Nostalgia and World of Warcraft: Myth and Individual Resistance

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Abstract

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Using post-structuralist psychonanalytic theory and ludology theory, this analysis looks at the game World of Warcraft (Warcraft). It asserts that Warcraft’s relationship to its players resembles society’s connection to the individual: they both give a framework of myths, of unreality, from which the individual defines him/herself. Defining oneself from a constructed reality results understanding of self and others in terms of a constructed identity. This arouses a desire for a unified sense of self, a way to connect back to the real. However, this desire can turn into pathology, where players try to ascribe meaning onto others in a possessive and degrading manner. In their attempts to reconcile their disconnectedness, anxiety and melancholy, they can choose to avoid this pathology. Games can inscribe myths on players, but players can resist this through creative use of meaning, creating identity from the self rather than as myths dictate, and avoiding power relationships created from constructed identity.

Approved: ______________________________________________________________

Judith Grant

Professor of Political Science
To my father, Michael Slodov
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Introduction

Games facilitate the need to avoid confronting the meaninglessness of existence. I call this avoidance Nostalgia, a desire for the unified self, a pathology that projects through the medium of video games.

Society’s myths erase the real, from which the individual has disconnected. This compels the individual, who has lost his/her connection to the real because of society’s use of myth to construct meaning, to internalize the loss in melancholy. Drawing from Freud’s theory of melancholy, I equate the relationship between the game and the player as analogous to the relationship between the love-object and the ego. Those who play these games, who have this melancholy, can pathologize it through the desire to possess objects. Games collect myths of western society, presenting them to the player as a myth with which he/she interacts. The attractive nature of the game comes from this submerging of players in a pure mythic system.

World of Warcraft (WoW, or just Warcraft) gives an ideal form of denial of the real using the imaginary. Warcraft creates the illusion of a coherent reality in its simplified reproduction of myths, and the illusion of a unified sense of self for players because it allows them the opportunity to possess and place meaning on objects. To have control, identity, and a unified sense of self, players project society’s myths of dominance and privilege on others. The game reproduces myth and gives players a framework to inject mythic institutions of dominance such as patriarchy and whiteness, projecting their neurosis onto real people as a means of possessing using reductive meaning. However,
while these two kinds of expression represent a negative acting out, players also have the potential to positively act in the face of this problem.

The psychoanalytic deconstruction of the game offers a way to understand symptoms of the avoidance of meaninglessness. Yet it does not portray a way out of the problem. Ludology, or the study of games, explains video games as a new medium that can give players a platform freedom from and resistance against mythic structures. Considering gaming from this approach, discovering its positive role, this theory can help remedy the problem of melancholy, helping players let go of the attachment to a presumed ‘real.’

The first chapter explains the background of the game and its basics, while also leading into a discussion of what drives players to play the game. Describing the history of the game, how players interact with it, and some perspectives about its importance, I argue that the game tends to require its players’ submission to myth.

The second chapter explains myth and the mythic structure of Warcraft. Here I argue that the game, as a mythic structure, constructs a false reality and imposes meaning on subjective experience. I continue the discussion about myth in the third chapter, and discuss the effect of mythic structures on individuals. Subjection to the meaningless universals of society via myth causes individuals to have a melancholy, and pathologize it through a need to possess objects. This desire for possession includes the way players see others. Players use myths of dominance to impose identity categories on others, in order to have a sense of identity themselves.

In the fourth chapter I discuss a way that players impose identity categories using patriarchy. The discourse of patriarchy imposes meaning on gender, subjecting
individuals to the dominance of the male/female dichotomy. Players use these categories to impose meaning on female and male as certain types, where power defines their relationship to each other. The fifth chapter argues another way in which players pathologize using the identity category of race. Othering and essentializing non-whites, players use the identity category of white to dominate and possess their difference. The behavior in both chapters four and five represents troubled identity formation, using the game as a way to channel myths of dominance and give the illusion of a unified self.

The last chapter argues that ludology offers a way to resist structures of meaning in the game, changing the player-game relationship. Critical theory from a psychoanalytic approach helped diagnose negative player behavior, and as a solution to this problem, ludology gives the player a chance to resist the player-game relationship. Disrupting and individualizing in the game, players can actively create meaning rather than represent a passive conduit of mythic structures.
Chapter One

Unraveling the World of Warcraft

“Last fall, a group of *World of Warcraft* players in China committed mass suicide. They wanted to draw attention to the latest restriction on their liberty: The same government agency that censors newspapers and bans books had just mandated a system of disincentives to limit the number of hours per day they spent playing online games.” - *Wired*

The above article concerning World of Warcraft players in China relates to phenomena of attachment and value in the virtual world. Fervor for this game exists at such a high pitch for some people that the restriction of playtime results in serious political protest: "The players' digital representations martyred themselves; their fleshy masters kept breathing. These were virtual suicides in response to a crackdown in a virtual universe." The result of this protest, according to the article: "In January, in the aftermath of the public outcry (and virtual die-ins), the Chinese government announced that adults could play MMORPGs for as long as they like," shows their importance for players, and the world at large. To understand the dynamics of how such a massive game can exist with as many as 10 million people subscribing to it, and why so many invest so much in the game, one must understand its history and that of its genre.

The modern history of the role-playing game genre lies in the original role-playing game Dungeons and Dragons, where a group of people played together with pencils and paper, rolling dice in a combination of board games and role-playing. Role-playing games evolved alongside computers, from the 80’s to today. The interfacing
text-based programs in the 80s, very simplified forms of Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPGs) called MUDS, or a Multi-User Dungeon, were text-based adventures or very simple graphical interfaces where more than one user participated in the same environment. Since that time the nature of multiplayer role-playing games slowly improved with technology—games such as Ultima Online and Everquest in the mid-to-late 90’s expanded the concept of what a multiplayer role-playing game was. These games also gradually expanded the genre’s player-base, constantly gaining popularity among casual and ‘hardcore’ gaming enthusiasts.

The MMORPG World of Warcraft, developed in 2004 by Blizzard Entertainment incorporates many of the most popular styles of earlier RPGs and online games. It constructs its world through visual and textual narratives of morality, medieval and fantasy in the tradition of Tolkien, and also brings in elements of science-fiction, and pop-culture references (one race in the game dances exactly like the character ‘Napoleon’ from the film Napolean Dynamite, for example). According to Blizzard, the game’s developer, within an MMORPG:

[...] thousands of players exist in the same game world at the same time. This creates an incredibly rich and active environment in which interesting things are constantly taking place. MMORPGs provide thousands of hours of game play, with a nearly infinite variety of goals to achieve across a vast world covering miles of land and sea.

The company has built its reputation as a quality producer of computer games since early in the 1990s with its release of the Real-time Strategy game, Warcraft. Since then, it has released a number of critically acclaimed titles such as Diablo and Starcraft, all building
its reputation towards its most lauded and popular game to date: Warcraft. With Warcraft’s release, Blizzard created an accessible and well-crafted MMORPG, which has quickly grown in popularity and content to this day. Approximately 6 million users subscribe to the game in the United States and a further 4 million subscribe world-wide in Europe and China.

Having explained Warcraft’s place in game history, an understanding of how Warcraft itself works will help reveal how players can immerse themselves totally in it.

**Playing the game**

After purchasing the game, which runs on a computer system rather than a console such as the Xbox or Playstation, one must install it. Once installed, patched and updated to its latest version, one creates an account with a monthly fee of $15. This fee exists because of the persistent nature of the game—it requires constant updates, fixes, and maintenance—an entire development team exists just for creating new content for an already-published game.

Having created the account, one may now enter the game world, and must choose which type of server to enter. A server means an instance of the entire game world wherein about 10 to 15 thousand players can exist, each server exists simultaneously but separately, and represent the same world recreated many times to accommodate the large player base. Servers have four different types: Regular, Player versus Player (PvP), Role-play (RP), and Role-play Player versus Player (RP-PVP). Regular servers allow questing without the threat of PvP Combat. PvP servers have mandatory combat wherein the risk of attack by the players of the opposite faction exists (more on the game dynamics later).
RP servers have strict guidelines for behavior and character names and require adherence to the game-world, and RP-PvP servers are role-playing with the twist of PvP combat.

Two main factions exist in the game: Horde and Alliance. These constantly warring factions, as part of PvP combat, often attack each other whenever possible in the game world. Each faction has 5 of its own races, each with different appearances and characteristics. Having chosen a faction and race, one must choose a class. As with many role-playing games ‘classes’ determine what abilities a character will have—a magic caster, melee, or healer and so on. The last aesthetic part of the process involves changing minute details about the character’s appearance such as hairstyle, skin color and face type. Finally, naming the character completes the creation process.

Joi Ito, a writer at Wired, describes the game’s goals in his article “World of Warcrack”: "There are four basic draws in any MMORPG: the ability to socialize, an achievement system that gives players an incentive to improve, complex and satisfying strategy that makes combat fun, and an underlying narrative that players want to learn more about." Once in the game world, one ‘levels up’ as the main objective, which increases ones character’s potency in combat. The game currently has 70 levels, each of which requires a certain amount of experience points to go from one to the next. One begins as level 1, and one ‘quests’ as the primary way to increase experience—small tasks given by non-player characters (NPC) in the game world. These involve a variety of tasks, but most focus either on acquiring X number of objects, either from the environment or from killing certain monsters, or simply to kill X number of monsters. As levels increase, the amount of experience required for the next level increases proportionally, so leveling from 1-10 takes much less time than from 50-60. As a way to
alleviate the ‘grind’ of this leveling, many different ways of gaining experience exist. Level-specific dungeons exist for players to enter as a group, where they work together to defeat enemies too strong for a single player. Exploring and killing monsters without any objective also grant experience, though at a slower rate. Geography divides the game world into 3 different continents, each with different zones. A zone means a moderately large area with towns with many quest-givers for each faction. It usually accommodates a certain range of levels, like 20-30, so that as you progress you move from one zone to another, always entering a new environment. This process facilitates each of the ‘game goals,’ because players often socialize when they group together, have incentive to improve through leveling, learn how to play their character through gaining new abilities, and progress along a storyline.

Trade skills and social environments exist as supplements and diversions to the process of leveling. One may take two main professions, such as leatherworking and skinning, and gain ‘skill’ in it. Similar to gaining experience, progressing in a trade skill means more and more time spent as the skill gets higher. Professions not only help one’s character a utility such as armor and weapons, but also act as a way to gain money as a part of the game’s economy. Auction house systems exist where players can post any item for any price, yet often times an average price exists for something because of its perceived value. A crucial aspect of the game, making money directly informs much of the game such as progression in trade skills and other important items like mounts (a horse, etc.).

Players also have many social spaces in the game. They create guilds, or virtual organizations of players, to have a sense of community, to help one another, and support
each other with a common pooling of resources. Major cities have social environments where many people gather in one place to trade, chat and idle when not engaged in questing. Some players even role-play, using custom outfits and having events such as in-game marriages. These all offer ways to spend time in the game without leveling up.

Much more complex environments can exist when players advance past the typical game play, but for many, the descriptions above represent the full extent of their gameplay experience. Warcraft amounts to simple and easy player interaction and objective-based game play—an approach which accommodates very dedicated and casual players, thus its large audience. With no actual end, many goals exist for the player to pursue. While the game doesn’t explicitly force objective-based goals, players often choose them as a way to enjoy the game. Ito describes his personal experience of the game, and his involvement in ‘raiding’:

I started playing a year ago and have become custodian of We Know, a guild of about 250 people worldwide: medics, CEOs, bartenders, mothers, soldiers, students. We assemble in-game to mount epic six-hour raids that require some members to wake at 4 am and others to stay up all night. Outside the game, we stay in touch using online forums, a wiki, blogs, and a mailing list – plus a group voice chat, which I’ve connected to my home stereo so I can hear the guild’s banter while I’m cooking dinner. I have never been this addicted to anything before. My other hobbies are gone.

This account gives a well-rounded illustration of a more ‘hardcore’ gameplay, where players can spend over 5 hours a day logged into the game. While the game may not force a player to undergo a particular type of gameplay, most players gravitate towards
certain aspects of the game that do force certain gameplay, such as raiding in the above example. Players that raid ‘hardcore’ have to play on a set schedule, work very hard and play long hours in raiding dungeons, all in a very organized social environment.

