

## Communicative Commodity Forms: Meaning-Making in World of Warcraft

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Abstract: World of Warcraft, a “massively multi-player online role playing game,” is a rich dialogic encounter that is mediated by the players through interpersonal footing and reliant on normative discourses. In this paper, I employ a semiotic analysis of the commodity forms within the game to illuminate the motivation and social meaning behind the interactions oriented to these commodity forms in order to deconstruct and understand them as a part of the dialogic meaning-making by the players themselves. Additionally, I explore how a player’s orientation to the game alters the embedded meaning of the commodity forms in my discussion of hypothetical “gold farmers” in Bolivia.

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The proliferation of literature surrounding the internet and online video games<sup>1</sup> is testament to the expanded public interest in these types of virtual technologies. Some authors view the phenomenon with fear, warning that “an epidemic has been growing over the past ten years. What had started out as a simple game has grown into a social dilemma” (Waite, 2007; 2), while others extol the idea that “cyberspace is seen as a utopian space...an alternative to contemporary social reality” (Nayar, 2004; 166). Indeed, as the documentary *Second Skin* presents, there are individuals who feel they inhabit Azeroth, the online world in which World of Warcraft is based,

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<sup>1</sup> 281,076 returns for a book search of “internet” on Amazon.com and 2, 467 returns on “online video games” [http://www.amazon.com/s/ref=sr\\_nr\\_i\\_0?ie=UTF8&rs=&keywords=internet&rh=i%3Aaps%2Ck%3Ainternet%2Ci%3Astripbooks](http://www.amazon.com/s/ref=sr_nr_i_0?ie=UTF8&rs=&keywords=internet&rh=i%3Aaps%2Ck%3Ainternet%2Ci%3Astripbooks)

and visit the physical world beyond the computer. World of Warcraft, or WoW, a massively multiplayer online role playing game<sup>2</sup> more often referred to simply as an MMORPG, is seen by some as a growing epidemic,<sup>3</sup> and by others as an alternative to contemporary social reality<sup>4</sup>. I argue that the game is not a detachable alternative reality from what is considered “real life” but rather a communicative encounter that, as such, is mediated through interpersonal footing and dependent on normative discourses. In particular, commodity forms within the game, such as the armor or weapons a character uses embody many of the same semiotically significant characteristics that reflect the dynamic process of meaning-making between and among discourse participants.

The players of the computer-based fantasy game of WoW begin with a character at level one and work up to level seventy by completing *quests* (goal-oriented pursuits such as killing dragons or collecting treasure) and acquiring increasingly prestigious *gear* (whatever the character can wear or use, but not including what the character can consume) as a result. To merely achieve a level seventy requires the equivalent of about 30 days, or 720 hours of play time; many prominent level seventies have logged between 200 and 250 days, or 6000 hours of game time. Once a player reaches level seventy, he<sup>5</sup> usually focuses on acquiring the most elite gear possible because it is not possible to progress any further up in level. However, the most elite gear is actually unattainable to a single player playing alone, but rather is found in *instances* – or specific multi-player quests – that require from 25 to 40 high level players and are precisely

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<sup>2</sup> MMORPGs are computer games where extremely large numbers of players can interact with each other through their characters in a virtual world that exists and evolves regardless of any individual player’s participation.

<sup>3</sup> <http://arstechnica.com/news.ars/post/20060809-7459.html>

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.kansan.com/stories/2007/mar/01/alternative\\_reality\\_/](http://www.kansan.com/stories/2007/mar/01/alternative_reality_/)

<sup>5</sup> My choice to use the pronoun “he” throughout this paper is deliberate: both for the sake of clarity and because 84% of WoW players are male (<http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/archives/001369.php>).

coordinated. It is exactly this mandatory interpersonal component, and the extensive time commitments involved in acquiring the gear, that imbue the commodity forms within the game with symbolic significance.

