

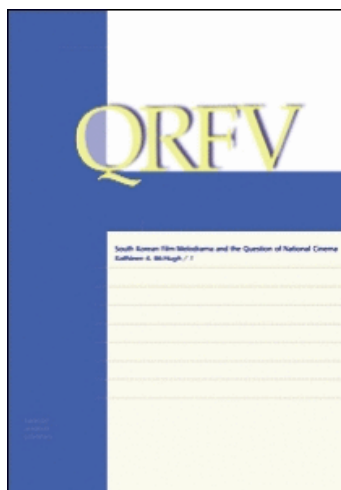
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## Persistent Rhetoric for Persistent Worlds: The Mutability of the Self in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games

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## **Persistent Rhetoric for Persistent Worlds: The Mutability of the Self in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games**

MARLIN C. BATES, IV

Employing a grounded theory approach to implicit identity theory, this essay seeks to argue that humans create both the product of identity and the process of identity through rhetorical actions in two massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPG). Specifically, this essay builds on a prior investigation into *Ultima Online* by comparing it to a relative newcomer, the MMORPG *World Of Warcraft* in order to demonstrate how rhetorical forms are persistent across these two games. The essay examines how player-characters in *Ultima Online* and *World of Warcraft* follow an implicit schema of character and, thus, identity development. Players use the site of the MMORPG in order to create identities in a manner that is implicitly recognized by all players. Player-characters then perform those identities in web sites.

Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss argue that too often we are concerned with proving that a theory works, rather than discovering the theories already present within a given situation.<sup>1</sup> Glaser and Strauss argue that when the process of grounded theory is properly completed, the theory discovered will be “readily understandable to sociologists of any viewpoint, to students and to significant laymen.”<sup>2</sup> Also, the users of the theory do not necessarily recognize it as a theory. What the participants do recognize is that there are certain ways that they must or may act in a given situation. Much akin to norms within small group communication theory, these rules develop through continuous interaction and are adopted and adapted to the needs of the situation.

The MMORPG players present not only an identity, but also a method of performing and altering that identity. The identity is created using guidelines presented by the software itself, web pages, and other users. Identity is then performed by the users within the game and on related web pages. The creation of identity occurs as users choose what they wish to be in the game. Users further refine the performance of their identity within web pages related to the particular MMORPG. Although the in-game performance allows users to perform the identity to a certain extent, time and space constrain the number of other player-characters that are able to witness that performance. The player-characters also use the web pages to further expand the professions and personalities available for performance. However, the newly expanded professions are still constrained by the identity process created within the game.

Current communication theory concerning computer mediated communication (CMC) argues that there are “at least five sources of impact on CMC” and that “each of those

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sources—external contexts, temporal structure, system infrastructure, group purposes, and participant characteristics—is itself comprised of variables.” This belief is then used to support a theory that CMC reacts to these variables by “appropriating rules and resources from pre-existing sources of influence through social interaction.”<sup>3</sup> However, I would argue that this theory is false. Online community is not created as mimicry of the “real” world. Rather, it is a creation of the individuals themselves; that roles and behaviors are fulfilled as users motivate towards one of the identity schemas available inside of the game. MMORPG players have already differentiated themselves from the mass of society; they do not need to replicate the society they leave when they enter the MMORPG. Members of the community can gain membership into the group only by playing the game itself. However, Stephen Doheny-Farina writes that,

A community is bound by place, which always includes complex social and environmental necessities. It is not something you can easily join. You can’t subscribe to a community as you subscribe to a discussion group on the net. It must be lived. It is entwined, contradictory, and involves all our senses.<sup>4</sup>

Neither Ultima Online nor World of Warcraft is a physical location. The discovery of my work, however, expands the definition of “place.” Player-characters in MMORPGs form complex relationships with each other. Some player-characters join large guilds that are formed on the basis of craft or personality. Others get married to other player-characters in and out of the game. Furthermore, the joining of the MMORPG community is not a simple act. A person desiring to engage in this community must first purchase the software and then sign up for the service on a continuing basis. The player-character must also pay a monthly fee in order to maintain their existence in the game. With the research that follows, we will come to see that a person *is* able to subscribe to a community. It is not the *place* that bounds community, but the *identities* that are formed within it.

The following analysis will attempt to prove that five rhetorical forms, or identity schemas, are present within both UO and WoW. In my previous work, I identified these schemas as “new player,” “role player,” “gamer,” “player,” and “independent.”<sup>5</sup> The names tend to describe how the player-character will interact with others and what language will be used to conduct that interaction.

The first identity is one that all players start from. It is often a source of derision by other, more established, players through the use of the epithet, “noob.”<sup>6</sup> However, that does not negate its existence. Indeed, the disdain other players have for this identity only further serves to prove its existence. The second identity is the “role-player.” The player-character employing such an identity seems to go to some length to maintain the illusion of the game fiction. In order to recognize and be recognized as a member of the “role player” identity group, player-characters within the web pages use language that contains a great deal of abstract detail. “Role players” also realize that they must use first person references to describe themselves and their activities. When these player-characters attempt commerce, that attempt will also align with the role being portrayed. Finally, there will be little, if any, attempt to distinguish statements between in-game references and real-life references.

