

# The Computer Culture Reader



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Edited by

Judd Ethan Ruggill, Ken S. McAllister  
and Joseph R. Chaney



Cambridge Scholars Publishing

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## Dedication

This volume is dedicated to all the people who have presented their work on computer culture at the Southwest/Texas Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association Conference. You and your work make the community what it is.



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## Introduction: Without Analogy

Those of us who are immersed in computer culture but remember life before the Internet are keenly aware that a global revolution has occurred. It is still underway, and therefore we are hard-pressed to say what it means for our lives and what impact it will ultimately have on our value systems. The essayists in this volume add their perceptions and analyses to the growing body of scholarship on computer culture, a nascent field of study whose fate may be to remain always too young, focused as it is on what is changing and what is to come. The aim in this volume is to cut through the heady atmosphere that understandably surrounds any revolution in order to reveal some of the underlying structure of our experience while also teasing out cultural implications. From such snapshots we gain insight into how people and computers produce meaning in the new places we inhabit and through the new technical and cultural forms we employ. Sometimes we may even gain a sense of the speed at which we are traveling into the future.

At the same time that we find ourselves engaged in specific analyses, we are also eager to comprehend the whole, its history, and its future. The phrase “digital revolution” speaks mainly to the technical sources of a movement that is reshaping human experience in numerous lived contexts—through new forms of community and new modes of communication, representation, information-production, learning, work, and play. Whenever such fundamental changes have disrupted Western culture in the past, they have been accompanied by alterations in our very concept of subjectivity and of our place in the world. What makes this revolution unlike past revolutions, so that we find ourselves desperate for and uncertain of analogies, is that the digital revolution is occurring simultaneously with the speedy process of globalization. The two are in some sense indistinguishable. In other words, the field of reference for these technological and cultural changes extends beyond any nation or region to include (and less and less merely as a potentiality) the universal set of cultural concerns, local and global. Even as the Internet seeks to reproduce and replicate the world, to become an archive and a second life, it fosters new modes of being, multiplying our concepts of identity and altering the features of the world that it mirrors and extends. The foregoing metaphors are of course inadequate to describe a process that necessarily has a warping effect on language itself—one that in fact generates words, concepts, and metaphors at an alarming rate. Even if no computer may yet be said to be intelligent, the Internet itself seems more a being than a thing. We call it a system, a network; but we mean some-

thing more than a library or a machine. At times we may mean a society, a world, or even something like a god—an implication suggested by the title of Andrew Chen’s essay in this volume, “We Are Blog,” where the blog is imagined, somewhat facetiously, as a vast inter-subjective cyber-human entity like the Borg of Star Trek fame. But Chen also turns such an image inside-out, showing us how one small, personal online enterprise extends into infinity along a series of links, uniting us collaboratively and erasing us. Chen describes an ecstatic realm, intensely personal and vastly communal. On the Web we are globally connected, and that relationship to a vast Other both threatens our conventional identities and promises to save us.

The Internet is a world. The motivation for the early development of what would become the Internet, in the ARPAnet project, was closely tied to the objectives of the U.S. space mission, which gave us our first photographic images of the earth as an entity, a tiny and isolated blue planet, an improbable oasis of life. The experience of manned space flight, and above all the moon landing, was momentous not least of all because it inspired a new global awareness in the popular imagination. We envisioned a limit, but also a oneness, an interconnectedness. Computers and the Internet have provided the objective corollary of the global vision, speeding the growth of a global economy—a process that has, in turn, spread computer technology to all corners of the world, precisely eliminating the “corners” and other refuges from modern technology.

The digital revolution may seem to be analogous to the industrial revolution, insofar as it has transformed production and democratized access to markets, created a wide range of new products, and changed our ways of doing business. In each case, we can speak of cultural destruction and economic divides, as well as expansions (in the availability of technology, in economic opportunities, and in creativity). The industrial nations have sought to diminish the industrial divide by exporting mechanized industry, often at the expense of traditional cultures and through the violent displacement of populations. Likewise, there are digital divides within and between nations; and a brand of utopian optimism seeks to bridge these divides, viewing the Internet as a source of aid in education and commerce. The industrial revolution also altered culture in profound ways, primarily by changing the worker’s relationship to production and consumption. The industrial revolution brought about a consumer culture whose implications (for example, for democracy and for global trade) could not have been foreseen in the nineteenth century and are not easily comprehensible today. Workers were in some small measure compensated for their alienation from the means of production by their expanded access to products that were formerly luxury

items. Consumer society is image-obsessed largely because mass-produced luxury goods have rendered obsolete most traditional, material measures of class and social standing. The availability of computers, cell phones, portable media players, and other digital products serves to heighten modern anxieties about social status, because they, too, symbolize wealth and thereby serve to conceal inequalities that persist despite appearances.