To examine all aspects of commercialization and commodification in WoW is impossible to do in a single article, so I will focus on commodity forms embodied by the characters' gear and the characters themselves through the various ways these are semiotically motivated, referentially significant and used to construct social meaning by the players. The business models of the companies behind the game, the advertising campaigns surrounding it, and third party marketers' reference to the game are all intrinsic to the WoW experience but simply cannot fit into this limited amount of space. Additionally, I won't be exploring the economic exchanges between characters in the auction houses or banks within the game itself. While I acknowledge the importance of these elements, they are outside the scope of this paper.

Orienting my argument, I build on the seminal works by Castronova (2001/2005/2006), Turkle (1995/2005), Dibbell (1998/2006) and Bartle (1996/2006) who laid the foundation for social science research in virtual worlds. They introduced the very real power of the economy, interpersonal behavior and various orientations of the players and essential aspects of understanding game play. While Lessig (1999) gave us the ability to understand the implicit and structural influences of code, these scholars also allowed us to witness a player's own agency and alignment as equally informative to their patterns of engagement. In particular, I will utilize a semiotic analysis (see Gee 2003/2007 for semiotics of virtual worlds and education, as well as Agha (2005/2007), Inoue (2006), Parmentier (1994) and Silverstein (2003) for semiotics of

language and culture) to examine the tacit meaning in a character's gear. Boellstorff (2008) introduces us to the viability and value of an anthropological perspective and ethnographic approach to virtual world research. World of Warcraft itself is the focus of much interesting and valuable scholarship, including the Daedalus Project's<sup>6</sup> exploration of gamer demographics, Corneliussen & Rettburg's (2008) compilation of analyses regarding digital culture and identity in WoW, Golub's (2008) look at interpersonal bonds and the public of WoW, and Rossignol's (2008) look at the function/aesthetic balance drawn by the players themselves, to name a few.

Methodologically, this paper builds out of a much wider research project including structured interviews, filming of players engaged in the game, participant observation both on and offline, and extensive resultant field notes. The arguments made here are based on the data surrounding how a player's character acquires a particular type of gear in the game in 2007 and the descriptions of this process by multiple players as well as the author's own experience. While the two expansion packs of Burning Crusade and Wrath of the Lich King have changed the prestige of the particular gear described, the process of acquiring high level gear remains consistent. Thus, this argument remains salient and relevant, although the specifics of the gears and levels are slightly outdated, a challenge that pursues all scholars of the virtual.

The internet has made possible the exchange of video game commodities through the use of auction sites where a player can buy gold or gear or even another character to use in an online video game. These exchanges are often illegal, protected against by the games' terms of service,<sup>7</sup> but continue to proliferate for a number of reasons, and with numerous consequences. If

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/archives/001365.php>

<sup>7</sup> For example: <http://www.worldofwarcraft.com/legal/termsofuse.html>

discovered, a character account purchased through an online auction will be automatically kicked off of the game. In order to understand the exchange that occurs when a character is sold online, we need to elaborate on what is actually being exchanged, beyond the account information.

When World of Warcraft characters and equipment are bought and sold by individuals in online auctions, what is actually being marketed is a unique experiential commodity, where what is being bought and sold is not an experience, but rather the time of the individual who created the character. A purchaser is buying a *potential* experience that can only be had by acquiring a commodity fashioned by the labor-time of the vendor. Acquiring these commodities equips the purchaser with a high level character with which they are able to access the upper-level, more dangerous, more challenging, and for many players the most exciting and rewarding, areas of the game. The characters and gear themselves are manifest through the visible and audible material signs manipulated by the player. Although it has been argued that these virtual commodities are not actually material (Dibbell 2006, Castronova 2005), I argue that they are, in fact, material signs, seen and heard and informative. Understanding the materiality of the characters and equipment allows for a semiotic analysis of the motivation underlying the exchanges of these commodities and players' orientations to such exchanges. The materiality of these commodity forms serve to establish the items as non-linguistic repertoires as a part of the wider social register of an elite player. Thus, they are iconic emblems of personhood actually created and imbued with meaning through the performance of the character manipulating them.