The third identity is the “gamer” schema. Like the “role-player” this identity is derived from the “new player” schema. However, this identity arrangement is not concerned with the game beyond the fact that it is a game to be mastered. Indeed, there are really no restraints as to what “gamers” will or will not do to prove their prowess within and

without the confines of the game program. “Gamers” also realize that they must use third person references to describe their character and its activities. Moreover, those descriptions concerning the player-character’s abilities will be in the numeric equivalents. When these player-characters attempt commerce, that attempt will focus on the statistical data and not the narrative descriptions. Finally, there will be continued reminders to themselves and other players that this is a game and that they have mastered the game.

We can recognize “player” identity by its employment of elements from both the “role-player” and the “gamer” identities. The “player” users will freely borrow from both identities, as the player-character deems necessary. Other Ultima Online player-characters can recognize the “player” identity adherent when they see the combination of game fiction narratives alongside numerical statistics, a reference to out-game instances while using in-game fiction descriptions and a free use of both commerce styles as deemed suitable to the player-character.

The “independent” identity follows no discernable pattern that is replicated amongst other gamers. Indeed, the only coherent theory to this identity is that employers of this identity will be unlike either the “role-player” or “gamer” identities. “Independent” player-characters do not seek to be recognized by their fellow gamers, nor do they wish to be identified with a group of other players.

The beginnings of identity in MMORPGs are as modest as those in real life. We start out as blank slates that are inscribed upon by our experiences and the world around us. As Maurice Charland tells us, “our first subject positions are modest, linked to our name, our family, and our sex.” Such is the case with Ultima Online and the World of Warcraft. However, as Charland further states, “as we enter the adult world, [our subject positions] become more complex.” As the player progresses in the game, the player-characters recognize themselves “as the subject in a text.” The identity adopted by player-characters allows them to step beyond the boundaries of where they may be physically or temporally. As Charland reminds us, “it is to be a subject which exists beyond one’s body and life span.”<sup>7</sup> Moreover, it is the recognition of other players that allows individual player-characters to recognize that they are part of a “rhetoric of socialization”<sup>8</sup> and can thus be a “model of what the rhetor would have his real auditor become.”<sup>9</sup> This recognition is further shaped by the mode of communication in which the rhetoric is transmitted. Carey reminds us rhetors are not attempting to acquire information from other players, but are trying to confirm how to portray themselves within the world that is that particular MMORPG.<sup>10</sup> Player-characters read the web pages and garner from them a sense of what it means to *be* other characters. From that sense of Being, player-characters construct what it means to be themselves. That mode of being is then transmitted to others for reception and justification. The profile is the rhetorical discourse of being within Ultima Online. As Edwin Black states, the “best evidence in the discourse” of a link between an implied auditor and an ideology “will be in the form of stylistic tokens.”<sup>11</sup> The web page performances are the “stylistic tokens” that Black speaks of. By discovering there are implicit categories within the web pages, we can assign value to the stylistic tokens. Each rhetorical form represents a stylistic token and is adopted or rejected by auditors as player-characters seek to build their identity. Most importantly, there is no arbitrary construction of these tokens. Rather, players are interpellated into a sense of whom they are by implicitly recognizing which tokens to adopt. It is the use of certain tokens that allow the critic to recognize which group a particular rhetor belongs to. Moreover, it allows the critic to determine what changes can be wrought by individual player-characters and by groups of player-characters. For example, if a group of rhetor-players had adopted a habit of selling items by telling other players what numeric attributes each item had, we would be able to conclude that that

group was adhering to the “gamer” identity schema. If that same group of players then starts to describe their items for sale in another manner, we would recognize an attempt at changing the overarching identity schema was being made. Furthermore, by constructing the identity schemas, we know which group of player-characters accepts which tokens for each member’s use. The identity schemas represent the beginnings of how we can recognize the rhetoric of other members of the group. We will know, for example, that if players use the stylistic token of “numeric skill description” in either their web sites that they are part of the “gamer” identity. We do not know this because of a priori knowledge or even the arbitrary determination of the critic. We have this knowledge because the members of the group under study use particular tokens that express a particular “vector of influence”<sup>12</sup> that shapes how they respond to other rhetoric inside and outside of the game.

In the web pages, we begin to see how Charland’s “rhetoric of socialization” begins to be structured. Charland argues that auditors begin to see the calls, or hails, from other rhetors as an attempt to situate us within a particular frame of reference or rhetoric of socialization. The game software creates one instance of hailing the auditors, the web pages creates yet another. The web pages allow for the player-characters to more clearly shape their identities by allowing each user or group to refine further 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 to the call from the web pages to perform that identity. Additionally, the web pages are the player-character further entering the worlds of Ultima Online and Warcraft. Thus, their subject positions acquire and require more depth, more complexity. Some examples of further complexity are in how player-characters adopt specific roles within the fabric of Ultima Online’s and World of Warcraft’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 the schema. In other words, the rhetorical form provides the foundation and frame on top of which the uniqueness is built. The process is similar to what Burke explains as identification and differentiation. Burke tells us that as human actors we are constantly striving to belong to a group (identification) and yet still be different from the individuals within the group (differentiation).<sup>13</sup> It is the tension between these two modes that the individuals within the MMORPG must deal with. In order to reduce the tension, player-characters attend to the clues of how to perform 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.

