3.3. Studying World of Warcraft through ethnography-in-practice

Most qualitative research within organization and management studies study organizational types with which we are readily familiar, such as firms, public or third sector organizations. We do so using methods which are equally common-sensical: interviews, archives or ethnographic participation. This interaction takes place face-to-face or through some form of computer mediated communication such as voice, video or text transferred over the internet. Studying World of Warcraft is quite different from this, as it involves essentially studying a virtual world that unfolds on the computer screen. Hence, it is relevant to show what it actually means to be part of a MMO-type game such as World of Warcraft. While many of us these days have a favourite game or two, to grasp the whole breadth of a complex gaming genre such as MMOs requires specific insight and it is quite unlikely that many of my readers would a priori have this insight. I therefore present here three screenshots of actual in-game situations that display, if you like, my activities inside World of Warcraft. My basic in-game activity was conducted through playing a World of Warcraft character. I used two characters for this purpose, one called Salindar and the other called Elathrian. The screenshots in
Figures 2 and 3 depict Salindar in an in-raid situation, while Figure 4 depicts Elathrian inside the tavern of the village of Astranaar, thus illustrating the difference between a combat and a non-combat situation.

3.4. Raiding as my empirical context

In this thesis, I study an activity known as raiding. This has a specific meaning in gaming circles, and for the lack of a better source Wikipedia defines it as “a type of mission in a video game in which a very large number of people (larger than the normal team size set by the game) attempt to defeat a boss monster. This type of objective is most common in MMORPGs, where the servers are designed to handle the number of users”. During my 39 months of ethnographic fieldwork across five raid organizations I was involved in learning and planning how to handle a total of 68 such boss encounters. Some of these were very easy, requiring perhaps 30 minutes to learn. Some were extremely demanding, taking the raid organization over 1 month to learn. Also during my fieldwork, I participated in organizations that raided both with 25 concurrent online players and with 10 concurrent online players, which are the two formats commonly supported by World of Warcraft. The five raid organizations had differing ambition levels, reflecting on their selection of boss targets with more hardcore organizations pushing progress as rapidly as they could and more casual organizations progressing at a slower pace.

Figure 2  In-game screenshot: Combat from the Eredar Twins encounter
Figure 3  In-game screenshot: Setting up a raid for the Sunwell Plateau environment

Figure 4  In-game screenshot: My character resting in the Night Elf village of Astranaar
Raiding in World of Warcraft is very much an iterative process. Virtually no boss encounter is a single-shot event, rather all bosses are located inside what are known as raid instances. These are dedicated areas where only members of a given raid organization can enter, and even so the amount of players that can enter is typically restricted to either 10 or 25. These raid instances respawn once per week, so that bosses who have been killed previously are again available as targets for the organization, but also so that if progress inside a given instance is blocked by the need to defeat a given boss then the group must do so in order to proceed further. Typically, every boss will carry some loot which becomes available to the organization when they defeat it. Hence, raids are at times designated as either loot runs or progress runs, with loot runs targeting bosses that the organization expects to rapidly defeat with old routines in order to, for example, gear up new members, while progress runs target content that the organization has been unable to defeat earlier.

While the limit on how many players can participate in a given raid is something determined by the game, running a raid organization that is capable of mustering 10 or 25 concurrent players requires a substantially larger pool of players. My estimate based on the organizations I participated in is 15-25 persons for the smaller organizations and 40-60 persons for the larger ones. Typically, a raid organization will have raids scheduled over a number of evenings. In my case these ranged from as much as 28 hours of raiding spread across five weekly evenings to 12 hours spread across three weekly evenings. Considering that World of Warcraft is a hobby, conducted alongside studies, work and other social duties, it then implies that the player pool from which the raid organization has to draw must be larger than the amount of concurrent players in a given raid.

Further complicating the staffing is the fact that raids in World of Warcraft requires a certain mix of different types of characters. There are three primary functional roles that need to be performed: tanking, healing and damage dealing. Roughly speaking, a raid needs 20% of its participants to be tanks, 30% healers and 50% damage dealers. The possibility to develop a given role requires that the specific character class one is playing, out of the 10 available in-game when my research was done, has the abilities needed to perform the role. To put it simply, mages do not have the ability to wear the heavy armour required of tanks, nor do paladins have the skill to shoot crossbows. But, the ability to perform a given role does not only rest on having the character abilities for it. Characters must also undergo an often lengthy process of gearing up in order to have the equipment to perform their role at a sufficiently powerful level. For this reason, one character is normally restricted to performing one of these functions. Alongside the technical setup required to raid, there are a number of management functions that need to be performed during the raid. The most important of these is raid leading, which basically means selecting the specific tactics used in a given encounter and selecting the specific boss targets that the raid organization attempts during the evening. Alongside these there are roles relating to the management of the group’s assets and staffing issues that arise during the evening. Finally, especially in 25-character raid organizations, there is typically a sort of middle management layer in place known as team leaders, who are in charge of co-ordinating the efforts of the three specific technical functions (tanking, healing and damage dealing).
3.5. Playing the game

World of Warcraft is a computer game that is played either on PC or Apple computers using a game client that renders a fantasy-themed 3D world as depicted in Figures 1-3. The player's own avatar is in the middle of the screen, with dedicated information windows surrounding the avatar. The game occurs in real time, with every move undertaken by the player immediately occurring in the game. Similarly, moves by other players or in-game computer-guided avatars occur in real time. The screenshots attached show the way my own World of Warcraft user interface was designed. Apart from the basic layout of the avatar placed in the middle of the 3D view, the user interface is heavily modifiable. Typically, dedicated raiders like myself in World of Warcraft use a very heavily modified user interface. Movement inside the virtual game world is conducted using a combination of keyboard and mouse buttons, with a number of character abilities mapped in a similar fashion to keyboard and mouse shortcuts. Table 1 explains the main information windows, indicated with arrows in Figures 2 and 3. While these might be difficult to grasp without some understanding of 3D games, an explanation of these will give the reader some insight into the complexity of information that needs to be monitored and analyzed by a prospective World of Warcraft raider.

Table 4  Features of the World of Warcraft Game Client

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Window number</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Function</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Character health and mana bar</td>
<td>Indicates how much health and mana the player’s own character currently possesses. Reaching zero health means the character will die, while reaching zero mana means the character cannot operate important in-game abilities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Target frame</td>
<td>Displays whom the character is currently targeting; either a friendly or a hostile target. Furthermore, it shows the target’s target; i.e. whom the targeted avatar is focusing its attention on.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Buff list</td>
<td>Shows the type and duration of different long-duration (up to 2 hours) benevolent and malevolent spells currently affecting the player’s own character.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Ability timers</td>
<td>Shows the duration of different highly powerful abilities that the player need to pay attention to. These are typically short in duration (5-30 seconds); though they might have cooldowns which last longer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>In-game chat bubble</td>
<td>Shows the talk of another character in-game as a bubble above that avatar’s head. The same text will be found in the chat window.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Table 4 Continued..</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>The player’s own avatar</td>
<td>Located in the middle of the 3D client view, the player’s own avatar marks the middle point of what a player sees and is, in effect, the exact location where the player is standing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Minimap</td>
<td>A map-like overview of where the character stands, with different sorts of non-critical utility buttons groups around it such as access to the in-game mail system.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Main tank list</td>
<td>Shows the designated tanks of the current raid. Tanks are a special type of character that lead attacks due to their stamina; it is important for non-tanks to make sure that the enemy is focusing on the tanks and thus a dedicated main tank list is used by most raids.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Damage meters</td>
<td>For damage dealing classes, which all of my characters were, this is a real-time bar of how well you are performing vis-a-vis other damage dealers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Other avatars</td>
<td>In this case, these are other player characters in the same raid with me. The screenshot depicts a deployment situation in which the raid is getting ready to attack.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Raid member list</td>
<td>This information frame shows basic information (name, health and mana) for all the characters in the raid; in this case 25 raiders. This window is not so important for damage dealing characters; but vital for healer-type characters who will typically modify it to be much larger and contain a lot more information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Client function buttons</td>
<td>Features required for operating the basic game client; such as logging out and opening the player’s back packs. These features are not critical for raiding as such.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Mastering a user interface like the one I used for Salindar takes a fair bit of playing and would probably make no sense to a novice World of Warcraft player. Personally, I spent four months learning and gearing up Salindar before joining a raid organization. Especially when playing a damage-dealer character, the game is rather transparent performance-wise and a failure to play up to the raid’s expected standards will often draw harsh critique. Furthermore, the relative importance of the different character abilities are liable to change as the game undergoes developer balancing rounds. Hence being up-to-date on how to play a particular class is an ongoing process, involving following a number of sites dedicated to detailed discussions and even computer-based simulations of the performance of different abilities and ability sequences.

Personally, if I returned to World of Warcraft now, at the point of writing this, some three years after having raided with Salindar, it would probably take me some months to attain decent performance again. Yet, from a research perspective, the important thing to understand is that to research World of Warcraft through participation means playing an in-game character and partaking in the same in-game activities as the other players. It is by participating, observing and recording data from the in-game situations that the findings in this study are produced. Thus, it could be said that this type of research is a kind of avatar-watching. In many cases, I don’t have any idea who the actual physical person behind a given character is. This, fortunately, wasn’t a universal truth and thus I’ve been able to complement many of my studies with discussions and interviews with key members of the different raid organizations. But even when doing so, these iterations have always been focused on getting a second opinion on any analysis I had done regarding actual in-game events.

| Table 4 Continued.. |
|---------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| **13a; 13b; 13c**  | Chat windows                                    |
|                     | These provide a multitude of data; from         |
|                     | private messages to talk in the raid           |
|                     | organization’s diverse different in-game        |
|                     | chat channels. They also contain messages       |
|                     | generated by the game client. Personally, I    |
|                     | grouped these into three different windows. 13a|
|                     | was dedicated to private in-game messages; 13b  |
|                     | was dedicated to raid-related messages and 13c  |
|                     | contained the different social channels I was a |
|                     | member of.                                       |
| **14**              | Character ability buttons                       |
|                     | These display the different in-game abilities  |
|                     | that the player’s character has access to. For  |
|                     | Salindar, being a shadow priest class character,|
|                     | these had somewhat sinister names like Mind Blast,|
|                     | Mind Flay and Vampiric Embrace.                |
4 PRACTICES, BOUNDARIES AND TEMPORALITY IN STRATEGIC ORGANIZATIONS

Essays 2, 3 and 4, briefly introduced in Chapter 1, form the conceptual backbone of this thesis. What unites these essays is the strategy-as-practice tradition, in particular the conceptual framework of practice, praxis and practitioners (Whittington 2006). Yet, when looking at the specific contributions that the essays make, there is a need to move beyond the conceptual framework and simple identification of practices and examine micro-strategizing (Johnson, Melin & Whittington 2003). Examination of this kind requires through more specific theoretical lenses, which in my case relate to temporality, the internal conditions of organizational evolution, collective intentionality and organizational boundaries. What I try to offer in this final kappa chapter is a meta-theoretical reflection of how these notions interrelate within the confines of a micro perspective on strategizing. My proposition is that when we try to understand the modern strategic organization, these can be combined to generate a process-based understanding of how strategizing and strategic organizations unfold.

4.1. The concept of strategic organization

In much of this chapter, I use the concept of strategic organization to discuss my object of study. Often in the literature, the concept is simply used to refer to articles published in and contributing to the agenda of the journal Strategic Organization (Felin & Foss 2005; Langley 2007) or as a composite concept for the knowledge about strategic management generated by research to date (Mahoney & McGahan 2007). My take on the concept is similar, but in this specific chapter I restrict myself to the claims I make in this thesis. For me, due to my ethnographic sympathies, strategic organization is a potential property of contemporary organizations, which, if present, can be studied empirically both through participation and text. What I argue is that a strategic organization is one that seeks to anticipate its future (Vesa & Franck 2013). It does this by employing the individual skills and capacities of its managers and workers, often acting in unison though not necessarily in harmony, and applying principles from strategic management to achieve typically socially sanctioned and conditioned goals in the future.

For the organizational actors, as individuals or collectives, to do so implies that they must find the exercise meaningful and not a mere exercise of ritual. Typically this results in a mindset that is highly functionalist (Donaldson 2003). Hence, organizations are goal-satisfying utilitarian boundary constructs through which both individuals and groups seek to pursue strategic initiatives with regard to the environment. Organizations are, due to their perceived utilitarian nature, fundamentally constructs of a limited lifetime, bound to emerge and fade depending on the utility assigned to them by their constituent units. This understanding of strategic organizations sees collaboration as based on self interest accrued to a communal level by organizational members based on voluntary, functionalist behaviour. It should be noted that this view is about the phenomenological experience of the participant in a strategic organization and many very diverse forms of foundational organizational science quite validly challenge it (Cyert & March 1963; DiMaggio & Powell 1983; Knights & Morgan 1991). Indeed, the functionalizing nature of contemporary strategic knowledge might be the very problem (Chia & Holt 2006).
Thus, my approach towards the study of strategic organization generally recognizes that organizations are fundamentally made up of individuals, eschewing individual-less explanations of organization (Felin and Foss 2005). This accords with a sensitivity for micro activities through which organizations accomplish things through the day-to-day practices of its people. It is based on this phenomenological understanding of the organization as existing for its members, a utilitarian construct fulfilling strategic initiatives through the micro-level efforts of its members, that I seek to elaborate on the more general qualities of my study. Namely, how can one explain the practices, boundaries and temporality of strategic organizations? To discuss temporality is to essentially ask the question already evident in Barnard’s (1938) classical work ‘Functions of the Executive’: How can we explain the limited duration or life of an organization? To discuss practice means to raise the question of how the day-to-day work is organized within an organization during its existence. And to discuss boundaries means to explain the line that separates those who exploit the environment in order to accomplish an initiative (the organization) from that which is exploited (the environment). But before delving into these questions, I wish to elaborate on how I see the core activity of strategy around which strategic organizations form.

4.2. Strategy and temporality

Though asked in a polemical manner by Whittington (2001), the question “What is strategy, and does it matter?” is one that warrants a recap. The reason for this is that no matter if we work with an explicit, implicit or even unarticulated understanding of the phenomenon we are researching, our understanding of what we are looking for will still influence what we find. Hence, studies of the normative implications of different competitive stances will find either the existence or lack of competitive capacity. Studies of the formation of patterns of corporate strategic behaviour will find the existence or lack of such patterns. Just as our understanding of the concept of strategy has an influence, so does the originator of said strategy. Typically, in management and organization studies both strategic capacity and the capacity for strategy is located at the organization level, with control over this duality more or less in the hands of the organization’s managerial elite.

As is evident in the theme of Essay 4, I do not approach research strategy through a competitive or the behavioural pattern approach. The process of strategy and practice of strategic management are two different things. I see strategy as a deep process of organizing I call ‘temporal emergence’. My argument is that strategy as such should not be seen as a phenomenon of the modern world, even though the emergence of people defining themselves and their work as being strategic can be beautifully traced, as demonstrated by Heuser (2010). Rather, my argument is that what we know as ‘strategy’ is something that humans have had the intrinsic capacity and need to perform for as long as meaningful human studies have existed. At its core can be found a human condition; our hesitation with regards to our own future.

Strategy, and similar social behaviour through the ages, seeks to answer this hesitation. The future confronts us with a challenge, since we cannot meaningfully control it. Hence, humans across the ages have sought to confront this quality of the unknown through different means. Be it through the divine fatalism of the middle ages, shamanistic worldviews of humanity about to enter the historical age or the rational ordering of reality inherent to us in the modern world, we are ultimately hapless in front of our futures. This is particularly challenging for our modern age, because it strikes dissonance into the rationality and control that we so cherish. To study strategy
conceptually then means to study this process of temporal emergence; in other words, empirically how different strategic practices empirically structure uncertainty and personal experiences of time into common strategic initiatives around which organizations gather. Strategic management is the contemporary form of this practice of temporal emergence.

Temporal emergence is at its basis an individual condition. Collectively, we work with our personal sense of temporality, expressing at times collective temporality through shared experiences in art, but much more importantly for organization studies as shared experiences in time. Indeed, in strategic organizations one of the core functions of temporal emergence is the creation of a commonly-held sense of duration, known as time, through which we can order and arrange the everyday into a world of practices through which co-operation can occur. Through such co-operation arises another central phenomenon of the organizational world; the boundary. In all its simplicity, the boundary defines the sphere of co-operation. With whom do I work, towards what do we work? It is in this way that the three empirical papers included here come together in this discussion. I argue that temporality (Essay 4) connects the practices through which we organize the everyday (Essay 2) which leads to the establishment of organizational boundaries (Essay 3). It is the process of strategy that shapes this chain.

4.3. Strategy as temporal emergence - three key concepts

In the conceptualization of strategy as a process of temporal emergence, three constructs are of central importance, all of which relate directly to the aforementioned dissertation essays. These are temporality, practice and boundaries.

Temporality is an embedded characteristic of individuals in a community. It is how I as a person belonging to a specific community in the present experience the time in live in, both past and future. It is hence at the same time a personal and a social construct, but it is experienced always uniquely by every single member of the community. Temporality is messy and unstructured, consisting of both our memories of the past and our aspirations of the future. It contains hopes and fears and is highly intuitive. Temporality cannot be measured, but it can be meaningfully expressed through language and art. It stands in a contrast to time, which I argue is a social accomplishment in which the plurality of temporalities residing with the individuals of a community are arranged and ordered for the purposes of enabling common action.

Hence, time is a universal characteristic of the physical world; a continuing sequence of actions and things from the past to the future. Time can be meaningfully measured in numbers and allocated through the use of clocks and calendars. Strategy, as a manifestation of the deep process of temporal emergence, is the co-operative process through which this temporal emergence is accomplished in strategic organizations. The argument I present with my co-author in Essay 4 is that this is done through the alignment of temporalities into three broad categories of vectors: unquestioned, resolute and fragmented. It is worth observing that this process is an emergent one that simply happens when people collude on potential future scenarios. It is not to be equated with a rational, top-down formal corporate planning process, although much of the complex temporal emergence process can occur alongside a formal planning process.

This vectorization of temporalities into something communal generates the possibility for organizing collaborative work. This is a matter of everyday organizing; a shared
temporal ordering of time forms a prerequisite for arranging and communicating to bring about practical effort. This is where practice enters the picture. Following Miettinen, Fredricks and Yanow (2009), I consider practice to be in itself constitutive of everyday life and even more so of everyday co-operative efforts. Hence, what appears through a process of temporal emergence is not preliminary grand organizational plans but rather a vast horizon of possible mundane, everyday co-operative possibilities. These possibilities are by their nature practical, and the actual accomplishment of such co-operation depends on the gradual development and maintenance of social practices suited to completing the tasks. What is of interest here is that as the complexity of the co-operation increases, an entirely new set of practices emerge which relate to organizing the different practices required for complex forms of co-operation, and hence to what we in contemporary management and organization studies would refer to as management.

In Essay 2, I identify a vast array of managerial practices required to run and sustain raiding organizations in World of Warcraft. Furthermore, I demonstrate how different managerial practices are used with differing frequency, depending on the organization’s lifecycle and how different practices relate to the operative efficiency of the organization. Primarily, my argument is that foundational practices, necessary to establish a form of organizational collaboration, also introduce a high risk of organizational failure when in frequent use and furthermore lead to poor levels of organizational efficiency. Hence, successful organizations quickly move on from foundational practices to toolbox practices, which establish the day-to-day activities of the organization, before eventually moving on to routine practices which carry out the day-to-day activities. Occasionally routine practices will fail, and the organization resorts to toolbox practices anew in order to fix the glitches and return to routine practices. If this fails, the problem escalates and foundational practices re-emerge, bringing a substantial risk of organizational failure. Likewise, moving away from an environment characterized by routine practices has negative consequences for organizational performance. Figure 5 shows this from a process perspective.

**Figure 5  Practice and efficiency during an organization’s lifecycle**

But practices alone are not capable of explaining the location and scope of co-operative efforts. In the modern world, practices are exercised inside different kinds of organizations. Organizations form boundaries for practice enactment. The question of boundaries has been expanded to be understood as “simply the demarcation between the organization and its environment” (Santos and Eisenhardt 2005:491). But while organizations form boundaries for practice enactment, such boundaries are porous. In Essay 3, I identify two forms of organizational boundaries: necessity and fellowship
boundaries. These two are based on two different modes of co-operation; with necessity-driven coactivity seeking to satisfy the selfish needs of co-operative partners and fellowship-driven collaboration seeking to satisfy the needs of all involved parties. The same practices can be used in both kinds of behaviour, yet have different implications for the organization.

My argument here is that as increasing levels of complexity require managerial practices to step into the picture, selfish co-activity likely replaces fellowship collaboration. Thus, as modern organizations are in many ways defined by and through managerial praxis, they are also at the formal organizational level inherently volatile boundary constructs. What is persistent are fellowship nodes that move from one organization to another. This is so because the core unit of organizing and performing shared temporal vector-based practices e are fellowships. However, fellowships are by their nature fairly small and based on individuals who are acquainted, thus forming bonds that lead to the fellowship members seeking to satisfy the greater good of the fellowship. In turn, fellowships join other fellowships in order to enact complex or resource-intensive initiatives that are strategic at the organizational level. Defined as proactive, temporary group undertakings intended to create value for the firm (Lechner and Floyd 2012), strategic initiatives have a formative role for the emergence of boundaries.

4.4. The role of practice in strategic organization

In Essay 3, I analyze the way strategic initiatives form the basis of organizing. Different kinds of strategic initiatives lead to different forms of organizational boundaries, depending on if the initiative is aimed at intermediate-level fellowship collaboration or organizational level coactivity. In this part of the discussion, it is my intention to further develop the model presented in Essay 3 on what I call ‘the theory of the naturally-emerging organization’ by examining how the main theoretical constructs of Essays 2 and 4, managerial practice with respect to experiential vectors, blend in with the propositions of Essay 3, and thus explain the emergence of the strategic organization.