The game not only has a use for players, but significance in the job market. For instance, a story from Wired called “You Play World of Warcraft? You're Hired! Why multiplayer games may be the best kind of job training” discusses learning using the game, and its application to the 'real world.' Warcraft’s social structure and goal-oriented gameplay, the article suggests, train players without their knowledge. The article discusses the example of Stephen Gillett, who applied to Yahoo for a senior management position in engineering. Once Yahoo! discovered his former experience as a guild leader in Warcraft, they considered that an additional qualification. The article explains the logic behind this choice: "Unlike education acquired through textbooks, lectures, and classroom instruction, what takes place in massively multiplayer online games is what we call accidental learning. It's learning to be - a natural byproduct of adjusting to a new culture - as opposed to learning about." (Brown and Thomas) It explains further: "The fact that [players] don't think of gameplay as training is crucial. Once the experience is explicitly educational, it becomes about developing compartmentalized skills and loses its power to permeate the player's behavior patterns and worldview," (Brown and Thomas) this kind of subtle influence exists at many levels, where social factors influence players in many ways, not always to become a more productive member of society.

Awareness of how the game influences its players and its relation to the ‘real world’ leads one to question what the game means. If players in China have such a sense of propriety in their characters and value their playtime so much as to politically
demonstrate with ‘avatar suicide,’ the game has to have some significance. Similarly, if companies like Yahoo use these games as a means to evaluate business skills like management and communication, they must believe the games have an impact on its players. Participation in the game represents myth reading, where the signifiers of the game connote meanings of social structures. To participate effectively requires submission to these myths of social interaction, and this can result in channeling less savory social myths, those of dominance such as patriarchy and whiteness.

The following two chapters describe myth and its influence on the individual. They will help explain how Warcraft, as a collection of myths, can cause its players to behave in a discriminatory and oppressive manner.
Chapter Two

Resemblance of the Real

Period concepts finally correspond to no realities whatsoever, and that whether they are formulated in terms of generational logic, or by the names of reigning monarchs, or according to some other category or typological and classificatory system, the collective reality of the multitudinous lives encompassed by such terms is nonthinkable and can never be described, characterized, labeled, or conceptualized. Jameson—*Postmodernism Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (282)

I argue that Warcraft acts as a structure of myths that players participate in to facilitate an unconscious desire for unity of the self. Understanding myths, the perspective they create and the result of their use reveals how nostalgia shapes the player’s relationship to Warcraft. Barthes suggests that society uses myths at all levels to impose a shared perspective of reality. This shared perspective for Jameson resembles History, or a way that myths use time and place to construct meaning. The lack of meaning that History and myth impose on individuals through society disconnects them from reality, creating a space of the ‘hyperreal’ as Baudrillard discusses. The above quote’s discussion of History reveals how myth tries to categorize identity through the abstraction of time and place, imposing the perspective that a fixed meaning should define individuals, who in reality have a fractured and infinitely variable self.

Roland Barthes defines myth as: "a type of speech […] made of a material which has already been worked on so as to make it suitable for communication: […] all the
materials of myth presuppose a signifying consciousness. (109-110) Myth takes any form of communication—visual, spoken or written—and removes signifiers' connection to reality. It places figurative meanings on these signifiers and makes them ideas rather than representations. The result of this process: "first-order" semiotic systems such as language and writing lose significance when consistently used to create figurative, mythical meaning.

Using Saussure and Lacan, Barthes utilizes semiotics to argue that the symbolic structure of language creates meaning for the world through a series of relational terms, or the "symbolic chain." Each object in the world has a relationship to meaning, in that one uses some form of communication to represent it. Warcraft, as a construction of myths, can illustrate the symbolic chain’s process. The image in Figure 2.1 representing the word ‘log’ in the game refers to the idea of ‘log.’ This example illustrates a myth because a ‘log’ represents an idea based on language describing an actual, real object.
with no inherent meaning. The symbolic chain extends to the point where a cartoonish resemblance invoking the idea does not describe something real. One could imagine multiple chains, threads, all contributing to the meaning of the ‘log’; in Barthes' case, he imagines that the symbolic function of communication extends to beyond writing or words: "not only written discourse, but photography, cinema, reporting, sport, shows, publicity, all these can serve as a support to mythical speech." (110) Myth takes ‘first-order’ semiological systems like speech, language, writing, or images, and redefines them through relationality rather than connection to the real. Thus, in Figure 2.1 the idea of the ‘log,’ a myth, defines the pixels arranged into a rectangular object textured to resemble wood, and the pixel-image informs the idea of the myth.

Through this inclusion of all potential expressions within a larger system of meaning, Barthes implies how myth moves the signifying chain beyond simple relation of idea to object: "Mythical speech is made of a material which has already been worked on so as to make it suitable for communication: it is because all the materials of myth presuppose a signifying consciousness, that one can reason about them while discounting their substance." (110) When multiple levels of communication all have a similar 'metalanguage', one can draw out what over-arching language of meaning draws them together, and understand a myth.

Mythology in culture explains how society perpetuates discourses of dominance. This happens because myth masks itself as natural. But myth implies a constructed perspective, something from outside of the real: "Myth is not defined by the object of its message, but by the way in which it utters this message: there are no formal limits to myth, there are no 'substantial' ones […] Every object in the world can pass from a
closed, silent existence to an oral state, open to appropriation by society." (109) Myth imposes its abstraction on the symbolic chain, distorting the relationship between the real and its signifiers. Barthes sees this as the established order that uses discourses in culture at every level to reinforce certain perspectives about living.

Culture uses entertainment as a means to instill its beliefs and perspective, reinforcing the established order. Warcraft reinforces the established order as a type of entertainment, using a wide variety of cultural myths from around the world (but mostly western culture) to construct its virtual world. Take Figure 2.2’s illustration of a bank in Warcraft. Velvet lined ropes in a full white marble room lead players to bank tellers, with whom they deposit and withdraw items of value. Within the game, as part of its structure, players frequent these banks in order to expand their ability to make money and possess items. These images constructing the game bank and the function it serves within the

Figure 2.2. A Bank in World of Warcraft.
game, through its relation with the idea of a ‘real’ bank, perpetuates established order. Reproducing the ideas of institutions and their function in the game entertain because this removes murky relationships between a bank in reality and its meaning. Accepting the imposed idea that a pile of bricks, stones, mortar, paper, glass and people represents bank becomes easier when the game reproduces that relationship in a simpler form. Always training, society’s myths continually facilitate identification to mold individual identity to agree with its order.

This molding of identity does not happen without cost to or resistance from the individual. The imposing, interlocking myths impose a way of perceiving the world using the imaginary, but disconnection from reality causes disdain towards institutions of myth. In his essay on army and church, Adorno describes how these institutions control individuals through evoking their disgust and acceptance:

One cures doubts about the Church or the Army by the very ills of the Church and the Army. One inoculates the public with a contingent evil to prevent or cure an essential one. To rebel against the inhumanity of the Established Order and its values, according to this way of thinking, is an illness which is common, natural, forgivable; one must not collide with it head-on, but rater exorcize it like a possession: the patient is made to give a representation of his illness, he is made familiar with the very appearance of his revolt, and this revolt disappears all the more surely since, once at a distance and the object of a gaze, the Established Order is no longer anything but a Manichaean compound and therefore inevitable, one which wins on both counts, and is therefore beneficial. (42)
Discontent with myth’s imposition results in this dialectically contained process of revolt and acceptance on an individual level. Although culture continually presses with myths, their weight and burden of control never overwhelms. Naturalizing the function of myths in society creates a perspective that the established order does not change. Othering dissent, established order displaces it and depersonalizes it, thereby neutralizing any threat. One consequence of this containment means that individuals in this hopeless containment deploy negative, possessive myths as part of their dissatisfaction. Chapters four and five discuss, within the context of Western culture and Warcraft, how individuals use myths of dominance such as patriarchy and racism due to the imposition of myth.

Fredric Jameson understands History as myth. The idea of past, present and future all revolve around a collective false consciousness created for nation-states and cultures, distinctly separate from the individual and the real. Jameson gives agency to History as the cause for how living in a fabrication occurs, similar to what Barthes states about myth and history: "Mythology can only have an historical foundation, for myth is a type of speech chosen by history: it cannot possibly evolve from the 'nature' of things." (110) History employs fabrication (myth) to create meaning, and just as Barthes discussed with the established order, it fabricates through institutions such as entertainment. Similar to the example of banks in Figure 2.2, Warcraft uses all manner of myths from Western History to give a sense of place and meaning in the game. The race of humans has a capital city, ‘Stormwind,’ which resembles a cobbled-together collection of medieval architecture and tropes, such as using an image on a sign to represent a store-front, as seen in Figure 2.3:
The symbol of a beer stein represents an Inn, the tudor-style architecture and castle-like layout of the city connect to ideas about medieval period. This construction of place and time reproduces the experience of History, having a sense of identity through displacement from the real. History does not just mean a retrospective, but also constructs the present:

Historicity is, in fact, neither a representation of the past nor a representation of the future: it can first and foremost be defined as a perception of the present as history; that is, as a relationship to the present which somehow defamiliarizes it and allows us that distance from immediacy which is at length characterized as a historical perspective. […] what is at stake is essentially a process of reification whereby we draw back from our immersion in the here and now and grasp it as a kind of thing—not merely a ‘present’ but a present that can be dated. (284)
This process of drawing back and viewing the present as distanced creates a zone of comfort. And in the apparatus of Warcraft, the game reinscribes History’s function as a means to have comfortable perspective. The comfort and false sense of perspective relate to the unity of the self, where this distance and reification give the individual the impression of coherence, when none in fact exists. The entertainment value of a game taking place in a distant time, out of place and having a distance from the present, yet also in the here and now gives helps reconcile the imposition of myth over the real.

This process of willful delusion, reifying the familiar and the present, influences perception not just of greater meanings like History, but also self-perception. Suggesting how this delusion distorts identity construction, Jamesons states:

…the sense people have of themselves and their own moment of history may ultimately have nothing whatsoever to do with its reality: that the existential may be absolutely distinct, as some ultimate ‘false consciousness,’ from the structural and social significance of a collective phenomenon, surely a possibility rendered more plausible by the fact of global imperialism, in terms of which the meaning of a given nation-state—for everyone else on the globe—may be wildly at odds from their own inner experiences and their own interior daily life. (282)

The collective nation-state myth of History not only places meaning on how individuals see the world as a whole, but personally in terms of morals, the way they think, and interact with others. Constituent parts of the self as defined in myths, culturally indoctrinated ideas, influence self-perception in a meaningful way: “Although one does not confuse a person with what he or she thinks of himself/herself, such self-images are surely very relevant indeed and constitute an essential part of the more objective
description or definition.” (281) Collective myths give common meaning for individuals, imposing identity-constructions based on ideas rather than reality, a meaning not in any way related to that individual’s experience.

Myth subsuming first-order semiotic systems implies that their signifier / signified relationship degrade. When myth abstracts the relationship from the literal to figurative, meaning dissolves. Since this connection to reality loosens, myths refer less and less to reality but to an imaginary construction. Baudrillard, in Simulacra and Simulation, argues that these imaginary constructions completely remove any connection to the real. Myth gets to the point where it simulates itself, removing any connection with reality that originally existed: "The closer one gets to the perfection of the simulacrum, the more evident it becomes how everything escapes representation, escapes its own double and its resemblance." (108) For Baudrillard the myth now performs the function of operational negativity, denial through simulated death: "It is always a question of proving the real through the imaginary, proving truth though scandal, proving the law through transgression […] All the powers, all the institutions speak of themselves through denial, in order to attempt, by simulating death, to escape their real death throes." (19) History in this context affirms itself through reification, just like the ‘Church and Army’ example and the bank example from Warcraft, superimposing meaning. Since connection to the real no longer exists, institutions fictionally transgress their boundaries to show that they have significance, when they only exist in a closed-circuit of meaning, unrelated to individual experience and the real.