In these ways, the industrial revolution continues to transform culture. Its expansion leads to unforeseen ironies and opportunities. The changes that the Internet in particular has effected during the digital revolution are different, although at least as profound in their cultural effects, and as uncertain in their teleology. The most profound changes have occurred in the realm of communication, through increased access to information and increased social networking opportunities, along with the proliferation of information and information sources that such changes imply. Online social networks and so-called virtual communities replicate and greatly expand preexisting communications and foster the creation of new markets. They also enable the formation of previously unimaginable cultural spaces, such as online auctions like eBay, which function as universal bazaars while creating surprisingly stable communities of merchants, collectors, and hobbyists; or communities composed of members of a narrowly defined and normally isolated social minority—minority groups that in no sense had been groups before—such as teenagers who celebrate bulimia as a lifestyle. The Internet makes possible a vast underworld of subcultures. Another effect of Internet culture is the growth and increased significance of visual culture, which carries with it a challenge to educational institutions in a world in which visual literacy is woefully lacking among citizens and consumers. In this volume, essays by Margaret Batschelet and Mary-Louise Craven analyze ways in which computer culture confronts us with new challenges in the area of visual culture. Batschelet and Craven question the design decisions that tend to predetermine our uses and perceptions of visual media. The debate over usability tends to undermine, to some extent, optimistic claims for the democratizing value of computer culture.

The digital revolution is surely more all-encompassing than the Gutenberg revolution, which began in the mid-fifteenth century. Even so, it must be said that mechanical printing, by which texts were made available to an ever-widening and potentially universal set of readers, changed almost everything in the West, fueling the wars of religion and the rise of nation-states, and paving the way for the development of modern civic institutions. The impact of the printing press on communication and education was, of course, enormous, but it had more subtle consequences that were

every bit as revolutionary. It is no accident, for instance, that the advent of mechanical printing coincided with the development of a new subjectivity, one characterized by interiority. Through the sudden popularization of the formerly rare practice of reading silently to oneself, the technology of the printing press opened an interior space in the popular mind, a new self-consciousness, that accounted, in part, for the remarkable proliferation of Protestant religious faiths in northern Europe, the birth of autobiography and biography, a radically new valuation of sentiment, the so-called invention of childhood, and the moralization of work and of business. In contrast to the ancient, oratorical performance of public and communal reading, the new mode of reading made possible by mass-produced books undermined or weakened traditional forms of hierarchy. This democratizing force was hard to comprehend, and even frightening, but it was wildly uncontrollable. It was frightening because it could not be controlled. Its effects were irresistible. It produced a multitude of new desires.

The democratizing principle finds its strongest expression, at last, in the technologies of the Internet, and in this sense we may say that the personal computer is an extension of an “old” revolution. What works against such a reassuring assessment is the fact that the digital revolution threatens to erode the very same civic and corporate institutions that the old revolution brought into existence. The current attack against established institutions is structural first of all, driven as it is by technological change; only secondarily is it ideological or a matter of revolutionary purpose (for instance, in the work of some hackers). Cyberspace tends to diminish the importance of traditional social spaces, which is partly to say, physical buildings and public places insofar as they exist to enable real-time exchange and interaction. For instance, it empties the credit union of the customers and service employees who had formerly met there to carry out banking transactions. Its video games of virtual adult adventure take children off the streets and lawns of suburban neighborhoods. Modern liberal subjectivity is itself under attack in a structural sense. Now we speak of “identity theft” as an operation distinct from impersonation, because what is stolen is not a personality or a career, but instead the digital traces of an existence that is itself primarily digital in its legal and financial operations. It makes sense, therefore, that the hero of the digital revolution is the hacker, an outlaw figure who represents the anonymous operation by which the world we once knew is being dismantled.

The threat is never the threat of non-culture, of the end of culture. The sometimes terroristic violence that traditionalists sense in the face of the digital revolution comes from the emergence of cultural forms that make

sense to today's twelve-year-olds but will remain at least a little foreign to many of us who did not grow up with video games, MySpace, and text messaging. In these pages, James Brown examines this gap between world-views in "Speech Hacks" and develops the concept of the "hacker ethic" as a way of understanding the positive communal value of various acts, such as "tagging," that may seem to be merely idiosyncratic, selfish, or even disruptive. His title plays on the concept of "speech acts." The hacker uses language performatively, as a speech act that purposely violates the rules by which information is normally organized on a Web page, claiming the right to rename and reorganize Web content. But this performative operation is, despite appearances, collaborative and user-friendly in the final event. Even when they are driven by subversive motives, uncontrolled operations like tagging, which shift the creative authority to users, have a strong tendency to increase the value of a Web site. Thus they may form part of a company's strategy for growth. In this way, the violence that the new system does to the old is indistinguishable from the creative force within the new system.

Internet culture as culture challenges us for two reasons: 1) it has introduced new forms of community and communication; and 2) it exists, at once, as a dynamic mode of cultural production and as a very large set of cultural products. To take up another example from this volume, these are the problems with which Marlin Bates grapples in his chapter which opens the book, "More Real than Real: The Ur-Reality of the World of Warcraft." His analysis of multiplayer online role-playing games confronts the question of existence itself, specifically whether one's online and offline experiences belong in any sense to separate worlds. He employs the concept of the "ur-Real" to describe the in-between state of identity utilization, which is perhaps less a state of being than an operation of translation between game world and non-electronic world. The concept is a means of getting beyond the simple and inadequate real/virtual split. This problem concerns many of our authors, whether the topic is video games, online communities, or the question of the original work of art. Computer culture challenges us to reconceptualize the "real." At the same time, it resists our attempts to define our experiences "there," online, in terms that mirror our offline experiences. On the Internet, the philosophical "crisis of representation" has become a practical, legal, and political problem.

