
Storyline, Dance/Music, or PvP?

Game Movies and Community Players in World of Warcraft

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Player-created game movies have been an outlet for creative expression by World of Warcraft (WoW) players since the beta version of the game. The proliferation of players, clans, Web sites, and community forums for creating, consuming, and commenting on WoW movies is remarkable. Linking multiplayer game communities and the making of animated movies is not unprecedented. It has been a characteristic of machinima for more than a decade. In this article however, the author hopes to show that the context, content, and consumption of game movies based on massively multiplayer games raises new questions about contributions game-based performances make to player communities. The author connects the brief history of WoW movies to the history of machinima and other game movies, illustrates the variety of impulses behind WoW movies through three quickly recounted examples, and gathers together salient themes around one movie in particular: Tristan Pope's *Not Just Another Love Story*.

Keywords: machinima; World of Warcraft; computer games; online games; performance

Player-created game movies have been an outlet for creative expression by World of Warcraft (WoW) players since the beta version of the game. Considering this game's relatively short life and the aesthetic and technical constraints posed by moviemaking in massively multiplayer online (MMO) games, the proliferation of players, clans, Web sites, and community forums for creating, consuming, and commenting on WoW movies is remarkable. This linkage between multiplayer game communities and the making of animated movies is not unprecedented however. It has been a characteristic of machinima for more than a decade (Lowood, 2005, in press-a; Nitsche, 2005). I hope nonetheless to show in this article that the context, content, and consumption of WoW game movies raises new questions about the contributions that game-based performances make to player communities and culture. I will connect the brief history of WoW movies to the roughly decade-long history of machinima and other modes of community play, such as the circulation of replays or the practices of skill certification and training associated with demo movies. Three examples will illustrate a variety of motivations behind WoW movies. Finally, I will gather together salient themes by concentrating on one movie: Tristan Pope's *Not Just Another Love Story*.

In this article, I am less concerned with an aesthetic evaluation of these movie projects than with aspects of World of Warcraft as social space, player community, performance technology, and intellectual property. These aspects have given WoW game movies their particular significance. My aim is to document how players—those I call *community players*—use computer games to create their own narratives, culture, and performance. The community player is not only creative and theatrical but also takes care to exhibit mastery of technology and cyberathletic skill. It is important to recognize the contributions made to game culture by the extroverted and expressive play performance of the community player. Part stage actor, part activist, the community player plays for other players. In recognizing the community player's creativity as player and performer, I have been informed by the dense literature encompassing art worlds, cultural studies, fan communities, and tactics of media resistance and appropriation (e.g., Becker, 1982; de Certeau, 1980/1984; Fiske, 1992; Hall, 1980; Hills, 2002; Jenkins, 1992b; Sandvoss, 2005). As I hope to show however, the complex cocreation of WoW game movies brings noteworthy twists to the story of active consumers of media.

World of Warcraft Movies

I've like known people and stuff that have had like . . . y'know, like . . . like jobs and stuff like that. They wake up in the morning and they watch like CNN replays and stuff. I just don't really like that cause I think that's kinda fake, right? Like on CNN it's kinda like what the journalist thought happened, right? You watch a replay on CnCreplays and that's like what *really* happened, right? (Jeremy, in *Pure Pwnage*, Episode 1)

With the advent of World of Warcraft, the internet has been flooded with movies made using the game. (Australian teenager on the Oz Chronicles blog, September 11, 2005)

Players of competitive multiplayer games have gained a place among the ultimate media fans. They are certainly “consumers who also produce” and “spectators who also participate” (Jenkins, 1992a). The connections of machinima to 3-D first-person shooter (FPS) games or of the replay scene to real-time strategy (RTS) games provide two important examples. Historically, one route to the replay culture of game performance can be traced through various notions of the demo—demonstration program, demoscene, demo movie. This route led to DOOM demo movies, then speedruns and player-created software tools, and finally Quake movies and machinima. Witnessing and validation associated with demonstrations match up well with the notion of games as responses to adaptive problems such as achieving mastery over code and real-time interfaces while also providing means and motives for community players in networked, competitive games such as early first-person shooters. To more fully understand the replay culture leading to WoW movies however, we need to vary the demo theme with a different take on replay that I call *game film*. This term reflects a historical use to be revealed shortly, but it also opens up game

replay to other historical forms of mediated or archival performance such as televised sports spectatorship (introduced as Ampex's "instant replay," first used by CBS for a football game telecast in 1965) and practices of "proto-performance" (Schechner, 2002) tied to rehearsal and training (as in "studying game film").