Although the game reflects Sut Jhally's (1994) idea of a commodity image-system, or rather "a particular mode of self-validation that is integrally connected to what one *has* rather than what one *is*" (329), the complexity of this validation is based on the semiotic reference of the

commodities themselves. Buying a character or gear, rather than earning it through playing the game, receives scorn from other elite players within the game. The players are adamantly opposed to such exchanges as Dibbell (2006) so beautifully documents: “it’s like showing up to a knife fight with a knife you bought from somebody else instead of handcrafting it yourself” (15) but they struggle to articulate the reasoning behind their opposition. In economic systems, disparate social values are linked to items of identical use (Veblen, 1994) because the commodity ownership itself diagrams social relations between people, which then indexes the social standing of the owner. Semiotic analysis of this dynamic process of connecting social meanings to the characters’ gear itself illuminates the communicative process at the center of WoW commodity forms.

World of Warcraft, like other MMORPGS, is set in a fantasy world where players create characters and interact with other characters in real time. A player begins by designing his character, choosing a race (such as trolls or gnomes, etc.) and a class (warrior, shaman, etc.). He then proceeds to complete quests, such as killing fantasy creatures or exploring the surroundings, to gain both gear and experience points. Throughout this process there are also instances, or dungeons that require multiple characters working together in order to beat the bosses therein. Often characters join a guild, or voluntary groupings of players who frequently play together and centralize their resources. Once into the higher levels of the game – after hundreds of hours of play – raiding groups of 25 (originally 40) tackle the most complex and powerful bosses and, as a result, acquire elite gear. This paper will explore how this process of raiding imbues the gear earned by characters with social meaning in addition to the armor or skills it may provide.

To understand the social meaning behind the process, let us first elaborate on the extensive time, energy investment, and personal commitment necessary to acquire this gear. Once a character reaches the higher levels (50-70), gear is ranked along Tiers 1-6, with 6 being the highest quality, and these tiers are oriented to the level of character. Thus, level 50 characters cannot acquire Tier 6 gear but work instead to begin acquiring Tier 1 gear. For example, *Warlocks* – one of the classes of characters – may begin to acquire Tier 1 *Dreadmist* gear at level 55 through the group instances. The character can complete these Tier 1 quests in small five-person instances, an early exercise in building teamwork that will become so essential for the forty-person raids at the highest levels. The Tier 1 gear is all blue colored, which means it is of good quality, but less ‘elite’ or of less economic and social worth than purple or orange, the most elite colors. After a long series of quests resulting in the acquisition of all eight Tier 1 pieces – a process that involves on average many dozens of hours over several months – a character can begin to acquire Tier 1.5 *Deathmist* gear which is half blue and half purple (more elite) gear. This gear is also acquired through a long series of quests and instances of five or ten other characters, rather than the 40 person raids that the character is continually working towards. However, when a character reaches a level in the upper 50s, and certainly by the time he reaches 60 and onward, he engages in quests with 40 other characters who all have to work together in specifically delineated roles to beat the *monsters* and *bosses* that they face, as they slowly earn Tier 2, all-purple gear, called *Nemesis*.

These forty-character quests are significantly more complex, time-consuming and challenging than single player, five player or even 20 player instances. For the sake of brevity – or at least an attempt at it – let us merely consider the process of acquiring level 60 Warlock, Tier 2 *Nemesis*

gear. Bear in mind, however, the hundreds of hours already invested to achieve level 60, the additional four Tiers of gear for this Warlock after acquiring *Nemesis*, as well as Tiers 2-6 for the other 8 classes of characters<sup>8</sup>. The *Nemesis* gear, acquired in order from easiest to most difficult to obtain, includes 8 different pieces: skull cap, bracers, leggings, belt, boots, gloves, spaulders, and robes. Before our Warlock can even face the monsters to start acquiring this new gear, he must go through a complex series of quests to become attuned, or systematically prepared. Once this is completed, the skullcap is earned through killing the initial monster Onyxia, and the bracers and leggings are earned through killing different bosses in the instance entitled Molten Core (MC). In MC, as is common in many high-level quests, the 40 person group is only allowed to enter the cave and attempt to acquire gear once a week, slowing the process of acquisition dramatically. While it takes only about half an hour for a skilled and coordinated group to kill Onyxia, the dragon who drops the skullcap, continuing on to complete the entire instance of MC and killing Golemagg the Incinerator and Razorgore the Untamed to get the bracers, and finally Ragnaros, the final boss who drops the leg gear, can take anywhere from 3-10 hours depending on how skilled and coordinated the group is; the fastest and best groups can do it in just under three hours. Yet killing these three monsters are only the beginning of the process in acquiring the Tier 2 gear.