Disconnect from reality, from the referential, defines how institutions and individuals act towards the world. Baudrillard discusses the effect of simulation:
We are in a logic of simulation, which no longer has anything to do with a logic of facts and an order of reason. Simulation is characterized by a \textit{precession of the model}, of all the models based on the merest fact […] The facts no longer have a specific trajectory, they are born at the intersection of models, a single fact can be engendered by all the models at once. (16)

The order that myths and their repetition follow revolves around this spinning circle of meanings without meaning. Consider Figure 2.3, the construction of place in the Warcraft city Stormwind: it uses the idea of medieval, a ‘glossy’ reproduction of actual medieval times. Even the concept of medieval times has itself as accounted in writing had lost meaning in the reproductive translation of History. Institutions now generate myth from myth, with no central basis of meaning, rather only referring from one abstract to another. Referentials create trauma, produced in disconnect from first-order semiological systems, where myth’s constant reproducing eliminated meaning. Baudrillard describes this trauma:

\begin{quote}
This trauma (loss of referentials) is similar to the discovery of the difference between the sexes in children, as serious, as profound, as irreversible: the fetishization of an object intervenes to obscure this unbearable discovery, but precisely, says Freud, this object is not just any object, it is often the last object perceived before the traumatic discovery. (44)
\end{quote}

We project our nostalgia for a ‘real’ past through this freezing of what we once referred to, which was considered ‘real.’ History represents simulation of a real past. That last moment, the time before simulation, we affix to avoid confrontation with the current meaninglessness of existence. And we reproduce this affixation constantly. Again,
Stormwind represents this nostalgia, a fetish for a non-existent past, creating a perspective for the present through the reproduction of History from concept to a virtual world.

Discussing entertainment and art, Baudrillard talks about History in cinema, and compares it to a type of painting. The illustration explains that history, as injected into forms of entertainment, becomes a hollow reproduction without any intrinsic meaning:

Today, the history that is ‘given back’ to us (precisely because it was taken from us) has no more of a relation to a ‘historical real’ than neofiguration in painting does to the classical figuration of the real. Neofiguration is an invocation of resemblance, but at the same time the flagrant proof of the disappearance of objects in their very representation: hyperreal. Therein objects shine in a sort of hyperresemblance (like history in contemporary cinema) that makes it so that fundamentally they no longer resemble anything, except the empty figure of resemblance, the empty form of representation. (45)

Reality, lost because of the myth-making process, essentially becomes hyperreal, or the conception of the real as seen through simulation. The expressions of Neofiguration represent what every institution does: reproducing the idea of the real in an exaggerated and untrue fashion. Though this does not happen consciously, but as part of the process of creating myth. The concept of a virtual space reproducing the myths and institutions of the hyperreal space proves his point even more succinctly. Banking, the medieval city, even a mundane object like a log: all objects of a world literally exaggerated in a virtual space. Almost like his example of Neofiguration, Warcraft mimes and invokes a resemblance through its distorted representation of the real. His description of cinema as
History, “[History’s] reinjection [into cinema] has no value as conscious awareness but only as nostalgia for a lost referential,” (44) suggests that depictions of the past, through narratives in entertainment such as Stormwind in Warcraft inscribe a constructed perspective.

This account of History and the function of institutions such as entertainment reflect how deeply myth affects society. Just as in Barthes’ example of Church and Army and Warcraft, the reassurance of existing in a space without reference comes from both reviling and affirming:

Such is the watershed of a hyperreal sociality, in which the real is confused with the model […] Such is the last stage of the social relation, ours, which is no longer one of persuasion but one of deterrence: ‘YOU are information, you are the social […]’ An about-face through which it becomes impossible to locate one instance of the model, of power, of the gaze, of the medium itself, because you are always already on the other side. (29)

The memory and trauma from the lost connection with the real compels society to grasp onto a resemblance of meaning and exercise control through deterrence. This idea of deterrence explains how myth affects perception and agency: myth conflates individual perception with its abstract generality.

In this myth-drenched hyperreal world, what better way to affirm the existence of the real than through a complete virtual world such as Warcraft, the equivalent of Disneyland for Baudrillard: "The imaginary of Disneyland is neither true nor false, it is a deterrence machine set up in order to rejuvenate the fiction of the real." (13) As a deterrence machine, its unreal environment reflects myth-construction of the social,
affirming society’s ‘real’ with its imaginary space. Warcraft represents myth’s use in the social, and reveals the constructed and false relationship between the individual and the social.
Chapter Three

The World Is Systematized Horror

Nothing is more ruinous: the scentless bouquet, the institutionalized remembrance, kills what still lingers by the very act of preserving it. The fleeting moment can live in the murmur of forgetfulness, that the ray will one day touch to brightness; the moment we want to possess is lost already. Adorno – *Minima Moralia* (112)

If myth constructs History, and if society immerses itself in this lack of meaning, we must then understand what compels individuals to remain in this lie. The desire for a unified self drives belief in this system. The desire itself originates from the splinter between the universal and particular, where the meaningless generality of culture overshadows creation of meaning at an individual level. This experience results in a figurative loss of love, the individual’s sense of self degrades from having to relate to myth. Through the process of socialization, subjection to the meaninglessness, the individual experiences a melancholic attachment to the lost real. Finally, this attachment to loss manifests itself in the desire to possess and control meaning in objects.

The Hegelian concept of the universal and the particular expresses the idea that the individual does not determine him/herself, rather his/her self acts as a boundary, and that he/she then needs to define him/herself through an arbitrary generality, or universal. Myth and constructed History, as the previous chapter discusses, establish the late 20th / early 21st century idea of universal. The hollow meaninglessness of myth creates this
generality, forcing the individual to define him/herself through its falseness. Adorno, in *Minima Moralia*, discusses the problem of the universal versus the particular:

The world is systematized horror, but therefore it is to do the world too much honour to think of it entirely as a system; for its unifying principle is division, and it reconciles by asserting unimpaired the irreconcilability of the general and the particular. Its essence is abomination; but its appearance, the lie by virtue of which it persists, is a stand-in for truth. (113)

The world’s construction of meaning defines perception of reality; it subsumes the individual in meaninglessness generality. Referring to the world’s appearance as ‘the lie’ and ‘a stand-in for truth,’ he accuses it of ignoring the conflict between the individual’s sense of reality and the word’s depiction of reality. Myths and their imposition at every level of society reinforces his idea of the world’s construction of meaning: the world transfers its mode of thought onto the individual, thereby reproducing and enforcing the social’s dominance over being: “The principle of human domination, in becoming absolute, has turned its point against man as the absolute object […] The self, its guiding idea and it’s a *priori* object, has always, under scrutiny, been rendered at the same time non-existent.” (63) The contingency of the individual on the meaning that myth provides means that institutions create meaning for and define the subject. These institutions reflect the myth-making process: abstract meaning of institutions imposing itself on perception.

History acts as the ‘unifying principle of division,’ and instills a perspective of loss, using memory as a weapon against having a sense of being as an individual. History helps reconcile the difference between the universal and particular, making every
individual subject to the identity of place and time, while also giving individuals the
illusion of agency with leaders and figures of ‘influence’. It placates through this
unification, binding the individual and the universal together, when the distinction
between the two remains. An agent of history, Adorno’s culture industry represents an
aspect of society that enforces this mode of thought. He describes the culture industry:

The culture industry not so much adapts to the reactions of its customers as it
counterfeits them. It drills them in their attitudes by behaving as if it were itself a
customer […] [It] is geared to mimetic regression, to the manipulation of
repressed impulses to copy. Its method is to anticipate the spectator's imitation of
itself, so making it appear as if the agreement already exists which it intends to
create. (201)

The need of individuals to overcome the difference between their limited understanding
and History’s given definition of reality results in this industry. Catering to that need, the
culture industry neutralizes the problem through externalizing it. Warcraft provides this
service to its players, giving them a world they enjoy because its virtual world reproduces
a sense of existing, indulging the ‘repressed impulse to copy.’ And players in the
following figures evidence this impulse within the game, reproducing and using copies,
even of themselves, as a type of entertainment:
Figures 3.1 and 3.2. Multiboxing: respectively, a computer set-up in which a player uses up to 5 or 6 monitors / computer systems at once to run many copies of the same online game simultaneously. They then use one or two keyboards to control 5 characters.
simultaneously. This example is shown in the second figure, where a player using this technique (for the most part) uses the exact same gear and character-types together.

Players use Multiboxing as a way to have a distinct advantage over others: controlling five characters instead of one. They also treat the practice as aesthetic, outfitting their characters identically, naming them with the same root word (in Figure 3.2 all variants of ‘zin’), giving them a copied and mimetic quality. These players evoke Adorno’s idea about miming, reproducing themselves as a way to gain a false sense of control. Agents of culture indulge and subjugate the individual, showing him/her an abstracted image of him/herself through which the colonization of meaning occurs. Culture industry supports myth, giving people consumption and replication as a means to avoid meaninglessness. To explain why individuals accept the culture industry, Adorno argues that they indulge avoiding the problematic between universal and general.

Happiness and truth relate to unconscious desires to avoid the problem of universal and particular. Describing the process of truth and untruth, Adorno states: “Things have come to pass where lying sounds like truth, truth sounds like lying. Each statement, each piece of news, each thought has been preformed by the centres of the culture industry. Whatever lacks the familiar trace of such pre-formation lacks credibility.”

The universal defines meaning and overshadows the real. The culture industry uses myth to play out a simulated conflict between truth and untruth, when the entire situation holds no actual truth, and it uses this to impose its mode of thought. Considering the previous figures, multiboxing, a reproduction of the subject ad infinitum, lets players act out the universal / particular problem using a fiction of identity. Adorno believes that the reason for culture industry’s success and acceptance comes from an unconscious desire
for fiction, to avoid the conflict between universal and particular. He illustrates untruth’s function in the unconscious:

The untruth of truth has a core which finds an avid response in the unconscious. It is not only that the unconscious wishes horrors to come about […] So desperate have people become in civilization, that they are forever ready to abandon their frail better qualities as soon as the world does their worse ones the obligation of confessing how evil it is. (109)

To live the assumption of the subject when the subject means what institutions define it as, this kind of reality lets individuals construct identity categories based on how institutions of myth define those categories. In multiboxing, players not only accept their role as a subject of the game, but reproduce that role because of the supposed utility it grants. Just like the way truth and untruth mold the way individuals behave, Adorno’s thoughts about happiness relate the same unconscious desire:

To happiness the same applies as to truth: one does not have it, but is in it. Indeed, happiness is nothing other than being encompassed, an after-image of the original shelter within the mother. But for this reason no-one who is happy can know that he is so. To see happiness, he would have to pass out of it: to be as if already born […] He alone keeps faith who says: I was happy. (112)

The reference to past, to ‘after-image’ discusses the importance of History; reification, especially in the form of mimicry, shows happiness’ contingency on referencing its past state. Happiness relates to the game and multiboxing. Players use the utility of controlling five characters at once and often aestheticize the process, making them all similar. This reproduction and simultaneous control of characters acts out the desire to reify. Just like
in the opening quote, where Adorno compares untruth and memory to a fake bouquet of flowers, reproductions of falseness through memory of the real and attachment of sentiment to these reproductions, represents the desire of the individual to remain in nostalgic society.

Freud, in his essay “Mourning and Melancholia,” describes how the subject internalizes grief and makes it melancholy. As an extension of Adorno’s idea about the problematic of the universal and particular, Freud explains how the individual sentimentalizes reproductions of the real and adjusts to disconnection from the real. Freud describes mourning as:

> An object-choice, an attachment of the libido to a particular person, had at one time existed; then, owing to a real slight or disappointment coming from this loved person, the object-relationship was shattered. The result was not the normal one of a withdrawal of the libido from this object and a displacement of it on to a new one. (586)

This represents pathos where the subject’s connection to a person lingers when broken, but moves on to another. However with melancholy, he states: “The free libido was not displaced on to another object; it was withdrawn into the ego. There, however, it was not employed in any unspecified way, but served to establish an identification of the ego with the abandoned object.” (586) The melancholic internalizes loss of the love-object and points the critical agency of the ego at his/her own self.