Game film can be associated with the game genre known as real-time strategy. The historical transition from turn-based, tabletop play (chess, board games, miniatures) to multiplayer, real-time computer games was a defining moment for competitive digital games. Yet RTS games have received relatively scant attention in game studies. This genre can be understood as a transmutation of historical simulations and war games catalyzed by computer technology. Real-time strategy games such as Warcraft (not World of Warcraft) redefined strategy gaming by adding real-time performance of interface mastery skills to a traditional core of contemplative problem solving and decision making. Although it is not customary to think of World of Warcraft as a competitive game, the cultural economy of the Warcraft series of RTS games published by Blizzard Entertainment since 1994 has carried forward to WoW movies, particularly in the production of gameplay and player versus player (PvP) movies (Lowood, in press-b). As I have argued elsewhere, Warcraft became the basis for a virtual community of players, and fans built on the foundation of competitive play as a mode of performance. The comparison to sports spectatorship is helpful here. E-sports fans are spectators who play the game. This important distinction vis-à-vis the majority of professional sports fans helps to explain the crucial role that the sharing of recorded replays of completed games has played as a media object in the Warcraft community. Spectators who do not play have little interest in watching a replay lacking the dramatic tension of an unknown outcome; players and coaches on the other hand watch them incessantly as a means for bringing detached analysis to bear on the improvement of their own skills and strategies.

The role of replays has been recognized throughout the development history of strategy and first-person shooter games, beginning with Dani Buntin Berry's *Modem Wars* (1988). *Modem Wars* was modeled on the backyard play of boys, without "any of the complicated rules and relationships" of war games. Berry explicitly designed it to reward hand-eye coordination and interface mastery as well as strategic thinking so that "each person had their own specialized style of play." The technical design of the game made it possible to store data from which replays, or "game film" as Berry called it, could be produced, and these movies allowed players to rerun and study their performance. Berry (n.d.) was amazed at "how people used this opportunity the game films offered to rationalize their loss and to create stories out of the intense and ephemeral experience of the battle." She believed that player communities would thrive on game film's capacity to make "legends out of their best performances." Game film was included in both *Command HQ* and *Global Conquest*, thus introducing competitive player performance and spectatorship to real-time gameplay—too soon in fact because the network infrastructure required for making the reputations of community players was in fact not yet available.

Blizzard's timing was better. By the mid-1990s, support for online competitive games was snowballing. Competition in computer games meant networked play, first via peer-to-peer Local Area Network (LAN) connections as in DOOM, then client-server technology and the Internet. Network support has made Warcraft II: Tides of Darkness (1995) and Warcraft III: Reign of Chaos (2002) easy to play with others. The growth of virtual communities of RTS players was served by matching services such as Kali that spoofed LAN connections over the Internet, and Blizzard also licensed Warcraft to commercial networks such as TEN (Totel Entertainment Network), Mpath, and Engage Games Online. As Berry's vision of turning strategy gaming into a space for social performance had predicted, networked players make replay movies for other players to document their prowess. The publication of Warcraft II and Command & Conquer within months of each other in 1995 fueled impulses among multiplayer RTS players similar to those that propelled DOOM and Quake demo movies but separate from the linkage to demos, mods, and machinima.¹ In Warcraft III, built-in spectator modes and replay capture, Web sites for distributing replays and VODs (from video on demand), and shoutcast commentaries of games fostered a player-spectator relationship around competitive game performance. Player, replay, game news, and replay sites proliferated, building a huge community database of multiplayer tips, star players, advice on "micro" (micro-management of units) and "strats" (strategies), fee-based play training, and reports of league or championship competitions.

As the very existence of a game called *World of Warcraft* suggests, the story world in which the Warcraft series takes place has been important to its players. And yet in contrast to the emergence of machinima from the demo movies, recams, and speedruns of first-person shooters, real-time strategy games have produced relatively few game-based movies.² Machinima sites such as machinima.com and the Machinima Archives offer not one single movie based on Warcraft III for example. What distinguishes the game film culture of Warcraft from the demo is its reduction of the replay to event capture and in cases such as VODs simply to screen capture. In this sense, distinguishing demos and game film within replay culture mirrors Michael Nitsche's (2005) separation of demo and screen modes of machinima production. Whereas RTS replays are often viewed within game software, shifting camera views and choosing which player's interface screen to view is about as far as manipulation of replay recordings typically goes. Circulation of game film replays and demo movies or machinima seems to have created similar relationships between spectators and players but somewhat different connections between productions of game-based performance and underlying game technology. Perhaps differences of abstraction and representation in these two game genres trump the shared story of performer-spectator relationships embedded in competitive multiplayer play. For example, the technology of the game "camera" as a first-person view into a world operates quite differently from the relatively fixed battlefield map or televised sports perspective of the RTS game. The historical connection of id's game technology to traditions of

cracking, hacker clans, and the demoscene provides another explanation. Differences in cultures of game modification, technology, character identification, and visual perspective separated RTS games from other genres as platforms for game-based movies. The emergence of WoW moviemaking was tied more closely to the replay culture of Warcraft III game film than practices of demo coding and machinima production.

