

Hilde G. Corneliussen & Jill Walker Rettberg (Eds.):
“Digital Culture, Play, and Identity: A World of Warcraft® Reader”.
Cambridge (MA): The MIT Press. 2008

The “readers” on my bookshelf are heavy books that I was told to purchase by the teachers of various university courses. They are books that present newcomers with thematically organised selections of key texts, providing overview of various fields. The “World of Warcraft Reader” is not a “reader” in that sense. It was a mere five years ago that “World of Warcraft” (2004, WoW in the following) hit gaming culture, almost immediately obtaining an unrivalled number of subscribers (11.5 million as of December 2008), resonating with mainstream culture in a far wider and more positive way than had previous games (whereas “Doom” was blamed for teenage boys going on psychotic killing sprees, WoW machinima is used to advertise respectable brands such as Toyota). Therefore, this book can not point back to a history of foundational WoW texts. Again, this is not a “reader” like the ones I was told to buy for my classes. As the editors, Hilde G. Corneliussen and Jill Walker Rettberg, suggest in their introduction, this is a “reader” in the sense of a “casebook [...] of critical approaches to [a] canonical [work]” (p. 3).

WoW is indeed a canonical work and this becomes clear in Espen Aarseth’s essay. Aarseth’s essay might actually be a good starting point for the uninitiated and more MMO-savvy readers alike. Covering a mere 11 pages, it is the shortest chapter in the book, containing numerous references to other essays. Aarseth briefly yet clearly places WoW in a (computer games) historical context and this is where the “canonical” comes in: “In terms of game mechanics, gameplay, and social aspects, not much has changed in three decades [...] Significantly, [WoW] does not up the ante in terms of better, more, or nicer. [...] Still, by spending many years studying MMOGs before coming up with their own synthesized design, Blizzard avoided several of the poor choices made by its competitors” (pp. 112, 113 and 115). WoW is a smooth, well-oiled, inherently generic synthesis of what came before it. Thus it can be tempting to use WoW as a shorthand for MMOs in general, but most of the authors of this book pay very close attention to what they are studying and avoid making generalisations from WoW to other online games. Aarseth thus points to important differences between WoW and “EverQuest II” (2004) in his description of WoW as a kind of “gameworld” or theme park version of the “fictional world” Azeroth, known from novels and older, offline games (an important distinction in game studies where the word “fictional” is sometimes used in a much less precise way).

Avoiding premature generalisation from the many case studies springing forth recently is a central theme of T.L. Taylor’s essay. Taylor speaks with authority, having written the seminal “EverQuest” (1999) ethnography “Play Between Worlds” (2006). Not only does Taylor point to differences between WoW and “EverQuest” in general, but she also reminds us that WoW is many different worlds. The 11.5 millions players (or whatever that number is at the time of publication) inhabit hundreds of similar mirror worlds, each populated by perhaps 20,000 players (it is hard to determine exact numbers). These mirror worlds come in different flavours, e.g., worlds where the game

mechanics have been tuned to allow and promote fighting amongst players. Taylor “immigrated” to such a “player versus player” world when she took up WoW. More than that, she immigrated to a European server and this change of ethnographic field site “significantly affected several phenomena I had previously discussed” (p. 188) (Roughly half of WoW players are Chinese. The remaining half is split unevenly with North Americans representing a higher proportion than Europeans. Since nine of the 13 writers who contributed to the “WoW Reader” work and live in three Nordic countries [Denmark, Norway, Sweden] and the remaining four work and live in the UK, one can not help but wonder how the project would have turned out had the collective of authors been more representative of the linguistic and geographical diversity of WoW players). Taylor’s essay is required reading for those who have been following her work. Her main point is that the “instrumental and (hyper) rationalized play” (p. 195) she observed in “EverQuest” back in the day has now moved from the periphery (where it was sometimes labelled “power-gaming”) to the centre as a widely accepted if not mainstream mode of play. This leads her to reflect on “emergent coercive systems” (p. 195).

