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The Concept of War in the World of Warcraft

MMORPGs such as WORLD OF WARCRAFT can be understood as interactive representations of war. Within the frame provided by the program the players experience martial conflicts and thus a "virtual war." The game world however requires a technical and as far as possible invisible infrastructure which has to be protected against attacks: Infrastructure means e.g. the servers on which the data of the player characters and the game's world are saved, as well as the user accounts, which have to be protected, among other things, from "identity theft." Besides the war on the virtual surface of the program we will therefore describe the invisible war concerning the infrastructure, the outbreak of which is always feared by the developers and operators of online-worlds, requiring them to take precautions. Furthermore we would like to focus on "virtual game worlds" as places of complete surveillance. Since action in these worlds is always associated with the production of data, total observation is theoretically possible and put into practice by the so-called "game master." The observation of different communication channels (including user forums) serves to monitor and direct the actions on the virtual battlefield subtly, without the player feeling that his freedom is being limited. Finally, we will compare the fictional theater of war in WORLD OF WARCRAFT to the vision of "Network-Centric Warfare," since it has often been observed that the analysis of MMORPGs is useful to the real trade of war. However, we point out what an unrealistic theater of war WORLD OF WARCRAFT really is.

War is a subject which raises serious and important question within political philosophy as well as in ethics. The answers to these questions depend upon the underlying concept of war. In this paper we

assume that popular video games like WORLD OF WARCRAFT (2004) have become an important source of common understanding of war. Thus, analyzing the different concepts and levels of war in a game like WORLD OF WARCRAFT (WOW) may contribute to a better understanding of the ongoing discussion on war related issues. Likewise, the technological and military analogies of "war-gaming" and "real war" will be shown, so that the relation between game-internal war concepts and game-external war concepts become clearer.

Following Geyer (1995), we define war in general as mass-death organized and accomplished by humans; as the system, the acts, and the consequences of killing and being-killed. Thus, we ask how war is organized within the game and have a look at the consequences of killing and being killed.

One might expect a massive multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) like WOW with over 10 million players all over the world (Blizzard 2008) to be a kind of "virtual world war." Nevertheless, we argue that there is a strange absence of war in the sense of "mass-death." Although the game offers references to the war between the two main fractions, the "Alliance" and the "Horde," which provides the background narrative of the game (MacCallum-Stewart 2007); the players are actually engaging in a series of small fights and battles, which do not have any impact on the history of Azeroth, the fictional world where the game takes place.

We will follow the arguments of Esther MacCallum-Stewart (2007), that WOW offers a confusing mix of different concepts and attitudes towards war. Especially in "Player vs. Player" combat the game focuses on fair fights between well-balanced single characters. However, since online communication between the players plays an important role in successfully playing the game, we will add another perspective on the process of organizing battles and fights within the game. We will argue that the importance of using different channels of communication to organize battle groups and guilds brings aspects of

"net-centric warfare" to the Agame (Cebrowski/Garstka 1998) There-fore, we will also look at the game from the perspective of "informa-tion warfare" and include a third level of war within our analysis: The battle fought by Blizzard Entertainment to remain the true sovereign of Azeroth.

Therefore, we assume that there are at least three levels of wars to be analyzed in the context of WOW and that the different concepts found within the game add up to the impression of a rather unreal mixture of concepts of war.

From War Games to Role-Playing Games: War Gets Personal Again

As Williams, Hendricks, and Winkler have noted, tabletop fantasy role-playing games have their historical basis in miniature war-gam-ing, which existed since the early 18th century:

> [B]ut war-gamers in the 1960s and 1970s became increasingly in-terested in taking on the role of specific heroes in battle […] rather than manipulating entire armies (Williams et al. 2006:3).

It is interesting to note a similar movement from war-gaming to role-playing when taking a look at the development of the computer game series of the WARCRAFT-games from Blizzard Entertainment. WAR-CRAFT III: REIGN OF CHAOS (2002) may be seen retrospectively as an important move towards role-playing since it introduced the concept of individual heroes. In WORLD OF WARCRAFT we can see both the roots of war-gaming and the role-playing concept of focus-ing on the development of a single character.

However, the story of the player's character is remarkably de-tached from the history of Azeroth. Actually, the outcome of the single battles and fights being embedded in the war-related back-ground narrative of the game do not have any direct influence on the

game's world at all. Taken from the words of Carl von Clausewitz in his famous book *On War* from 1832: "War is no pastime," since "it is a serious means for a serious object" (Clausewitz 1976:86). One might say the battles fought in WORLD OF WARCRAFT are actually just a pastime, because their outcome does not have any effect on the game's world or the screen life of the player.

Signs of Yesterday's War

It seems remarkable to MacCallum-Stewart that WORLD OF WAR-CRAFT "is a fantasy world stuffed with signifiers of World War One, from the zeppelins outside major Horde cities to the bi-planes locked inside Gnomeregan" (MacCallum-Stewart 2007:68). However, the presence of technology, unfitting in a medieval fantasy as it may be, might also be seen as an influence of steampunk aesthetics. On the other hand, mixing genres in role-playing games is not unconventional.

