

Chapter 15

The Ur–Real Sonorous Envelope: Bridge between the Corporeal and the Online Technoself

Marlin Bates IV
University of the Pacific, USA

ABSTRACT

In the rhetorical construction of identity, we are often tasked with analyzing how rhetoric either points to or creates a space for identity. This chapter would seek to move beyond that. This chapter seeks to analyze how ur-real rhetoric creates identity not through a textual sense. It creates an effect on our psyches. The exigence is no longer the over-riding guide for the identity construct. Rather, the rhetoric is called forth not just by the situation but instead by the sum total of the rhetorical effect on the bodies being changed. It is the totality of the milieu in which we find ourselves. This represents what can be considered to be a fundamental shift within identity theory: Heretofore, we seek to explain reality and ur-reality in terms of how it aligns/misaligns with the physical realm. This chapter examines World of Warcraft's and Ultima Online's impact not just on the lexical construction of rhetorical identity, but also on the somatic; we need to be looking as to how the body responds. The chapter attempts to discern where the somatic and the lexical construction of rhetorical identity intersect by applying theories from Black, Burke, and others.

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INTRODUCTION

What do I mean when I say “rhetorical creation of identity”? To be brief, I refer back to my original definition of what I have come to call, ur-real. The reasoning for the neologism is because although it is not the reality we corporeally exist in, it is nonetheless an existence, a community of ways. Yet because it is non-corporeal, we need to set it apart. Some have used the term “virtual reality.” However, this term carries with it the connotation that the online community is “not real, but virtual.” The argument that I will make in this chapter is that the MMORPG experience is somewhere in between and, thus, deserves a special designation.

Additionally, we will look to how the rhetorical identities create a sense of belonging and place so that users are able to exist in a community that is no longer bounded by the physical. Rather it is bounded by the acceptance of the game space as ur-Real. In specific, the game space is not virtual, nor is it an ersatz copy of the Real; it is ur-Real. To be in the ur-Real world means to be in a world that is just as enrapturing as the non-electronic community. It is my belief that the ur-real is just as impactful to our corporeal identity as anything else we might experience. Indeed, as Kenneth Burke (1984) notes, “in the mimesis of the practical the distinction between acting and play-acting, between real and make-believe becomes obliterated” (p. 254). Therefore, when this chapter examines rhetorical identity construction online, it does so with the understanding of how player-characters use the ur-real to further who they are as a person and as an instantiation of that person.

BACKGROUND

Massively Multiplayer Online games (MMOs) have steadily increased in prominence over the last decade to a point where discussion concerning the genre is no longer confined to the computer rooms and Internet cafes. Indeed, there is

a growing body of scholarly research on MMOs and their various instantiations (Doheny-Farina, 1996; Donath, 1999; Turkle, 1999; Bates, 2005, 2009). To be precise, prior research (Bates, 2005) has indicated that the rhetorical construction of identity not only exists online, but also that rhetorical identities have combined to form associations with other identities. Those associations and identities are what Kenneth Burke (1969) would term a “community of ways” (p. 130). Burke (1969) tells us that imitation allows a rhetorical personage to find a place within their community. The player-characters, whether they are gamers or role-players, imitate each other in order to perfect their individual - and yet communal - identity and, thus, win acceptance from the group. Moreover, the research has focused on how the game itself, web sites, the USENET, and game message boards allow player-characters to conduct what is essentially an “out-imitation” of each other. Therefore, if there is a need to emulate those around them in the game, the players will naturally tend towards competition in order to fulfill that need. It is the conscious use of imitation/competition by the player-characters that draws them together as a whole. In order for there to be order within the chaos that is a culture, there must be a sense of how one fits within that community. Burke tells us that the imitation allows a rhetorical personage to find a place within that community. Contradictory as it may seem, the MMORPG represents a site in which player-characters seek out ways to be like each other in order to maintain an individual identity that exists within the community. The player-characters, whether they are gamers or role-players, imitate each other in order to be the best and, therefore, win acceptance from the group as a whole. I believe that not only is the Burkean sense of identification in play, but also Edwin Black’s (1970) theory of the “second persona” is at work here in the ur-real. Moreover, the Dawkins (1976) neologism, the meme, works in concert with these two theories to drive online ur-real identity creation. In an effort to support these

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