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# Confronting Heteronormativity in Online Games: A Critical Discourse Analysis of LGBTQ Sexuality in *World of Warcraft*

**Alexis Pulos**[1]

**Abstract**

In 2008, ten million people were playing the massive multiplayer role-playing game *World of Warcraft* (WoW); a fantasy-based virtual landscape where players bridge real-life personas with digital identity. However, the construction of sexuality within this gaming environment has created an oppressive atmosphere for individuals who do not adhere to a heteronormative lifestyle. In this essay, I undress the bottom-up and top-down structures that are regulating an environment that has no use for a constructed sexual binary and yet has one strictly imbedded in it. This analysis utilizes discourse analysis to analyze 400 messages posted to a WoW discussion board regarding the topic of "LGBTQ players and the WOW Community" in order to queer the sexuality presented in this space. This essay is further supplemented with my own experience playing the game and with an analysis of the games structural elements.

**Keywords**

*World of Warcraft*, heteronormativity, LGBTQ, digital identity, discourse

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In 2006, Sara Andrews, a long-time *World of Warcraft* (WoW) player, started a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQ)-friendly guild to create a safe place for this community. In January 2006, Andrews used the general chat channel, because most guilds recruit members this way, to recruit players to her LGBTQ-friendly guild "Oz" (Wark, 2007). The guilds credo was simply stated as "peace and unity without judgments or intolerance of others, whatever they may be," a credo that was not returned to her (Anderson, 2006, Blizzard Bans). After posting this, goal administrators quickly contacted Andrews informing her that this was a breach of the games terms of service. The Blizzard terms of service asserts that "sexual orientation," including both clear and masked language, which "insultingly refers to any aspect of sexual orientation pertaining to themselves or other players" is banned (Blizzard Entertainment, 2009). The Blizzard terms of service this one of the only publishers that claims to fully moderate derogatory discussion by asserting a temporary ban from the game for the first infringement and a permanent ban on the final, other publishers such as Sony—which produces EverQuest Online—offers a variety of warning before any serious action is taken. However, Andrews did not insult anyone or herself—she just attempted to create a guild. Andrews "was warned by a Blizzard game master that this violated the company's policy on harassment," and "Blizzard went so far as to threaten Andrews with banishment from the game if she continued" (Anderson, 2006, Blizzard Bans). Blizzard justified their actions by saying that they were trying to protect her from harassment.

Blizzard claims that LGBTQ-friendly guilds would attract the attention of other players and become a focus for abuse. One Blizzard press release states "topics related to sensitive real-world subjects—such as religious, sexual or political preference, for example—have had a tendency to result in communication between players that often breaks down into harassment" (Terdiman, 2006, online game). The inconsistency present within this statement is that guilds based on religion or politics exist and yet an LGBTQ guild is not permitted. Crecente (2006) states that while Blizzard is within their right to regulate discrimination in their game, "there is nothing 'insulting' about identifying oneself as gay, lesbian or transgender, nor does the announcement of a guild for LGBTQ gamers constitute 'harassment' in any sense of the word." And if players react insultingly, then Blizzard should discipline them and "not attempt preemptively to silence the potential victims of harassment" (WoW warning). The sanction imposed on Andrews, and Blizzard's attempt to restrict the LGBTQ communities, indicates one way in which digital social worlds are intersecting with non-digital social worlds.

Anderson (2006) states that "Cases such as these make it clear that 'virtual' worlds are only virtual in a limited sense; real-world issues can and do impinge on the fantasy landscape of games such as *WoW*" (Blizzard Bans). Schultz continues to state that "Queer folk (have) always been told to hide themselves and who they really are in the real world. I would hope that in these new online worlds, people would not be punished for being honest about themselves" (as cited in Mendenhall, 2006, Warcraft incident). Digital worlds do not have to adhere to any specific

formula or organization, and yet ideological constraints have seeped into its very existence and frameworks. Andrews states that "maybe it's not a very good escape from the real world, playing a game online and dealing with a bunch of other people ... It's like escaping the real world and finding what you don't like about it—the slurs, the homophobia—in the online world" (as cited in Brownlee, 2006).

The normative regulation of sexuality within this game is produced and reinforced by its creators and by the communication practices of the online communities that navigate this environment. While the fantasy environment has the potential to be queer or even to avoid gender or sexual associations, a top-down construction of heteronormativity and a homophobic bottom-up regulation of the gender/genders and sexuality/sexualities exist here. The creators of the game construct fantasy story lines and fictitious digital bodies using a heteronormative framework. Male characters are stereotypically hypermasculine and female characters are hypersexualized.[1] The published content and game structure provide a normative resource for player interaction, and while this is an important line of inquiry for researchers, this serves as a primer and supplementary framework for this research project.

In addition to this top-down creation of heteronormativity, the concern of this project is focused on the individuals interacting in this game and communicating on the WoW-sanctioned forums or blogs that pejoratively utilize homophobic language. Reacting to some of the LGBTQ concerns, Blizzard released a public statement noting that if players would like to discuss issues of the LGBTQ communities that this would be a more appropriate place to do so (Gibson, 2006). Within the game and on these forums, homophobic language is perpetually utilized to express frustration, anger, failure, distrust, and to attack those who try to create a LGBTQ-friendly environment, or to address individuals that disagree with their derogatory sentiments. While digital environments have the potential to overcome the heteronormative ignorance and social stigma perpetuated by those in power and by the pressure to conform to social norms, the problematic portrayals of sexual and gendered norms are continually rearticulated here.

