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Description

Review of *Digital Culture, Play, and Identity: A World of Warcraft Reader* / edited by Hilde G. Corneliussen & Jill Walker Rettberg. MIT Press, 2008.

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Digital Culture, Play, and Identity: A World of Warcraft Reader

Posted on **February 1, 2009** by **Editor**



Review by IProfess, Level 70 Druid, Azeroth.

Editor's note: The author of this review purports to be an avatar from the on-line game World of Warcraft. He, she, or it has agreed to accept emails forwarded from me at barlowj@pacificu.edu or, of course, with our commenting function, readers can now leave comments following the review. Please note, that as in every case in interface, the author's opinion are his, hers, or its own and do not represent those of Interface nor those of the Berglund Center at Pacific University Oregon.

As my personal circumstances are somewhat unusual, I feel it necessary to once again introduce myself. I am what many might think of as an "avatar,"—a digital identity in an online role-playing game, the *World of Warcraft (WoW)*, where I am currently a level 70 Elven Druid. We prefer to think of ourselves as "'Toons," short, of course, for the dreadful Disney equivalent, cartoon.

Unlike many of my kind—we are everywhere—I now think it safe to present myself in TRW (The Real World, laugh out loud) as, in fact, I am. As TRW has grown increasingly "unreal" and the virtual worlds increasingly "real," the distinction has become a blurred one. I have written before for *Interface* [1] and only the dominant unreasoning prejudice against 'Toons prevents me from being named a Contributing Editor, and, I might add, finally being paid. [2]

It is, of course, a great honor for a 'Toon to be reviewing any work published in TRW let alone one published by the M.I.T. Press. Julian calendar year in and year out, this press in TRW consistently takes games and game playing most seriously. [3] And this work, as per M.I.T.'s tradition, is a most valuable one, though not without flaws.

There are currently more than ten million gamers real worldwide who live partially in TRW and partially in the massively multiplayer online role-playing game WoW. There are also many millions

more ‘Toons like me, who, while preferring the relatively orderly *World of Warcraft*, where at least you know who your enemies are and there is a direct relationship between work and return, occasionally cross over into TRW for amusement, if nothing else. [4] I had hoped from the subtitle of this work, as I am sure those millions will as well, that it might be a useful accompaniment to the “game.”

The book does have tremendous merit. Its editors, Hilde G. Corneliussen and Jill Walker Rettberg, are Associate Professors of Humanistic Informatics at the University of Bergen, Norway. As I am myself essentially a bundle of Humanistic Informatics, this seemed to me a most promising intellectual venue from which to review our joint interest, the intersection between *The World of Warcraft* and TRW.

However, the book has two different origins (or in *WoW* we might say Quest Lines) from which it developed. One was a guild (a league of self-selected players), “The Truants,” in *WoW*. This group of researchers came together in 2006 to share experiences and to conduct research. All the contributors are guildies in The Truants.

Their personal involvement in the game led most of the contributors to take advantage of the many tools that an online role-playing game can offer participant-observers. These include distributing questionnaires and engaging in interviews with other players. This led them to a surprisingly deep understanding of the game. It is also probable, however, that many of the authors, like myself, are ‘Toons crossing over in what, I fear, is a vain attempt to enlighten TRW.

The editors and contributors aim their thirteen chapters squarely, as is so often the case in academic grinding, at themselves: “academic scholars and students of game studies and other disciplines dealing with digital culture.” [5] The book is divided into four sections, “Culture,” “World,” “Play,” and “Identity.” Each has two to four chapters of sometimes-uneven contributions. I restrict myself henceforth to praising rather than blaming as each section includes meritorious chapters, well worth any ‘Toon’s time.

For me, as the ultimate insider, the test of a work such as this is whether or not it teaches me something about my environment and myself. Many chapters did so. My personal favorite was Jessica Langer’s piece, “The Familiar and the Foreign: Playing (Post)Colonialism in *Worlds of Warcraft*.” In this piece, Langer takes on the game designers for some of the odd parallels they draw between TRW and specific races and game areas in *Warcraft*. She is, I think, quite correct that for the designers to model upon the familiar in TRW necessarily simultaneously incorporates the tendency of TRW to introduce by way of contrast, “The Other.”

While I am personally sympathetic with Langer’s argument that Blood Elves (members of the sinister Horde faction, as opposed to the forces of light, the Alliance, to which Night Elves like myself belong) are “analogues to drug addicts...” [6] I do believe that only those most familiar with the history, lore and legends of Azeroth could possibly see any truth in this position. Like all academics, Langer is capable of so much abstraction—I will not use the word *reification*, [7]

though it is a favored and trenchant academic criticism—that she produces truths so distant from reality as to sometimes court, at the least, an ironic response if not, ahem, outright parody.