The Web appeals to people uniquely by means of its interactive features. Interactivity means that the ground is always shifting; viewers are involved in changing what they see. Although the experience of visiting Web sites is still too often a matter of capturing static information or consuming culture rather than engaging in production or exchange, more and more, the Web

is becoming interactive in practical ways that take us beyond the mental interactivity of traditional reading. How is reading the news online different from reading a newspaper? An answer to this simple question has the potential to become a lengthy dissertation, because online experience is hard to contain and therefore difficult to narrate. Analysis of online experience depends on an appreciation for the aesthetic of fragmentation. On the surface, news content may appear to be the same in both media. But online, it arrives in pieces throughout the day from numerous international sources, and each time-stamped article is sometimes updated more than once, so that it is possible to follow not just the development of events but also the drafting of copy. We gain access to news articles either through a particular news site (one produced by a newspaper, a cable news outlet, a news association or syndicate, or a blogger, among other possibilities) or through a site that aggregates articles, such as Google News, or through any number of search engines. Again, this list is not meant to be exhaustive. One of the problems inherent in a discussion of the Internet is that no one, and possibly no group of people, can know all of the means by which people find and share information online. Individuals use multiple means to access the news and to narrow their field of search. As with a newspaper, we may browse, but the process involves operations such as clicking and scrolling. The physical activities differ, and those differences make a difference. In a culture already characterized by ease of use, minor advantages matter. Scrolling (a wonderfully, disconcertingly allusive term) requires a bit more effort than running one's eyes down a column; but clicking a link to a sequential page is easier than shuffling from A1 to the story's continuation two-thirds of the way down page B8. And the accompanying distractions are different (flashing or static ads, arriving email, and so forth).

Many of us have moved completely from paper to screen. We are still reading, but online we are also writing and performing other tasks with the material. Online, we can click on a link within a news story to another (current or past) article, including not only pieces produced by the same news outlet, but also pieces by other outlets, and videos, from here and abroad—not to mention links to non-news sites: the home page of the corporation or individual referred to in the article, an encyclopedia entry, a map. And then there is the “comments” box and the thread of reader comments attached to opinion pieces and news blogs and, increasingly, news articles themselves. There is the link to the journalist's email address. Such options for interaction imply an ability on the reader's part to change or contribute to the text. Through emailed corrections and published comments, as well as her or his own “separate” productions, one may read and write in the paper at the

same time. (It is worth noting here that the Internet changes the newsroom, as well.) But a person may do more than contribute new facts or a different interpretation. Even when that is what one is primarily doing, she or he may also be contributing to an inchoate and temporary, or a flourishing and ongoing, online community. In fact, this contributor's primary motivation may be social. And in some sense, she or he is helping to form communities anyway, regardless of intention. The Internet has given us a new, vastly expanded culture of news and opinion. The expansion is the novelty, because the democratization of the interaction, the introduction of feedback loops, has changed the culture qualitatively. The addictive mechanism is choice—both the illusion and the reality of options: the seemingly inexhaustible store of information and opinion, and the truly limitless availability of communication. Our desire to communicate is the heart of the digital age. Never before has communication itself (and the opportunity for private and public expression) taken such a commanding hold on our imaginations. Is this because we had never before been offered so many inexpensive means of busying ourselves with conversation and the production of messages, or is it because the destruction of physical community and the dispersal of the family in the West has created a need for new means of contact with others, new avenues of recognition?

In this connection, we would note that one attraction of online communication is the opportunity for anonymity and for reinventing oneself by means of avatars and other devices. Anonymity itself may assume several forms, including lurking within online communities and games, participating namelessly or through an avatar, assuming new personalities and pretended views (as in trolling), and, in a more general way, immersing oneself in the vastness of Internet culture and its universe of possible modes of being. The Internet offers to each of us a second life, and a third. By the same logic, it offers us immortality. But, as Marlin Bates points out, identity and anonymity are not as simple and pure as they may seem; anyone who has been immersed in multi-player game culture has experienced a fluidity of identity that calls into question the artificiality of an avatar, as well as the reality of the offline self we think we own.

We rehearse these familiar facts by way of underscoring the potential for computer culture, and specifically Internet culture, to transform culture at large, our practices as well as our organizations. One might argue that conceptually the Internet offers nothing new in the way of challenges to our thinking about culture in general. Even if that were so, cultural changes are never the result of wholly new concepts; instead, already familiar concepts and practices are defamiliarized and take on new meaning in the context

of new technological processes. For literary scholars, it is nothing new to speak of “the death of the author,” but the Internet—and wikis and blogs in particular—make this theoretical concept real to people in an unavoidable way, as a problem, or blessing, of existence. It was always the case, even as a practical matter, that authorship was shared between the writer and her friends and editors, and even her printers and critics in some respects, not to mention her readers and the authors she had read whose voices can never be suppressed or subsumed by her writing. But on the Internet, and in blog culture in particular, the successful text is multiply authored, revised communally, and extended via links to numerous other texts and other blogs, and thus enmeshed in an evolving intertext the authorship for which cannot be definitively determined. A successful blog of the specialized discussion group variety is written communally.