The goal of this essay is to analyze (1) the ways in which the LGBTQ communities are discursively constructed between players within WoW- and the Blizzard-sanctioned forums—specifically *LGBTQ players and the WoW community*—and (2) to understand the complex relationship of the production company Blizzard and the interaction between players in the negotiation of and resistance to this community. To achieve this goal I will (1) contextualize the WoW game and address the presence of the LGBTQ communities within this space; (2) present an overview of critical discourse analysis (CDA) as a method to analyze the Blizzard-sanctioned forums; (3) offer an explanation of the ways in which normative constructions of power and sexuality are being integrated and negotiated within digital spaces; (4) finally, I will offer an examination of the presented analysis. To focus this analysis, this essay will first describe the digital environment of WoW as a means to contextualize player experience and to begin framing the social nature of this game.

## WoW

Dalaran is a crowded city center that supports independent merchants, various street vendors, and is 1 of 10 central metropolises in the digital environment of WoW. WoW boasts a population of more than 10 million players across the globe, ranging from mainland China, Korea, Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, Macau, and the regions of Taiwan and Hong Kong (Blizzard Entertainment, 2008). Individuals participating in this game congregate at these metropolises to interact with each other and to offer help, trade goods, form guilds, and develop a social dynamic within the virtual. To have access, each player pays a monthly fee of 15 dollars or its equivalent, earning the production company, Blizzard, over 1.8 billion dollars a year. According to the 2009 World Bank indicators, Blizzard's income on this game alone would place them above the gross domestic product of over 30 countries (The World Bank).

WoW[2] is a massive multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) that is comprised of enormous digital worlds in which players virtually participate (Nardi & Harris, 2006, p. 1). Published by Blizzard Entertainment, WoW had approximately 10 million users at the beginning of 2008 and is one of the most popular subscription-based MMORPG (Woodcock, 2008). Considering this high volume of players, much of the general communication that occurs between individuals, via general chat boxes, is text based. In MMORPGs and other online games, such as Multi User Dungeons or Massive Multiplayer Online Worlds, chat boxes can broadcast messages to the entire environment or to specific players. Yee (2006) notes "On a simplistic level, MMORPGs could be thought of as a scenic chat room with a variety of interactive tasks" (pp. 314). WoW is, in a sense, a social site, like twitter, Pintrist, or Facebook because it allows individuals to present their persona and communicate with each other. What separates WoW, however, is its "Tolkienesque high fantasy motif" (Nardi & Harris, 2006, p. 2), consisting of characters such as elves, dwarfs, trolls, or orcs, and players who follow epic "ring bearing" quests.

Quests are the initial stage for users to enter into this digital environment. According to Aarseth (2005), "quests are a basic, dominant ingredient in a number of types of games in virtual environments, from the early adventure games to today's massive multiplayer's" (p. 1). In WoW, "quests are constructed as riddles that must be solved through exploration by the player" (Karlsen, 2008, ¶ 4). Every user participates in these quests in order to advance through the game, discover new plots of land, and gain new talents, a process that connects every user to a similar narrative progression. At points, quests are accomplished with the assistance of 3–40 players[3], adding a social[4] dynamic[5] to the game that is primarily structured through the formation of guilds.

Guilds consist of social organizations allowing players to stay in touch with each other and interact with the game as a group. By developing relationships, guilds form a community and the longer that users are involved with a guild, the stronger their social connection and obligation to it becomes (Williams et al., 2006, p. 358). Chen

(2008, pp. 69–71) explains how guilds form a collaborative teambuilding unit, which can foster a trusted network of friends (Reeves, Malone, & O'Driscoll, 2008). While guilds help players progress through the game, they also develop a space for socialization, team unity, and friendship. By functioning as a social community, guilds serve as a backdrop to help frame players' broader experiences within the game.

Many LGBTQ players are attracted to MMO games because they offer a place to socialize, to form new networks and experiences, and to enact nonheteronormative roles. Turkle (1984) notes that MMOs not only allow individuals to frame their experiences within the game, but they also serve as a testing ground, allowing people to try on new roles and to work through personal issues. Guilds are thus an important space to understand one's place in this game and to form trustworthy social connects that can allow players to work through personal issues. The formation of guilds respectful to the issues and concerns of the LGBTQ communities are particularly important as the game is designed within a heteronormative matrix that is resistant to this community. The anonymity of games like WoW players can manage the degree of connection they develop and offer to their guild or other players. To accomplish this, players can utilize their characters to blur gender roles and act to promote social justice, offering a transgressive way to participate in the digital world (Sundén, 2009). Schmieder (2009) notes that even though prejudices, hatred, and taunts are ever present, due to the blurring of gender through the digital interface, no space is free of LGBTQ connotations. Games like WoW can "habituate the hetero-normative parts of society to diversity and variation" through the consistent interaction with characters free of gender or sexual norms (p. 18). Games can encourage its players to leave behind their normative assumption and engage with other players and the game through a transgressive lens. While games like WoW may offer the potential to be transgressive or to confront social issues, there is still a visible dearth of equal LGBTQ treatment within digital environments (Shaw, 2009).