Promotional videos and “sneak peeks” for WoW have been prepared for the Electronic Entertainment Exposition and distributed via the Web since 2002. However, it takes players to make movie files based on authentic gameplay. The first sites to distribute player-created movies launched while the game was still in its beta release. Warcraftmovies.com, the best known of these sites, was in operation by early October 2004.³ Its avowed purpose was to offer “every single *World of Warcraft* movie that has been released.” To put this date into perspective, consider that the first “stress test” of this game had occurred but a month earlier; the release of an open beta version of the game would not occur until the end of October. These events made possible the growth of a significant player community before the first official launch of the game in the United States, but even so, the movie site launched as the early expansion of this community was only just underway. The moderator of the site, located in Sweden, had himself not yet acquired a beta account.

Despite these limitations, on October 9, warcraftmovies.com offered 59 movies with an average run time of over 20 minutes and average file size of 134MB; nearly 22,000 downloads were recorded in just over a week after opening, well over 2,000 per day. This first batch of movies could be browsed via categories derived primarily from types of play and players: character class and category (PvP, player versus environment [PvE], and “other”) in the former case and language and geographic location in the latter. The firm emphasis on gameplay reveals much about the origins of WoW movies. Although the game was still in beta, before it had become massively successful, much of the curiosity and anticipation concerning World of Warcraft came from the already established virtual communities created around Blizzard’s competitive RTS titles, particularly Warcraft III. These players were comfortable with leaving game-based storytelling to Blizzard via the single-player campaign format perfected in Starcraft and the Warcraft series; for them, movies meant replays and skills demonstrations.

A year later, by mid-September 2005, warcraftmovies.com had gathered roughly 3,500 WoW movies, about 250GB and over 400 hours of content; other sites such as IGN’s World of Warcraft Vault, XFire, and Fileplanet offered hundreds of movies. The thousands of WoW movies offered on warcraftmovies.com were divided according to categories that reflect a spread of audience interests no longer focused exclusively on gameplay. Warcraftmovies.com claims to have supported about 18 million downloads in its first year of existence, an average of nearly 52,000 per day. Even with the vast expansion of the audience for these movies, about 30% are in the PvP category, with PvE and instance runs following distantly in popularity. Less than 10% have been put in the category of storyline movies, that is, attempts to present

linear narratives through the recording and editing of in-game performances, roughly akin to machinima. Related diversions from game replays include dance movies and music videos set to WoW footage and the ubiquitous “other” category with documentation of in-game activities such as the “naked gnome” protest of January 29, 2005. What was hot, according to the Web site? A PvP movie devoted to the rogue class that despite being a 352MB file download attracted nearly 10,000 downloads per day, almost 200,000 in all since first being added to the collection (Mute, 2005). Yet the “What’s Hot” list as of September 15, 2005, included examples from nearly every other format of movie in the classification scheme: PvP, PvE, instances, storyline, and so on, an indication of the diversity of WoW-based movies and of the community’s interests both as spectators and players. The contributions of three influential moviemakers—JuniorX, Daddar, and Pals for Life—provide threads for taking us through these many projects.

JuniorX

I am not in beta, so for me, all the JuniorX movies are great for learning how the classes start out. Thanks for such a great job! (Cyrus Rex in the JuniorX, *Dwarf Hunter Movie* forum, warcraftmovies.com)

A player known as JuniorX made the first WoW movies to be widely distributed. Their popularity must be attributed in part to their connection to the replay scene popular among players of Starcraft and Warcraft III, who were certainly part of the new player base for WoW. At the same time, his videos recalled the use of demo movies for skill training in DOOM and Quake. When released in 1993, DOOM included a feature for players to record demos of their gameplay; viewers watched them to learn superior play tactics by seeing games (literally) through the eyes of better players. BahdKo, a veteran of the DOOM demo scene, pointed out that the “use of demos for their educational value has been going on since almost the beginning” (personal communication, January 28, 2004) Typically,

A new player who wants to get better requests that a game with a higher-skilled player be recorded, and then the new player watches the demo (where presumably he lost) from the higher-skilled player’s point of view, hoping to learn ways to improve his own skill. Such a player is then able to plainly compare his own movement, aim, and possibly strategic ideas with those of the higher-skilled player, enabling him to practice on his own in order to improve or otherwise attempt to adjust his own performance.