Melancholy relates to the universal and particular problem discussed in Adorno, in that the individual has withdrawn his/her ability to create real meaning or libido, and internalizes the conflict between loss of the real and the real as institutions present it.
Loss of the real represents loss of the love-object, in that the individual defines him/herself through it. The withdrawn love-object (i.e. reality) in society represents the distance from meaninglessness of myth and the individual's need for reality. The relationship of the game to the player in Warcraft mirrors the relationship between society and the individual. Players in relation to the game, like individuals in relation to society, do not have a real source to determine their identity from, and have this melancholy as a result. The game, like society, acts like a surrogate, offering an imaginary set of meaning (myth) that players use to placate melancholy. Holding onto the object-love, players distort use these meanings offered in the game and society to impose identity on others in their environment, acting out of the ego’s critical agency. This morbid attachment exists at a societal level, and the behavior it expresses reflects pathology of melancholy.

Baudrillard's *The System of Objects* discusses how we process melancholy on a societal level, and in Warcraft. Melancholy drives avoidance of the reality of death. Death of the real, just like loss of the love-object, has happened, which the individual attempts to defer with fixed repetitive meaning, possession and collection of objects. Describing the object as he sees it, Baudrillard states:

The object is *the thing with which we construct our mourning*: the object represents our own death, but that death is transcended (symbolically) by virtue of the fact that we *possess* the object; the fact that by introjecting it into a work of mourning—by integrating it into a series in which its absence and its re-emergence elsewhere ‘work’ at replaying themselves continually, recurrently—
we succeed in dispelling the anxiety associated with absence and with the reality of death. (104)

Taking into account Freud’s explanation of mourning, the object in this case represents what the ego expresses once it withdraws the libido into itself. Mourning takes on a role as the individual’s criticism towards his/her environment as a part of him/herself. The process of mourning drives us to focus this criticism of the environment onto objects: “We cannot live in absolute singularity, in the irreversibility signaled by the moment of birth, and it is precisely this irreversible movement from birth towards death that objects help us cope with.” (103) These objects for him can exist as anything, and so Warcraft represents a world of objects. Even less close to the real than hyperreal society, Warcraft uses a virtual world as a type of catharsis related to this object-behavior that Baudrillard discusses. He describes what mourning compels us to do with objects, what he calls ‘the system of objects’:

A complex action which ‘recycles’ birth and death into a system of objects. What man gets from objects is not a guarantee of life after death but the possibility, from the present moment onwards, of continually experiencing the unfolding of his existence in a controlled, cyclical mode, symbolically transcending a real existence the irreversibility of whose progression he is powerless to affect. (104)

Behavior towards objects takes on a repetitive characteristic, a trait resulting from the anxiety of loss, acting out against the environment and latching onto the ‘the system of objects.’ Warcraft’s structure compels its players to engage in this behavior: the game’s ‘grinds.’ Nearly every aspect of the game, ranging from leveling to professions to
reputation with factions\(^1\) involves repeating the same tasks over and over again. The enticement of possession, of owning more and having more power through the more one ‘grinds’ encourages this catharsis of anxiety through repetition.

Baudrillard discusses object-collection as a defining behavior of mourning. Objects possess meaning in relation to the individual’s perception, and the way the individual treats objects reflects the angst of living under myth. Indicating beyond their immediate meaning, objects signify about the individual’s construction of meaning, just like Dreams do for Freud: “It is in this sense that the environment of private objects and their possession [are] just as essential as dreams.” (103) Resorting to object-collection amounts to the avoidance of death, avoiding the meaninglessness constituting reality through this compulsion to externalize oneself into possessed objects. Baudrillard explains avoiding meaninglessness, avoiding time:

> The deep-rooted power of collected objects stems neither from their uniqueness nor from their historical distinctiveness. It is not because of such considerations that the temporality of collecting is not real time but, rather, *because the organization of the collection itself replaces time*. And no doubt this is the collection’s fundamental function: the resolving of real time into a systematic dimension. (102)

Replacing time represents how the individual cuts him/herself off and externalizes his/her avoidance of reality’s meaninglessness using the collection. Even the most objective-

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\(^1\) Factions are groups of Non-player characters in the game. The player performs quests, kills monsters, and runs dungeons related to these factions in order to gain reputation with them. As reputation level goes up, the player goes from ‘neutral’ status to ‘friendly,’ ‘revered’ and ‘exalted,’ where each stage usually gives the player more access to that faction’s vendor, who sells useful / valuable items. This process represents a ‘grind’: more time and energy invested in repetitive behavior results in rewards.
seeming unit of measurement, time, loses meaning when subsumed under a subjective reality of meaning as expressed in collection. The acting out of melancholy and the anxiety of loss resembles Freud’s discussion of the child and his ball:

We are not far from the ball which the child (in Freud’s account) causes to disappear and reappear in order to experience the absence and presence of its mother alternately – in order to counter her anxiety-provoking absence with this infinite cycle of disappearance and reappearance of the object. (104)

Acting as a construction of the individual’s neuroses, this behavior symbolizes for Baudrillard a regression from confronting the loss of the real. In Warcraft, the game world revolves around a day-night cycle which reflects real time. However since the game so thoroughly revolves around individual players’ collections and ‘grinds,’ the game often exists outside of time.

*Figure 3.3.* A window displaying a player’s reputation status with a variety of factions.
The above figure shows only a small portion of the game’s thirty plus factions, each of which have similar ‘grinds.’ This repetitive behavior makes achieving long and drawn out processes the player’s goals, rewarding them with items, titles or some other item to possess. Players personalize these ‘grinds,’ experiencing it as something new in their ‘collection.’ Just like Freud’s ball example, repetitively grinding alleviates, allowing themselves to exist outside of time as part of their avoiding disconnect from the real, the overlap of the universal onto the particular.

Objects within a collection constitute a discourse to oneself; the relationship between the collector and the objects means a subjective experience, where the withdrawal of the libido into the self causes distorted perception of reality and other individuals. The repetitive meaning of collection works to the detriment of human relationships and understanding of reality, as Baudrillard states:

Taking refuge in a closed synchronicity may certainly be deemed denial of reality and flight if one considers that the object is the recipient of a cathexis that ‘ought’ to have been invested in human relationships. But this is the price we pay for the vast regulating power of these mechanisms, which today, with the disappearance of the old religious and ideological authorities, are becoming the consolation of consolations, the everyday mythology absorbing all the angst that attends time, that attends death.” (103)

As the real faded and myth took over, the individual had to create his/her own version of a once institutionalized lie about reality. To achieve this comfort of displacing anxiety in melancholy can result in defining other people as objects, in an essentializing and demeaning way. Baudrillard states: “Human relationships, home of uniqueness and
conflict, never permit any such fusion of absolute singularity with infinite seriality—which is why they are such a continual source of anxiety. By contrast, the sphere of objects, consisting of successive and homologous terms, reassures,” (95) suggesting that refuge in the object world alleviates the anxiety of human interaction. Warcraft subjects human interaction to its object-interface, reducing the level of interaction to ‘thinner’ forms of communication like text and sometimes speech, all taking place within a system oriented around object-collection. Players communicate through the object of the character, through the graphical construction of the game, all centered around the individual player and his/her collection of objects. The game’s reduction of human relationships alongside its compelling players to engage in object-collection behavior, give the player a way to reduce human relationships to the level of object.

Possession extends beyond the inanimate and begins to encompass in a different way, mainly because, as an individual’s relationship to objects develops, he/she can displace this kind of perception onto actual others. Using an example of women, Baudrillard discusses fracturing another person into parts as constituted through distorted, melancholic object-collection behavior: “A woman broken down into a syntagma of erogenous zones is classified exclusively by the functionality of pleasure, to which the response is an objectivizing and ritualizing erotic technique that masks the anxiety associated with the interpersonal relationship.” (110) The individual interacts at a detached level, rather than with the cathexis healthily external, its withdrawal means that interaction only fulfills the function of melancholy. Warcraft facilitates this even more

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2 Thin communication refers to the idea that less rich forms of human interaction, like text-based chat, doesn’t adequately capture the nuances of human communication. As a result, it has less meaning and is ‘thinner.’ Player in Warcraft typically communicate in chat, text-based interfaces, but can also use voice-communication.
than traditional object-collection: it subsumes individuals into a functioning world of objects, making the decision to displace the system of objects onto other players.

At this final stage, object collection represents the process of displacing anxiety of avoidance into possession of any external thing, object, person or idea. Myth replacing the real gives impetus to this object-collection behavior, driving the neuroses of melancholy, sometimes to the detriment of others. Warcraft facilitates this process, subsuming its players into a world of detachment and into object-collection-related gameplay. Players in Warcraft displace their anxiety, created from myth imposing its generality, and pathologize object-collection in the following chapters. They impose constructed identity categories from myth on others as a way to externalize their own discomfort with an incomplete sense of self.
Chapter Four

Pathology of Melancholy, Part 1: Patriarchy

“Mirror images, deceptive and distorting as they may be, do not contradict but actually typify the intrinsic character of our worlds […] whatever we may indeed call ‘reality’ is not the domain of some transparent and self-evident truth but rather a hazy realm riddled with hidden passage-ways, secret chambers, murky cellars and spectre-infested closets.” Cavallaro – *French Feminist Theory* (62)

The individual in the mythic system understands him/herself from the general, disconnected from the real. The resultant anxiety of that disconnect can drive a desire to possess, as Baudrillard explained in the previous chapter. Possession of meaning then expands to collection of objects, which can apply figuratively to other people. Players can use cultural discourses of dominance, such as patriarchy, to convert this desire to possess into an imposition of identity categories on themselves and others. These identity categories alleviate the anxiety of the universal and particular problem. The contemporary theory discussed here from the French feminist school gives an evolved discussion that builds on the theory in the previous chapters to reveal how players pathologize melancholy using the discourse of patriarchy.

Players in Warcraft impose identity categories constructed in the myth of patriarchy to reinforce their constructed self. To varying degrees, players use this discourse to express their own and others’ identities; having anxiety from an uncertain sense of self they project this through the possession of meaning. Male players can use it to deride female players, to imagine themselves in a position of power and females in a
submissive or lesser position. Just as equally, female players can participate in this
discourse and consider themselves objects of desire, deriving their sense of integrity from
others’ perceptions. Both of these cater to what Cavallaro describes, ‘the gaze’: “the
discourse of visuality that posits man as the owner and woman as the object of the gaze”
(Cavallaro 61). The gaze transforms women into objects and reduces their meaning as
human beings to one-dimensional fantasy, subject to male desire, becoming an Other.
Warcraft’s depiction of gender as a static category uses exaggerated bodies to fit an
idealized mold of female and male representing the myth of sexual difference. Myths of
gender and sexuality define the artificial, exaggerated appearance of characters in
Warcraft. The characters act as symbols that the male gaze defines. Troubled identity
formation and separation from the real causes the player to use Warcraft as a means to
restrict meaning—which the game facilitates with its virtual world of objects. The
pathology of this process displays patriarchal hegemony through male cliquishness and
berating female players either actively or tacitly. The game’s repetitiveness and
encouraging of object-collection behavior influences players to see others from their own
pathological issues of identity, causing them to reinscribe myths of dominance just as
repetitively as they ‘grind’ for levels or reputation.

Julia Kristeva’s work helps explain how culture constructs categories and gender
through a unique view of subjectivity. She argues that logic represents an instrument of
patriarchy, discussing the identity of Woman: “To believe that one ‘is a woman’ is almost
as absurd and obscurantist as to believe that one ‘is a man’ […] I therefore understand by
‘woman,’ that which cannot be represented, that which is not spoken, that which remains
outside naming and ideologies.” (Cavallaro 60-1) This skepticism towards logic
questions categories, and points out how they restrict an experience or concept into something else, something less—categories essentialize. Essentializing means using essential, or categorically descriptive, characteristics to define a person, often overlooking the reality of that person’s being and also often doing so at that person’s detriment. Warcraft’s use of myth to construct its virtual world and its object-collection gameplay give players a tendency to categorize. The game channels History and Adorno’s culture industry in its virtual world, constructing a perspective through reproduction of myth. This virtual world of pure myth creates an alternate-but-similar experience to that of hyperreality. The game offers players a way to reinscribe patriarchy in players, creating a place for them to satisfy the male gaze and mask difference. The myth of patriarchy defines gender from the male gaze and lets players place identity categories on others as a way to express their own anxiety.

