

## **The Monstrous in Miniature: The Use of Machinima to Defeat Real and ur-Real Monsters**

*Marlin C. Bates, IV*

*Kathleen Bruce*

### **Abstract**

Prior research (Bates 2005, 2007, et al.) has indicated that the rhetorical construction of identity not only exists online, but also that the rhetorical identities have combined to form associations with other identities. Those associations and identities are what Burke would term a “community of ways.” 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. This same research has also indicated that the monstrous is present within identity construction in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs). A recent addition to this process is machinima or the use of the MMO game engine to produce videos. These videos are then distributed—much like music MP3s are—through a variety of websites, not the least of which is YouTube. This paper will argue that machinima not only allows the player-character greater freedom in creating an identity, but that it also allows the player-character to reduce the monsters of the ur-real and the real world to a much smaller—and therefore manageable—size. Specifically, that the machinima grants the rhetor/director the ability to minimize problems found in life to a point where the video engenders laughter (and, therefore, support) or compassion (again, more support) that helps the rhetor deal with the problem. This process is then repeated (if successful initially) with problems inside of the ur-real world as well. This support is found in the form of online “comments” to the video on the host website or in e-mails in USENET newsgroups. In this way, the monsters--just like the hobgoblins of life--are diminished and defeated.

### **Keywords**

Massively Multiplayer Online Game, id, super ego, ego, ur-Real, rhetoric, identity

---

Massively Multiplayer Online games (MMOs)<sup>1</sup> 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. To be precise, prior research 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.<sup>2</sup> Those associations and identities are what Kenneth Burke would term a “community of ways.” Burke 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 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. We believe that not only is the Burkean sense of identification in play, but also that the Dawkins neologism, the meme, is the primary engine that drives machinima creation.<sup>3</sup> In an effort to support that theory, this study seeks to discover how the relatively new front for identity construction--machinima--is being employed by rhetors to complete their identities and to meld the real and the ur-real in their everyday lives. The ensuing identity-meme alloy then allows the rhetor the ability to deal with difficulties in all planes of existence.

But what is “machinima”? Machinima is a neologism crafted by media practitioners, Hancock and Marino to explain a new online phenomenon. Indeed, some would make the claim that machinima is a new community on the web “showcasing work, issuing manifestoes, publicizing the scope of the practice and making claims for its future.”<sup>4</sup> The phenomenon is best defined as “where 3D computer animation game play is recorded in real-time as video footage and then used to produce traditional video narratives.”<sup>5</sup> Although this paper will certainly agree with the definition as it pertains to the use of 3d game play animation, we will respectfully disagree that the format must be either traditional or solely focused on a narrative format. We believe that machinima associated with the ur-real world of online gaming is better described as a confluence of story-telling, identity creation, performance, and an acerbic reflection of the corporeal world.

This paper will employ a grounded theory approach in order to discover how machinima is used to ameliorate the monsters of both real and ur-real life. We define monsters as those instantiations of vicissitudes that cannot otherwise be dealt with in a solely real-world. Grounded theory, when properly completed, will be “readily understandable to sociologists of any viewpoint, to students and to significant laymen.”<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the new viewpoint will not be supplanted by another because the grounded theory is “too intimately linked to data, it is destined to last despite its inevitable modification and reformulation.”<sup>7</sup> Also, the users of the theory do not necessarily recognize it as a theory. What the participants do recognize is that there are certain ways that they must or may act in a given situation. Much akin to norms within small group communication theory, these rules are developed through continuous interaction and are adopted and adapted to

the needs of the situation. By examining the situation as deeply as possible, the researcher can predict, to a certain degree, how particular group members might present their identity within that specific group situation.

According to Glaser and Strauss, an investigation attempting to discover an implicit theory should follow three steps. The first step is to select, as naturally as possible, a group of interactants. The second step is to gather as much data as possible about the group and its interactions in as many different formats as possible. The third step is to read the data as completely as possible without any preconceived ideas. From this, the researcher should be able to discover categories and hypotheses from the data. Group selection begins the process of discovering an implicit theory. This is different from other social scientific experiments that gather a group together for the purpose of proving a theory. In standard social scientific practice, the theory is imposed on the group, whereas implicit theory discovery seeks to gather the theory from the group itself. Group selection in implicit theory research is intended to find a group that has naturally formed so that the schemas discovered within the interaction are intrinsic to the group itself and not merely the situation in which the group is investigated. After the group for study has been selected, the elements of the theory can be generated by a close examination of the data. The researcher should read the data in order to gain an overall understanding of how group members interact. Additionally, the research should keep an eye out for the particular type of interactions that are of interest.

