

Blizzard will soon display your real name: Identity and governance in WoW¹

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Introduction

On July 6th 2010 Blizzard made an announcement that it was destined to shake the very foundations of online gaming communities. According to their representatives, in the near future **WoW official fora will display players' Real ID**: *“their real-life first and last name, with the option to also display the name of their primary in-game character alongside it”* (Vaneras, Blizzard’s online community representative for the European WoW community).

This feature that was only a part of a broader system with Battle.Net² in the core of this concept would be implemented in StarCraft II and applied in WoW Cataclysm and Diablo III. Briefly, the characteristics of RealID system³ are:

- Your friends will appear with their real names and their character names in your friend’s list and vice versa.
- You can enjoy a cross-game, cross-realm, and cross-faction chat with your Real ID friends, across all supported Blizzard games.
- Status messages will inform your friends about your current actions/ decisions. You can also find out what your friends are doing and which games and modes they’re playing in real time.

The aim of this “design philosophy” was the reinforcement of “community”, the creation of a “new gaming environment” with emphasis in the “social” aspect of the game and the construction of an “ideal place for gamers to form long-lasting, meaningful relationships”. The reaction was immediate: Until the threads were locked, the US official forum recorded around 50,000 posts and the European one 14,000 posts, most of which were declaring their anxiety regarding the new feature and their unwillingness to participate in this new social gaming experience. Three days later, on July 9th 2010, Blizzard released a statement withdrawing their plan.

This paper examines the underlying political meaning of these actions, stressing the role of identity as a major field of virtual political battle.

¹ World of Warcraft is a Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG) by Blizzard Entertainment

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² Battle Net is a premium gaming service provided by Blizzard Entertainment.

³ “Real ID is a completely voluntary and optional level of identity that keeps players connected across all of Battle.net. When you and a friend mutually agree to become Real ID friends, you’ll have access to a number of additional features that will enrich your social gaming experience in new and exciting ways” (from “What is Real ID?” <http://us.battle.net/en/realid/>)

Protest in MMOGs

Why an incident like the massive reaction against “Real ID system” in WoW fora, really matters? What analytical value may this incident encapsulates?

Protests and demonstrations in online game worlds are not rare in MMOG history. As Taylor (2006) mentions, incidents like “demonstration for private housing in WorldsAway (1996) or a naked avatar run to the virtual castle of Richard Garriott (1997), creator of Ultima Online” and the reactions that brought about, function as an analytical kaleidoscope. These kind of collective incidents, reflect on the one hand the importance which the players receive as a key component for the viability of a virtual world, while on the other, permit the thorough analysis of the procedures and practices that actually compose the relationship between code and players.

Other radical patterns of cyber-collective action are: a) the WoW protest on the Argent Dawn server in January 2005 and b) the Anti-Bot protest in Aion(CN) on April 2010. In the first case, hundreds of gnome warriors marched and got naked demonstrating about issues concerning the Warrior class. Meanwhile, in the second example, thousands of characters with the name “Resist the Bot” who were created only for that purpose were logged in, at the same server at the same time. Sending the message “Not bot but a clean Aion!” their actions resulted in a server crash. The above collective actions are highlighting the fact that when need is present, code’s *regulability* is truly high⁴ and *player-participation model* is being challenged⁵.

Different from the above cases, protest against Real ID system had the above characteristics:

- a. The field of dispute concerned the official fora, the in-between space of play and not the actual game world. Official fora tend to perform two interrelated acts. On the one hand, they constitute the “social world” of the game (Taylor, 2006b), the neutral ground where as the official Code Of Conduct mentions:

*“You can discuss ideas, give game play advice, role-play,
and converse about any other aspects of the game”.*

This is the moment in the broader game world where the conjunction of game and real life is being revealed to the naked eye, expanding, at the same time, the game experience beyond game’s virtual boundaries. On the other hand, official fora also constitute the informal “public space” of the game, the medium for critique and interaction among law (authority) and players (users) (Castronova 2005: pp153). Castronova states that official fora are the place where coding can be frank with the players and explain design choices and rules. However, these procedures take place inside an informal frame. As official Code Of Conduct also refers:

⁴ “Regulability means the capacity of a government to regulate behavior within its proper reach.” (Lessig, 1999: 19)

⁵ In the first case the demonstration was treated as griefing (disturbing the game experience) and Blizzard threatened to suspend accounts, whilst in the latter NCSOFT stated that this kind of reaction was expected and players should be patient and wait the future class balancing.

