

“Speak quickly!” *World of Warcraft*’s Influence on Language

Jason W. Ellis

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My name is Jason Ellis and I am an Assistant Professor of English at the New York City College of Technology, CUNY. Today, I would like to share with you my research on video games and language change titled, “Speak quickly! *World of Warcraft*’s Influence on Language.”

[ADVANCE SLIDE TO WORLD OF WARCRAFT]

Blizzard’s *World of Warcraft* (WoW) is a massively multiplayer online roleplaying game (MMORPG) that pits the forces of the Horde against those of the Alliance for the prize of control over their world called Azeroth. Since its launch in 2004, non-playable characters (NPCs) of the Forsaken often demand players to, “Speak quickly!” This repeated phrase about speech in the game reinforces two aspects of language. On the one hand, MMORPGs like WoW depend on the interaction between playable characters and NPCs to advance the game’s narrative. On the other hand, WoW requires players to interact with other players using written messaging Chat and speech-based Voice Chat. In this paper, I focus on the language use between players, and argue that players’ linguistic practices in Chat and Voice Chat leads to language change beyond the game.

[ADVANCE SLIDE TO LANGUAGE]

When talking about language use in WoW, I rely on how the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines language: [QUOTE] the system of spoken or written communication used by a particular country, people, community, etc., typically consisting of words used within a regular grammatical and syntactic structure [UNQUOTE] (2008). A language facilitates communication within groups of people who know and share the same language, and it includes both speech and writing. Likewise, within the game,

the playable races (e.g., humans or orcs) have different languages, but factions (e.g., alliance or horde) share a *lingua franca* for mutual understanding. Chat and Voice Chat reinforce these language constraints.

[ADVANCE SLIDE TO LANGUAGE AND CULTURE: ASIF]

The community of WoW players who rely on these technologies for communication within the game create a shared culture through these language and game play practices. Anthropologist Agha Asif asserts that [QUOTE] cultural formations are reproduced over social groups through communicative processes that unfold one participation framework at a time [UNQUOTE] (Asif, 2007, p. 9). WoW players produce cultural formations each time they work together, and use Chat and Voice Chat to communicate.

[ADVANCE SLIDE TO LANGUAGE AND CULTURE: CORNELIUSSEN AND RETTBERG]

Considering this point from another perspective, Digital Humanists Hilde Corneliusen and Jill Walker Rettberg write that, [QUOTE] *World of Warcraft* has a culture and a language all its own. To players of the game the customs and cultural rules of the game rapidly become familiar, but to outsiders, they can be quite baffling [UNQUOTE] (Corneliusen & Rettberg, 2008, p. 1). The culture and language familiar to WoW players, I will argue below, is transportable to culture-at-large.

[ADVANCE SLIDE TO LANGUAGE, CULTURE, AND WOW: TEXT CHAT]

The cultural formations WoW players create are facilitated by the two communication technologies built into the game: text-based Chat and speech-based Voice Chat. The first of these is invoked when the player presses the “/” key, which is called forward-slash or slash. Pressing slash switches the player from interacting with the game world to chat mode, which includes text communication and nonverbal emotes. An example of Chat’s influence on language involves the emote

“/ignore” or slash ignore. Slash ignore is a command used in text chat to prevent a player from communicating with you. This command is often used to silence someone being annoying or offensive. Likewise, players exported this command as a culturally-embedded addition to the English lexicon as “slash ignore,” which is even defined on the *Urban Dictionary*, liked due to its now general use.

[ADVANCE SLIDE TO LANGUAGE, CULTURE, AND WOW: VOICE CHAT]

WoW’s second communication technology is Voice Chat, which enables groups of players to talk and coordinate leaving their hands free to control their characters. Unlike text Chat, Voice Chat is ephemeral, which means that if someone steps away from the computer, she may miss critical information needed upon return to the computer. For example, an online video from 2005 shows WoW game play and carries a voice track of the players engaged in strategic planning for a difficult area of Upper Blackrock Spire. Meanwhile, the player identified as “Leeroy Jenkins” is AFK (away from keyboard). Unaware of his fellow players’ plans when he returns, he runs headlong into the enemy shouting, “LEEROOOOOOOY JEEEEENKIIIIINS!” This video has been viewed nearly 50 million times. What began as a shared experience among WoW players engaged in play and communicating over an earlier form of Voice Chat, carried over into the larger WoW-playing audience and then into culture-at-large. Leeroy Jenkins represents an idea of foolhardiness, courage, and recklessness. Signifying these things, he has entered the English-language lexicon as a clue on Jeopardy (A battle cry for a new generation, 2006), inspired a Toyota truck commercial (Szabelski, 2007), and appeared in legal articles (Chamberlain, 2009; Harlow, 2010).

[ADVANCE SLIDE TO WOW AS ENGINE OF LINGUISTIC CHANGE]

Slash ignore and Leeroy Jenkins are only two examples that reveal WoW’s influence on language. WoW seems to be an engine for creating culture via linguistic practices. While Blizzard creates the space for linguistic practices among players, it is ultimately the players who drive linguistic

innovation across writing and speech. WoW and other immersive gaming experiences that encourage and facilitate interaction among players using language will, I believe, lead to new developments in how we communicate within game worlds and in the world at large. New words and phrases with culturally laden meaning are only one way these games and their players influence the ongoing development of language. Other innovations in syntax and grammar might be taking place right now, which necessitates further research to uncover and understand them while many of us might be using them naturally as a part of our language practices.

Thank you for listening.

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