There is the persistent stigma within this game that portrays gender as hypersexualized (DiGiuseppe & Nardi, 2007; Garner Ray, 2004). According to Schapp (2002), the discussions of gender "takes place in a, usually, firmly heterosexual context, in which, for instance, homosexual acts are seen as unnatural and opposed to the supposedly natural and biologically preordained order of heterosexuality" (Kafi, 2008, p. 63). Even the ostensible initiation of a LGBTQ conversation typically prescribes a heteronormative environment, characterizing LGBTQ discussions as abnormal. There is a frequent use of pejorative messages concerning sexuality when playing this game, which are stated, shouted, and spammed across the general chat. Phrases such as "fags suck," "I hate queers," and "die homo die" are contagiously spread across chat lines. It is perplexing that in a fictional environment, comprised entirely of simulated images, such blatant real world discrimination would filter into a broadcast conversation and that it would be focused on homophobia. To address the issues facing the LGBTQ communities and the development of queer, this project seeks to add to the current literature base that often focuses on game play and social interaction.

## Understanding Digital Worlds

Digital worlds, and specifically WoW, are complex environments that offer research opportunities to communication scholars. The recent success of video games in general and MMORPGs specifically solidifies their importance to scholars. In 2008, MIT press released the *World of Warcraft: Digital Culture, Play, and Identity: A World of Warcraft Reader* anthology. This reader, along with other journals (e.g., *Game Studies, Games and Culture, Eludamos, Journal of Virtual Worlds, and Simulation and Gaming*), illustrates the wide range of interests concerning these digital spaces. Three specific areas of interests related to this project consist of online worlds, identity, and sexuality.

Participating in WoW is more than a game; it is a complex virtual world in which players can interact with individuals on a daily basis and address issues relevant to real life; making this MMORPG remarkably different from the traditional games. Krzywinska (2006) notes that unlike other games "*World of Warcraft* offers a persistent world in temporal terms that exists whether or not an individual player is playing" (p. 385). Like real life, WoW continually evolves so that even when an individual is not playing, various interactions still occur, the game environment changes, and thus individual experience differs every time the individual logs on.

The players' involvement with the game creates a narrative myth, "immersing" the player and allowing individuals to get "lost" in the socially constructed world (Krzywinska, 2006). With the interactive nature of this narrative world, players can confront issues, such as death and dying, which are directly transferable to the real world (Klastrup, 2008). Additionally, the study and analysis of digital worlds "can teach us something about human behavior, innovations, deviance," and the development of social skills (Mortensen, 2008, p. 203). The "immersion" of players into this digital world occurs through their avatar or digital representation and their communicative interactions to navigate and to understand their experiences within this space.

Through the appearance, communicative interactions, and capabilities of a character, WoW players create an "emotional connection" to their digital representation (Tronstad, 2008, p. 251). Crossing into the digital, the self becomes performative, gamers are active participants in a social environment that suggests "digital gaming can involve 'virtual,' 'psychological,' and 'physical' presence for gamers, all of which are 'real'" (Crawford & Rutter, 2007, p. 276). Bessière, Seay, and Kiesler (2007) further state "as players gain experience in the game," through their characters, they can "feel psychologically connected to their character, often keeping the same one for months or years" (p. 530). The creation of, and connection to, a virtual identity is further noted by Turkle (1984, 1995), Taylor (2003, 2006, 2008), and MacCallum-Stewart (2008). This connection is not only developed through the appearance of a character, but what she does as well; whether it is protecting someone or standing up to derogatory remarks players take pride in and are concerned about their character. To extend the research on digital spaces and to integrate the

research formulated in communication studies, this project turns to the utilization of CDA.

## Insights to WoW Through CDA

CDAs offer a "description of both the social processes and structures which give rise to the production of a text, and of the social structures and processes within which individuals or groups as social historical subjects, create meaning in their interaction with texts" (Wodak & Meyer, 2001, p. 3). CDA uncovers the production and social structures that govern the ways meaning is created. One focus of CDA is to illuminate how ideological discourses work in a virtual world and what this means to the broader social environment. According to Fairclough (2003), "Ideologies are representations of aspects of the world which can be shown to contribute to establishing, maintaining and changing social relations of power, domination and exploitation" (p. 9). Fairclough continues to suggest that a textual analysis needs to be framed in relation to the social, which frames "bodies of texts in terms of their effects on power relations" (p. 9). The analysis of discourse illustrates the ways in which ideology works and exposes the unequal structures of power inherent in language, disrupting the dominant paradigm and destabilizing the oppressive nature of grand, or totalizing narratives (Lyotard, 1984).