Figure 6 The emergence of the strategic organization
The whole process through which strategy guides the organizing trajectory that leads to strategic organizations as we know them starts with the individual. Individuals possess a temporal understanding of the world; one in which our memories and expectations exist in a raw, unstructured form. Through interaction with others, we realize that our temporalities have common experiential vectors; we hold somewhat convergent understandings of what we would like to see happening in the future. These convergent understandings convene into experiential vectors, which by their nature can be unquestioned, resolute or fragmented (see Essay 4 for a detailed description). This shared foundation of the very human condition in which we exist makes possible the first steps towards co-operation. We see where we could potentially work together, and we see how many of the expectations we hold cannot be accomplished alone.

Hence, we start to seek practical, everyday collaboration with those with likeminded expectations. Through this everyday collaboration we give rise to practices, mundane everyday forms of collaboration focused on the activity at hand. At this stage, such practices are located within a small, closely-knit fellowship, in which all the members personally know each other. The level of trust is high, and members of the fellowship are committed to what Hakli, Miller and Tuomela (2010) call a “we-reasoning”. Thus co-operation is aimed towards satisfying the requirements of the whole fellowship; work is collaborative. The boundary construct of a fellowship is in many ways a none-issue, since high levels of trust makes explicit definition of such boundaries unnecessary. Yet, on an implicit level the boundary exists and is persistent. It consists of actual social ties to other individuals, built up slowly over time as acting together results in shared practices. Structurally this is understandable as a network construct in which different fellowship cores fade away into outliers which link to other fellowship cores, hence forming a spider’s web that contains the entire society. At the level of fellowships, strategy is an emergent, purposive activity which does not contain formal processes or planning. It emerges from that which is being done, and intends to sustain that which is being done, assuming no changes in the experiential vectors from which the fellowship collaboration emerged (Tsoukas & Chia 2002; Chia & Holt 2006).

Yet there are instances in which the forms of collaboration required to satisfy fellowship goals are beyond the means of the fellowship. When this condition is directed at satisfying compatible goals and is shared by more than one fellowship, it gives rise to organizations. What differentiates organizations from fellowships is that the complexity of the tasks undertaken is such that they require a specific set of practices, as well as managerial practices to organize the effort. It is no longer possible to achieve the tasks via everyday emergence, instead strategy shifts from being purposive to being purposeful.

It is only at this stage that we encounter what commonly in management and organization studies is referred to as strategy, a formal planning process that aims, following Chandlers (1962) classical definition, to determine the long-term goals of an enterprise and oversee the allocation of resources for accomplishing these goals. But something significant occurs at this stage, namely the complexity of the tasks ahead and the differentiation of management lead to the erosion of trust-based collaboration. Rather, in an organizational setting, fellowships maintain an inward-looking collaborative focus but start to exhibit a self-interested behaviour with regard to other fellowships. Hence, boundaries are manifestations of selfish fellowships acting together. The boundaries thus created are weak, and fellowships are likely to leave the organization once the collective needs of the fellowship’s members have been satisfied in the organizational co-operation. It is unlikely that a fellowship would demonstrate altruistic behaviour by staying in an organization after it has stopped providing the
fellowship with utility, as the creation of utility beyond its own means was the reason the fellowship joined the organization in the first place.

4.5. Implications for management and organization studies

Examination of the theoretical propositions made in the model begs the question: “What does such theorizing about strategic organizations explain?” The following points capture the main underlying empirical phenomena that in my view require explanation. First, organizations are constructs with a limited lifespan. Hence, a theory of strategic organizations should be able to explain the inception, sustenance and decline, or lifecycle, of the organization itself. This is realized by the theoretical propositions of this thesis by explicating on the role of temporality in forming the basis for collaboration and the use of different types of practices during an organization’s lifetime. Second, while organizations can be studied as independent constructs, they inevitably consist of people. Hence, a theory of strategic organization should be able to explain the interplay between an organization and its constituent units, i.e. people.

In this thesis, theoretical propositions regarding the nature of strategic organizations explains this interplay by explaining the role of temporal vectors, different types of practices and different sorts of organizational boundaries. Third, for management and organization studies, a theory of strategic organization should be able to explicitly pinpoint the location and role of management in organizations. This dissertation does this by naming management as a set of practices required to negotiate complex coactivity occurring beyond intermediate-level fellowship boundaries. And lastly, for the study of strategy processes and practices, a theory of strategic organizations should be able to explain the specific role of strategy in the organizing of an organization, rather than explaining the value creation efforts associated with strategy. This theory does so by arguing that strategy exists on two levels: purposive through shared experiential vectors at the fellowship level and purposeful through managerial practice at the organizational level.

In drawing these theoretical propositions, a paradox emerged. Namely, through studies criticizing the lack of sensitivity for technology, I finally end up with a theoretical model that itself excludes technology. This apparent paradox is intended, and it is on this that I next wish to explicate. The basic argument I make is this: it is different to seek to rinse away the residue of contemporary society (technology) from a theory of organization than to being callous to its existence. Our capacity for organizing is something that I consider to be a fundamental human condition, of which we have a historic record stretching back thousands of years. Yet, many of the notions through which we study this phenomenon are fundamentally embedded in the socio-technical weave of our time. We seek to explain what we see through different sorts of causal mechanisms, from market competition to regulating effects of laws and contracts, but we lack the curiosity to look beyond such mechanisms. Yet, I think if we wish for our effort to have an emancipatory potential in the world we need a way of distinguishing between the fundamentals of organizing and organizations and the sociotechnical systems through which they are implemented in a given time and space. It is a point I touch on in Essay 3 when presenting the argument that strategy should be seen as a profound process of temporal emergence. For indeed the search for fundamental principles of organization is the pursuit of such deep-seated processes. Who determines the time in organizations is no innocent question.
4.6. Quo vadis, strategy-as-practice?

It cannot be denied that strategy-as-practice has been an evocative academic program since its inception in the early 2000s. It has expanded the horizons of what is seen as legitimate strategy scholarship, and academics associated with the perspective have been consistent in their promotion of plurality within the perspective. Thus, strategy-as-practice has been an easy movement to join, welcoming practically everyone who shows an interest. While such openness is commendable, ten successful years later, we see that it brings with it a number of challenges.

Scientifically, perhaps the biggest challenge for strategy-as-practice today is pointing out its specific contributions in the field of strategy research. Due to the openness of the perspective, it has become in effect like an outwardly expanding cone, where every new step makes the whole increasingly diversified and difficult to understand. When the perspective’s first seminal special issues were released in 2003, the talk was still mostly about an action-based perspective, a fairly logical follow-up to previous strategy process research. Contributions were envisaged to areas such as evolutionary perspectives and strategic change. Problems the new activity-based view claimed to solve were practical strategy issues, for instance using detailed micro-studies to better understand the unique and inimitable resources of the resource-based view (Johnson, Melin and Whittington 2003).

Since then, the perspective has taken a turn towards plurivocality, with nearly every renowned sociologist gaining a proponent: Luckmann (Hendry and Seidl 2003), Foucault (Laine and Vaara 2007), Garfinkel (Samra-Fredricks 2003), Bourdieu (Vaara & Faï 2012) and Giddens (Jarzabkowski 2008), to name a few. Increasingly, a similar list could be drafted for philosophers (Chia & Holt 2006; Mantere 2010; Franck 2012). In an almost disturbing inability to generate independent theorizing, strategy-as-practice scholars search sociology, anthropology and philosophy for thinking and conceptual models from these areas. While the insights generated in this manner are certainly valid per se and expand on our understanding of the specific organizational phenomena we are studying, it nevertheless begs the question: “Why do we not generate theory of our own?”

Much of the answer probably lies in the perpetual expansion of the perspective. In a fragmented field, it is increasingly difficult to locate and contribute to streams of theory. Hence, it is a much more feasible proposition to generate insight by drawing on names already established in adjacent, established fields of science. Along with the constant expansion of the perspective, strategy-as-practice has struggled to legitimize itself as an independent niche within strategic management studies, particularly by seeking to differentiate itself from strategy process research. To my mind, this has the unfortunate side effect of also rendering diffuse the research agenda strategy-as-practice is trying to explain or understand. It is rare for strategy-as-practice studies to explain issues pertaining to normative qualities of strategy. It is even more rare for strategy-as-practice studies to be forthcoming about the managerial implications of the different studies. Thus, to put it polemically, if we lack a common theoretical base on which to expand, fewe common empirical questions and low managerial relevance, the question becomes: What does unite us?

In my view, the surprising answer is preferred methodology. If anything, strategy-as-practice is defined by its near-exclusive focus on qualitative methods. While the perspective does not hold a monopoly on the use of such methods in strategy studies, it is probably the only distinct field of strategy studies where qualitative methods are the
norm. Thus, it would be reasonable to assume an extensive interest into developing research methodology would be evident within the perspective. But again, this is not so. Thus, in my mind the field is in need of more focus in order to render itself an integral part of the strategy research community, beyond simply functioning as a social movement within the strategy research community.

4.7. Strategy-as-practice and the road ahead

Based on these comments and the wider scope of this thesis, it is my intention to point out four areas in which strategy-as-practice could be developed in order to promote either internal theory generation, methodological capacity or societal relevance.

This first is my recommendation to study unusual targets. In a way my own empirical setting of online communities is reflective of this disposition. The study of unusual targets is, however, not arbitrary. Such settings need to be selected because they are particularly pertinent for one of two reasons: they are either well suited to studies intending to uncover deep-seated organizational processes, or they are well suited to the analysis of specific socio-technical change. The case selection of World of Warcraft in this thesis is powerful because it explores virtual technology as a form of socio-technical environment. It also allows for the emergence of a profound process definition of strategy.

My second research recommendation relates to the need to pursue in-depth studies. Ethnographic methods are commonly used within strategy-as-practice, but this does not normally extend to a pursuit of full-fledged ethnographies. What I refer to is the need to get deep inside processes of organizational strategy making. Contemporary ethnography is, at the end of the day, a matter of participation and to participate in strategy means becoming ingratiated into the core of the organization where strategy as a form of privileged practice and knowledge is practiced. I call this the ‘pursuit of immersive practice’, and it forms the centrepiece of the methodological advice found in Essay 1.

Third, I would make the call for more integrative and independent theoretical modeling within strategy-as-practice. Rather than seeking to use outside theories in explaining our conceptual models or empirical findings, we would as a field be better off if we dared to pursue our own theoretical interpretations. It would also render the field more approachable for other strategy scholars and alleviate the risk of strategy-as-practice becoming so diverse that the already loose cords holding it together would not entirely come loose. While we can use Whittington’s (2006) conceptual model to understand what is being done within strategy-as-practice as practiced by Jarzabkowski and Spee (2009), this merely explains the work being undertaken within the perspective. It does not explicate on, for example, possible common theoretical insights within the field.

My fourth and final suggestion is that strategy-as-practice needs methodological development in all of its forms. Since the perspective can pretty much lay claim to the use of qualitative methods, there should be much more reflection on the suitability of certain methods for the study of certain questions. There is scope for substantial development of research methods adapted to the very specific epistemo-ontological assumptions of researching strategy as well as the practical considerations of researching a field where the researched phenomenon is often hard to access.
4.8. Conclusions

Ethnography provides a fruitful means for exploring strategic organizations, whether they are conventional firms from management studies or virtual organizations like that of this thesis. Pursuing in-depth empirical studies opens up a powerful window on strategy, strategizing and strategic organizations. It allows us to build rich methodological and theoretical insight into core features of organizing. This is brought to fruition in this thesis by examining three core features of strategy work: the transformation of individual temporalities into organizational time, the actual practices of managing virtual organizations, and the generation of boundaries in naturally-occurring strategic organizations.

Exploring these issues through studies of what is, in essence, a computer game is a provocative and radical take on strategy. It is one that embraces changing technology and crosses the bridge towards Generation Y, to a world in which digital communication, social media, avatars and online collaboration become normative work features, replacing office spaces, meeting rooms and workshops. Sites such as World of Warcraft with its 10+ million subscriber base are capable of shaping how an entire generation views these questions, and as strategy terminology and practice seeps into these virtual gaming worlds, have potentially displaced business schools in their capacity to define what such terminology and practice means. In fact, one could speculate that the game-like nature of World of Warcraft is becoming reminiscent of contemporary mainstream organizations, where people's work is increasingly directed at performing in metaphorical games; whether the academic “publishing game” or different kinds of “investment gambles”. Hence, it is my view that the boundary between work and games is probably a lot more porous than we would like to admit.

Our study of strategic organizations should explore an ever wider range of settings. While these might not lead to theories of the firm, with just a slight expansion of the scope of research topics, we can start to uncover a whole range of different forms of organizing that seek to achieve economic performance. Often such novel ways of performing economically lead to new insights regarding the nature of organizing, like the exploration of boundary types or virtual management practices delineated in this thesis. To allow our curiosity to be kindled by that which is novel, overlooked or provocative will make our field of science more robust. Perhaps we could all could learn from a message delivered by former Apple CEO Steve Jobs in his 2005 Stanford commencement speech:

“Stay hungry. Stay foolish.”
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APPENDIX 1

Essay 1: Strategy needs ethnography and we need to do it right (pp.77-85)
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Essay 2: Evolutive consequences of managerial practice: Internal cessation as a selective outcome (pp.87-107)
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Essay 3: Collective commitment and intra-organizational boundary formation for a bulletin board view of organizations (pp. 109-132)
Mikko Vesa

Essay 4: Bringing strategy to time - Studying strategy as experiential vectors (pp. 133-154)
Mikko Vesa & Henrika Franck
Strategy needs ethnography and we need to do it right

Mikko Vesa & Eero Vaara

(Submission under review)

Abstract

We argue that taking ethnography seriously is a way to increase the relevance of strategic management research. We identify and elaborate on three distinct forms of ethnographic research: direct observation, participant observation, and immersive participation. In particular, we call for an immersive participation approach to research that builds on in-depth local engagement as an active agent in a position of responsibility. We argue that immersive participation provides access to privileged knowledge and enables natural on-going dialogue between knowledge with practical relevance and that with academic relevance.

Keywords: ethnography, strategy-as-practice, immersive participation

Introduction

As strategy scholars we are confronted with the question of relevance – and we should be. Despite an obvious need, many critics argue that knowledge with relevance for practitioners is not being produced (Mintzberg, 2004; Nicolai & Seidl, 2010; Walsh, 2011). In this paper, we argue that a partial reason for this lack of relevance is that in terms of how it is gathered, processed, and presented the knowledge produced is often far removed from the spheres of practitioners. The purpose of this paper is to argue that ethnography is a methodological perspective that provides access to privileged knowledge, which by its very nature is relevant to practitioners. Moreover, it is usually gathered in a process that necessitates close engagement with them. We can therefore increase the relevance of strategic management research by taking ethnography seriously.

While ethnography is generally regarded as an important part of management and organizations studies (Ybema et al., 2009; Van Maanen, 2011), it is not part of the mainstream of strategic management research. This is despite the fact that influential work in strategy process research has been based on close engagement with the organizations studied (Burgelman, 1994; Mintzberg, 1978; Mintzberg & McHugh, 1985; Pettigrew, 1987). In recent years, ethnography has been increasingly mobilized and referred to especially in strategy-as-practice research (Samra-Fredericks, 2003; Kaplan, 2008; Vaara & Whittington, 2012). However, there is confusion as to what ethnography actually means and ambiguity in the terms applied. In fact, ‘ethnography’ has far too often been used as a label to denote and justify qualitative case study research – without appreciation for the specific characteristics of ethnography that make it an extremely valuable methodology for the study of strategic management.

To guide future research efforts we will identify three ideal forms of ethnography for strategy studies in this paper: direct observation, participant observation, and immersive participation. While we see value in all three approaches, we call especially
for research adopting an immersive participation approach as such studies have been scarce despite their huge potential for producing knowledge that is relevant to practitioners. By encouraging the researcher to delve deeply into organizations, immersive participation allows us to study managers from their own point of view, as active agents in positions of responsibility. In particular, we argue that immersive participation provides access to privileged knowledge and enables a natural on-going dialogue between two kinds of knowledge, the practically relevant and the academically relevant.

**Three forms of ethnographic strategy research**

More or less all organizational ethnography is a search for socially shared and acquired local knowledge (Van Maanen, 1979). According to Geertz (1983:167), ethnography pursues an approach that could be called “to-know-a-city-is-to-know-its-streets.” Nevertheless, there are many ways one can learn about the streets of a city, not to mention that there are a plethora of streets. In the following, we identify three distinctive ethnographic methods of strategy research: direct observation, participant observation, and immersive participation (see Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Three Ethnographic Approaches to Acquiring Local Knowledge</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Researcher’s role in local organizations</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Ethnographic Perspective</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Knowledge of the local generated through</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Powerful for understanding</strong></td>
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In direct observation, the ethnographer attempts to be the fly on the wall - unobtrusively present in the daily life of the host organization and documenting all the (s)he observes for later analysis. Some studies employ direct observation as one of the
main data sources (Jarzabkowski 2008; Kaplan 2011; Denis, Dompierre, Langley and Rouleau 2011; Vesa and Franck 2013) while others clearly relegate it to a more secondary, triangulating role (Salvato 2003; Balogun and Johnson 2004). In the latter case, observations are used as a complimentary data source with the purpose of strengthening or testing the validity and quality of theoretical constructs. This is done in order to mitigate the effects on the analysis of any bias in information processing due to interview data (Eisenhardt 1989).

In contrast to the more widespread use of direct observation, participant observation plays a more peripheral role in strategy studies. However, participation offers a rich and meaningful method for gaining insight into the everyday life of organizations from the inside. The researcher contributes to the host organization through local interaction, often by adopting boundary spanning roles such as those of consultant (Sminia 2005; Laine and Vaara 2007), trainee (Howard-Grenville 2007) or managerial assistant (Rouleau 2005). In these studies participation forms the primary data source on which complimentary sources provide insight.

While both direct observation and participant observation have enriched strategy studies through ethnographic methods, researchers can also take a further step: immersive ethnography. Here we respond to a methodological call for immersion (Orlikowski 2010; Rasche and Chia 2009) that emphasizes the need for deep involvement in the local organization. Recent methodological developments encourage this immersive turn, pointing out the value of studying settings in which the researcher is an embedded insider (Brannick and Coghlan 2007) through self-ethnography or auto-ethnography (Alvesson 2003; Karra and Phillips 2007).

Each of these three approaches has distinct implications for strategy research in terms of the role of the researcher, the use of empirical materials, and the nature of fieldwork. Going for direct observation gives priority to the perspective of the stranger; a perspective giving prerogative to academic knowledge and identity. Unobtrusiveness is valued, and efforts are made to maintain a high level of ethnographic distance from the local organization. This implies, however, that access to and understanding of strategic knowledge is limited. Participant observation switches the perspective; the researcher attempts to become a member of the local organization. This changes the perspective from observational appreciation towards socialization. However, such socialization is usually only initial and partial; it is not the deeper engagement that provides access to and understanding of strategic knowledge – as would be the case with immersion.

In contrast to other types of ethnography, the method we employ involves hands-on involvement in actual strategy work. There are those who are interested outsiders; they include analysts, journalists, or authorities. There are those who are professionally tasked to cross organizational boundaries such as consultants, executive educators, trainees, and fresh recruits at all levels of the corporation; they undergo the very same professional socialization on which participant observation ethnographers build their claims to knowledge. However, if we desire to understand what managers engaged in strategy work actually experience, with its bounded rationality, emotional turmoil, and socio-material constraints, are we justified in claiming access to it through either observation or participant observation? We would argue that this is rather unlikely. Hence, we call for immersive participation: an insider’s perspective.
Characteristics of Immersive Participation

Immersive participation means working as a strategist when and where strategy happens. It means being an active agent in a position of responsibility. In strategy work, senior managers, board members, and strategy specialists hold key positions, but other managers and organizational members also engage in strategy-making. It is essential for full immersion that the researcher bears some kind of responsibility for the outcome of strategy work. This ensures access to privileged knowledge that is usually not available to outsiders and intimate understanding of what it is and feels like to do strategy — with all its limited information, unpredictability, emotional upheaval, lack of resources and constraining socio-material conditions. This implies participation in the strategy process as a form of natural behaviour, contributing to the local organization on its own terms. Ideally, the ethnographer is both a fully-versed inside participant in strategy-making as well as a full-fledged member of the academic community. However, as we shall note below, immersive participation can also be based on collaboration.

While immersion is thus likely to help us to better understand strategy work as it happens and thus contribute to our academic body of knowledge, it also feeds back to the local organization in a much more natural and effective way than is the case with more conventional approaches. In classical anthropology participation is employed in order to immerse deep into local communities, with the intent of bringing forth indigenous knowledge, typically in the form of research monographs. This has also been the case with strategy research, albeit that articles have replaced the monographs. We argue, however, that we should seize the opportunities of immersive participation and engage in continuous dialogue between the local organization and the academic community and between practical knowledge and academic knowledge. Hence in the spirit of immersion, it would seem important to value this natural engagement throughout the process more than any final publication – often written in a jargon that is far removed from the spheres of practitioners and appearing too late to have much relevance.

Immersive participation is a tall order in today’s academic world and requires a clear awareness of the ethical ramifications of the work. It seems difficult to be both a successful academic and an active strategist in an organization. Yet there are inspiring examples of immersive participation, often drawing on ethnographic research traditions of organizations and work (Barley and Kunda 2001; Bechky 2011; Phillips and Lawrence 2012). These are based on long-term immersion in specific organizations, such as Pratt’s (2000) research on Amway distributors or Michel’s (2011) study on control of the bodies of investment bankers. Interestingly, Alvesson (2003) argues for self-ethnography and makes the point that we as academics should also study our own university organizations from an ethnographic perspective. In strategy, immersive participation can and usually must build on collaboration. For example, Vaara et al. (2005) analyzed restructuring of banking in a research team that involved top managers. In their study of organizational identity formation Gioia et al. (2010) employed their primary informant as an inside researcher with a dual actor/observer role. Going a step further in her study of identity-challenging technologies, Tripsas (2009) served on the host organization’s board of directors. Furthermore, immersive participation opens fascinating opportunities for the exploration of new organizational forms (Daft and Lewin 1993; Schreyögg and Sydow 2010) such as online communities (Ren, Kraut and Kiesler 2007; Wiertz and de Ruyter 2007) and virtual organizations (Kurland and Egan 1999) that are still understudied.
Immersion also opens the door to study the materiality of strategy work first hand (Orlikowski and Scott 2008; Leonardi and Barley 2010).

