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

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

Editor: Hilde G Corneliussen, Jill Walker Rettberg

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Both the digital and real societies produced by Blizzard's Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game (MMORPG), *World of Warcraft*, have received a lot of attention in the relatively new field of game studies. Due to its phenomenal size and cultural significance, the interest *World of Warcraft* draws is justifiable. The book, *Digital Culture, Play, and Identity: A World of Warcraft Reader* attempts to dissect the gaming industry's largest MMORPG through a compilation of work consisting of thirteen separate analyses, representing a wide variety of scholars trained with different analytical toolsets. This format was deliberately chosen by the editors, Hilde G. Corneliussen and Jill Walker Rettberg, because it is common among important works in related fields such as literature and media studies. Furthermore, *World of Warcraft* necessitates "multiple approaches to the game" due to its complex multiplicity (3). These different approaches are categorized into a logical organization and often complement each other, and the result is four delineated sections (three of which makeup the title): Culture, World, Play, and Identity.

Culture contains four chapters and addresses different reflections from the real world that appear in the virtual world of Azeroth (the planet where the majority of the game is placed). Scott Rettberg starts the book off with a convincing argument labeling *World of Warcraft* as capitalist training that rewards a dedicated protestant work ethic. In fact, Rettberg offers his thesis as a reason for the game's success: "the principle reason why Blizzard has been able to build such a large and devoted audience for their flagship product is in fact because it offers a convincing and detailed simulacrum of the process of becoming successful in capitalist societies" (20). Esther MacCallum-Stewart changes the topic, analyzing parallels between real world warfare of the 20th century and the image of war and conflict in *World of Warcraft*. Chapter two specifically uses World War I as a historical model for the attritional battles that take place in the game, "with no side ever winning in the long term" (40). The author believes that by "setting up these factors in an ongoing and historicized conflict, *World of Warcraft* paradoxically challenged its own right to be a world at war" (40). Co-editor Hilde G. Corneliussen authors the third chapter, with an insightful discussion on feminism in *World of Warcraft*. The author utilizes the collective works of the French Revolution historian, Joan Wallach Scott, to frame her argument around three different feminist perspectives: difference, similarity, and the Parité movement's version. The final chapter in Culture is Jessica Langer's observations of race in Blizzard's flagship game. Her argument primarily centers around the "otherness of the Horde" in a post-colonial context and referencing some of the ideas in Edward Said's *Orientalism*; however, Langer also addresses the problematic disparity between race in the game (stemming from

biology) and race in the real world (which is socially determined) as well as the complexity of race in *World of Warcraft* -- both as a sophisticated model interacting with stereotypes and preconceptions and as a reinforcement of the perceived otherness of darker skinned races.

The second section, *World*, discusses how *World of Warcraft* sets up a cohesive gameworld from four perspectives: geography, mythology, death, and narrative each in their respective chapters (11). Espen Aarseth offers an interesting parallel for the "world" in *World of Warcraft*, comparing it to an amusement park in appearance and function, rather than an actual digital "world." The author's main point is that players are unable to leave a lasting mark in their respective "realm" (Blizzard's name for individual computer servers), making it a "hollow, multicolored shell with a hard, static surface and no inner substance to speak of" (112). Tanya Krzywinska's chapter addresses the "game's remediation of mythic forms and devices" (125). She astutely picks apart some of the myths and histories found within the gameworld's lore and dissects their role in the gaming experience. Chapter seven, by Lisbeth Klastrup, covers a popular topic in gaming, the representation and experience of death in *World of Warcraft*. Klastrup separates her argument from previous works by specifically looking at the subjective experience of death and dying by a video game player through their in game avatar, while also analyzing the problem from a game design perspective. Klastrup utilizes personal observations she made during "field work" and player stories that she collected through her website, death-stories.org, in order to provide data for her argument. In co-editor's Jill Walker Rettberg's chapter, quests are the lens in which she chooses to access "some of the basic patterns of the game itself" (168). She concludes that "deferral" and "repetition" are key components to the construction of a game that allows for such a variety of players.

