At the Convergence of the Elite and the Everyday: The Democratic Potential of Virtual Worlds

Kimberly J. Lau

(University of California, Santa Cruz)

In this paper, drawn from my larger research project on World of Warcraft, I explore the complex interrelationships and alternative spaces for democracy that emerge when the virtual worlds developed by elite media and entertainment corporations are populated by millions of everyday individuals. Investigating the convergence of elite media and entertainment forms with the everyday vernacular practices that sustain such forms, I read the ideological and symbolic environment of Azeroth-the virtual world at the center of World of Warcraft—together with the game's structural and technological features to suggest that such virtual worlds might open up possibilities for different models of sociality, communication, and democratic engagements, making possible what Derrida calls "another space for democracy."[1]

---

[1] Derrida, *Spectres of Marx* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 169. Derrida asks us to "think the virtualization of space and time, the possibility of virtual

Because virtual worlds are truly instantiated by players—by the everyday practices that transform computer code into living spaces—it is easy to forget that these worlds are nonetheless produced, maintained, and owned by corporations.[2] They are, in essence, both mass-media products and vernacular practices occurring at the same time, in the same space. In Azeroth, discourse (like everything else) operates in seemingly paradoxical ways and illustrates one of the primary ways in which the virtual world is always also the actual world, even at the level of mass-mediated product. As Alexander R. Galloway points out in his study of World of Warcraft and utopian desire, "the game performs a *semiotic segregation* whereby textual and iconographic signifiers are divorced from the diegetic world of the game…[and] the vast majority of signification exists in the heads-up display, the two dimensional gamic overlay."[3] Azeroth as the diegetic world produced by Blizzard Entertainment (the company that owns World of Warcraft) might be relatively free from signification and

events whose movement and speed prohibit us more than ever… from opposing presence to its representation, 'real time' to 'deferred time,' effectivity to its simulacrum" (ibid.). For Derrida, an emphasis on such virtualization as an alternative *tekne* that decouples religion and technology "obliges us to think… another space for democracy" (ibid.). I cite Derrida here because of his concise articulation of the ways in which virtual worlds, through their alternative workings of time and space, might open up spaces for thinking democracy differently. See Tom Boellstorff's *Coming of Age in Second Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008) for an extensive discussion of *techne* as the definitive feature of our current interaction with virtual worlds.

[2] Jay Mechling's extensive discussion of Fiske's theory of semiotic democracy has been foundational for my own thinking on the subject. See his article "On Sharing Folklore and American Identity in a Multicultural Society," *Western Folklore* 52 (1993): 271-289.

[3] Andrew R. Galloway, "*Warcraft* and Utopia," *CTheory*, February 16, 2006, http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=507.

therefore seem an unlikely site for studying local responses to mass-mediated products, but as Galloway makes clear the interfaces that actually enable game play, also produced by Blizzard, are highly textual, graphic, and ultimately mass-mediated significations.

Perhaps even more important, it is the discursive practices of the players and avatars who inhabit Azeroth that literally bring it to life as a thriving, complex social world. As a result, the virtual world becomes an extended "moment of semiosis" and an example of "semiotic democracy," to use John Fiske's descriptions of the ways that meaning is negotiated between mediated communication and audience.[4] That is, ongoing participation in Azeroth is also an ongoing negotiation for the very constitution and meaning of this specific virtual world. Within this context, Galloway's insightful observation and articulation of the semiotic segregation at the center of World of Warcraft is useful for framing some of the modes of democratic exchange within the virtual world. Implicit in Galloway's semiotic segregation (important for his own argument about the desire for virtual worlds to be utopian spaces) is, of course, the deep interconnection between the segregated semiotics. Thus, although distinct, they are also wholly dependent upon each other. In practice, then, the player and avatar discourses that enact the virtual world take place in and across both of these semiotic realms. For instance, avatars have a "say" command that allows them to "speak" to others within visual proximity by using a command that places their words in a speech bubble above their heads. However, because many people

---

[4] Jay Mechling's extensive discussion of Fiske's theory of semiotic democracy has been foundational for my own thinking on the subject. See his article "On Sharing Folklore and American Identity in a Multicultural Society," *Western Folklore* 52 (1993): 271-289.

