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A Critical Analysis of Identity Liberation in Virtual Gaming Communities

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Except for the technophobic neo-Luddites, cyberspace and virtual societies (along with the liberation that comes with them) have been appropriated by almost every school of postmodern thought. From Neo-Marxism to Psychoanalysis, the current trend is to see cyberspace as a new frontier in which we can cast off the oppressive shackles of modernity. Optimistically, these theorists infer that virtual reality and cyberspace is humanity's chance to start over, to make things right. The opinion seems to be that online communities are they way out of traditional social norms and mores – perhaps they may even liberate us from dominating social institutions all together. We are told that as long as humanity is given a safe space, a liberating medium to exist in, the utopian escape of power and domination can be achieved.

The vast worlds of Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs) seem to be the closest implementation of these postmodern desires. In these games, a player is able (forced, even) to radically constitute their on-line self at will. Race, age, gender, beauty, social role, economic class, and innumerable other traits which have a strong influence in human interaction are simply another form of voluntary communication in an on-line realm. Despite this, these virtual gaming communities should not be seen as safe spaces in which a subject can realize their true (or ideal) self. In these games, a globalized capitalist hegemony is furthered both inside and out of the virtual world, violent normalization based on hierarchy and militarism is commonplace in all but the tamest on-line realms, and seemingly free-form gender play becomes appropriated, paradoxically entrenching a stable gender order.

Liberation of the gendered subject is a heavily advocated position in postmodern thought. In the status quo, the arguments presented in favor of the cyberspace-as-liberation viewpoint are based on principles of identity and society. The problem that postmodernists attempt to solve is a double-dialectic of identity between the conflicts of

society versus the individual and the individual versus themselves. The first point of tension is based on a difference between what society says the individual should (not) do and what actions the individual wishes to perform. This is most clearly illustrated in reactions to homosexuality: a societal norm may exist against same-sex relationships, causing outward conflict.¹ The second is due to an internal struggle between the individual's physical body and mental self (psyche). One instance of this struggle is that of a blonde deciding to dye their hair brown, believing that that their personality corresponds more to that of a brunette than a blonde. Another example of this conflict is that of the pre-op transsexual, who feels that their true self does not correspond to their physical body.²

From this viewpoint, on-line gaming communities appear to be an instant solution to these problems, as they are based on the static nature of the human body. The tension between societal roles and individual identity can be bypassed in these realms, as a subject can define their avatar so that the actions that the self desires are socially acceptable when performed by the avatar. An example of this is a male homosexual playing a female heterosexual character in an attempt to enter into a relationship with a man; even in the most homophobic virtual communities, such an act is socially acceptable. Obviously, it follows that the second source of tension, the internal struggle, is mitigated in these worlds as well. The subject has full control over who their digital character is, and this freedom is often seen as liberation of the subject.

Postmodern theorist Miroslaw Filiciak paints a delightful picture of the liberation that can occur in online gaming communities. Though the willful assertion of our true selves, Filiciak asks us to embrace this new "chance of expressing ourselves beyond

¹ Butler 1993, 4-6.

² Heyes 2003, paragraph 10.

physical limitations” as a “postmodern dream being materialized.”³ In addition to simply providing for a healthier psychological state, Filiciak believes that online gaming communities have the ability to escape the cycle of domination and power – he states that “[t]he possibility to negotiate our ‘self’ minimizes the control that social institutions wield over human beings.”⁴

In the same vein, cultural theorist Lisa Nakamura believes that games have the power to re-write the traditional notions of race and ethnicity. She believes that “[r]ole playing is a feature...it would be absurd to ask that everyone who plays within it hew literally to the gender, race, or condition of [their] life. A diversification of the roles which get played... can enable a thought provoking detachment of race from the body.” Nakamura even goes as far as to say that “[p]erforming alternative versions of self and race jams the ideology-machine.”⁵

Due to certain assumptions taken during its formulation, this view of on-line gaming communities is ultimately unequipped to face the oppression it claims to solve. The cyberspace-as-liberation discourse not only takes for granted that gender is a stable, binary notion, but actually reifies this concept, which makes gender-based oppression inevitable. Furthermore, the liberatory view is a false transgression against the stable gender identity which serves to maintain its existence. It fails to take into account the socially constructed nature of gender, instead desiring what is essentially rage against the machine, by the machine.

On the surface, this theory of cyberspace-as-liberation appears to be a radical movement. After all, players are supposedly making bodily categorizations irrelevant

³ Filiciak 2003, 101.

⁴ Ibid, 100.

⁵ Nakamura 1995, 23.

through playing with these traditionally static categories. In actuality, the so-called revolution is situated at a point where it appeases those who are discontent with the existing social order, yet fails to challenge societal construction, the true system by which domination is ultimately exercised.

Protests against the liberal-democratic capitalist order provide a relevant analogy for the problem. The system, under the principles of freedom and choice, permits its members the ability to criticize it. However, this is only the case because all defiance is situated at a point in which protest ultimately sustains the system as a whole.

Resistance, therefore, is co-opted; instead of banning The Communist Manifesto, it is sold. The main issue is not that the order allows these transgressions to exist, or even that they effectively support the liberal-democratic capitalist system. The fact of the matter is that the ability to criticize the order is an essential part of its existence.⁶

Gender functions in a similar fashion; libratory discourse is the digital equivalent of a Che Guevara shirt sold at a department store. In this case, the order is that of stable gender identities. The ability of a player to freely define their character's sex is permitted, as long as that sex is either male or female and static for the course of the character's existence. Resistance to the gender order is placed at a point where true subversion of the system is impossible, insulating it from any true change. As with the political/economic order, this break (however damaging it may seem) is actually an essential part of the stable gender order.

Such acts of gender reidentification (the digital version of cross-dressing) may seem like transgressions against a system of stable gender identities. Under a closer, more empirical inspection, it is evident that such seemingly rebellious acts entrench the

⁶ Zizek 2002, 168-171.

order further. In digital games, presented gender roles tend to be exaggerated; males are often bursting with muscle, carrying large weapons, and acting as the hero while females are frequently scantily-clad, voluptuous, and playing the damsel in distress.⁷ While most of these constitutions are due to the choices of game designers, players of on-line games tend to exaggerate gender stereotypes when playing in a social game. Whether one is playing a character that is representative of their 'true' gender or not, a major goal of role playing games is to have one's character be considered authentic by others. In terms of gender, the easiest (and most natural) way for this to occur is through the application of stereotypes.⁸ The act of parody is not uniquely one through which stable gender orders are challenged; in fact, they are frequently used to reify them.⁹

In this way, the order of stable gender identities becomes entrenched through what seems to be a rebellion against it. This is the case because the very notion of a stable gender order cannot exist without allowing for trans-gender play. However, like the liberal-democratic capitalist order, rebellion in the system precludes the possibility for any sort of real damage to it. In the same way that students are permitted¹⁰ to walk out of school in protest as long as they remain in the classroom on all other days of the year, individuals are allowed to act out alternate genders and sexualities in an on-line video game community, as long as they come back to the real world (and their real gender/sexuality).

⁷ Dietz 1998, 436.

⁸ Bell 2001, 125.

⁹ Butler 1993, 124-126

¹⁰ By permitted, I mean that they are allowed to perform an act of civil disobedience which may or may not include punishment.

When discussing the liberation of the subject in any situation, analysis must also be given to the structure that makes this escape possible. In the case of on-line gaming communities, the forces of globalized capitalism are at the forefront of any movement within these worlds. With this in mind, the digital cure for oppression may be worse than the disease. Most strands of postmodern thought strongly oppose capitalism, viewing it as a system of oppression and domination.¹¹ Post-Marxists view capitalism and consumerism as part of a system of commodity fetishes and see micro-political acts as a system for resisting these superstructures. Post-colonial theorists criticize the globalizing mechanism by which multinational capitalism destroys the individual or indigenous people, while other postmodernists simply deconstruct the hierarchical structure of such an ethos.¹²

Presented in this context, a quick look at the actual gaming communities shows that their existence reinforces capitalism in two ways. The Internet, the essential network which connects players together from around the world, is a product of globalized capitalism, as are the games which enable this so-called liberation. In order to participate, players must significantly invest into this system; even if a game is offered for free, the cost of internet access and a personal computer contribute to the global capitalist hegemony that many postmodern thinkers regard as a major source of oppression.¹³

More importantly, capitalism is a powerful and necessary institution in the actual gameplay of many MMORPGs. Earning in-game currency in order to buy better weapons (so that one can get more in-game currency to buy better weapons, and so

¹¹ Zizek 2000, 322.

¹² Ward 2003, 173-198.

¹³ Dean 2005, 74-81.

forth) is one of the basic premises entrenched in many of these games. The notion of capital (especially capital as a mechanism of power) thrives in MMORPGs.¹⁴ One example of this is the game Everquest, developed by Sony. Soon after the game's release, players began to sell their in-game currency or treasured items to each other for real-world cash via on-line auction site. An entire economy arose, based solely on the production and trade of virtual items. A now-famous study by Edward Castronova showed that the game's economy was a powerhouse: the digital nation had the 77th highest GDP per capita in the world, slightly richer than Bulgaria.¹⁵

This has significant implications for libratory discourse on the subject. For postmodernists, the cure for a categorized self may be worse than the disease. If the only way to liberate the self from one form of oppression involves participation in a capitalist system which introduces another form of oppression, what truly has been accomplished, aside from the transference of masters? Even if an individual is able to play such games as a liberated self without participating in the capitalist systems, the space of the game is still influenced by such structures of class and capital, which create dominating superstructures capable of oppressing (or assimilating) those who are not complicit in its creation.¹⁶

In addition to problems with gender play and capitalism, seeing digital gaming realms as a safe space to escape domination ignores the oppression that is inherent in society. While this form of subjugation may be inevitable in any civilization, it is exacerbated in highly hierarchal and militarized ones. The basis of such a criticism is based on the works of Michel Foucault in regards to power. Foucaultian power is a

¹⁴ Reynolds 2003, section 3-5.

¹⁵ Castronova 2001, 32-33.

¹⁶ Zizek 2004, 94-98.

social force, which causes community members to not only regulate others, but themselves as well. The traditional notion of power, the ability to dominate or subjugate, is only the most complete implementation of power. Similar to the sociological concept of norms, power is a result of normalizing social institutions.¹⁷

Instead of being instituted by the source, power is always instituted by the subject on behalf of the source. Foucault sees power emerge frequently from the bottom-up of a hierarchy; instead of powerless individuals doing the will of those with power, these so-called powerless figures attempt to find the norm, and then self-regulate their behavior to follow it. In addition, power operates laterally, with members of a society comparing their behavior to those like them to see if they are “normal.” Finally, power can even be formed from the top-down, in which the so-called authority figure bases their behavior on what would be perceived as most acceptable to those below. In essence, “power is everywhere ... because it comes from everywhere.”¹⁸ The problem with this normalization is that it is the root cause of all oppression and domination, known as terminal forms of power in Foucaultian terms.

When social interactions in on-line games are examined, it is evident that Foucault’s criticisms are even more applicable to these communities as they are to the “real” world. In World of Warcraft, this form of socialization is built into the game. In order to be successful, one must not only “party up” with other gamers, but also join a guild of fellow warriors in advance to the higher levels. These guilds are often strictly-regimented organizations which demand intense loyalty between members, a Foucaultian recipe for disaster. These social institutions have the explicit function of

¹⁷ Foucault 1984, 188-205.

¹⁸ Ibid, 92-102.

making combat easier against more powerful enemies, but perform a powerful function that is often overlooked: normalization of militarized behavior.

One of Foucault's main criticisms is that domination always results when in such a system of normalization, yet structures such as the military and institutionalized education allow for a greater force to be applied to the subject. Even if the deidentified subject is possible, it is impossible for a subject to escape significant power relations while also being a member of a highly hierarchal, militarized society. In this case, the deconstruction of identity is all for nothing, as further forms of domination will be brought up to replace the ones eliminated in the postmodern breakthrough.¹⁹

The process of liberation in on-line video games is a difficult subject, due to the complex relationship between socialization and performativity in virtual worlds. Such systems may seem like inviting spaces for gender play, but one must be wary of the underlying stable gender order which appropriates this act. Furthermore, when searching for liberation, postmodernists should also be wary of the massive globalized capitalist system that dominates both the virtual realm and the technological infrastructure it utilizes. Finally, structures of power and dominance must be understood in their hierarchical and militaristic context, or else the liberated subject risks falling back into the same level of domination under a different master. Despite this, one should not conclude absolutely that there is no action which can be taken to solve the problem; the search for a viable mechanism for which liberation can be achieved should always continue in order to avoid a nihilist collapse.

¹⁹ Ibid, 214-225.

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