Signs From A Strange Planet: Role Play And Social Performance In *Anarchy Online*

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ABSTRACT
In this paper we examine the online multi-player RPG *Anarchy Online*, using social semiotics. Social semiotics emphasizes context, discourse and motivation in sign making and sign interpretation. Drawing on our own experiences of leveling up in *Anarchy Online*, player interviews, and recorded game sessions, we suggest three inter-related and broad categories of motivation: representational, ludic and communal.

Keywords
RPG, role-play, avatars, social semiotics, motivation.

1. Introduction
Anarchy Online (Funcom) is a science fiction styled multiplayer online role-playing game 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 skill, 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. They manipulate their avatar, and type/chat live to other players. In the background a rainstorm or 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. Social semiotics places an emphasis on the creative work of the signmmaker, and their transformative use of the available semiotic resources. A further development of social semiotic theory proposes that the landscape of contemporary communication is *multimodal* (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2001). 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 needs of the signmaker. We are interested in how *Anarchy Online* offers a rich array of semiotic resources to the player, who learns how to deploy these resources for digital dressing up, exploration, self expression and combat. We will also explore how the players' speech-like mode of 'chat' shapes the ways in which roles are played out, and facilitates the players' interaction 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 (and provisionally titled) areas within which to explore the presence of motivated sign making and sign reading in this game. First, we suggest various **representational motivations** – this category involves presentational, dramatic, narrative and performative aspects within the game. Second, we suggest a **ludic motivation**: an interest in the skills, rules, competition and dynamic engagement invited by the game. This category is named for 'ludology' a term popularised by theorists such as Gonzalo Frasca (www.ludology.org). Finally we explore 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. The notion of the 'communal' is intended to refer to both the social, shared nature of the game, and the sense that the game itself is located within a generic community that encompasses similarly themed fiction and other computer games.

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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, and narrative and ludic discourses in RPGs (2003a,b). 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 or identity.

Figure One: Aisea applauding

***Anarchy Online* (copyright Funcom)**

1.1 Representational motivations : "Welcome to Rubi-Ka"

Anarchy Online is a role-playing game (RPG), which means that it owes certain generic factors and a rules system to table-top role playing games such as *Dungeons and Dragons* (TSR 1980s). Whereas console games generally offer the player a ready made avatar with 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 players of *Anarchy Online* are 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 player selects from four very different species, each with different strengths. The player then selects a gender. Each of these choices will have ramifications for the subsequent options that the player is presented with. The player selects a face for their avatar, and then a height and a body weight. Variation is further multiplied when the player selects from one of twelve professions (which determines a character's initial wardrobe, among other things). The player is then invited to give their character a nickname, which has to be unique. Then the player decides on the political alignment (neutral, clan or corporate) of their avatar. These options relate to the game's back-story and have geopolitical consequences for an avatar.

This simple set of options produces thousands of 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 also choose the skills and weapons acquired by their avatars as they 'level up'.

1.2 Character generation: Nirvano, Grayse and Aisea

Anarchy Online dramatises the character selection process. A new game opens with a view from orbit, and the player is welcomed to the "territorial space" of Rubi-Ka. The 'camera' then swoops along the corridors of a 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; it's 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 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 that 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: While I have played in the guise of a short, bald engineer with a moustache, called Festa, the avatars that I have spent most time playing are female. The first character I built was (and is) called Grayse. I choose to play as a doctor, believing that her ability to heal other players would help facilitate friendly interaction and team play. Grayse is small, dark, and named after a friend. Grayse is a nanomage- a small indigenous humanoid with certain genetic and technological advantages. Generally in RPGs magic users become powerful over time, but initially they are vulnerable. This, it quickly became apparent, was also true of technology dependants on Rubi-Ka (*Anarchy Online* is a science fiction and the alien technologies operate much as magic would in a fantasy RPG). After being killed numerous times by toxic rodents, I put Grayse to one side in order to learn the basics of the game with an easier and stronger character, and returned to the character generation phase. Second time around, I built a martial artist named Aisea. Aisea is also named for 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, so she is genetically predisposed to absorb the power of 'notum'. I choose to play a martial artist because I like martial arts movies, and because it suggests to me more interesting combat possibilities than shooting does. An additional incentive was that I had noticed other female martial artists in the game wearing cocktail dresses. The idea of combining lethal moves with pretty clothes is appealing. As Aisea has levelled up she has learnt some relatively spectacular moves, including flying kicks. Aisea is tiny compared to many of the other characters, and her smallness gives me pleasure: it makes her look deceptively harmless, and it signifies a very satisfying combination of precision and violence.

Aisea and Nirvano are partial representations of us, at least to the extent that they express various preferences. Each character is also bearing generic markers (they are martial artists in a science fictive space). We have chosen from a restricted menu of semiotic resources. Our selections are down to personal prerogative, but the menu of choices on offer is afforded by the game. Thanks to the multiplicative nature of the options on offer during character creation, our avatars are visibly distinctive. Our avatar's names are unique as well: nicknames are entered using text, and the only restriction is that is singular.

Figure Two: Aisea fighting Highvoltage the TechnoSlave
***Anarchy Online* (copyright Funcom)**

1.3 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 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 they 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. 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 and the repertoire of potentials offered by the game connote their eventual expression in the game world.

A percentage of players of *Anarchy Online* are committed to Role Playing. Role Players (or RPers) 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 it's 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 beginner's 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 commited 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*. In a game, resources and rule-systems are offered – but like language, there are not necessarily limits on what can be "said" using these resources: in this case, the construction of complex, highly developed dramatic roles.