#### **1. The Artifact**

Over the course of eight weeks, we watched and read the comments associated with a wide range of MMO-related machinima from a wide range of websites. In total, we looked at four dozen videos ranging from *HALO* to *World of Warcraft* over a period of four months. Although the games depicted in the videos are very different in nature, the motivations behind the rhetors who created the videos appeared to be consistently similar. For example, creators of *Call of Duty* and *WoW* machinima wanted to depict a story from the real world in an ur-Real format. In addition to the machinima themselves, there were pages of comments attributed to the videos that were posted on the publication websites, (e.g., YouTube and Machinima.com). Websites users and machinima creators commented equally on the posted videos. The commentary thus engendered conversation on the motives behind the video and the symbols that were used. Discussion amongst rhetors therefore brought users together to discuss implications of not only the video, but also the game, temporarily cementing their identification through the ur-Real.

#### **2. Analysis and Implications**

Our research has concluded that not only is the machinima the representation of the id of the internet unconscious, but it is also the super-

ego of it as well. This apparent contradiction is resolved when we consider that the machinima is not the meme of the ur-Real identity (the ego), but the *meta*-meme! In short, the machinima allows the individual rhetors to access social unconscious archetypes in order to change the meaning contained therein. Perhaps the best example of the interaction is found in the machinima created by “Brandon” of “Oxhorn”-series fame. The director of these machinima featured a collection of World of Warcraft player-characters doing various and sundry shorts and vignettes. That is until the director, Brandon, moved to San Francisco to take a job with “Wegame.com.”<sup>8</sup> The rhetor created a machinima that chronicled his travels from the suburbs of Seattle, Washington, to San Francisco, California, as he shifted from a purely ur-Real world existence to a consubstantiated existence of ur-Real and Real. His monster in that machinima is the long mental and physical trek from the known hometown to the unknown and monstrous world. In doing so, the monster is diminished in the machinima by demonstrating how such a move is to be understood: A quest to be completed with rewards and a happy ending waiting for the audience at the end. The comments attached to the machinima are not only supportive with comments such as “LOL awesome!! Your a true hero:P [sic],” but also comments that align with the diminishment of the monster such as “HEY!!! I’ve done that quest!”<sup>9</sup> The comments demonstrate what Burke explains as an attempt continuously by the human animal to reconcile the need for perfection with the need to identify with his/her neighbors. In our analysis, we believe that the human animal in the ur-Real setting does not differentiate between what is Real and what is ur-Real. Therefore, the need to “out-imitate one another” is shifted to the ability to allow the immediacy of the id full reign over the super-ego in order to create a more perfect ego. Specifically, the machinima allows rhetors to take the monsters of our super ego and redefine them in terms of the more malleable id. Rhetors can now present problems in terms so simple that the problems become tautologies. For example, if a speaker were to explain a situation to an audience in idioms that the audience did not have a frame of reference to understand, then the audience would not be able to comprehend the message. If the message cannot be comprehended, it is dismissed as unnecessary and/or worthless. As a corollary, if a problem exists that cannot be explained in the realm of the id, then it becomes a problem to be disregarded. Moreover, even if the process is conducted in language that is not generally acceptable to the audience, yet nonetheless understandable, the process can still take place. For example, when commentators on Call of Duty machinima posted responses, they used language that did not reflect super ego norms. However, these commentators were granted leeway because they were able to tap into the internet meme (unconscious) that is associated with “rough and tough war veteran persona” in order to resolve the contradiction.

---

Additionally, the use of the player-character names to represent the actors in the machinima is a fallible sign that the identity of the player-character is inextricably combined. In dramatic machinima, one might expect to find characters named differently from the player-characters acting the role, but one does not.<sup>10</sup> This extension of the player-character identity from the ur-real to the real and then extended into a fantasy based in the ur-real allows us to make the argument that the ur-real is the key to both online and off-line identity construction. Indeed, when the ur-real is used as a fulcrum in the real as exemplified in “The Edge of Real Life,” we are forced to make the conclusion that the ur-real is the dominant mode of thought not only as far as identity construction is concerned, but also in terms of understanding player-character’s corporeal existence. Anecdotally, the rise in the corporeal use of ur-real acronyms seems to affirm this conclusion.<sup>11</sup>