Considering the dilemma of pathology from a contemporary position, the following analysis builds on the themes from the previous chapters. It discusses how the homogeneity of appearance in the game reinforces patriarchy, and how reducing sexual characteristics to exaggerated forms caters to the male gaze, both of which create identity categories. Not only does the game facilitate those myths, but player activity within the game perpetuates the same myths. When players congregate in large cities in the game, they tend to communicate with each other frequently in large chat channels, and many players often visit the game’s forums on its website. In these places, players behave and communicate in a way similar to the object-collection behavior, repetitive and possessive: joking, phrases, and ideas recurring with little to no variation, and often imposing the male gaze on women.
Understanding in a more particular way than Baudrillard how the divide between the universal and particular isolates the individual will help explain why players use common meanings arbitrarily and possessively as a way to overcome their anxiety of a meaningless existence.

The divide between universal and particular introduces the idea of isolation, the individual’s isolation from meaning. Prokhoris’ “The Prescribed Sex” discusses how the isolation of the self results in the arbitrary use of signification, stating: “we are from birth deprived, and therefore constrained to find support from the other, the neighbor, in order to survive [and this force] renews in welcoming us, the familiar, sometimes unrecognizable, echo of an experience.”(Oliver and Walsh 195) The idea of the Other represents the impossible connection between two particularities that, in their difference, try to find similar meaning between each other to determine identity, but because society subjected them to hollow generalities, grasp with possessive and arbitrary signifiers of meaning. The other personifies the horror of isolation and unknowing, the not-oneself, for which: “There is danger in addressing. Therefore, we face with horror, or anesthesia, the proven feeling of ‘unavoidable solidarity’.”(Oliver and Walsh, 195) This underlying need for a binding communication accounts for why players in Warcraft essentialize concepts of gender, where “We are ready to hold on to the determining factors which the signifiers arrange […] This appetite for consent is […] narrowly channeled from the imaginative resources which preside over the paths of identification.”(Oliver and Walsh 196) Identity, formed through the arbitrariness of meaning, clings to the socially mandated signifiers, an aspect of the myth of patriarchy, so that one can attempt to have a complete sense of self.
Applying Prokhoris’ idea to Warcraft, the individual player embodies and enacts this isolation through playing a game that represents the empty generality of myth. In the game, everything revolves around the player; the persistent world with thousands playing in it at once caters to each of those players as its center. One narrative exists, the game has the same story for every player, and the experience does not change. This can facilitate isolation of the player in the game. A figurative isolation from meaning, Warcraft uses a structure of the imaginary, creates false meaning using myth. This meaninglessness compels players to grasp onto a way to bind meaning.

Irigaray’s concept of sexual difference as it relates to the Other connects with Prokhoris and the isolated self. The Other represents what an individual sees as different, what that person displaces onto another individual as not him/herself. The act of Othering means an individual actively puts different characteristics onto another individual in the effort to see that person as different. An individual’s isolation from the real facilitates the creation of the Other: limited personal experience determines how he/she understands the difference between sexes, which leads to essentializing categories and Othering. The myth of western patriarchy makes this worse, as Irigaray explains: “the West has traditionally entertained a reductive notion of alterity, where ‘the other is not defined in his actual reality’ but as ‘another me’: in this framework, ‘there is not really any other, but rather only the same: smaller, greater, equal to me.’” (Cavallaro 63) The atomized individual, then, indoctrinated and resorting to his/her own unavoidably narrow perceptions, brings a reductionist mindset to the issue of gender. In the case of Warcraft, this means the isolated Player understands place and other players within the context of this narrow perspective. Prokhoris states:
The signifying universe buzzing with the discourses which circulate in every direction and which cross everyone is potentially so charged with ambiguities and disagreements, and is so extensive, that the bottleneck which rings out and folds back its possibilities in the univocal manner of an injunction, giving free reign in this way to the exorbitant power of the ‘discourse of the other’ of which only one version will be authorized—the ‘sovereignty of the signifier’—could at any moment implode. (Oliver and Walsh 197)

In this signifying universe, then, holding on to univocal ideas and views assures the individual against such an implosion. Therefore, the need to maintain the sovereignty of the signifier results in binaries, categorizations, and a reluctance to accept difference.

Figure 4.1. A Human Female Character.
Imagery in the game (See the above Figure 4.1), particularly of female characters’ cartoonish ballooning of erogenous areas, facilitates players’ seeing themselves and others as part of the male gaze. An early 20th century African vaudeville character, Sara Bartmann, written about in Sharpley-Whiting’s Black Venus: Sexualized Savages, Primal Fears, and Primitive Narratives in French illustrates how entertainment in culture can facilitate the male gaze. When discussing the illustrations of Bartmann, Sharpley states: “the sketches, yielding up Bartmann’s body, provide more visual clarity so that the gaze can fixate on the body in order to contemplate its anomalies.”(23) This rendering of a female body in Warcraft gives the male gaze an abstract object of desire reduced to a visual representation, upon which a player may then express the desire to possess objects using patriarchal discourse. This gaze influences male players to see female players of the game as an object of desire, while female players could potentially see themselves as that object also, where both perspectives essentialize and demean a sense of identity. The players in their individual, detached playing of the game, all potentially view the feminine differently yet, as Sharpley states: “Bartmann’s body is inscribed upon from the various perspectives […] While the points of view appear to reflect different positionalities, the ways of seeing the Other as exotic, amusing, invisible and as something to be eaten or consumed like roast been reflect sameness.” (21) Ways of seeing the feminine may differ, but exist along the continuum of the myth of patriarchy, which essentializes identity using concepts of gender. Players actively and tacitly take part in this discourse along a spectrum, with some explicitly using it and others condoning it through their passive acceptance.
Furthermore, images like Figure 4.1 promote a type of male gaze involved in patriarchal hierarchy, depicting a subordinate. Cindy Sherman’s art, as discussed in Claire Nahon’s “Excess Visibility of an Invisible Sex,” comments on male gaze and its multiple forms. Rather than one system of metaphor or signs, the image and its referents have many interpretations which can lead to Othering: “…far beyond the image as such, that which Sherman makes apparent with such subtlety: that which cannot be imaged, that which has no shape.” (Oliver and Walsh 165) Nahon’s comment about Sherman’s art reflects how each individual’s pathology forms in a unique way and relates to the male gaze in a particular way. The experience of playing the game and maintaining the male gaze results from a need for arbitrary signifiers, which stems from the isolation of particular from the universal.

Kristeva, when discussing semiotics, states: “The signs through which human beings attempt to express themselves and to communicate with others include not merely words and visual images but also gestures, postures, clothes, food, music, art, advertising and legion of other structures of symbolization…” (Cavallaro 79) Figure 4.1 represents an imagery semiotic system that reduces women to sexuality in the rendered figure, a system that pathologizing players interpret in the context of patriarchy’s myth. Just as figure 4.1 illustrates a sign of sexuality, the social structure within Warcraft tends to reinforce patriarchy through the collective use of phrases and concepts rooted in a semiotics of male power. Derivative of the myth of patriarchy, these systems of imagery and language in the game no longer have connection to the real but signify the abstraction of patriarchy, which players use to impose identity categories on themselves and others. Not every player takes part in this practice; the individual-oriented nature of the game can
support more than one approach and attitude. However, the discourse of patriarchy remains very strong in the game and its community, its pathology exists in degrees, from extreme and overt to passive and unconscious. Take, for example, Figure 4.2 versus 4.3. 4.3 shows overt patriarchy, with acerbic verbal attacks directed towards a woman meant to force her into a perceived identity category. The other, 4.2, shows players joking among themselves in a way that essentializes the feminine to a lesser degree. In large part, 4.2’s discussion reflects socially acceptable attitudes which denigrate women in a variety of ways, mostly jokingly, or that use overt sexualizing of women, while some also relates to 4.2, or resentment towards women—these all represent how players use the myth of patriarchy to impose identity categories.

Identity-formation means a distorted, unreal process, something incomplete after the meaningless generality of myth imposes itself on identity. Irigaray, commenting on Lacan’s theory of the mirror stage in the opening quote of the chapter, discusses the idea of distortion and identity. He takes this idea a step further: “…there are ultimately no selves, names or properties beyond representation in a system that posits identity itself as an effect of images.” (Cavallaro 62) The expression of the self through language reflects the disjointedness of identity formation, as Kristeva states: “all identities are unstable: the identity of linguistic signs, the identity of meaning and, as a result, the identity of the speaker.” (Cavallaro 78) To resolve fractured identity formation and language, a semiotics of dominance emerges in the attempt to create arbitrary generalizations to which pathologizing individuals attach themselves, thereby having a false sense of resolution in understanding themselves and their surroundings as unitary.
Warcraft, then, becomes an example of how contemporary culture can deal with the problem of troubled identity formation. Entertainment in the culture industry has the function of perpetuating identity categories in myths, which individuals use to essentialize language and behavior, expressing their conflicted identity through interaction with each other in the game and on its forums. Kristeva, when discussing the concept of the Other, discusses how ostracizing in effect shuns an aspect of oneself:

“…its own inherent otherness is projected onto the people whom it discriminates against, and the Other is thereby transformed into an external dimension of being […] we repress what we cannot come to terms with.” (Cavallaro 140) In an effort to possess, players project their own discomfort with identity onto people whom they categorize and ‘possess’ as certain ‘types’ such as categories of gender. Singling out and attacking another person in such a way so that their difference takes precedence over any other characteristics shows how players externalize and Other, like in the following example:
Figure 4.2. A collage of a forum topic (Do girls play Warcraft?).

Here a woman has written a topic asking if women play Warcraft, and has a variety of responses, most of which resemble the two lower entries. Instead of giving serious responses, many players tend to jokingly dismiss the question while also directly or indirectly insulting the woman. When discussing the insidious nature of vaudeville and how its depiction of native savagery was far from innocent of kind, Sharpley states:

“Jokes are explicitly linked to the production of pleasure. But jokes equally, according to Freud, carry implicit and insidious judgments about the object or objects of the joke[...] ‘a hostile joke (serving the purpose of aggressiveness, satire, or defense)” (33)
Sharpley’s writing applies as easily here as it does to vaudeville, because they both use entertainment and laughter as a screen for cultural self-loathing. These discussions on forums equate to a ‘performance’ like vaudeville in that, they reinforce the myth of patriarchy to express their own disjointed and uncertain identity. Take for instance the second response which compares the idea of Warcraft being a “man’s game” to voting, and by extension politics, in one swipe accusing women of lacking responsibility entirely. Just as in the vaudeville play with Bartmann, where her “symbolic presence acts as a mirror, legitimizing existing notions of the superiority of France and the inferiority of the Other,” (37) the presence of her question implicating her difference encourages other players to participate in an Othering, creating positions of power and inferiority.

Language, subjectivity, and the isolated self build towards the idea that Warcraft inscribes the patriarchal system on its players’ consciousnesses. Similar to the way that participating in the game gives ‘leadership skills’ for management jobs, like in the example used in chapter one, it also can impose through repetition a way to categorize identity. Irigaray states that “equality is merely a ploy designed to induce women to emulate men,” (Cavallaro 63) suggesting how instead of asserting unique individuality, women conform themselves to masculine standards. In Warcraft, genders have no difference whatsoever in their abilities or level of aptitude. Erasing difference, the game gives players a way to construct identities for each other defined in terms of patriarchy. The game facilitates reductive cultural myths: its gameplay of repetition encourages players to use this in relation to categorizing behavior, repeating essentializing cultural myths as a way to possess.
Warcraft sexualizes female characters with very sensuous, exaggerated bodies, while the male characters tend to appear hyper-masculine. Rather than exaggerated erogenous zones, the male characters have exaggerated bodies in regards to large upper-torsos and muscles. While both have equal power and abilities in gameplay, visually the male figures signify power and strength, while the female figures suggest sensuality and eroticism. And both game genders facilitate constructing an identity from the male gaze: male as position of power, female as object of desire. Thus, the discourse of the male gaze continues to exist, framing male and female as visually different yet players perceive them in terms of a relationship based on power, patriarchy. As part of their pathology, players both resent and desire the power relationship implied in patriarchy, similar Adorno’s theory about the Church and Army: institutions imposing meaning, causing resentment. Similar to the Other, they desire categorizing an individual in the category ‘woman,’ along with its implications and constructed meanings, giving themselves a false sense of identity. But these identities degrade the relationship they have to others and their understanding of themselves, because the identities’ meanings derive from meaningless generality, which causes resentment. Both genders in these categories act from a constructed position of power, subordination, and manipulation: “On the one hand, patriarchal discourses need to perpetuate this stereotypical notion [of woman as voraciously sexual] as one of their fundamental beliefs; on the other, they aim at curtailing woman’s supposedly deleterious powers by effacing the significance of her sexual functions.” (Cavallaro 57) This conflict deals with the seeking of players for a unified sense of self, which pits fragmented identities, meaningless language and a lost atomized self, against sexual desire, creating frustration, as the following illustrates:
Figure 4.3. Response to a forum thread (Who should not be a warrior).