To conduct this research, I adapt of Fairclough's (2001) five levels of analytical framework to analyze the communication on the WoW forums (p. 125). The first level emphasizes the positioning of sexuality in the LGBTQ communities within the broader cultural atmosphere. The second level identifies the obstacles to LGBTQ concerns that resist a simple solution, and the third level analyzes the ideological contributions that act to sustain the relations of power and domination. The fourth level notes how the LGBTQ communities resist the problems facing them, and the fifth level will then reflect back on the analysis and summarize the project. I will be adapting this process to the Internet, a medium that "is so dynamic and flexible," that "it reacts with unprecedented speed and precision to social change," and as Mautner (2005) observes, "CDA is still directing relatively little analytic attention to the world wide web" (pp. 820–821). The use of CDA in this project attempts to address Mautner's concerns and expand this methodology to the analysis of power relations within the discourse of a web-based forum.

## Queer Discourse, Power, and the Digital

The utilization of domineering or belittling language through ideological discourse works to oppress and marginalize groups or individuals. Derogatory terms and insults, such as "fag" or "that's gay," paint the LGBTQ communities in a pejorative light and frame any discussion of equality negatively. Discourse today does not pertain only to the lived world, but to the digital environments that individuals participate in. Locating this discussion in WoW and the apparent lack of any LGBTQ

discourse within this digital environment, the use of Queer theory explicates the ways *discourse* can *discipline* a *simulated* environment and challenge the established heteronormative ideology.

Discourse consists of social dialogue, a practice of meaning making and "a set of rules for producing knowledge that determines what kinds of intelligible statements can be circulated within a given economy of thought" (Wilchins, 2004, p. 59). It is insignificant if someone says yes to sex (or sexuality) or whether its magnitude, but it is significant who speaks the viewpoints and the institutions that promote the dialogue. Foucault (1990) identifies "what is at issue, briefly, is the over-all 'discursive fact,' the way in which sex is 'put into discourse" (p. 43). The ways in which sex and sexuality are talked about and what individuals are allowed to talk position one's ability to express his or her opinions in relation to the dominant discourse.

The regulation and distribution of power occurs, in part, through the language of individuals. In progressive politics, we often think of power coming from the top and disseminating to the individual, discursive power operates differently. Wilchins (2004) interprets Foucault, in regard to gender

> the main exercise of power is not through repression but *production*. Discursive power produces specific kinds of individuals, with specific bodies, pleasures, and sexes ... This kind of power does not operate from 'the top down' but from 'the bottom up.' It is not central but diffuse and capillary. It is not held by authorities and institutions, rather, it is held by no one and executed by everyone. (pp. 62–63)

Discursive power is enforced and reinforced by individuals every moment and if this process is left unchecked, individuals will accept the discourse as the norm (Foucault, 1978, p. 93). Foucault (1977) describes this process as a *disciplining*, an organizing principle for conforming people and society to produces docile bodies that are governed by other docile bodies—where power is exercised through the anonymous gaze of the panopticon (pp. 195–228). The dominant discourse seeks to discipline individuals to conform to what is being said.

Baudrillard (1981), conversely, sees power as a *simulation*, it is feigned and masqueraded as a sign that has replaced the actual force. Baudrillard further notes that power in a mediated or simulated society is abstract, because signs of power are embedded in power simulations that replace the real as part of the textual language of digital landscapes. According to Baudrillard, "in a society in which sexuality speaks in advertising, fashion, the media and other popular discourses, it is manifest and open throughout social life" (as cited in Kellner, 1989, p. 135). Sexuality is presented only by the dominant discourse or its simulation, the image of sexuality replaces the real as individuals are *seduced* and *disciplined* into believing in its truth. Sexuality thus becomes simulacra, a reproduced image derived from a previous model. In WoW, sexuality is only created because one is disciplined to know what sexuality is and how it should work—it places a reproduced model of sexuality onto a *virtually* produced/reproduced image. Sexuality is manifested in an environment

that requires no sexuality, yet individuals are seduced to believe that it could exist and that they know what it should be.

While Baudrillard and Foucault hold divergent viewpoints on the ways that power works, together their concepts offer a useful way of analyzing WoW—which is both structurally and socially created and maintained. Current social experiences are complex, diffuse, and multiperspectival, where power works through the oppressive bureaucracies "or the panopticon of powers of surveillance which Foucault describes so well" and "the new situations which Baudrillard evokes," such as political simulacra or the seduction of media signs (Kellner, 1989, p. 141). The discursive structuring of sexuality and the LGBTQ communities in this essay calls for a utilization of these positions through a "queer" stance.

In this analysis, "queer" is the reappropriation of a pejorative term that suggests LGBTQ activism and bends of the normalized reductions of all sexualities. In this process, sexualities are social labels with limited possibilities (Morton, 1996). Queer theory explodes the binaries of gay versus straight and considers the complex ways and multiple stories used to construct sexualities (Garber, 1995). This process radically destroys conventions, rejects normalization, and unlocks the notions of dualism to formulate a perspective of alterity in a commitment to equality, to antisuffering (Felice, 1996), and a compassion where others are always acknowledged (Honneth, 1995). Plummer (2005) notes that queer theory challenges any settlement on sexual binaries and transgresses the embodied power of discourse, "Queer theory puts everything out of joint, out of order. 'Queer,' for me, is the postmodernization of sexual and gender studies" (p. 359). Queer theory unearths the overt social conceptions of a universal sexuality and identifies the ways in which power works structurally and socially to reinforce a sexual rigidity, and confronts the simulated issues of LGBTQ sexuality apparent in the WoW forum.