Programs such as the DOOM Honorific Titles, based on Uwe Girlich’s Little Movie Processing Center (LMP), established recording games with an authentication mechanism as a technology for certifying the reputations of players, thus promoting documented gameplay as the basis for a performer-spectator relationship.

In July 2003, JuniorX founded the United Canadian Alliance (UCA) as a Warcraft III clan; a year later it morphed into a WoW guild as its members joined the beta test. Quake movies of the mid-1990s had been closely associated with player clans, and likewise many WoW movies were guild projects. UCA was visible inside the growing player community as its vigilant opposition to player styles such as backstabbing drew it into public, interguild disputes (UCA, 2005). Like DOOM Honorific demo recordings a decade earlier, JuniorX's movies demonstrated skills and provided tutorials. These lengthy recordings of unadorned gameplay introduced curious viewers lacking access to the WoW beta to its pace, user interface, visuals, challenges, and tactics. They functioned as leveling tutorials for new players joining the beta test, covering all aspects of the game beginning with initial menu selections in character creation. The video capture was supplemented only by infrequent text inserts on points of tactics and interface or noting patch changes and bugs. It is clear from comments on JuniorX's movies in discussion forums that many of his spectators had not yet played World of Warcraft—after all, it was still in testing. Yet it is safe to say that many were avid Warcraft players who voraciously consumed RTS replays. Despite lengthy download times and lack of personal experience with the game, they eagerly anticipated these movies. His movie on the hunter class for example, which came out in late August, showed every moment in the career of a dwarf character up to Level 10 in the game; more than an hour long and claiming nearly 400MB of storage space, it was nonetheless downloaded more than 11,000 times from the warcraft-movies site alone.

The replay format perfected by JuniorX thus mixed elements of skill training and replay viewing associated with competitive online games. WoW movies made during beta testing of the game generally did not initially stray far from this formula, but before long they pointed to different kinds of projects in two more important ways. First, JuniorX's early beta Dwarf Hunter, Orc Warlock, and other popular PvE movies could be followed as player biography, easing players from the mind-set of competitive RTS games through the familiar settings of the Warcraft narrative arc and onward into an online role-playing game set in the World of Warcraft. This move established the narrative arc of character development in the game but also opened up the use of recorded gameplay as the basis for story-based movies set in this world.

JuniorX himself explored a second path toward the game movie as an entertainment form. He recognized an opportunity to perform in a different way, through the sheer joy of performance rather than mastery of gameplay. His *Dancemovie* and *Dancemovie 2* (see Figure 1) combined the discovery of dance movements built into the game as animated “emotes,” the presence of other players as cop performers or spectators, and the showcasing of neat tricks and exploits. For example, he learned that it was possible to activate dance movements during combat (a fleeting “feature” eliminated later in the beta test), and his first dance movie showed off this discovery. JuniorX accomplished this in *Dancemovie* by putting together dance and combat scenes set to the music of MC Hammer, whose own dance style had inspired the

Figure 1
JuniorX, *Dancemovie 2*



Source: World of Warcraft® provided courtesy of Blizzard Entertainment, Inc.

particular dance animation of Orc characters in the game, such as JuniorX's own featured in the video. Setting his dance in a persistent virtual world turned mixed event capture and performance; other players joined in, turning his dance movie into community play in two senses: a live event viewed as a replay movie.⁴ This sly mixing of party, community performance, and gameplay became one of the first WoW movie hits, partly explaining why the dance/music category became an early staple of the game's movie scene. As players began to create movies, they often borrowed from the familiar format established by MTV music videos through play set to music, paying particular attention to matching lyrics and images, synchronization of character movements to soundtracks, and choreography of players. "Machinima music videos" have been made in other games, from *Soul Caliber* to *Battlefield 1942*. For the WoW player community, their entertainment value dovetailed with practices of replay spectatorship to teach WoW players how to perform for each other in a virtual world.

The Ironforge Bank Robbery

Hunting is inherently, not metaphorically, theatrical/dramatic. A script is necessary in order to develop strategies that culminate in a climactic attack-event. (Schechner, 1988, p. 104)

A ghostly figure approaches the bank in the mighty Dwarven stronghold of Ironforge, perhaps the most densely populated location in the virtual Azeroth of World of Warcraft. Invisible to the population of humans, dwarves, and elves, the stealthy thief strides confidently and invisibly into the bank and positions himself behind a teller named Soleil Stonemantle, poised to attack. Without warning, the thief strikes, slaying the bank employee effortlessly and then fending off the determined assaults of guards positioned in the building. Defeated once, the outlaw returns and finishes the job. He slays all the vault employees and evades their defenders while under the watchful eyes of numerous citizens of the Alliance who gather to gaze upon his exploits. When it is time to escape, the rogue sneaks out, jumps on his horse, and rides away.