**Conclusion**

Although strategy research should be relevant for both researchers and practitioners, this does not seem to be the case. By turning too much towards theory and aspiring to methods more suited to the natural sciences, we have forgotten that strategic management is a business where we have to get our hands dirty if we desire to escape Plato's cave. We do not make an impact on society and we do not reach wider stakeholder audiences if what we do does not resonate with what they do. Even the most informed theorizing or sophisticated econometrics is unlikely to help us here; doctors don't save patients by staring at charts all day. As the current economic turmoil makes altogether too obvious, we do not lack patients of our own in a metaphorical sense. Being serious about the condition of our patients and about learning their situation will go a long way in bridging the relevance gap.

In this paper, we have identified three ethnographic approaches: the more conventional observation and participant observation modes and then immersive participation. Immersive participation is a demanding approach to the study of strategy-making in organizations because it requires engagement as an active agent in a position of responsibility. However, in and through such immersion, it provides access to privileged knowledge and opens up opportunities for natural dialogue between practical and academic knowledge.
References


Evolutive consequences of managerial practice:

Internal cessation as a selective outcome

Mikko Vesa

Winner of the Best Student Paper Award of the Strategizing Activities and Practice-Interest Group of the Academy of Management, 2013

Abstract

By focusing on the actual use of practices in strategy work, we are increasingly better informed about the on-going day-to-day work through which strategy is done. Using a 39-month ethnographic study, this paper analyzes management practices used in virtual organizations. I make three contributions. First, while research to date has focused on conventional corporate and public organizations, I identify three bundles of managerial practices for running a virtual organization. Second, arguing for a performative view of organizations, I show how these three bundles internally shape organizational evolution by prioritizing day-to-day work. Finally, by exploring the relationship between the bundles of practice and organizational failure, this paper contributes to our understanding of the causes of organizational failure trajectories by attributing failure to cessation: an inability to perform managerial practices that reproduce the organizational body. Hence, organizational failure can also be caused by an internally induced inability of the organization to re-emerge under conditions of low competitive pressure.

Keywords: cessation, performativity, organizational evolution, failure, strategy-as-practice

Going ever deeper into the on-going daily work of managers and strategizers has gained increasing popularity in management and organization studies. Typically aligning with the former in what Bourgeois (1980) called the process-content divide, such studies commonly follow practice or discourse-based approaches. In what can be viewed as an ardent, sincere and often successful attempt to pry open the lid of the black box of organizations, this research popularly organized under the strategy-as-practice banner has become a potent alternative banner for the study of strategic management (Golsorkhi, Rouleau, Seidl and Vaara 2010). Examining the field of strategic management through the overarching conceptual framework of praxis, practices and practitioners (Whittington 2006), these studies regularly seek to identify practice applying to specific empirical activity or conceptual framings. To date, this has included research in areas such as mergers and acquisitions (Vaara 2002, 2003), change management (Jarzabkowski 2003; Stensaker and Langley 2010), periphery/centre strategy making (Regnér 2003), and strategic sensemaking (Rouleau and Balogun 2011). Often such studies prioritize discourse, focusing on the analysis of text and language (see Mantere and Vaara 2008).

Though successful, a number of questions remain underexplored with regard to the perspective’s own research agenda. This study identifies, and seeks to answer, three such questions. First, as observed by Jarzabkowski and Spee (2009:83), a limited number of studies have rigorously examined the way practice bundles interact. In this
paper, I offer a holistic view of actual management practices used in one organizational type, the virtual organization. Building on this, I examine the relationship between the use of these practices and outcomes (Whittington 2007) by offering a performativity-based, practice-driven view of intraorganizational evolution (Burgelman 1994; Lovas and Ghoshal 2000). Finally, based on this practice-driven view of intraorganizational evolution, I expand on the causes of strategic failure (Maitlis and Lawrence 2003) by outlining three failure trajectories resulting from inaptitude in managerial practice to perform recursive reproduction (Hernes and Weik 2007). Inaptitude such as this results in what I call cessation: an intraorganizational reaction to cease operations when facing little or no competitive pressure.

On performativity, organizational evolution and strategic practice

There are two concepts that are important to clarify for the grounding of this paper. The first is that of performativity: a notion drawing from the work of noted twentieth century philosopher of language J. L. Austin (1962). Performativity is a view that eschews representationalism and sees agency not as an attribute but as the on-going reconfiguration of the world (Barad 2003:818). Ontological priority is granted to the phenomenon at hand, rather than ex-ante agencies such as individuals, structure, technology or language (Orlikowski and Scott 2008). Organizing is a consequential result of performativity, an outcome brought into effect through material and discursive practice. To study performativity is to study the practical and the everyday, preferably through immersion in the practice at hand (Orlikowski 2010).

In this study the practice at hand is managerial practice, a phenomenon that arises when the complexity of work is such that immanent and purposive everyday work practices fail to create purposeful co-operation (Chia and Holt 2006). At this point, a new set of deliberate and purposeful managerial practices emerges to perform organizing. Performativity is a promising new lens for the study of strategic practices because it allows us to open a more materialist take on strategizing. For a practice perspective on strategy, performativity gives a new theoretical metalens (Jarzabkowski, Lê and Feldman 2012). What differentiates performativity from current conceptual frames in strategy-as-practice research is the ontological priority given to the phenomenon and the unwillingness to see agency as anything other than change pertaining and arising from within the specific conditions of the phenomenon. It thus refocuses strategy-as-practice studies on the performative activity of strategizing (Johnson, Melin and Whittington 2003), while eschewing the search for explanation from individual agency (Balogun and Johnson 2004; Mantere 2008), social structure (Whittington 2007) or linguistic representation (Vaara 2010). Rather, performativity focuses on the sociomaterial conditions for emergence and failure of organizational bodies.

Performativity also opens up a new perspective on the other concept under study in this paper, that of intraorganizational evolution (Burgelman 1991). In the study of organizations, evolution is assumed to be a force capable of rapidly producing market optimization with empirical regularities (Nelson 1994). It is a process depicted through dynamic models, allowing for variation and selection processes (Barnett and Burgelman 1996). The intraorganizational view posits that this happens through two types of strategy-making processes: induced processes that are within the organization's current strategy and autonomous processes that emerge from outside the current strategy (Burgelman 1991:241). The performative angle on intraorganizational evolution expands on these models by not pre-emptively assigning agency to either environmental selection or strategic adaption, but by showing how
organizations face evolution even when beset by no selective pressure. Even with no explicit evolutionary pressure, organizations consist of a cycle of emerging and failing practices, seeking to maintain the organizational body through constant reproduction.

**Research questions**

Though this research follows an inductive, grounded design it recognizes its embeddedness in the strategy practice/process tradition that guides the research (Suddaby 2006). Through iterative sampling, this study evolved from the following research questions:

What do people do when they organize in virtual environments?

Which kinds of bundles of managerial practices do they employ in order to perform organizing in virtual environments?

What are the performative causal connections between bundles of managerial practices and organizational outcomes?

The first research question is best understood as a foreshadowing question (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983). Serving as a broadly guiding question during the conduct of the ethnographic fieldwork, it ensured that my fieldwork was constantly sensitive to issues of import for strategy-as-practice studies (Jarzabkowski, Balogun and Seidl 2007). The second research question was one that joined the research after the fieldwork, and is in many ways a refinement of research question one. Namely, having identified what people do when they strategize in virtual worlds through a practice perspective leaves the researcher with a whole number of grounded practices. But in order to develop theoretical insights into the consequences of such practices, they need to be gathered up in bundles. Finally, once the bundles of managerial practices used in organizing are identified, one can take the analysis one step further to examine the connections between bundles of managerial practices and their possible consequential outcomes. Research questions one and two are developed in the analysis section of this paper, while research question three forms the core of the paper's theoretical contribution and is elaborated in the discussion section.

**Case and method**

The subject of my empirical focus is raid groups in the World of Warcraft game, a massive multiplayer online game (Bainbridge 2010; Nardi 2010). World of Warcraft is the market leader in the massive multiplayer online game segment, with more than 12 million players worldwide (Blizzard 2010). The analysis presented in this paper is based on ethnographic research conducted across five different groups of World of Warcraft gamers from 2008 to 2011. The ethnographic approach used was participant observation (Van Maanen 1975, 1979), a pursuit in which the researcher studies the group by attempting to immerse him or herself deeply into the life of the host community. While ethnographic participant observation methods have previously been used in strategy research (Samra-Fredericks 2003; Sminia 2005), this study represents the first use of participant observation ethnography to study strategizing in virtual environments (Hine 2005) and responds to a wider call for the use of embodied participative methods in strategy-as-practice studies (Rasche and Chia 2009; Streeck, Goodwin and LeBaron 2011).

Participant observation ethnography is an approach by which the researcher does not attempt to be a fly on the wall and often ends up being a fly in the soup. As this was a
consideration when doing the field research, therefore the researcher held various organizational roles from low-profile member status in groups Alpha, Beta and Epsilon to a mid-hierarchy position in Gamma and a high-ranking core officer in Group Delta across different groups in the game (see Table 1). At the same time, though I was always forthcoming about my research interest and gathering of observations, the core foci of the studied groups’ activities were in the virtual environment and thus painstaking effort was made to ensure the anonymity of the informants and groups involved.

Table 1: Field work conducted

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group/Item</th>
<th>Alpha</th>
<th>Beta</th>
<th>Gamma</th>
<th>Delta</th>
<th>Epsilon</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Researcher’s Participant Role</strong></td>
<td>Trial member; Full member</td>
<td>Trial member; Full member</td>
<td>Trial member; Full member; Recruitment officer</td>
<td>Raid leader; founding member of the group</td>
<td>Full member; founding member of the group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Key type(s) of empirical material collected</strong></td>
<td>Textual: discussion forum entries, chat logs</td>
<td>Textual: chat logs, discussion forum entries, screenshot galleries</td>
<td>Immersive: active managerial participation</td>
<td>Immersive: active managerial participation</td>
<td>Video: In-game recording</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Exit caused by:</strong></td>
<td>Moving to a more competitive group</td>
<td>Organizational failure</td>
<td>Organizational failure</td>
<td>Self-termination</td>
<td>Self-termination</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The overall material is rich, encompassing interviews, in-game video recordings, screenshot galleries, internet forum discussion board transcripts, in-game chat log transcripts and voice-over IP recordings collected during over 200 multiple-hour group gaming sessions. These were then complemented with video-taped interviews with select participants to affirm initial findings. This provided for richness in the ethnographic insight used to select empirical material for the initial analysis. During fieldwork, initial findings were often discussed and debated with the players, giving the empirical material a quality of practitioner-led research (Balogun, Huff and Johnson 2003).

When first encountering a virtual world such as World of Warcraft, an ethnographer is struck by the amount of organizing that is going on, as different kinds of activity teams are being constantly formed over the different, mostly text-based communication interfaces provided to users by the computer client. As one becomes more immersed in the environment, the more structural properties of the on-going organizing start to become apparent. The original purpose of the fieldwork on which this paper is based was to examine more specifically the question of strategy making in virtual gaming worlds, as opposed to the connected but arguably broader idea of organizing (Whittington 2002). Hence, I focused my activity on getting access to the most stable and organizationally complex form of activity within the game.
This activity, popularly known as ‘raiding’, revolves around gaming organizations known as ‘raid groups’ or ‘raid guilds’ that often persist for years and contain up to one hundred members at any given moment. This, coupled with the systems and ordering of activity that went into maintaining these organizations, made in my view these raid groups a vibrant research target from the point of view of studying what people do when they organize in virtual worlds. The core activity of raiding is to co-ordinate the efforts of anything from 10 to 40 concurrent online players, each with specific tactical abilities and roles, in defeating computer-guided algorithms known as ‘bosses’ that in-game are portrayed as monsters such as dragons or demons. This poses requirements for organizing, and successful raid groups have established rules, structures and organizational identities that are known across the player base (Malone 2009).

This research followed an inductive logic (Phillips and Hardy 2002). Following a grounded analytical approach, my aim was not to explore a strict set of pre-defined research questions, but rather to let the empirical material derived from the immersive participation and practitioner reflection iterate my analytical focus (Corbin and Strauss 2008). This is also reflected in the evolution of my research questions from a rather generic foreshadowing problem through a study of practice bundles to specific issues relating to intraorganizational evolution. Due to the richness of the empirical material, in particular regarding the insights derived from the extensive participant observation, the analytical work frequently involved traversing back and forth between the empirical observations and the analysis. In selecting the empirical material for use in the analysis, my first recourse was to fall back on the ethnographic insight gained during the 39 months in the field.

The analysis proceeded as follows: initial empirical material was selected and coded in order to identify managerial practices in action, typically by searching for specific ways through which members maintain or improve the focal organization’s structure, resources, membership base or goal setting. After thorough reflection on the content and meaning of the initial codes, I created the ten first-order concept-based practices presented in the analysis section of this paper. These ten were then organized into three abstract second-level categories of practices based on their role and position in the organization’s lifecycle. To ensure the reliability of the findings, I tested the analytical conclusions of this paper with the same field contacts whose interviews were analyzed as part of the empirical material, asking them if the analysis reflects their understanding of what happened. Thus, a grounded disposition was maintained by the theoretical sampling conducted by the author, as well as by adding a layer of abduction by frequently consulting practitioner sources in the development and refinement of this analysis and ensuring theoretical propositions. This being said, the role of the researcher was dominant towards the latter stages of the analysis when more abstract theoretical synthesis concerning the relationship between practice bundles, intraorganizational evolution and the notion of cessation was conducted.

**What people do when they strategize in virtual environments**

I have identified three bundled categories of practice based on their different performative roles in the evolution of the organization: foundational, toolbox, and routine practice. These three bundled practice categories assemble the ten virtual management practices identified as first-order concepts in a group that depicts the core activity of purposeful organizing in the research setting. The relationship between the categories and the concepts is highlighted in Table 2, while illustrative excerpts are provided in the text that follows:
Table 2: Categories of organizing practices in virtual gaming groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Foundational practices</th>
<th>Toolbox practices</th>
<th>Routine practices</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Core formation</td>
<td>(3) Recruitment</td>
<td>(7) Staffing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Identifying core members</td>
<td>- Recruiting new members</td>
<td>- Managing day-to-day personnel demands: whom to include, whom to exclude and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Assigning tasks among the core</td>
<td>- Managing human resources</td>
<td>whom to put on reserve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Normative Sculpting</td>
<td>(4) System Design</td>
<td>(8) System Maintenance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Establishing group mission and overall</td>
<td>- Establishing new support systems</td>
<td>- Updating the content of existing support systems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>strategic goals</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Establishing group norms and values</td>
<td>- Modifying or administering existing systems</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) Strategizing</td>
<td>(9) Tacticizing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Making broader decisions concerning a</td>
<td>- Making in-situ decisions on group tactics in on-going</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>group's in-game activities</td>
<td>gaming situations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Making decisions concerning the resource</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>distribution of the organization</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(6) Conflict Resolution</td>
<td>(10) Mediation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Disciplinary action</td>
<td>- Promoting the daily social cohesion of the group</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Enforcing group norms and values</td>
<td>- Encouraging group norms and actions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Foundational practices

In examining both what practitioners do when they strategize in virtual worlds and the material conditions of this strategizing, the analysis uncovered two related practices that to my understanding perform a formative role in the very question of the emergence of virtual organizations. I call these: core formation and normative sculpting. Core formation is the activity of assembling the key critical organizational members, while normative sculpting is the effort through which the core players construct and communicate their organizational design, ethos and modus operandi to the wider organization. This is highlighted in the following excerpt:

Excerpt 1: (Group Delta Officer D1, interview April 2010)

“I’d say most of it centred around the core people. It can be concentrated around a single person, but like any group you will have the core; people who form the core, which then runs the whole show. It’s basically the heart of the group. I mean, we had the goal of being a group that actually gets stuff done. And very specific stuff, like hard in-game stuff, which other people wouldn’t be able to do because they didn’t have the drive. So we wanted people to agree that you would have to have the drive and sort of have the skill... that you wanted to get this stuff done. Why would you be there
otherwise, otherwise you’re just sort of dead weight. So we wanted specific people that would agree on the specific sort of mindset for doing stuff.”

Foundational practices are central when a raid group is about to be initially formed or when it needs to re-emerge following a substantial organizational crisis. They relate to questions of organizational emergence and crisis; when the state of the organization’s leadership is in question or when the core values of the group are for some reason being seriously questioned. Failure in the performance of foundational practices at these critical junctions is a likely source of cessation, an internally induced initiative for the organization to fail. Under normal circumstances, normative sculpting done by the core members result in tangible mission statements through which a raid group will communicate its stance to both internal and external stakeholders, as done here by Group Alpha in its public recruitment poster which is not dissimilar to many other such posters in World of Warcraft.

Excerpt 2: (Group Alpha recruitment poster, March 2008)

You will want to raid a minimum of 3 times each week from 19:30 to 24:00 CET. (Alpha raids 4 days a week: Monday, Wednesday, Friday, and Sunday 19:30 to 24:00). Grind whatever is needed for raiding outside the raid hours. If you show up without potions, elixirs, flasks and food, it is a sign that you don’t want to perform at your best and that won’t get you membership in Alpha. You must also be able to use TS. Listening required, having a mic and using it is preferred. All gear must be enchanted with the best enchantments suited to your role. Do not bother to apply with poor quality gems or unenchanted gear.

We are looking for members with previous raiding experience. You should always as a goal want to outperform any veterans in the raid or there is no reason to invite you. You have to be able to handle criticism and learn from your mistakes. You must also be willing to accept being benched for certain fights when the raid needs a new setup. You will be judged on how consistent your performance is.

A recruitment poster like this is one of the end products of foundational practices. Having undergone core formation, an organization’s key players sculpt the norms they wish to symbolize the organization; a key implementative element of which is the recruitment of an actual member body through public announcements such as this. When examining an organization across its entire lifecycle, foundational practices can always be seen during the initial formation of an organization. After this point, while they are always passively present through statements such as the recruitment poster above, foundational practices do not occupy a large part of an organizations agenda. They will occasionally resurface, typically when a substantial threat to the composition of the current core becomes apparent or when organizational norms are challenged. It also seems to me that for the virtual form of organization studied here, organizational failure is the result of a relapse of an organization’s attention back into its foundational practices in which the foundational practices fail to (re)emerge a set of core members and/or a value structure capable of sustaining the organization.

Core formation involves the recruitment of the initial core members around whom the organization takes shape. It as also is charged with replacing them when they for some reason leave the organization. Virtual organizations are very dependent on the core because of the core’s role in both leading the production of virtual goods, as well as the core’s role in creating a sense of gratification amongst the member base. No matter which form the core formation takes, after a group’s initial formation, a relapse to core
recruitment is always a substantial risk for the group’s survival, as core members are carriers of the group’s foundational values as well as a lot of specialist practical knowledge required for front-line practices. In my own fieldwork, I witnessed a core re-emergence failure following a similar crisis at Group Gamma. In practice, core formation varies across groups. For some it’s an affair of almost papal secrecy, while in others a replacement is attempted through open and equal elections. It is often the case in virtual organizations that the core consists of people who either know each other outside the virtual environment or who have developed prolonged ties in the virtual environment.

As Officer D1’s above comment shows, foundational practices are not only about having the right people but also about securing the right people with the right mindset, in his case a mindset of accomplishing things. This is the realm of normative sculpting, an activity in which the organizational core members negotiate, argue and agree amongst themselves about the goals of the group they are founding, and how they desire to accomplish the group’s goals and execute its general working methods. These values are important because they reflect onto nearly all the daily routines of the group, from standard member recruitment to resource allocation, remuneration and expectations of participant performance and behaviour. Thus, in many ways what emerges from the foundational practices used at the founding is a package reading roughly: “Here is who we are, here is how we do things and here is how we intend to achieve our targets”.

While foundational practices create a foundation on which to build an organization, such stability is transient. Both the organization itself and its environment change over time. This is inductive of a gap appearing between the intended normative design of the group and its actual in-game performative behaviour. Many groups initially strive for a higher competitive performance than they are capable. Sometimes this happens over time, due to changing circumstances, for example when real-world demands on the group’s membership lessen the amount of available in-game time. There is risk in this, however, as group members that strongly adhere to the original norms might be disappointed with such changes. If this disappointment affects a sufficient number of the group’s member base, the group might be unable to field its activity and eventually collapse from internal cessation. In this study, this happened to both Group Beta and Epsilon.

Routine practices

In contrast to the foundational practice bundle, I denote key daily activity here as routine practices. This is the realm of the everyday; the central organizing activity repeated over and over as the virtual organization operates. The analysis shows that the execution of routine practices is at the fore of organizational activity the majority of the time. Organizational focus deviates from routine only in the case of disruptions. It is through accomplishing routine practices that organizations achieve the goals that the membership base has united around, the production of virtual goods and generation of member gratification. This analysis identified four specific practices that make up the routine practice bundle: staffing, system maintenance, tacticizing and mediation.

Staffing practices relate to everyday administration of the organization’s personnel resources. Depending on the environment, organizations experience a pre-determined set of constraints regarding the type and balance of personnel they need. In this case it relates not only to the specific capabilities of the distinct character types of the game, but also to their competence-based distinctions, such as whom to take along for specific operations. Staffing practices were in active use throughout any given game session, as
the groups sorted out whom to take where, which people to hold as tactical reserve in case replacements were needed, and which of the available characters had sufficient technical capacity for the specific game environment. An example of this in action is provided by the following excerpt, which shows the practice discursively taking place in a dedicated in-game chat channel just prior to the start of one evening’s operations. The text in italics is player-written chat, while the normal text is computer client messages generated by the player actions.