“Your access to these forums is a privilege” and not a “right”, Blizzard Entertainment reserves the right to suspend your access to these forums at any time for reasons”.

In consequence, official fora do not stand for an official democratic tool of negotiation and cooperation, but constitute an informal way of dealing with peer pressure. A characteristic example of this social functionality that official fora tend to display lies in the following answer of Caydiem (Blizzard CR) towards the protestors of Argent Dawn:

“Please understand that we value your feedback and we know how upset the Warrior community is at this time. There are ways to express your opinion on this. Post on the forums -- we do read the class forums, we know you're not satisfied, and we appreciate your well-written posts. The protest is not a constructive way to get your point across. It causes lag for many customers and can ruin their gameplay experience. This is why we cannot allow such a thing to continue. If you use constructive means of communicating with us, trust me... we'll listen.”

- b. Many other secondary initiatives took place, boosting players' effort against Blizzard, giving rise to the social networking of the collective action i.e. online petition, in-game protest, facebook groups of support.
- c. Last but not least, the outcome was in favor of the players.

Our primary goal is to investigate the relationship between Blizzard and player base as it was expressed by the very same subjects and as it manifests itself through the specific incident. The political status of their action and the produced political discourse, if any, constitutes our next theoretical question.

Methodology and data collection

The method of qualitative discourse analysis on online fora was applied to approach these questions. Our main interest focused on the subjective and intersubjective interpretation of facts and the subsequent social construction of computer-mediated reality. Thus, the specific methods include, Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis, Conversation Analysis and Open Coding.

Sampling involved articles and posts on community fan sites and online magazines regarding Blizzard's initial and final announcement (more than 3.000 comments in approximately 20 sites). Blizzard official fora were not included in the sample because of the following two methodological constraints. To start with, WoW official fora are under Blizzard's control, so whatever actions are taking place there, are filtered from the same authority whose “design choices” are under investigation. In consequence, the theoretical validity of the research would be jeopardized. Second, WoW official fora were rebooted after the release of WoW Cataclysm resulted in the lost of every single data.

Our research interest was orientated mainly towards WoW players and secondarily towards MMORPG players, who use gaming fora and acknowledging them as part of the social world of the game. For that reason, the acceptance of online fora, as our research field, was a methodological choice of great importance. Even though this type of asynchronous communication of time and place lacks social cues, the informality of these sites helped us to diminish this effect and at the same time, enabled us to form a more spherical opinion of the “events” and eventually, helped us to form more accurately the individual codes. Articles with open and anonymous commentary were also an important methodological variable. The data collection was continued until the theoretical saturation was achieved.

Unmasking gamers

The main argument against Blizzard’s changes, was that the application of Real ID in official fora would endanger players’ sense of privacy and probably more importantly their notion of security. Here, the fear of being victimized was constituted in the base of the following two projections of cyber-risks (Williams, 2006:42)

- Cyberspace as an anarchist social space and
- Gaming environment, in specific, as a space of generalized but latent social delinquency.

The fear of victimization as a social construction and as a research index does not form a non problematic starting point of analysis. The fear of crime as a theoretical concept has proved to be difficult to define⁶ and even more problematic to measure using well-established social research methods. As Tsiganou (2007:198) mentions, most official criminological research tools tend to measure the feeling of peoples’ personal insecurity as a lack of public safety. In our case, the fear of crime is bounded with the concept of cyberspace as an anarchist social space in which control is absent and personal security is at stake.