Play is the section that best explores the human element of *World of Warcraft*, specifically studying the ways players alter their gaming experience from the linear and static game world described in the previous section. In chapter nine, T.L. Taylor focuses on third party programs or "mods" that have become ubiquitous in *World of Warcraft*. While Blizzard endorses the use of programs that do not give an unfair advantage, the author argues that the line between right and wrong has been blurred and meaningful side effects have developed. Chapter ten, by Torill Elvira Mortensen, explores the interesting concept of "deviant strategies" such as socializing, being a guild leader, roleplaying, and policing gold farmers. Mortensen frames her examples of "deviant behavior" by first explaining the rules of playing games like *World of Warcraft*. She builds off of previous work to define this key to her argument, "When we apply Baudrillard's understanding of the distinction between Rule and Law to the understanding of MMORPG's, Lessig's *Code* would be Rule" (13). Therefore, Mortensen points out that for *World of Warcraft*, the rules that are being deviated from are the codes created by Blizzard's programmers. Chapter eleven is yet another insider study, this time the authors, Esther

MacCallum-Stewart and Justin Parsler, both avid roleplayers, explore the problems a player faces when they opt to roleplay in *World of Warcraft*. While Blizzard defines specific roleplaying servers, the authors point out a list of reasons how the game is not conducive to this sort of behavior, "player agency is limited within the game, interface causes a separation between player and gameworld, other players do not respond to role play in consistent ways, and there are invariable differences of culture, linguistics, and age" (226).

The final and shortest section, Identity, consists of two perceptive chapters. Ragnihild Tronstad, in chapter twelve, disagrees with previous work on character identity that argues a "player's experience of being their character relies on the character's capacities in the game rather than on its appearance" (13). Instead, she believes that the two are related and both contribute to the player's identification. The final chapter of the book, ethnologist Charlotte Hagström presents her research on the naming of characters in *World of Warcraft*. She performed a survey in the game and collected data from friends and colleagues and compares her findings with naming practices in a global perspective of the real world.

This work is unique and valuable in its approach, and not just because of its compilation makeup described above. It is an inside-out study; the authors all play the game themselves, therefore their observations are, at least partially, first hand references. This approach and the format of the book make it difficult to critically review, since the book covers thirteen different topics and are taken from first hand experiences. However, while the first hand references are useful, they are also limiting. Many of the articles rely on personal observations or specific data sets; while the authors normally acknowledge this weakness, it does not mean it is not problematic. There are several instances throughout the book where additional sources would add to their respective arguments. Some of the chapters could have utilized sources from Blizzard directly other than their official website, such as interviews, press releases, developer diaries, chat logs, and developer forum posts. For example, on page 50, MacCullum-Stewart comments on the historical connotation of Zeppelins and reflects on their presence in *World of Warcraft*: "these cultural assumptions provide a strong undertone to the Horde's use of zeppelins. Their appearance brings with it suggestions of aggressive colonization, technology outstripping need, and a potentially fascist militarism insinuating itself into normal life" (50). She goes on to point out that the Zeppelins (and the crash sites) give the appearance of a hasty war preparation, but are softened in order to "avoid the fascist undertones of the use of zeppelins" (50). While the description of the zeppelins and their relative history are interesting and astute, there is a deeper level of analysis available -- what prompted the developers at Blizzard to included this historical reference? Was it a conscious or unconscious decision? Either answer would be of interest to this argument. It is of course possible that these sources were explored; however, no evidence of such investigation is represented.

As a whole the compilation could be enhanced through a timely comparison of other MMORPG's and by diversifying the authorship both in the real and digital worlds. The authors often make interesting observations about *World of Warcraft*, but a true understanding of the topic cannot be made without parallel knowledge. For example, on page 234, the authors write, "Blizzard, who we have already shown to have a rather hand's-off approach to roleplay -- probably because of the extreme difficulties of making such diverse acting out of characters into a series of formal rules" (234). The question that arises from this comment is how could they be more hands-on? One example that could have been offered is Sony Online Entertainment's *Star Wars Galaxies*, where players are given the option of building their own cities with player owned buildings, therefore making a true imprint on the landscape. Overall, what is the norm in the MMORPG genre in regards to supporting roleplayers, and do roleplayers expect to "deviate" from the outset of playing the game? As mentioned before, the book has a fantastic array of scholars who have proven credentials and exemplary erudition. However, while research was conducted on a variety of servers, the authors reveal that they all ended up in the same guild, The Truants, on a European Server. Secondly, since *World of Warcraft* is played across the globe, it would be interesting to include chapters from scholars outside of those working in Europe. However, this criticism is not something for which the authors should be accountable; instead, it simply means that more work can be done on *World of Warcraft*.

Overall, *Digital Culture, Play, and Identity* is a valuable and important book that deserves attention from those interested in game studies. The work is ideal for use in the classroom and addresses an extraordinary number of topics in a logical, clear, and intelligent manner -- a testament to the editors and authors.

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