The theoretical basis for these conclusions can be found in both Kenneth Burke and Edwin Black.<sup>12,13</sup> Burke argued that since rhetors (in our context, player-characters) are “rotten with perfection,” they are constantly searching for ways to compete with each other to achieve that perfection. Burke tells us that “from the standpoint of ‘identification,’ what we call ‘competition’ is better described as men’s [and women’s] attempt to *out-imitate* one another.”<sup>14</sup> 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. Indeed, “when [we] change the nature of [our] interests, or point of view, [we] will approach events with a new ideality, reclassifying them, putting things together that were in different classes, and dividing things that were together.”<sup>15</sup> If our identity changes, we will change the equations, which comprises that identity within the reality we currently reside AND the one in which we are presenting it, if there is a difference between realities. That difference resides within the ideality. As rhetors, we present that ideality as identity. The ideality does not alter the reality, but only the factors we must employ to present a true identity. As Burke reminds us, we must focus on “a study of communication which necessarily emphasizes the social nature of human adjustment, . . . , considering [humans] as *possessed*, and [humans] as the *inventors of new solutions*, but these two frames would be subdivisions in a larger frame, *[humans] as communicants*.”<sup>16</sup> If we are in need to communicate who we are, we will find a way to express that identity. However, that identity must be expressed in terms of links between others and ourselves.

In an earlier paper, Bates argued that,

Users further refine the performance of their identity within web pages related to the particular MMORPG. Although the in-game performance allows users to perform the identity to a certain extent, time and space constrain the

number of other player-characters that are able to witness that performance. The player-characters also use the web pages to further expand the professions and personalities available for performance. However, the newly expanded professions are still constrained by the identity process created within the game.<sup>17</sup>

To a certain extent this still holds true. More intriguing is that the imitation of other player-characters in order to achieve Burkean identification through machinima is even further confining than web page identity performance. As Bates noted before, the web pages require a certain adherence to the game software engine.<sup>18</sup> However, that adherence is greatly on a volunteer basis. Whereas the use of machinima to perform identities requires adherence to the game software. Imagine it this way: Although web page identity construction requires the page author to represent the game identity in a manner that aligns itself with the game engine, the machinima *uses* the game engine for identity performance. There can be certain non-game-like uses of the engine, but the identity performance is still constrained by a canvas that cannot be altered in the manner a web page identity performance would be.

Moreover, the need to compete is what drives the machinima performances. Player-characters are constantly trying to create new storylines and ways to demonstrate their identities within the game. The game companies even expand the ability for machinima to act as the venue for identity performance by conducting machinima contests around a certain theme.<sup>19</sup> Machinima then becomes the stage for not only dramatic performance, but also a meta-stage for the rhetorical performance of who the player-characters believe themselves to be within the role. As far as Burkean theory is concerned, Shakespeare, apparently, wrote about online identity as well. Again, the machinima allows the use of the meta-meme to confound the monsters that exist in our everyday identities, rhetors simply disregard those monsters that do not fit within the what the directors wish their worlds to contain.

Edwin Black offers a separate perspective on the intersection of rhetorical identity and monsters in his “Secrecy and Disclosure” article. Black argues that certain matrices of power have effects on audiences. The argument is that certain rhetors have information desired by certain audiences. These audiences desire to be a part of the rhetor as well as be a part of a select group. The best example Black uses is the “priest and the penitent.” Black’s argument is that the priest has information that the penitent desires. The penitent wishes to be amongst those in the flock who are “of God” and worthy of the religious counsel. The rhetor becomes part of the select by revealing special, or secret, information to the auditor. At the same time, the auditor becomes part of the rhetor and, thus, both are changed.

This is the overriding way in which identity is formed online. Indeed, the specific method may change, but there is still an exchange of secret information between the computer-priest and the user-penitent.<sup>20</sup>

Additionally, it is this matrix of power that allows the machinima rhetor to control the monsters of his/her life. As the director explains the monsters of life, she also instructs the audience how to deal (or not deal as the case may be) with the monsters. If the monster is to be shunned, then the audience takes that perception away and shares this perspective with other audiences. In time, the monster problem is dissipated by either widespread exposure or simple denial on a global scale. In short, the id forces the super ego to accept the redefinition of what is a monster, what requires attention, and what is no longer important. In the process, a new ego or rhetorical identity surfaces that then moves on to the next instance. The problems of their lives--and by extension the lives of their auditors--become nothing more than the creatures under our beds: To be grown out of and past by.

### 3. Conclusion

Machinima are yet one more instance of how the ur-Real world is much more malleable than the real world. That flexibility, it seems, is now being extended to the real world as well. The saying goes that life imitates art, but perhaps the more timely aphorism would read: Life and Art are the same. The ur-Real is the canvas for the Real to be interpreted and ascribed power by those that live within it and around it.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> MMOs are now loosely defined to include not only the standard fare of games like *World of Warcraft* and *Everquest*, but also games such as the first-person shooter (FPS) of *HALO* or *Call of Duty*.

<sup>2</sup> M Bates, 'Implicit Identity Theory in the Rhetoric of the Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG), *Ultima Online*,' Ph.D. Thesis, The Pennsylvania State University, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> The "meme" was first posited by Richard Dawkins in his 1976 text, *The Selfish Gene*.

