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Title: Signs from a strange planet: role play and social performance in *Anarchy Online*

Anarchy Online (Funcom) is a science fiction styled massively multiplayer online role playing game (MMORPG) set on the mysterious planet of Rubi-Ka. The population of Rubi-Ka undertake missions, dodge dangerous animals and augment their bodies with nano-implants powered by 'notum', a rare and precious mineral. As you would expect with a role-playing game, each player constructs his or her avatar according to a set of templates relating to species, skills, looks and profession. These avatars are the sign of the player's presence in this fictional world. Because *Anarchy Online* is an online game, the world of Rubi-Ka, with its factions, cityscapes and deserts, is a shared space. Players interact (with varying degrees of skills, civility, hostility or ineptitude) in real time, thanks to their colourful digital representatives, and an in-game chat window.

Anarchy Online (www.anarchyonline.com) is undeniably multimodal, meaning that users re-act to, and act within, the game's world while responding to written, audio and pictorial information. The player clicks on a mouse and keyboard while gazing at an online graphically rendered world, manipulates their avatar, and types/chats live to other players, while in the background a rainstorm and a moody score lend atmosphere. The theory we have adopted in order to make sense of this unpredictable and massive text is social semiotics. Social semiotics (Hodge and Kress 1988, Kress and van Leeuwen 2001; Halliday, 1978) is a branch of semiotics that proposes that the relationship between sign and signifier is socially motivated, placing the emphasis on the creative work of the signmaker, and their transformative use of the semiotic resources available. A further development of social semiotic theory proposes that the landscape of contemporary communication is *multimodal* (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2001). Thus, social actors and communicators reach for the semiotic modes, tools and media most suited to their purpose, and integrate them in ways provisionally determined by generic conventions, but always transformed in use, according to the need of the signmaker. In the online game, we will be particularly interested in how the game offers a rich array of semiotic resources in visual design and animation, which the player learns how to deploy in the digital dressing up, exploring, emotional expression and combat involved in avatar-based roleplay. At the same time, we will explore how the mode of speech-like writing in the chat-based talk of players also determines the ways in which roles are played out and players interact with each other.

This approach provides us with a frame through which to delineate and conceptualise the repertoire of modes and acts at the disposal of *Anarchy Online* players. While console games might be played with friends, and while much

computer game play is contextualised by shared cultural activities of some description (online fan culture, walkthroughs, cheat sharing etc) an online multiplayer game like *Anarchy Online*, is unavoidably public. The graphic world is shared with thousands of other players. Social semiotics is appropriate for our inquiry as it conceptualises signs as arising from, and constructing, social discourse. If the sign making and sign reading activities are discursive and contextual, motivated rather than arbitrary, the initial question becomes: what are these motivations?

While we accept that the answer to this question might well vary from player to player, we propose the following broad areas within which to explore the presence of motivated signs in this game. First, we suggest various **representational or dramatic motivations** – this (provisionally titled) category involves presentational, narrative and performative aspects within the game. Second, we suggest a **ludic motivation**: an interest in the skills, competition and dynamic engagement required by the rule-based system of the game. Finally we explore the related categories of **communal** motivations. These involve the game’s generic identity, fan cultures, wider digital culture and the taste communities in which it is inter-textually embedded.

In order to address these questions, our first task was to learn to play *Anarchy Online* ourselves. While we have to date dedicated many hours to this end, we still regularly find ourselves lost and baffled on Rubi-Ka. In addition to self-reporting our own somewhat fumbled forays into this online world, we enlisted three teen-age volunteers to be our informants. We interviewed them prior to their introduction to *Anarchy Online* about their expectations regarding the game, and kept in contact with them as they familiarised themselves with the game world. Over time we conducted further interviews on video, via email, and ‘as avatars’ within the game world itself. This presentation is an abridgement of a chapter length paper written as part of our project ‘Textuality in video games: interactivity, narrative space and role play’. Our chapter on *Anarchy Online* draws on other work we have done over the course of this project, including Andrew’s work on multimodality and social semiotics in the *Harry Potter* and *Final Fantasy* games (2002, 2003), and Diane’s work on genre (2003) narrativity and ludic discourses (2003a,b) in RPGs. For the sake of brevity, in this presentation we will limit our discussion to the various motivations we have discerned, rather than addressing the wider implications of performance, theatrics or identity.