turn off the speech bubble option in their interfaces, an avatar's speech will also appear in the lower-left hand "log" that runs in real-time throughout the game. To speak in this way is a public act: all players in major cities will see the avatar's words in the log even if out of visual range of the avatar if the avatar is located in any one of the cities; otherwise, all players within a relatively close proximity (a named region, for instance) will see the avatar's words. There are also more and less public ways of speaking such as yelling (the text in both the speech bubble and the log appear in red), speaking only to a pre-established group (communications are visible only to those within the group with the text in blue), and whispering (essentially private instant message chat between two players with text appearing in purple in the log). Avatars can also literally speak through built-in speech functions that allow them to share scripted, pre-recorded greetings, humorous social interactions, jokes, and flirtations; unlike other avatar "talk," these are part of the auditory channel and can literally be heard by others to whom the speech is directed.

In addition to these general modes of communication, Blizzard has also created four specific communications channels-General, Trade, Local Defense, and Guild Recruitment-for players and avatars to discuss issues on these specific topics. However, in practice, almost all discourse occurs in the Trade Channel which is intended for facilitating the exchange of goods and services among players (this shouldn't be too surprising given the simultaneity of play and work in these games, together with the fact that several researchers contend that it is through economic exchange-both virtual and actual-that these worlds really come into being). This essentially creates an ongoing discursive stream accessible to people in any of Azeroth's

major cities and ultimately gives these cities their sense of sociality. In the truest sense of Fiske's "moments of semiosis," players take over the Trade Channel for their own cultural exchanges, including joke chains, word play, limericks used to "sell" services and goods, and everyday conversations. The vernacular practice of appropriating the Trade Channel for all communications exemplifies the process of semiotic negotiation as individuals shape the game's technological interface according to their own demands and desires. In addition, because of its wider distribution among players, talk in the Trade Channel is much more public than talk that relies on the "say" command, but both appear-often interspersed-in a player's log. Each player's log is unique, combining the ongoing stream of discourse generated by other avatars and players with some built-in game description and some description of the player's own actions; as a combination of mass-mediated discourses and player/avatar discourses, each player's log is also a representation of semiotic democracy in action.

 This ongoing discursive stream contributes to the sense of public dialogue within the major cities, especially when it turns to explicit political and social commentary and debate. I first became aware of people discussing and debating political issues when I "overheard" a lengthy explanation of the differences between communism and socialism, the size of the United States' debt to China, and the politics of the International Monetary Fund, all prompted by someone's characterization of Hillary Clinton as a "commie." Though this particular conversation began with what might have been an attempt to stir controversy during the period leading up to the selection of the Democratic presidential nominee, it quickly turned to

an intelligent synopsis of the differences between communism and socialism; as more people began to participate in the discussion, some people countered the neutral and/or positive descriptions of communist theory and socialist political economies with claims to U.S. (and, implicitly, capitalist) superiority. This, in turn, led to the aforementioned overview of the International Monetary Fund and the size of the U.S. debt to China. This was one of the most extensive and well-informed political discussions I ever heard in Azeroth, lasting approximately 30 minutes (interspersed with more mundane Trade Channel talk), and led me to begin transcribing future discussions, particularly those with explicitly political themes.

While most of the debates I transcribed were much shorter (generally between 10-20 exchanges) and not always as theoretically sophisticated as the one described above, they were (and are) common, almost daily, occurrences. The following example is typical and was inspired when a player asked how to locate an orphan, a non-player character necessary for the completion of a specific quest:

> [Catcaller] shoot someone's parents
> [Lyam] It's more fun to get rid of them, just find a nice hungry demon
> [Mallakith] or iraq··· which is not funny··· so get out of there!
>   (ellipses in original)
> [Tarandia] lol
> [Interorgator] what are you talking about Iraq is a friendly country as long as you have a 50 cal or 240B
> [Drollcset] I love iraq
> [Mallakith] 80 thousand is not collateral it's genocide
> [Drollcset] go hug a tree
> [Drollcset] have you seen what these people have done
> [Interorgator] I would love to glass iraq so I can go home and not

> have to come back
> [Voldiond] should have been done decades ago
> [Mallakith] you really are braindead
> [Interorgator] you may think we are braindead but your opinion
> would be much like ours if you had rockets and
> roadside bombs go off and hit around you and kill
> your friends
> [Brandus] support the soldiers or your gonna get punched in the
> face by Chuck Norris. Thank You.