While three hours is a time commitment in and of itself, each boss in MC will most likely only *drop* – or provide – two or three Tier 2 pieces, so no more than nine total pieces out of the 180-240 necessary<sup>9</sup> will drop in the entire raid. For example, Onyxia will only drop the *Nemesis*

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.worldofwarcraft.com/info/classes/>

<sup>9</sup> Each guild has more than just 40 players who are ready to acquire that Tier of gear, often as many as 60 or 80. Only 40 players are allowed to play at once, however.



Skullcap, which our Warlock wants, 12.56% of the times the boss is killed.<sup>10</sup> In every group of forty there are usually five Warlocks, in addition to 35 other players for whom the Nemesis Skullcap has no use. Razorgore the Untamed will only drop the Nemesis Bracers 17.86% of the times he is killed<sup>11</sup>. This means that the group of forty will repeat their fight past Onyxia all the way to Ragnaros every week at a set and specific time, as they attempt to outfit every member of the guild with the Tier 2 equipment, which will take almost a year, or 51 weeks, just to acquire the first three Tier 2 pieces found in Molten Core. Additionally, these three pieces – the skull cap, bracers and leggings – are the three easiest pieces to acquire, and thus acquired first. The other 5 are found in the instance entitled Black Wing Lair, or BWL.

Black Wing Lair is another instance that the group is allowed to play no more than once a week and which has its own prerequisite complex quest chain for attunement. In BWL, the guild spends seven to ten hours a week, every week, trying to kill the seven bosses who hold the last five pieces of Tier 2 purple gear: the belt, boots, gloves, spaulders and, finally, the robes. As with MC, each of the bosses will only drop two or three pieces of Tier 2 gear during the raid, again necessitating extended months of coordinated raids as players slowly earn the gear to outfit their own character as well as participate in the raids to help their fellow guild members attain their own gear. BWL, while similarly structured to MC, is significantly harder, and groups will often enter and be unable to get past the second-to-last monster, Chromaggus. Or if they are able to battle their way past, it is more common to be unable to beat the final monster in the attempt to get the robes. For this reason, it could easily take almost two years of weekly investments of 7-10 hours in order for the guild to acquire a complete set of Tier 2 equipment for all the members.

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<sup>10</sup> <http://wow.allakhazam.com/db/mob.html?source=live;wmob=10184>

<sup>11</sup> <http://wow.allakhazam.com/db/mob.html?source=live;wmob=12435>

Once the guild is outfitted in the complete set of Tier 2 gear, they may proceed to the instances for Tier 3 gear. It is impossible to skip the steps or exchange gear with other characters; the only alternative is purchasing a high-level character online, in which someone else has already invested the time to proceed through the various levels and acquire the elite gear.

In addition to actually completing the quests as a group, there is an intricate economic system within the instances entitled Dragon Kill Points (DKP) which balances the rate at which the characters acquire their gear. This user-created system is not an official element of WoW, but was established to ensure fair distribution of the gear dropped by the bosses. Players and third party programmers have made add-ons to help with the process of fairly distributing gear. Each guild has a slightly variant system, but the general concept remains uniform.<sup>12</sup> This entire process establishes a normativity of behavior in that the player learns that the experiences of all the players in the guild are intertwined, that helping others ends up helping him, and that the characters are mutually reliant on each other in the attempts to acquire high-level gear.