Representational and dramatic motivations : “Welcome to Rubi-Ka”

Anarchy Online is a role playing game, which means that it owes certain structures around characterisation, role, narrative and ludic structures to table-top role playing games such as *Dungeons and Dragons* (TSR 1980s). The phrase ‘ludic structures’ here refers to those aspects of the text indicative of its being a game: components, goals, chance and rules, for example. Whereas console games generally offer the player a ready made avatar through which to steer their way through the game (such as Lara Croft of *Tomb Raider* fame), RPGs typically offer the player the opportunity to construct their own avatar/protagonist utilising a set of templates relating to profession, species, and physicality.

In one sense the player is choosing options from a limited set of paradigms in order to construct the 'syntagmatic bundle' which, once named, becomes their avatar. But, in actuality, even the few options that relate specifically to the avatar's most overt physical characteristics (species and gender) are subject to a multiplicative effect that produces considerable variety. The four breeds or species, and the two sexes produce seven possible outcomes. Each of these outcomes in turn produces multiple options relating to the 'look' and the face of the character/avatar. The process thus far (species, gender, face) has already generated forty-two distinct characters; options around height and bodyweight produce further obvious variation; and this is multiplied again by the twelve professions (each of which will determine a character's initial wardrobe). By Andrew's calculations, this deceptively simple set of options actually produces one thousand five hundred and twelve possible characters. Though this is still a restricted set of semiotic possibilities, it does result in real diversity within the game, and a sense that each avatar is unique. Of course variety and distinctiveness are further developed during play. Players can buy clothes (from party dresses, to protective hoods and boots) and win armour during missions, thus manipulating and individualising their avatar's appearance further. Players make particular choices about the skills acquired by their avatar's as they 'level up', and make choices about weapons specialisation, fighting styles, or professional skills.

Character generation: making Nirvano

Anarchy Online dramatises the character selection process. Entering the game the player views a cut scene and is welcomed to the 'territorial space' of Rubi-Ka. Animation swoops along the corridors of an orbiting space station, and the player is invited to begin DNA sequencing a body for their new life on the planet below.

Andrew: During the construction of my first character, I felt compelled to make him bald and a little overweight, as if there was a kind of honesty in resisting any temptation to construct a muscle-bound representation. Other choices, too, felt unexpectedly loaded: it is not possible to choose gender, for instance, without, in some basic way, saying that this character is going to share a set of potential cultural dispositions with me; or I'm going to adopt a set of dispositions profoundly unfamiliar (our three player-interviewees all expected to choose avatars like themselves in some respects). Nirvano is a solitus, the species on Rubi-Ka that is closest to human. My character is called Nirvano, a masculinized version of the name of an American student I once taught briefly; its reminiscent of appealing Buddhist characteristics; and at the same time appropriate to the sci-fi setting of the game. The choice of a name is in itself an intensive semiotic activity – loaded with associative signification. It may be witty, misleading, serious, erudite, genre-based. Nirvano is a martial artist. I had begun with a liberal disinclination to carry weapons, and initially tried to play as a 'meta physician' character, but I discovered that having a character survive, even in the training level, required that they be able to fight off aggressive small animals.