Set to raucous, throbbing music, this dramatic in-game exploit by Daddar (see Figure 2), a member of the Goon Squad clan on the Mal'Ganis server, was recorded in mid-January 2005. He revealed his deed to the player community by providing links to download locations via Blizzard's WoW forums; within a few days, discussion of the movie spread virally through the WoW community, with hundreds of posts on the official community site and other sites. As of March 2006, it had been downloaded about 93,000 times on the warcraftmovies site alone. As a dramatic and sinister deed, Daddar's massacre of the Ironforge bankers ranks with the assassination of Lord British by the thief Rainz during the beta of Ultima Online. Like Rainz, Daddar struck where nobody had thought to strike before; the exploit became an event. Firmly in the tradition of PvP replays, Daddar's video also demonstrated the arrival of WoW movies as a central focus of the game and fan culture growing up around the game, by then clearly destined to set new standards for massively multiplayer role-playing games in terms of both sales and popularity. One player's summary of the robbery echoed hundreds of others in forums and discussion boards,

A level 60 rogue from the **Goon Squad** snuck into the **Ironforge bank** a number of times and assassinated the bankers. Except for the first time, he made it out alive on the other attempts. I thought the video was cool as Hell. It's the little cool things like this that make the game worth playing. (Monkey, 2005)

Other players were inspired by the movie to create their own Undead Rogue characters like Daddar's: "Very awesome!!! Rogue is my favorite class and now i'm 100% sure to play Undead Rogue in retail . . . gotta love that epic mount as well . . . beautiful!!!" or "Never imagined it would be this cool, actually. . . . Makes me wanna go rogue for retail"⁵ (Redrum, 2005).

Daddar's movie is reminiscent of the building of reputations by exploits, some taken to the edge of criminal behavior, in hacker clans or multiplayer games such as Diablo (Kuo, 2005; Thomas, 2002). The visual flow, music, and homage paid to stock cinema scenes such as the getaway could be appreciated in a general sense by

Figure 2
Daddar, the Ironforge Bank Robbery



Source: World of Warcraft® provided courtesy of Blizzard Entertainment, Inc.

almost anyone, but full appreciation as a spectator of Daddar's deed required inside knowledge of the game; online discussions analyzed the weapons and abilities used or even questioned the degree of skill actually required to carry off the exploit. Players imitated the feat, testing out and comparing their own skills against this now legendary if shadowy figure that became part of the player community's shared history. Through discussion threads and commentary, Daddar's exploit evolved from news event into a thoroughly documented moment in the history of an online culture, not an artifact of the fictional world of Azeroth but a product of its player-experienced counterpart.

Pals for Life and *Leeroy Jenkins*

Leeroy. n. 1: One who does not grasp the concept of caution. 2: One whose success is based purely off relentless aggression and pure luck. 3: One who likes chicken.

Figure 3
The Pals for Life Guild Banner



4: One whose battle cry consists of their own name. (*Urban Dictionary*; <http://www.urbandictionary.com/>)

If there is one icon of the WoW player, one movie from the game that everyone has seen, it is without a doubt *Leeroy Jenkins*. It has been popular enough to leave traces throughout Web-based popular culture and virtual media, from viral video sites to a storefront with Leeroy merchandise at cafepress.com, even in sly references found in comics and other computer games.⁶ Created in May 2005 by the notoriously quirky Pals for Life guild on the Bloodhoof server, the video begins as Leeroy's guild mates prepare for a run at the Rookery Room. Leeroy's in-game character avatar sits off to the side in a manner that suggests that he is not paying attention, most likely "away from keyboard" (AFK). This run is hardly easy pickings; it is part of a difficult raid set in the Upper Black Rock Spire instance that leads eventually to the legendary Onyxia quest, a dragon so challenging that movies are routinely made to document the prowess of the guilds that have defeated it. As the other Pals for Life players ponder strategy and carefully calculate their odds for success, Leeroy suddenly awakens from his stupor and recklessly charges into the Rookery, screaming his name as a war cry and thus attracting every hostile monster within earshot. Caught off guard, the party dashes in to help Leeroy, but they are all quickly and mercilessly massacred. Berated by his guild mates for an impossibly incompetent performance, Leeroy reveals that he was inattentive for a reason: "At least I have chicken."

In short, Leeroy Jenkins is the anti-Daddar. As of March 2006 it had been downloaded nearly 1.4 million times from warcraftmovies.com alone while also being distributed via

Figure 4
Pals for Life, Leeroy Jenkins Video



Source: World of Warcraft® provided courtesy of Blizzard Entertainment, Inc.