In addition to actually acquiring the gear through this long and arduous process, a player must also be aware of the type of gear that his character has earned. There are three distinct types of gear. First, there is what is called *regular gear*. All lower-level gear falls under this category, as does some upper-level gear. Regular gear means that a player may pick up the item or clothing

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<sup>12</sup> An example of one guild's DKP process: Every character starts the instance with 0 DKP and everyone in the raid increases their DKP by gaining 1/40<sup>th</sup> of DKP earned by killing the boss (hence the name "Dragon Kill Points"). Any single boss will drop 1-5 different items, most unrelated to the gear but rather useful potions or pieces of leather, etc and every item has a DKP cost. A character must spend his DKP in order to get equipment, thus lowering his own DKP amount; the DKP he spends gets split among the other players. So every time a character gets equipment, he loses DKP and cannot get more equipment for a while; every time another character gets equipment, the DKP of those who do not get equipment increases. When an item is dropped by the boss, everyone who wants the dropped item can ask for it, and the person with the most DKP out of the group requesting the item will get it. Their DKP gets recycled back to everyone else, and so the balancing system continues.

and use it until he gets something better, and still be able to auction it off either within or outside of the game. His use of it does not affect the resale value. The next type of gear is *binds on equip* gear, which comes into effect as the gear gets more prestigious. This is gear the player is able to pick up when he finds it and put in his bag for later use or sell to someone else, either in or out of the game. However, once he actually uses it, it will bind to his unique character and he will be unable to resell it to another character; it binds to – and is only usable for – the initial character who uses it. It is possible to sell this gear to a computer-generated vendor within the game, but only at a fraction of its original resale value to other characters in the Auction House. For this reason, when a character earns binding on equip gear, he must choose whether it will be more beneficial to his game to play with it or to sell it and pocket the gold for future gear purchases. Lastly, there is *bind on pick up* gear, which as its name indicates, binds to the character that picks it up, regardless of whether or not the character uses it. It is then permanently useless to any other character. All of the elite gear (Tier 2 and above) is bind on pick up, thus making it impossible to auction off online. In order to acquire high quality elite gear of upper level characters, the player must earn it, or buy another player's entire character account with the gear included. Thus, each of these levels of gear constitutes a distinct commodity type with its own relationship of exchange-value to use-value. The higher levels mark a lower degree of alienability of commodity from character, hence a closer indexical connection between the two.

This extended explanation of how one acquires the Tier 2 (out of 6) gear is itself demonstrative of the knowledge, time and energy investment necessary to acquire elite gear in the game.

Through this process, the gear is no longer valued just for its denotational characteristics and “value no longer inheres in the commodity itself as a tangible thing; rather, value inheres in

something else, something less tangible” (Moore, 331). For players, gear becomes emblematic of more than just the equipment and skills necessary to increase in level. It also implies the time commitment and personal commitment to the guild, and appropriate interpersonal interaction learned in order to acquire all the gear. It acts as emblematic of the semiotic diagram (Inoue 2006) of an elite player which implies having gone through the process of learning normative behavioral patterns through the various instances, in addition to developing the technical skills of the game. This reflects Castells’ (1997) assertion that social character involves looking at action in the realm of collective purpose, evidenced as relevant to World of Warcraft through the infamous “Leeroy” episode<sup>13</sup>. Leeroy Jenkins’ character impatiently charged off out of turn, before the group was ready, during an instance called Upper Blackrock Spire and ended up getting the entire group spectacularly killed, all for his lack of orientation to the collective purpose. Thus, having a certain level of gear also implies a certain ability to play well with others, to understand how to play a part, and how one’s role is tied into others. Similarly to how human subjects in global networks grasp themselves as a part of an organization (Sassen, 2006) and are aware of their actions as a result, the players in WoW learn to be aware of how they are situated within their guild, the game and each instance in which they participate. Even if a player who is a healer has impressive weaponry, he will be able to restrain his desire to attack the monsters when he needs to be healing. He understands that this is not his role; his job is to heal characters whose role is to attack. If the group is sufficiently healed, he might attack briefly, but his top priority is to keep everyone else healthy. It would be detrimental and potentially fatal to the entire experience if he did not do his specific job. This understanding of a particular character’s role leads to the general concern regarding buying characters online, such that if

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<sup>13</sup> [http://www.wowwiki.com/Leeroy\\_Jenkins](http://www.wowwiki.com/Leeroy_Jenkins)

someone who has never played the game or played only a bit of it buys an elite character with complicated gear, not only will he likely play his character badly because he lacks necessary technical skills, such as correct timing for casting spells, but he also won't have the interpersonal skills, such as his ability to play his specific role, as implied by his gear. Hence a character-plus-gear combination is emblematic of the player's technical skills in the digital environment plus the player's interpersonal skills vis-à-vis other players as these are manifest by proxy through digital encounters among their characters. As Leeroy demonstrated, a single player's inexperience can get the entire group killed; thus, a single ignorant player can waste time and ruin the chances of success for the 39 other players.

