WORLD of WARCRAFT

LEET NOOBS:

Expert World of Warcraft players relearning and adapting expertise in new contexts

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Design Questions

There are many ways to play the massively multiplayer online game (MMOG) *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*), but generally it can be seen as a game in two phases:
1. exploring the game world and "leveling-up"—advancing the abilities of one's character or avatar, and
2. joining a raid group of up to 40 players to kill all the monsters in "high-end" or "end-game" dungeons for the treasures they guard.

Given how varied the fights are in *WoW*, all expert players are "adaptive" (Hatano & Inagaki, 1986) to some degree, but, for raiding, some players are able to adapt faster than others.

How is the definition of expertise different between these two phases, and how do players gain access and then engage in the new practice of raiding?

Phase 1: Individual expertise: Exploiting game mechanics
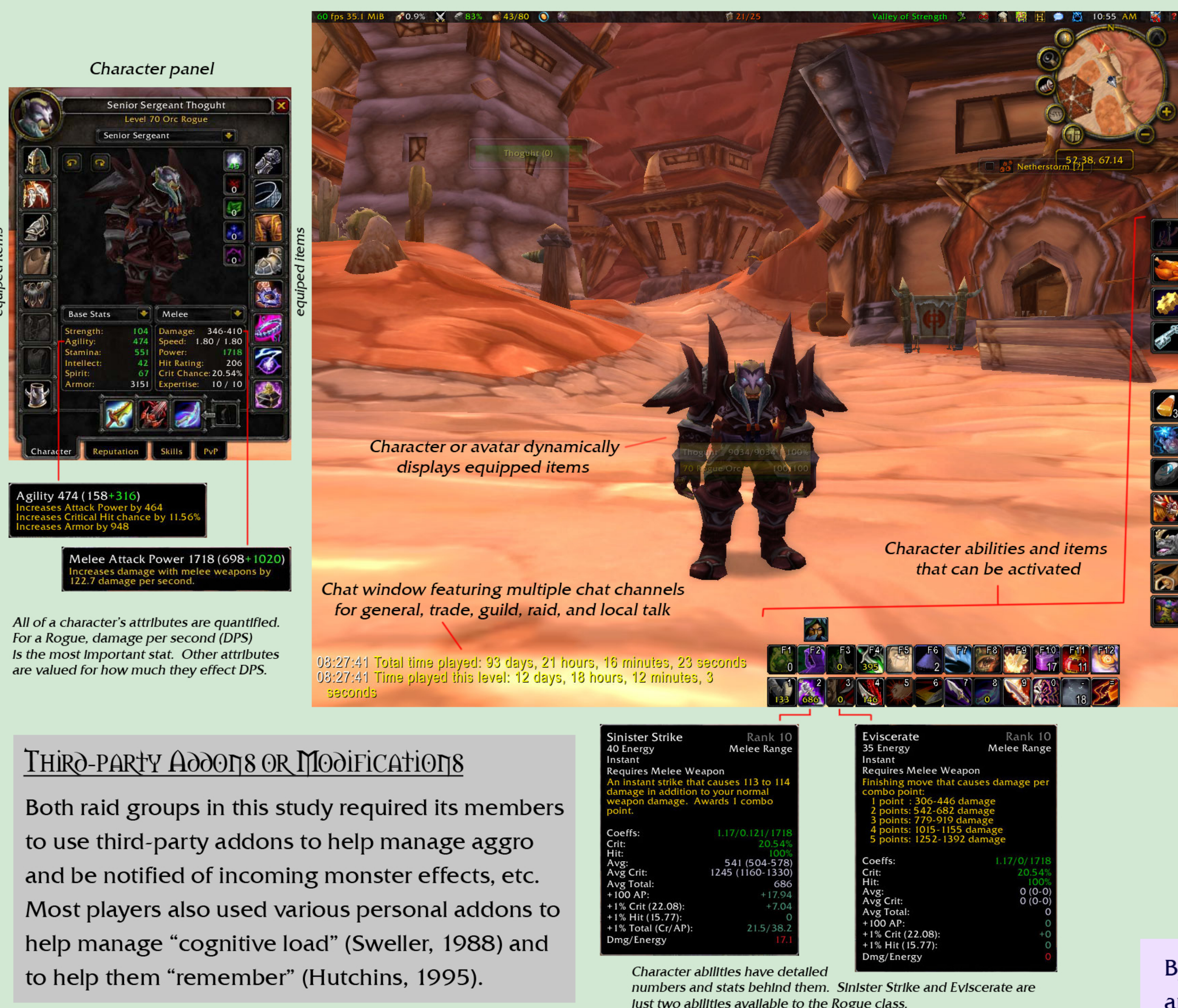
Expertise while leveling-up is defined by a player's ability to kill monsters efficiently. This necessitates knowledge of the multitude actions available to a particular character type or class and the underlying math behind those actions. In other words, to be considered an expert, a player must be able to recognize, understand, and exploit the "game mechanics."