## Sexuality and Gender in WoW

The regulation and control of sexual expression is not a new practice, and there is little doubt that the marginalization of individuals has previously occurred. According to Richardson (2006), sexuality is often central to the social "organization of the 'public' world and to the conceptual frameworks we deploy to make sense of the social world we inhabit" (pp. 32–33). Individuals, in part, come to understand the world through their lived experience, of which one aspect is sexuality (Plummer, 2005). Wilchins (2004) notes that the concern over sexuality is often motivated by nonknowledge, "which seeks not to 'state the truth but' to 'prevent its very emergence;" about a knowledge not of, but over sex (p. 53). The constraint placed on the LGBTQ communities constructs an indirect and direct control over sex, ranging from job discrimination (Levine & Leonard, 1984; Ragins & Cornwell, 2001) and wage variations (Badgett & Frank, 2007) to public policies of health care (Harper & Schneider, 2003; Meyer, 2003), marriage (Adam, 2003), and military service (Belkin, 2003), to outright violence and hate crimes (Ott & Aoki, 2002; Perry,

2003). Discourses concerning sexuality frequently subjugate and silence LGBTQ voices, a practice that is prevalent even in simulated worlds. In order to address the concerns of Andrew's and the GLBTQ community, Blizzard refers players to their guild recruitment forums and community website (Gibson, 2006).

The WoW forum site is easily accessible to players. A simple navigation menu guides the reader, directing them first to locate their interest in one of several categories—this might include character question, general discussion, or technical questions. The user can type their query into a search bar with a simple search function and an advanced option. Once directed to a forum, the initial post appears first and every subsequent response follows it. Users can quote any post, to directly address any individual or topic, or to reply to a chosen post. The forum lists, on average, 20 responses per page and there is a page index at the top and bottom of each page—allowing users to navigate to any page quickly. Each response is located in relation to a picture of the respondent's character, their level in the game, and the guild that they belong to. The first thread that appears in response to the search term LGBTQ was *LGBTQ players and the WoW community*, a thread that directly addresses the presence and existence of the LGBTQ communities. Created by Elphie (January 15, 2009),[6] the thread consists of 296 total posts, after which it was locked, and offers "an open forum to discuss what it is exactly that bothers people about LGBTQ WoW players, and conversely for LGBTQ WoW players to share their negative experiences" (Msg. 0).

The messages on the thread begin with the implication that sexuality has no place in the WoW environment and that sexuality has nothing to do with your ability to play the game. Miruna (January 15, 2009) states "that sexuality, religeon [*sic*] and other stuff, has no place in a game like this. Real life issues are ment [*sic*] to be left behind you when you play a game like this" (Msg. 116). This post shows WoW as an environment that has no need for sexuality or LGBTQ expression, indicating that real-world issues should not be brought to the attention of this community. The negation of real-world structures in this game positions an out-of-sight, out of mind mentality. Unwilling to recognize the unequal structuring of sexuality, respondents further claim that frequently utilizing gay as a pejorative term can "hardly be called homophobia or discrimination" and that "It's become common gamer lingo" (Totalhalibut, January 15, 2009, Msg. 69 and 31). Hyanil (January 15, 2009) states, "a lot of people that played this game are young and are intolerant of homosexuality. People use the words 'fag' and 'gay' as derogatory terms. So the amount of people that would diss [*sic*] such a guild is a lot" (Msg. 80). Throughout this thread, numerous individuals recognize the pervasiveness of derogatory LGBTQ terms and work to assert the "normalcy" of such terms.

These messages discursively construct the broader culture of the forum, and of the game as a legitimizing space for homophobia. The acceptance of intolerant players and pejorative language as commonplace "gamer lingo" is present throughout the forum, illustrating that the larger WoW community has not only accepted an intolerant framework but that it encourages it in all parts of gameplay. By lowering

the LGBTQ communities to a resource for slander and demeaning language to the broader WoW environment, a heteronormatively dominant culture is continually enforced and elevated while the position of the LGBTQ communities relegated to a fringe position. The homophobic culture that is created in this WoW forum points to the issues that Andrews and other face in this space, and thus "illuminates the problems which people are confronted with by particular forms of social life" (Fairclough, 2001, p. 125). To further address this social problem, the second level of analysis explores the obstacles facing this issue.