Because the web authors are no longer constrained by the software engine, web pages allow their creators a great deal of flexibility in how content concerning the MMORPG is presented. Moreover, there are fewer limitations as to what may be presented within the web pages. In examining web pages that echo the identities created within the MMORPGs, we are able to discern a more complete picture of the identities. Specifically, the rhetor can create whatever images and text necessary to the task, whereas, within the game, the player-character is constrained in word and deed somewhat: text is transitory, graphics must be created with the game engine, and there is no place to universally access or display information. Therefore, the identities discovered within the web pages are less susceptible to artificial constraints such as the limitations of a game.

Ultima Online’s official websites present information in a manner that would seem to contradict itself. The first portion of official web pages dedicates itself to explaining how to play the game itself. However, the web pages do so in a way that ascribes a reality to

the game's fiction. For example, the web page that explains to new players how to get ahead in the game does not explain the process in terms of game mechanics, but in terms of the game's fiction. Even the sub-titles of the web page tend to support a role-playing interpretation: "Getting Money," "Banking," and "Safe Deposit Boxes." The sub-titles are active references to real-life actions, while simultaneously pointing the reader toward the in-game simulacra. As the web page unfolds, the rhetoric of the page forces its reader into accepting the game fiction as reality in order to understand the game itself. Specifically, "the simplest way to earning an income is to start trading" and "do not try to steal anything unless you have the appropriate Thieving skills—you're unlikely to survive the experience."<sup>14</sup> The web page does not state that players should not attempt to steal unless they have xx.x percent in thieving. The web site seeks to disseminate information, but it intentionally does not violate the willing suspension of disbelief amongst a portion of its player base.

However, there are exceptions to this unwritten rule. In explaining the "Character Window," the web page states, "your backpack may also be accessed by clicking the Inventory button on your character window, or by holding ALT key and pressing 'I'."<sup>15</sup> The phrasing used here reminds the reader that a computer game is being discussed (for example, "ALT key") and, thus, could spoil the suspension of disbelief. However, even in this exception there is an attempt to keep the player enmeshed within the game fiction. By using the phrasing "your backpack" and "your character" the web page ameliorates the use of computer terminology and maintains the suspension of disbelief. Other informational pages place any text that does not align with game fiction in italics.

The official web pages increase their reality prescription when they focus on the game fiction specifically. As described by the company itself,

The Britannia News Network is the official news site for Ultima Online. All articles are written by our Interest staff and are based on actual events and situations in the game. From time to time, fictional stories may be provided by the developers, expanding upon the lore of Britannia.

The sites are not simply web pages, but rather they are "official news sites" and expand on the "lore of Britannia." Additionally, any information that does not align even peripherally with the game fiction is referred to sites not included within the main pages. For example, there is a newsletter that describes "the most recent changes in the game and on the Web Site." However, this newsletter is not found within the official site. Rather, the newsletter is sent to individuals via electronic mail. Moreover, the web site refers players to guild web sites that contain "over 23,000 player-run organizations, or guilds, [and] permeate the landscape of UO." Again, there is a separation between what is game fiction and what might potentially distinguish fact from fiction.<sup>16</sup>

The "Role Player" identity adherents specifically seek out situations that allow them to become more enmeshed within the game fiction. The "Information" section of the official web sites allows the player-character to continue this pattern. Information contained within this section of the website is not presented in a straightforward manner. Indeed, the web pages take extreme pains to couch all information, whether it is beginning or ongoing, in terms of the game fiction. Specifically, it is the rhetor's choice of "person" that places the auditors of these web pages within certain identity schemas. In language, the first person is used to distinguish the speaker; the second person is used to address the individual being spoken to, and the third person is used to speak of an object or a party separate from the

speaker or the auditor. The official web sites avoid separating the character from the player by avoiding the second person groups of pronouns and referring to the character and the player as one and the same.