The relationship between cyber death and real death grows ever closer in the real world. We now have virtual sites memorializing the passing of mortals, and demonstrations in TRW asking for protection of species endangered in Azeroth. [8] This melding of the “real” and “virtual” worlds itself illuminates a critical divide between essentialists and phenomenologists in Azeroth (see note [4] below). I therefore found Lisabeth Klastrup’s contribution “What makes *World of Warcraft* a World? A Note on Death and Dying” thought provoking.

Lisabeth models a useful participant observer approach, deeply imbedded in the game itself and in the subjective experiences of the many players with whom she had discussions. Simultaneously, these are informed by a wide variety of academic theories and practices. Any of us, whether gamer, ‘Toon, or skeptical academic, can learn much about death and dying, in TRW or virtual worlds, from her article. Woot, Lisabeth!

If the first strand from which the book develops—membership in The Truants—the requirement that contributors actually play the game has had positive results, it also has a dark side. The title of the guild itself betrays some participants’ unease at playing a game when they should have been “working” in TRW.

For this group, there was necessarily a second quest strand—simply playing the game would not have lured them to write. This second strand was a workshop held in Bergen in 2006. [9] This gave the contributors a face-to-face connection in TRW, and let them play at academic games in a convivial space, wearing nametags with their academic titles, attending no-host bars, presenting papers to which only they themselves listen and potentially no one reads, exchanging scholarly pedigrees, etc. Unfortunately, the conference also required that each participant have at least one avatar who could pass in Meatspace, as we sometimes refer to TRW.

This latter strand has led to some unevenness in the work. It suggests, not a finely tuned guild raid, but rather a PUG (pick-up group—a collection of unaffiliated volunteers, including some Noobs [new players] and Losers [same usage as in TRW]). Some contributors are dedicated to a closer understanding of the game, others merely to getting published. Their approach is often dry and rather lifeless, sometimes failing to convey the essence of the gameworld, its ludic qualities. This, however, is an inevitable consequence of the grinding practices that those living largely in academic Meatspace must rely upon to increase their rep (reputation) with peer groups.

We promised above that we would not dwell upon the negative here, but a brief discussion to demonstrate the dilemma in which the academic rep grinders are caught might be useful. The lead-off chapter, by Scott Rettberg, “Corporate Ideology in *World of Warcraft*,” begins with a typical non-gamer’s question: Why do you spend so much time playing this game when you might rather, (as Scott suggests by way of reasonable alternative), have read James Joyce for the fourth time? [10]

Rettberg then goes on to point out how players will spend hours securing game items that, to him, have no “real” value. His acerbic statement is: “While no one I know would be motivated to work for more than a day or two by the prospect of purchasing a new pair of trousers, *World of Warcraft* players will happily put in dozens of hours of labor in order to acquire a particular pair of magic pants.” [11] Scott would do well to raise his understanding of the varied definitions of “value” in the Dismal Science of Economics, and he might also think deeply upon the meaning of the word “happily” as quoted above. [12] Basically, Scott, like some other contributors, though he is far the most obvious in this, thinks of online gaming as the pastime of nitwits and incompetents who would be better off grinding out an academic career; that is, being paid for studying the behavior of nitwits and incompetents.

His central position is:

I will argue here that though the world Blizzard has created offers an engaging gameplay experience and is not without some visual beauty, wit, and narrative subtlety, the principle reason why Blizzard has been able to build such a large and devoted audience for their flagship offering is because it offers a convincing and detailed simulacrum of the process of becoming successful in capitalist societies. [13]

This remarkable conclusion requires some explanation and it, too, has to do with one of the recent favored tropes of academia: “Border Crossing.” This is the semantic cover whereby academics transgress the traditional boundaries of their fields in order to say something sensible about an area such as gaming that is new, at least to them. The remarkable success of gaming as an industry and as a pastime has made it possible for ‘Toons to cross over and pose as academics. Sadly, however, some academics are simply unable to surrender their real world status and take the plunge by crossing into the virtual world.