“I am not open myself up like that on the internet on open forum. There is a REASON for the anonymity that is so often abused on the internet”,

Opposite to the futuristic perception of cyberspace as an anarchist place of absolute freedom, devoided of any central governmental oppression⁷ (Barlow 2001: pp27-30), here it is the exact nature of multifragmentation of cyberspace that produce and reproduce images/projections of crimes and finally anxiety about one’s personal security. The notion of anarchy in cyberspace or as Timothy C. May (2001) refers to it as “crypto anarchy”, comes to express the horizontal structure of communication, the decentralized agency and last but not least the existence of localized hierarchies

⁶ According to Ditton *et al* (1999:83), the concept of fear of crime is “encompassing a confusing variety of feelings, perspectives, risk-estimations, and thus means different things to different people”

⁷ The main arguments upon which the notion of cyberspace as a place of absolute freedom is being constructed, can be divided into: a. technological (the use of cryptology), b. institutional (As Castells (2005: p201) mentions, cyberspace was established in USA constitute and thus engaged with the First Amendment- Freedom of Speech) and c. ideological (in reference to the production of a symbolic culture that tends to deny any external exercise of power) conceptual categories.

instead of a central oppressive power. As Castells (2005) notes, this space of uncontrolled production and flow of information became the unofficial political target of state, using the concept of cybercrime as an alibi for intervention. The concept of the politicizing of crime and the growth of the so-called “culture of fear” is not new and it is not a surprise that found its way towards the promising cyberspace.

The demonization of cyberspace and the depiction of its dystopic nature, on the other hand, results from a mythology deriving from media and the official discourse of policy makers, whilst secondhand information gathered and distributed through social networks are producing fear levels that are disproportional with either real cyber crime rates or even legal convictions (David S. Wall 2008; Wesley Skogan 1986; William Howard Moore, 2007).

*“I saw **someone** mention that **someone** was stabbed over **something** that happened in Counterstrike. The guy took 6 months to hunt him down, only going off of the other person's in-game name. Insane.”*

Anonymity, on the other hand, tends to provide the illusion of protection against cyber-risks and more specifically against the dangers that stem from the supposable criminogenic environment of WoW. According to our research, the dangers that players believe that may accrue from their exposure and their participation in a gaming environment could be divided into two subcategories:

- a. Threats against personal identity: possible threats coming from co-players due to one’s ethnicity, gender or age.
- b. Threats against social identity: in case of revealing one’s own identity as a WoW player to one’s own workplace/circle of friends.

The first category tends to point WoW population as both the victim and the offender of a series of abuses that are taking place in official fora. These abuses refer to potential incidents of either sexual racism:

“If your name is Clara, Laura, Anna you are soon going to be faced with a lot more sexism and misogyny than you’d like“,

marking at the same time WoW space as a mainly boyhood virtual playground (Cassell & Jenkins 2005; Haines 2004; Taylor, 2003), incidents of racial prejudice or potential threats about minors

“There are kids (under 18) that are posting - it's a safety issue for them. I don't want my kids' real names being used online”,

On the other hand, the vast majority of the player-base expressed its concerns regarding their WoW identity being broadcasted and revealed by a present or by future employer or by their circle of friends. Undoubtedly, the consequences of such an action could induce their social status.

“It has less to do with me from a personal perspective and more to do with how an employer could easily bias you and eliminate you from hiring because of these

stigma attached to wow players that cause them to be less productive in the work place to begin with. The Stigma also doesn't have to be something severe, merely loss of sleep in favour of playing longer at night...”,

or

“Not many of my RL friends play.... unless they, like me, are 'hiding' it from me/them”.

The matter of self – management as a result of a person’s attempt to cope with the established social patterns and in consequence to successfully meet the prevailing social standards, constitutes a central concern of analysis (Goffman 1984: page, Dowe 1973). According to Goffman (1984), people are experiencing an almost schizophrenic life. Torn apart between their true self or personal identity and their potential selves or social identities (or multiselves), they are keep trying to suppress those characteristics/personal traits that could marginalized them. At the same time, they are laboring to build a more suitable and decent social image. WoW players by having internalized⁸ (Mead 1967c) the “status of discreditable”⁹, are experiencing the Real Id application in official fora as their “violent unmasking”, as an attempt to make visible to the public/the Others/the non-players, their attribute as MMORPG players, in the bottom line as an exposure of their “stigma” (Goffman 1984; Goffman 1986). Goffman (1984) argues that when we deal with discreditable persons, the importance lies in “the management of undisclosed discrediting information about self” or in other worlds in the process of “passing” (Goffman 1986: 57). In our case, the unveiling of anonymity will eventually intercept each player’s attempt to implement the “passing” process and thus will force him/her to accept the stigma of “*Identified wow players*”. This is a trait that does not seem to correlate with the rest of the social roles that a person tends to occupy in every day life:

“I for one will not be posting in the new forums because when you google my name I need my professional work and website to show up, not my opinion on healadins”

Gaming community versus social networking

The disruption of the normal gameplay for the benefit of economic interests and the consequent downgrading of the game experience was the second category of the dispute. The deprivation of player’s in-game identity disrupts the game’s continuum by intervening into an important aspect of the game: *the element of role-playing*. Even though, there is a theoretical controversy whether role-playing is possible in an MMORPG (Yee 2006; Esther MacCallum-Steward and Justin Parsler 2008), players are experiencing the lost of this game element, acknowledging, at the same time, the role of official fora as part of the social world of the game:

⁸ An anonymous mentioned: “The image of WoW even in the gaming community itself is horrible. Everyone think we are basement dwelling nolifers who spend too much time in front of the monitor”

⁹ The “status of discreditable” refers to the person whose dissimilarity is not obvious or known to others in contrast to the “discredited”, whose stigma is visible (Goffman 1984).

“So Warcraft is losing its status as a RPG because it is no longer Role Playing”

Taking into consideration that a name incorporates virtually both the game character and the player (Hagstrom 2008: 275), the removal of this fantasy element results in the violent divestment of his/her identity and his/her rehabilitation to reality.

“Now, with this change (given that he makes a post on the forum), everyone who knows him ingame can look him up and draw his real world misery into the game world”.

When we are referring to online games, collective fantasy does not constitute a steady variable, an objective reality. Gary Alan Fine (1983) mentions that collective fantasy is a social construction that owes its existence to the intercommunication among the actors, to the combined experience and the shared expectations. This produced fantasy is not uncontrolled or disorientated, but rather interconnected with the specific game environment (Gary Alan Fine 1983: 2). In our case, the removal of the gaming character from official fora tends to spoil the collective fantasy, converting an up to now game space to a social space, a space where reality enters and the magic circle is broken.

“This is Not the real world Blizzard. This is a game where we go to relax, have fun and separate ourselves from the real world. But now Real world is being forced back to us. Don't blur these lines”.

Clearly, there is no intention to question the social aspect of the game here. Using Simmel's terminology, the element of **sociation** (vergesellschaftung) in MMORPG consists first and mostly a design choice rather than a natural consequence (Ducheneaut, N., Moore, R.J., and Nickell, E. 2007; Ducheneaut, N. and R. J. Moore 2004). Social bonds do take place in a game world, relationships that as Celia Pearce (2009) mentions are being determined and defined in reference with the place of analysis i.e. the specific game environment. It is important however to mention at this point, that in these communities we are witnessing a type of **Gemeinschaft-like**¹⁰ relationships which on the one hand are being enforced by the several types of collaborations that are taking place on the planet of Azeroth and on the other hand, are being expanded through the relationships that players maintain offline (Nardi & Harris, 2006). This kind of **hyperpersonal community interaction** is what defines players' **real life social reality**¹¹, demanding this kind of bond to be recognised as an important aspect of their virtual well-being (Boyns, Forghani & Sosnokavskaya 2009: 71)

¹⁰ Nardi & Harris (2006) are using Ferdinand Tonnies' term Gemeinschaft (community) in order to address the issue of the community construction in the base of common will and share interest (in opposition to Gesellschaft (society) which refer to large-scale associations mainly deriving from the division of labor.)