However, we agree upon her observation that the battles fought in WORLD OF WARCRAFT are old fashioned in different regards despite the presence of modern technology; e.g. the player is able to obtain "honor" within a simple and stereotypical "honor/point" system. We would like to add the absence of civilian casualties as another important characteristic which contributes to the overall impression of pre-modern warfare within the game. The history of real warfare shows that in World War One 90 percent of the dead and wounded were combatants and only 10 percent of the victims were non-combatants. The percentage has almost become reversed within the last twenty years, with 80 percent of the dead and seriously wounded now being civilians (Münkler 2004).

WORLD OF WARCRAFT is a world in which the classification in combatants and civilians is still of significant importance. Players may even choose not to be engaged in battle with other players by playing the game in a "normal realm," where "enemy players can't attack you unless you allow them to" (Blizzard 2008b).

But even in a "battleground" like the "Warsong Gulch," where players of the Alliance and the Horde team up to play "Capture the Flag"; the fighting between players is to be seen as an element of competition since there are no consequences except for single players, who may gain some honor points or have to resurrect their dead body. Which side wins the battle will have no influence on the background narrative of the game. Like the bosses at the end of a quest who are reborn after a group leaves the dungeon, the battlegrounds are reset after a battle – war in WORLD OF WARCRAFT has no serious consequences for the players or the game world.

Although Blizzard is trying to present a dense background narrative of the war between Horde and Alliance by implementing orphans of war (Blizzard 2008a) or places like the "Shrine of the Fallen Warriors," we do not agree to the view presented by MacCullum-Stewart that these "signifiers combine to remind the player that war has consequences" (MacCullum-Stewart 2007:68). Given the missing impact of the battles fought on the overall storyline of the game's world, we suggest regarding WORLD OF WARCRAFT as a war-themed game, characterized by a remarkable absence of war in the sense of organized mass death.

Infowar@Azeroth

Like almost every sphere of life, modern warfare has become more and more dependent on information and communication technologies. Since the 1990s, this is a prominent subject addressed by keywords like "information war" or simply "infowar." Before addressing the second and third level of war in WOW, we would like therefore to summarize some of the important changes related to the technical development of real warfare that are also found in game-internal warfare. As Friedrich Kittler has noted:

> 1809 Napoleon decided the outcome of a whole campaign […] by employing the revolutionary optical telegraphy. […] The campaign of 1809 […] injected war with a function of urgency. The polite and suicidal waiting of the French Knights until the British enemy too was ready for the battle of Azincourt in 1415 came to an abrupt end. […] [The] history of war over the last two centuries has been pure dromology, according to Virilio's hypothesis" (Kittler 1998:25).

It is important to point out the perception of Napoleon's campaign as a major change in modern warfare in order to understand Arthur Cebrowski's and John Garstka's claim in their article on "Net-Centric Warfare," that the better use of today's information and communication technologies will lead to "a revolution in military affairs unlike any seen since the Napoleonic Age" (cit. by Shachtman 2007:242). According to Noah Shachtman the American Army has spent more than $230 billion to a network-centric makeover, which emphasizes on fewer, faster-moving troops and enabling "plugged-in soldiers" to be able to cover a bigger area in the battlefield:

> In 1991, Operation Desert Storm began with a long bombing campaign, then a ground assault. But in Afghanistan and the 2003 Iraq war, soldiers on the ground handed off coordinates to bombers and fighter planes, who attacked with laser- and satellite-guided munitions. The effect was devastating, shrinking the so-called sensor-to-shooter cycle to mere instants. During the first Gulf War, it typically took three days of paper pushing to assign a plane a target to hit. This time around […] it took under 10 minutes (Shachtman 2007:248).

Having stated the importance of communication in today's high-tech warfare, we would like to address the importance of communication in playing WORLD OF WARCRAFT. The game offers various options

for communication between the players, which are even extended by add-ons. The bandwidth of communication ranges from the community's paratexts on web pages to the instantaneous communication via headsets. Most of the bigger adventures can only be solved by groups ranging from 5 to 40 players:

> This is not a solo game; it's a social world, and there are many activities within the game that cannot be experienced without the cooperative effort of many people (Malone 2007:4).