Individuals with little or no experience playing the game who want to skip the tedium of some low-level quests soon discover that, by not going through the questing, they lack the skills necessary to actually play a high-level character. By the time a player reaches a level 70, he has hundreds of items and dozens of bags and bank accounts, so these inexperienced, high-level players are actually unable to play their character well or to their full potential implied by the equipment. However, players who have already leveled a character(s) up to level 70 and simply want to try out a different race or class without having to spend the approximately 800 hours making them elite can actually purchase the character for as much as \$1000 through online auctions. These players retain their technical and social skills acquired through previous leveling experiences and play their new elite character appropriately and well. This often still has negative connotations for players, explicable only through the social meaning of the gear itself. The player and character played hold no liability for the guild with whom they raid, but they still only partially embody the diagram implied through ownership of the gear.

While the opposition to “buying your way up” is quite clear in the case of *noobs* who do not have the experience to play their character appropriately, elite players who have extensive experience playing upper levels are often still scorned if they buy upper level characters because of the incongruity between the implied background of the character and player manifest in the gear. Even for elite players who have alternate high-level characters, their mastery of the nuances in using complex gear may belie the purchase. Hence the character-plus-gear indexes a gaming history of experiences, and players may be evaluated as inauthentic by displaying a background that is not their real one. This incongruence and the corresponding contempt are related to an “ability to invoke such classifications in mutually intelligible ways [which] itself mediates, even maintains, a sense of group unity and cohesion, allowing individuals reflexively to recognize each other, or to recognize persons altogether elsewhere, as belonging to the classes ordered by such acts as invoke them” (Agha, 2007; 269). The gear is diagrammatic, not just of the class and level of the character but also of the normative behavioral patterns and time investment necessary to acquire the gear, thus even partial semiotic irregularity is deemed undesirable. Similarly to Inoue’s (2006) arguments regarding semiotic irregularity in women’s speech in Japan as perceived to be aesthetically vulgar and representational of a transitional shift in the diagrammatic meaning of Japanese women’s speech, so too can these elite players who purchase their characters partially embody the semiotic diagram made manifest in the gear they wear. While the process is clearly dynamic and subject to nuances of power, global relationships and hierarchies among the elite within the game, to the players for whom the diagram is meaningful, partial irregularity remains an example of incorrect and often disdained embodiments of the social persona.

The perceivable signs of the character and the gear are enregistered as social indexicals of game-internal roles and experiences (Agha, 2007). As such, they are dynamic and reflective of the social organization within the game with social meaning for high-level players. Identity is both enacted through publicly perceivable signs of the characters and their gear and altered because of players' interactions with other's perceivable emblems of identity since "the existence of a group is a function of the existence of its members, the existence of members is a function of recognition" (Agha, 2007; 269). Players familiar with the gear in the game will recognize the enregistered persona of a level 70 as embodied in the gear worn by the character, but elite players within the game are often further able to identify the players who bought their character through their partial nonalignment with the entextualized personae performed through gear ownership. They are oriented to the social classification within the game based on normalized models of behavior (Agha, 2007). Clearly, this is an issue of spectrum, and the nonalignment of a new player with a high-level character is significantly more pronounced than that of an experienced player with a purchased character. However, the nonalignment can be evidenced in either situation. Whether the complete diagrammatic identity is preserved and perpetuated by the character can be recognized by those for whom the referential embodiment is meaningful. Rather than being a mechanistic delineation of power embodiment, this process involves degrees and dynamics of membership and orientation. A player who himself has purchased an elite character will be less negative about others making similar purchases, and certainly the creators and vendors of these characters are quite positive on the process since it is their livelihood. The gear itself carries its semiotic significance in the behavioral implications, both of current behavioral ability and past behavior necessary for the gear acquisition. As such, the gear is indexically