Fileplanet, Gamespot's DLX service, Xfire, ifilm, youtube, and dozens of other sites. Despite popularity indicative of a breakout from insider game culture, appreciating Leeroy's sheer incompetence requires the viewer to grasp intricacies of the game such as the location, enemies, and strategies cited. It is difficult for nonplayers to grasp this situation beyond the silliness of Leeroy's witless charge. As with Daddar's exploit, the player community has focused on issues of authenticity, debating whether the incident was a genuine failure or merely staged by Pals for Life for the recording. But the movie is performance capture of a more general sort. It comments on a moment—death by incompetent playing partner—experienced by players of every multiplayer game. The fictionality of the moment is irrelevant. It overcomes the specificity of the performance through an interplay of images and dialog that creates a more general reference, a comedy of spectacular failure—in short, an anti-replay. Other Pals for Life movies, such as the mock battle in *Anfrony vs. the Giant Baile* and the marvelous “sky cam” shots in *Freefalling*, also occupy this liminal space between documented gameplay and fiction, mixing gimmicky characters and actions with an emphasis on exploits and use of musical accompaniment familiar

Figure 5
“Leeroy Dragons” Is Cited in *Ultimate Spider-Man*



from dozens of other movies. The validity of *Leeroy Jenkins* points to the capacity of in-game performance to draw in conventionally theatrical ways on the shared culture of player experiences in what is depicted rather than its specific veracity; hardly universal truth but a basis perhaps for a medium of expression to circulate beyond the in-game community.

Tristan Pope's *Not Just Another Love Story*

I only executed what the pixels in WoW suggest. (Tristan Pope, Crafting Worlds Web site)

WoW movies, from game film to dance videos, have become an integral part of the culture shared by a player community that recently surpassed 6 million players. As moviemakers in WoW and other massively multiplayer games have discovered

Figure 6
Banner for Tristan Pope's *Not Just Another Love Story*



Source: World of Warcraft® provided courtesy of Blizzard Entertainment, Inc.

however, increasing popularity magnifies the creative constraints on their work, set not only by technical limitations but also by social dynamics and politics. The production and reception of Tristan Pope's *Not Just Another Love Story* (Figure 6) illustrates the new performance politics of the community player, suggesting both the payoffs and problems he or she faces. Marino (2004) called machinima "animated filmmaking within a real-time virtual 3D environment." The game-based moviemaker operates within an "interactive space" that a game developer created. Little attention has been given to the potential for creative conflict beneath the surface of the relationship between machinima and game developers. In the tradition of Quake movies made in 3-D action games such as first-person shooters, machinima creators side-stepped issues of creative control to some extent by modifying or creating new intellectual property for their productions. The game engine often remains "under the hood"; in the case of projects such as Fountainhead Entertainment's *Anna*, viewers hardly notice that they are made with game technology. The server-based environments of massively multiplayer games do not offer the same freedom of separating visual elements (e.g., the sets and character avatars) from game assets and intellectual property. Moreover, the social dynamics of persistent worlds and their residents further complicate the on-set production and off-set reaction to these projects. Pope's *Not Just Another Love Story* connected several difficulties faced by machinima artists who seek to sharpen the edges of WoW-based storyline movies.

A theater student from the City College of New York and cofounder of the Raiders of Goldshire clan on the Lightning's Blade server, Pope released his first WoW movie,

Figure 7
Troll Falls for Human, *Not Just Another Love Story*



Source: World of Warcraft® provided courtesy of Blizzard Entertainment, Inc.

I Surrender, near the end of the beta period. Completed after playing WoW for only 3 days, he was inspired by other beta period dance and party movies available around that time, such as Jace’s *Jace in the World of Warcraft* and probably Masse’s *Stress Test Party* (Pope, 2005a, 2005b; movies available at <http://www.craftingworlds.com/videos.html>). He created the Crafting Worlds Web site to facilitate the distribution of his projects to the WoW community. With each of his movies from *I Surrender*, released in November 2004, through *Onyxia Eliminated*, completed in April 2005, he worked through remediations of various movie and even game replay formats, such as the music video, sketch comedy, and guild demo. In April, he coyly introduced a more ambitious project, *Not Just Another Love Story*:

I want to give you a full description of this movie, but that would ruin the surprise. I’ll give you a hint: I only executed what the pixels in WoW suggest. . . . And it has something to do with something that was removed in patch 1.3. Ok, that’s all you get! (Pope, 2005a)

Beginning with the disclaimer that “this movie contains material that may not be suitable for all ages,” Pope’s movie tells a Romeo-and-Juliet story but with a game-specific twist. It sets up the story by showing his Troll Rogue character, Tristanmon,

Figure 8
A World of Warcraft Rave, *Not Just Another Love Story*



Source: World of Warcraft® provided courtesy of Blizzard Entertainment, Inc.

heading off to work in the desert for another day of monotonous creature kills. In the middle of combat, he notices and falls head over heels in love with a human female who can match him kill for kill. Alliance and Horde characters do not mix in this world, but despite such taboos, they become engaged and marry. Pope uses editing, character positioning, and carefully chosen camera angles to depict the pair consummating their love in various ways. The highlight of Pope's movie is a spectacular rave (Figure 8) during which the Troll emerges from his shell and is fully transformed by love into a wildly dancing party animal. The masterfully choreographed series of scenes would not have been possible without dozens of player-actors, choreographed actions and spell effects, cleverly chosen locations, and immense preproduction planning. In a stunning reversal, the troll's new life is shattered after the party by the death of his spouse in combat, but his luck holds out when she is resurrected by an equally attractive human female, thus providing the basis for this threesome to live happily ever after.

A brief plot summary of *Not Just Another Love Story* fails to reveal how Pope purposefully sharpened the narrative edge of game-based performance to give voice to the player community, a crucial characteristic of meaningful fan-created content (Jenkins, 1992b). Content, visual tactics, and subsequent audience reaction activated several neuralgic points for the participatory culture of WoW moviemaking. The story provoked attention to issues of creative ownership of the story world. Since the first Warcraft game, subtitled *Orcs vs. Humans*, the narrative momentum pushing forward the single-player campaign was faction and racial hatred. Although the opposed races

and their relative moral elevation could be remixed from version to version of the game (e.g., the focus on the reawakened nobility in the Orcs of Warcraft III), the role of relentless and unremitting conflict in shaping the history of the fictive world remained constant and fundamental. As players descended from the strategic perspective of the RTS games to play on the ground in World of Warcraft, they discovered that these conflicts had been built into their characters. This fundamental fact of Warcraft life translated into the inability of Horde and Alliance characters to communicate directly in-game through language. Chat was impossible, and shouted speech was rendered as unintelligible gibberish; the game software even recognized and filtered out subversive attempts to communicate by embedding text in descriptive gestures, known as *emotes*.

Beginning in the beta version of the game, players discovered that the language of game culture provided the key for unlocking a system of universal speech. Just as an earlier generation of hackers and gamers had used it to circumvent mail and bulletin board language controls, they found that it was possible to embed the number- and special character-based misspellings of “1337 speak” (“leetspeak,” or elite speak) in emotes, thus bypassing Blizzard’s text filters and making it possible for, say, trolls to speak with their human enemies. This was a clear transgression of Blizzard’s control of the relationship between gameplay and story world, so in the aforementioned 1.3 patch of the game the development team announced that henceforth “numbers and punctuation will not be passed through chat communication to members of the opposing faction” (World of Warcraft 1.3 Patch Notes, 2005). In the context of this assertion of Blizzard’s control, Pope’s depiction of the marriage of Troll and Human characters, as well as the massive collaboration of Horde and Alliance players evident in the movie itself, represented an alternative vision of the game world favored by some players. In the movie (Figure 9), Pope directed a final comment to Blizzard after the credits had wound down and the waning notes of The Darkness’ *I Believe in a Thing Called Love* had faded away: “Even without leet speak you cannot take away our love!” The mature content creatively constructed through character positions and camera angles in the video intensified this point, but it also sharpened the ensuing controversy. Machinima based on massively multiplayer games are inherently constrained by lack of access to the artistic assets of the game, in sharp contrast to readily modified games such as first-person shooters. But an often overlooked implication of this restriction is, as Pope argued with a wink, that he had merely showed “what WoW’s pixels imply.” Even sexual imagery therefore was nothing more than a rearrangement of what Blizzard’s artists had drawn or more accurately, what its game engine generated during gameplay. Rather than asserting his right to subvert the game’s content, Pope turned this argument on its head by reasoning that he had in fact created nothing.