Less and less does it matter who we “really” are. Increasingly, the challenge before us, even if we remain committed to an older sense of authenticity, is to create a credible and engaging story for ourselves. Online, everyone is a fiction writer. This factor shares with our previous point about authorship the fact that it causes us to cast backward upon so-called ordinary culture a new scrutiny and to perceive there the same social needs and representational strategies that we meet online. Even as we struggle to find analogies adequate to explain what is happening online, our online experiences are providing us with insights into offline parts of our lives, often by virtualizing them. In this sense it is already true that Internet culture has subsumed culture in general, providing us with the master narrative for lives that are constructed of representations, multiple and contested lives. The problem is perhaps clearest of all in our experience of managing an account on a social networking site, where people we have known at different times and in separate contexts, old friends and new, online acquaintances and family members, may mingle in ways that escape our management. Suddenly it is possible for the various and sometimes contradictory selves and stories we have constructed over a lifetime to come into conflict with one another. We ourselves become the pages that others write in the network that extends from the contested center of our “home” to all other places. Out there, where we lose ourselves, what do we find?

# Chapter One

## More Real than Real: The Ur-Reality of *World of Warcraft*

Marlin Bates

There is an intriguing uncertainty about virtual game worlds. Some claim that what happens inside these worlds is neither significant nor substantial: game worlds do not represent separate cultures but rather mirror extant exterior cultures. Others believe that what happens within games and indeed other computer-related communities are by definition instances of culture and the process of enculturation. This polarity creates a number of questions: Is there a difference between online and offline existence? What do players experience when they are online? How do people know what is “real”? Is something real merely because it is designated as such? The purpose of this chapter is to answer these questions.

The virtual worlds that will be the focus of this chapter are massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs). MMORPGs feature persistent worlds that undergo changes that may affect a player-character even when the player is not logged in.<sup>1</sup> Although a number of MMORPGs focus on fantasy (e.g., table-top role-playing games such as *Dungeons and Dragons*), the genre has expanded to include less fantastical landscapes such as racing and real estate. Player populations of these online games range from as small as two hundred to the eight million of *World of Warcraft*, and usually players pay a monthly fee to maintain a character presence.

With apologies to Stephen Donaldson, I believe it is best to describe online MMORPG communities as “ur-Real,” because although they are not the reality humans corporeally exist in, they are nonetheless forms of existence, of communities of ways.<sup>2</sup> It is the conscious use of imitation and competition by player-characters that draws them together as a whole and, thus, creates cultures in which they can exist. Yet because these cultures are non-corporeal, it is important to set them apart.

Various scholars have used the term “virtual reality” to describe these kinds of cultures. The origin of the term dates to the mid-1980s when scientists at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, California, were

discussing the work being done by Scott Fisher of the NASA Ames Research Center (Carlson 2007). However, this term carries with it the connotation that online communities are “generated simulations.” I would argue that the MMORPG experience is somewhere in between and thus deserves a special designation. In other words, it is the experience through the utilization of identity that creates existence. Because players within a game create/employ individual and group identity in a community that is no longer bounded by the physical, such a community must be bounded by the acceptance that the game space is neither virtual nor an ersatz copy of the Real; it is ur-Real. To be in the ur-Real world means to be in a world that is just as enrapturing as the non-electronic one, yet it is a world that only refers to but does not require a corporeal referent or a real body. Therefore, it can and must be delineated from the real and yet remain connected to it because each world requires the other to define the existence of the player-character; thus, the reason for calling it ur-Real.

In addition to being separate yet connected to the real, the ur-Real is primarily constructed in rhetorical terms. In the corporeal world, rhetorical constructions of identity function alongside physical attributes, socio-economic status, education, and a myriad of other identifying characteristics. However, in the ur-Real world, identity is constructed by how player-characters describe themselves. It is the need to out-imitate one another rhetorically that creates identity and, through that, a culture.

In order to more fully understand why the culture of the MMORPG requires a special designation, I will first present how scholars have framed online experience both in terms of genre and identity, after which I will discuss how identities and existence are rhetorically created and presented within game space. Finally, I will conclude with how users/rhetors disseminate and perform identity through the use of web pages such that the line between the real and ur-Real is further blurred.

