Chapter 19

“I Rolled the Dice with Trade Chat and This is What I Got”: Demonstrating Context-Dependent Credibility in Virtual Worlds

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the authors extend Warnick’s (2007) appropriation of Toulmin’s (1958) “field-dependency” as applied through an ecological lens to examine credibility and ethos in the virtual world of a massive multiplayer online game. The authors theorize that ethos in such virtual environments is context-dependent—that it is in the interaction between designed game and user action/communication that ethos is engineered in a process that is fundamentally different from both websites (which are static) and other social media (where the environment is not nearly as much of an actor in the development of ethos/credibility). To better understand how players (as inhabitants of the game ecology) view the establishment of ethos, the authors collected in-game chat and near-game forum posts that included responses to requests for assistance or invitations to join a guild, and we asked our participants to evaluate these texts. The chapter uses the data collected about the perception of ethos to identify three key elements for successful demonstration of credibility in multiplayer games: specificity, demonstrated expertise, and experience.

INTRODUCTION

Massive multiplayer online games such as World of Warcraft, League of Legends, Rift, and City of Heroes take place in virtual worlds; these worlds are both programmed (by the game designers) and socially constructed (by the game players), and it is this intersection of digitally-mediated environment and action that provides a unique rhetorical ecology for each multi-player game. Because each game provides its own virtual world, the study of rhetorical activities takes place in communication networks that are both bounded and programmed.
In our review of the literature, we noted that a direct consideration of ethos has not yet been addressed by game studies scholars or by those in rhetoric and writing: even important works specifically interested in the rhetorics and literacies of games, such as Bogost’s (2007) *Persuasive Games* and Selke and Hawisher’s (2007) *Gaming Lives in the Twenty-First Century*, for instance, address questions of agency, identification, and ethics, but they do not look at ethos as constructed by either the player or the game (or any combination thereof). We believe that digital games—and multiplayer games in particular—are ideally situated to allow scholars to consider the role of context in the development of ethos. Halloran (1982) pointed out that “most concrete meaning given for the term [ethos] in the Greek lexicon is ‘a habitual gathering place,’” (p. 60), and in this chapter we examine not only the ways in which ethos is located in the person of the rhetor and the construction of the argument, but also within the designed ecology of the “habitual gathering place” of *World of Warcraft*. In the following sections, we examine the differences between analyzing ethos in websites/relatively static digital texts and analyzing ethos in interactive digital environments, present a theoretical framework based on an ecological view of game activity, and use in-game and near-game texts as prompts for player interviews to help us see the interrelationships of player, text, and game design as they impact the invention and deployment of ethos in game-based communications.

Analyzing written texts for the use of ethos as one of the three artistic proofs of classical rhetoric (as identified by Aristotle) has been a staple of rhetoric and composition courses, although it has shifted from the classical approach of proof inherent in the text itself to a form that is both inhabited by the rhetor and bolstered by drawing on networks of expertise (see Warnick, 2007). And over the past decade, computers and writing scholars have applied and refined the analysis of ethos as embodied in digital texts (Brent, 1997; Heba, 1997; Fogg, 2002; Grover, 2002; LaGrandeur, 2003). For websites, we might be able to use the same basic analytic approach as printed text, but we also need to address a number of elements that arise from the position of the websites within networks: “[W]hat other sites link to the site in question, whether its content is supported by other content in the knowledge system … how well the site functions, and whether it compares favorably with other sites in the same genre” (Warnick, 2007, p. 49). The digital nature of the text also allows the use of tools that orient the analysis to the role of the site’s infrastructure and its place within the network itself—see, for instance, Jim Ridolfo’s (2006) “Comprehensive Online Document Evaluation,” which provides instruction on using three network analysis tools to uncover both geographies and owners of digitally networked sites, along with two additional web-based tools for examining the changes over time that a given website experiences.

Multiplayer online games, however, have not received as much attention in terms of the development of rhetorical approaches to assessing ethos, whether exercised by the design of the game itself or by the activities and interactions of the players. One of the distinctions between the rhetorical situations of websites and games is the level of interaction. While a website exists within a network of links and associations, and the interface of any given site may require more or less user interaction, games require a much higher degree of engagement and interaction in order to function; this interactivity takes place between and among the players, the non-player characters (software agents), the programmed game mechanics (the “rules”) and the designed virtual environment that contains the primary interactions of play. We would suggest that understanding the role of ethos in games calls for a distinct analytic approach that considers the ways that environment, expertise, and rhetorical moves interact.

Both contemporary and classical approaches to the development of ethos focus on the interplay
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