Scott Rettberg examines a somewhat similar theme in his essay on “Corporate Ideology in World of Warcraft”, but whereas Taylor considers the possibility of “soft” coercion “emerging” in the interactions between players, Rettberg finds that it is “the game itself [which trains] players how to function within the market economy, of which “World of Warcraft” is a product, and for which it serves as a heuristic device” (p. 34). Not aiming for the level of comparative specificity characteristic of the essays mentioned above, Rettberg would probably have arrived at the same conclusion had he played “EverQuest”. Placed at the very beginning of the collection, Rettberg’s essay might serve as an introduction for the uninitiated who will probably sympathise with the charmingly honest and elaborate description of Rettberg’s gradual discovery of the inner workings of WoW; but as hinted at, the essay ends on a slightly idiosyncratic note. Idiosyncrasy also colours Tanya Krzywinska’s essay somewhat. Despite acknowledging signs indicating otherwise, Krzywinska insists on WoW belonging to the genre of “high fantasy”, along with J.R.R. Tolkien’s Middle-Earth, and that “instructions on how to undertake a quest must be read carefully as they contain less-than-obvious clues, thereby encouraging players to engage with backstory” (p. 130). This jars somewhat with Taylor’s suggestion about a general rise in “instrumental play”. Measured against a theoretical backdrop, Krzywinska’s essay is the most ambitious and far-ranging of the book and I found myself in a state of disappointment when the appetising mention of “worldness” and “worldview” were never fully fleshed out.

Hilde G. Corneliussen makes good use of Nick Yee’s extensive surveys of MMO players, using his numbers to challenge the truism that “girls do not really like computer games” (p. 65). Corneliussen is not the only one to refer to the large-scale surveys and “census snapshots” by Yee and others, which were exactly produced to form the basis for further research. There is a fine interchange between such quantitatively grounded work and the present, more qualitative and critical work. Incidentally, Corneliussen’s essay functions very well as an introduction to current feminism in general (at least to a noob such as myself) and as a thought-provoking example of how these theories can be applied to WoW in particular (here is one observation as an appetiser: “[in WoW] femininity has a much stronger resistance than masculinity towards features that, from a Western perspective, are perceived as monstrous and ugly” [p. 74]).

The book is, thus, the result of a having a group of academics playing the same game: “The articles collected in this book are all based on [...] first-hand experience [...] as well as on data gathered and interpreted by the authors themselves” (p. 2). Original “data gathering” is most obvious in Charlotte Hagström’s contribution (based on the 1366 character names she gathered) and in Lisbeth Klastруп’s collection of players’ stories about their characters’ deaths. Both essays carve out new and convincingly relevant niches to focus attention on WoW. Especially Hagström’s subject seems worthy of further attention. The essay manages to organise and present a rather large amount of character names and the stories behind them, and to show the importance of that subject as an instance of attaching (or rather, adding) personal meaning to a cultural product. The essay ends on a critical note, considering who has control of such practices and how naming acts as a process integrating the individual into a given culture (“given”, yet altered by each integrated individual).

The authors (apart from the already mentioned the authors are: Jessica Langer: “The Familiar and the Foreign: Playing (Post)Colonialism in WoW”; Esther MacCallum-Stewart and Justin Parsler: ““Never Such Innocence Again”: War and Histories in WoW”; Torill Elvira Mortensen: “Humans Playing WoW: or Deviant Strategies?”; Jill Walker Rettberg and Ragnhild Tronstad: “Character Identification in WoW: The Relationship between Capacity and Appearance”) have all belonged to a so-called “guild”, i.e., an in-game group allowing its members to communicate and play together. The guild has been “a warm and vibrant academic community” to work and play in (p. vii) for the 13 authors and the resulting essays are solid pieces of scholarship. Maybe it is simply because the acknowledgements and introduction are written with such enthusiasm, but I could not help but imagine that some of this warmth and vibrancy surfaced in the essays now and then (e.g., Rettberg: “my level 57 hunter, Ulcharim, is one of the lesser lights in our guild” [p. 19]). The book shows the productiveness of a wide range of approaches, some focusing on the game culture as it is negotiated amongst the players, some focusing on the game as it is given by designers. Speaking of the designers, several authors place some importance on their intentions (pp. 73, 130, 147). Why not simply interview these designers rather than try to second-guess their intentions, sometimes with support from superficial sources such as the official WoW-site or “behind the scenes” material? Another tiny sour note one could add is the occasional use of concepts purely for the added oomph (“memes”, p. 91, “Heideggerian *throwness*”, p. 23), but these small examples only highlight that this is predominantly humanities scholarship at its least pretentious and most straightforwardly and productively hard-working. It demonstrates the possibility of cheerfully embracing a significant part of popular culture, hence obtaining valuable firsthand experience, whilst ultimately delivering carefully nuanced, critical observations, e.g., when it comes to issues of gender and questions of control over identity and means of self-expression.

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