Blizzard has sponsored WoW events such as screenshot and stunt competitions, encouraging players to use the game’s visual assets creatively as a means of generating new content and shared culture around the game. Community managers encourage announcements about game movies in official WoW forums, allowing

Figure 9
Concluding Shot, *Not Just Another Love Story*



Source: World of Warcraft® provided courtesy of Blizzard Entertainment, Inc.

creators to provide links to facilitate downloading of video files. Pope was allowed to post such a link, but within 2 days the volume of complaints, flames, and counterflames about “adult” scenes in *Not Just Another Love Story* caused Blizzard to cite the user agreement concerning language or images that are “pornographic in nature” and lock the discussion thread about his project. It also barred links to any of the movie’s download sites in subsequent discussion threads (Caydiem, 2005). The marketing of in-game creativity had collided head-on with the game’s demographics and success, which by then had brought many young players to the WoW player community. Players responded with arguments such as “How can making an IN GAME movie with only IN GAME animations, on a forum about THAT GAME be inappropriate?” or took Blizzard’s side,

Let me go take Ken and Barbie at Toys R Us and pose them in sexual ways, and say “But whoamgod~ their joints BEND that way so its not sexually suggestive or inappropriate for us to advertise that way!!!” Plus you’re overlooking the simple fact that there ARE forum rules prohibiting these things. (Necrotus, 2005)

Pope conceded Blizzard’s right to some measure of control but questioned why it would renege on earlier support for his moviemaking project:

I understand that the forums and the game are not run by the Constitution, but there needs to be a finer line IMO between that and this. I do not want anarchy, but I also

don't want censorship over something that took what is already in game and just made it more provocative. (Pope, 2005c)

Before the controversy ran out, two discussion threads devoted to it had garnered nearly 800 replies and more than 200,000 views (Pope, 2005a). By acting as a lightning rod for commentary on the contested boundary between developer and player control of a complex, multiplayer game world, Pope's *Not Just Another Love Story* demonstrated that game movies could function as a medium for public discussion and negotiation of issues important to the player community.

The replay culture of game film and screen capture has gradually supplemented the demo as the basis for game-based moviemaking; screen capture and nonlinear video editing are supplanting techniques that involve direct manipulation of game data, such as recamming⁷ in Quake movies and early machinima. Demo files that must be played in-game have been replaced by downloadable or streamed movie formats anyone can view. It is tempting to view these developments as part of a broadening of appeal accompanied by an expansion of audience. The astonishing volume of movies produced in massively multiplayer games like World of Warcraft supports this view. Although it is tempting to read the chronological sequence of the four WoW movie projects presented in this article as suggesting that MMO-based machinima may break out of player culture to engage with more challenging stories and themes, a sample of four projects representing far less than 1% of the movies collected by warcraftmovies.com alone hardly constitutes a complete history of this media phenomenon. It is clear even from such a preliminary survey however that player-created game movies have provided the largest player community ever assembled for a massively multiplayer game with a popular and important outlet for creative expression and performance.

Further work is needed on the specific contribution of community players to player communities. Whether as creator, performer, collector, enunciator, or spectator, the massive participation of players in the creation of a game-based medium deserves our careful attention. Tristan Pope's apparent puzzlement about the reaction to his provocative movie suggests that the next challenge for community players will be focused on a different kind of creativity: how to create game-based movies that speak to an increasingly diverse community of players.

Notes

1. Although early on players offered software tools such as War2BNE to capture replays of Battle.net games, it is worth noting that for the most part, few real-time strategy replay tools have been player created.

2. The few exceptions may be seen as proving the rule in that they have been produced not for player communities but for other audiences. These include the "supplies and the man" short in episode 4 of *Pure Pwnage*, based on the Zero Hour expansion of Command & Conquer: Generals, the use of Rome: Total War in the BBC's *Time Commanders* television series, or even Blizzard's game-based cinematics in some Warcraft III cut-scenes and credits.

3. The discussion board of the site opened on September 29, 2004. The Internet Archive first captured the site on October 9, 2004. Uzbeki, the administrator of the site, began to send out announcements to message boards at the beginning of the month, for example, to the World of Warcraft (WoW) Public Forum on Universal Realms, *New: WoW Movies Site*, October 2, 2004 (retrieved September 2005 from Google's cache of <http://www.universalrealms.com/ShowPost.aspx?PostID=565>; cf., Uzbeki, *subject: first =*), posted October 2004; retrieved September 2005 from <http://warcraftmovies.com/forum/viewtopic.php?p=6&highlight=#6>).

4. It is worth noting here that the occurrence of this event inside WoW territory inhabited by the shaman-dominated Orc culture of this story world corresponds neatly with Richard Schechner's (1988) studies of the relationship between ritual-based, participatory performance culture and the figure of the shaman.

5. Several Stanford University students told me at the time that they "rerolled" Undead Rogue characters after seeing this movie.

6. A character refers to "Leeroy Dragons," in *Ultimate Spider-Man* No. 81 (August 2005), whereas an NPC in Guild Wars named Kilroy Stoneskin yells his name and attracts the ire of every monster in sight.

7. *Recam* comes from *recamera*. Recamming is a postproduction technique that alters the original camera perspective of game-based replays; it is used in machinima based on games that allow manipulation of these game data.

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