## **Identity Online**

In “Second Persona,” Edwin Black discusses the intersection of identity and rhetoric. Black argues that rhetors and auditors—in the case of the MMORPG, fellow player-characters—engage in some method of identity exchange:

Actual auditors look to the discourse they are attending for cues that tell them how they are to view the world, even beyond the expressed concerns, the overt propositional sense, of the discourse. (1993, 165)

His argument that “there is a second persona also implied by a discourse, and that persona is its implied auditor,” gives support to my use of web pages as examples of identity creation. To put it in Black’s terms,

Let the rhetor, for example, who is talking about school integration use a pejorative term to refer to black people, and the auditor is confronted with more than a decision about school integration...And more, if the auditor himself begins using the pejorative term, it will be a fallible sign that he has adopted not just a position on school integration, but also an ideology. (1993, 165)

In addition, the ur-reality that player-characters are attempting to describe must be human-centered. The reason for this is simple: Humans, through their use of language, create the reality around them. Whether that reality is in a computer or in an open field, how humans understand and communicate is an “instance of Reality” through the use of human-created symbolic language. Kenneth Burke once defined humans as a “symbol-using animal” and that this trait constituted reality. As Burke explains,

The “symbol-using animal,” yes, obviously. But can we bring ourselves to realize just what that formula implies, just how overwhelmingly much of what we mean by “reality” has been built up for us through nothing but our symbol systems?...What is our “reality” for today (beyond the paper-thin line of our own particular lives) but all this clutter of symbols about the past combined with whatever things we know mainly through maps, magazines, newspapers, and the like about the present? (1966, 5)

Therefore, it is only through language that humans can gauge what is and is not real. By using language, humans describe the characteristics of what constitutes the real. Moreover, it is in the description of the real that humans come to rhetorically exist. The two are inextricably linked: reality and existence, rhetoric and being. Any instance humans seek to designate as real in MMORPGs must be able to be sensed by not only the player-characters who create it, but also by the player-characters who receive it. Otherwise the instance would be reduced to a figment of imagination. In the exchange of descriptions, a framework for how identity and existence are created and displayed; in the ensuing interconnections of creation, display, and refinement, a rhetoric of identity—and therefore culture—is established.

In her chapter for Smith and Kollock’s *Communities in Cyberspace*, Judith Donath brought to light several ways that individuals produce and

read identities in the Usenet. Donath's specific goal was to "discover how identity is established in an online community and to examine the effects of identity deception and the conditions that give rise to it" (1999, 29). Although her discussion of identity deception is intriguing, it was her discussion of how the online identity is palpably different from the physical one that is more important. Indeed, she makes reference to how, in the corporeal world, the body provides a unifying anchor for physical identity, yet this anchor is not present in the virtual world of *World of Warcraft*. Donath suggests an important question: if there is no physical anchor and "one can have, some claim, as many electronic personae as one has time and energy to create," then how does one determine the "real" (29)? Donath writes that even though clues to identity are not plentiful, they do exist. Moreover, writers on Usenet use these signals so that they will be recognized over time. Specifically,

to the writer seeking to be better known, a clearly recognizable display of identity is especially important. No matter how brilliant the posting, there is no gain in reputation if the readers are oblivious to who the author is. (Donath 1999, 31)

Jodi O'Brien's "Writing in the Body" in turn suggests how online rhetors ascribe bodily characteristics to a non-corporeal existence. O'Brien theorizes that even though the physicality of the online author's body is not present, the author's audience will nonetheless create a virtual replacement:

The subject of human categorization has both fascinated and troubled philosophers for centuries, but most agree that one idea is worthy of the initial premise: we cannot apprehend our environments and behave with any consistency in an uncertain world, unless we render it meaningfully "fixed" through collective categories of representation. The way we do so is grounded in shared lines of distinction. These lines may or may not have physical referents.... Thus, even when the body is anchored elsewhere and unavailable as a source of symbolic cueing, central distinctions that reference the body as connected to the self will still be evoked as the basis of meaningful communication. (1999, 85)

Imagine that a male player has created a female character. According to O'Brien, the ensuing player-character would evoke responses that were both male and female in orientation. Thus, the resulting rhetorical creations of this player-character would be blurred in their gender references. Even if the male player were masterful in his emulation of a female character,

he would still, unwittingly perhaps, evoke responses from others as if he were male. This creates a community and a culture that values actions and rhetoric far more than the physically-bound world. Identity is no longer wholly tied to one's physical being, but to what one actually does within the world around him-her. How one actually becomes present in *World of Warcraft* is, therefore, crucial to the discussion concerning identity, being, and culture.

## **Identity Creation within *World of Warcraft***

To enter the world of Azeroth—the fictional world depicted by *World of Warcraft*—requires a series of steps. First, players must decide in what type of “realm” they would like their character to reside: Normal, Player versus Player (PvP), or Role-Playing. In a “Normal” realm, player-characters are allowed to co-exist with those of the opposite faction (e.g., Alliance or Horde) without fear of unprovoked attack. On a PvP server, any player-character can be attacked at anytime outside of minimal “safe zones.” Finally, a Role-Playing (RP) realm may either be a normal or a PvP. Unlike non-RP realms, while in-game, RP-realm player-characters are strictly prohibited from having any public conversation that does not adhere to what their avatar might do or say in the reality of Azeroth. Indeed, Blizzard has an entire policy dedicated to what can and cannot be said by a player-character when in a role-playing realm. Blizzard's reasons for this are clear:

Creating an immersive world that holds true to the “Base Storyline” of the *World of Warcraft* is the driving motivation behind our Role-Play Servers. While other servers allow you to play *World of Warcraft*, these servers are intended to let you live *World of Warcraft*. (Blizzard Entertainment, Inc. 2006c)

Thus, Blizzard has already delineated the rhetorical boundaries for player-character identity and existence. Player-characters who choose to reside in role-playing realms are constricted in how they present who they are and how they exist within the ur-Real world. Thus, player-characters who choose the RP realms do so in order to create an existence that is part of a community with pre-established rhetorical norms. Similarly, those player-characters who choose to reside on non-RP realms have made a rhetorical identity choice: their identity and existence are more under their own control than the community's. However, as I will demonstrate, the community still exerts a great deal of influence over identity creation and being.

The left side of the game's character-creation screen, for example, arrays

for the player a range of acceptable choices for defining one's avatar. As she chooses her race, occupation, and name, the player-character is brought by the software a little further into the ur-Real world by describing the player-character in corresponding terms of the game fiction on the right-hand side of the screen: click the "human" and "mage" icons on the left, and the right side of the screen will describe the player-character accordingly in well-wrought prose. This is the creation of an ur-reality and the foundation of the culture. The software hails the player with the lore of the Warcraft universe. Whether the player-character is a gamer, player, or role-player, s/he cannot help but be pulled a little further into the world and, thus, the community that is the *World of Warcraft*.

Once in the ur-real, player-characters need a way to identify themselves. As Burke noted, we are "the only animal. . . that seeks to define itself" (1984, 295). Therefore, player-characters must communicate who they are. The identity presented and which the audience receives is one and the same. No matter how many differences may arise from the display of certain characteristics, it is real. Again, Burke explains that "in the mimesis of the practical the distinction between acting and play-acting, between real and make-believe becomes obliterated" (1984, 254). Whatever actions are presented—and received by the audience—become part of the player-character's identity. Therefore, questions of whether this is a "valid" representation become moot. Furthermore, actions that are not received by an audience, no matter what the sense of reality, cannot be part of that identity. The player-characters may wish the actions to be part of their identity, but unless others receive the player-character's symbolic labor, identity cannot be expressed.

The primary way that the audience in *World of Warcraft* (i.e., other player-characters) receives symbolic labor is through the selection of race. Not only does this choice determine outside appearance, but it also determines how the player-character will respond and interact with others. For example, the *World of Warcraft* software provides "slash commands" which allow the player to emote a feeling or perform an act based on what the command entailed. A player might execute `/silly` in the chat window and the software would then demonstrate the player-character telling a joke that everyone nearby can hear. Those jokes, however, are from a pre-set selection based on the player-character's racial identity. An Orc character (who happens to have green skin) who typed in `/silly` would say "It's not easy being green" (Wolf 2006). However, a male Troll character who inputs the same phrase will recite, "I kill two dwarves in the morning, I kill two dwarves at night. I kill two dwarves in the afternoon, and then I feel

alright.... I kill two dwarves before I kill two dwarves, and then I kill two more” (Wolf 2006). Not only does the choice of race, and therefore faction, determine *what* is being said; it also determines *how* it is said. This is important, because the player-character is then represented by these outward appearances. The in-game references to racial identity are quite rampant. The table, below, outlines the races available to player-characters.

<i>Horde Races</i>	<i>Alliance Races</i>
Orcs	Humans
Tauren	Dwarfs
Undead	Gnomes
Trolls	Elves
Blood Elves <sup>3</sup>	Draeni <sup>3</sup>

Table 1-1: *World of Warcraft* races

In addition to different races, classes are available. Classes are the primary occupation of a particular character. Some classes are restricted to only certain races and, therefore, to certain factions. The table below represents the arrangement and availability of classes in *World of Warcraft*:

<i>Class</i>	<i>Available to only these races</i>
Druid	Night Elves, Tauren
Hunter	Night Elves, Dwarves, Orcs, Trolls, Tauren
Mage	Humans, Gnomes, Undead, Trolls
Paladin	Humans, (Blood Elves)
Priest	Humans, Dwarves, Night Elves, Undead, Trolls
Rogue	Gnomes, Humans, Dwarves, Night Elves, Orcs, Undead, Trolls
Shaman	Orcs, Tauren, Trolls, (Draeni)
Warlock	Gnomes, Humans, Orcs, Undead
Warrior	All Races and Factions

Table 1-2: Arrangement and availability of *World of Warcraft* classes

All classes are not available to all races or even both factions. This means that player-character must make a choice, and that choice is inherently rhetorical in nature because embodies how player-characters wish to be identified in the community. Even in the most open of cultures, there are preconceived notions

of what to expect from persons employed in particular occupations and from certain locations—the ur-Real world is no different. That is the second method that Blizzard uses to channel online identity creation: class or occupation determines how the player-character is going to interact with the world.