In some respects, this character generation process is like the offstage space Goffman (1959) terms the 'back region', as distinct from the front region where the performance of role is taken out into the world. The back region is the more private space, where the role is prepared. In life, for instance, it may be the private domestic domain, where the elements of the public role are assembled for the day. In the theatre, it is the dressing room. In the game, it is this

offstage laboratory like space where the parts of the avatar are laid out. However, there is another space which also corresponds to Goffman's back region – the world on the other side of the screen, where the player sits at a computer, entering the gameworld through the interface technologies of keyboard, mouse and screen. In this space, while creating Nirvano and stumbling with him into the training ground with other new players ('newbies') I muttered to myself, exclaimed aloud when surprised (or killed), jotted down possible names when the nicknaming process was in train (the first four names were rejected). As I think of this, I am reminded of the Numbskulls, a comic strip in which the central characters were little creatures occupying the brain of a man, who they operated by a series of mechanical devices. The construction of character felt, at least to me, like a set of parts for a character, a resource for dressing-up, a character kit. The character might be 'starting from scratch' but just like when my 6-year-old nephew dresses up as Batman, you know that you are supposed to behave in a particular kind of way.

Diane: Grayse was my first creation. She is a very small doctor, named after a friend. She is a nanomage, which is a small humanoid with certain genetic and technological advantages, balanced by relative physical weaknesses. Often in RPGs, magic users only become powerful over time, initially they are vulnerable. This, it quickly became apparent, was also true of technology dependants on Rubi-Ka (Anarchy Online is a science fiction, alien technologies operate much as magic would in a fantasy RPGs). After being killed numerous times by toxic rodents, I put Grayse to one side to learn the basics of the game with a fighter character, a martial artist named Aisea (again, a name that reminds me of an old friend). Players can run up to seven characters in *Anarchy Online* (although they can only operate one at a time within the game world). Aisea is, like Grayse, small dark and female. She is an Opifex, a local species of humanoid, genetically predisposed to absorbing the power of 'notom' in order to perform amazing high kicks and supercharged moves. I choose to play a martial artist, because I like martial arts movies. An additional incentive was that I had noticed other female martial artists in the game wore armour that looked like Chinese silk dresses, and I find the idea of combine lethal moves with pretty clothes appealing. Also the idea of direct hand to hand combat is more interesting than standing there shooting, and as Aisea has levelled up she has learnt various relatively spectacular moves, including flying kicks. Aisea is tiny compared to many of the other characters, and her smallness gives me pleasure because it makes her look deceptively harmless and because it signifies a very satisfying combination of precision and violence.

Here, then, our motivations are concerned with performed representations of aspects of ourselves, but in combination with characters which possess certain narrative properties, predisposing them to the actions of science fiction characters and martial artists, with the narrative trajectories those genres imply. Semiotically, the latter is provided for us, but we have chosen from a menu. These choices the game can predict – my own traversal is motivated by my own tastes and preferences. The choices I have made which relate specifically to myself, my history, my body, are also predictable, laid out in the game's trajectory; but again, my traversal is informed by my own sense of self and identity. This assembly of motivated resources depends entirely on a restricted semiotic language, a limited menu laid out by the game – with one small but important exception – the name. By definition,

this is unique in the game, unpredictable to the system (no-one else can have the same name); and is composed from an unrestricted natural language of words and letters.

Newbie to veteran; templates to biographies

When we joined the other players in the training grounds and cities of Rubi-Ka, it became apparent that the seemingly incidental choices we had made in the privacy of the character generation chamber would have repercussions. Andrew, for example, felt bound to construct an ‘honest’ rather than a wishful persona, and perhaps as a consequence, found himself in the surreal position of taking another player’s derogatory comments about Nirvano’s fitness personally. Over time it became clear that the private frameworks through which we assembled our avatars, using the resources supplied by the game, were more revealing and autobiographic than we had initially appreciated. Our choices related to how we feel (however vaguely or unconsciously) about managing shared spaces in real life. It is very probable that this is indicative of our lack of experience with online invented personas.