The second level of analysis asks, what is it about "the way in which social life is structured and organized that makes" the homophobic nature of the WoW forum and WoW resistant to an easy solution (Fairclough, 2001, p. 126)? To address this level, I analyze the ways in which the LGBTQ movement is first structured and second, how it is linguistically shaped. The first way users on the thread structure the LGBTQ guild is through the claim of attention seeking. This discourse frames LGBTQ inclusion as an attempt to incite a reaction by promoting a perverse symbolism of sexuality for game players. For example, Eirenaios (January 15, 2009) states "the creation of such a guild was designed to provoke a reaction" (Msg. 179), a sentiment further supported by Ianrush (January 15, 2009) who claims in WoW "we don't need to know, however perverse, your sexual tendancies [*sic*] are, keep guilds like this out of the game and just play and keep quiet like most other decent folk . . . So basically, your [*sic*] just asking for it" (Msg. 197). Miruna and Stephynie (January 15, 2001) compare this to the "gay pride marches, which are events for gays to dress up and flaunt their sexuality like an 'idiot,' where gays act 'differently' from 'normal' people, this callas [*sic*] attention to the LGBTQ communities and encourages hate crimes" (Msg. 132; 137; 103). Miruna (January 15, 2009) goes on to further state:

> In a community of thousands there will always be bigots, wether [*sic*] you like it or not. And because those few people care, making a guild that is "LGBTQ friendly" [*sic*] is like a magnet to those bigots. You can do 2 things to prevent abuse: either do not provoke them by not advertising the guild as "LGBTQ friendly", or just ignore the bigots. (Msg. 209)

This statement suggests that the LGBTQ guild's discourse flaunts sexuality with no purpose, claiming that gay pride is not relevant, and that this celebration invites the negative responses it receives. Moreover, the ideological implications of these posts are that LGBTQ communities should maintain a "don't ask don't' tell" policy for the heteronormative majority.

The framing of the LGBTQ guilds expression as just "attention seeking," assumes that this guild causes more problems than it solves. While bringing LGBTQ concerns to the forefront, these posts should allow those in the forum to confront these issues; the messages on the threads shift the discussion away from addressing concerns of power and place blame on the LGBTQ communities, claiming that the guild was responsible for the discrimination they received. Stupidmoo (January 16,

2009) states that LGBTQ guilds are "deliberately segregating themselves from the society as a whole, they create their own barriers and therefore only make the discrimination worse" (Msg. 209). Shadowdream (January 15, 2009) claims that LGBTQ guilds foster more problems than they solve, and by segregate [*sic*] queer sexuality into a guild they are separating themselves from other players (Msg. 177). Additionally, another post asserts that LGBTQ guilds are painting "a bullseye [*sic*] on your face" and want to be bullied (Stirge, 2009, Msg. 9; Squidface, 2009, Msg. 227), claiming that if you have a bulls eye you should not complain when you get hit. These remarks perpetuate a position that the LGBTQ communities creates their own problems and if they would not bring up their sexuality—keep quiet—then there would be no point of contention.

By structuring the LGBTQ guild and conversation as attention seeking and problem causing, this community is presented as a cause of its own problems and negates any responsibility of the status quo. The restructuring of the LGBTQ communities as responsible for their abuse takes responsibility away from perpetrators and works to ignore the systematic issues of oppression at work in this forum. The inability of the forum, and WoW, to recognize the oppression of this community asserts as ideological authority over LGBTQ players. The heteronormative imposition of power over this community simultaneously reflects Fariclough's third level of analysis; does the social order "need" the problem? The utilization of LGBTQ abuse as self-promoted and warranted frames the problem as a nonissue by the WoW forum, thus allowing the abuse of this community to be acceptable and to continue. The structuring of this community is further defined through the linguistic framing of their identity.

The ideological argument that reoccurs throughout this thread positions heterosexuality as normal vs. queer as "special." Stephynie (January 16, 2009) summarizes this position by explaining the formation of a LGBTQ guild "assumes that you can't fit into 'society' (ie, a 'normal' guild), and so you must have a guild built specifically for the minority because the majority won't accept you," adding that the LGBTQ communities should work to better "fit in" (Msg. 226). These individuals mark LGBTQ guilds as "special," positioning them against the "normal" guilds and indicating a queer identity as "odd" and "abnormal" (Lecow, 2009, Msg. 156; Hysterica, 2009, Msg. 156). By placing queer sexuality on the periphery, this post mitigates the attempt to attain equality and any endeavor to improve LGBTQ relations is instead directed to "fit in" and become "normal" (Stephynie, 2009, Msg. 226; Dodots, 2009, Msg. 271) These posts force queer sexuality into the confines of heteronormativity, indicating that LGBTQ individuals need to play by hegemonic rules because no straight player is going to join a guild whose purpose is "to have hardcore gay cyber sex rather than to clear Naxx or find an Arena team" (Jesuz, 2009, Msg. 268; Polo, 2009, Msg. 36). The ideology proliferating through this threads discourse perpetuates a linguistic framing of straight as normal and queer as deviant. This discourse places the LGBTQ communities as an irrelevant population of exhibitionists deserving of punishment, and forces them to assimilate into the

heteronormative status quo. Various individuals throughout the thread did however speak out and attempted to confront this normative discourse.