¹¹ The real life social reality refers to the “Interaction and exchange or sharing information and experiences using alternative and non-game mean like blogs, web-forums” (Boyns, Forghani & Sosnokavskaya 2009)

“I realize that WoW is by default a social game but I like to keep my online relationships at arms length and it feels like Blizzard is trying to push us in a certain direction simply based on the popularity of facebook”

“True as gamers we spent a great deal of time using things like Vent, IRC and MSN but the large majority of that is based on the need to organize and coordinate, not to socialize. The people at the top making decisions don’t understand their costumers. They are not gamers, they are businessmen”

With the phrase “They are not gamers”, players’ concern refers to the intrusion of ungaming elements of social networking and the consequent threatening tendency of altering the already existing gaming culture. World of Warcraft like other MMORPGs, is a virtual world that was built out of various intertextual fantasy-based cultural references, creating fantasy rhetoric familiar only to the initiate spectator (Krzywinska, 2006). This kind of cultural backpack is one of the reasons that differentiate MMORPG from the mainstream social media “genre”, creating dichotomic conceptual frames that cannot be merged for any reason.

“MMO’s have forged many strong and social communities, long before social networking sites were a gleam in some college kid’s eye.”

“I have to admit I am a little insulted that they have insinuated that we need these social features because any friendships we form without real names is somehow not as meaningful”

“World of Facecraft”

In the name of the father

The problem of security risk, the controversial portrait of WoW players, the disruption of gameplay, are the main categories around which the basic line of argument against Blizzard efforts was composed. Here, the public claim about a more horizontal governance that will take into consideration the needs and desires of the broad community, a claim that was incarnated in the dichotomic scheme of Us (players) versus Them (Blizzard), was constituted on the demand for identity self-management and control of privacy. The above claim which turned against the hegemony of code:

“In Soviet Blizzard the forums post you,

was also dressed up with political teachings about a sovereignty that does not allow totalitarian attitudes to be developed, not at least without inducing severe reactions:

“Another thing I hope has been learnt here is to not announce things like that as “it’s going to happen”, but instead “this is what we would like to do, what do you guys think?”

and made winning sound more like a revolutionary act that defied the system :

“We are Anonymous, We are Legion, We do not forgive, We do not forget... We have won”.

The above threats, which actually referred to players’ account cancellation¹², are difficult to be evaluated if we take into account the fact that as far as gameworlds concern, players and code are bounded with the EULA (End-User License Agreement) and the relevant Terms of Service (“ToS”). Adding to this kind of privacy disruption all those means that game development companies have in their disposal for collecting personal data (cookies, gamer profile etc.), the notion of privacy in virtual worlds tends to be devoid of true meaning. As Zarsky (2004) states, gameworlds are fruitful examples of technologies of control, examples to investigate for future applications in the web.

In other words, what most people experiencing in gameworlds and cyberspace in general, is a pseudo-anonymity, an inherently traceable communication which potentially can be managed by a higher authority, in our case Blizzard Entertainment (Mohamed Chawki, 2006). Thus, the question that arises is: in cyberspace where privacy seems like a “modernist conceptual baggage about rights and access” (Bogard 1996: 126), where privacy co-exists with public, in terms of Foucault’s panoptical system, what’s the true meaning of the above political act?

This collective incident which was expressed spontaneously, emerged out of a generalized anxiety and formed on the basis of identity self-management differs from mob-like or even crowd-like collective ideotypes in that its agents temporarily formed a political body potentially capable of producing as Tilly (2004) mentions, contentious politics. Their political actions, which were constituted in the base of various collective initiatives like the online petition¹³ and the promotion of the collective identity, seemed at first capable of activating the “systemic circles of contest” of MMORPG social reality¹⁴. However at the end, did not manage to acquire such a political role.

This collective moment, on the contrary, is related to what Touraine referred to as *ideological conflict*¹⁵ (Touraine, 2002, 93). Briefly, according to the French sociologist, the kind of political action that does not entail a specific political proposal i.e. a political program to be applied, is the kind of collective action that does not permit new political actors to arise and thus remains confined among barren ideological schemes of actions. Expressing a “denial” (standing against the system, denying its principles) without providing an “affirmative” (a new political horizon, a solution) is what turns a prospective political scheme of power to an ideological movement (Touraine 1999). Continuing in the same vein, only the creation of new frames of collective action capable of provoking old ideological schemes will embody already existing models of action and produce new “master frames of meaning” (Tarrow 1995). The WoW protest, unfortunately, did not produce these so-called

¹² This is a threat virtually difficult to materialize because of the time and of course the money a player has invested inside the specific game world (Castronova 2005).