Perusing the player’s forum makes it clear that many experienced players make very specific ‘role play’ choices, right from the start. They have intentions to play a type of character, with a particular background and allegiances. While we made our early selections based, seemingly, on judgements that refer back to our sense of our real selves, many veteran players make their selections based on a specific fictional identity that have (partially at least) already designed. Our early attempts at character generation were very much, as Andrew has described them, a kind of playful dressing up. What became clear only later, was that our playful choices were more indicative or revealing, and less spontaneous and whimsical than we had thought. But, compared to committed players of *Anarchy Online*, we were starting ‘from scratch’. Returning to the character generation stage to invent a new character after you have played the game (even if still a novice) is a different experience. Once you have played, your familiarity with the game contextualises the offered resources: the repertoire of potentials offered by the game are bound to their eventual expression in the game world.

A percentage of players of *Anarchy Online* are committed to Role Playing. Role Players (or RPer) invent characters with biographies and histories that far exceed the templates on offer. The intention is that these characters partake in shared events and improvised scenarios. There is an active Role Player forum on the Anarchy Online website, where players meet to discuss the state of the game. A few frequent topics of discussion include:

- The relationship between Role Players and the general player population
- The best way to begin role playing, as opposed to just playing the game
- How to spot a Role Player
- The right way to play a ‘baddie’.

Vixentrox (dec 31, 2002) suggests that when creating a character “a brief background outline is a good place to start” and “If you have multiple characters...make sure they RP as different people. My main character has a ‘step sister’. They trade insults and don’t like each other very much. The one is more fun loving...the other is more

serious and stern.” Its obvious that Vixentrox is referring to traits that have little to do with the templates offered by the game, other than that its probable that a face could be selected that would, at least for that player, communicate a certain kind of personality. Lillemjau (Jan 5th 2003) replies to a beginners request for Role Playing advice with the following:

“I want to address your character development...in between the background history and personality traits, add some good and bad habits, strengths and weaknesses things your character loves and hates. Those little things makes the depth of him/her more interesting”.

As Lillemjau’s and Vixentrox’s posts to the player forums indicate, for committed role players the character templates offered by the game as a set of resources are only a set of starting positions. The manner in which a player might interpret and then perform the identity of their avatar exceeds their indexed attributes. In this sense, the resources offered by the game are what Kress and van Leeuwen (2001), following Halliday, (1985), call systems of *meaning potential*. Like any games, they offer resources and rule-systems – but like language, they do not place limits on what can be “said” using these resources, in this case, the construction of complex, highly developed dramatic roles.

We have tended to think of this category of sign making as being motivated by representational, narrative and dramatic concerns. What typifies these motivations in this context is that they are not limited by the explicit textual imperatives of the game (goals, scores) and they exceed the indexical attributes (i.e. strength of 12, or 14, or 3) by the game to an avatar. For motivations that more directly concern the game structure, and the real time events of play, we turn to what we have called ‘ludic motivations’, named for the term ‘ludology’ popularised by games theorists such as Gonzalo Frasca (www.ludology.org).

Ludic motivations : game, goals, strategies

As has been pointed out by various videogame theorists, narrative discourse contains prior events whereas playing a game involves events that unfold in real time. This differentiation is central to the distinction between our first two categories of motivation. The ludic qualities of *Anarchy Online*, are those parts of the game, that make it a game: strategy, goals, real time events, chance, rules, skills acquisition, exploration and levelling up. The narrative and representational concerns discussed above rely on schemas that are not necessarily made explicit on screen. A character’s biography, for example, will refer to previous events (as opposed to the real time events of play). One immediate clarification that needs to be made however: the borders between the ludic and the narrative strata are not, in this particular game, necessarily clear-cut. There is some discussion on the player’s forums as to what, for example, constitutes role play (play with a self professed narrative agenda, as described above) and more general play, where players go on missions or explore the game world using their avatar as a game-tool, rather than as a character per se. Accordingly this category revolves around considerations of ‘how to play’. Ludic modes foreground the role of the avatar as game component, as symbolic unit of strategic value (like a chess-piece).