Excerpt 3: (Group Beta in-Game discussion channel, 1 September 2008)

Officer B1: Now which one of you two (Member B1/Member B2) wants to do [Encounter 1] more? Oh, wait. Never mind me.

Officer B1 has invited you to join a group. You have joined a raid group.

Officer B1: Right then, got a strict list of what I am supposed to bring for [Encounter 1], so. Sitouts?

Member B3: Me.

Officer B1: But I’m doing invites with [Encounter 2] in mind, so I might swap a person or two.

Member B2 has joined the raid group.

What we see here is how Officer B1 builds up the group for the operation. The initial question is focused on Members B1 and B2. Initially, the officer asks which one of the two will come along but soon realizes he’ll need both. After this, he goes on to build the rest of the group, asking if any of the other online members will volunteer to be in reserve, to which Member B3 agrees. Officer B1 has a further constraint on his staffing, as he’ll need a team capable for both [Encounter 1] and [Encounter 2]. Staffing activity like this takes place every session, and not infrequently several times per evening as the group progressed through the game content.

Systems maintenance practices were focused on keeping the core support systems of the organization operative. This could involve, for example, organization-specific internet resources or in-game resource management. Nearly all raid organizations examined in this study had their own internet-based discussion forums, and many also maintained support systems for recording and allocating the virtual goods they acquired. Often integrated into these allocation systems were simple virtual organization-specific currencies that were used for competitive bidding when allocating produced goods. Internet discussion forums, on the other hand, could be seen as more of a social media, in which the group’s diverse member base could discuss anything from specific in-game tactics to completely off-topic issues, such as important football games. They formed important domains of organizational identity through which group values were communicated. Hence, when a prospective member was interested in joining a group, he or she would typically be guided to the organization’s internet site, which could contain specific sections on new player recruitment and rules.

The third kind of routine practice that the analysis identified was something I call ‘tacticizing’. This relates not to the determination of which actual objectives to pursue, rather it is a practice that refers to the micro-level performative accomplishment of previously established objectives. Tacticizing is an activity that is executed in order to implement strategic decisions. It is an iterative learning activity aimed at changing the
in-game tactical setups employed in specific encounters. It is based on data gathered from the environment through both in-game and off-line analysis, mostly carried out on the internet discussion forums, but also procured through data mining, i.e., exploring popular gaming sites and video-sharing communities. This practice is thus best understood as a hybrid form of in-game front-line commanding and back-office planning. This is demonstrated in the following excerpt:

Excerpt 4 (Group Epsilon Officer E1 on [Encounter 3]):

I disagree. If the feud tank is taunting too early, then the feud tank needs to sort it out. The main tank cannot adjust what he or she is doing. The main tank should always taunt IMMEDIATELY after the double strike. Make sure you can see the buff CLEARLY (the power aura I posted above is ideal). Whilst performing double strike interrupts, his regular attack sequence and stacking break on his target, he can resume his regular attacks + breaks as early as 1 second after losing the double strike buff.

While the text itself is rather technical, it shows the level of attention to detail that tacticizing involves in order to successfully complete in-game objectives. This dedication to detail is central for the iterative learning required to effectively achieve objectives in this specific environment.

Routine practices are not restricted to formal domains like staffing, systems or the tactical. They also reside in the more informal aspects of the organization’s daily activities and the maintenance of social cohesion, which is vitally important to organizing. This practice, which I call ‘mediation’, reflects the role of conflict arbiters assumed by the core members. As members of the core are considered to manifest the values of the group, they are also invested with the authority to solve conflicts amongst members. In practice this means moderating discussion in shared spaces such as chat channels, voice communications software and internet discussion forums. This also involves making on-the-spot calls for mediating conflicts amongst members. Conflict topics range from petty quarrels to resource allocation disputes not explicitly covered by the group’s values; essentially interpreting values and rules when grey zone issues arise. For groups that promote fun and friendship above rapid progress and playing excellence, the practice of mediation is possibly the primary everyday practice used by the core. Properly executed, it allows for the generation of entertainment-based gratification and fun for the members. The following statement highlights this:

Excerpt 5: (Group Gamma Officer G1 interview, May 2010)

“...if somebody gets really dramatic over something and maybe threatens to leave or something like that, I sometimes would whisper to the person and ask them what really makes them feel that way. Is it the people, the game or something in real life? Sometimes I would have long conversations with these people.”

Thus in summary, routine practices form a conglomerate set through which the group organizes its everyday activity. It includes practices for staffing in-game activity, maintaining the systems through which the group communicates and moderates resource allocation, performing tacticizing to learn iteratively how to handle in-game encounters and mediating social relationships within the group. They are not grand and foundational, but many things can happen that impede a group’s ability to perform the routine practices. For these instances, there is a third bundle of practices that I call ‘toolbox practices’. These are best understood as fixes; things the core members draw on in order to repair things that hinder the performance of routine practices.
Toolbox practices

Mediating between the foundational and the routine is a bundle I call toolbox practices. These are recurring in the sense that they are accessed with relatively high frequency, in this case weekly or monthly. They are not, however, routine practices in the sense that they are on-going. Most often toolbox practices are resorted to in organizing, when something has gone amiss with the routine practices; something needs mending. Toolbox practices are important to avoid a relapse back to foundational practices, which might undermine the viability of the entire organization. As toolbox practices are often responses to failures in routine practices, I have identified them as closely matched with routine practices in the type of activity they involve.

The empirical excerpt through which we highlight toolbox practices comes from a closed Group Beta forum section dating from August 2008, accessible only by the group’s core. Here Officer B2 discusses the group’s current recruitment challenges and their implications for tacticizing and strategizing:

Excerpt 6: (Group Beta Officer B2 discussion forum entry, August 2008)

“A couple of things do worry me at the moment. Over the past week, we have seen in which situations it –really- hurts not having [Character Class A]. Hence why I rate getting more of [Character Class A] as our highest priority. We also have basically one trained spotter for [Encounter 3]. We need to expand on that list. Then we have slightly less urgent problems we should look into. Our tank team, covered in a separate post. [Character Class B] that can tank. Melee DPS team has been low on numbers for a while. It needs strengthening so people don’t start to burn out. Rebuilding a proper [Character Class C] team. The latter list is stuff we should try to do properly, but they aren’t issues that might prevent us from raiding right now, so we have some time to fix these things properly.”

While the recruitment challenge in the excerpt is fairly self-evident, two points warrant highlighting. Namely, the overall lack of Classes A, B and C represents a strategizing challenge. In specific circumstances they are liable to be complete show-stoppers, closing out strategic alternatives for the group. A tactical challenge is also present as there is a lack of a specific resource for Game Encounter 3, though any player can be trained for this function. This is a tactical challenge in the sense that an extra investment of time might be required to expand this capacity.

Toolbox practices are usually controlled tightly by the core and are thus not accessible to rank-and-file membership. Looking more specifically at types of toolbox practices, I identify four that align with routine practices but on a higher aggregate level: recruitment, systems design, strategizing, and conflict resolution.

Recruitment practices typically match impulses generated by staffing practices. A gap occurs in the staffing that needs to be filled, as highlighted by the talk on teams in Excerpt 6. It can also be launched by tacticizing practices, as a result of analysis indicating a technical deficiency in the current member roster. This is exemplified by the need to develop the “spotter” capability in Excerpt 6. At the time of organizational founding, it is initiated by two foundational practices when the organization is populated for the first time, but this is an organizational one-off event. Furthermore, member recruitment isn’t solely about recruitment; it is also about promoting different kinds of trial and fringe members to full member status and thus upholding the existing organizational structure. It is, however, not about core recruitment, rather it is focused purely on the member-level participants.
System design practices are used to both design the systems that systems maintenance runs as a part of the groups’ routine practices, but also to modify them when a need occurs. Modifications can be technical in nature, such as changing forum moderation rights, but they can also reflect changes in the rules of the virtual organization. For example, a decision might have been made to alter the value of a certain resource, which requires a change in the databases that the organization uses to monitor resource allocation. System design is an important organizing practice, as many members monitor different group systems with keen interest and consider their accuracy to be important for their personal status. Thus particularly in more competitive groups, the quality of a group’s support infrastructure can be a source of constant tension if not properly designed, because it is likely to complicate the routine maintenance of the systems.

Contrasted with tacticizing, strategizing is not about in-situ decision-making but rather about the decision process around the wider long-term goals and objectives of the virtual organizations. Typically these include decisions on which parts of the game content to confront and at which point, but they can also include assessments about the general aspects of the group’s internal resources, such as desired staffing levels or special prioritization of virtual goods when a specific demand is imposed by the game environment. These decisions have wide-reaching implications for organizations, and they are often imposed by changes in the virtual gaming environment beyond the direct control of virtual groups. Thus, strategizing practices are typically only available to the core of the core: the most influential organizational members.

The final recurring practice I identified is the counterpart of mediation, namely conflict resolution. Whereas mediation aims at keeping the group social cohesion high, there are times when this simply fails and personal conflicts within the group reach an impasse and something needs to be done. Conflict resolution practices are taken in order to enforce such a solution. These might result in disciplinary action against group members, a readjustment of official policy regarding social interaction or even outright dismissal of group members. Dismissal is much more likely to occur if one of the contending factions in a dispute consists of trial or fringe members, as it seems to be common to think that the dismissal of outliers constitutes no substantial problem to the these kinds of groups.

In all, the identified practices reflect some mutually exclusive inverse characteristics of managing raid groups in WoW. Examining the frequency of use, foundational practices are rarely evoked, while routine practices are in use all the time. From a practice perspective, it is the timely performance of the different practices that enables an organization to sustain its status as a performative body. Foundational practices establish deep-rooted organizational basics in terms of key actors and values that sustain an organization and its performance, whereas routine practices are the everyday accomplishment of these values. Toolbox practices, then, land between foundational and routine practices both in frequency and magnitude. Toolbox practices are fixes that aim to prevent a relapse towards foundational practice use. When examining an organization’s evolution, foundational practices and routine practices occupy different positions. Whereas the foundational practices are dominant at the outset and end of the organization’s lifecycle, on-going practices dominate between the starting and ending points.
Bundles of practice and their consequential outcomes

This paper identifies three bundles of managerial practices: foundational, toolbox and routine. After long-term analysis a picture emerges that procedurally explains the causal relationships between these different bundles. Different bundles of practice have a temporal sequencing in the evolutive lifecycle of the organization. Being able to observe this sequencing is possible due to the specific virtual environment under study. Although virtual gaming organizations are persistent, they often have a lifecycle of one to three years. Through longitudinal ethnography, it is possible to study practices throughout the entire lifecycle of an organization, turning virtual worlds such as World of Warcraft into laboratory-like research environments through which to extrapolate on organizations in general. Hence, I present here three propositions. First, in examining the relationships between the bundles of practice we can identify four types of transitions between the different bundles. Specific bundles of practice are used at different points in the organization's evolution, depending on the consequential outcome being sought. Second, these four transitions give rise to three organizational failure trajectories, which I respectively call inception, resourcing and production failures. Finally, these three organizational failure trajectories depend on an intraorganizational adaptive mechanism I call 'cessation', which is essentially an internal decision by the organization to shut itself down. I explicate on this process in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Evolutive consequences of managerial practice

As indicated in Figure 1, there are essentially four cases of transitions between the bundles of practice identified. A T1 transition is the switch from foundational practices to toolbox practices. During the inception of an organization, the initial bundle of practices performed will always be foundational. Core formation and normative sculpting occur simultaneously. Core formation defines who the key members of the organization will be, and through this formative practice the normative sculpting of the emerging organization conjointly solidifies. Once foundational practices have been performed, the core and norms are established. This leads to the transition from foundational practices to the toolbox practices bundle. At inception this round is likely to be the heaviest round of toolbox practice use that an organization goes through, because the core augments the organization ranks by recruiting all the rank and file members of the organization.
Furthermore, all initial support systems are designed and the initial strategic in-game targets of the group are formulated. Also patterns of conflict resolution are likely to be laid down at this point. Not until both foundational practices and the initial round of toolbox practices have been completed is an organization ready to initiate operations. At this point it transitions to the performance of routine practices: transition T2. Routine practices involve the main activity of the organizations, both in relation to the production of goods and services as well as the gratification of membership needs. The practices here are by their nature operational and everyday; they are about staffing decisions, systems maintenance, in-situ tactical decisions and mediation of social relations. This is the desired form of practice in organizations. A relapse from routine practices back into the potentially more disruptive toolbox and foundational practices is something that both the organization’s core and members wish to avoid.

Yet during organizational evolution, relapse cannot be avoided. People of different statuses leave the organization, systems become outdated, and the game environment changes, thereby questioning the legitimacy of the core and the validity of initial normative sculpting. The function of toolbox practices is to help sustain the on-going organizational activity by patching glitches in the operation of routine practices, avoiding a relapse to constitutive foundational practices. At times, this inevitably fails. Toolbox practice failure is followed by a transition towards the re-entry of foundational practices in efforts to renegotiate, which sometimes ends in organizational failure. This is indicated in Figure 1 as transition T3 from routine to toolbox practice bundles, and transition T4 from toolbox to foundational practice bundles.

Contained in each of these transitions are three possible organizational failure trajectories. Failures essentially occur when a descending transition from one bundle of practice to another fails to either incept (Trajectory F1) or revitalize (Trajectories 1 and 2) the organization’s performative capacity. The inceptional failure indicated by F1 in Figure 1 indicates an outright failure to adequately perform foundational practices; no group of core members emerges or the group fails to set a normative agenda for the intended organization. Hence, the emerging organization is never in a position to perform transition T1 and fails. If performance of foundational practices leads to a satisfactory outcome and the emerging organization transitions through T1 towards toolbox practices, the emerging organization essentially faces a number of resourcing and planning challenges with regard to membership, systems, administrative procedures and strategic goal setting. A failure trajectory can start at this point if these the performance of these practices does not lead to a satisfactory outcome. This resourcing and planning failure is indicated by trajectory F2. This trajectory can be intercepted by formative practices, but in case formative practices cannot rectify the failure originating at F2 the trajectory results in organizational failure. Finally, if both foundational and toolbox practices are performed with satisfactory outcomes the organization transitions through T2 to the sphere of routine practices. A final failure trajectory T3 starts here, originating typically in changes that hinder the organization from fulfilling its productive goals.

The four identified transition points point out the interplay between different bundles of practices across an organization’s evolutionary trajectory. Such a trajectory will inevitably end in failure, as all organizations have a limited lifecycle. Hence, the model depicted in Figure 1 seeks to explain how the micro-processes of strategizing have wider organizational implications that, when aggregated, can be used to explain processual outcomes. The model also bridges the practice and process views of strategy (think of citations). My final proposition further builds on this bridge by pointing out how the study of internal micro-practices can enrich the debate on intraorganizational
evolution. I do so through proposing the concept of cessation: a form of organizational adaption in which the organization selects to cease under conditions not dictated by the environment. Essentially, in cessation, the systemic level of the environment is viewed as an intraorganizational phenomenon, with failure characterized as an internal implosion.

**Cessation as an internal selective outcome of managerial practice**

The examination of organizational evolution is often operationalized through the concepts of adaption and selection (Levinthal 1991). The reasoning goes that when faced by competitive pressure from the environment, organizations and management can attempt to make informed choices regarding how they adapt to the selective pressures. In their examination of the fate of organizations, Barnett and Burgelman (1996:7) observe, “Those that continue to survive have an internal selection environment that reflects the relevant selection pressures in the external environment and produces externally viable new strategic variations that are internally selected and retained.” Internal selection is hence seen as a response to stimuli from the wider social system. When studying strategy through a practice lens, it is this intraorganizational quality of selection that helps to bridge the gap between practice and evolutive process views on organizational strategy making. The practice perspective’s contribution to the question of intraorganizational selection stems from the way the use of on-site qualitative, often ethnographic field methods brings the researcher close to the action on the shop floor. By studying actual managerial practice as it is enacted, it is possible to study the actual organizational conditions in which strategy work occurs.

The question then becomes “What can we learn from the ‘over-the-shoulder’ view on strategizing that the practice perspective brings forth?” or “What can an aggregate understanding of bundles of managerial practice bring to the wider question of organizational evolution?” And it is here that I find cause to return to the idea of internal selection. Namely, when examining the failure trajectories outlined in the previous section, it seems to me that a rather particular form of selection was taking place within the organizations studied (with the exception of Group Alpha). It was organizational failure induced not by external environmental pressure, but rather by a mixture of two internal qualities:

- An unwillingness to reproduce the organization through managerial practice, causing a self-induced pressure for organizational failure under conditions in which no external pressure threatened the survival of the organization.

- The resulting degeneration of the organizational fabric as a result of a sustained unwillingness to reproduce the organization, resulting in the organization following a failure trajectory leading to organizational failure becoming a fait accompli.

These two factors point in the direction of organizational failure being brought about by an internal organizational condition. Just like environmental pressure can lead to organizational failure through a systemically competitive selection process, there are times when internal selection leads to failure in a perfectly healthy organizational body. This internal selective outcome, in which an organization effectively elects to beach itself like a whale, I call cessation. Strategic change isn’t something that happens in organizations simply because of environmental pressure. Rather, in process studies (Langley 2007), change should be seen as an ontological a priori condition (Tsoukas and Chia 2002). Hence, even when confronted with little competitive need to adapt to
the environment, organizations still face an internal change environment. The result of internal changes might be a performative failure of the organizational body or, even more curiously, an internal consensus on the termination of the organization.

Cessation forms a specific subtype of intraorganizational selection, in which the organization actively removes itself from the competitive environment. It goes beyond Burgelman’s (1996) notion of strategic business exit in the sense that the organization doesn’t simply elect to cease a specific type of business, but decides to cease as a whole. This is best understood as organizational bodies having a natural propensity for failure as a social outcome. In the studied setting, cessation came about in two different ways: involuntary through an inability to perform managerial practices in the cases of Groups Beta and Gamma, and that of conscious adaption of a policy of self-termination with groups Delta and Epsilon. Signs of both types of cessation are visible beforehand. With involuntary cessation, it is often typified by accumulating problems in the execution of managerial practices that increasingly move the organization away from routine practices and towards more foundational practices. Voluntary cessation is often anticipated, with groups agreeing on sets of conditions that will mark the end of the group, such as a major revision of the operative environment. This should, however, not be understood as an external pressure, because in both cases there would have been no valid reason to suspect that the groups would not have been competitive after the revisions were implemented.

Conclusion

This paper draws on a 39-month immersive, ethnographic study of World of Warcraft. By focusing on an activity known as raiding, I study how groups of gamers form organizations within a virtual space in order to tackle the most demanding challenges presented by the game environment. Based on observations and empirical material gathered during the study, I conducted a grounded analysis in order to determine which practices are used in organizing a virtual organization in these circumstances. This leads me to identify ten practices, which I then bundle into three broader categories of managerial practice: foundational, toolbox and routine.

The findings in this paper pertain in particular to organizational forms that exist in virtual organizations. However, the increasing proliferation of virtual environments and the subsequent rise of new organizational forms make the findings of this paper increasingly generalizable. As digital technology multiplies collaborative opportunities between both private and public organizations and new forms of organizing such as web and open source communities, the practices identified herein become more important. Furthermore, as highlighted by the types of practices, many of these intercede with business school curricula. The organizing knowledge attained by Warcraft’s 12-million player base might, in subtle ways we yet fail to appreciate, become the home grown MBA class of tomorrow (Durand and Dameron 2011).

Examination of the causal connections between the three bundles of practice results in the emergence of an evolutive model of managerial practice use. Each bundle of practices suits a certain modus operandi of the organization. Furthermore, each bundle has its own inherent propensity to fail due to constantly evolving organizational changes. This creates three unique organizational failure trajectories, which have led the author to the conclusion that organizational failure can be the result of an internal selection process. This selection arises from an organizational inability to rejuvenate itself during the evolutive process through the successful performance of practice. Sometimes this failure in internal performance of practice occurs under conditions of
low or no external competition. Hence, selective processes can be both induced from within, as well as arising from environmental pressure. By tracing a path from ethnographic fieldwork to practice and process studies, this paper seeks to reconcile micro and macro perspectives on organizing and strategizing, demonstrating how, with grounded analysis, the micro findings of ethnographic field work can be inductively aggregated for the purposes of macro analysis.
References


Collective commitment and intra-organizational boundary formation:  
For a bulletin board view of organizations  
Mikko Vesa

Abstract

This paper studies the effect of collective group commitment on the management of organizational boundaries. Based on a 39-month ethnographic field study of five virtual organizations, I argue for a bulletin board view of organizations. Under conditions of transparency, voluntary membership and contractually non-suppressive organizations, groups position their intentions vis-à-vis an organization’s ethos. Changes in the ethos can alter the collective commitment of groups, leading to changes in the organizational boundary. Drawing on the theory of sociality, I argue that under the listed conditions it is the type of collective commitment held by an organization’s constituent groups that defines the nature of an organization’s boundary. Explaining this type of boundary formation process helps us to understand managerial agency in emerging organizational forms. It also reveals a break in institutional logics, keyed to an ideal type view of organizations associated with Generation Y. In bulletin board organizations the boundary can ultimately be a matter of logging in or logging out; the management of which is a practical managerial problem.

Key words: organizational boundary, collective commitment, bulletin board view

Organisational boundaries are one of the foremost practical issues structuring managerial work. Boundaries demark the separation of an organization and its environment (Santos and Eisenhardt 2005) and consequentially structure managerial activity as occurring outside, across or inside organizational boundaries. Conceptualizing executive work through boundaries has been at the fore of many prominent research traditions. In transaction cost economics (Williamson 1981, 1991), the question of markets or hierarchies is one that concerns the economic efficiency of locating an activity within the confines of an organization or outside it as a market transaction (Pisano 1990; Jacobides and Billinger 2006). In competitive strategy, notions such as the value chain (Porter 1985; Roper, Du and Love 2008) guide managerial efforts to exercise both control and cooperation in external markets for expected returns (Jarillo 1988). Alternatively, competitive advantage can be achieved through the internal nurturing of unique and hard-to-imitate resources and capabilities (Peteraf 1993; Teece 2007). Beyond economic decision making, managers working with organizational boundaries face different forms of non-efficiency constraints. These can relate to cognitive sensemaking processes (Weick 1995) associated with internal responses to changes in organizational structure (Balogun and Johnson 2004; Mantere, Schildt and Sillince 2012) or wider pressure from institutions (DiMaggio and Powell 1983) or field of practice (Vaara and Whittington 2012) leading to industry-wide expectations of boundary (Porac, Thomas, Wilson, Paton and Kanfer 1995) and identity (Tripsas 2009) conformance.