This example is characteristic of public political discussion in several ways. First, the tone is characteristically both serious and playful at the same time, allowing the debate about the U.S. war in/on Iraq to involve multiple positions. Second, even though name-calling (e.g., "braindead," "tree-hugger") is a prominent feature of this (and similar) debates, it does not seem to be enough to shut down the discussion; rather, the name-calling is simply absorbed into larger rhetorical moves. Lastly, it is also quite common for someone to attempt to quiet conflict within a conversation by using humor, though such efforts are just as frequently ignored. More specific to this example, the question of whether Interorgator is actually fighting in Iraq-as s/he seems to suggest-or has experienced the traumas s/he describes is irrelevant to the public discussion; rather, what is important is Interorgator's discursive position and her/his attempts to give meaning to the political space of Azeroth by assuming this particular rhetorical stance. The issue of veracity is secondary to the act of public engagement, and in this sense, political discussion in virtual worlds is no different from political discussion in actual worlds where one's presentation of self is always already a performance of a subject position.

Because these political debates occur through the Trade Channel, the log figures centrally in creating an alternate space for semiotic democracy. As mentioned above, the log is simultaneously a technical interface and a part of the diegetic world; paradoxically, it brings the world to life and gives it a feeling of real sociability even as it is separated from avatar bodies. The log ensures that discourse occurs through a *virtual* disembodiment. That is, while the conversations made possible through the log truly impart the sense of a busy, living, social world, a sense enhanced by the many avatars literally moving in and through it, discourse in the log is divorced from avatar bodies even as one is aware of their presence in this shared public space. This virtual disembodiment is key to understanding virtual worlds as an alternative space for democracy, but only insofar as it is also accompanied by the process of first relocating oneself in an avatar.

The intensely personal and co-constituted sense of self that emerges with avatar embodiment in these contexts motivates and inspires player-avatars to imagine themselves as social and political actors in these worlds; however, the real potential for an alternative public sphere, for spontaneous, sometimes extended political conversation among strangers, also depends on the virtual disembodiment that introduces another level of anonymity. Not surprisingly, a number of psychological studies have determined that anonymity, especially visual anonymity, leads to both pro- and anti-social behavior in computer mediated contexts while also leading people to disclose more personal information in such environments.[5] In one sense, avatars

---

[5] Adam N. Joinson summarizes many of these studies in his article, "Self-Disclosure in Computer-Mediated Communication: The Role of Self-

are a type of anonymity. In World of Warcraft, avatars must be created from a stock set of features; consequently, they are not capable-on their own-of revealing the player's actual world identity. This alone might seem like the anonymity necessary to facilitate different types of participation in social discourse, including making incendiary comments ("flaming"), extending oneself beyond one's actual world comfort zone, and participating in political debate based on one's deeply held beliefs. However, this understanding of the avatar as a form of anonymity contradicts the understanding of the avatar as a co-constituted self and underscores the importance of virtual disembodiment to anonymity in virtual worlds.[6]

A player's deep and enduring embodied and psychological relationship with his or her avatar changes the nature of anonymity in computer mediated contexts like virtual worlds. For Edward Castronova, even this anonymity is unlikely to persist given the fact that "[h]uman societies rely so much on reputation for their basic functioning."[7] While Castronova anticipates virtual worlds becoming less and less anonymous vis-à-vis actual worlds as people endeavor to mark their virtual accomplishments in ways that accord with their actual lives, I want to suggest that this concern for one's reputation also applies to an avatar's status in the virtual world as they exist in our

---

Awareness and Visual Anonymity," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 31 (2001): 177-192. See also Nick Yee and Jeremy Bailenson, "The Proteus Effect: The Effect of Transformed Self-Representation on Behavior," *Human Communication Research* 33 (2007): 271-290.