Ludic activities on *Anarchy Online* include going on missions, selecting one style of 'profession' over another based on your preferred style of strategising (sniper over martial artist, for example) and directing energies towards the accumulation of experience points (through goal attainment) that enable avatars to 'level up'. In terms of sign making and sign reading, much of this activity is focused on the operations of the player's avatar.

While expert players traverse the game world, beginners struggle to move their avatars at all. Initially it's difficult to see what you need to see, and tricky communicating properly with other characters. Our new avatars staggered around, made false moves, rotated wildly, or were strangely still. When we wanted to quit out of the game, we realised we didn't know how. We selected 'quit' from the menu, and were informed by text that we must sit down before we could quit. But we could not find out how to sit down. Fortunately the training ground is full of other players of varying degrees of expertise. Once you have mastered the ability to type/enter basic conversation (not as simple as it might sound), it is possible to ask advice of your fellow players. There is also an open chat channel just for 'newbies' which tends to be full of questions and requests for aid, including some quite odd ones: "my head is stuck in a wall, can somebody help me?"

Just as the character templates supplied by the game initially appear limited, the various motions of the new avatar appear stiff and mechanistic. They are stilted until the player has gained a certain level of familiarity with the controls. Initially the player has to make a considerable conscious effort to drive the avatar through simple actions, such as turning a corner without bumping into a wall, or running along a path without falling over the edge. The commands that are constantly used soon move to a stage of less conscious manipulation. This is an acquired skill, a literacy, a fluency. The avatar moves in the world through the combination of a set of technological potentials for sign-making and the player's skill in deploying those signs, much as you move through the world in your car, making both a functional journey and a social performance, by exploiting those potentials through learned manipulative skills.

The actions of the avatar depend on player-action – and these actions involve the manipulation of technologically mediated signifiers. These signifiers form what Halliday (1989) calls the *restricted language* of games. His example is contract bridge, where very limited sets of signifiers (such as the four suits in a deck of cards) can multiply with other sets (such as the numbers of such suits which can be bid) within the rule structure of the game. In spite of the restrictions, we can see that the range of possible combinations, the ways in which they relate to the rules of the game, and the way all this in turn is determined by strategic collaboration between players, all makes for a complex activity requiring considerable skill. In computational linguistics, for example, restricted languages have found a new significance as bounded systems which computers can handle easily, as opposed to the unpredictable, unbounded nature of natural language. The analogy with *Anarchy Online* is close in many ways. The player has available a restricted language of avatar movement – run and walk, directionality, jump. Any movement, however simple, however, is immediately a more complex act semiotically. This is because the movements are not made against an empty white background: the gameworld contains both a landscape and other characters and creatures,

any move of our avatar makes a syntagm – a move forward combines our avatar’s move with the landscape; and with other characters (both NPCs and other avatars). Should we decide to take out new avatars for a walk outside the city gates of Borealis, we ‘walk forward’ and immediately other signs in the 3 D multimodal world collect around this simple action – we can “see” a new landscape outside the city; the music changes; the sound of our feet on the ground changes to the crunch of a sandy path. Simply wandering around in the gameworld involves the combination of a highly restricted language of avatar action with the much bigger language of the gameworld and its contents. The latter is, in principle, an unrestricted language, as anything can be designed into it, whereas the avatar movement must, within the confines of current technology at any rate, depend on keyboard and player fingers.

In semiotic terms, however, it is clear that the ‘design’ of our avatar’s wandering, is a joint activity, with three principal co-designers at work. The player designs a walk through the woods; and the game’s programming designs elements around us. The other co-designers of our experience are the other players who may affect our experience to a greater or lesser degree. In addition to the representational and ludic motivations we have discussed, these social motivations (shaped by various cultural expectations) shape the player’s experience of the shared game world.

Similarly, we can see other rule-systems, expressed in semiotic terms as on-screen resources such as weapons, actions, first-aid kits, and so on, as restricted languages, quantified economies whose very limitations constitute the challenge of elements of the game such as combat sequences and mission goals, challenges which are important constituents of the ludic motivation of the player, and which draw intertextually on similar systems in other RPGs.