The ramblings in Figure 4.3 respond to a woman arguing that female characters have the physical capability of warriors. Obviously inflamed, this person’s response shows an unwillingness to recognize an actual equality between men and women, especially when it comes to a characteristic that rivals his constructed sense of self (physical strength). Typical responses to an assertion like the woman’s: dismissive joking, pseudo-ironic statements or direct hostility. In this case, her incompatibility with the discourse of the male gaze evokes his direct hostility. This hostility occurs because she disrupted his constructed identity without placing herself within that structure. His sense of integrity (physical strength) has its meaning because of the Othering of feminine as lesser and weak, conflicting this incites outright threatening and violent language. This assertion does not agree with his construction of meaning, a subject close to his identity. His verbal

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3 The warrior ‘class’ in Warcraft uses melee attacks, and requires a great deal of physical strength.
assaults even reach beyond the game and attempt to insult her in real life, using a trope of internet come-backs “you’re fat.” The vitriolic reaction implies how his sense of identity forms around subordinate of women.

Psychologically, identity, language and the isolated self converge as a means to avoid confrontation with difference, difference in symbols, signs and ideas. The discourse of the male gaze and patriarchy facilitates this drive. Using the myth of patriarchy illustrates how players externalize their melancholy through objects. Using the game and those within it as a system of objects, the player engages in repetitive gameplay all with the goal of possessing and collecting. These goals, and the thinness of communication in the game, facilitate the treatment of other individuals in the game as objects, and as another goal- something to possess.
Chapter Five

Pathology of Melancholy, Part 2: Whiteness

“Dysconscious racism is a form of racism that tacitly accepts dominant white norm and privileges […] Uncritical ways of thinking about racial inequity accept certain culturally sanctioned assumptions, myths, and beliefs that justify the social and economic advantages white people have as a result of subordinating others. Anything that calls this ideology of racial privilege into question inevitable challenges the self-identity of white people who have internalized these ideological justifications.” Joyce E. King “Dysconscious Racism: Ideology, Identity, and Miseducation” Critical White Studies (128)

As with patriarchy, players can use white privilege as a means to express their pathological melancholy. Mythic dominance excludes the Other, and privileges white over non-white while essentializing non-whites. Instead of focusing on gender and sexuality, whiteness analyzes the issue of race to explain how players separate themselves from other races to maintain a sense of superiority. Players can reinforce the myth of whiteness in their language in the game, with racial jokes for example. Warcraft facilitates this expression of pathology, using reductive cultural myths about race in their construction of the game. Trolls, for example, represent a collection of myths about the difference of African-Americans, and Blacks in general, from the norm. Just as with patriarchy, a spectrum exists: some players express the myth of whiteness with overt racism, some mask racism in joking, and others just passively submit their attention to these myths as perpetuated in the game.
Within Warcraft, cultures exist where players bring a certain amount of familiarity from the real-world into the simulation—what they know from life, how to interact, the jokes they use—they bring myths of culture with which they have constructed their identities. Race, one type of identity construction, plays a role in how players communicate with each other. In order to maintain its control on identity formation, culture retained the meanings created from racism and converted them into acceptable, masked myths with the same meaning. Just as Adorno discussed how culture uses myths to impose control, this aspect represents how culture perpetuates identity based on race, encouraging people to create identities based on this fabrication. In the mythic environment of Warcraft this avoidance occurs, too: the game anthropomorphizes myths of race, and pathologizing players nostalgically retreat into socially and spatially restrictive groups to avoid confrontation with such issues.

The social norms in Warcraft, the jokes commonly used in it, its players’ choices of appearance and its subcultures all reflect ways in which players use race to Other, to essentialize, and impose identity categories on themselves and others. Richard Delgado’s *Critical White Studies* argues that white culture willfully avoids the problem of racism through a process of deterrence, refusing to acknowledge that white as an identity exists. Yet the process of differentiating race implies the presence of something in contrast, such as something in contrast to African-American. All aspects of culture relate to the differences between races, even through efforts to appear equal, they need to have distinction from one another. His theory reveals how race as an identity construction creates power relationships where the Othering of certain people, African-American, results in the empowerment of another group, whites. This relates to how Warcraft’s
gameplay uses a systematized, repetitive approach, which influences how players construct identity in a similarly systematized way. From lacking sense of identity, players systematically apply identity categories on their surroundings as a form of possession, in this case using the myth of race.

Condoned racism exists in Warcraft’s social chat environment. The game has a guideline of rules for social behavior that players enforce themselves. For example, one typically couldn’t shout extremely lewd, sexual comments around a large group of players—at least one player will ‘report’ the incident to a Game Master, who in turn punishes the player with a suspension from the game. In this sense the players themselves govern the rules, and punish those that fall outside of these informally agreed upon rules. In theory the system should work well, but players permit some wrong behavior and comments. For instance, players do not report certain types of jokes within the game, even though the jokes have blatantly racist content. An often used comment “Nagga stole my bike” substitutes a game-world creature with a similar sounding name (Naga) to the N-word to make a derisive, racist comment. Not used as a direct insult, players simply mention it to one another as a form of light amusement. Variations exist of this, making any racist comment substituting the world Nagga or Naga for the N-word. This kind of joking behavior represents pathological melancholy in that players repetitively externalize their anxiety about difference and meaning, trying to possess meaning and treating actual groups of people as objects, in this case, of derision.

When confronted and brought to the fore-front, this behavior which players unconsciously engage in as a form of comfort provokes anger. As a way to prove the defensiveness of whites when confronted with racism and their unwillingness to accept
accusations and responsibility, I entered the game world and asked many players if they thought the comment was racist. Below in figures 5.1 and 5.2 you will see their responses:
Figures 5.1 and 5.2. An in-game conversation in a large chat channel about Naga jokes. I have shaded out the irrelevant entries and, to respect identities in the game, I have shaded the names out. I am the darker shaded portion, while other players have a shade unique to them. Here they respond to the question of “Do you think the ‘Naga stole my bike’ joke is racist?”
Very common psychological responses: deflection, derision. Instead of taking the direct accusation seriously, they ask to ‘lighten up and forget about it.’ In Critical White Studies’ introduction, the book states that “Whiteness, acknowledged or not, has been a norm against which other races are judged,” (1) revealing how pathologizing players using whiteness Other people based on the concept of race. Yet in a confrontation with the meaninglessness of theses constructions and their identity based on them, they reinforce each other’s belonging with these responses and have aggressive responses towards the person questioning. This behavior reflects the myth of whiteness, which players reinforce for one another through language and informal codes of social conduct.

The author of “Great White Male” points out how white males have built a dominant power structure that caters to certain norms they have created, norms that view other races as less powerful. These views amount to collective myths, which dictate how individuals identifying themselves as white males interact with and govern each other. Personal connections and ‘moving ahead in the world’ based on status as a white male dictates one aspect of this view. Women and Asians, for example, have a different means of moving ahead—through a work ethic that does not rely on personal connections but the fruit of one’s work— “Those who are threatening the great white male—women, Hispanics and Asians—hold a totally different view of the world.” (5) The pathologizing player uses the myth of whiteness, in particular the comradery of whites, as a means to Other ‘lesser’ races, possessing them inherently undeserving of the same comradery, using essentializing and demeaning categories. As a way of expressing this view, the pathologizing player not only uses language and informal social codes of conduct such as
in Figures 5.1 and 5.2, but image semiotics of the game, such as the way a particular race looks, acts and sounds.

Players choose race and the race’s color of skin on an aesthetic basis, and based around what the individual see him/herself as not being. One particular race in the game, the troll, represents a hunched, tall, gangly green creature with tusks jutting out of its mouth:

![Figure 5.3. A Troll character at the character creation screen.](image)

In keeping with the somewhat cartoonish aspect of the game, many aspects such as races use the trope of anthropomorphizing, constructing humanoids as similar to traits of human beings. Troll speech, as represented in the voice acting, consists of poor grammar, lots of slang, with sentences often ended by a ‘mon’ as in a Jamaican stereotype. Often
times during the storyline of the game, it depicts trolls as savage and primal when in their jungle homes, and once in civilized environments regarded suspiciously as thieves and simpletons. The troll reflects a collection of various South American, Caribbean and African cultural stereotypes, and players choose this race the least in the game. According to a census website for Warcraft, warcraftrealms.com, one of the largest servers, holding a total of 16,310 players on the Horde faction (to which the Trolls belong), only 11% of players chose to make a Troll character. Yet another server, with 19,526 Horde characters and a total of 26,000 overall, again only 11% chose to create trolls. Across every server the census data shows the same result- players play troll characters the least. In this case, the game itself has facilitated racism: creating an anthropomorphic collection of racist stereotypes and perceptions. A strong part of why players, in their categorizing, choose other races comes from a racialized perception of Trolls as the ‘black’ characters, as ugly and hunched and primal—aesthetically made unappealing, and socially within the game players do not regard troll characters very highly. In a similar manner, when creating a character, players often choose skin tones that reflect them, something socially acceptable, i.e. white. Selecting tones that reflect themselves or the ideal of white, players use this aesthetic to impose myth of appearance on identity. The exclusion of trolls and darker skin tones suggests a social and individual sense of identity as not those characteristics, as ‘more white.’ Gallagher states in his section “White Racial Formation: Into the Twenty-First Century” that:

…whiteness is in the midst of a fundamental transformation. White identity is not only a reaction to the entrance of historically marginalized racial and ethnic groups into the political arena and the ensuing struggle over social resources. The
construction of whiteness is based … on a perception of current and future
material deprivation and the need to delineate white culture in a nondemonized
fashion. (7)

As part of this transformation and discovering whiteness as identity, immersing oneself in
the culture of Warcraft lets players create definitive cultures based on categories like
race. Operating through the abstraction of the game, players act out the desire for unity of
the self. In a static world of myth, they use the discourse of whiteness as a means to unify
their own self-perception, Othering and essentializing races.

Subcultures exist that take these characteristics into a more extreme form. Many
players enjoy making videos for youtube.com from the game itself, editing and synching
them to music, called ‘Machinima.’ Often machinima shows playful and entertaining
short videos sometimes imitating major films, music videos and so on. Yet they also tend
to reflect trends in the game’s social culture, even those such as the ‘Naga’ trend. One
player-made video in particular “Life of the Role Player: Episode 2: Life of the Naga”
quite horrifically pronounces its racism. In the short movie, a dark-shaded human
character called ‘Bikestealer,’ described by the short movie as a ‘Dirty Naga’ (figure 5.4)
happens upon some object he apparently intends to steal.
Once he gets closer to it, four white-robed, white colored characters rush to capture him and promptly kill him. Later their leader declares “This dirty Naga has besmirched the clan of the white! He has been punished to death and shall be crucified!” (figure 5.5) and “Now we burn his corpse and hopes he burns in hell… FOREVER!!”
Figure 5.5. Screen capture of the youtube.com video “Life of the Role Player – Episode 2: Life of the Naga.”

