

“Azeroth the homeland”- World of Warcraft and the Sense of Belonging

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INTRODUCTION

“We actually tend to joke, me and my partner, that Azeroth (location in the game) is our true homeland, the place we call home. We come from different edges of Europe, he from Romania and I from Finland, and yet we feel an utter sense of understanding between each other. And it is not so surprising. It was in WoW where we met, and the frame of existence was the game and our activities in it. There the shared meaning was easy to find, and more importantly, it was no longer dependent on the physical space of our existence” - From my field research journal, 22.01.2014

Homeland is a concept full of connotations. Often marking a location in a world of nation-states and containing patriotic tone to it, it is loaded with affective undertones. In this vein, *having a homeland* suggests a sense of belonging to a specified place which is historically, socio-politically and culturally constructed, but usually also constrained by physical borders (Billig, 1995). According to Michael Billig this idea of the world neatly divided into bordered nation-states has been naturalized in the modern era (1995). This naturalization operates as an ideology under the surface of the everyday rhetoric and habits, thus making it seem and feel normal that the world would be divided in this manner (1995). This also works as a fuel for banal and hot forms of nationalism.

In order to explore both theoretical and lived alternatives for this normalization, I investigate the sense of belonging in connection to massive multiplayer online game *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004), utilizing an autoethnographical approach. Through this investigation I aim to demonstrate how in the context of *World of Warcraft* the sense of belonging and the idea of homeland are constructed in a different manner than in the everyday rhetoric and habits: Unlike with the bordered nation-states, the idea of *Azeroth as homeland* suggests that a homeland could simultaneously be “here” and “elsewhere” and without clear physical boundaries or with multiplicity of them.

Regardless of the autoethnographical approach utilized here, Azeroth as a location of belonging is not limited to the author’s experience but comes up in multiple contexts, like

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in the parodic song “We are the World of Warcraft”, performed in The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon (2013), where it is sang that “Its a world, a world that we call we home...and on Azeroth you never be alone”. Moreover, this sense of being at home, having homeland, and belonging to Azeroth also repeats in the discussions between the players of the game and in the commentaries under Youtube videos portraying content from the game. As Azeroth as a location of belonging is part of complex intersubjective, material and cultural conditions, of which the game itself is not the least important. In order to further analyse these conditions and their interplay in producing the *Azeroth the homeland* and the affects and conceptualizations accompanying it, I utilize both autoethnographically gathered data from the experience play of World of Warcraft from the years 2013-2016 (including discussions with other players), as well commentaries under Youtube videos portraying in-game content. In the analysis of the data I utilize loosely the concept of figure (Haraway, 1997). Donna Haraway (1997) describes figure as a location for both geometrically and rhetorically constructed repetition, which allows us to trace categories and binary oppositions, but also to recognize fractures and affective openings (1997). Based on this, I analyse how the *Azeroth the homeland* is constructed both in the rhetoric of repetition, thus by examining how “Azeroth” repeats in my field journals and discussions of the players online and in the commentaries, as well in the everyday habits, thus by looking at the material conditions around the play.

Based on the findings, I demonstrate how *Azeroth, the homeland* functions as a both representational trope to which meanings are attached, as well as a fracture where the usual articulations of homeland, borders, and nationality can be challenged. While doing this, I utilize and develop a DeleuzeGuattarian framework towards understanding of play and explore Gilles Deleuze’s concept of simulacrum (1983) as a theoretical tool to understand the logics of belonging and nationalism in relation to *Azeroth*. I further relate this particular fracture to the way the game on the one hand represents borders and nations, and on the other hand the kind of affect the game creates in the act of play. Thus I argue that it is the disjoint between experience and representation which allows the fracture to be born. Continuing from this, I am hoping to show that fractures such as *Azeroth the homeland* are central for play. Finally, I will demonstrate that while play (of *World of Warcraft*) contains potentiality for new categories to emerge, play is not a fully nomadic and free space, but contains its own hierarchies and power structures which should not be ignored while tracing *Azeroth the Homeland*. Regardless of this, analysing the game-world as a homeland can offer fruitful direction as it facilitates a potential for understanding the sense of belonging towards virtual locations.

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