Communal motivations: Sharing Rubi-Ka

We consider communal motivations to include player expectations, genre, trans-textual content, the wider gaming community, role playing in other games, and fan culture; and the fact that the game is a shared, largely public space. Kress and van Leeuwen (2001) propose that all multimodal design incorporates four strata – discourse, design, production and distribution. We normally think of these as belonging only to the text (in this case, the design studio of Funcom, and its marketing and online distribution technology). However, though in many ways we are cautious about rhetorical claims for player-as-author, in respect of this particular communal motivation we are looking at forms of textual production which are unambiguously those of the player – chat-based dialogue within the game between players, and extra-game online communication between players.

When we interviewed our three player-consultants about their expectations of *Anarchy Online* before they began to play, the communal motivation was clear – all three of them had played online games before, and had clear expectations about the pleasures they would provide. Their expectations in terms of ludic motivations were similarly clear: they had well-articulated expectations of certain aspects of play, such as the kinds of combat they would be able to engage in, the ways in which they might level up, and the kinds of choices they might make about their avatars which would give them strategic advantage in the game. Once one of the interviewees, Tim, began to play *Anarchy Online*, he employed a trans-textual approach to selecting his character’s name. He found an online English

to Elvish translator, and used his own nickname to generate a name for his avatar, as he explains in this e-mail message:

Name: Belithralith - soulish (my nickname) translated into elvish on an internet translator.

Breed: nanomage - just look kind of misterious

Gender: male - 'cos that what i am i 'spose

Profession: Agent - all i can say is: sniper rifles :)

Clearly, then, the semiotic motivation here depends from related discourses – the name from a culture originating, like the RPG genre itself, from Tolkienesque narratives and textual histories, and the cultural affiliations which adopt, develop and transform them; the sniper rifle from more recent media discourses oscillating between film and game cultures. Like our own choices of body, Tim’s decisions are also influenced by a sense of connection between his online persona and himself – “‘cos that what i am i 'spose”.

It was, perhaps, in terms of the social motivations of the game that their expectations were most interesting. They expected quite specific kinds of relations between avatars and players they encountered. In particular, in relation to gender they constructed a modality which effectively read through the appearance of the avatar, expecting the player underneath to be a polar opposite. The boys were very certain, for example, that behind any female avatars, are ‘fat American (male) teenagers’, which they then quickly revised to ‘fat middle-aged American men’. However, when asked what kinds of avatar they would choose, they all said they would be male, human, and like themselves. This kind of expectation seems rooted in a broad stereotyping (even when females are visible in an online game world, we’re invisible!) which we expect to break down to some extent when they actually encounter other players; but also to be rooted in a discourse of ‘internet suspicion’, born of alarmist attitudes towards online dangers and duplicity. In the case of these three teenagers, such suspicions are reinvented as a ‘knowing’ discourse.

To move on from Kress and van Leeuwen’s “discourse” stratum to their “design and production” strata, we want to focus specifically on how players interact with others. In social semiotic terms, this is to analyse how they use specific communicative modes to fulfil the interpersonal metafunction, one of the three metafunctions which Halliday argues is common to all semiotic acts – the *ideational*, the *interpersonal* and the *textual* metafunctions (Halliday 1985). One option when playing of Anarchy Online is to play solo – to refuse to engage with other players; though it is not possible to ignore their existence in the world, as they will run past you, hold you up in queues for mission terminals, stand next to you in shops, have conversations you can ‘hear’, and approach you with questions or requests to join them. If you explore these possibilities, it becomes apparent that most of the interaction with other players’ is channelled primarily through two (occasionally disarticulated) modes:

- The visual, animated aspect of the avatar (how they act, how they look)

- In-game live chat (typed and entered by players in real time, some ‘in character’ some ‘out of character’)