connected to the past action of the player in their playing of the character. This indexical link is most clearly at the forefront when there is discontinuity between the actual behavior of a character and the behavior expected by the gear worn. This non-congruity between the indexical presupposition and the entailment may or may not be linguistically denoted by another player, such as referring to a player as a *noob*. Importantly, the semiotic processes are domain specific and investigable where the social constructs manifest therein intersect (Inoue, 2006); this dynamic of social meaning is enabled by various orientations to the commodities in different domains. When a player becomes interested in selling characters for profit, the semiotic system is fundamentally altered and gear becomes significant for its potential economic implications, rather than for the behavioral and interpersonal implications.

While the purchase and use of high-level characters is scorned in general – or at least in public – by the players, there remains a steady demand for upper level characters to purchase. This type of transaction provides interesting opportunities, impossible before the development of the internet, for accumulating real-capital through the trade of digital goods. Castronova (2005), Dibbell (2006) and Boellstorff (2008) all give thorough accounts of this phenomenon in various virtual worlds. As such, the sign-values of a character's gear are naturally affected by the player's orientation to the game whether he is paying-to-play or paying-to-earn. Thus, for players who invest their own in- and out-of-game capital and labor for the pleasure and interminable challenge of playing the game, the elite gear indexes a player's time and energy commitment as well as his multi-faceted aptitude at the game. However, for the players and/or "farmers" (Dibbell, 2006) who play the game with the intent to level up their characters and then sell them online, the high level characters and associated gear have exchange values that prospectively



index financial gain. The interpersonal alignment indexed lacks salience since the characters are created and developed with the intent to sell. Small businesses with enough employees to form their own guilds and thus complete quests as an autonomous unit – as well as larger businesses of dozens or hundred of players – are often where one finds gold and character farming<sup>14</sup>. These businesses are especially prolific in countries where a lower cost of living allows for a ratio of time-investment to profit such that the business can be an extremely lucrative endeavor. I will briefly explore the situation and possible implications of these businesses in Bolivia.

In Bolivia, where the per capita annual income hovers around \$1500 (USD) in urban areas and \$850 (USD) in rural areas<sup>15</sup>, World of Warcraft is more than just a game: It is employment. The level 70 characters with good gear are sold for between \$500 and \$1000 in online auctions.<sup>16</sup> To refresh, the average level 70 being sold for around \$600-\$700 online requires the equivalent of 30-35 days, or 720-840 hours of play time for the average player. But employees in the farming businesses who have support from high-level characters being played by their coworkers and who also have additional programs, such as third-party programs as well as illegal mods and bots, for “super leveling”, or leveling at a much faster rate, can achieve this feat in about 80-100 hours. This means an individual – please note that this is a hypothetical situation – working 60 hours a week, or the American concept of time-and-a-half, could make at least \$600 every week and a half. At this pace, including taking two weeks off every year, they would make just over 30 characters in a year, which would garner at least \$18,000 a year, or twelve times the national,

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<sup>14</sup> [http://www.wowwiki.com/Gold\\_Farmer](http://www.wowwiki.com/Gold_Farmer)  
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<http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/LACEXT/BOLIVIAEXTN/0,,contentMDK:21310720~pagePK:1497618~piPK:217854~theSitePK:322279,00.html>,

<http://www.nationsencyclopedia.com/Americas/Bolivia-INCOME.html>

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.gamewar.com/buyaccounts.php?gameid=2>,

urban, annual per capita income for Bolivia. Working 40 hours a week, the numbers are still impressive, with workers being able to make about 21 characters in the year, earning an income of around \$12,000 or eight times the national per capita income. Not only is this an extraordinary amount of money for the area, but it also allows for intense price competition between online auctioneers, as well as service offers such as made-to-order characters for the purchasers, because the Bolivian players are able to lower their prices dramatically and still cover costs with a handsome income.