Studies of organizational boundaries can increasingly benefit from looking beyond atomistic single-boundary decisions (Santos and Eisenhardt 2009). By focusing on
boundary formation as a historical process (Pettigrew 1979), research can capture the state of flux confronted in actual, managerial work (Tsoukas and Chia 2002). This paper examines the internal dynamics of organizational boundary formation from a sociality perspective (Hakli, Miller and Tuomela 2010; Tuomela 2007). Boundaries emerge as malleable, temporal constructs resulting from managerial efforts to reconcile different types of group intentionality (Hernes 2004). Exploring how group commitment affects organizational boundary formation is particularly insightful for explaining the challenges of managing virtual organizational forms, such as open source communities and online communities (Jeppesen and Frederiksen 2006; O’Mahony and Bechky 2008; Faraj, Jarvenpaa and Majchrzak 2011). This is true because in these organizations boundary formation is less dependent on economics of specialization or recursive practices, but rather on practical improvisation and contradicting demands (Schreyögg and Sydow 2010).

**Sociality as a boundary-shaping force**

Boundary studies are receiving increased attention across different forms of human studies (Lamont and Molnár 2002). In management studies, boundaries are important for understanding prevailing business practice such as personnel outsourcing, research and development decisions or technology sourcing (Pisano 1990; Steensma and Corley 2001; Walsh and Deery 2006). When examining non-efficiency-based constraints on boundary formation in settings such as virtual organizations, we are faced with two problems. First, it is difficult to argue that boundary formation would follow institutional logic (Thornton 2004) because the context is too novel to have stabilized as an institutional field (Hardy and Maguire 2008). Similarly, in the pursuit of internal explanations such as routines (Feldmand and Pentland 2003) or identity (Albert and Whetten 2004), we yet again struggle with the problem of finding explanatory power in organizational qualities that might be in a formative phase. It is these types of problems that the theory of sociality addresses, by explaining organizational action through collective intentionality. Organizational boundaries start to materialize as a result of group intentions to jointly work towards a goal, thereby creating a potential micro-source for institutional change (Lawrence, Hardy and Phillips 2002).

The theory of sociality stipulates that the foundation for groups’ decisions to work together rests on how they relate to the organizational ethos. The ethos broadly defines the organization’s sphere of interest with regard to what it does and what are its goals. The theory identifies three distinct forms of committing to this ethos: the we mode, the progroup mode and the I mode. In the we-mode the group and its individual members are collectively committed to accomplishing the organization’s ethos and assume that the same is true for all the other groups that make up the organization. In a progroup mode the group and its members are individually committed to the organization’s ethos, but do not require or assume this to be true for other groups that belong to the organization. Finally, in a pure I-mode a group and its members are opportunistically interested in working towards specific individual goals that opportunistically happen to align with the organization’s ethos, without any specific commitment to the ethos in question or intention to act reciprocally.

Following this reasoning, the different forms of group commitment to the organizational ethos have consequences for the process of organizational boundary formation. Boundaries emerge as a result of voluntary commitment to an organizational ethos, but not all group commitment is of the same kind, nor is it static. Rather, the commitment can change either as a result of changes in the organization’s ethos or changes in the external environment. This leads to an understanding of
boundaries as on-going processes that form out of the dynamics of group commitment. Hence, the maintenance of organizational boundaries is not simply a matter of managers assigning them ex officio, rather they are the result of management mediating between complex group dynamics. Boundaries shift over time as groups with weaker I-mode commitment to the organizational ethos cease to see participation in the organization as meaningful, while at the same time introducing the possibility of including entirely new groups to the organization. The boundary shaping force of collective commitment thus both constrains and enables managerial agency with regard to the establishment and maintenance of the organizational boundary. The core concepts of the theory of sociality as applied in this paper are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Application and definitions from the theory of sociality

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization conceptualized through...</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Organizational ethos</strong></td>
<td>Defines the content of the organization's sphere of interest in the shape of central goals, beliefs and standards. It can be either explicit or implicit, but all constituent groups must be aware of it for collective commitment to be possible.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Organizational boundary</strong></td>
<td>Is effected by groups collectively committing to an action proposal based on the organization’s ethos. It is malleable and defines which groups through their collective commitment are a part of the organization and which due to lack of such commitment are outside of it.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Collective Commitment</strong></td>
<td><strong>We mode</strong> Joint action with other groups with the expectation of full reciprocity</td>
<td><strong>Progroup mode</strong> Joint action with other groups with no expectation of reciprocity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Resulting from individual intentionality</strong></td>
<td>Act through a condition of collectivism: one for all, all for one</td>
<td>Act though a condition of conscientiousness: divide and rule</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Consisting of groups acting through...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>We mode</strong></th>
<th><strong>Progroup mode</strong></th>
<th><strong>I mode</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Joint action with other groups with the expectation of full reciprocity</td>
<td>Joint action with other groups with no expectation of reciprocity</td>
<td>Opportunistic action with other groups, no expectation of reciprocity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Act through a condition of collectivism: one for all, all for one</td>
<td>Act though a condition of conscientiousness: divide and rule</td>
<td>Act through a condition of competition: each man to his own</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If dominant, it results in organizations whose...

| **Boundaries are characterized as...** | **Stable**: efficient with regard to fulfilling ethos-driven action, but static and hard to change with regard to organizational boundaries | **Semi-Stable**: efficient implementation of action but groups commit mainly to the ethos and not other groups | **Unstable**: uneven capacity to implement action leads to opportunistic groups exiting the organization once group needs are fulfilled |
|----------------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| **Scope of managerial agency is...**   | Low: management cannot propose action that would challenge the organizational boundary | High: low social inter-group cohesion and high performance capacity leads to high managerial agency | Low: opportunism drives the boundary to a state of flux that management struggles to control |
|----------------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
This paper contributes to multiple streams of management research. First, in the study of organizational boundaries it increases our understanding of organizational boundary formation by showing how boundaries are formed by different kinds of internal collective commitment. This explains why the management of boundaries cannot only be understood as an exchange-efficiency problem, institutional adaption problem or evolutionary selection problem. Rather, boundaries are at their core a practical managerial challenge in which the degrees of freedom in managerial agency are constrained by the kind of collective commitment shown by an organization’s constituent groups towards its ethos. The ethos broadly defines the content aspects of an organization’s identity, such as central goals, beliefs and standards (Tuomela 2007:16). These implications are developed throughout the paper, and in conclusion, they are developed into propositions regarding the impact of different kinds of collective intentionality for organizational boundaries and managerial agency.

In addition, this paper contributes to our understanding of strategic change by explaining how managerial agency with regard to the setting of organizational boundaries can be both constrained and enabled by the dominant form of collective intentionality within an organization. Together the collective intentionality view of organizational boundaries and managerial agency forms the bulletin board view (BBV) of organizations (Tuomela 2007:88-92). Finally, this paper contributes to the study of institutional logics by arguing that the BBV exposes a new organizational ideal type indicative of the organizational preferences of the younger generation, so-called Generation Y. The BBV essentially stipulates that organizations are based on full transparency in which agents empowered to make action proposals based on the organizational ethos, typically in the form of organizational core groups such as management, publicly post their action proposals on a virtual public bulletin board for all constituent groups to examine. The constituent groups then examine these action propositions in light of their own commitment to the organization’s ethos with either the option of committing to the action on some collective level or exiting the organization’s boundary. Hence, all managerial activity can be examined as either explicit or implicit boundary management. All three contributions are elaborated on in the discussion section.

Data and Methods

The data analyzed in this paper was collected through a longitudinal, ethnographic case study of virtual organizations (Yin 2009). As the question of management and boundary formation in emerging virtual organizations is poorly understood, I used a contextually inductive analytical design (Ketokivi and Mantere 2010) suited for developing grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss 2008). This approach allowed me to examine the case organizations from diverse perspectives by altering my participant role across different groups. In order to ensure cross-case comparability of the data, all of my fieldwork was undertaken in one specific context (Eisenhardt 1989). I focused my studies on the genre-defining massive multiplayer computer game World of Warcraft, conducting 39 months of participant observation research across five different virtual organizations known as raid guilds (Nardi 2010; Bainbridge 2010). By conducting participant observation from the perspective of multiple roles in a simplified game world, this study was able to abductively experiment with its research questions (Locke, Golden-Biddle and Feldman 2008). The unusual research target was selected in order to study a type of organization that was a polar opposite to the conventional firm, seeking maximum contrast through which to elucidate the specific qualities of virtual organizations (Pettigrew 1990).
Research Setting

World of Warcraft is known in the games industry by the rather atrocious acronym MMORPG, a massive multiplayer online role-playing game. It is the latest release in the Warcraft franchise, developed by California-based studio Blizzard Entertainment since 1994. World of Warcraft is the industry-defining game in its own niche, and while exact numbers are not disclosed by the publisher, it can safely be deduced that the game has generated revenue of several billion USD since its initial North American release in November 2004. The game is a global phenomenon, hovering between 10 and 12 million paid subscriptions since the release of the Wrath of the Lich King expansion in 2008, with its most viable competition based on franchises such as Star Wars, Middle-Earth or Conan the Barbarian peaking between one and two million subscribers.\(^1\)

While the business implications of World of Warcraft are immense within the computer games industry, this paper focuses on World of Warcraft as an organizational phenomenon. The game fosters a committed online world in which players create characters that they develop over time, often over the course of several years. The development of the character is structured in a manner that promotes collaboration between players. One of the collaborative venues that the game promotes for optimal character development opportunities is known as ‘raiding’; which entails co-ordinating anything between 10 and 40 concurrent players with different and synergistic skill sets in an effort to defeat computer guided in-game adversaries. These adversaries often require substantial planning, co-ordination and analysis to overcome. Defeating such adversaries also gives access to a restricted number of character improvements, which

\(^1\) Source: Source: [http://mmodata.blogspot.fi/](http://mmodata.blogspot.fi/). Industry data not publicly available; but this blog is the generic reference point within the industry.
need to be allocated within the victorious groups. These basic mechanisms lead to raid organizations becoming increasingly established, with their own internal hierarchies, resource allocation systems and group rules. These raid groups represent pure play virtual organizations. Rather than being simply connected by virtual communication technology, they exist only within a virtual world and their work is purely focused on accomplishing things within their constituent virtual world. While the game has experienced a number of substantial changes as new expansions have been released (see Figure 1), the core mechanics of raiding have remained the same. One notable change is the gradual diminishing in size of raid organizations, from a model that favoured 40 concurrent online players in the original World of Warcraft launch to 25 concurrent players in The Burning Crusade and a mixture of 10 and 25 player formats in the latest expansions.

The data analyzed in this paper draws on a 39-month immersive, ethnographic study of five raid organizations. The mixture of organizations includes both what are known as ‘casual’ raid organizations focusing on friendly, relaxed playing and ‘hardcore’ raid organizations that prioritize competitive progress. Over the course of the group studies, I took on various positions as different characters in the game, as indicated in Figure 1. This allowed me to gather participant observation data from different points of view, as well as to personally experience the different roles assigned to organizational members (Evered and Louis 1981). In accordance with the principles of ethnography, participant observation was the primary data source (Van Maanen 1979), but secondary data was also collected in many forms. This secondary data was comprised of (1) internal archival material like internet discussion forum backs-ups, (2) video-taped semi-structured interviews with key informants, (3) qualitative online questionnaires and (4) public media texts from sources such fan sites, game industry magazines and official Blizzard Entertainment press releases. Furthermore, as the research progressed, the findings of the research were extensively iterated with the key informants. The combination of multiple perspectives and data sources, coupled with practitioner iteration, allowed for triangulation of the analytical constructs and conclusions (Miles and Huberman 1994).

**Participant observation**

The primary data of this study was collected through ethnographic participant observation research (Van Maanen 1979). The fieldwork was divided into three stages: peripheral, immersive and triangulating (see Figure 1). In conjunction with the first stage, an initial preparation episode was conducted in order to learn the ropes of the game world and thus give the researcher the skills necessary to prevail as a member of the raid organizations. This first stage consisted of classical participant observation research, conducted from peripheral organizational positions such as trial and rank-and-file membership. In stage two, this position evolved first to a middle management-type position, as I was in charge of group recruitment, and later developed to a top management role as one of commanding raid leaders. This gave stage two a quality of immersive, insider research (Alvesson 2003; Karra and Phillips 2008) The final period saw a return to peripheral member position, and was used to iterate developing analytical findings and retain contact with the field for purposes of practitioner feedback. In total, I spent approximately 1,230 hours over 39 months conducting in-game participant observation (See Table 2).
Fieldwork data was recorded in three distinct ways. In all three stages I utilized ethnographic field notes, writing my on-going observations either by hand or on a separate laptop computer. Field notes were often raw, unprocessed data stored for later reference and analysis. In the final stage, when I was more in the process of iterating my analysis, this was the sole form of ethnographic field data I gathered. Alongside my notes, in stages one and two I kept a research diary. As my fieldwork was conducted in the evenings and sometimes even at night, I would start the next working day by drawing together my field notes and experiences. In stage one, this was compiled into an ethnographic field diary, in which I reflected on my understanding of the practices and processes at work in my host organization. In stage two, as my personal role became more important for my host organizations, my field diary also assumed a debriefing role in which I would process the inevitable frustrations, challenges and conflicts associated with managing an organizations.

**Secondary data sources**

Alongside the participant observation I collected mostly archival material to support my online participation. The most important of these was the collection of notes and entries made on the various groups’ internet discussion boards. In groups 2 and 4 I obtained a retroactively backup of the entire phpbb-based discussion forum, while in group 3, I was given moderator access to the boards but was unable to download the entire discussion board content. In groups 1 and 5 I only ever had access to those sections of the discussion boards normally available for a member of my rank. Beyond the discussion boards, I followed a number of hi-traffic fan sites dedicated to World of Warcraft, as well as media text covering both articles about the game as well as the economic performance of Blizzard Entertainment. I also conducted some Webropol-based online questionnaires with open-ended questions to explore specific questions regarding World of Warcraft organizing. Finally, during the last triangulating stage of the research, I conducted four in-depth three-hour interviews with key informants in order to explore emerging themes as well as numerous informal talks, chats and emails exchanged with a wide range of in-game informants. As an ethnographer I was constantly on the look out for all forms of field data, and Table 2 shows what I emphasized during the different stages of fieldwork.
Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted in three separate stages, directly following the fieldwork stages (see Figure 1). The initial analytical process was guided by ethnographic foreshadowing (Hammesly and Atkinson 2007:21-24), based on the strategy-as-practice research agenda (Jarzabkowski, Balogun and Seidl 2007); focusing on the micro-activities of strategizing (Jarzabkowski 2008). I coded the data around questions such as “Who makes strategy?”, “What sorts of tools and practices are involved in the making of strategy?” and “Where is strategy made?”. Early analysis produced technically detailed, birds-eye categorizations of strategizing activity. As the iteration of fieldwork and data progressed, initial comparative sampling developed into theoretical sampling, combining field data, emergent analytical themes and current themes of organization theory (Corbin and Strauss 2008). Findings were throughout iterated with field informants in order to ensure their first-order validity (Van Maanen 1979), but the author developed the final analysis independently.

The analysis presented in this paper is the result of this theoretical sampling. When working with the data in March-May 2012 I was trying to understand the deceptively simple question of “Why do people strategize?”. As an analytical experiment, I had generated coding trees built around concepts such as player status, player experience, type of activity and WoW product lifecycle. Then I started to regroup my data around different aggregate dimensions of agency such as individuals, parties, groups, guilds and organizations, to better understand the “Who?” of strategizing, combining expressions of action, attitude and actors. This led to a major breakthrough in the sampling, leading to an emergent theme uncovering the importance of organizational subgroups in strategy work.

Technically, the coding proceeded from 241 initial codes identifying incidents, grouped according to the action/attitude/actor scheme, to 15 first-order categories. These 15 first-order concepts formed a first attempt at theorizing, resulting in a set of three second-order categories around the idea of different aggregate levels of strategic agency. Following the initial coding, I did not revisit the code-levels any further, but rather through theoretical sampling proceeded to the process of making empirical comparisons at the first-order concept level, and theorizing to second-order categories. This iteration proceeded over three rounds and led to the formation of the core categories. It was a mixture of intense analytical work, independent reflection and reading into existing organizational theory in order to develop emerging theory and understand its possible role in relation to existing studies. Throughout the sampling process, insight gained during the ethnographic fieldwork was used to guide the selection of data from analysis. Table 3 displays the final coding tree and the actual sample of field data coded for this analysis, while illustrative excerpts are provided in the findings section. Next I will describe on a theoretical level the organizational boundaries of different collective commitments, before linking this theorizing back to the different forms of individual identity formed by the second-order categories in Table 3.
Table 3: Final coding tree and data used for analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First order concept</th>
<th>Second order category</th>
<th>Second order explanation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal gaming skills</td>
<td>Conscientious</td>
<td>Conscientious conceptions of the self in strategic incidents relate to an awareness of one’s own role in the immediate operative environment. This conscientiousness relates to both an intention to work towards the group’s ethos and to an intentional drive to focus on one’s own capacity to contribute specifically to one’s group.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immersive acting</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual morale</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience and exploration</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Progress and conquest</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group boundaries</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member categories</td>
<td>Collective</td>
<td>Collective intentions in strategizing incidents compose of actions and desires that see the entire organization as one entity collectively out to accomplish something from which all members should benefit. Hence, notions of reciprocity abound.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnocentricity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entertainment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Camaraderie</td>
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<tr>
<td>Algorithms and analysis</td>
<td>Competitive</td>
<td>Competitive intentions in strategizing incidents relate to how individuals see the game environment opportunistically. Organizations are seen as something with which each individual has a fleeting, personal relationship. It is acceptable to enter and exit organizations according to one’s own intentions. There is no expectation of adhering to group values or long-term goals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operational tactics</td>
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<td>Meta-planning</td>
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<td>Organizational purposes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Resource acquisition</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Common commitment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Data used for analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In-game chat logs</td>
<td>Collected throughout the peripheral participation period. Of this, a section covering 2 months, equivalent to roughly 130 hrs of raiding, was analyzed in detail. Sample size: roughly 3,500 pages of A4-printout.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet discussion board entries</td>
<td>Collected during the entire span of fieldwork. The focus of this analysis was on the backlog of the entire Group B discussion forum, covering June 2005-October 2008 and totalling some 49,000+ entries. Of these, 1,317 entries that focused explicitly on strategizing were analysed in detail.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-structured interviews</td>
<td>Conducted during the triangulating part of the fieldwork in spring 2011. Transcripts of four in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted with officers of groups B, C, D and E were analyzed in detail. Transcripts totalled 121 pages of A4-printouts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online questionnaire</td>
<td>Collected using a qualitative survey distributed across players on a specific European World of Warcraft server, using Webropol. The questionnaire investigated questions regarding the nature and goal-setting of raid organizations. 49 one-page replies were received.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-game screenshot galleries</td>
<td>Collected in particular during the peripheral participation period. The galleries were used in conjunction with the interviews to highlight specific strategizing features and to triangulate the analysis as point of reflection. 2000+ screenshots were inspected.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Organizational boundaries under different forms of collective commitment**

The boundary implications of different forms of collective commitment that emerged from the five virtual organizations studied can be grouped into three distinct models of boundaries: the we mode, the progroup mode and the I mode collective commitment (see Figure 2). These are ideal types of boundaries distilled for purposes of clear theoretical articulation. In empirical settings, it is sufficient to conceptualize one form of commitment as dominant for conceptualizing boundaries in a given organization at a given time. It is likely that every empirically examined organization will exhibit varying degrees of all three forms of collective commitment.

Figure 2: Inner and outer boundaries under different collective commitment forms

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2.1) We-Mode Commitment; 2.2) Pro-Group Commitment; 2.3) I-Mode Commitment;
“All for one, one for all”  “Divide and rule”  “Each man for his own”
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Following methodological individualism (Felin and Foss 2005), this model aggregates organizational boundaries as outcomes of individual action, first as intra-individual collaboration in groups, and then as intra-group collaboration in organizations. In Figure 2 these are respectively represented as the small inner circle, which depicts the group boundary, and the larger outer circle, which depicts the organizational boundary. Though the model builds notions of organizations derived from the actions of individuals, the risk of reductionism (Tsoukas and Knudsen 2003) is somewhat abated by the recognition that this aggregation is not a simply a summation. Rather, individual intentions give rise to different forms of collective commitment with unique group and organizational qualities that ex post facto can no longer be reduced to their constituent individual components.

The model captures this transformation by moving from individual intention to group and organization level collective commitment as the key driver. The intention to work together with others means complex modes of social collaboration, which entail uncertainty. Acting as a group has its own unique characteristics, in particular with regard to the level of reciprocity and opportunism that we jointly as groups acting together exhibit towards other groups and members of our own group. In the model that I present, it is assumed that the core operational unit of organizations is the group.
This is an intermediate-level construct inside an organization, i.e., a working team or a group defined by similar tasks, skills or competencies. The reason for lifting up the group as a central concept of explaining how boundaries are shaped is that the analysis indicates different forms of behaviour in how informants differentiate between groups inside an organization, in particular their own and the organization at large.