The play guide section of the website is perhaps the best example of this tendency. Although the play guide attempts to present information to new players as if they were simply playing a game, the web pages in this area slip into the language of the role-player identity. One section starts out stating, "Your Character Window displays your character's full name, including profession, and any titles you may have."<sup>17</sup> This statement is an attempt to differentiate the player from the character. But, the statement contradicts itself. At the end of the sentence, the phrase "any titles you may have" implies that the *character* no longer possesses the title, rather the *player* himself does. This conclusion is reinforced by the sentence directly following, "Your name will also reflect your reputation."<sup>18</sup> Again, the distinction between the player and character is no longer present because the name is the player's, the reputation is the player's, and the player is the auditor being addressed by the page. The web page is not discussing a separate person or object; it is discussing the auditor. Had the web authors wanted to separate the player and character, they could have continued the third person references used in the beginning of the sentence by saying, for example, "your character's reputation will be reflected in its name." This is not an isolated example. The next section on the same page tells the reader that "the Character Window shows a close-up view of your character, including the clothing and armor you're currently wearing, or any weapons or tools you're currently wielding."<sup>19</sup> The initial use of the third person reference is an attempt to draw all readers into the role player persona. Indeed, this use of the third person allows even the skeptical player entrée into the "role player" schema because there are no barriers to the use of the schema. The auditor is led from game, to the persona objectified, to the persona as auditor. If anything, these web pages add to the "role player" identity in that it provides further justification of the perception of real. If we are constantly seeking for instances of stable, coherent identities, then there must be an opening for the auditor-player to enter accept this instance as an acceptable identity schema. In the official web pages of Ultima Online, it is the subtle movement from third party ("Your character's reputation") to the second person ("Your name" and "Your reputation"). This fugue state of sorts is present within almost all elements of the information pages. Even the italicized side notes, which are ostensibly present to separate the game from the gamer, contain these subtle movements.<sup>20</sup>

To finalize the analysis of the official information web pages, let us apply the identity elements of the role player to these pages. To begin, there tends to be a large range in the amount of data employed to describe a player-character by persons adhering to the "role player" identity schema. The information web pages present information in a middle ground type of detail. Although there is a good deal of information present, it is up to the player to discern the implication of most of the information. Furthermore, the web pages do not present computer-related specifics unless absolutely necessary. Even when this information must be presented, it is accompanied by ameliorating statements. All three types of game character titles are treated by the web pages as belonging to an entity that is neither player nor character alone. Rather, these titles are "your name" and "your reputation."

The web pages are also used to present the identity elements of the "role player" in the first person. The official information web pages explain commerce within the game as aligning with the role being portrayed by the player-character in such a way as to minimize any differentiation between in-game and real-life references. This is best portrayed by the following statement from the official Ultima Online web pages:

For very large purchases of 2000 gold or more (a house or ship deed for example), or for purchases from a vendor where it would be difficult or impossible to carry sufficient cash on your person, the vendor architect, shipwright or other tradesman can transfer funds directly from your bank account, even without a banker present, once the deal is agreed upon.<sup>21</sup>

The specific use of first person statements creates a sense of reality. The player-character is not interacting with a game; he is agreeing to make a deal with an architect or a shipwright. The power of these words allows those seeking some stable, coherent identity to maintain the identity schema of the “role player.”

These web pages do not “prove” that the “role player” identity exists. Rather, these pages independently allow a “role player” identity to be performed. It is an identity that aligns with one present within the game itself. The web pages do not explicate a method of playing the game. Rather, they entrap players into a mode of thinking that allows them to discover the “role player” schema for themselves. Additionally, the web pages allow the auditors to see how their individual employment of the identity schema would interact in the world created in Ultima Online. The performance occurs mentally as the auditors read the web pages and imagine how “their reputation” may be affected by in-game events or how they might do their banking.

The World of Warcraft official site does Ultima Online one better in terms of presenting a stage for the identities to be performed. Unlike Ultima Online, Blizzard’s World of Warcraft site separates the areas for identity performance. The “New player” is presented with a large variety of information to choose from. There are discrete areas to find “Role-playing discussions” as well as “PvP [Gamer] discussions.” The “Player” identities can then pick and choose what information they need and desire.

Specifically, the side frame of the World of Warcraft site lists information in groups. The visitor to the site can find “Game Info” as well as “Forums” for discussion. However, the information, much like that found in the Ultima Online web sites is couched in a neutral language that can be construed—by the player-character—as to be in support of any of the rhetorical identity schemas. If one were to go to the “Info—Basics—World of Warcraft Guide” page, the reader is presented with the following opening paragraph

As a massively multiplayer online game, World of Warcraft enables thousands of players to come together online and battle against the world and each other. Players from across the globe can leave the real world behind and undertake grand quests and heroic exploits in a land of fantastic adventure. At long last, the world of Azeroth, first glimpsed in Warcraft I and further enhanced in subsequent strategy games, is realized in glorious detail and ready for the arrival of millions of prospective players. So step upon the hallowed shores of this embattled world, and see what journeys await for those who would plumb this ancient realm’s many secrets.<sup>22</sup>

Just as in the Ultima Online pages, Blizzard seeks to shift the player from one realm to another. The reader is invited to “step up upon the hallowed shores.” The player is hailed to join the world known as Warcraft. It is not a world created for this “game.” Rather, it is a world that has been in existence and was “first glimpsed” in a long-past time.

Just like the UO pages, however, these pages not only offer the rules to be followed, but also the stage on which to demonstrate the identities behind the rules. In the forum section



of the WoW web pages, there are discussion areas for “Role-playing,” “PvP Discussion,” “Professions,” “Quests,” “Code of Conduct,” and more.