The first visual mode of sign making (and sign reading) is generated by the visual design, actions and animating of the individualised avatars. Our avatars enable us to occupy the gameworld, and to approach other characters in a way that signals some expectation of reaction. The particular system of *meaning potential* here is the way in which our characters, as computer animations, are equipped with a repertoire of blended animated movements expressive of emotion or certain kinds of social communication. These range from waving, nodding, laughing, pointing, dancing, and varied other rude, humorous and expressive gestures. When Aisea, first appeared next to Nirvano at the appointed time and place, she was waving her arms vigorously. Andrew immediately became conscious, for the first time, that Nirvano’s arms were pinned helplessly to his side; and had to say (type into the chat-box) “How do you do that?”. This mode employs various potentials: costume, body, face and movement are all elaborately expressive of the role being played out within the science fiction fantasy of the game. There can be no lapse from this locale, the player’s presence manifests as the avatar.

The typed entries of players however, are comparatively flexible: this chat is at times the ‘voice’ of the avatar, and other times, clearly it’s the voice of the player. This speech (which has no actual vocal or audio component, it is typed and read) is entirely at the player’s disposal, so that it is possible to construct every shade of commitment to the avatar’s identity: to slip in and out of role, to maintain the role at a low level, to modify the role, to speak in your own voice (as a player) from behind the mask, or to speak in the voice of the mask. Game chat swings from ‘in character’ dialogue, to ludic orientated dialogue about gameplay and team formation, to observations on other avatars’ physicality or equipment, to completely unrelated sociable chat (“Hi, where are you from?”). This chat mode, unlike the specific, restricted language of the animated emote repertoire, is an unrestricted natural language; and, like the names, is a form of semiotic work unpredictable by the game and completely player-produced. The huge majority of in-game conversations that we have witnessed are as direct and abridged as the one we include here. In this sequence, Nirvano is trying to join a clan which is in the process of being formed by Stormthunder, Regrat, Articspider, Thie, Demonbuster and Fithelement:

Stormthunder:	make name
Stormthunder:	first
Nirvano:	yeah
Thie:	fighters of the lost realm
Stormthunder:	I got to go now
Regrat:	athen whompa? [this refers to a portal to another city]
Stormthunder:	hurry up
Articspider:	make me leader
Thie:	ok
Stormthunder:	u can make name
Thie:	no me
Stormthunder:	fith hurry up
Regrat:	thx anyway ☺

Stormthunder, although she expresses no ambition to be leader, or to decide on the name of the group, is assertive in assigning tasks to others, using imperative forms ('make name'; 'hurry up'). Similarly, the other dominant theme of the conversation, the choosing of a name for the guild, is a construction of group role appropriate to Role playing games (even if it appears to have strayed in from an alternate genre, i.e. fantasy). The group eventually agrees on "Fighters of the Lost Realm" (Nirvano's only contribution is to correct the spelling of 'realm' as he can't bear the thought of wandering round belonging to a misspelled guild). The players are clearly employing a ludic rather than narrative mode, organising a team with strategic rather than dramatic motives. The avatars were not talking in a manner dramatically consonant with the visual style of their character. Rather, the players are communicating in the universal, compressed dialogue, of synchronous chat, with typical orthographic and stylistic features; a mode that implies certain cultural and perhaps age-related attributes (a familiarity with online environments, an ability to talk and read 'txt'). Werry (1996) notes several linguistic features of Internet Relay Chat, such as abbreviation, paralinguistic cues, and actions and gestures, each an adaptive strategy to allow it to behave as much like speech as possible. The avatar talk in AO displays many of the same features. The game produces the addressivity necessary by showing the names of the speakers; abbreviations are used, both grammatical ('make guild') and orthographic ('u can make name'); while facial expression is simulated with Regrat's smiley. While one of the motivations may be the desire to replicate the 'feel' of speech within a typed and read mode, its also completely possible that the urge to save time (or "hurry up") is motivating the players.