The player makes choices about the 'look' of an avatar, and the style of play that they undertake. We tend to think of this category of sign making as being motivated by expressive, narrative and dramatic concerns. What typifies these motivations is that they are not limited by the explicit ludic imperatives of the game (goals and scores, for example). 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'.

2. Ludic motivations : game, goals, strategies

As has been pointed out by various videogame theorists (Juul 2001, Eskelinen 2001) narrative discourse contains prior events that are ordered in time (or plotted) and related to the user, whereas playing a game involves events that are ordered, at least in part, by the player, and that unfold in the real time of the user. 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 schemata 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 needs to be made: the borders between these ludic and the narrative strata are not particularly distinct. There is some discussion on the player's forums as to what, for example, distinguishes role play (play with a self professed narrative agenda, as described above) from 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.

Figure 3: *Anarchy Online*, copyright: Funcom. Ludic motivations: Image of the character 'Japhis' with her statistics screen

Ludic modes foreground the role of the avatar as game component, as symbolic unit of strategic value (like a chess-piece). Accordingly this category revolves around considerations of 'how to play'. 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. 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. At first 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 might move through the world in a 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 the player – and these actions involve the manipulation of technologically mediated signifiers. These signifiers recall what Halliday (1989) has called 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, 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 make for a complex and creative activity requiring considerable skill. In computational linguistics, too, 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 player responds to the game's rules, which are expressed in semiotic terms as missions, weapons, rewards and first-aid kits. These are central to the game's challenges and game-play. The player has available a restricted language of avatar movement – run and walk, directionality, jump, but each movement, however simple, 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 avatars. As the player acquires fluency, the ludic and representational qualities blur: a high level avatar will be visually distinctive, personalised by exotic armour and monstrous pets.

If we decide to take our 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 an avatar's movements depend on the game's mechanics and the player's 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 fellow players, who may affect our experience to a greater or lesser degree. In addition to the representational and ludic motivations we have discussed, these communal motivations (informed by various social and cultural expectations) shape the player's experience of the shared game world.

3. 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.

When we interviewed our three (male, teenage) player-consultants about their expectations of *Anarchy Online*, before they began to play, certain communal motivations were clear – all three of them had played online games before, and all had ideas about the pleasures and options that the game would provide. Their expectations in terms of ludic motivations were 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 advantages 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. Interestingly his action associates this game with its *Dungeons and Dragons*/Fantasy roots, rather than with its science fiction setting. Tim 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 on related discourses – the name is borrowed from Tolkienesque narratives and live action role-play games. Tim explained his predilection for sniper rifles in terms of his past experiences in FPS games. 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". All three interviewees expressed distaste for the 'dressing up' potentials of the game.

It was, perhaps, in terms of the social motivations of the game that our interviewee's expectations were most interesting. They expected quite specific kinds of relations between avatars and players. In particular, in relation to gender, they constructed a modality that selectively 'read through' the appearance of other avatars. The boys were very certain that behind all 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 as like themselves as possible. 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. Their distrust also appeared to be rooted in a discourse of 'internet suspicion', born of an alarmist and wary attitude towards predatory online duplicity. In the case of these three teenagers, such suspicions are reinvented as a 'knowing 'discourse.

One option when playing *Anarchy Online* is to play solo – to refuse to engage with other players. However it is not possible to ignore their existence in the world: they will run past you, hold you up in queues at mission terminals, stand next to you in shops, have conversations you can 'hear', and approach you with questions or requests to join them. As we explored these possibilities, it become apparent that the interaction with other players is channelled primarily through two (occasionally disarticulated) channels, or 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 others in a way that signals some expectation of reaction. This particular system of *meaning potential* involves the way in which our avatars are equipped with a repertoire of blended animated movements expressive of emotion or certain kinds of social communication. These include waving, nodding, laughing, pointing, dancing, and various other rude, humorous and expressive gestures. When Aisea first appeared next to Nirvano at the appointed time and place, she was waved her arms in vigorous greeting. Andrew immediately became conscious, for the first time, that Nirvano's arms were pinned helplessly to his side; and he had to ask (i.e. type into the chat-box) "How do you do that?" This visual aspect of the avatar employs various potentials: costume, body, face and movement, and all are elaborately expressive. There can be no lapse from this locale, because the player's presence depends on and manifests as the avatar.

In-game live chat involves the typed entries of players, and this mode is comparatively flexible: chat is at times the 'voice' of the avatar, but at other times it's clearly the player who is talking. 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?" or "Are you a real girl?"). This chat mode, unlike the specific, restricted language of the animated emote repertoire, is an unrestricted natural language and, like our nicknames, it is a form of semiotic work that is 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 that 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 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 'talking' in *Anarchy Online* 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.

In this particular example of synchronous chat, the players have a high ludic motivation, and a low commitment to developed roleplay or characterisation. In the above exchange, no one was interested in the character, history, or personality of his or her 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 and indecision of the human players. In terms of multimodal theory, the semiotic effect of this kind of role-play is a pulling-apart of the two modes through which the avatar acts – the animated image and the written chat. In this instance, 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. In such cases abbreviation is clearly not an issue, as is clear in this exchange witnessed by Andrew in passing: "I bow to your superior wit and wisdom, and withdraw from combat".

4. 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, playground style "why, are you?"). Thus we met Rafayel, an avatar with a 'male model' physique, wearing high heels, thong style underpants and sunglasses.[1]

For Andrew, Rafayel'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: Rafayel was hassling Nirvano for associating with a female. Rafayel 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, Rafayel completely ignored Grayse. Grayse resorted to conciliatory compliments about Rafayel's shoes, but to no avail. Inspired by the tattoo that Rafayel sports across his chest, