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The Rhetoric of Sophistication

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An Order for Multiple Personalities: Identity-Play in the *World of Warcraft*

"On January 29, 1998, Karyn and a friend were out test-driving a Porsche 911. Sometime around 6 P.M., they crossed over the center lane of a stretch of highway outside Trondheim and collided head-on with a Volkswagen. Karyn and her friend were killed instantly, as was the driver of the other vehicle" (Spaight, 190). The article posted on Karyn's homepage detailing her death struck one virtual community hard. She was a well-known player on LegendMUD, a variation of the type of MUD games, or "Multi-User Dungeons" that are the precursor to modern day Massively Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Games, or MMORPGs. MUDs and MMORPGs allow hundreds or even thousands of gamers to play simultaneously in a singly virtual world. Loved for her inspiring leadership of the influential guild "The Norse Traders" and her pleasant company, game researcher Tracy Spaight notes, in response to her death "the outpouring of grief was immediate and heartfelt" across the MUD community (190). One player lamented:

> We play 'games' like this one here on the Internet, often without realizing how our actions affect *real* people, perhaps thousands of miles away, on the other side of a telnet session. We form friendships that outgrow the boundaries of any simple 'game'; sometimes we even fall in love. How can this be, that we experience such profound emotion from a game, with people that we have never even met face to face? It is my hope that those that read of your story will reflect upon the relationships that *they* have built, playing these 'games,' and try to realize the importance of building lasting, caring friendships wherever possible, because life is fleeting. (Spaight 191)

Players even petitioned LegendMUD's creators to build an in-game memorial to Karyn. They can now visit a room known as the "Garden of Remembrance," which contains a tree with a plaque that reads, "In Memory of Karyn whose kindness and companionship will always be missed" (Spaight 190).

Despite all this genuine loss at the death of Karyn and somewhat ironically in light of the above player's eulogy, according to Spaight's research, Karyn as the players of LegendMUD knew her *never even existed*. The newspaper article detailing her death and all the stories she told about herself in game and on her homepage were fake. Says Spaight, "The conclusion seems inescapable: 'Karyn' fabricated her death just as she'd fabricated her life" (195). I will not concern myself with the ethical implications of this story; she was under no obligation to let people know her real identity. But how could this "Karyn" so easily fool her fellow gamers into believing her stories? Because: identity is never guaranteed in online worlds. As Brunel University Professor Tanya Krzywinska expounds, "the experience of being immersed in a virtual world hinges on a blurring between the boundaries between player and character: 'the player is the character. You are not role-playing a being, you *are* that being; you're not assuming an identity, you are that identity…' " (113).

The successors to MUDs, MMORPGs like Blizzard Entertainment's *World of Warcraft*, by far the most successful game in the genre, have exploded in popularity and in the amount of time they consume in people's lives. By the time I signed off of *World of Warcraft* for the final time in 2008, I had logged over two months of consecutive game play over about three years. I had spent around fourteen-hundred hours sitting in front of a computer screen, living in a virtual world. Nor was I alone. Gamers spend an average of 22.7 hours per week playing *World of Warcraft*, the equivalent of a half-time job (Daedalus Project). Since the game's release in 2004,

players have collectively accumulated over 5.93 million years of game-time (McGonigal 6:05). In this paper I investigate why *World of Warcraft* enthralls gamers so. I argue that players are driven by escapism, seeking to immerse themselves in new characters in-game. MMORPGS have embraced and now thrive off the very same looseness of identity that Karyn took advantage of to dupe LegendMUD, allowing players to craft and inhabit entirely new identities.

Virtual Reality 101

Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs) counted over 16 million active accounts in 2008. Of those accounts, 97.9% lived on MMORPG servers, with *World of Warcraft* alone holding about 10 million (Woodcock). Regardless, the MMORPG experience remains far from universal. With the hope of opening up a new world and rendering the rest of my paper comprehendible, in this section I elaborate on life in the *World of Warcraft*.

In Blizzard's now classic game, players interact with a 3-D virtual world known as "Azeroth" through a humanoid character called an "avatar." Azeroth's expansive territories include four continents and a vast array of landscapes ranging from frozen wastelands to luscious rainforests. Two playable factions, the Horde and the Alliance, war constantly with each other for land, strategic resources, and influence as a result of historic grievances. At the same time, however, several threats loom over both factions, and in key locations they have banded together, most notably against an army of undead controlled by the Lich King and a vast array of demonic forces known as the Burning Legion. The Lich King maintains an icy grasp over the northern continent of Northrend while the Burning Legion controls much of a realm known as the Outland, and the Alliance and Horde struggle with fighting three wars at once.

Into this conflict sundered world, after installing the game and paying the 15 dollar a month subscription fee, players can create their first avatar. *World of Warcraft* presents them

with eight faction-aligned humanoid races, including typical fantasy fare like Dwarves, Orcs, Humans, and Trolls, along with a short history of each. While race has little functional impact on the game, players then customize their appearance and select a "class" which dictates the abilities and equipment that he or she can access in-game. For my first character, I created a female Human "mage," enticed by the idea of dominating my enemies with powerful magic. Upon character creation, a short video introduces the beginner territory and current state of affairs. For Crezdezia, my mage, a deep voice narrated:

> The noble Humans of Stormwind are a proud tenacious race…. Nestled in the foothills of Elwynn Forest, Stormwind city is one of the last bastions of Human power in the world. Backed by their stalwart allies, the armies of Stormwind have been called away to fight the savage Horde on distant battlefields. With the armies gone, the defense of Stormwind now falls to its proud citizens. *You* must defend the kingdom against the foul mongrels that encroach upon it, and hunt down the subversive traitors who seek to destroy it from within. Now is the time for heroes. Now, Humanity's greatest chapter can be told. (*Warcraft*)

At last, players are free to take control and pursue glory.

The most basic measure of a player's accomplishments in-game is character "level." Starting at level one, by killing enemies, completing quests, and exploring the world one gains level-increasing "experience" and can eventually reach level 85. Higher levels provide access to more powerful skills and abilities, better gear, more exclusive locations, and interesting challenges. Combat is the heart of gameplay in *World of Warcraft*, with players striving to become the best at killing other beings. Not only is it the ultimate measure of skill, but killing creatures yields experience and items that players can take, a practice known as getting "loot" or

"looting." The most valued items are gear that players can equip, augmenting both abilities and appearance.

Most combat takes place in the open world. Players encounter "mobs," or NPC enemies, which they can usually "solo," or kill alone. "Dungeons" are areas that contain much more difficult enemies that require players to coordinate strategy and team up in groups ranging in size from five to 40. While demanding much more time and skill, dungeons also provide sought after loot and an exciting team experience. Player-versus-player combat, or PvP, occurs when players of the opposing faction fight each other. Players gain "honor" for PvP, providing access to otherwise inaccessible equipment, and the most skilled PvPers are regarded with admiration.

Quests, mentioned above, are tasks given out by friendly "non-player characters" (NPCs) that reward players in the form of money, experience, and gear. Quests often ask players to kill or loot a certain number of enemies, gather resources, or find something, framed in relation to the story of the game. Frequently they also engage players in activities besides combat like "professions." These skills like mining, blacksmithing, and herbalism enable gamers to build as well as destroy, and the more experience a player has in a profession, the more sought after they become for the products they can produce.

Finally, with its "Massively Multiplayer" tag, socialization obviously plays a significant role in *World of Warcraft*. Given that players all inhabit the same virtual world, they can assist each other in every aspect of the game, questing, fighting, and chatting together. Players that enjoy each other's company can add each other to a "friends" list, enabling them to find each other whenever the other is in-game. Large groups of people join together under the banner of a "guild," providing a supportive community within the larger game and a regular group to attempt dungeons and PvP with.

This completeness of experience, the potential to create a whole new personal narrative in *World of Warcraft* is what inspired my thesis.

Identity-Play

Before delving into the nuances of identity-play in video games, identity requires a definition. At its most basic level, Nathan Placencia explains, "Identification… is a psychological relationship… [in] which [people] incorporate aspects of their internal and external world into their 'self'" (644). In other words, people define themselves based on both internal and external factors they consider relevant to their self-image. For the sake of simplicity, I distill all these influences into three primary aspects: physical appearance and name, history, and social relativity. For example, imagine George. Physically, he is a slim, pale-skinned, and freckled 16 year-old boy. Per his history, he has lived in both the South-Eastern and North-Western United States, moving as his mother got a new job. History also includes group-history, or heritage and culture, and in this he is American with distant Irish roots. Socially, his family belongs to the poverty-stricken working class, and among his peers he rates neither popular nor unpopular, merely occupying one of the invisible in-betweens of the public school social hierarchy. Fleshed out with more detail, these factors define George's identity. Online "Role-Playing" video games are so attractive because they provide an ideal vehicle for assuming a complete and new identity, allowing players to redefine all three identity components.

The avatar in *World of Warcraft* functions primarily to detach the gamer from his or her real physical body, allowing for a recreation of the first aspect of identity, physical appearance and name. The first task a player undertakes in playing the game is to create a name and design a character. "Naming is a central phenomenon in individual identification," elaborates cyberpsychologist Matthieu Guitton, and restrictions on character naming compel players to take

on a new name to imbue avatars with an identity separate from their own ("Cross-modal compensation"). Blizzard prohibits more than one character of the same name on each server, meaning that most common names are taken and players will likely find their name unavailable. While this obviously serves the utilitarian purpose of making character recognition in an environment of limited character models and the programmatic implementation of the game simpler, Blizzard also interestingly prohibits obvious non-names like the "superGamer2259" ids that are ubiquitous throughout the internet. This forces players to choose a name not their own, yet one that is still believable – one that can become the character into which they immerse themselves.

Furthermore, despite the definition of an "avatar" as "a graphical representation of a person," the game actively discourages players from designing a character that resembles them (*Oxford*). Whereas games like Will Wright's *The Sims* offer gamers a dazzling array of avatar customization choices, allowing them to control everything from eyelash length to overbite, *World of Warcraft* artificially limits player control over avatar appearance to a much narrower range. Players are confined to a small number of predefined faces to choose from and then only allowed to change superficial features like hairstyle and skin color. This artificial curtailing of avatar design means that even if a player chose a human avatar it would be virtually impossible to make it resemble him or herself. Removed from the choice to mimic their own appearance, gamers play miniature gnomes and emaciated undead with fantastical names, redefining the first component of identity, appearance and name. From a small pale youth, George goes to Rokzor, a tall and majestic blue-skinned Draenei, powerfully built with beautifully curved horns sprouting from his forehead.

As the avatar provides the body for a player's new persona, Blizzard hinges player enjoyment and understanding of the game on immersion in a new history, redefining the second core component of identity. In her paper on identity construction, Karen A. Cerulo describes how in studies of identity "participants' perceptions of history, social structures, and cultural arrangements constrain or enhance the interpretive processes" (394). Group history and personal experience define an individual's values, directing how he or she interprets and reacts to the world. An avatar's race interacts with the game's elaborate backstory to give characters a personally applicable heritage. From this comes the sort of "clear-cut enemy," and inversely "clear-cut" ally, "associated with values that are linked to [the] definitive historical moments [and] cultural practices" described by psychologist Leonie Huddy and that character heritage delivers (150). When creating their avatar, Blizzard provides players with a description of the races culled from the game's backstory and reiterated during the opening cut-scene. About the "immortal night elves": the player learns that "the catastrophic invasion of the Burning Legion [a powerful demonic force] shattered" their ancient, ten thousand year old nature worshipping druidic civilization and forced them "to sacrifice their cherished immortality." In a misguided attempt to reclaim that immortality, their leader, arch-druid Fandral Staghelm, ignored the will of nature, inviting the taint of the Burning Legion onto the Night Elves' beloved homeland. In light of this tragic history, the player is implored, "As one of the few night elves still left in the world, it is your sworn duty to defend Darnassus and the wild children of nature against the Legion's encroaching corruption" ("Night Elf"). More than just an interesting read, these racial introductions induct players into the culture of their race and clearly define friend from foe. Immersed in a new history, an "inspiring story of why we're there, and what we're doing", players venture forth confident in the righteousness of their cause (McGonigal 5:25). They

appreciate why the Undead, abominations against nature, ally with those champions of the environment, the Tauren, and why the Blood Elves fight their brethren the Night Elves.

Moving beyond just character creation, the group-history integral to a player's avatar's identity is also reinforced throughout gameplay itself. Going back to appearance, limited character choice results in a racial homogeneity that emphasizes race-membership and thus racial, or group, history. Blizzard takes advantage of the widely held "common sense assumption" that "individuals' physical traits determine racial group membership" (Brunsma et al., 226). All Orcs have green skin, thick and well-muscled bodies, huge fists, and a hulking presence. There are no pale skinned Humanesque Orcs, short Orcs that could be mistaken for Goblins, or slender beings that might resemble somewhat shaggy Night Elves. As sociologists David L. Brunsma and Kerry Ann Rockquemore elaborate, "The most salient symbol representing group membership is bodily appearance… Appearances… provide some cognitive context for… individuals involved," and "In this sense, appearances can become a reality [of identity] in and of themselves" (226). Given that "race is largely cosmetic," having no deeper implications of player skill or power, appearance in and of itself drives the "reality" of the race's history (Nardi 16). George as Rokzor embraces his Draenei past, fully appreciating the heavy responsibility his status as one of the few remaining refugees of a dwindling race places on him and his commitment to battling evil and the Horde.

Says Huddy, "identity is fluid, contingent, and *socially constructed* [my emphasis]" (127). Social construction – i.e. what defines social relativity or one's position within a social hierarchy – results from the confluence of socioeconomic background, merit, and the other two components of identity: heritage, and appearance. Rounding out its creation of a new identity, *World of Warcraft* removes players from the social construct that controls the social relativity of

their real-world personas. Which is not to say that the game lacks social relativity all together; rather, the game replaces it all with a system of social hierarchy only relevant in-game.

Regarding socioeconomic background, the creation of an economy completely separate from real-world monetary systems removes players from the influence of external wealth. As opposed to games like *Conquer Online* that allow play for free but charge real money for items that increase in-game wealth, Blizzard charges a subscription fee but refrains from selling anything else. Virtual gold that players can only acquire through in-game methods drives the economy. Wealth and the benefits it brings result from skill and dedication to play, not how much extra cash someone has to shell out on a game.

In terms of personal merit in determining social relativity, the different reality of *World of Warcraft* brings with it different standards for skill. Learned knowledge, athleticism, and accomplishment are rendered irrelevant by a world with an entirely different flora and fauna, magic, and the computer as its interface. Game objects have to act accordingly with their programming – which is done at a level comprehendible to the least common denominator to access the widest audience – meaning that specialized knowledge means nothing. Spells and point-and-click bandages allow George to heal others just as effectively as a world-renown trauma surgeon. The use of the keyboard means that George's avatar tires at the same rate as that of a marathon runner – that is, never. A wide variety of skills, magic, and weaponry, and a combat system reliant on a keyboard and mouse and all unique to *World of Warcraft* give George the chance to defeat enemies with more aplomb than a U.S. marine. As with wealth, skill and the esteem it brings come from dedication to the game, mastery of a sort that cannot be attained from the real world.

Finally, while heritage and appearance play heavily into one's social relativity in the real world, they have little bearing on *World of Warcraft*'s social hierarchy. In normal society, heritage issues like religion play a huge role. For gamers, however, Blizzard's balancing act in making sure every race has an equal chance at succeeding, ensuring fairness in play, and its design of the storyline so that everyone feels justified in their actions remove an avatar's race-based history and culture from social dynamics. Appearance too has little of the influence in game that "sex appeal" does in real life. Again, racial homogeneity comes into play, resulting in a fairly constant base level of attractiveness. Concurrently, gender, like race, is purely cosmetic, with the game providing little room for sexual exploration, the closest thing to romance being "flirt" emotes in which an avatar makes a flirtatious comment. As game ethnographer Bonnie Nardi notes, the dominant landscape of *World of Warcraft* is one of flattened sexuality, with players "focusing on performance [and] kicking back to enjoy rough talk, without the need for the sometimes vexing activities of heterosexuality" (160).