The “Role-playing” forum allows player-characters to act out their characters in such posts as

Stareye wearily dismounted the gryphon and walked through Astrannar. The beautiful purple and green forest was a welcome sight from the arid Barrens. He walked into the inn and bought a room and meal for 50 silver. Stareye had been called to Ashenvale to help the Sentinels regain the forest. For many years, he had battled the Horde with many other Alliance forces. The upcoming battle may be his hardest yet.<sup>23</sup>

The forums give the players an opportunity to reach out and display their characters and how such characters would act. Such messages exist for all of the rhetorical schemas. Additionally, by placing such explicit divisions on the web site, Blizzard does what EA/OSI does not: explicitly recognizes that there are different types of players within their “community.” Indeed, Blizzard even goes so far as to have certain servers dedicated to certain identity types.

Blizzard created three different types of “realms” or servers on which a player-character can engage in the game’s world. Blizzard calls these server types “Normal,” “Role-playing,” and “Player vs. Player [PvP].” There is also a combination of the last two: “Role-playing PvP.” The description that Blizzard gives them further cements the theory that the rhetorical forms found in Ultima Online have been replicated in World of Warcraft.

For the “Normal” realm, Blizzard sums up the realm with a “Sentence to remember: On a Normal realm, I will never be attacked by other players if I don’t want to be, except if I enter an enemy capital or a Battleground.”<sup>24</sup> In other words, this could be the playground for the “Player” identity, the player-character who seeks to gather something from everything. The “sentence to remember” for the “Role-Playing realm” is equally fitting: “If I choose to play on a Role-Playing realm, I will act and speak as my character should in the World of Warcraft setting.”<sup>25</sup> Again, as was discovered in UO, the role-player rhetorical identity seeks to immerse themselves in the ur-Real world within the game. The realm and the web site forums go hand in hand to allow that identity to be performed. The “Player vs. Player” realm also allows for the “Gamer” to demonstrate his or her dominance of the game by joining a realm that places player-characters in situations described by this “sentence to remember”: “On a Player vs. Player realm, I may be attacked by other players everywhere at any time, except in friendly (green) territories and in dungeons (instances).”<sup>26</sup> In conjunction with this type of realm there is a ranking page that shows how each player-character is doing in terms of body count and player kills.<sup>27</sup>

The rhetorical forms found within Ultima Online have not only been replicated in the World of Warcraft, they have been further refined so that identities may be performed even more closely to the rules promulgated from other, earlier, MMORPGs. In our further discussion, we can begin to see what impacts will arise from this persistency in persistent worlds.

The conclusion to this analysis of the Ultima Online and World of Warcraft web pages brings forth a number of new additions to the identity schemas in play within MMORPGs. The web pages force the reader/audience into further accepting, and therefore adhering to, the schemas in play. This further support results in the broadening of the implicit identity theory to include three new facets of the rhetoric of these MMORPGs to consider: understanding, meaning, and identity.

The web sites foster the creation of understanding in that the pages allow some entrée for new players into the game by allowing new players to view the performance of the identity schemas present within the game. Moreover, those “gamers,” “players,” and “role players” who wish to understand more about the world in which they play and live are able to view those other personas who seem to be similar to them on the web pages. By sharing information in the manner each identity user is accustomed to receiving it, each group of identity users begins to share an understanding of how the game and their new “lives” work. The web pages are ascribed an authority on par with the game itself because the web pages seek to describe the game and the identity creation found therein. The web page’s author, therefore, has a great deal of influence in controlling information and, as Kermode reminds us, “once a text is credited with high authority, it is studied intensely; once it is so studied, it acquires mystery or secrecy.”<sup>28</sup>

With the exposition or maintenance of the mystery, the web sites also engender understanding in that the web pages allow the adherents of each identity schema to further differentiate themselves. The web pages represent player-characters who not only have faith in MMORPGs as a place for identity, but also player-characters who know how the ur-Real world works. These player-characters—be they “role-player,” “gamer,” or “player”—profess knowledge on their web sites. The knowledge they possess must, in order to be fully understood by the web site’s audience, be translated into a language of action or of implementation. Each identity schema’s adherents use the web pages, therefore, to dictate what is acceptable in terms of identity creation and performance. In discussing how “the texts of disclosure . . . confer suasive power on the translator,” Black posits that “anything at all that may have a latent meaning in addition to its manifest one is susceptible to translation and so is a potential vehicle for the enhancement of the translator’s ethos.” In completing the translation of the game’s fiction into acceptable modes of action, the player-characters become more than just players, they become “initiates, possessors of privileged knowledge.” In other words, the player turned initiate is now elevated to something more than one of the crowd. Along with that elevated status comes the ability to dictate which configuration of identity and identity performance is acceptable for those that aspire to be like the translator. The web pages become the connective tissue between the bones of the identity schema. In translating the game, the web pages allow performance to more accurately reflect the intended identity as it allows a greater range of movement, much like the difference between an angle and a curve. The game’s software allows the rough angle to be constructed with crude implements, but the web pages with the exchange or retention of secret information allows the angle to be shaped into a curve.<sup>29</sup>

With the creation of the more appropriate curve, there comes a creation of meaning. The information ceases to just be instructions on how to play or live, and becomes something of more substance. The translator’s information becomes, as Burke states, consubstantiation. Burke posited that consubstantiation can only come after identification. The process of establishing rhetorical identity schemas and the process of translating the information surrounding these identities creates the identification situation. From this, the aspects of the identity become even stronger. As the identity schemas are strengthened, the player-characters are able to find fellow characters that are of the same identity type and begin to re-tribalize. With the re-tribalization, the player-characters accomplish the establishment of stable, coherent identities or consubstantiation.

