

## ***Serenity Now bombs a World of Warcraft funeral: Negotiating the Morality, Reality and Taste of Online Gaming Practices***

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### **Abstract**

In this paper we examine the controversy surrounding the *Serenity Now bombs a World of Warcraft funeral* video. This video depicts a group of players in *World of Warcraft* attacking a group of enemy players as they gather for the in-game funeral of a woman who had recently passed away. We argue that this historical controversy and the ongoing debate surrounding it is a form of “boundary-work” through which players are negotiating the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate online gaming practices. This boundary work involves three strands of demarcations. It has ethical, ontological and aesthetical filaments. The fact that the disputes played out through these entangled filaments haven’t been resolved seven years after the incident indicates that the spaces and boundaries of online interaction remain uncertain and contested. Thus, this paper speaks directly to the themes of appropriation, resistance, and how people negotiate acceptable and unacceptable uses of the internet.

### **Keywords**

World of Warcraft; Serenity Now bombs a World of Warcraft funeral; commemoration; grieving; boundary-work

### **Introduction**

On March the 4th, 2006, around 5:30 p.m., members of the Horde on Illidan-US gathered together at the Frostfire Hot Springs in Winterspring at a memorial service for Fayejin, who suffered a stroke and passed away earlier in the week. As her avatar shone brightly by the shore of the lake and as mourners lined-up in an orderly queue ready to file past and pay their respects, a group of Alliance players led by members of the guilds Serenity Now and Gnomeland Security charged through the snow-clad forest, down to the shores of the small lake, and killed everybody.

While not necessarily common, the practices of holding weddings, funerals, birthdays, and the like in Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOG) are well known (Gibbs et al., 2012). The practices of ‘grieving’ – taking actions to deliberately frustrate, annoy or harm other players – are also well known. The above events that occurred in the MMOG, *World of Warcraft (WoW)*, are noteworthy because members of Serenity Now made a video of the event and shared it online.<sup>1</sup> Like much on the Internet, the video has been posted and reposted, recycled and rehashed. The video can be found in dozens of locations, has been viewed millions of times, and has been discussed by tens of thousands of people in various online forums. The incident was reported in gaming and mainstream media including *PC Gamer* (Graziani, 2006) *Newsweek* (Elf, 2006), *The Guardian* (Davis, 2006) and *The Howard Stern Show* (2010). Discussion, debate and controversy over the “rights” and “wrongs” of the actions depicted have emerged with each reposting of the video with little signs of “closure”.

We argue that the debate is a form of “boundary-work” (Gieryn, 1999) through which players are negotiating the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate online practices. In Gieryn’s work the

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<sup>1</sup> See Hollingsworth 2006 for a reposting to YouTube. The originals are no longer available.

term refers to the rhetorical work scientists do to demarcate science from non-science by establishing boundaries around intellectual activities and to mark one side of these boundaries as legitimate and the other as illegitimate. In this paper we use the term to refer to the rhetoric used by participants to position the activities depicted in the video as legitimate or illegitimate. This boundary-work involves three entwined filaments of demarcations: ethical, ontological and aesthetic.

### **Boundary-Work<sup>2</sup>**

Ethically, the debate concerns morally acceptable behavior in an online game and on the Internet more generally. Some argue that common decency gave the mourners the right to be “*left alone*” and that PvP rules of play should have been suspended given the gravitas of grieving and death. “*That doesn't excuse the fact that choosing to use people who are feeling real grief and are vulnerable to you because of that for your own entertainment is still pretty shitty behavior.*” Others argue that serious matters such as funerals have no place in online games and that the raiders were playing the game how it should be played. “*Serenity Now were playing the game as was intended, the others are upset because they got killed as a result. Meh.*”

Ontologically, participants adopt differing positions on the reality of online persons, online games, and online spaces more generally. Some emphasize the ontological personhood of the avatar; “*This is an MMO, your character is quite literally an extension of yourself*” and assert the reality of online life; “*it's a video game that deals with real people... if you don't understand that then you're ignorant*”. Others argue for the artificiality of game spaces and in-game actions, and assert that as *WoW* is “*only a game*” its in-game activities are inconsequential. Others extend this argument to online spaces as a whole: “*I'm not excusing it, but some of you guys are getting far too worked up over something that happened on the Internet*”. Predictably, many argue that serious matters do not belong in games, “*Mad props to serenity now, for keeping wow what it should be, a light hearted game, not a virtual life*” and some go further to criticize the funeral for being a “*disingenuous and disgusting representation of serious real life matters*”.

Aesthetically, through their rhetoric (Paul, 2009) and invective (Voorman, 2002), participants construct and position identities for themselves and others through expressions of taste and tastelessness within gaming culture. Some find the “*massacre*” reprehensible: “*You just don't do something like that and then wear it like a badge of pride if you are normal, responsible human being*”. Others find the incident hilarious: “*That was brutal, in bad taste, and funny as hell though*”. Ubiquitous throughout are various forms of invective and personal abuse. Serenity Now were “*gaping assholes*” and the mourners “*sad geeks*” or some variant thereof.

### **Boundary-Play**

Considerable scholarly ink has been spilt on the incident. The incident was discussed at length on the Terra Nova blog (Combs, 2006). Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009) have suggested that the exploits depicted in the video have become an important part of *WoW* history (p. 131).<sup>3</sup> Moral philosophers have evaluated the case and arrived at predictably moral conclusions (Goguen, 2009; Luck, 2009). Frier and Saulnier (2010) use the incident as an example of morally ambiguous play and suggest that discussion of cases like this can aid in the moral development of children and adolescences. It has been used as a case in the discussion of legal liabilities and harms in virtual worlds (Levine, 2010). Evans (2010) points to contested notions of the reality and consequences of online game spaces and suggests both groups, raiders and mourners, have an entirely valid, if conflicted, perception of the gamespace. Hutchings (2012) follows suit. Varnelis and Friedberg (2008,

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<sup>2</sup> All quotes are, as Phillips (2011) might say, subject to flashing neon “[sic]”.

<sup>3</sup> However, they wrongly describe it as “the attack by Serenity Now on a rival group, CROM.” The majority of the mourners were from Fayejin's guild, Maledictions.

p.26) suggest the debates about the video raises questions about “the moral behavior and the limits of reality in MMORPGs” but offer no answers. Heidbrink et al. (2011) argue that the controversy stems from different perception of the reality of online spaces and its suitability for ritual practice.

As the above literature and our discussion of boundary-work indicate, the incident raises many questions about the morality, reality and consequences of online actions. Ethical considerations and the ontology of personhood and the game space are thoroughly entwined. This is clear. However, a third thread in the triple helix is largely missing from the above considerations. That is, the way competing expressions of taste (Bourdieu, 1984) provides an opportunity to perform identities by celebrating and/or lamenting aspects of the incident. Boundary work around taste is thus played out according to what is identified as “funny” or “sad”, “cheap” or “disrespectful”, “naïve” or “shit”, and so on. Using such aesthetic-descriptors to express the subjectivities of taste, participants jockey for cultural position by using appeals to “good taste” and “bad taste”. These appeals establish and perform identities by marking affiliations and drawing distinctions, and in so doing gesture towards ontological and moral positions about what is real and/or acceptable. *Serenity Now bombs a World of Warcraft funeral* thus provides an important opportunity to the game community for boundary-work around the morality of online activities, the reality of online spaces and the consequences of online actions, as well as the performance of identity and cultural positioning. That this controversy has been ongoing since 2006 and has still not reached closure is a strong indication that these still remain largely unresolved and are perhaps irreconcilable.

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