The video concludes with a farcical chase scene where the hooded white characters (an obvious allusion to the KKK) chase the ‘Naga’ character in circles to the Chicken Dance song (a derisive reference to the stereotype that all African-Americans enjoy chicken, and an arcane reference to their acting like chickens in farces like black-face performances). While an extreme form of racism in the game, players may still ignore, shrug off, or even condone this kind of behavior, something not unfamiliar or infrequent. One could infer the participants’ young age from poor spelling and grammar, and dismiss the behavior as simply immature and ignorant. However, more mature and adult players tend to ignore
these occurrences and sometimes participate in them, either way they are often tacitly condoned. Regardless of age, that any player made this represents how thoroughly humor can give a false sense of unity of the self, it generalizes and demeans, all while giving the person using it a clean conscience.

Myth exists in the game in many ways which reflect how culture treats race. The idea of the culture industry relates, in that Warcraft uses race as a way to mime, entertaining the player through his/her reproduction of him/herself as a particular color of skin and anthropomorphized appearance. This indulges the need to have a sense of identity, but not in a way which gives players anything real. It perpetuates the simulation, a fabrication of difference about identity. These fabrications, discussed here and in relation to patriarchy, show how culturally defined identities such as gender and race lead to an inherent imbalance of power between individuals subject to categories of identity. This results from that need to Other and possess, to express and externalize the problem of no identity, meaninglessness, and infinite particularity: displacing resentment and lesser characteristics that we see in ourselves onto others.
“The Only Reality in Which Any of Us Can Believe”

“We make sense of our world and construct our identities, in significant measure, out of the physical and cultural materials that surround us. Not only do we enjoy the products and entertainment that we consume; these things become an integral part of who we are. In our age of mass consumption, more and more of this stuff is produced not by us but for us, not according to the logic of community tradition or individual inspiration, but according to the pecuniary rationale of the market. The result is a historical separation between us, as individuals, and the entertainment and products we use, enjoy and derive meaning from. In brief: we are alienated from what we consume.” Duncomb - Notes from Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture (107)

Considering the dire state of self in the environment of the game, its options for positive change seem very limited. The previous psychoanalytic theories such as Baudrillard’s frame the issue to make this problem appear permanent and immutable. The desire for unity of the self, when presented with the myth construction of the game, can result in acts of dominance such as the ones illustrating patriarchy and whiteness. Both the fourth and fifth chapters reflect how players engage in imposing categories of identity on others. But the main point rests on how Warcraft elicits behavior in a systemized way. Resisting this, standing outside constructed positions of power, and avoiding them, can offer a way to escape falling into that pattern of behavior. Ludology, the study of games, explains how games give players a meaningful way to resist the dominance of myth.
Assertion of the self through avoiding the systematized behavior encouraged in the game, using performance and creativity, players can offer intriguing ways to change the course of the problem of repetitive desire for object possession. This figurative externalizing of the libido from the self reverts the problematic of melancholic pathology. Instead of a deterrence machine set up to reaffirm the cycle of a false reality, Warcraft can give players a platform to express themselves in a unique, innovative way which disrupts the process of repetitive behavior. Instead of maintaining myths that perpetuate power, players can opt to not participate and create meaning from their experience rather from constructed myth, outside of the universal and related to their particular selves.

Warcraft evidences a large and thriving culture of creativity. This exists in a variety of forms, from player-activity within the game to player-made art. Through the community and game, players find ways to express their views and/or art. Using a medium which many similar minded people can participate in, Warcraft gives an inexpensive, accessible form of expression. In a discussion reviewing Ludology, I reveal how Warcraft resembles a game in their language, and how players can use the game as a way to express themselves. I also discuss the perspective of Duncombe and his review of Zine culture, which parallels the process of individuals resisting culture and asserting themselves through creativity.

McKenzie Wark, in Gamer Theory, describes the Gamer Theory’s premise: “Gamer theory is not about asserting the absolute uniqueness of games, nor about assimilating them to other forms (novel, cinema), but rather about marking the game’s difference from these forms as something that speaks to changes in the overall structure of social and technical relations.” (225) If games reflect changes in social and technical
relations, then even indirect aspects of gaming can help illuminate these changes. Take the ever-shrinking, more personalized culture of art, for example. It has become more cerebral, less populist and more expensive in the past twenty years. The gap between the general population and this culture grew, and has remained with barriers of class, money and celebrity. A given individual’s ability to express artistically and have themselves recognized in a public sphere generally has diminished. However, with social spaces in online gaming, players use this disconnected, separate world to express themselves while having an audience. Through gaming they have a common metaphorical language for expression, a language they use for purposes beyond the game itself.

Investigating the nature of games from early writers Johan Huizinga and Roger Caillois will help facilitate understanding creativity in Warcraft. At its root, it may not hold direct similarities with the kinds of games analyzed in their works, but the concepts behind their analyses still have strong relevance in explicating how a game and play gives players a way to resist mythic structures.

Huizinga in *Homo Ludens* describes how the pressures of reality to some extent do not exist within game, “As regards its formal characteristics, all students lay stress on the disinterestedness of play. Not being ‘ordinary’ life it stands outside the immediate satisfaction of wants and appetites…” (9) This accounts for how players have a greater willingness to express in a game; the milieu has altered from a world of constraints to a more carefree environment. He states that “A play community generally tends to become permanent even after the game is over,” and that “the feeling of being ‘apart together’ in an exceptional situation, of sharing something important, of mutually withdrawing from the rest of the world and rejecting the usual norms, retains its magic beyond the duration
of the individual game.” (12) Although he tends to base his theory around the idea of a sacred game-space, a “magic circle,” much less difference exists between the game and the real in an MMORPG. Warcraft represents a large scale ‘play community’ wherein webs of interrelated social groups and networks of forums and websites constantly act to reinforce the ‘apart together’ feeling among players. Players create many of these sites, creation from the impulse to perpetuate the game outside of itself, and also to express views and ideas through the language of the game.

Within the game for Huizinga, play means “free, [and] is in fact freedom. A second characteristic is closely connected with this, namely, that play is not ‘ordinary’ or ‘real’ life. It is rather a stepping out of ‘real’ life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own.” (8) Following from this idea, a player within Warcraft has relative free-reign over how he/she decides to act. The ‘disposition’ of Warcraft means that a player may behave any way he/she wants. Through this freedom many players, even though for Huizinga play “is ‘played out’ within certain limits of time and place. It contains its own course and meaning,” (9) decide to create new meaning with the language of the game. Player-made videos, art and creative social behavior represent a playful creativity related to but not part of the game. Again, though “All play moves and has its being within a play-ground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally deliberately or as a matter of course,” (10) Warcraft as a ‘play-ground’ exists for its players conceptually as a series of ideas and experiences which they reproduce indirectly through creative art and performance. Huizinga describes how some of this happens, as play “promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other
means.” (13) This difference from the rest of the world, a contained knowledge about the
game, manifests itself not only through secrecy but expression using the internal
language of Warcraft. He describes how the ludic function accomplishes this: “the
function that is operative in the process of image-making or imagination is that it is a
poetic function; and we define it best of all by calling it a function of play.” (25) For
Huizinga then, the ludic function accounts for the innovative player activity surrounding
the game, a ‘poetic,’ artistic expression using imagination.

Caillois, talks about the social nature of games in Man, Play and Games and
mentions the essentialness of social interaction in the enjoyment of every type of game:
“It is painful to find oneself alone at a spectacle […] It is also clear that one is disguised
or masked for the sake of others.” (40) Although he tends to connect many types of
games with competition as the root for a social requirement, “games of skill may quickly
become games of competitive skill […] There is an element of rivalry in these varied
activities, and everyone tries to vanquish his rivals…” (39) Warcraft captures this
element of a social game, with nearly every aspect of the game either reliant on or related
to social play: raiding, pvp, role-playing, all require at least cooperation between multiple
players. It also represents a game which manages to combine three types of Caillois’
games: Agon, Alea and Mimicry. Agon (competitive) and Alea (luck, chance based) both
adhere to the idea that: “they imply opposite and somewhat complementary attitudes, but
they both obey the same law—the creation for the players of conditions of pure equality
denied them in real life.” (19) On Mimicry: “One is confronted with a diverse series of
manifestations, the common element of which is that the subject makes believe of makes
others believe that he is someone other than himself.” (19) Within his definition of
games, Warcraft encompasses many aspects, giving players the opportunity to participate in its environment in many different ways.

Both Huizinga and Caillois lay groundwork for what constitutes a game, and support why Warcraft reflects a ‘game’ and fosters a community. Two kinds of creativity related to the game—player art and in-game performance—display how players use the game to express their creativity in the game’s environment.

**In-game Performance**

Gary Alan Fine’s *Shared Fantasy* investigates player culture of dungeons and dragons in the early 80’s. That social world to some degree mirrors with player culture in Warcraft, in that social codes along with the game’s rules / structure enforce player behavior, although to a lesser extent. Player’s behavior can sometimes not directly relate to achieving any game goals whatsoever, and when coupled with an audience, dictates how they can express their creative impulses. This type of behavior takes many forms, often as a spontaneous collection of players entertaining one another. Fine’s idea of an idioculture, a “system of knowledge, beliefs, behaviors, and customs peculiar to an interacting group to which members refer and employ as the basis of further interaction,” (136) applies to Warcraft, where these groups use their common knowledge of the game to purposefully not
involve themselves in the game. Listless, social behavior such as that in Figure 6.1 reveal how players use common knowledge from the game’s culture to express their creativity. Granted, a dance animation involves a simple activation and your avatar begins a pre-programmed dance routine, however players often think of innovative types of expression through a system of ‘emoting’ and typed communication. A negative side of creative performance exists for Fine when he (briefly) mentions the treatment of women. His example discusses the DMing\(^4\) of a game where he states: “Frequently male NPCs who have not hurt the party are executed and female NPCs raped for sport.” (44) A chauvinistic, even sometimes racist culture can and does exist, which some players, as seen in the previous chapters, reveal. All of these characteristics are reflections of the

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\(^4\) DMing means being a dungeon-master. In Dungeons and Dragons, players would all interact with each other, and follow the narrative of a game. The DM told the narrative of the game, and controls the gameplay.
same negatives in culture, as Game Theory initially suggested, but the positive aspect of creative expression implies that players’ performing or expressing in a conscientious manner can resist the presence of these myths of dominance. To return to the example of dancing: A player could hypothetically begin dancing in a crowded city area and find that many players join him/her. From there he/she could use a series of emotes or typed words, with other players participating or being spectators, effectively a spontaneous performance. Fine says that “Players must identify with their characters in order for the game to be a success (214),” which applies to creativity in Warcraft in such a way that a personality or reputation becomes that center rather than the character itself. The example of a player dancing and holding other players’ attention leads to what influences the performer. Whether or not the player resists mythic structure represents the difference between this and players expressing racist or sexist categorizing.

The pen and paper world of fantasy gaming has evolved, especially with respect to frames and frame-shifting. Fantasy games to Fine have a flexible, loose stability, which lend them to shifting. Up or downkeying, or moving between frames, represents how focus on one immersion moves to another, like moving from immersion in a game to talking about one’s day. When explaining the concept of Frame-shifting, Fine states that “people make sense of their perceptions through multiple realities […] a frame [is] a situational definition constructed in accord with organizing principles that govern both the events themselves and participants’ experiences of these events.” (181) This idea of multiple shifting realities applies especially to games because they “are quintessential

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5 A frame means engrossment in a system of meaning, how the object of one’s focus influences one’s point of view. Shifting frames means changing from one focus to another.
examples for frame analysis because of their capacity for inducing engrossment. That is, voluntarily cutting oneself off from other realms of experience…” (182) Warcraft as a mythic construction constitutes the frame of systematized gameplay, but performing players and the immediacy of other players (if they communicate) can inform a sense of identity.