The fourth level analysis looks at the ways in which contradictions, gaps, or failures within the dominant social order, or resistance to this group, occur. While the majority of comments focused on negative assumptions of queer sexuality, often digressing into circular reasoning, several individuals supported the LGBTQ communities. The forum featured some posts that gave a voice to counter the prevalent position and addressed the concerns of the LGBTQ communities in WoW. Individuals posted that WoW is a community for supporting each other instead of allowing sexist and derogatory language to go unchecked in general chats (Blackwolfe, 2009, Msg. 215; Dizzie, 2009, 233). Queer player Hayanii (January 15, 2009) states "I don't like the word that describes me being used in a derogatory manner, so yes, it does happen a lot," (Msg. 62). Addressing this argument directly Eon (January 15, 2009) states:

> You will never know what its [*sic*] like for gay person to hear that kind of stuff and be discriminated against. So saying that we should just "get over it" isn't valid for 1 second ... its [*sic*] easy to say "get over it" and not actually have to "get over" anything yourself. (Msg. 83)

Affirming this comment, Brohg (January 15, 2009) states that "A person who plays warcraft or any other online game is no less gay when they play wow then when they don't, and as such, they deserve the right to be among people who don't make passing insults and derogitory [*sic*] remarks" (Msg. 14). By refuting the claim that Queer sexuality should not be a part of WoW, several posts express the need for a LGBTQ guild.

By directly refuting the heteronormative claims that LGBTQ guilds are attention seekers and problem causers, individual posts subvert the normative power structures of the majority. The position of advocates for LGBTQ guilds is not to attract abuse but to create a space free of abuse. After losing friends and family due to coming out, Aliane (January 15, 2009) notes, "It is a horrible feeling to feel isolated, cornered (alone?) and having to hear things about yourself that is hurtful," but having a group to make you not feel alone is important (Msg. 200). According to Daffyd (January 15, 2009), "I have dead friends because of intolerance and homophobia," and knowing that this prejudice exists, "the way to change things is for gay people to say 'Here we are and here we stay', exactly what the civil rights activists in the US did" (Msg. 136). The creation of a LGBTQ guild is not to make a spectacle of queer sexuality but to create a ridicule free environment (Dizzie, 2009, Msg. 171), where "'Minority' does not imply 'abnormality'" (Lothario, 2009, Msg. 150) and the acceptance of a queer sexuality offers a better place to interact (Ashiya, 2009, Msg. 220). By confronting posts that support ideological power of the majority, supporters of the LGBTQ guild and community limit the ability of that type of discourse to seduce and discipline.

## Implication of LGBTQ Communities in Digital Spaces

The imposition of sexuality in WoW is not limited to structural powers or discursive practices, but is simultaneously constructed and regulated by both. The construction and regulation of digital sexuality, from the explicit top down instructions and the learned or socially shared bottom up models, is indicative of ideological social structures (van Dijk, 2004, p. 26). According to Kincheloe (2002), ideology is part of a larger process that protects unequal power relations and maintains domination. ''Specifically, a dominant cultural form of ideology involves sustaining the power asymmetries through the process of making meaning, producing a common sense that justifies prevailing systems of domination'' (Kincheloe, 2002, p. 46). Ideologies work as fundamental belief systems for a ruling order, in order for these beliefs to be justified the ruled must agree to and willingly participate in them thereby justifying the imposed forms of meaning. In this way, the homophobic constraints that are both imposed by Blizzard and are reinforced through players discourse engender the processes of ideological domination that justify the normative confinement of gender and sexuality. The ideological impositions that maintain a heteronormative power structure within this game occur first through a process of *seduction*, where players are oriented toward a normative character construction and narrative plotline by Blizzard. Players then take up this call to assert that queer issues have nothing to do with this game space, asserting that these issues should be left behind; unwilling to recognize their presence in this space. Ideological constraints are additionally asserted through a *disciplining* of individuals to allow the abuse of the LGBTQ communities to be perpetuated as a common order of business.

When players do begin to discuss issues pertaining to LGBTQ communities, Blizzard disciplines the discussion from game play by pushing it to a sanctioned forum. Within this space, issues of gender and sexuality are presented as unnecessary elements to game play, and yet the broader culture establishes a heteronormative framework to allow for and encourage the use of pejorative LGBTQ terms as common ''gamer lingo.'' Subsequent discourses structure LGBTQ communities as ''calling attention'' or ''painting a bulls eye'' on individuals as a way to transfer blame away from the oppressors, a discursive practice that seeks to affirm the correctness of heterosexuality and to construct a linguistic understanding of LGBTQ communities as ''abnormal.'' The ideological discourse within WoW is thus operationalized through a general strategy of positive self-presentation, an affirmation of the normative rights of this heterosexual environment, against a negative-other presentation, and the social utilization of LGBTQ sexualities as derogatory (van Dijk, 2004).

The positioning of heteronormative as good against queer as bad is a polarizing strategy that not only creates a hostile space but produces homophobic players that learn to govern or discipline other players. The participation with a discursive community develops an understanding of that world and ties appropriate interactions to the perspectives of that community. The regular patterns of interaction in these

constructed spaces shape both the individual and the community itself and transform social practices into ways of being human (Packer & Goicoechea, 2000). Within a given community, the "changes in knowing become changes in being: through participation in a given Discourse community, an individual does more than merely acquire and reorganize symbolic knowledge about the world; she is ontologically transformed by it" (Steinkuehler, 2004, p. 3). In WoW, players are seduced by the constructs of the game, orienting them toward ways of functioning and acting that are in accordance with Blizzard, and they are imbedded in the discursive and communal practices of other players and game communities. The imposed ideologies in WoW establish, perpetuate, and promote a heteronormative agenda that not only limits queer identities and expression to exist, but formally and socially works to both create players who see this as fundamentally appropriate and teaches players to discipline oppositions to this.