Finally, we have discovered that the web presents a stage for identity schemas to be performed by each identity rhetor. Although the web pages do allow for expansion of the identity schemas created within the game, their main purpose is to present an exposition of the player-characters. The “gamer” persona, perhaps more so than any other identity

schema, requires the performance, as player-characters cannot simply state that they are proficient in the game. They must demonstrate it through knowledge and actions. The game allows player-characters to create a certain amount of that identity in that they can demonstrate some knowledge. However, due to the real time nature of the game, gamers cannot display that knowledge all in one moment. The “role players” can display their identity by maintaining the role and “becoming” more real. Thus, the web pages allow gamers, players, and their guilds to display all of that knowledge in a stable location and, therefore, to re-tribalize.

The web pages explain why tokens are ascribed to “role player” rhetorical form. The web pages allow certain members of the identity group to be elevated to the status of translator. This status carries with it the ability to specify what is correct behavior in terms of identity creation and performance. It is that elevation that also dictates why “role players” describe themselves only in terms of the language of the game’s fiction. These adherents do so because they value the secrecy of the game. As Black describes it, secrecy is not only in terms of the unknown, but also the mystique. Specifically, “the mediator of revelation became distanced into mystery.”<sup>30</sup> In keeping with the language of the game’s fiction, “role players” continue the tradition of the façade, the tradition of secrecy. In order to maintain that veil of secrecy and mystique, minor deviations from the language of the game fiction can and will be ignored in order to maintain the identity façade.

Additionally, since outright disagreement with the companies that create these ur-Real worlds would be tantamount to a drawing away of the veil, disagreement with the game, designers, or the company is done only in game fiction terms. If the “role players” admitted that there was a company behind the creation of the world, the secret would be “out,” the world would be “a computer game” and, therefore, accessible to all. Instead, by disagreeing with the company in terms of the game’s fiction, the veil is maintained and only the translators may allow access.

It is for similar reasons that guilds can and will be described outside of the game, but player-characters cannot be described outside of the game. The translator can reveal information about a guild because it maintains the translator’s status as disseminator of information that needs to be understood by the masses. The members of the role player group need to understand how guilds function within the mystery that is the particular MMORPG’s universe. However, to describe an individual is to reveal the person behind the curtain. Individual players may give information about themselves to the translator, but that knowledge is kept secret so that the mystery is maintained; the translator remains superior.

If the “role player” adherent uses the translation aspect of the web pages to maintain the mystery, the “gamer” uses the role to expose it. “Gamers” revel in the ability to understand how the game works but not in order to maintain a façade, but to display their place within the mystery. Since the game fiction does not allow objective representation of skill, the gamer resorts to the use of numeric equivalents. The entire identity schema is created to demonstrate prowess and technical abilities, thus the “gamer” uses the web pages to translate the game’s language in such a way that all readers may become initiates to the belief. Unlike a priest who seeks to maintain the secrets of the confessor, the gamer wishes to reveal all knowledge in the most efficient way as possible. The web pages allow the gamer to disseminate information in such a way as to let people become better at the game and, through that, better at performing the gamer identity schema. Thus, even though there will sometimes be elements of the role player presented, the vast majority of the information presented will be in the language of the gamer. For example, when the gamer presents web pages that “interview” other player-characters, there may be some game fiction language, but that language is used in order to expose the mysteries, not to confound them.

The “player” schema is, again, the middle ground between the role player and the gamer. “Player” web sites also employ the translator mode to explain the game. However, whether the translator deepens the mystery or solves the mystery depends on what identity group the player-character wishes to become consubstantiated with at the moment. As discussed earlier, the “player” schema adherents tend to pick and choose what stylistic tokens they adopt. Those choices will vary depending on the end state that the “player” wishes to achieve; either “role player” or “gamer.” As such, the choice of translator role must also vary. However, we can conclude that if a “player” tends toward adopting the stylistic tokens of a particular group (for example, “role player”), then the “player” will also adopt the translator mode that aligns with that same group (for example, one that seeks to maintain the mystery of World of Warcraft or Ultima Online).

The web pages not only allow the player-characters to display the choice of stylistic tokens they have adopted through the identity creation process, but the web pages also allow the player-characters to deem how to display and understand those tokens in such a way as to either maintain or expose the secrets of the world.