Dancing and talking about the Iraq war, for example, could hold political significance for a player; it could make an ironic statement about the frivolity of the war, or reflect complete irreverence meant to induce confusion and argument among players. Nonetheless, its public performance provokes at the minimum a reaction from spectators. Where for Fine “Fantasy gaming represents a pure game in that engrossment in the game world is the dominant reason for playing,” (185) Warcraft becomes a hybridized fantasy game and public forum which overcomes the binary opposition between engrossment and the likelihood of frame-shifting. For Dungeons and Dragons, “Both voluntary involvement and fun are related to the nature and extent of engrossment—but these are analytically separable constructs that affect engrossment while increasing or decreasing the likelihood of frame-shifting.” (197) But for Warcraft, engrossment in the game becomes a multifaceted idea where not just the game but its concept and associations are all part of one entity. Discussing real life issues within the game while dancing would break systematized engrossment, the presence of multiple ‘frames’ coexisting results in letting players creatively use of disrupting frames and making other players shift.

Though Ian Bogost’s focus in Procedural Rhetoric focuses on how a game and its construction convey a message through its structure, one could just as easily look at the form and function of a gamer’s innovative expressions within a structure as creative. He
discusses the “serious game” whose rhetoric conveys a message to the player, an ideologically influenced political message:

Videogames that engage political topics codify the logic of a political system through procedural representation. By playing these games and unpacking the claims their procedural rhetoric make about political situations, we can gain an unusually detached perspective on the ideologies that drive them. (75)

The concept of procedural rhetoric, when altered from its structuralist analysis of the game, could represent a player’s agency in determining what message he/she wants to convey in disrupting. For Bogost, the form of a game can resemble analog forms of expression: “Taken together, we can think of game engines, frameworks, and other common groupings of procedural tropes as commensurate with forms of literary or artistic expression, such as the sonnet, the short story, or the feature film.” (14) Now imagine the informal rules governing players’ social relationships to one another, the way a given player will typically think, and the ‘procedure’ of behavior. A player can use this idea, just as much as a game’s structure, to disrupt other players’ submission to dominant systems of myth and the engrossing frame of object-collection.

Continuing with the dance and politics example, the player structures the situation so that spectators have an expectation (entertainment, brief enjoyment), but the player manipulates the protocol of social behavior so that a political discussion rises out of innocent entertainment, influencing the spectator and bringing him/her out of systematized behavior. The idea that players can sometimes purposively act in a disruptive manner for some desired effect reflects Steven Duncomb’s discussion of Brecht, from the book mentioned in the opening quote of the chapter:
This desire to have an audience ‘read’ and ‘react’ also lay behind Bertolt Brecht’s ‘epic theater’. Horrified by the fact that his audience might ‘lose’ themselves watching one of his political plays, Brecht set out to create a theater that purposely alienated the audience from what they were viewing […] He hoped that his plays would encourage the members of the audience to think about their own situation. (128)

Encouragement to contemplate how myth affects identity, this kind of performance can require other players to think about their position in relation to the performance. Just as in his discussion of zines and their proponents, Duncombe states “The strategy of the zine rebel is one of removal: of communicating feelings of alienation by alienating herself from society,” (25) the same sort of strategy exists for players to communicate the alienation inherent in the total myth of the game, through the game itself. While the player can only manipulate so much, the effect could resemble those of games focusing on ethics, which Bogost discusses here:

[…] videogames can represent ethical doubt through logics that disrupt movement along one moral register with orthogonal movement along another. On the other hand, videogames can represent ethical positions through logics that enforce player behavior along a particular moral register. (287)

The same example applies where the player disrupts the typical moral register of an issue through pressure of a social nature, where others may reinforce or conflict in views, the process of conflict about the issue becomes the message. The presence of a theater for individual assertions gives players a way to express themselves and create their own sense of identity.
**Player Art**

The collection *The State of Play: Law, Games, and Virtual Worlds* brings together a number of speeches and articles related to player rights in virtual worlds and games. Most of the book focuses on an idea with serious implications that a player and his/her time invested in a game represent property and should have protection. The substance, then, of most its articles do not relate to player creativity, however their conceptual basis does. Players’ attachment to the virtual world holds importance. Ultimately players’ attachments inform how they can use a game as a platform to create their own interpretation of its meaning, using art.

Grimmelmann’s article, “Virtual Power Politics” discusses the relation between players and designers and how important each is in respect to changing the game environment. When discussing players’ motivations, he states: “Players play games for many reasons, including the pleasure of facing a challenge and overcoming it, the pleasure of competing with others and of acquiring superior social status, the pleasure of socializing with friends, and the pleasure of collaborating with others in the pursuit of a common goal.” (149) These all constitute reasons for a player’s involvement in a given game, but also for why he/she may decide to undertake the effort of creating something using the language or imagery of the game.

Part of Koster’s “Declaring the Rights of Players,” an exercise in deliberating rights for gamers, touches on the subject of the avatar: “avatars are the manifestation of actual people in an online medium, and their utterances, actions, thoughts, and emotions should be considered to be as valid as the utterances, actions, thoughts, and emotions of people in any other forum, venue, location, or space” (57) This concept exists not only
for players in the game, but on a meta-level for them to think conceptually about the game, their avatar, and their personalities. This investment holds a truism for players, due to the interaction between engrossment, a sense of one’s avatar and personality mixing together producing engrossment in the game. In a similar way, Duncomb’s analysis of Zines and Zine culture discusses the struggle to find and express the authentic self, against the norms and entertainment conventions of society, as driving the underground movement of Zines. To the Zine culture, “It is these sorts of things—the experiences, the ideas—which are ‘nothing at all’ to the dominant society, whether because they are too regular, or too far outside what is regular, the zines represent and communicate.” (26)

The dejected individual and his/her fragmented identity reconcile the incomplete, socialized self through reaction against cultural norms.

Having an investment in the game in some way results in the sense of connection and understanding, like the social group of Huizinga, and players sometimes choose to use this as a way to create new meaning using that collective understanding. Art such as that in the following figure illustrates this point:
Looking at Figure 6.2 one can see an obvious effort on behalf of the artist to create a detailed, stylistically satisfying work which relates to the game. The color palette reflects a similar range of reds and oranges present in the area where trolls originate within the game, showing how the artist intends to depict this troll in its natural habitat. Some of its equipped items resemble items in the game, and furthermore the troll’s posture, expression, and seating above a pile of skulls create a menacing atmosphere. This use of the game’s imagery and functions as a personal expression relate to “Power Politics” in *State of Play* that states: “The software constitutes the ‘reality’ of the virtual world, by
establishing a common set of metaphors for the players to share […] These common metaphors, together with the logic by which the software responds to player requests to manipulate them, define the game.”(150) In this case the use of the game’s metaphors for art lets this player give actively create meaning onto the metaphors, rather than tacitly accepting or reproducing them.

Creation in the game represents a proactive player, playing with the mythic construction of not only the game but also reality itself, questioning how representation can dictate identity. The following figure 6.3 ironically juxtaposes a small, young girl with a giant orc simultaneously shouting the same taunting words of battle, commenting on the difference between avatar and player’s position of power in reality versus the game. The player who created this comic uses the language of Warcraft along with self-consciousness about the game, commenting on game diversity, and how identity becomes amorphous.
Wark, through variety of interconnected ideas theorizing about games and their philosophical implications, discusses the nature of “the digital game” as an evolved form. He states that “the form of the digital game is an allegory for the form of being. Games are our contemporaries, the form in which the present can be felt and, in being felt, thought through,” (225) implying that existing in a game and its mode of being reflects the individual’s experience of reality; understanding experience from myth’s construction. He distinguishes passively existing in myth from actively trying to reconcile with disconnect from reality in his example discussing the storyline of Katamari
Damacy⁶: “The storyline’s last task is to erase itself and initiate the new conditions of difference for gamespace. This task—like that of Sisyphus—must be endlessly repeated.” (93) Here one could compare the idea of the shifting narrative and storyline into repeating unique phenomena as an expression of creativity. This represents a way to resist systematized behavior enforced through linear object-driven gameplay. Similar to the gameplay of Katamari, players continue to create art in an infinite variety of forms depending on their imagining and using language and imagery of the game for expression. Take the following Figure 6.4:

*Figure 6.4. Player-made comic from World of Warcraft main site.*

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⁶ Katamari Damacy is a game with a very simple concept, for the player to roll up objects in an environment with a sticky ball that picks up everything it rolls over.
This connects the language of the game—a gnome, his place as somewhere specific in the game, the phrase “Steelgrills” (a gnome repair area), his mechanical ‘mount’, the expression “/sigh”—with a language of experience in real life—“gnome depot (a pun for Home Depot),” the idea of a commercial hardware store and an individual’s reluctance to patronize it. Visually, it blurs the normal Warcraft environment and distorts it slightly, while inserting a tweaked image of a Home Depot store in the game environment.

Combining the Warcraft world with real life woes conceptually and visually, the artist shows how “The digital inscribes gamespace within the subject itself,” (96) and how a line between the gamespace and the real becomes blurred. It also shows how the gamespace and the real distinguish themselves from one another, through using their difference as a trope for humor. This comic, while at its surface offers a small chuckle to players familiar with the game language, also implies through its subject matter that the game and real life are to some degree indistinguishable in how myth pervades both.

Humor can give a healthy outlet for the anxiety of separation from the real, which this meta-comedy provides. The previous two comics do not need to have explicit meanings, and players certainly interpret them differently, another aspect of the creativity and art: but both comics relate to how the player as artist and audience can resist myth’s structure of meaning, in this case through self-consciousness and humor.

While the player culture of Warcraft does not have the same world renown as most contemporary art scenes, it has become, like any other social environment, a venue for expression. In a time at its most atomized, individuals resort to personal modes of expression such as MySpace and YouTube. But these environments exist largely in a
vacuum, where one person knows the other only through thin language and stripped down communication. As the quote from Wark in the beginning of the paper states, Games provide a lens through which society can be viewed. Players can use games to deconstruct their existence in mythic systems, manipulating meaning and categories of the game as resistance against systematized myth. Warcraft’s contextual richness allows players to express themselves associatively through the game, letting them proactively reconstruct the identity lost through creative reinterpretation of signs in the game. Using the game’s imagery and form to communicate innovatively with others reflects, after all, the goal of art, to reach the audience with one’s message—and the process of doing so liberates melancholic anxiety.
Conclusion

The universal uses hollow generality to define itself, having based itself off of myths, concepts with no referent in the real. The particular, or the individual, defines him/herself through these hollow generalities because myth, or the universal, exists at every level of culture. Culture indoctrinates and prescribes viewpoints for the particular, as a means of control over individuals. Individuals accept this process reluctantly like a sickness that no one can diagnose. This sickness relates to Freud’s concept of melancholy, where attachment to the lost love-object represents attaching universal’s meaning onto the particular.

Identity, regardless of gender, ought to have its roots in mutual understanding and respect rather than arbitrary categorizations, yet institutions of entertainment force these myths using systematized structures like Warcraft. The player’s relationship to Warcraft represents the connection of the individual to society, one subject to the imposition of myth. The imposition of myth can degrade perception and behavior into the pathology of melancholy. However, individuals can resist the systematized nature of the game with divergent activities such as comics, performance and art.

Using the language of Warcraft in a unique and innovative way as an individual not subject to the mythic system can overcome the pathology of melancholy. Using the game as a platform of expression, actively rather than as a passive experience of fitting into a system, lets the individual experience the process of creating meaning. Regulated through a social atmosphere this creation can serve a utility of humor, entertainment and comradesy, where creation of meaning brings about a positive outcome. As it relates to
patriarchy, one way to resist its presence in the game becomes what Kristeva concludes about women: “Woman, then, denotes a subject position that must always retain elements of fluidity and liminality if it is to escape a fate of reductive stereotyping analogous to the one imposed upon women by patriarchy through the binary representation of femininity.” (Cavallaro 61) A fluidity could exist in any number of ways, as long as it provokes thought and helps break down the unhealthy barrier of Othering with the male gaze. Players can use artistic expression and performance to provoke this fluidity because art, in its infinite particularity, defies the categorization typical of identity construction. Reconciling and understanding the limitations of the incomplete self through multiple conflicting discourses could be a means to combating this behavior.

The MMORPG maintains large player bases and immerses its players into an environment that never finishes; no ‘beating the game.’ It can give players a way to repeat their anxiety of a constructed identity, to anxiously use its systems of repetition and to reinscribe myths over themselves continually, a deterrence machine. But this game also has the potential to give its players a sort of freedom, a way to resist structures of meaning; it just depends on the player.
References