Character panel

Character or avatar dynamically displays equipped items

Chat window featuring multiple chat channels for general, trade, guild, raid, and local talk

Character abilities and items that can be activated

All of a character's attributes are quantified. For a Rogue, damage per second (DPS) is the most important stat. Other attributes are valued for how much they effect DPS.

Bag space

The default UI for WoW shows detailed tooltip information about items. Third-party addons such as Auctioneer allow players to view in-game economic stats related to their items. Others such as EquipCompare let players quickly compare newly acquired items to currently equipped items.

Phase 1 fighting: position not important, maximum dps

Third-party Addons or Modifications

Both raid groups in this study required its members to use third-party addons to help manage aggro and be notified of incoming monster effects, etc. Most players also used various personal addons to help manage "cognitive load" (Sweller, 1988) and to help them "remember" (Hutchins, 1995).

Character abilities have detailed numbers and stats behind them. Sinister Strike and Eviscerate are just two abilities available to the Rogue class.

Phase 2: Group expertise: Distributed knowledge, coordinated efforts, and aggro management

Phase 2 fighting: position important, dps v. aggro management and coordination become priority

Unit frames to keep track of all members in a raid, showing current health, energy or spell points, and effects.

Minimap

Various minimap buttons to configure third-party addons

A list of the main tanks and their current targets. Clicking on one selects that tank's target, which makes it easy to focus-fire.

Poor aggro management

By contrast, the second phase of *WoW* presents players with dungeon-specific settings in which to play and learn. This new raiding activity, focusing on highly technical "boss" encounters, can only be successful if players adapt and relearn the way they play the game.

Detail of map showing raid start positions for fight with Ragnaros, the final boss in Molten Core.

Map of Molten Core, a high-end dungeon

Each dot represents a monster to fight. The raid made weekly attempts to clear the dungeon in a very specific order. Only after months of trying, did the raid finally succeed in a total clear.

The old method of doing as much damage to monsters as possible no longer works because raid monsters hit back much harder than previous types of monsters. Only certain character classes (known as "tanks") can take the hits and survive, so their role is to maintain the monsters' aggravation ("aggro"). Meanwhile healer classes need to continually replenish the tanks' health while other classes deal as much damage as possible to the monsters without drawing aggro. **The ability to manage aggro becomes the new definition of individual expertise.**

Like the naval vessel and its crew that Hutchins writes about (1995), the raid as a whole succeeds when simultaneous specialized actions are performed by players who may only be knowledgeable of their individual roles. Thus to succeed, **raid members have to trust each other** and be confident in each others' expertise and their ability to stay coordinated throughout a fight.

> *"Ultimately each of us can only control our own character; so the most important job we each have to do is make sure we are doing our part both effectively and efficiently... [S]moothly executing a kill on a boss that used to kick our tail is very gratifying, I think. ;)"*