[6] I explore the process and significance of such co-constitution in my larger project on World of Warcraft; for a more detailed discussion, see my article, "The Political Lives of Avatars: Play and Democracy in Virtual Worlds," *Western Folklore* 69 (2010): 99-124.

[7] Edward Castronova, *Synthetic Worlds: The Business and Culture of Online Worlds* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 23.

contemporary moment. As I have been suggesting, avatars are not means of projecting anonymous selves in a virtual world; rather, they are counterparts of actual selves with reputations to cultivate and protect. The fact that anonymity facilitates self-disclosure and other forms of intensified communication does not mean that such engagement does not happen in virtual worlds because of avatar embodiment and identification, however. It simply means that the *avatar* requires anonymity for such communication to flourish, and this is what *virtual* disembodiment accomplishes through the technological interface of the log as the literal site of discourse.

Massively multiplayer online role-playing games call into question the myriad frames through which we make sense of "the real." A virtual world like Azeroth suspends "reality" through fantastic narratives, graphic delusions, player anonymity, and idealized avatar representations *while simultaneously* insisting on the ways in which such worlds are also always "the real" by virtue of their interpenetrating economies, their ambiguous renderings of play and labor, and the avatar embodiments and psychological identifications at their center. Within the virtual worlds instantiated through paradoxical framings and alternative configurations of time and space, through the imperfect overlap of virtual and actual, play and work, avatar and player, discourse is necessarily always both play and not-play, and this seemingly impossible state of the world(s) is what might actually generate another space for democracy and expand the possibilities for social and political engagement by freeing it from its overdetermined contexts. While such an interpretation of virtual worlds might seem to be yet another example of the utopian fantasy of democratic discourse beyond the strictures of hegemonic identity

categories like race and gender, I believe that the disorientations and re-identifications necessary to inhabit these worlds recalibrate the idea of play and identity. The politically oriented debates I have experienced in Azeroth are not so much playing with identity as they are reframing and playing with the very nature of political discourse. It is this distinction that attests to the possibility of a truly democratic semiotics and the potential for an alternative space for democracy, a space in which we might struggle to define the "thin conception of the good" even as we usher it into being.

WORKS CITED

Boellstorff, Tom. *Coming of Age in Second Life*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008

Castronova, Edward. *Synthetic Worlds: The Business and Culture of Online Worlds*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.

Derrida, Jacques. *Spectres of Marx*. New York: Routledge, 1994.

Galloway, Andrew R. "*Warcraft* and Utopia." *CTheory* (Feburary 16, 2006). http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=507.

Joinson, Adam N. "Self-Disclosure in Computer-Mediated Communication: The Role of Self-Awareness and Visual Anonymity." *European Journal of Social Psychology* 31 (2001): 177-192.

Lau, Kimberly J. "The Political Lives of Avatars: Play and Democracy in Virtual Worlds." *Western Folklore* 69 (2010): 99-124.

Mechling, Jay. "On Sharing Folklore and American Identity in a Multicultural Society." *Western Folklore* 52 (1993): 271-289.

Yee, Nick and Jeremy Bailenson. "The Proteus Effect: The Effect of Transformed Self-Representation on Behavior." *Human Communication Research* 33 (2007): 271-290.

Abstract

At the Convergence of the Elite and the Everyday: The Democratic Potential of Virtual Worlds

Kimberly J. Lau

(University of California, Santa Cruz)

This paper explores the complex interrelationships and alternative spaces for democracy that emerge when the virtual worlds developed by elite media and entertainment corporations are populated by millions of everyday individuals. In particular, I focus on World of Warcraft (WoW), one of the most popular massively multiplayer online role-playing games ever created, to investigate the convergence of elite media and entertainment forms with the everyday vernacular practices that sustain such forms. Reading the ideological and symbolic environment of Azeroth (WoW's virtual world) and the game's structural and technological features while also attending to the multiple ways in which virtual worlds complicate more traditional understandings of the "elite" and the "public sphere," I suggest that such virtual worlds open up possibilities for different models of sociality, communication, and democratic engagement, making possible what Derrida calls "another space for democracy."