

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

Jason W. Ellis

New York City College of Technology, CUNY

Author Note

Jason W. Ellis is an Assistant Professor of English at New York College of Technology, CUNY, where he teaches in the Professional and Technical Writing B. S. Program.

Correspondence concerning this document should be addressed to Jason Ellis via email at jellis@citytech.cuny.edu.

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Abstract

Blizzard's *World of Warcraft* (WoW) is a massively multiplayer online roleplaying game (MMORPG). MMORPGs require players to interact, communicate, and cooperate with other players using a variety of methods, including written-messaging Chat and speech-based Voice Chat. In this essay, I focus on the language use between players, and argue that players' linguistic practices facilitated by WoW Chat and Voice Chat leads to language change beyond the game. This language influence is generated by the community of WoW players who rely on these technologies for communication within the game to create a shared culture through these language and game play practices. Slash ignore (text Chat), Leeroy Jenkins (speech-based Voice Chat), and other language practices within WoW reveal how significant this MMORPG is to language use and language influence. These examples reveal how WoW is an engine of cultural creation via linguistic practices.

Keywords: Video Games, MMORPG, online communication, linguistic lexicon

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Blizzard's *World of Warcraft* (WoW) is a long-running, 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. I have been an active player in the game since it first launched in 2004. For most of that time, I have played characters of the Forsaken race, and I have participated with other players on quests and so-called raids over the Internet, within the game. Over the years, I have often heard non-playable characters (NPCs) of the Forsaken demand my characters to, “Speak quickly!” This repeated phrase about speech in the game reinforces two aspects of language. On the one hand, the immersive aspect of MMORPGs like WoW are partially leveraged on the interaction between playable characters and NPCs. Speech and writing convey important information about the game and tasks needing completion for advancement. On the other hand, MMORPGs require players to interact, communicate, and cooperate with other players using a variety of methods, including written messaging Chat and speech-based Voice Chat. In this paper, I focus on this latter aspect of language use between players, and argue that players' linguistic practices facilitated by WoW Chat and Voice Chat leads to language change beyond the game.

Before showing how WoW influences language use, it is important to establish what I mean by language and how language is used in WoW. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines language as, “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” (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. All humans can understand one another, and all orcs can understand one another. Also, races within the same faction have a *lingua franca* for mutual understanding. However, when the two factions meet in battle, the characters of different factions are unable to understand one another except through the use of universalized nonverbal actions called emotes (e.g., gestures of praise

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or vulgarness). For players within a faction, WoW's online communication technologies include writing with Chat and speech with Voice Chat.

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. Agha Asif, an Associate Professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania, asserts that “cultural formations are reproduced over social groups through communicative processes that unfold one participation framework at a time” (Agha, 2007, p. 9). Likewise, each time players participate in a quest or raid as a social group, and use Chat and Voice Chat to communicate in writing or by voice produce cultural formations. These, I would add, are dependent upon their written and spoken language use, which in turn, tend to create culturally-based language additions. Considering this point from another perspective, Hilde G. Corneliussen and Jill Walker Rettberg, professors of Humanistic Informatics at the University of Bergen, Norway, write that, “*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” (Corneliussen & Rettberg, 2008, p. 1). The culture and language familiar to WoW players, I will argue below, is transportable to culture-at-large via language.

The cultural formations WoW players create are facilitated by the two primary communication technologies built into the game: text-based Chat and speech-based Voice Chat. Focusing on Chat first, it 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 and her character's abilities to chat mode. Immediately after the slash, one may enter commands that designate the chat channel, the range away from the character where others may hear her, and emotes that return the character to interacting with the game world and other characters.

WoW's original messaging system has led to new real world language effects based on its keyboard commands for text communication. For example, the emote “/ignore” or slash ignore is a

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keyboard commands that shifted from a practical operation in WoW into online vernacular. 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.” As user Niddler explains on *Urban Dictionary*, “Saying “slash ignore” to someone means you don't want to hear what they are saying. From MMORPGs (e.g. WoW), where the command “/ignore” hides all messages from a specified user” (2007). Texting or saying “slash ignore” to someone means that you are explicitly disregarding anything else the person has to say, but it can be used in a serious or playful way analogous to Dwight Schrute’s (Rainn Wilson) “shun” and “unshun” behavior in the episode “Safety Training” (12 Apr. 2007) of the NBC series *The Office* (2005-2013).