In playing *World of Warcraft*, George inhabits a character with an identity unrecognizable from his own. While outside the game he is hardly remarkable, upon log in, the small, pale, and freckled boy becomes Rokzor, the heroic, barrel-chested Draenei warrior. Motivated by a fearsome hatred for the Burning Legion that destroyed his home and race, he draws upon his unmatched skills with the blade to slay the demons – and vanquish the Horde fiends that threaten his newfound allies in the Alliance. Real-life poverty and youth mean nothing as George, regardless of his blue skin, the odd tentacles that protrude from his chin in the place of a beard, and his cloven hooves, commands respect as the leader of a powerful guild and proven slayer of Horde.

Gamers in Real Life

In engaging in identity-play in MMORPGs like *World of Warcraft*, do players end up changing or removing themselves from their own identity? This question is gaining increasing relevance in today's digital era. A 2008 Pew survey declared that an astounding 97% of children from 12 to 17 play video games, meaning an entire generation is now growing up engaged with interactive electronic entertainment (Irvine). As increasing numbers of these young gamers discover MMORPGs, society has taken notice.

In a recent article on MSNBC entitled "Virginity's making a comeback, report says," the author Diane Mapes notes how the percentage of men and women aged 17-24 who have not had sexual intercourse rose 5% between 2002 and 2008 to 27%. While Mapes delves little into the reasons why, user "justdontgetit-2670205" was less reticent, proclaiming, "She may not be able to speculate, but I sure can… when it comes to males… I'd bet a majority… are too busy sitting in front of the computer or x-box… My brothers fall into this age group and their friends are some of the laziest, most anti-social people I've ever met… all they care about is WoW [*World of Warcraft*] and first person shooter games" (Mapes). Indeed, such withering sentiments are hardly rare. In a more startling accusation, a 2007 article again from MSNBC describes how, "On those rare occasions when a student opens fire on a school campus," Florida attorney Jack Thompson "is frequently the first and the loudest to declare [video] games responsible." Says Thompson, "The problem is we are programming these people as a society… common sense tells you that if these kids are playing video games, where they're on a mass killing spree in a video game, it's glamorized on the big screen, it's become part of the fiber of our society" ("Were Video Games to Blame…?"). Less sensationalist media and more substance is a 2007 article in the Cornell issue of *The Triple Helix* which argues that MMORPGs' ability to satisfy

"The basic humanistic needs of love, belonging and achievement" presents "a serious risk to those who choose to abandon real life altogether in favor of the game" (Garg). In each case, video games and specifically MMORPGs are presented as withdrawing youth from reality to engage their digital identities. Thompson even goes so far as to claim that susceptible individuals bring those identities back out into the real world.

Having played MMORPGs extensively myself, I propose that not only are these accusations overly apocalyptic, but virtual worlds have the potential to be hugely beneficial. Identity-play liberates players from the mundane and too familiar real world and immersion in another persona simultaneously enables self-exploration. As Nardi delights, the "focused experience [of *World of Warcraft*] moves "the player away from the ordinary into the alternative reality of a fantasy space… Play permits us to abandon acquiescence to a consistency demanded in everyday life. In play we move to a space in which we can be more than one thing, however opposed those things might be in the logics of ordinary existence" (13, 173). Of course, no one can deny that, as celebrated economist Edward Castranova puts it, "we're witnessing what amounts to no less than a mass exodus to virtual worlds and online game environments" (McGonigal 11:30). But, too often people ask what is wrong with virtual worlds that so many people find them so enticing, even addicting. Instead, we ought to ask: what can we learn from virtual worlds to make reality more compelling? In *World of Warcraft* we find an equality of opportunity and community unrivaled by any on Earth. Furthermore, gamers regularly spend hours and perform marvels of teamwork to solve difficult challenges, valuable traits in any real-life situation. Perhaps, rather than trying to bring gamers back to the real world, we should try to bring life to the game. Per McGonigal, the time has come to "start making the real world more like a game" (12:11).

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