¹³ You can see the online petition at <http://www.gopetition.com/petitions/stop-wow-realid.html>

¹⁴ Mainly because of the extension that this event took in almost every MMORPG community, satisfying Tarrow’s standard about the “sectoral and geographical extension of cyclicity” (Tarrow, 1995).

¹⁵ Even though Touraine was actually analyzing the formation and value of new social movements, a collectivity that suggests higher forms of organization and value-orientated praxis, his basic conceptual framework can nevertheless constitute the basis of our analysis.

master frames of meaning- procedures and social fermentations, on the other hand, which were materialized but lacked the necessary social dynamic in the LambdaMOO example (Dibbel 1999).

Briefly, WoW players' massive reaction did not become the cause for a future form of political institution. Players' reaction was settled down as soon as Blizzard withdrew its plan. The immediate and "bloodless" resolution of this incident, was due to the fact that even though players decided to stand up to Blizzard's governance, their opposition did not truly question or deny its authority. In contrast to what Castronova (2005) stated in his recent interview,

"I think the U-turn is a fascinating development. It is a political event, really, the equivalent of a government policy being overturned because of public outcry"

Blizzard's authority was not merely affected from this incident; instead this collective incident acted as a political catalyst for the reinforcement of the relationship that already exists between code and players:

"A lot of companies hear a ton of negative feedback and decide to go ahead with their decision anyway"
or

"Based on your own knowledge of Blizzard and history of dealing with the company, which is more likely? That they've suddenly become an evil faceless corporation with some vague goal of controlling the universe just as soon they know who your favourite band is or that someone high up at Blizzard thought this was a solution to the problem of unaccountable troll on the forum?"

Quotes like the above, illustrate the tendency of romanticizing Blizzard as a company or a high authority, full of understanding and democratic sensibilities. The history of WoW as a vital virtual world, it is interconnected with the development of Blizzard Entertainment, a company which like an anonymous noted is a "by gamers for gamers" company. According to this perspective, the political distance between the "power class" and the "base" is not as large as in any other company whose interests and actions are linked with the laws of the market. This kind of narrative was reproduced during the Real Id incident, producing in turn two kinds of social myths:

-The social myth of the conscientious game developer working for Blizzard: According to virtual whisperings, Blizzard's employers and specifically the "race" of developers were really annoyed from this decision. Unfortunately, they had no control over things.

- The scapegoating practice: Blizzard Entertainment was not the one pulling the strings in WoW governance, Activision was. The demonization of Activision as the big faceless corporation, hidden behind those anti-popular measures, served as a mechanism of alleviating the social pressure, conserving at the same time, players' faith towards Blizzard. Scapegoating as a frustration-aggression social process of shifting blame and displacing aggression (Douglas 1995; Wilcox 2009) was activated to avoid any further damage upon players' own self-image.

"I need to trust the company that has my name and credit card info"

Blizzard on the other hand was mainly blamed for being disloyal and handing over the control of WoW and in extension the control of the gaming community to an authority who didn't really share the same ideals and values with the main gaming culture.

“Blizzard has left control when they sold their souls to Vivendi, going from there is a straight way down”

In conclusion, Blizzard's date decision to withdraw its initial plan about implementing Real ID system in official fora proved to be a political regulatory act, utterly interwoven with what Castronova (2005) refers to as a practice of a benevolent dictator protecting its interest against other benevolent dictators of other virtual regimes. However, the event per se constitutes a political fact of great importance. The formation of a solid collective “class” of WoW players in the base of an emerging collective identity, the US-claim versus Them, the transmission of protest in different social layers with different manifestations, are all indicators of a premature political infrastructure in WoW society- a political infrastructure that ultimately did not result in the emergence of new political actors. The question that arises is whether the above political event, which is now established as a precedent in MMORPG history, will trigger future pioneering political acts- acts that will indeed deny the predominant system and propose new ways of inter-governance.

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