

Essay 2: Media Microecologies of *World of Warcraft*

5-6 pages

due Monday, November 10th

due as hardcopy and on SafeAssign

Any medium—poetic, literary, cinematic, computational—can be read as a configurative system, an arrangement of discrete, interlocking units of expressive meaning. I call these general instances of procedural expression unit operations.

—Ian Bogost, *Unit Operations*¹

Play is no longer a counter to work. Play becomes work; work becomes play. Play outside of work found itself captured by the rise of the digital game, which responds to the boredom of the player with endless rounds of repetition, level after level of difference as more of the same. Play no longer functions as a foil for critical theory. The utopian dream of liberating play from the game, of a pure play beyond the game, merely opened the way for the extension of gamespace into every aspect of everyday life. While the counter-culture wanted worlds of play outside the game, the military entertainment complex countered in turn by expanding the game to the whole world, containing play forever within it.

—McKenzie Wark, *Gamer Theory*²

Failure in games tells us that we are flawed and deficient. As such, video games are the art of failure, the singular art form that sets us up for failure and allows us to experience and experiment with failure.

—Jesper Juul, *The Art of Failure*³

Ian Bogost's book, *How to Do Things with Videogames* (2011), takes up a deceptively modest project. Rather than attempt to formulate some all-encompassing theoretical approach to videogames, how they interact with other media, and what they do in our world—what famous media theorist Marshall McLuhan and others would call a “media ecology”—Bogost wants to dig into the dirt of videogames, to look at small, overlooked aspects of games, and to study them “microecologically.” He wants to approach videogames as an entomologist or a nanotechnologist or an archaeologist would. This approach is genealogically tied to McLuhan's famous dictum, “the medium is the message”—that whatever content or meaning resides in any particular text should primarily be understood in terms of the formal properties of the medium—but it also comes from Bogost's awareness that the message is *also* the message. In a staggeringly diverse approach to many aspects of videogames, Bogost's book is a first, albeit small step toward a media microecology of videogames.

For your second essay I would like you to take up Bogost's project, to approach *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004-2014) from the position of a media microecologist. *Warcraft* is an immense game, one that cannot conceivably be traversed over even the course of a month of play. Indeed, people who have been playing for years still encounter new aspects of the game. And further, it is a game that is constantly in flux, changing over time, becoming something different than what it once was on a near daily basis. In short, one cannot conceivably approach the entire, whole text, perhaps as one would a novel or film. As such, it is an excellent site for doing media microecology, for honing in on some small, specific aspect of the game, and analyzing, reading, and interpreting that aspect in order to come to a greater understanding of

¹ Ian Bogost, *Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 3.

² McKenzie Wark, *Gamer Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), section 16.

³ Jesper Juul, *The Art of Failure: An Essay on the Pain of Playing Video Games* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), 30.

how *Warcraft*, and perhaps games in general, do certain kinds of work and make certain kinds of meaning.

For this essay I would like you to choose some *specific* aspect of *Warcraft* to investigate, to interpret, to analyze, to approach as a media microecologist, and to write an essay making an argument about that aspect of the game. You will note that each of Bogost's short chapters in *How to Do Things With Videogames* makes some kind of argument. Often these arguments are fairly modest, but even the simplest ones have wide-ranging implications. I would like see you critically engaging with *Warcraft* in a similar way: that by analyzing and interpreting some small aspect of the game, you might arrive at an argument about what kinds of work and/or what kinds of meaning *Warcraft* produces.

Further, I would like your analysis of *Warcraft* to engage with at least one of the critical texts we have read so far in the course. I imagine that the essays by Espen Aarseth, Bogost, Hilde G. Corneliussen, Alexander R. Galloway, Lisbeth Klastrup, Jessica Langer, Marshall McLuhan, or Scott Rettberg that we are reading alongside *Warcraft* will be quite useful, but I could also see that one might productively engage with other theoretical texts we have read this semester, namely those by Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, Donna Haraway, Martin Heidegger, Frank Kermode, and others. What you choose to discuss is up to you, and there are a number of ways to go here, but your essay should show that it is clearly in conversation with the larger theoretical discussions we are having in class.

Lastly, though I am asking you to write about something that is not necessarily a text in a "traditional" fashion, I will still be primarily interested in the strength of your argument and the quality of your idea, and much of how and why you construct your argument in the way you do will be based on the perceptiveness and care of your close, careful reading of the game. So being specific in your engagement will immensely help you here, being critical in your *play*, as will being creative, attempting to look at something, like Bogost does, that might be easily overlooked by most players of the game.

As always, I am happy to talk about ideas, so please feel free to meet during office hours or make an appointment. This is both a broad and specific assignment, which means that there are a *number* of interesting paths you might take here, so I urge you to write about something that interests you. I look forward to see where your thinking takes you. And please do not hesitate to ask questions.