

Blog Post 3: Unpacking *World of Warcraft*

Minimum 500 words

Due Monday, October 27th

As should be clear, *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004-2014) is an immense game, one that none of us will finish or completely traverse during the month allotted for play. Further, *Warcraft* is quite complex in a variety of ways. It has a tremendously large narrative, one you may only glimpse in your travels around Azeroth. It is highly allusive and referential, oftentimes comically so, drawing upon and pointing toward many aspects of popular culture, other videogames, and even itself. It has a complex in-game economy. It has its own set of social norms, discourses, and behaviors. And, of course, its mechanics, systems, procedures, and what Ian Bogost elsewhere calls “unit operations”¹ have provided millions of players worldwide with countless hours of play. In short, it is what I have begun calling in my own work a *megatext*, a text that is simply too large to traverse in nontrivial ways, and perhaps too large for any single person to experience. As any quick search of the *WoW Wiki* or other internet forums on the game will demonstrate,² *Warcraft* calls for, encourages, and has produced considerable *collective* engagement. I would like to see us do something similar with the game by using the tools of the blog to collectively critically read and play the game, turning the blog into a site of research and a resource for other students that draws upon the communal nature of play and blogging to produce more knowledge and critical engagement than any of us could alone. I have provided four options for how you may add to our collective critical reading of the game. Please choose one option for Blog Post 3.

Option 1: Criticism

We will be reading a number of interesting essays from Hilde G. Corneliussen and Jill Walker Rettberg’s collection, *Digital Culture, Play, and Identity: A “World of Warcraft” Reader* (2008) over the next month. But we do not have time to read all the essays. For this option I would like you to select one essay that we are *not* covering in class and to write a report and a response to it. First, introduce the essay, describe its argument, and locate its critical stakes. Then describe and show how the critic reads and interprets *Warcraft*, how they *support* their argument. Pick significant, specific moments of reading and interpretation to focus on. You will probably find that some of these essays are difficult and complex. Focus on those moments of difficulty and complexity and try to account for them, try to see what the critic is trying to do and trying to say. Second, I would like you to *engage* with the critic, to comment on their reading, to extend their thinking. One easy way of going about this would simply be to answer the following questions: Do you agree or disagree with the critic? Why or Why not? What has the critic done well? What have they overlooked? You may choose, however, to build upon the critic’s work (or read them against the grain), to go *further* in your reading, to allow their insights to lead you toward new, interesting, novel ways of engaging with the game. Though agreeing/disagreeing with a critical text can be an effective way of engaging with it, I find that more often being *generous*, trying to read criticism critically, to see what *more* the critic might have *opened up*, can be a more productive and useful way of reading, writing, and thinking.

¹ See Ian Bogost, *Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006).

² For the *WoW Wiki* see <http://www.wowwiki.com/Portal:Main>.

Option 2: Procedure

For the second option, I would like you to focus on some *procedural, formal* aspect of the game, one of the game's mechanics (e.g., battle systems, PvP, etc.) or its other various systems (the Auction House, trade chat, etc.). For this option I would like you to principally focus on *form* in manner similar to Alexander R. Galloway's in "Gamic Action, Four Moments" or Bogost's in *How to Do Things with Videogames*. In other words, how might interpreting and analyzing the formal aspects of this medium (the videogame, the MMORPG, etc.) allow you to say something about the kinds of *meaning* the game produces (remember McLuhan's dictum: "the medium is the message"³). Bogost calls this kind of formal meaning making "procedural rhetoric," that the game is *saying* something through how its various gamic, machinic procedures operate. For this option, pick one small, specific aspect of the game's procedures to closely and carefully interpret, and make an *argument* for what kind of meaning is being produced, an argument about the game's procedural rhetoric.

Option 3: Intertextuality

World of Warcraft is a game that wears its influences on its sleeve, drawing readily and unapologetically from other Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games and popular culture to weave its gamic fabric. For this option, I would like you to investigate one of the intertextual references *Warcraft* makes, either to other videogames or some other aspect of culture. After you have selected a reference or allusion you find interesting, problematic, strange, confusing, etc., I would then like you to do the following things. First, consult the *WoW Wiki* to see what it has to say about the reference. Where might it lead you? Second, I would like you to do some further digging on your own. What else might you learn about this reference? For this you will want to get into the archive. Perhaps you might begin by consulting Wikipedia, but as this is a notoriously unscholarly and inaccurate resource, I do not want you to stop there. Get into the library, into the stacks, into PittCat's databases and see what more you can learn. Basically, what can you learn about the reference the game is making. Third, I would like you to report on your findings. For this option, quote or describe the moment where your reference occurs at the top of your post. Then begin by describing the intertextual reference that *Warcraft* is making and provide some context for where and how this reference is made in the game. After this, provide a short "research report" on your findings. What is significant about the game's reference? Where is it situated in history? Where did this reference take you? What sources did you look at (cite them)? What interesting discoveries did you make? Lastly, I would like you to then use what you have found out in your research to critically engage with the game, potentially using this reference to open up some other aspect of *Warcraft*. Basically, how might this reference allow you to interpret the game? What kinds of close readings might it produce? What else in the game might be important to consider with regard to your research? In short, what kind of *argument for an interpretation* does knowing about, researching, and understanding the game's reference allow you to make?

Option 4: Narrative

As said, *Warcraft* has an immense narrative. For this fourth option, I would like you to do a bit of research on an aspect of the narrative that intrigues you. As said, it is quite possible that you will miss much if not most of the game's narrative while playing the game. This option hopes to

³ Marshall McLuhan, "The Medium is the Message," in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, critical ed., ed. Terrence Gordon (Corte Madera, CA: Gingko, 2003), 19.

account for that by allowing you to gather together some of the diverse threads of *Warcraft's* narrative. Begin by choosing some *small* aspect of the narrative that intrigues you. This could either come from your experience of the game, or else arise from your further knowledge or research. Next, figure out as much as you can about this aspect of the game's narrative and how it fits into the larger world of the game. Consult the *WoW Wiki*, the game's website (which provides a *lot* of narrative detail), other online forums, the novels published in conjunction with the game, etc., to see what you can learn. Then I would like you to report on your findings. Begin by describing the narrative aspect of the game you are focusing on. Remember here that your fellow classmates may not be familiar with the narrative you are presenting, so some amount of description and synopsis is necessary. (I would also like you to describe *how* you encountered the narrative that you did: either through the game, online reports, reading a novel, etc.) But obviously I would like you to go considerably beyond just description and synopsis, allowing what you've learned to inform your critical reading of the game. So lastly, I would like you to then use what you have found out in your research to critically engage with the game. Basically, how might you *read* the game's narrative? What is critically interesting about this aspect of the narrative? How does it illuminate or complicate some other aspect of the game? How does the narrative converge with the game's formal and procedural conventions? What is the relationship between the game's content (the narrative) and its form (procedure)? In short, what kind of *argument for an interpretation* does knowing about, researching, and understanding the game's narrative allow you to make?