Moreover, class not only determines what a player-character will do in-game, it also determines the role he/she will play in groups. A Priest, for example, is a class that is primarily used for healing other members of an adventuring group. As such, player-character Priests have chosen a back-up role in a group adventure. These player-characters have decided that their identity is to be one of support and aid and not one that is directly involved in the slaying of monsters. This creates a situation in which the class clearly shapes how player-characters wish to be identified and placed within the *World of Warcraft* culture.

After this choice, player-characters choose professions. Professions are how the player-character can earn money outside of adventuring (e.g., slaying monsters, completing quests). *World of Warcraft* allows player-characters choose both “Primary Professions” and “Secondary Professions.” Not only do these professions allow player-characters to earn money from other players, but also they allow player-characters to create items they may need as they progress through the game. For example, Warlocks may only wear cloth armor. Thus, Warlocks might choose tailoring and enchanting as primary professions. Tailoring would allow them to create armor and enchanting would allow them to imbue it with magical properties to aid them in their adventuring.

The final method in which Blizzard engenders a specific online identity is through the selection of a player-character’s name. In each realm there cannot be any duplicate names. Blizzard even comments on name selection:

One of the first adventures you will embark upon within *World of Warcraft* will be that of choosing a character name. While your subsequent exploits should prove infinitely more exhilarating, great care should be given to name selection. The first impression other players have of you will be based on your name, so it’s best to start off on the right foot. (Blizzard Entertainment, Inc. 2006b)

Thus, Blizzard sees the selection of a name as one more way to make the player-character unique. Blizzard seeks to create a world of unique identities. Certainly there will be a number of player-characters that are Undead Warlocks, but only one of them in the entire realm will be named MacRorie. This unique identifier allows player-characters to find their position within the society. As an Undead Warlock named MacRorie, the player-character

is associated with an identity both in a group and outside of the game. When logging into the world, player-characters are greeted not by their “real life” name, but by the name of the player-character within the *World of Warcraft* community.

Those associations and identities are what Burke would term a “community of ways.” Burke argues that “from the standpoint of ‘identification,’ what we call ‘competition’ is better described as men’s attempt to *out-imitate* one another” (1969, 131). This imitation causes consubstantiality by a community of ways. From this identification, the players find not only their identity, but also how they fit within the community as a whole. Therefore, if there is a need to emulate those around them in the game, the players will naturally tend towards competition in order to fulfill that need. It is the conscious use of imitation/competition by the player-characters that draws them together as a whole. A player-character seeking to become more involved with a group of gamers begins to see the need to “beat the game” in order to be more accepted by the group. Role-players must find new and different ways to be more involved in the game fiction in order to be accepted by role-playing guilds.

It is an interesting conundrum that player-characters must actively seek out different ways to become more the same. And yet, player-characters must not just seek to imitate, but imitate the hierarchy of the imitation. Burke posits that imitation is, perhaps, a crude way to get at consubstantiality. However, human beings are constantly seeking ways to achieve consubstantiation. Indeed, according to Burke, human beings are “rotten with perfection”: they are constantly seeking to be perfect so that they can share their substance with their creator and community. By the same token, it is that pursuit that allows people to find others with whom they identify so that communities and culture can be formed. The imitation and competition within *World of Warcraft* is the pursuit embodied. Player-characters seek to merge not only with themselves and their characters, but also with the culture as a whole. The need to belong to and to exist within that culture becomes both a driving and a maintaining force. In order for true identification to exist, there must be hierarchy. Specifically, the player must “imitate not [her/his] mere insignia, but the principle behind the *ordering* of those insignias” (Burke 1969, 131). When player-characters seek out similar occupations or equipment possessed by other player-characters, they do so not just to be like the other player-characters. Rather, they do so in order to be part of the hierarchy of insignias mentioned by Burke. The player-characters, whether they are gamers or role-players, imitate in order to be the best and be accepted by the group as a whole. Thus, the game software itself not only allows but also forces the player-character to establish a unique identity and become enmeshed within

the community of ways found within the *World of Warcraft* universe.

The game software is not the only site where identity construction and culture exists for *World of Warcraft*. The “rhetoric of socialization” Maurice Charland writes about begins to be structured by the identity creation that occurs in web pages concerned with *World of Warcraft*. Charland argues that auditors begin to see the calls, or hails, from other rhetors as an attempt to situate them within a particular frame of reference or rhetoric of socialization. The game software creates one instance of hailing the auditors, the web pages create another. The web pages allow for the player-characters to more clearly shape their identities by allowing each user or group to refine their subject position within the text/context. The web pages, therefore, are the instance of the auditors answering the hails of both the call from the software to create a character that adheres to an identity and the call from the web pages to perform that identity. Additionally, the web pages allow the player-character to more deeply enter Azeroth and the *World of Warcraft*. Thus, their subject positions acquire and require more depth, more complexity. Examples of further complexity can be seen in how player-characters adopt specific roles within the fabric of the game’s fiction. The player-characters are no longer just ordinary individuals in the game; they have taken on unique performances. These performances fall within the identity schema, but they differentiate themselves through the adoption of a schema. The process is similar to what Burke describes as identification and differentiation. As I noted above, Burke explains that human actors are constantly striving to belong to a group (identification) and yet still be different from the individuals within the group (differentiation). It is the tension between these two modes that the individuals within *World of Warcraft* must deal with. In order to reduce the tension, player-characters attend to the clues of how to perform identity that are present within the game and the web pages. In doing so, the player-characters become part of the group but still maintain their unique selves.