The difference in average annual income between Bolivia and the United States creates the possibility for the different players' orientations to the game, arguably an entirely different level of semiotic negotiation. Not only are the players creating characters to sell rather than play, which alters the meaning of characters and gear, but they also embody a very different positionality within the game, as the creators of the characters rather than the purchasers. This both embodies and problematizes the historical relationships of global inequality that are much more than this paper itself can explore but are essential to bear in mind. The disparate orientations to the game, based in these economic and political disparities of power, serve to illuminate the dynamic process of meaning-making based on participant orientation to the communicative event. The meaning of a character and the character's gear is dependent on whether the player's orientation to the game has an entertainment or economic focus. In America, where the average per capita income is \$33,050 (USD),<sup>17</sup> to create characters full time would involve a substantial pay cut. Even if one worked as much as 60 hours a week at the top speed of creating the characters in 80-100 hours for high level characters, rather than 720, the

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<sup>17</sup> <http://bea.gov/bea/regional/reis/drill.cfm>

income remains at barely above American minimum wage<sup>18</sup>. This disparity in average annual income between America and Bolivia, coupled with the difficulty of enforcing business restriction and regulation internationally, presents the motivation behind the rise in ‘farming’ operations in countries with a much lower cost of living; the financial gain is respectively much greater, and the potential legal consequences are virtually negligible. In addition to the challenge of pursuing legal matters internationally, attempting to locate a small business in Bolivia specifically flaunting the rules created by an American business – where credit cards are virtually never used and addresses non-existent, and thus businesses are significantly less structured – is simple and virtually inconsequential.

Whether or not the difficulties of enforcing American business legal restrictions is its motivation, Blizzard Entertainment, the owner of World of Warcraft, is making the process of purchasing characters and gear online much more difficult from the purchaser’s side. While it is possible to locate an auction for characters or gear online, eBay - the website which was once the top auction site for WoW characters and gear - now only offers cheap guides to various parts of the game for bidding. This exchange relation in the non-digital world, based on the degree of alienability of the gear and character from the player, reflects the exchange relations of the digital commodities, which are themselves based on the alienability of the gear from the character. The three distinct commodity forms of the different types of gear – regular gear, bind on equip, and bind on pickup – are translated into non-digital exchange relations because it is impossible to buy elite gear by itself; one must buy an entire character in order to get the character’s elite possessions. Even then, the player cannot transfer the gear to another of their

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<sup>18</sup> Minimum wage is \$5.15 on 12/19/2007 [http://www.epinet.org/content.cfm/issueguides\\_minwage\\_minwagefacts](http://www.epinet.org/content.cfm/issueguides_minwage_minwagefacts).  
\$5.15 x 60hrs x 50 weeks = \$15,450

characters; they can only use the gear with the character they purchase. This is a clever conundrum, not only because it is significantly more expensive to buy an entire character account, but also because players most often become emotionally invested in their own character. For WoW, this prevents the pattern of commoditization common in other games where accumulation and resale of gold and gear, rather than characters, is an easier and faster way to accumulate enormous amounts of wealth (Dibbell, 2006, Castronova, 2005). These steps do not eliminate online sale of WoW characters and gear, but by simultaneously enforcing limitations of the sites and creating the elite gear to be non-transferable, Blizzard is clearly working on the most cost-effective limitations on such commodity exchanges by the players.

Understanding and deconstructing the semiotic significance of the material commodity forms in WoW, specifically the elite gear only acquirable by completing extensive 40-person quests, reveals the game to be an intricate communicative encounter involving dynamic processes of meaning-making between the participants. The orientation of participants to the game, whether it is a form of entertainment or a form of economic gain, thus shifts the meaning imbued in the perceivable signs without eradicating the role of the gear as a sign emblematic of a diagrammed persona of the player and as dependent on the contextual normative discourses for establishing mutual orientations among participants. This allows the players to recognize each other within the classificatory framework to which they oriented, and the gear subsequently becomes interpreted according to either its economic value or social value. When there is only partial alignment to the implied diagram, as exemplified in the case of a player purchasing a high-level character online rather than earning it through time, effort and teamwork, the player might be scorned for such semiotically deviant acts. A close semiotic analysis of the gear within WoW

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allows for the motivation and social meaning behind the interactions oriented around the gear to be deconstructed and understood as a part of dialogic meaning-making by the players themselves.

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