### Implications

The users of the MMORPG and the implicit identities created do not recognize how they construct their player-characters as a theory, *per se*. Rather, through their performances in the web, the player-characters recognize that in order to create and perform a certain identity schema, they must adhere to certain rules. Those rules are found within the five distinct identities revealed: “new player,” “role player,” “gamer,” “player,” and “independent.” The player-characters then perform those identities in the game and in the World Wide Web. In performing the identity schemas, the users present a coherent whole to the auditors within the game and are thus recognized by their peers. Problems within the framework of the MMORPG that do not allow the player-character to perform an identity in an acceptable manner are addressed in a variety of contexts. Collective identities are formed by the combination of player-characters into guilds and other associations found within the game and also reinforced through web sites.

Those associations and identities are what Burke would term a “community of ways.” Burke tells us “from the standpoint of “identification,” what we call “competition” is better described as men’s [and women’s] attempt to out-imitate one another.”<sup>31</sup> This imitation causes consubstantiality “by a community of ways (identification’).”<sup>32</sup> 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. However, the conundrum is solved when we understand that the 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. In order for true identification to exist, there must be hierarchy. Specifically, the player must “imitate not its mere insignia, but the principle behind the ordering of those insignias.”<sup>33</sup> When player-characters seek out similar professional titles possessed by other player-characters, they do so not just to be like the other player-character.

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, thus, be accepted by the group as a whole.

MMORPGs provide further support for their sense of real by providing insight into how identities maintain membership and community cohesion. It is the web sites that provide us with information as to how the group is maintained over time. Black posited that an auditor could not employ a rhetor's terms without also adopting the ideology behind those terms. MMORPGs not only provide support for this thought, but also advance it one step further in that they use the theory to maintain membership. Those performance rules either allowed each player-character to fully demonstrate an identity or the player-character was given the ability to withdraw from the membership. Those adoption of the performance rules are the "fallible sign" that the player-characters have adopted "not just a position, but an ideology."<sup>34</sup> Acceptance of the performance rules, and the ideologies behind them, means that all of the player-characters have sufficient reasons to continue in the activity. Promulgating the performance rules and, thus, the identity schemas themselves, to other auditors allows the community to expand. Those that choose to leave the membership do so not because they have forsaken the ideologies behind the identity performances, but because they believe that identity performance, for them, is no longer possible. Indeed, when there is a change to the game that allows former player-characters to believe that their identity performance is once again possible, then they return to the game. Thus the player-characters not only have the basis for accepting rhetorical identities, but also a way to maintain and promote membership.

Charland explains this on-going process when he discusses the *Peuple Quebecois*. *Ultima Online* is constantly calling its members to be a part of the situation. More importantly, the constant hailing occurring reminds the other player-characters on how to act in game in terms of their chosen identity. If those identities are shifted from acceptable norms, then the web pages remind the player-character how to act. These player-characters become part of the fabric of the game. When the player-character guilds form a player-run town, they do so not because it allows them any special rewards, but because it affirms their discursive position. No longer is their identity outside of the rhetoric, it IS the rhetoric. These players do not exist simply because they wish to play a game, they exist because they need to re-tribalize, re-form communities whilst still maintaining an identity that is stable and coherent. The websites allow for that creation, they also allow for other auditor/rhetors to affirm the identity as "acceptable." Moreover, the web pages give the player-characters a primer on acceptable and unacceptable behaviors. The player-character has broken out of the constraints of the game engine and has accepted behaviors, which allow him/her to demonstrate being different within the game. It is a rhetorical act that demonstrates knowledge of identity as well as hailing other players to move beyond just the identity creation and into identity use. The game allows certain identity schemas to be employed. The player-characters have created those schemas to either explicitly follow or not follow game-based fiction. By stepping outside the confines of the game engine with that identity, player-characters make a statement that they are rhetorically "real." The player-character has substance beyond that which the companies have allowed them. Moreover, by creating and displaying items that are outside of the explicit game engine, the player-character becomes rhetorically "real" WITHIN the game engine. The creation of non-software manufactured items is one of the ways that player-characters interpellate others into the rhetorical situation, it is the rhetorical invitation to BE.

One of the questions this research sought to answer was how player-characters recognized each identity schema. Donath argued that it was the use of "assessment" and

“conventional” signals that allowed others to recognize and be recognized. Ultima Online’s and World of Warcraft’s identity schemas certainly contain a bit of the Batesian<sup>35</sup> mimicry being revealed, but it is the focus on how those signals are used “in accordance with prevailing cultural scripts.”<sup>36</sup> The player-characters unconsciously ask themselves whether another, allegedly role-player, player-character is acting like a regular role-player would. Do the rhetors in question use the language of the game’s fiction to describe their situation or is it the speech that is best ascribed to players or gamers? Questions like these are the prevailing scripts being enacted. Determining whether the enactment is good or poor allows auditors to also align with a prevailing script. The player-characters constantly dance around each other acting and RE-acting, making sure that the identities being performed are recognizable and correct and therefore the identity is complete and stable. There is no director for this script save those who are acting the parts, who are becoming and performing that which is real. It is the epitome of “identification through action.”<sup>37</sup>

MMORPGs are more than game and yet less than life. It is certainly something that stimulates the senses and engenders more communication than most any other individual activity. That is to say, MMORPGs such as UO and WoW are very close to a life in that it engages the senses: player-characters who are lost are mourned, people come together and marry, professions obtained, and wealth is gained and lost. It is, in a word, real. The communication crafted within its virtual borders follows similar rules and expectations as the communication crafted outside of the activity. The creation of virtual worlds is a fascinating one, but it is the study of how the populations of those worlds communicate that is the richest area of all. People masked behind a virtual avatar function no less real than those in a tête-à-tête. Indeed, it could be argued that the rhetorical representations within a virtual world are more pure because there is no fear of communication: rhetors are indirectly communicating to their auditors and, thus, feel freer to communicate their intentions. This research does not even begin to discuss these conclusions, but it is a fine thought to conclude on.