To do this simultaneous role-taking, each role type uses a specialized chat channel. **General raid talk may be going on even while discrete specialized talk is used to focus on role-specific strategies.** The talk includes questions and answers, conjectures on different strategies, etc. Most of this talk is done during planning before an encounter followed by assessment and reflection time after the encounter. For example, when one of the raid groups in the study was first learning how to defeat Ragnaros, the boss detailed in the screenshots on this poster, pre-planning took as much as an hour. This does not include the time it took for raid members to read online strategy guides and discuss strategies in online forums. By contrast, the fight itself was under 10 minutes long.
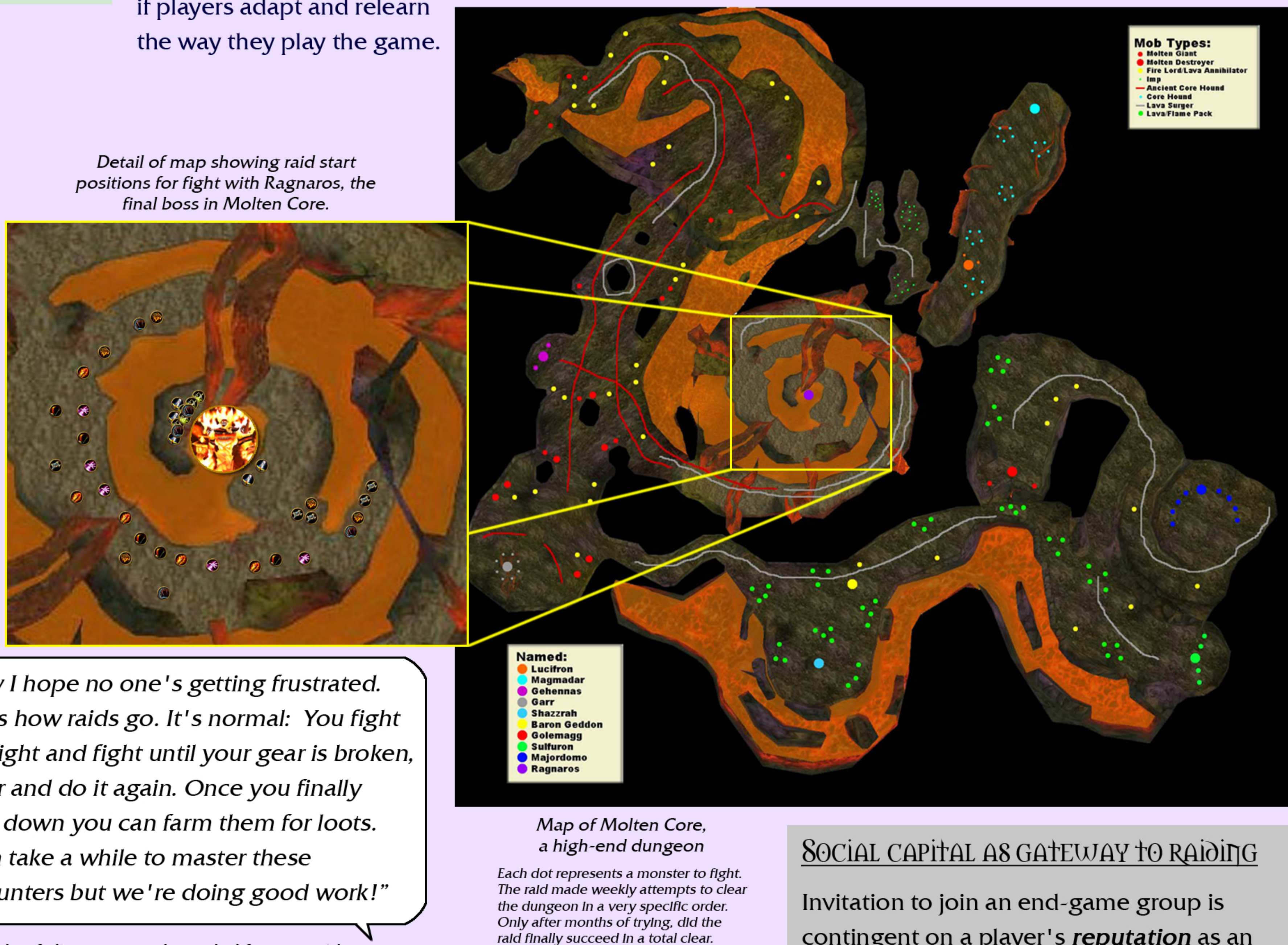
> *"Now I hope no one's getting frustrated. This is how raids go. It's normal: You fight and fight and fight until your gear is broken, repair and do it again. Once you finally get it down you can farm them for loots. It can take a while to master these encounters but we're doing good work!"*

Example of alignment work needed for new raid norms

The actual skills and abilities an individual player uses are reassessed for how well they complement other players' resources. **Thus, once-expert players become novices or "noobs" to relearn expert or "leet" gameplay,** yet they are not true novices because they already have a good understanding of the game mechanics. Rather, **they are *leet noobs*** who must realign and adapt their expertise for new social structures and norms that emerge above the underlying game through joint venture.

Social capital as gateway to raiding

Invitation to join an end-game group is contingent on a player's *reputation* as an expert of *WoW*'s underlying mechanics and rules. It is also necessary, however, to have proven oneself as someone who is sociable and trustworthy enough to work on a team. Not all players have enough of this social capital to gain access to regular raiding groups.

> *"So, realize that World of Warcraft is NOT a single-player game. The things that make someone a good player in a single-player game do not hold the same value here... The first thought most players have is that to be a good player and work well with a party is to know your class... choose a good talent build and know which abilities to use... that makes you a good player. I'd argue that it is only a part of what makes you a good player... because a MMOG is a social game. You have to deal with other people who may or may not be as adept as you. They have different personalities, goals, motivations... Sometimes they are having a really great day, sometimes a really bad day... In an RP server, there is an implicit understanding that even more emphasis will be placed on the social nature of our game."*

Victory! Ragnaros down!

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