A second communication technology built into WoW is Voice Chat, which enables groups of players to enjoy the higher bandwidth of vocal communication. It has led to a new addition to the language lexicon. Sharing a common spoken language over Voice Chat supports rapid communication and coordination within a group of players united in the game but separated by geographical place. Text messaging requires typing on the part of the sender, which takes her hands away from controlling her character, and it requires the recipient to read in the text overlay, which might obscure something important taking place within the game. Freeing the players from distractions to their hands and visual field in the game, Voice Chat makes it possible for unfettered communication with a shared, spoken language. Voice Chat enables players to plan battles and coordinate shifts in strategy in real time while keeping their hands on their keyboards and mice for maximized character control. Also, it is real time, synchronous communication. This means that all players can hear and act on what they hear in real time. However, 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.

The ephemerality of Voice Chat led to one of the most lasting additions to the English lexicon from the shared culture of WoW. On 11 May 2005, a video released online shows WoW game play and

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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) making chicken to eat. When Leeroy Jenkins returns, he is unaware of his fellow players’ designs and runs headlong into the enemy shouting, “LEEROOOOOOOY JEEEEENKIIIIINS!” On the event of its tenth-anniversary, Time Magazine reports that the original video had been seen 43 million times (Rhodan, 2015)! The higher quality video now on YouTube has been seen over 5 million times (Dblow3003, 2014). These numbers tend to indicate that many more people have seen this video than the number of actual WoW players. 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. He has been a clue on Jeopardy (A battle cry for a new generation, 2006) and inspired a Toyota truck commercial (Szabelski, 2007). The character serves as a reference in articles about counterinsurgency in Iraq (Chamberlain, 2009) and the rule of law during war (Harlow, 2010). This sampling of Leeroy Jenkins’ widespread adoption in culture reveals how the character’s name has entered the English-language (and possibly other languages, too) lexicon.

Other aspects of WoW would seem to have an influence on language use. Players have to be good multitaskers to switch between game controls and text-based Chat. This might translate into other areas of proficiency in text-based communication while juggling other real-world tasks. Similarly, Voice Chat encourages social interaction, camaraderie, and strategic planning. Perhaps the spoken language use over this technology might develop players’ abilities in these areas beyond the game itself and into the real world. Furthermore, the tight integration of players with the video game might strengthen the effects of language change by video game practices and affordances. Consider, for example, how the video game player is reconfigured as a cyborg, which Donna Haraway defines as, “a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction. Social reality is lived social relations, our most important political construction, a world-

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changing fiction” (Haraway, 1991, p. 149). The video game player is a cyborg, because she is a human organism integrated with computer hardware and software via the interfaces of the keyboard, mouse, screen, headphones, and microphone. The player’s WoW avatar within the game is a representation of her cybernetic self whose “lived social relations” are enabled by the computer and video game’s cybernetic feedback control systems. The cyborg video game player communicates with others via Voice and Text Chat and maintains social relationships through linguistic communication, friend lists, and guild rosters. The social existence of the video game player, within the boundaries of the game, is mediated by the computer and software technology that is also mediating players’ linguistic practices.

Literacy theorist Walter Ong offers a way of framing the influence and effect of WoW’s multiple mediations of its players. He argues, “Without writing, the literate mind would not and could not think as it does today, not only when engaged in writing but even when it is composing its thoughts in oral form” (Ong, 1986, p. 24). Ong shows how writing restructures the way we think, and how our literate society today has internalized the practice so deeply that without great introspection can we distinguish what literacy has wrought over orality. He continues, “Writing was an intrusion, though an invaluable intrusion, into the early human lifeworld, much as computers are today” (Ong, 1986, p. 27). If the intrusion of writing technology restructures thought, then what might the intrusion of computer technology, including the assemblage of computer, video game, Voice and Text Chat, keyboard, mouse, screen, headphone, and microphone, have on reshaping the fundamental character, quality, and shape of thought? In addition to what I have discussed in this essay about the linguistic effects of WoW’s Voice and Text Chat technologies, I am suggesting that WoW as well as other computer technologies might be influencing aspects of our thinking much like Ong argues takes place with what he terms “secondary orality,” or the return to oral culture via electronic technologies made possible by literate cultures (Ong, 1986, p. 23-24). From my point of view, our immersion in a culture of secondary orality facilitates each of us gaining digital literacy, or “the practices of communicating, relating, thinking, and ‘being’ associated with digital media” (Jones and Hafner, 2012, p. 13). This is even more so an effect on WoW

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players, because their enjoyment and success within the video game depends on their investment of time, attention, and dedication to their cyborgizing and socially mediating technologies through and with which they play, socialize, and linguistically communicate.

Slash ignore, Leeroy Jenkins, and other language practices within WoW reveal how significant this MMORPG is to language use and language influence. I assert that WoW is an engine of cultural creation via linguistic practices. While Blizzard and its developers create 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.

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