Looking at the way battles are organized in WORLD OF WARCRAFT, it has to be noted that most battle groups, as well as guilds, have leaders who determine the tactical approach and coordinate the hostilities by using different channels of communication. Thus, WORLD OF WARCRAFT is not as old-fashioned as it seems at first. This becomes particularly clear when one considers the role of communication within combat operations. It seems a little bit surprising in this context that MacCallum-Stewart notes that the fight in "Alterac Valley," another battleground within WORLD OF WARCRAFT, "shows an obvious parallel to more recent conflict, whose use of sophisticated weaponry to destroy prime targets in advance" is comparable to information warfare (MacCallum-Stewart 2007:71). But she does not recognize the importance of online-communication which enables small groups to "be delegated to take mid-point objectives," to use an example provided by herself. Actually, the importance of communication during fighting seems to be a blind spot in research since the possibility to communicate with other players' characters is characteristic of massive multiplayer online role-playing games like WORLD OF WARCRAFT. However, putting the focus on the importance of online communication to accomplish missions or win battles is important in analyzing the concepts of war to be found in the context of the game. Otherwise, the connection to "information war" is likely to be overlooked especially when focusing on the representation of war within the game's world.

The Struggle for Sovereignty

As observed by Michel Foucault in his writings on Governmentality (Foucault 1978) Machiavelli's Prince in *Il Principe* is a new kind of sovereign, whose connection to the people of his land is rather fragile. There is a constant threat that the people will no longer accept his authority, and there is always the danger of someone from the outside trying to take away his land:

> For a prince has only two things to fear: one is internal and concerns his subjects; the other is external and concerns foreign powers. From the latter he protects himself with reliable troops and reliable allies – and he will always have reliable allies if he has reliable troops. Moreover, he will always enjoy quiet within his kingdom if there is quiet outside of it, unless it is disturbed by conspiracy (Machiavelli 2003:71).

Within the research on the governance of WORLD OF WARCRAFT, most authors seem to agree that Blizzard Entertainment is more like a god who has created the world and less like a government (Malone 2007, Bartle 2006). Pointing to the war fought by Blizzard Entertainment, we argue that Blizzard actually seems to be less of a god and more of a prince in the Machiavellian sense and has to struggle to remain the sovereign of Azeroth. It might seem a little bit dramatic to address the following issues under the keywords of "information warfare," but one should keep in mind that infrastructure security as well as information superiority are key concepts in the info-war doctrine (Kuehl 2007).

Let us begin with the attacks "from the outside," as in any popular online-game there were many attempts to steal the WOW-players' accounts – targets being virtual goods as well as "real life" credit card details (Cheung 2006, Bardzell 2007:742).

However, Blizzard seems not to concentrate on enemies and attacks "from the outside," but rather on the governance of the players. To guarantee a similarly good game experience for all gamers, some hundred so-called game masters supervise the course of the game and control the compliance with the "End User License Agreement." They answer to requests of the players in case of problems with the game world or between players, but they have a control function at the same time. Noticing the invisibility of these guardians to the normal player, one has to wonder that there is little research on the panoptical WORLD OF WARCRAFT.

The game masters are responsible as well for finding and sanctioning players who cheat or otherwise break the rules governing their participation in the game. These irregularities are addressed in the "Terms of Service" and the "End User License Agreement" and are punished by game-internal sanctions or exclusion from the game. The use of third-party programs has also become very restricted. These programs can e.g. serve to gain overview in battles. It was accented before that WORLD OF WARCRAFT is very old-fashioned in some aspects and attaches great importance to fair battle between equally strong opponents within the game's world; we have to admit as well that the ensuring of equality of weapons is one of the declared objectives of the "War on Cheating" at this level of information warfare.

A major challenge for Blizzard, which also attracted a lot of media attention, is the trading of virtual goods, i.e. avatars, objects, and gold. Selling and buying such virtual goods officially violates the end user license agreement. However, since players seem to be willing to spend real money for these goods, thus saving time and effort, a black market economy has emerged. For example, so-called "farmers" relieve their customers of the boring task of gaining in-game property by collecting objects or beating opponents and charging real currency for the virtual gold. This is prosecuted by Blizzard.

Regarding our assumption that Blizzard Entertainment is trying to defend its position as sovereign of Azeroth, the restriction of commerce with virtual goods can be seen as a way to defend the boundaries of the game's world. In contrast, in EVERQUEST 2 (2004) players can buy virtual money or goods without large effort in exchange for real money. Also SECOND LIFE (2003) consciously provides the mixture of virtual and real markets (Bradley 2007:5). The possibility to control, sanction, and banish the players clearly shows that one has to take the developers and operators seriously in their function as sovereign. Unlike the battles within the game world, this war also has a political dimension: It is aiming at providing the players a safe and entertaining wartime experience that leaves no consequences for them.

As we have shown, there are different concepts of war underlying the game. On the one hand there is a romantic, pre-modern conception of war; and on the other hand we can find elements of (post) modern information warfare. Although the central action of WORLD OF WARCRAFT is actually not about war in a modern sense, because of the remarkable absence of mass-death and civilian casualties in the game, the different interactions behind the scenes are good examples of information warfare. Not only is the in-game warfare considered on the basis of the capabilities of the players to communicate and exchange knowledge; but the efforts of Blizzard at defending the game regulations in order to provide fair and balanced combats can be seen from the perspective of information warfare. Finally, we have shown that WORLD OF WARCRAFT presents a mix of different concepts of war, contributing in making the game a rather surreal theater of war.

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