We may assume that the synchronous chat, then, is employed by players who, while they may have a high ludic motivation, have a low commitment to developed roleplay. In the above exchange, no-one was interested in the character, history, personality of the fictitious characters; only in getting the job done. The dynamic properties of the exchange were not dramatised elements of invented roles, but the real impatience, assertiveness, indecision of the human players. In terms of multimodal theory, the semiotic effect of this kind of roleplay is a pulling-apart of the two modes through which the avatar acts – the animated image and the written chat. The two modes are only loosely connected, because the dressing-up part of the role and the strategic decision-making are only loosely-connected.

Though we have no space here to develop an account of how the modes of image act and speech act integrate differently where players are committed to Role Play, we can give one brief illustration. Such players will infuse their exchanges with invented personas and abbreviation is clearly not an issue, as is clear in this exchange witnessed by Andrew : "I bow to your superior wit and wisdom, and withdraw from combat".

In conclusion

The broad categories of motivated sign making and sign reading that we have been exploring in the context of *Anarchy Online* do not occur in isolation, on the contrary, they are combined during play. We conclude by relating an in-game encounter intended to illustrate the co-existence of the various modes and motivations. To recap, we described these styles of motivation as:

- **Representational** (dramatic, performative, figurative, graphic, narrative)
- **Ludic** (game orientated: scoring, levelling up, the avatar as tool)
- **Communal** (generic and other expectations, wider online culture, the shared nature of the game world).

In the middle of a play session Nirvano (Andrew) and Grayse (Diane) were trying to decide whether to head straight out on a mission, or go shopping, when we were interrupted. A ‘voice’ intruded on our conversation (in the form of a line of text) to ask if Nirvano “was pregnant”. Andrew’s understanding of this was that the new arrival was making an offensive remark about his avatar’s girth. Diane’s understanding was that the player was mocking Nirvano for hanging around with girls (and so retorted “why, are you?”). Thus we met Dalii, a male avatar with a ‘male model’ physique, wearing high heels, thong style underpants and sunglasses.

For Andrew, Dalii’s comment was confronting because Nirvano wears aspects of Andrew’s real body image. Diane’s (Grayse’s) response was also triggered primarily by her ‘real world’ identity: Dalii was hassling Nirvano for associating with a female. Dalii made more jokes about Nirvano’s appearance (‘i can hear the baby kick’) and then compounded the provocation with mildly confronting actions (walking close enough to Nirvano to make contact, and then apparently bouncing off). In both his dialogue, and in his stance, Dalii completely ignored Grayse. Grayse resorted to conciliatory compliments about Dalii’s shoes, but to no avail. Inspired by the tattoo that Dalii sports across his chest, Grayse asked about where to get one for herself. Dalii ignored Grayse. Nirvano repeated the question, and Dalii answered “on missions mostly”, referring to game play (the tattoos are a mission reward).

We responded to the representation in front of us (by noticing the tattoo and his bizarre dress sense). Dalii initially offended both of us, for completely different reasons. We both assumed, throughout the encounter, that Dalii was a male player. There is of course, no reason to believe that is the case – ‘Dalii’ might well be an adolescent girl or a sixty year old woman, but while in this particular embodiment, he was male to us. In his chat (even when ‘out of character’) Dalii presents himself as male. Nirvano and Grayse (and Andrew and Diane) experience him as a male presence. Nirvano and Dalii met again later that same afternoon, and Dalii offered Nirvano an in-game object for his in-game apartment (a lava lamp, actually) and typed that he was “from Sweden”.

As this encounter demonstrates, while it is possible, in part, to distinguish between the various motivations shaping the reading and making of signs in a massive, shared, graphically rendered world like that of *Anarchy Online*, in practice, these motivations are simultaneous. Just as a deceptively simple set of templates combine to create a huge range of possible avatars, the motivations we have examined mesh during play, proliferating, compounding and informing one another. And ambiguous and multiple dramatic motivations, in which the invented persona of the avatar is curiously shot through with aspects of the everyday performance of self of the player, will employ the available semiotic modes of animation and speech-like chat to play out these ambiguities.

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