The proposed boundary constructs build on how organizational groups differentiate between reciprocity and opportunism. These intentions are two-way constructs; hence, they contain both an assumption of how given member groups behave towards other member groups, and how the same member expects other members and groups to behave towards them. These intentions are separate with regard to two social formations, the core group to which a member belongs and to the overall organization. In the case of we mode commitment, groups relate mainly through reciprocity towards both other group members as well as other groups, whereas in the case of progroup commitment, reciprocity is applied to other members of one’s core group while it is assumed that opportunism defines the intra-group relationships that make up the organization. In the case of I mode commitment, all organizational relations are assumed to be guided by opportunism. The boundary formations proposed here reflect the bulletin board view of organizations (BBV). This broadly implies conditions of voluntary membership, transparency of action proposals, internalized avoidance of opportunism and low coercive management power. This conceptualization eschews the possibility of contractually regulating organizations. The BBV will be explored more fully in the discussion section of this paper, but next I consider the boundary consequences of collective commitment indicated in Figure 2 by grounding the model through empirical samples and the analytical second-level categories highlighted in Table 3.

Relating individual intentions to collective commitment

The coding tree (see Table 3) introduced earlier shows how incidents relating to strategizing were abstracted into three grounded second-order categories based around conscientious, collective or competitive intentions. All these intentions are individual, reflecting those things single informants see as critical in the strategizing of groups and organizations. As these intentions find their social operationalization through participation in an existing organization, or the formation of a new one, it is assumed that such individual intentions become for the purposes of achieving joint goals subsumed under one form of collective commitment. It is assumed that on the group level there will be a sufficient homogeneity of collective commitment. This homogeneity is based on the way a common group-level understanding facilitates a sufficiently shared interpretation of the ethos.

**Code excerpt 1: Collective intention leading to we mode collective commitment**

“I personally consider the group as a family, where you do what you can to help other members in the group, for instance, helping them farm resources they cannot get on their own. The big carrot here is the raids, where you go with your friendly group, you take down the meanest bosses, live through the worst nightmares together and yeah... you don’t give up. You analyze what you did wrong, or could do better and then you improve. So, the purpose of good, stable raid organizations is solidarity, cooperation and communication”. (Group 2 member, in-game chat, August 2008)

The story behind this excerpt shows how the individual intents of the informant lead to collective commitment in the we mode. The ethos is made feasible, and the resulting
action is accomplished with the collective intent of satisfying the needs of all the constituent members and member groups of the organization. This means acting under conditions of full reciprocity inside one’s own core group as well as towards other groups inside the organization, as opposed to spontaneous collaboration with other groups who happen to be in the environment. Such a strong collective stance results in boundaries that are often strong and static, defined by an internal ethos of jointly accomplishing the ethos. The organization is, in effect, defined by a strong collectivism with personal goals subsumed by reciprocal group goals, where every member has agency in the organizational life of other members; directly in the case of members of one’s own group and indirectly where such agency is the result of intra-group co-operation. The boundary of the organization is fully reciprocal, and is exemplified by Case 2.1 in Figure 2.

We mode commitment stemming from collective intent is but one possible case. When examining the intentions behind progroup commitment, we find individual intentionality directed towards reciprocity with one’s own group, but opportunism with regard to the rest of the organization. Hence, within the group there is commitment to act as one and not as an opportunistically aligned sum of individuals. Yet, this does not extend to other groups within the organization. In the progroup mode, the co-operation between groups is an intergroup collaboration without the extension of agency across group boundaries. Hence, the goal-setting activity of each group is ultimately a matter left to each group individually. This form of collective commitment is based on intentions that are conscientious by nature. Of essence here is how in-group members maintain high performance with regard to other in-group members, but assuming that no such reciprocity necessarily exists with and between other constituent groups. Commitment to the organizational ethos is based on group commitment to fulfil the ethos based on their assessment of action proposals, but not on a sense of reciprocity. Collective commitment in the progroup mode does not require that the interpretation of the ethos is similar across the organization, but it does require a high degree of interpretational similarity within the organization’s constituent groups. The following excerpt displays how such conscientious individual intentions become operational with regard to how an individual player of the rogue class positions himself vis-à-vis the rogue group within the raid organization:

Code excerpt 2: Conscientious intention leading to progroup commitment

“I play a rogue that is in a purely DPS-oriented class. As a result, I try to keep myself up-to-date on the game mechanics that are relevant for my role and try to play in a way that allows me to do optimal damage during raids. To help this, I employ spreadsheets that allow me to input my theoretical DPS. I am also trying to program a python script that would allow me to simulate rogue damage dealing in a numerical fashion. I do this mostly out of concern for how accurate my current knowledge of rogue mechanics is”. (Group 3 officer, in-game chat, June 2009)

But while conscientiousness often directs commitment towards some form of peer group, like the rogue class in the above excerpt, personal intentionality is often expressed purely in competitive terms, leading to the I mode form of collective commitment. In these situations activity both within groups and organizations is built on no assumption of reciprocity, but rather on an organization-wide acceptance that interpretation of the organizational ethos is individual. This, however, should not be confused with an inability to organize or with such groups being asocial. Rather, the organization is assumed to exist to satisfy the relatively opportunistic needs of its individual members, without individuals or groups acting as if they had a joint
intention. This has implications for how such an organization can collaborate, but the I mode collective commitment is still a form of collective commitment. It simply assumes a lack of permanence from the organization by accepting that the organization functions as a “each man for his own” collaborative effort.

**Code excerpt 3: Competitive intentions leading to I mode commitment**

“The primary purpose of raid organizations is to give more people the chance to working together to defeat large targets, and in that way be rewarded in two ways: one, your organization gets better at fighting together, and the other is that you acquire the best items that you can in-game”. (Anonymous player, online Webropol questionnaire, April 2008).

The thing that defines these I mode groups is that the members have a personal relationship with the organizational ethos. Collective commitment is opportunistic in the sense that members and groups join together in order to accomplish a task as an intermember/group effort, rather than an intramember/group one.

All of these individual intentions and forms of collective commitments have boundary implications. The more an organization is based on acting through a we mode collective commitment, the more longevity it will have. The reciprocity criteria create a stronger sense of shared agency, where personal and group-level goals are subsumed to intra-organizational goals, essentially entailing that each member and group will eventually have their needs fulfilled through the collaboration. However, under conditions of we mode commitment, the organization is also liable to become rather static, as all forms of strategic change must be collectively accepted by the entire organization and found to be in accord with the organizational ethos. Such organizations offer relatively limited managerial agency especially with regard to change, because management is effectively inhibited by the strong sense of reciprocity collectively expected within the group. In contrast, by focusing member attention more on their own respective in-groups, conscientious intentionality renders the progroup collective commitment type of organization more open to managerial decision-making.

The way the organizational ethos is communicated into action is less subject to organization-wide reciprocity and the constituent subgroups of the organization will be less interested in how the action treats other groups. This opens the door for management to make action propositions that they know favour an outcome that is liable to appeal more to some groups than others, allowing for a divide and rule- kind of interpreting act of the organizational ethos. When examining competitive intentions, the organization ceases to be a defined by any aggregate level interpretation of the organizational ethos. Rather, it is an opportunistic coalition of individuals searching to satisfy their needs with others who accept this opportunism and who themselves act in the same manner. While this in theory allows for much managerial agency, organizations acting under I-mode commitment require extensive managerial attention to the on-going daily operations as the lack of any permanent boundaries results in large volatility across the organizational boundary.

**Managerial Agency under different boundary conditions**

While raid organizations in World of Warcraft come in many different configurations regarding issues such as degree of competitiveness, ethnic and linguistic makeup, in-game history and administrative praxis, there are shared elements in the organizational ethos that define the kinds of issues with which management must deal. To frame what an ethos contains, the following excerpt sums this up on a general level.
Code excerpt 4: Organizational ethos in World of Warcraft

“Raid organizations exist to tackle the high-end PvP (Player versus Environment) content of World of Warcraft. They gather more or less like-minded players together to overcome challenges that require varying amounts of tactical thinking, cooperation, reflexes and knowledge of game mechanics. As a reward for defeating these challenges, players are often rewarded with equipment for their characters that allows them to defeat even more difficult content and which give them bragging rights over other players. Some players have this gathering of equipment as their primary motive for raiding, while others consider new content or the satisfaction of working with others to defeat a difficult boss as reward enough.”

This kind of framing leads to a set of generic day-to-day challenges that management has to tackle. The following excerpt expresses this through an informant’s voice.

Code excerpt 5: Day-to-day managerial tasks of World of Warcraft raid organizations

“I believe all raid organizations want some kind of in-game progress. The challenges are as follows: (1) Strategy research, i.e., how do we defeat specific encounters, (2) Operational staffing with regards to what type and amount of raiders are needed, (3) Assigning tasks for each attending raider and briefing each raider so they understand their role so that the organization can work together, (4) Motivate all members to do their best and explain why the specific staffing requirements excludes some raiders, (5) Create a system for sharing and distributing rewards in a fair way that is accepted by the raiders, and (6) Ensure everyone has fun and the raid has a good atmosphere.”

However, depending on the type of collective commitment that glues the organization together, exercising managerial agency to accomplish these tasks is constrained and enabled in differing ways. Proposing organizational action, such as ordering work tasks, is always done against the organization’s sphere of interests as communicated in its ethos. It is the degree of freedom in interpreting the organizational ethos that forms the scope of managerial agency. I analyze this here by examining how the boundary condition impacts the three classical dimensions of managerial work: the short-term implementation of strategy, the long-term planning of strategy and the possibilities for strategic change with regard to content and structure.

Under the conditions of a we mode commitment, management faces an organization that has a strong collective, reciprocal way of operating. This leads to the organization being an efficient implementer of current strategy, because it is permeated by a shared understanding of the ethos. However, the strong collective commitment of the we mode constrains the long-term planning possibilities, as all changes need to be rooted in the collective commitment of the organization. This is particularly strong when it comes to management initiatives to change the organizational structure, as there is little possibility to strike specific deals with specific parts of the organization. Hence, the we mode commitment gives rise to stable organizations which are difficult to alter. These organizations can be effectively managed under a business as usual-situation, but they are bound to be rigid when confronted with a need to change.

Code excerpt 6: Organizational ethos under a we mode commitment

“I believe our raid group is something that may be considered semi-casual. We lack the tight organization and raid attendance tracking that more serious groups have,
but we still have the general idea of trying to see as much content as possible before the next expansion as our primary motivator, while not letting it interfere with our real life priorities too much.

In contrast, progroup commitment moves the organization towards flexibility, where organizational loyalties are mostly restricted to the insides of individual constituent groups. Group cohesion maintains the organization’s ability to work, but it is more open to managerial initiatives as management can directly negotiate about the implementation of the organizational ethos with the different organizational groups. This negotiability also opens the door for strategic change, as management has more freedom to adjust the way the ethos is made feasible in ways that might create priorities between the different groups. Similarly, in-group cohesion keeps the organization sufficiently stable for the implementation of long-term strategies. The drawback of the commitment is that the organization will require more active management in order to get things done.

**Code excerpt 7: Management action proposals under the progroup commitment**

“Simply slashing DKP prices will not add good offsets for a few people; it will add half-arsed offsets for a lot of people. Half-arsed offsets are not a good thing for the raid group – decent well-geared offsets are. So the aim is to gear up a few people with good sets, not everyone with bad sets. As harsh as that may seem, it is in the interests of [Group B] as a whole. Personally I have my own ideas, but I am not going to share them with you. I don’t think as an officer I should take part in an open debate amongst members, and I don’t think any other officer should either. This thread isn’t about us trying to influence you, it’s about us wanting to see what ideas the members can come up with.”

When organizations move towards I mode commitment, they start to become brittle. A myriad of individual goals and intentions makes management difficult, as there is very little stability around which to create feasible content. Hence, managerial agency is constrained by a constant need to fire fight different sorts of on-going crisis situations. Under these opportunistic intention conditions, the organizational boundary is constantly shifting as specific opportunistic individual or group-level commitments to the organizational ethos are fulfilled. Such fulfilment will lead either to a new interpretation of the ethos for yet another opportunistic goal, or the individual or group exiting the group with little or no reciprocal intent towards the former colleagues.

**Code excerpt 8: Opportunism constraining managerial agency under I mode commitment**

“Not in an attempt to sound harsh, but I think most prefer DKP because the fact is a lot of this raid group barely turns up for the minimum time required by our rules, meaning they’d get screwed in a loot council, whereas our DKP hinders them a lot less. A loot council would always put the raid’s interests over that of the individual and many don’t want that. This shows a lot about the groups.”

Excerpts 7 and 8 are actually part of the same discussion, which relates to changes planned to the loot distribution system used by Group 2. It shows how different collective commitments are in force somewhat simultaneously, with management (aka the officers) pushing the organization into two distinct groups depending on which of the proposed new systems is supported. The feasibility of the entire change is brought into question in Excerpt 8, where a group leader questions whether the change initiative has any chance of succeeding based on his understanding that the group
actually operates more under the premises of a I mode collective commitment. Such I mode commitment is often characterized by a voicing of the ethos which highlights the purely personal dimension of action:

*Code excerpt 9: Organizational ethos under an I mode commitment*

“Raid organizations are needed to be able to experience challenging end-game content. Technically this is just not possible without a raid organization, sadly. On a personal note, I enjoy working in a team to beat the puzzle that each boss encounter poses, the more so if the people are nice.”

It is worth observing that the I mode is not inherently asocial, nor is it incapable of forming friendly atmospheres. It is, however, a construct that doesn’t depend on any forms of reciprocity. That makes it difficult to conduct long-range planning, because it is accepted as a basis of collaboration that each group and member is quite free to come and go as they please; in a sense the organization is an on-going team being constantly reformed for the purposes of exploiting opportunities in the environment.

**Towards a bulletin board view of organizations**

Conceptualizing organizations through the forms of collective commitment analyzed in the previous sections creates a new perspective on organizations. It is essentially an organization where individual intentions blend together into irreducible collective commitments that shape the organization with regard to its boundary conditions and managerial agency (see Figure 3). It should be noted here that managerial agency in this regard should not be seen in a sense limited to formal management in organizations, rather it implies in a broad sense anyone with the organizational power to suggest action proposals based on the organizational ethos.

In the bulletin board view of organizations, organizations are seen as dynamic bundles of action proposals at different stages of completion. Such action proposals are ways of making the organizational ethos feasible (for the possible content of such ethos in this setting, see excerpts 4, 5 and 9). In this sense the ethos is the main cultural artefact of the organization, but it stands in a reflexive relationship to the managerial agency exercised on it. While action proposals must draw on the organizational ethos, similarly over time the action proposals through their role of being the everyday action guidelines of the organization, will reflect back on their constitutive cultural artefact. The exercise of managerial agency can come in many shapes. Typically in World of Warcraft raid groups, it is done by groups of officers that hold different administrative positions in their respective raid organizations, but it can also arise from “shop-floor” management like class and function representatives. Attributes like experience, seniority and in-game playing skill can be mobilized as power-strengthening sources in putting forward action proposals. The view of managerial agency here recognizes that it is unevenly distributed within the organization, but also maintains that the use of such agency is not the sole property of formal management.

Proposals for action are by nature public. In essence this explains the metaphorical name of this view of the organization, as you need only think of organizations as big, public bulletin boards where action proposals are posted for all and sundry who hold a stake in accomplishing the proposed action to read. Hence, the relationship formed to the organization comes through a relationship formed with the proposed action. How the action is evaluated depends on the form of collective commitment(s) within the organization. In cases where there is a we mode commitment, the evaluation is based on its overall utility for the whole organization and its ethos is based on criteria of
reciprocity. Under a progroup commitment, each constituent member group evaluates the action proposal with regard to their own interpretation of the organizational ethos and possibly the group’s own utility. Reciprocity based on this interpretation is extended to other members of the group, but not to other groups within the organization. Finally, under I mode commitment, every action proposal is evaluated individually. The organizational ethos is seen as an umbrella from which action is drawn, and every member relates to such action proposals based on their own opportunistic interpretation of how said proposals accords with their own intentions. This is, however, still a form of collective commitment in the sense that the organization is collectively committed to pursuing its ethos under conditions of opportunism.

Figure 3: The bulletin board view of organizations

Particular conditions pertain to when a bulletin board view of organization can come into effect. First, it requires a strong condition of voluntary membership. Essentially, unless members are free to choose their commitment to a particular action it cannot be held that their interpretation of action proposals is based on a collective commitment. Rather, it is instead based on different forms of coercive power exercised by management, for example, in the form of binding contracts. In reverse, the main condition inhibiting managerial agency in this setting is the explicit lack of coercive power. Hence, managerial agency is exercised through propositional power, which draws on the organizational ethos and the organization’s collective commitment to seeing it accomplished. It is power based on organizing action based on the ethos, rather than power based on disciplining the ethos into force.
As can be seen by comparing Figure 1 and Figure 3, the same boundary conditions affect the form of collective commitment that influence the interpretation of action proposals. While the boundary conditions are ideal types, it is likely that one form of collective commitment is at least reasonably dominant within a given organization. Conflicting forms of collective commitment will lead to disappointment within the organization regarding how action is accomplished, which in turn will compel certain groups to remain within the boundary of the organization while others will exit. Yet it is possible for multiple forms of collective commitment to persist within a given organization simultaneously. Often the formation of a we mode commitment requires time and affinity, as well as the gradual generation of the collective trust that gives credence to such reciprocity. Similarly, new members and groups will often initially have an I mode commitment to an organization before undergoing deeper socialization. Also, all forms of commitment may for a period coexist unaware of the other forms simply because chance happens to align how different forms of commitment see concrete action proposals. We mode groups behave according to reciprocity towards the whole organization, while I mode commitment may lead to the conclusion that reciprocal behaviour with regard to a given action proposal may in fact be opportunistically the most efficient solution.

**The bulletin board view as institutional logic of gaming**

Although this study of World of Warcraft raiding organizations proposes a bulletin board view of organizations, this still does not really address the question of why such an organizational ideal would be interesting beyond the mere pleasure of theorization. I argue that its importance to contemporary management and organization studies can be derived from its potential importance for both current and future ideals of what organizations fundamentally are. In essence, we are seeing an organizational form based on gaming logic that has the potential to impact other dominant forms of institutional logics such as markets and democracy; with both gaming lives in constant interaction (see Table 4). Gaming as understood through the MMO lens highlighted in this paper is a relatively new phenomenon. It emerged in the late 1990s with games such as Ultima Online and Everquest, eventually developing towards an important breaking point with new digital technology enabling home computer users to be logged into the internet for prolonged periods via connections of sufficient speed and stability.

This permanence of online presence for a large sector of technology-savvy consumers created the technological basis on which the MMO genre developed. Suddenly persistent virtual worlds inhabited by virtual characters started to become a reality in the computer games industry, evolving beyond the amateur-driven multi-user dungeons that existed previously. With this new permanence came the possibility of forming organizations in purely virtual environments. This differs from more conventional takes on virtual organizations, which see virtual organizations as a means of communication connected by digital technology. In MMO-based virtual worlds, digital advances enable bigger and better things, beyond simply a means of communication between teams in New York, London and Beijing. In the new virtual organization, the virtual environment creates the loci of the organization for purposes of both work and leisure.
Table 4: Scope of gaming as a form of organization in society and adjacent logic

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Business (Market Logic)</th>
<th>Computer Gaming (Gaming Logic)</th>
<th>Public Society (Democratic Logic?)</th>
<th>Estimation of Societal Scope</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Entire Computer Games Industry</td>
<td>Organizing Principles in Collaborative Computer Gaming</td>
<td>Public Discourse on Gaming; Legislation</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MMO-branch of the Computer Games Industry</td>
<td>Raid Organization in MMO-genre Computer Games</td>
<td>MMO-gaming culture; Dissemination of jargon; Systems of organizing</td>
<td>25 million people*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World of Warcraft Developers at Blizzard Entertainment</td>
<td>Raid Organization in World of Warcraft</td>
<td>Virtual Communities New avenues for sociality “IRL” stakeholders</td>
<td>10-12 Million people*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Five Raid Organization On a European WoW Server</td>
<td></td>
<td>= 220-240 people</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* These are estimates of total player numbers. It would be my estimate that perhaps 40-50% of these numbers are or have been active in the raid format of collaborative MMO gaming.

Though this study is grounded in the analysis of strategizing activity in five World of Warcraft raid organizations, one should not dismiss the potential effects it portends for how we see organizing. As summed up in Table 4, the potential influence of gaming logic on the institutions through which we constitute society are immense. In World of Warcraft alone, there have been 10-12 million players over the last few years, and increasingly the type of raiding activity studied here forms one of the core activities of the game, as it does in practically the entire genre of MMO gaming. Due to MMO pre-eminence in the computer games industry, the collaborative modes of MMO games are widely recognized in the entire industry segment, thereby reaching what could be argued to be a substantial part of the population of developed, industrial nations. Beyond the simple numerical scope of the phenomenon we should also recognize the potential for a generational shift in values regarding the ideal organization. While the so-called Generation X was the first properly computer gaming generation sitting in front of their consoles and home computers, it is not until the Generation Y that virtual worlds become an embedded way of being social in the world.

The analysis and modelling presented in this paper leads to the formulation of propositions regarding the nature of the collective commitment and the bulletin board view of organizations. As the construct is essentially a pragmatic one, driven by an interest in what people desire to achieve and the forms of collaborative agendas this results in, it is natural to form them based on the different forms of collective commitment presented. Hence, this paper posits three propositions. It is important to remind the reader at this juncture that these propositions are based on ideal types of commitment, whereas actual empirical situations are likely to exhibit a mixture, although one mode of commitment is likely to dominate a given organization setting at any given time. As the influence of a bulletin board view of organizations is likely to be a gradual one on the actual practice of organizing in society, these propositions are useful for examining the potential influence of gaming logic on other forms of organizing.
Hypothesis 1: Under conditions of we mode commitment,
both organizational and group boundaries are rigid, with few groups and/or individuals entering or exiting the organization over time, and
managerial agency with regard to action proposal is restricted by a high degree of reciprocity but facilitated by a high degree of internal trust.