<sup>4</sup> L Berkeley, Situating Machinima in the New Mediascape, *Australian Journal of Emerging Technologies and Society*, 4(2): p. 65.

<sup>5</sup> Berkeley, p. 65

<sup>6</sup> B G Glaser & A L Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Aldine de Gruyter, 1967, p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> Glaser & Strauss, 4.

<sup>8</sup> Dennis, B, "Oxhorn Brand Movies," 7 August 2008, <http://www.youtube.com/user/Oxhorn>

<sup>9</sup> Dennis, B, "Oxhorn's Move to California – WoW video,"

[http://www.wegame.com/watch/Oxhorn\\_s\\_Move\\_to\\_California/](http://www.wegame.com/watch/Oxhorn_s_Move_to_California/), 7 August 2008.

<sup>10</sup> Dramatic machinima are those machinima that are created by rhetors to be a movie with a plot wholly separate from the engine being used. For example, a machinima creator might use the World of Warcraft engine to create a machinima about private investigators in a murder mystery set in Los Angeles. For more explicit descriptions see, Bates, M & Bruce, K, "Identity Through Machinima: The Expansion of the Ur-Real Rhetorical Identity."

<sup>11</sup> Increasingly, our students are using internet acronyms as "words." Instead of saying, "Laughing Out Loud," they will usually say "Lol" as if it were a word in and of itself. Although there are certainly extant examples of this in English (e.g., SCUBA), it is somewhat disturbing to hear someone say "Oh Em Gee!" instead of "Oh my God!"

<sup>12</sup> K Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1969.

<sup>13</sup> E Black, "The Second Persona." In *Landmark Essays on Rhetorical Criticism*, edited by Thomas W. Benson (Davis, Ca: Hermagoras Press, 1993), 165.

<sup>14</sup> Burke, p. 131.

<sup>15</sup> Burke, p. 106.

<sup>16</sup> Burke, p. 267.

<sup>17</sup> Bates, 2008.

<sup>18</sup> M Bates, 'More real than Real: The ur-Reality of World of Warcraft' In Chaney, J.R., Ruggill, J.E., & McAllister, K.S. (eds.) *Computer Culture Reader* Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Cambridge, UK, 2008.

<sup>19</sup> Some examples of this are the Joystiq *World of Warcraft* contest with Music Video, Comedy, Drama and Short Feature.  
<http://www.joystiq.com/2006/10/26/world-of-warcraft-machinima-contest-winner/>

<sup>20</sup> E Black, 'Secrecy and Disclosure as Rhetorical Forms,' *Quarterly Journal of Speech* vol. 88, 1988, 133-150.

### Bibliography

- Bates, M. *Implicit Identity Theory in the Rhetoric of the Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG), Ultima Online*. Ph.D. Thesis, The Pennsylvania State University, 2005.
- Bates, M. 'More real than Real: The ur-Reality of World of Warcraft' In Chaney, J.R., Ruggill, J.E., & McAllister, K.S. (eds.) *Computer*

- 
- Culture Reader* Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Cambridge, UK, 2008.
- Bates, M. & Bruce, K. 'Identity Through Machinima: The Expansion of the Ur-Real Rhetorical Identity'. Unpublished paper presented at the 29th Annual Meeting of the SW/TX Pop Culture Association/American Culture Association, February 13-16, 2008.
- Black, E., 'The Second Persona'. In Benson, T. W. *Landmark Essays on Rhetorical Criticism*, edited by Thomas W. Benson (Davis, Ca: Hermagoras Press, 1993), 165.
- Black, E. 'Secrecy and Disclosure as Rhetorical Forms'. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, vol. 88, 1988, 133-150.
- Berkeley, L. Situating Machinima in the New Mediascape. *Australian Journal of Emerging Technologies and Society*, 4(2) 2006: 65-80.
- Burke, Kenneth. *A Rhetoric of Motives*. University of California Press, Berkeley, 1969.
- Dawkins, R. *The Selfish Gene*. Oxford University Press, 1989.
- Dennis, B. 'Oxhorn Brand Movies'. *YouTube.com*, n.d. viewed on 7 August 2008, <<http://www.youtube.com/user/Oxhorn>>.
- Dennis, B. 'Oxhorn's Move to California – WoW video'. *YouTube.com*, n.d. viewed on 7 August 2008, <[http://www.wegame.com/watch/Oxhorn\\_s\\_Move\\_to\\_California/](http://www.wegame.com/watch/Oxhorn_s_Move_to_California/)>.
- Glaser, B.G. & Strauss, A.L. *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Aldine de Gruyter, Chicago, 1967.
- Various. 'World of Warcraft Machinima Winners'. 26 October 2006, viewed on 10 May 2008, <<http://www.joystiq.com/2006/10/26/world-of-warcraft-machinima-contest-winners/>>.