## Notes

1. Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (Chicago: Aldine de Gruyter, 1967).
2. Glaser & Strauss, 3.
3. Nancy K. Baym, “The Emergence of On-Line Community” in *Cybersociety 2.0: Revisiting Computer-mediated communication and Community* edited by Steven G. Jones (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1998), 49.
4. Stephen Doherty-Farina, *The Wired Neighborhood* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 37.
5. Marlin C. Bates, IV, “Implicit Identity Theory In The Rhetoric Of The Massively Multiplayer On-line Role-Playing Game (MMORPG), Ultima Online.” Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, (State College, PA: The Pennsylvania State University, 2005).
6. Literally, a new person. Pronounced “newbee.”
7. Maurice Charland, “Constitutive Rhetoric: The Case of the Puelpe Quebecois.” In *Landmark Essays on Rhetorical Criticism*, edited by Thomas W. Benson (Davis, Ca: Hermagoras Press, 1993), 143.
8. Charland, “Constitutive Rhetoric,” 138
9. Edwin Black, “The Second Persona.” In *Landmark Essays on Rhetorical Criticism*, edited by Thomas W. Benson (Davis, Ca: Hermagoras Press, 1993), 113.
10. James W. Carey, *Communication as Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 21.
11. Black, “Second Persona,” 112.
12. Black, “Second Persona,” 113.
13. Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969, 21.

14. Electronics Arts, Inc., "Money and Banking," (Redwood City: Electronics Arts, Inc., n.d.), <[http://guide.uo.com/start3d\\_10.html](http://guide.uo.com/start3d_10.html)>. May 12, 2004.
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16. All quotations in paragraph: Electronics Arts, Inc., "Community," (Redwood City: Electronics Arts, Inc., n.d.), <<http://town.uo.com/>>. May 12, 2004.
17. Electronics Arts, Inc., "Character Window," (Redwood City: Electronics Arts, Inc., n.d.), <[http://guide.uo.com/start3d\\_6.html](http://guide.uo.com/start3d_6.html)>. May 12, 2004.
18. "Character Window," 2004.
19. "Character Window," 2004.
20. From the web site: "Note Certain items and actions may require that you have one or both hands empty. Check your paper doll if you have difficulty equipping or using an item" ("Playguide: Character Window: Clothing/Armor/Weapons").
21. Electronics Arts, Inc., "Money and Banking," (Redwood City: Electronics Arts, Inc., n.d.), <[http://guide.uo.com/start3d\\_10.html](http://guide.uo.com/start3d_10.html)>. May 12, 2004.
22. Blizzard Entertainment, Inc., "World of Warcraft Community Site—Info—Basics—World of Warcraft Guide," (Irvine, CA: Blizzard Entertainment., n.d.), <<http://tinyurl.com/8csup>>. January 2, 2006.
23. Stareye, "WoW Role-Playing—" (Irvine, CA: Blizzard Entertainment, Inc.), <<http://tinyurl.com/awbsm>>. February 6, 2006.
24. Blizzard Entertainment, Inc., "World of Warcraft Community Site—Info—Realmtypes," (Irvine, CA: Blizzard Entertainment., n.d.), <<http://www.worldofwarcraft.com/info/basics/realmtypes.html>>. January 2, 2006.
25. Blizzard, "Realmtypes."
26. Blizzard, "Realmtypes."
27. Blizzard Entertainment, Inc., "World of Warcraft Community Site—Info—Basics—World of Warcraft Guide," (Irvine, CA: Blizzard Entertainment., n.d.), <<http://tinyurl.com/d8ous>>. January 2, 2006.
28. Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 144.
29. Quotations in paragraph are from Edwin Black, "Secrecy and Disclosure as Rhetorical Forms," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 88 (1988): 135.
30. Black, "Secrecy and Disclosure," 135.
31. Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives*, 131.
32. Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives*, 131.
33. Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives*, 131.
34. Black, "Second Persona," 165.
35. "Batesian mimicry" is where a prey species adopts the coloring of a similar species in order to avoid being eaten. The most well known example is the monarch and viceroy butterflies. The monarch is not palatable to most predators. The viceroy has, through evolution, adopted similar identity traits (color, markings).
36. Jodi O'Brien, "Writing in the Body: Gender (Re)Production in Online Interaction." In *Communities in Cyberspace*, edited by Marc A. Smith & Peter Kollock (London: Routledge, 1999), 22.
37. Sherry Turkle, *The Second Self* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984), 83.

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