Hypothesis 2: Under conditions of progroup commitment,
organizational boundaries are malleable while group boundaries are rigid. Groups enter and exit the organizational boundary, but group membership remains stable, and
managerial agency with regard to action proposal is strong due a high degree of within-group reciprocity and internal trust and low degree of reciprocity and trust between constituent organizational groups.

Hypothesis 3: Under conditions of I mode commitment,
both organizational and group boundaries are malleable, with many groups and individuals entering or exiting the organization over time, and
managerial agency with regard to action proposal is restricted by high degrees of unpredictability of organizational boundaries but enabled by a lack of reciprocal consideration.

Conclusions
This paper studies how intermediate, group-level collective commitment shapes the formation of organizational boundaries. Drawing on the theory of sociality, it presents three types of collective commitment (we mode, progroup mode and I mode) which all have a distinct influence on both the formation of organizational boundaries and the scope of managerial agency within the resulting boundary construct. These findings relate in particular to new organizational forms such as virtual organizations, in which membership is based on conditions of transparency and voluntary association.

Based on these, the paper conceptualizes a bulletin-board view of organizations. In this mode of operations, the organization is essentially seen as bulletin board on which cooperative action proposals are posted. The enactment of the action proposals depends on the prevailing mode of collective commitment. This theorization of organizations is intended to explain a type of organizing inherent in virtual organizations and online communities that draw their logic from gaming. Finally, hypotheses for identifying different modes of collective commitment are presented.
References


Bringing strategy to time - Studying strategy as experiential vectors

Mikko Vesa & Henrika Franck

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Abstract

In this paper, we explore the relationship between strategy work and temporality. More explicitly, we seek to understand time as temporality, i.e. as the negotiation and the organization of time as it is experienced and not as chronological time. Much of the previous research on time and strategy features researchers positioned as ex-post rationalisers who deduce behavioural patterns or competitive recommendations from events in the past. We examine managers engaged in the manifestation of strategy here and now, focusing not on ex-post strategy, but rather how managers experience strategy as in-situ vectors of the future. We define these vectors here as experiential vectors of strategic temporality and further identify three broad groupings of such vectors in our research: unquestioned, resolute and fragmented experiential vectors. We argue that these vectors are constantly present in unfolding strategy work. They influence managerial conduct of strategy and hence the retroflex elucidation of strategy theory.

Key words: Management teams, Strategy as practice, Strategy research, Temporality, Time

In many ways, time is one of the prime concerns of strategy research. From Chandler’s (1962) seminal study of the formation of American corporations to Mintzberg’s intensive historical studies (1978, 1982, 1985) and Pettigrew’s longitudinal case studies (1987, 1990, 1992), time has formed the chronological plotline against which researchers base empirical material, analysis and findings of strategy studies. Similarly, research on competitive strategy, starting with Porter’s work (1980, 1985), rests on the logic of making competitive strategy recommendations based on the statistical analysis of historical industry performance. Studies using the resource-based views of the firm (Wernerfelt 1984, Barney 1991) and dynamic capabilities (Teece 2007) strive to unravel competitive advantage as an internal quality of the firm, attained and sustained over time. Indeed we believe that a fundamental concern in strategy - both in research and practice - is what will happen in the future based on an assessment of the past. The aim is to understand how managers and organizations should influence, prepare for and act in an uncertain future. What often distinguishes research from practice, however, is the fact that managers engaged in strategy work often don't have the luxury of divining the outcomes of their actions to the same extent we researchers do. Our intention with this paper is to delve into this uncertainty - to explore the relationship that managerial strategy work has with time as work unfolds. We want to understand time as temporality, i.e. as the manifold of personal durations of time as it is experienced prior to its ordering and sequencing into chronological time. We see this study as contributing to the strategy-as-practice perspective (Golsorkhi, Rouleau, Seidl and Vaara 2010). In it, we analyze the actual on-going work of managers (Jarzabkowski 2005), employing interpretative research design to develop mid-range theoretical
propositions (Merton 1949) regarding the relationship between temporality and strategy work.

We make three contributions in this paper. Firstly, we demonstrate that temporality is the root form of strategy work. Strategy is a complex and embedded process that generates order by reducing multiple temporalities into group- and organizational level temporalities that can be turned into chronological time. Three such organizational-level temporalities are identified in the form of experiential vectors; unquestioned, resolute and fragmented. Then, we explore the factors that shape temporality in strategy work and identify two; change and complexity. The dominant experiential vector in a given organisation is likely dependent on how its members perceive the change and complexity its operations are subject to. Finally, we explore the way temporality makes itself manifest in strategy work, arguing that strategy is a contemporary label for a deep process of temporal emergence. Such emergence affects all social actors; and in a similar fashion most strategy research is likely to produce studies conducive of its own experience of chance and complexity.

Time and strategy as practice

When examining the way time is seen in strategy-as-practice, a natural starting point is the strategy process tradition from which strategy-as-practice has largely evolved (Langley 2007; Whittington 2007). Two traditions that have been influential for strategy-as-practice stand out in their efforts to understand organizations over time: the historical studies conducted at McGill by Mintzberg and his associates on the one hand, and the longitudinal case studies conducted at Warwick by Pettigrew and his associates on the other. These two traditions both put the organizations centre stage, but have different takes on time as an empirical phenomenon. The McGill studies trace long, historical patterns using several decades of mostly archival data (Mintzberg 1978; Mintzberg and Waters 1982). Mintzberg and McHugh (1985) recognize, but eschew, the possibility of using participants or interviews as data sources. They consider that the stability of strategies can be high and thus such on-site methods might not be able to infer any changes in strategy due to the problems associated with doing such fieldwork for a sufficiently long time (Mintzberg and McHugh 1985: 164). Pettigrew’s work takes a somewhat different stand, arguing that one should also study ‘reality in flight’ (Pettigrew 1990:270). Seeking to understand organizational change, the longitudinal case approach is used in his studies in order to understand the interplay between context, content and process utilizing a multi-method design (Pettigrew 1987, 1997). Strategy process research has offered rich insight into the question of organizational time depicting it as a series of events, short episodes, epochs, biographic history (Melin 1992) or event sequences (Van de Ven 1992) at the aggregate level of the organization. Perhaps the culmination of the McGill tradition was the conceptualization of organizations exhibiting different forms of cyclical change from one pattern of behaviour or action to another; itself a proposition about the way both management and environment structure time (Mintzberg and Westley 1992). Hence to summarize the tradition: in strategy process research, time is conceptualized as linearly patterned. Events, action and behaviour are analytically plotted onto a chronological timeline, after which theory is generated by looking for repeated, episodic patterns and disruptions in that timeline (Mintzberg 2008, Burgelman 2002, Pettigrew 1987).

The strategy-as-practice perspective evolved from the early strategy process tradition and largely remains complicit with it, albeit with a turn away from the organizational level towards micro-level analysis (Chia 2004; Whittington 2004). In strategy-as-practice research, the historical organizational patterns of earlier process research
make way for the notion of strategizing (Jarzabkowski, Balogun and Seidl 2007; Hernes and Weik 2007). In strategizing, the manager is seen as located in a constantly ongoing stream of strategic activity, shifting the durational lens from past patterns to present work. Strategy research is conceptualized through the practitioner, practice and praxis framework (Jarzabkowski 2005, Whittington 2006). Some researchers making the transition from the process school to study practice have continued with established themes, though their studies now focus on the micro-level of individual managers and management teams (Balogun and Johnson 2004; Balogun and Johnson 2005; Paroutis and Pettigrew 2007; Stensaker and Langley 2010). At the same time, however, the entry of sociological theory and internal intermediate theory generation has offered a diversified set of tools through which to approach questions relating to time (Hendry and Seidl 2003; Jarzabkowski 2004; Denis, Dompierre, Langley, Rouleau 2011).

Yet, if we follow the strategy-as-practice call to study not only strategy but also the act of strategizing, the question becomes: is chronological time really an adequate concept (Chia and MacKay 2007)? Strategic plans, budgets and schedules, along with the activity and results that they are later associated with, might in hindsight seem almost blatantly self-evident; but at the moment of inception it is quite the opposite. Strategy rests in tension between a ‘building vs. dwelling’ worldview, as the intent of much contemporary strategy is to produce deliberate order out of immediate purposive everyday being (Chia and Holt 2009, Chia and Rasche 2010). However, at the moment of the inception of strategies and as they are revealed in the actual manifestation of strategizing, no such ordering capable of producing chronological order exists. Rather, it is a temporal landscape that confronts the strategizer (Simpson 2009), a notion that we in this paper associate with the continental phenomenological philosophical tradition (Heidegger 1962). This temporality is the condition of our existence that we consistently face in the now, as we struggle with the unarticulated co-present totality of our pasts, presents and futures.

In strategy, temporality is an embedded characteristic of a situated community. It is how I, as a person belonging to a specific community, now in the present, experience the time, both past and future, that I live in. It is encased in rich history, culture, lived experience and belief systems. Temporality cannot be measured, but it can be meaningfully expressed through language and art. This temporality is not predictive, an imposition on the future, but rather an opening out to what is in our immediate surroundings. It is realized though our sensitivity to what is ordinary, mute and overlooked. Hence, temporally the world is ‘ready-to-hand’ and immanent, rather than a resource to be organized and exploited (Chia and Holt 2006). Reversely, time is a universal characteristic of the physical world; a continuing linear sequence of actions and things from the past to the future. Time can be meaningfully measured in numbers and allocated through the use of clocks and calendars. In organizations clock time is commonly used to record the linear flow of events that occurred in the past to events we intend to happen in the future. Time is identical and consists of measurable units to whose ordering we subject ourselves, and contrary to temporality, it is always a social accomplishment typically based on the need to organize collaboration (Sorokin and Merton 1937).

It is hence through the notion of temporality rather than through time that we approach strategy makers and strategizing in this paper. As pointed out by Chia and MacKay (2007), often in strategy-as-practice research, the main characteristic that sets it apart from earlier strategy process research is a fine-tuning of the methodological periscope; what used to be a study of organization-level processes becomes a study of individuals engaged in micro-processes. Thus, there has been no need to question the
inherited linearly-patterned understanding of time. Yet, if we strive for a post strategy processual understanding of time, temporality provides a way of examining strategy-makers’ conceptualizations of duration as strategy work actually unfolds.

It is based on this reasoning that we approach the questions surrounding time and temporality in strategic management through the following research questions:

How does temporality manifest itself in on-going strategy work?

What are the factors that shape temporality in strategy work?

We will explore these questions empirically by analysing discussions at strategy meetings in a Northern European utilities company. Based on our findings relating to research question one, we extrapolate on the processes and factors in our discussion section. We also discuss the implications of our research for strategy studies in general.

**Methodology and data collection**

Our fieldwork approach to this study is case-based and processual (Pettigrew 1992). In order to capture contextual complexity and depth (Dyer, Gibb, and Wilkins 1991), we use a qualitative single case study design (Yin 1994). Since the focus of the research was on temporality and how managers in strategy work experience it in the present time, the study was conducted as an interpretative inquiry, with the aim of making interpretations from the inside (Brown 1994, 1995). The study was conducted at a Northern European utilities company with operations in 18 countries that we shall call ICE (all names are pseudonyms). Listed on the stock exchange in the late 1990s after a merger between two companies, ICE is a major player today. However, after the stock listing in the late 1990s, the company’s share price fell rapidly and the organization was in crisis. There was no vision in place for how such a company could compete in the free market after previously having operated in a quite regulated market. In 2000, a new CEO was appointed who was seen both inside and outside the company as a saviour. Shortly after his entry, he initiated big changes. Given that the cultures of both companies involved in the merger were characterized by not only the inflated bureaucracy commonplace to state-owned companies but also a civil servant mentality, a lot of effort was put into changing this culture into a more market-oriented kind. At the time of our empirical study, the company was implementing radical changes in response to the new requirements. ICE consisted of a corporate headquarters and seven business units. The seven business units were granted more responsibility, with the ultimate goal of making some of them work as independent units. One of the main strategic targets was growth. After 2000 ICE succeeded in growing substantially, purchasing new companies in Northern Europe.

When we began our work at ICE in August 2007, many change initiatives had been implemented in the structure. These included various training programs, re-structuring of the organization, new practices for performance follow-up, scanning of low-performance and the changing of key people in management teams. The first top management meeting we attended was a two-day strategy away-day, where the goals for the next year were presented. Figure 1 illustrates the timeline of ICE’s change initiative and our research.
In this study, we mainly rely on observation of negotiation in meetings over strategic priorities, but we complement these insights with interviews and documents. Observation data were gathered during five months sitting in on top management team meetings and in three different business unit management team meetings. Most meetings were recorded and transcribed. At some meetings we took notes, very quickly writing down what was said. All in all we attended 15 one or one-and-a-half day meetings. We interviewed 19 managers in top management and middle management. The interviews took place during work hours and lasted approximately one hour. They were all recorded and verbatim transcribed. We also collected and read public documents from ICE and newspaper articles. Table 1 summarizes the data set.

Table 1: Summary of Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Top management team</th>
<th>Extended management team</th>
<th>Business Unit 1</th>
<th>Business Unit 2</th>
<th>Business Unit 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Observation</td>
<td>5 meetings</td>
<td>2 meetings</td>
<td>3 meetings</td>
<td>4 meetings</td>
<td>3 meetings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>31 hours</td>
<td>4 hours</td>
<td>19 hours</td>
<td>23 hours</td>
<td>12 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>7 persons</td>
<td>3 persons</td>
<td>4 persons</td>
<td>5 persons</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data analysis

In our analysis, we followed an inductive logic (Phillips and Hardy 2002, Wodak and Meyer 2002). This meant that we had an exploratory approach toward our data and aimed at structuring the data on an on-going basis from a ‘grounded’ understanding of the phenomena in question. But as this kind of analysis in practice requires a constant movement back and forth between theory and empirical data, our approach could more accurately be described as abductive. As our empirical material includes several kinds of data, including observation, company documents and interviews, it provides an extensive interpretative database for examining various temporalities in the discussion, documents and practices associated with strategy work. Our research design allowed us to contrast the linear view of time and different temporalities and these comparisons have been an essential part of the refinement of our theoretical ideas.

Our analysis proceeded in three stages. We first engaged in a descriptive account of the data and captured concepts and the process that was unfolding. The original purpose of the study as a whole was to inform broader theories on strategic change and organizational identity. However, in reading the data we observed that time was negotiated and renegotiated on an on-going basis. We found that a dominant theme in the naturally occurring management team meeting discussion and strategy text was the radical change that ICE was going through. This radical change brought forth everyone’s experiential struggle to understand the present and the past. This way we identified temporality as a key issue in this radical strategic change. The future had to be very different from the past, and on the organizational level the present was a struggle to make the change. We concentrated on typical features and patterns, but used specific examples to analyse some practices in more detail.

In the second stage, we focused on the temporal tensions, on specific examples that shed light on the temporal struggle at play. This does not mean that all strategy talk is linked to this struggle; rather it reflects our willingness to focus on the most central temporal elements that are brought about by strategy work.

In the third stage we developed themes that represented how the temporality of strategy work was experienced. These involved instances of temporality being uninterrupted in cases where the past and the future appeared similar; instances of interrupted temporality where past and the future appeared different; and instances of temporality being contested by different actors. The emerging issues are described in detail below. We saw that the organization of anticipation of the future was present in almost all of the discussions, and that the ambiguities that arose in trusting the views and uses of history and the future led to experiencing temporality in different ways. This was the specific experience of the temporality. We also understood that there were different managerial perceptions of strategy depending on the temporality, which led to different operationalizations of strategy. Table 2 summarizes the empirical findings that are more thoroughly illustrated in the findings section.
Table 2: Summary of Findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Temporality experienced as...</th>
<th>Resulting managerial perception of strategy</th>
<th>Strategy operationalized as...</th>
<th>Executed with the following strategy artefacts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Temporality as an unquestioned experiential vector</td>
<td>An uninterrupted communally shared vector in which the past and the future appear similar</td>
<td>Strategy is about analysing temporal experiences to optimize future performance</td>
<td>A logical, sequential plan, strategic planning and planned strategic change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temporality as a resolute experiential vector</td>
<td>An interrupted communally shared vector in which the past and the future appear different</td>
<td>Strategy is about collectively changing course as temporal experiences entail disruption</td>
<td>Unplanned changes through new awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temporality as a fragmented experiential vector</td>
<td>A dissonant communally shattered vector in which no common basis for the past or the future can be found</td>
<td>Strategy fails to aggregate at the current level. No shared temporal vectors exist.</td>
<td>Debate, conflict, indecision and struggle</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Findings: Temporality as experiential vectors

We analyzed how strategy is experienced through the settling of ideas concerning history and the future using notions of unquestioned temporality, resolute temporality and fragmented temporality as experiential vectors of time. These vectors show how the experience of temporality occurs in strategy work in two different ways. They either bring the future to the present, or they bring the past to the present. Hence, they allow managers to traverse different kinds of episodes and epochs prior to social accomplishment of time. We realize that these themes are simplifications of strategy discussions where the experience of a temporal understanding of time is in on-going negotiation, but we also claim that these vectors are concrete and visible in the data and touch on the day-to-day experience of those we observed and interviewed.

Temporality as unquestioned experiential vectors

Unquestioned temporality at ICE was characterized by two specific themes related to history and the future. For purposes of the present strategy, both history and the anticipated future provided the necessary credibility. Temporality was experienced as an uninterrupted, communally shared vector in which the past and the future appear similar. Managerial perception of the strategy was to optimize future performance as operationalized through plans, budgets, balance scorecards, etc. At ICE, the demands
for uniformity and goal compliance were clear and articulated. The company wanted to change from having been a state-owned company with a civil servant mentality into a market-oriented, competitive and innovative entity. The ‘old’ culture that was characterized by the hierarchy and mindset of a state-owned company that had to be changed. The company had initiated many what they called leadership programs to train the managers and potential future managers to conform to the desired future. The programs aimed at teaching the managers how to take initiative, to “think out of the box” and to put in an extra effort for the firm. An annual “people’s day” gathered over 100 managers to discuss the future, but also to evaluate potential talents. Even though the strategy was to change, the temporality was understood as unquestioned, as strategic change was the plan.

Uniformity and collective goals were the strategic benchmarks and this desired future was the norm that was supposed to be followed by others. The strategy discussions were configured around a strong sense of direction, a vision and a feeling that they were being pulled in a certain way, that the past was being settled in a quite explicit fashion. The idea of unquestioned time, the vector of time is being experienced in a linear way, left little room for curiosity or sauntering, nor for feelings of anxiety regarding the visibility and definitive status of the strategy and its realization, instead of feelings of absence or disorientation. It is not that there weren’t any issues, but the managers felt they knew what the problems were and were settled in the way things were at the time.

One of the key issues in the company was the question of mitigating climate change; it was one of the main focuses in the company’s strategy. The goal was to make it a ‘CO2-free company’, and the means to do so ranged from investing in nuclear energy to reducing travelling and changing the light bulbs in the buildings. The public discussion about sustainability in society was, and is, topical, and ICE was very active in communicating their efforts to mitigate climate change. The historical narrative had been in the organization for a long time, as this quote from a meeting reveals. It is from a top management team meeting, where they discuss how to maintain the image they have of excelling in sustainability.

Quote 1: Temporality as an unquestioned vector of the past into the present and the future (discussion at top management team meeting)

NN1: We want to excel in sustainability, we cannot back off and we do not want to back off. It is good citizenship. We will be scrutinized more than before. What about our green image?

NN2: But we are prepared for it and we have a very very strong position for it. Our vision is to become a CO2 –free company. The key is for us to prove that we can do it. We can utilize biofuels, push for market driven development. There is no reason to change any of this. We are one of the only companies that have CO2 –targets.

NN1: Let’s stick to our strategy. What do we need to deliver on our strategy? At this stage no reason to revisit our strategy.

The managers paint a future environment by ‘already being there’. They spur each other on to believing in a future where they excel in sustainability, where they already are a CO2-free company, and where individual participant agency is high. They also reassure each other that the current strategy rooted in history is the best alternative to achieve the goals. Intended actions for the future are listed as ‘performance excellence and growth’. The past, the memory, is settled by the assurance that monetary incentives will make sure the future is represented in the history.
The experiential vector of unquestioned time was also manifest when the managers felt they could govern the future, for example when middle managers envisioned a 'secure' future for their own business unit. Linear planning was mostly a top management effort, and on the surface it looked like it was successful, as the middle managers and their management teams had a congruent scheme with the goals of the top management. The demand to reach the strategic goals (whether those relating to a more entrepreneurial mentality, or to becoming carbon neutral, or even to growing) was communicated as requirements for the future. In the following quote, a member of the business unit management team draws a picture of the future that builds an experiential vector of unquestioned time:

*Quote 2: Temporality as an unquestioned vector of the future into the present (head of business unit at management team meeting)*

“We can drop some of the nonsense we do. I hope it is not much, but if we are doing a lot of nonsense, then we must change what we do now. I want us to start a culture of forecasting every month; it is one of the manager’s tasks if you know what you are doing. A good forecast has 3 items: A good idea of what will be the outcome, the range within the forecast, we need to communicate the spread, and thirdly we have to commit to certain actions. And this is much easier than doing it by quarter. If we do it continuously, we will remember what we have done. This is what makes life easy. “

Here, the future is tossed into the present via a secure awareness and faith in prognostic practices. The head of the business unit uses reasoned means-end arguments when he talks about a good forecast. The rhetoric is rational and represents a coherent logic, and he ‘secures’ the strategy by giving the management team tools to govern the future. The future becomes a guide of the present. This became the narrative that many managers seemed to buy in to. At times there was no understanding of what had been going on in the past based on any analysis. The top management was serving the future as a truth governed by an unquestioned presentation of the past in the present, and simply urging the organization to act in resonance with this truth.