This is true, I understand from academic friends at *Interface*, because writing about games—Border Crossing—is a hazardous business in the Meatspace of academia. To *enjoy* your subject might be taken as an indication of loss of perspective, for which the best anodyne is a slashingly critical and intellectually superior stance. Any academic committee trying to assess the merits of a contribution to this work would, after reading Scott Rettberg’s piece, be reassured that the work takes popular culture purely as subject, not as an attractive object. And in addition, it bashes capitalism! That committee might then grant the academic equivalent of gaming experience points, eventually redeemable for a pair of magical academic pants, or in TRW speak, a tenure tracked job.

Many other examples like that quoted above can be found in the work, which may well set upon edge the teeth of gamers and ‘Toons alike. Fortunately, the contributions of the work are far more representative of those of Langer and Klastrop than of Scott Rettberg. This work should be included in the library of any reflective gamer, ‘Toon, or academic interested in this area. It is also very often amusing to read, though perhaps it has been more so to write about it.

Endnotes

[1] See my piece “The Tales of Azeroth” (<http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/2005/03/iprofess.php>) and “Toons and Terrorism” (<http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/2008/04/iprofess.php>) See too my books reviews, the first of R. V. Kelly 2’s *Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games*, (<http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/2008/01/kelly2.php>) and Edward Castronova’s work, *Synthetic Worlds, The Business and Culture of Online Games* (<http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/2006/01/castronova.php>).

[2] *Editor’s note, preceded by a long-suffering sigh: As the author refuses to present verifiable identification which would permit us to properly account for any payments, he, she, or it cannot legally be paid.*

[3] In the pages of the esteemed e-journal Interface in which I now write, for example, a number of their works have been reviewed. Perhaps the work most similar to the one under review is: Raessens, Joost and Goldstein (eds.) *Handbook of Computer Game Studies*. Cambridge. MIT Press, 2005., found at <http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/2006/05/raessens.php>.

[4] I ignore here the raging debate in Azeroth on Essentialism v. Phenomenalism, led respectively by the Night Elves (including myself) and the Blood Elves. Like all essentialists, I hold that we exist independently of the game, as demonstrated by my existence in TRW. The Blood Elf philosopher Lethel, (she must be engaged in deep thinking a great deal as she is very low ranking indeed!) however, insists that we exist only when we are, as she puts it, “being played.” When asked how, then, *I write*, she dismisses this as just another tiresome variant on TRW Cartesian fallacy! If I catch her in a PVP mode, I will quickly unbundle her...but this debate is perhaps a topic for a special issue of *Interface*. (*Editor’s note: Unlikely, but interested readers might submit proposals!*)

[5] P. 3. I do hope that none of my readers see any conflict in the manner in which I cast Spells of Aspersion at academic grinding while incorporating notes here.

[6] P. 89.

[7] Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reify>

[8] The New Revelation—known in TRW as the expansion pack, “The Wrath of the Lich King”—even has an amusing quest series tied to the concerns of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, <http://www.peta.org/> One hopes that mammoth and rhinoceros ‘Toons are not permitted to cross over at random, though I think the American Congress might actually benefit from a few such incidents.

[9] P. vii.

[10] P. 20.

[11] P. 27.

[12] Joyce is, of course, himself a 'Toon, one of the founders of essentialism in Azernoth. I discussed this issue as best I could with him in his current chosen virtual form, an ancient Forest Walker, creaking around Darnassus. His Darnassusian accent, and what I must admit is, I think, habitual drunkenness, makes him somewhat hard to comprehend, but I understood him to advise Scott to "get a virtual life."

[13] P. 20.

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3 THOUGHTS ON "DIGITAL CULTURE, PLAY, AND IDENTITY: A WORLD OF WARCRAFT READER"

naija social network

on **January 30, 2014 at 11:36 AM** said:

While you happen to be driving a personalized jet, it's quite essential wear shoes which might be comfortable and just removable. It's likely you'll want to consider them off once under-going security checks. Sandals or flip-flops are footwear which is well suited for traveling.

plotka

on **February 1, 2014 at 1:49 AM** said:

It is my belief that mesothelioma is most lethal cancer. It is got unusual features. The much more I take into account it the greater I am assured it does not conduct itself being a real solid tissues cancer. Within the event mesothelioma is often a rogue virus-like infection, then there's the prospects for developing a vaccine plus offering vaccination for asbestos uncovered individuals who are vulnerable to high risk connected with developing lengthy word asbestos associated malignancies. Thanks for discussing your ideas about this crucial ailment.

bulgariaproperty.webs.com

on **February 3, 2014 at 7:37 AM** said:

I have learn some just right stuff here. Certainly value bookmarking for revisiting.
I surprise how a lot attempt you put to make this type of magnificent informative website.