While players are initially seduced and disciplined into problematic roles of normative power structures, resistance to this is not absent. Kellner (1989) pushes on the concepts of Baudrillard and Foucault to claim "that power by its' nature is reversible, that the dominated can always become the ones who dominate, that the terms of power are always subject to radical reversal, and that power relations are thus always becoming undone, reversing and redefining themselves" (p. 134). The struggles present in the WoW forum thus act as a space to confront and push against the presented heteronormative ideology. The comments on the forum begin to tackle the derogatory and incendiary claims against queer sexualities and offer support for the LGBTQ communities which seeks to reverse the controlling efforts of the dominant discursive powers. By not allowing a unified and controlling voice to maintain power, the discourse present in the forum is destabilized and opens the discussion around sexuality rather than binding it. After the Sara Andrews incident, gaymers have increasingly attempted to subvert the WoW environment in order to establish LGBTQ communities and queer sexualities. While no content has changed, Blizzard has reacted to this movement and in October 2009 they named *The Stonewall Family,* a LGBTQ-friendly guild, their guild of the month. Game-boy (2009) of Gaymer.net notes that:

> this guild helps many people in a variety of ways. No matter if someone is trying to find some pals to quest with or if they are having personal struggles and just needing someone to talk to, it's great to see that this supportive community can be such a positive influence and bring people together. This is especially impressive within an online culture that may not be initially welcoming. (¶ 4)

These guilds provide a safe and valuable space for players to communicate with other players and while Blizzard moves to recognize the presence of a queer community, the communicative violence allowed in this game needs to be more than simply recognized. It is appropriate that the first digital recognition of a queer space in WoW parallels the iconic gay club Stonewall as this name has served as a focal point for negotiating the structural forces of heteronormativity for 40 years.

It is within these focal points that communities can fortify a resistance to the complex negotiation of oppressive factors that stem from both Blizzard and other players. The effectiveness of this critique is seen through the recognition of both Blizzards attempts to implement a heteronormative environment while pushing Queer issues not only to fringe portions of the game but outside of the game entirely where discussion encourages, allows, and disciplines people in treating these communities as abnormal. In order to promote social justice within this environment, this critique recognizes the overt presentation of power and the heteronormative discourse that is both problematic and present within this space. If we take seriously the queer potential of digital environments such as WoW, where individuals can simultaneously confront the discursive practices and disrupt the structural powers that resist LGBTQ communities, then we can recognize digital games not as a forum to perpetuate pejorative viewpoints but as focal points to foster a commitment to equality and antisuffering that can transfer to experiences outside the digital spaces.

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## Notes

1. "In response to concerns that the Blood Elf male appeared to be too feminine ... the decision was made to increase the body mass to give them a more substantial, masculine feel," and "the impression of strength and a more menacing presence" (Nethaera, 2006, Msg. 234). In the game, my character can emote predetermined jokes, which often consist of purely heteronormative insinuations Female Dwarf: "No they're not real, but thanks for noticing," "It's like my father always used to say: 'Shut up, and get out.'" Gnome male: "I like large posteriors and I cannot prevaricate." Human female: "Me and my girlfriends exchange clothes all the time; we're all the same size." Undead female "Yes, they're REAL! They're not mine, but they're real!" Even the clothing of my character encourages a sexual framing, when armor is removed she is left wearing a grey thong with a string bikini top and even when adorned in armor her midriff is consistently left bare.
2. WoW developed from the popular "role-playing game" (RPG) *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D) (1974), which consisted of 8 to 16 players. The "massive multiplayer" dimension was established in 1996 when digital games allowed 3,000 to 4,000 individuals to play together (Castronova, 2005; Yee, 2006).
3. Structurally WoW is a fighting game, where the player fights against computer-controlled monsters as well as other players. According to Schmieder (2009), "In most cases, the players are not lone warriors. They generally play in small groups ('parties') or in bigger formations ('raids'), which can contain up to 40 players" (p. 7).

4. The rising expansion of games played across the Internet has produced a social atmosphere for users. According to Cole and Griffiths (2007), virtual environments allow users to interact with other players on a daily basis, allowing them to explore new space, relationships, and even themselves (p. 575).
5. In a study by Williams et al. (2006), the scholars found that "playing WoW is as social as a team sport, which has its own rules, literal boundaries, and social norms. Within those, there are still self-initiated tactics, team strategies, styles, and goals that make the play space a stage for socialization, organization, and networks that often have little to do with the original game" (p. 357). The social dynamic of WoW, and other MMORPGs, has the ability to create a community and relationship that involve more than the online game play.
6. All information and citations regarding this research project can be located in the reference list under Blizzard Entertainment (2009). LGBTQ players and the WoW community. Messages posted to http://forums.woweurope.com/thread.html?topicId=7 660256106&post Id=76593468631&sid=1#4.

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