The *World of Warcraft* web pages allow for both identification and differentiation to take place in that all of the text on the pages is crafted to present the world as if the ur-real were a physical place that could be visited. The game’s main web page, for example, is divided into eight sub-sections. Each sub-section focuses on a unique element of the world and game-play: News, Account, Game Guide, Workshop, Media, Forums, Community, and Support. The first, News, covers information that is either immediately or eventually placed in one or more of the other sections, so it will not be discussed. The second, Account, deals with billing information and, as such, is not overly important to my argument. The remaining sections, however, provide a great deal of insight as to how Blizzard engenders identity creation

and furthers a sense of culture and community.

The Game Guide section found on the left side of the screen is further sub-divided into fourteen sections. All contain information on how to enter *World of Warcraft* and “speak” to the reader. The pages present the reader, ostensibly a player-character, with a second-person perspective description of the world. Nowhere in the text is there a reference to Azeroth as “not real”: it is presented as a living, breathing world. For example, in the very first page of the Game Guide section, is a description of the *World of Warcraft*:

Four years have passed since the aftermath of Warcraft III: Reign of Chaos, and a great tension now smolders throughout the ravaged world of Azeroth. As the battle-worn races begin to rebuild their shattered kingdoms, new threats, both ancient and ominous, arise to plague the world once again. (Blizzard Entertainment, Inc. 2006d)

Note how the previous version of software is not referred to as a game or even software, but as if it was an instance of reality. This specifically hails the reader and invites them to participate in the world as if the existence was palpable. It is the perfect example of an “ur-Real” instance. Player-characters cannot have a corporeal existence there, but they can experience everything as if it were real. Even when the description seeks to explain specifically what the *World of Warcraft* software is, the description does not explain it as a game—it describes it as “an online role-playing experience set in the award-winning Warcraft universe.”

The Workshop section of the web page is broken down into seven sub-divisions. Most deal with how to become more proficient at the game and how to rise in stature vis a vis other players. Specifically, this section outlines how the PvP combat works. What is interesting to note is that this section reveals the information in terms of the game fiction as well. Even in an animated section detailing how PvP works, the references are to how the Alliance and the Horde do battle, not in terms of the character killing game sprites. There is no breaking of the “fourth wall”; the reader is lead to believe that this is simply an explanation of how one would act within the Warcraft universe, a universe that the reader now resides in. The maintenance of such ur-reality allows the gamer and player to become great and the role-player to know how to properly become more of the character. The reader, and thus his character, is called into being within this frame. The community becomes more real because it is discussed as if it were real. The ur-reality of the *Warcraft* universe becomes described using the symbols and language human beings use to describe their corporeal existence and

therefore transcend the limitations of the fact and are transported via mind to the ur-Real. Moreover, as O'Brien detailed suggests, since the body is directly linked to the rhetorical construction of identity online, the player-character is transported body and soul to the ur-reality of the MMORPG.

The Workshop section of the web page furthers this experience by describing fifteen separate "events" that take place in the world. Each event is carefully described to enhance the in-game experience for the community. Some of the events, such as "The Feast of Winter Veil," seek to mimic but not mirror real world events such as Christmas or Halloween. Other MMORPGs, such as *Ultima Online*, have mirrored holidays in-game, however the *World of Warcraft* seeks to create its own community and thus the web page for the Feast of Winter Veil describes what happens to player-characters in terms of the game's other inhabitants. Additionally, special quests are developed to get the player-characters actively involved in the events. For example, player-characters might help find "Smokeywood Pastures' Missing Shipment," when they have received the following quest:

Smokeywood Pastures needs a few brave adventurers to investigate the disappearance of a shipment of holiday goods. Rumors are the shipment are in the possession of the Abominable Greench, found somewhere in the snowy regions of the Alterac Mountains. (Blizzard Entertainment, Inc. 2006a)

Recalling the work of Ernest Bormann, this is very much an attempt to create a rhetorical vision that further entrenches the ur-Reality of the Warcraft universe. According to Bormann, a rhetorical vision is created when a group of people involved in a "unified putting together of the various shared fantasies" (1983, 114). These shared fantasies allow individuals to show their membership in the imagined community by using or knowing inside jokes that demonstrate their common ground. Sonja Foss offers a succinct explanation:

The concept of the fantasy central to this approach is defined as the dramatization of a hypothetical or actual situation in the rhetoric generated by the group's participants. A fantasy chain in a group is established when a participant communicates symbols that relate either to the group's here-and-now problems or to the individual psychodynamics of the participants. Such communications...form fantasies that tend to be played out in a more and more complete way until they reflect the members' common preoccupations and serve to make those commonalities public. (1979, 276)