**Temporality as resolute experiential vectors**

Woven within this experience of strategy being planned was, however, a sense of anticipating how to make the future certain. This sense was triggered by a new awareness of temporality as something that could be brought into active and explicit concern when problems were being addressed, by questioning the past or envisaging how to re-govern the future. Temporality was experienced as an interrupted, communally-shared vector where the past and the future appear different from each other. There is room for disruption and unplanned changes are allowed with new knowledge and awareness that is brought about through dialogue and negotiations. As ICE became more accustomed to the idea of changing to a market-driven culture, it became increasingly obvious that in order to survive in the culture, everyone had to change. Change seemed to be the norm, the grounding condition, so the language of strategy was omitted from that experience, which was the change changing. The demand for compliance was strong and the new values of excellent performance and growth were integrated in all goals and measures. Goal compliance was measured with a strong hand and people were to change by various organizational means. One of the managers said in an interview that if he could, he would change 50% of the personnel, but as he could not, he had to “stick to those that are here”. Hence, woven into the idea of following the planned change, there was also a willingness and compulsion to be prepared to execute quick changes if new information became available. This is an
extract from a business unit management team meeting where managers discuss reducing travelling with greater use of videoconference systems:

**Quote 3:** Temporality as a resolute vector of the history into the present (discussion at top management team meeting)

CEO: The idea was to save time, money and CO2. But can we do something else than put video cameras. Are there alternatives; are there smarter ways of achieving this thing?

NN2: Does it [video conference systems] really cut travelling?

CEO: Now I do not want to go back to the basic question. If someone proves it wrong, then let’s re-evaluate!

NN3: What should we do next?

CEO: We should come up with the best possible solution to achieve the target. But we will not discuss this here. Just make sure that the solution is the best!

NN3: About the energy-saving lamps, they should be installed by July 1. But that will not happen.

NN2: But I checked and almost all offices and power plants are done. I am surprised that all electricity in our buildings is CO2 –free.

NN4: Where is the surprise? We talked about that in our last meeting.

NN2: Ah, yes, but didn’t know.

The strategy of mitigating climate change was crafted via various methods, questioned here by some managers. The discussion represents how strategy is being created by what has happened in the past, but the ‘sustainability’ story hasn’t really reached a state of an agreed future – it is still being contested and renegotiated. NN3 asks: ‘What should we do next?’ thus trying to move into the future in the flux of new practices being enacted. However, the CEO wants to stick with the past decision and refuses to renegotiate the strategy. This, of course, is very typical in a strategy discussion and shows how eagerly strategists want to stay within the historical narrative, even though an awareness of how strategy is influenced by tacit and discursively incomplete phenomena would give a more complete understanding. Although acknowledging the rationality of the strategy to achieve the future desired, the managers fail to accept the real advantage to the company. This conversation raises an awareness of questioning, and even changing the past as well as the decisions for the future. It also brings up the power that the past has in relation to the future. The present was configured by an awareness of what needed changing, for example, the view that the biggest challenge with the company was that it was ‘tired’ and occupied by people with a civil servant mentality. The perceived future was also a reason for a resolute temporality in the strategy work. The following quote is from a business unit management team meeting, where the head of the business unit draws up a new future:

**Quote 4:** Temporality as a resolute vector of the future into the present (discussion at a business unit management team meeting)

NN1: The target is still an increase of 10%? It is impossible.
Head of business unit: But have we really tried enough? I cannot ask you to make something out of nothing, but you need to try harder.

NN2: But 10 per cent is not difficult, we just have to order it.

Head of business unit: But then it leads to short term action that does not provide any gain to the company in the long run. I don’t know what the number should be. I know that we are leaving a territory of feeling safe when we go out. I take responsibility, I trust you as an organization to be capable of doing that. In many cases we are looking at new challenges.

NN1 questions the projected future and the possibilities of realising the strategy as it has been planned, and sees the future in a different way than it was seen before. The head of the business unit changes the prevailing unquestioning of time, changing to a new vector of anticipation – to what we call resolute time. In sensing this, he uses rhetoric and persuasion to move others into a re-ordered temporality, giving reasons to believe in a new and better future. The business unit head tries to take back control from the top management. He tries to find some solution through the vector of unquestioned time, but sees that in order to do that, he needs to put new demands upon his management team –the experiential vector becomes resolute rather than simply unquestioned. Usually, a change to a resolute vector means that the voices of different individual are allowed to be heard. It takes into consideration the suggestion that strategy-as-practice occurs in both micro and macro contexts (Whittington 2003). Actors can bring in their own experiences from other parts of the organization or from outside the organization. This kind of experiential vector is typically needed more in heterogeneous groups, as the actors come from different structures. Culturally adaptive organizations are characterized by a senior management that support strategic initiatives arising at other levels of the firm (Bartlett and Ghoshal 1993). Individuals suspend their opinions and assumptions for the time of the conversation and build on each others’ arguments. This has a tendency to deepen the argument and make the strategy conversation more versatile and also more meaningful for the individuals.

Temporary as fragmented experiential vectors

As well as unquestioned and resolute vectors, there were also examples of what we call fragmented experiential vectors, characterized by an anticipation of the past and the future that was contested and not agreed upon. Temporality was a dissonant communally shattered vector in which no common basis for the past or the future could be found. What is more, strategy fails to aggregate at the current level and leads to struggles and conflict. The experiential vector of what the past, present and future meant (or could mean) different things for different managers and couldn’t be agreed upon. There was no consensus in the direction of anticipation. This is not uncommon in strategy work, as strategy work involves a multitude of voices through which strategies are formed. It gives a chance for strategies to be formed only partly by regulated management/strategy-driven processes in the struggle to keep a sense of safety and certainty in the midst of multiple of ways of understanding where you are, have been and might go. Managers who dictate strategy are not always able to appreciate a multitude of experiential vectors and the significance of multiple voices in strategy work.

This is a quote where the top management team discusses how to keep up in the competition of providing renewable energy.
Quote 5: Temporality as a fragmented vector of the past into the present (discussion at top management team meeting)

CEO: The renewable train is moving much faster than we have thought.
NN1: Yes, it is cooking now, this is important.
CEO: Yes, the others are moving and we are lagging behind.
NN2: No substitutes are long-lasting; a company that is sending out signals of renewable energy is considered a growth company.
...
CEO: We have to make sure that we do not look like we are just jumping on board, but that our efforts are a long-term: our religion
Many: Yes, yes, yes.
CEO: Because there are many others jumping the train right now.
A sense of history has been provided – renewable energy is important and future time is manifested by a willingness to ‘be on the train’, but where to? Action in the present happens in the conversation where the managers try to make sense of historic and future time. They realize that something in historical time has passed them by, and they fear that competitors are already in the ‘future’. The strategy is enacted here and now. There is a disruption between what they thought was the truth, where the past and the future are renegotiated in the present time as it is unfolding, which gives much agency to the individual managers. There is no consensus as to what might be expected from the future, and the past cannot be trusted either. There are different opinions on what can be done or what should be done.

Quote 6: Temporality as a fragmented vector of the future into the present (discussion at top management team meeting)

NN1: For five years we have had the same survey, we need to take the next step. We will measure engagement, not only rational but also emotional commitment. Are the people really ready to walk the extra mile for the company?

NN2: [NN1]: How do you communicate the change to the staff?

NN1: Reporting tools will be better and it is easier to follow action plans and structure the action. We need to market the new approach and we need to measure the direction.

NN3: And we must be careful, as this kind of survey asks things that are much tougher to answer than the other type of survey. They directly affect leadership style.

NN1: Or should we like they do in Jeopardy and give the answer first and then try to find the right questions?

The team has an unspoken mutual understanding that everything cannot be measured and that ‘you get what you measure’. Still, the strategic conformity and unquestioning acceptance was problematized. The last ironic remark by NN1 reveals a fragmented temporality, some kind of tacit consent to the uncertainty of the future and so of future
strategy. The dialogue overall seems to be about them reflecting on power and control vis-à-vis employees. From the start, the conversation is already about power and control – we need to control them (‘make them go the extra mile for us’). This runs against the ‘official’ notion of employee surveys as being positive attempts to ‘listen’ to employees and the strategic intent of making employees more entrepreneurial. The phrase ‘be careful’ implies they do not want to cede too much control to staff, for example, if employees give negative feedback on leadership styles and therefore start to effect change over managers, which again runs contrary to the spirit of the stated strategy itself, as much as it also implies a yearning for a linear and chronological timeframe that remains somewhat elusive, itself fragmented.

**Experiential vectors in strategy work**

In our exposition of the concept of temporality on pages 4-5 we point out that temporality is an embedded characteristic of a situated community. The vectors that we identify in our research are empirical manifestations of how organizations and their managers live with temporality in on-going strategy work. This strategy is an organizational process that aims to order and structure aggregate, typically organizational-level, expectations of the future. Yet, if one accepts the notion of experiential vectors, then at least from the perspective of executing strategy much of both analytical and prescriptive strategy research and advice ought to come across as rather static. No matter if we attempt to utilize an ‘analyze the past in order to conquer the future’- approach as typical in competitive strategy (Porter 1980, 1985), resource-based (Wernerfelt 1984; Barney 1991) or dynamic capabilities research (Winter 2003; Teece 2007) or simply content ourselves with identifying patterns as per traditional strategy process research (Mintzberg and Westley 1992), we end up building reified descriptions and models that prioritize predictability and control. This is in part understandable, because this is what strategy work strives to achieve. It is, however, problematic because it is not the state in which on-going strategy work exists. If we emphasize the predictability of strategy work, what we in essence are doing is to collapse the past and the future into the now as we allow ourselves the idea that we are in control of these two things. But the experiential vectors reverse this point-of-view. Experiential vectors emanate and exist only in the present, and challenge the very idea of controlling time. Organizations live in the midst of often unique unfolding organizational strategy work. Experiential vectors reside both in organizational memories as tangled pictures, tales, habits and traditions and in organizational aspirations as often illogically arranged stories, ambitions and emotive visions.

**Factors that shape temporality in strategy work**

Experiential vectors do not emerge from a void; they are dependent on the specific embedded qualities of the strategy process to which they belong. Returning to the research questions presented on page 5, two factors of this strategy-based effort at organizing are particularly pertinent. The first of these factors is how organizations relate to change: do they expect things to remain the way they have used to be? The second factor is how organizations relate to complexity: what is the quantity and complexity of factors that organizations include in their strategy work? How organizations relate to change and complexity is indicative of the temporal vectors they are likely to have. If organizations are embedded in environments of little complexity and change, then unquestioned temporal vectors are likely to dominate the way organizations handle strategy work. In reverse, if organizations are embedded in environments characterized by high complexity and high change it is likely that shared efforts to organize through strategy are dominated by fragmented experiential vectors.
In between these are resolute experiential vectors, in which the embedded qualities of specific organizational situations lead to a collective awareness of change. In Figure 2 we attempt to depict this relationship between the two factors and experiential vectors in strategy work; although the presentation should not be understood as a mechanistic causal dependency model. Organizations are guided by their relationship with change and complexity when working on their own possibilities as strategies. The possibilities that are made visible through a strategy process are strongly influenced by the participants’ dominant experiential vector.

As strategy unfolds, the experiential vectors associated with strategic ordering and future structuring are not static. In our empirical case, two state-owned utilities companies are merged and exposed to market conditions through a public listing. From the point of view of strategy, this alters the change and complexity factors embedded in the companies’ situations and the experiential vectors start to shift from unquestioned vectors towards resolute and fragmented vectors. There can be different levels of change as strategy work goes on and organizations can have different takes on the complexity through which they handle their situation. Understanding that experiential vectors precede the neatly-ordered world of strategic plans and budgets is important for getting closer to actual managerial strategy work.

**How temporality manifests itself in strategy work**

How organizations relate to change and complexity are factors that guide which experiential vector guides the outcomes of a strategy process. But what is the nature of the strategy process itself? Can we bypass it, and simply assert that strategies are
worked out in organizations in order to ultimately order and sequence the future? We think it is valuable to look beyond the normative, and ask ourselves what lies behind the strategy process. We do so through our other research question on page 5; how does temporality manifest itself in strategy work? The processual qualities of strategy are strong - whether in a traditional strategy process (Van de Ven 1992; Langley 1999) or a change-prioritizing ontological sense (Tsoukas and Chia 2002). Based on our study, we suggest strategy is a contemporary organizational label for a deep-seated process of temporal emergence. As argued by Sorokin and Merton (1937), time is always a social achievement. In order to organize in the first place and to create the very artefacts of organizational strategy: i.e. budgets, schedules and plans, organizations need a method for working with multiple temporalities. This social achievement starts with the individual temporality of organizational members. When individual temporalities are brought together in order to achieve organization, two forms of emergence take place. First there is the emergence of experiential vectors as held by subgroups within organizations. Secondly, as the strategy process unfolds, these coalesce into organizational experiential vectors such as those identified in our empirical analysis. Strategy is a way of processually fostering the emergence of both group and organization level experiential vectors, with the final step of the process being the reduction of the vector into mechanical and measurable components in the form of chronological time.

Deep-seated strategy processes allow for the emergence of experiential vectors based on the change and complexity factors organizations are subject to. Such processes have existed as long as humans have organised; strategy is merely the way by which the process of temporal emergence operates in contemporary organizations. Yet, for the study of temporality in organizations, strategy remains highly significant because it is the main management process through which this deep-seated process of temporal emergence operates. The need to understand temporal emergence becomes accentuated as unquestioned experiential vectors recede in societal importance. Globalization, the explosion of technological development and the way our entire economies are exposed to time through complex financial derivatives means that we are in a constant gamble with the future. Hence, as strategy scholars, we are increasingly unlikely to be able to explain contemporary phenomena by digging in the past. Empirically, the best we can do is to expose ourselves to what is the current state of the future, one that is in all its fluidity decidedly temporal.

The relationship between temporal emergence and strategy research

Being aware of temporal emergence has an important reflexive point for the academic strategy research community as well. Namely, we need to examine and be aware of our own experiential vectors. This is because the experiential vectors we hold are likely to reflect the research tradition within which we work and hence to influence the fieldwork, analysis and contributions that we strive to make. We explicate on this in Figure 3, which is a modification of Figure 2. It shows how researchers’ experiential vectors lead to different dominant paradigms with regard to strategy research. Again, the experiential vectors come from the embedded characteristics of different research traditions in the way the tradition relates to the change and complexity factors.
At the bottom left of Figure 3 we find core assumptions resting on a logic of causality, in which dependent variable based explanations reduce the change and complexity factors into quantifiable attributes capable of explaining the past and at times predicting the future. This assumes that the experiential vector pertaining to the past and the future is highly predictable, and thus not subject to genuine change and not too complex to prevent the isolation of the attributes through which it can be controlled. This kind of logic can be found in several strands of strategy research; such as competitive strategy (Porter 1980, 1985), resource based view (Wernerfeldt 1984, Barney 1991) and transaction cost based views of strategy (Williamson 1991). Typically, such traditions rely on the use of quantitative modelling based on statistics or economics-derived equilibrium models. Change and/or complexity are seen as choices between independent variables: if you change the value of independent variable X, it will result in value Y for the dependent variable. Hence, there is no disruption of experiential vectors, which are perceived as being linear and unquestioned from the past into the future. Also more deterministic process research often falls into this category, where patterns of behaviour are seen as reified and constant in order to depict causality (Van de Ven 1992).

Moving to the middle of Figure 3 where change and complexity increases we find strategy research traditions dealing with profound yet manageable change. Two types of strategy research traditions exemplify this category. Firstly, there are the historical studies of strategy process research that searched for patterns in streams of behaviour. In these studies, longer periods of stability are punctured by change requirements that lead to profound changes in firm behaviour (Mintzberg 1978, Burgelman 1994). Secondly, research on the sensemaking processes involved in strategic change study managerial cognition in relation to substantial organizational change, such as restructuring (Balogun and Johnson 2004, Kaplan 2008). The experiential vectors in
these studies shift from linearity towards a punctuated equilibrium approach where longer periods of fairly static activity is occasionally ruptured, leading to the generation of genuinely new temporal perspectives. Hence, the experiential vectoring of these studies follow resolute experiential vectors typically studying episodes or epochs and the disruptions that cause them (Melin 1992), grappling with the temporal dynamics of strategy-related phenomena (Langley 2007).

Finally, when we move to the upper right part of Figure 3 we have strategy research traditions embracing experiential vectors, which overwhelm organizational capacity to grapple with change and complexity factors. Hence, strategy research moves towards post strategy process (Chia and MacKay 2007) and ontologically change- prioritizing (Tsoukas and Chia 2002) traditions. Empirically, such research is typified by studies of power, subjectivity and the disciplining effects of strategy discourse (Knights and Morgan 1991; Laine and Vaara 2007; Mantere and Vaara 2008). In these studies the ideal of the organization as a unified entity sailing either through the tranquil seas of unquestioned experiential vectors or the rougher seas of resolute experiential vectors unravel into fragmented experiential vectors (Vaara, Pälli and Sorsa 2010). Organizations are not seen as harmonious entities in which groups and individuals share a common experiential vector; rather the dominant experiential vector is a fragmented, collectively held dissonance. The assumption is that the world is changing and that our understandings of it are subject to constant discursive challenges where stability, at best, is the result of power and domination.

Conclusions

In this paper we study strategy and management team work through the lens of temporality. Temporality, understood as the raw and unprocessed experience of being located in a stream of events is the core state of strategy work as managers seek to arrange and order the past and the present into a linear and coherent time. Accomplishing strategy is often a matter of accomplishing such an arrangement; and is evidenced through strategy artefacts such as plans, budgets and product charts which essentially communicate what ought to happen when.

Temporality, however, is more elusive than time. In this study, based on an empirical analysis of observing management teams in a Northern European utilities company we identify three broad groupings of temporality. We call these projections unquestioned, resolute and fragmented experiential vectors. They are vectors because they vector time in some fashion; bringing the past to the present, or the future to the present. Such vectors are always to an extent embedded in specific organizations, and exist on individual, group and organizational levels. For this study it is the organizational level that is important since what the vectors bear and expose to strategy work is determining for the possibilities that management will see as unfolding through strategy work.

The experiential vectors bring us to a deeper question relating to the nature of strategy itself. What is strategy if we focus on time and duration? We argue that strategy is the contemporary label for the deep-seated process of temporal emergence. The experiential vectors we have in strategy work are dependent on two key factors of the process of temporal emergence; change and complexity. In order to organize and collaborate, we need to have access to processes that allow us to organize future work. Yet, temporality is not merely a quality we can attach to managerial strategy work. Even we as strategy scholars are subject to it, and the relation our research tradition has to
change and complexity has a direct bearing on the type of explanations strategy research is likely to offer.

The deep process of temporal emergence manifests itself across settings; in this case both organizational strategy making and academic strategy research. In both cases it calls for practitioner reflexivity, both in doing strategy and in researching strategy. If we fail to question ourselves about the experiential vectors we hold, we are likely to fast-track ourselves to conclusions that might come across as more nuanced if we opened ourselves up to other experiential vectors. This is not merely a critique of the perhaps dominant mode of sticking to unquestioned experiential vectors. We certainly believe that much of the quantitative, mainstream study of strategy would become more nuanced and capable of resonating with the corporate field of strategy if it questioned its temporal assumptions. The same holds true for those of us who inhabit the other end of the spectrum as well. Temporality is one of the more fluid and elusive qualities of organizational life, but seeing the potential interexchangeability of stability and change on the one hand, and complexity and simplicity on the other will make our findings stronger. This is so, not as an universal generalizable theory, but as mid-range theorizing relating to practical problems in need to exploration and explanation. Although the current study takes a step towards understanding temporality as an important quality of strategy work, there are several pertinent challenges still to overcome. Studies of strategic change have taken the first important steps towards understanding time as a more complex phenomenon than merely chronological, and taking a temporal view on strategy will hopefully serve as encouragement for continuing these endeavours. Ours is a case study, exploratory in nature, and should be complemented and followed by other analysis. For instance, it would be interesting to study more longitudinal data and conduct cross-case studies to develop deeper insights in the nature of strategy and temporality. Understanding this will make us better at studying the managerial work and strategic micro practices/processes through which strategy work is conducted.
References


MIKKO VESA

THERE BE DRAGONS! AN ETHNOGRAPHIC INQUIRY INTO THE STRATEGIC PRACTICES AND PROCESS OF WORLD OF WARCRAFT GAMING GROUPS

To search for dragons is not an act of foolishness. Rather, it bespeaks a curious mind open for the discovery of new canvases of organizing and human action. Beyond our boardrooms and office spaces, bureaus and plenary rooms new organizational forms are springing into life. Fuelled by the explosive growth of human capacity in digital technologies, these new organizational forms inhabit virtual worlds created through computer code. In this thesis I open the door on my 39-month ethnographic journey through one such virtual world. Azeroth is the setting for the massive-multiplayer-online (mmo) game World of Warcraft. It is a world abuzz with activity, organizing, strategizing... and dragons. It is also the location of my field work, and a site that management and organization scholars hitherto have been largely unaware of. Hence, this thesis reports on findings in two distinct senses. Firstly, through the ethnographic sense of the joy at discovery of something new and secondly through the interpretive efforts I undertake in the thesis to contribute to management and organization theory through the insights hidden in my empirical material.

Underneath every ethnographic endeavour there is a journey of discovery. It is not always visible behind the sophisticated argumentation that exemplifies academic discourse. For conducting journeys of discovery I introduce in this thesis two distinct insights. I introduce the sub-genre of virtual ethnography and report what it means in practice to conduct such research in Azeroth. Secondly, I elaborate on the typically overlooked question of how to adapt ethnographic practice in order to contribute to a specific field of research. I do so by examining how ethnographic practice can answer questions posed by the field of strategic management studies. Success in such efforts entails a distinct take on the researcher’s field role and the type of indigenous knowledge pursued.

Theoretically, this thesis analyses the strategic practices and processes involved in managing a virtual organization. Drawing on the strategy as practice tradition I identify the core practices required to organize and maintain an organization in virtual space. I use these insights as building blocks to explain how through the utilization of an extreme case, such as organizing in World of Warcraft, we can better identify the internal causes of organizational failure and the importance of fellowship-based core groups in organizing. To follow the constantly unfolding canvas of organizing is one of the primary challenges of management and organization studies in order to retain topicality, and virtual worlds is one of unfolding canvases.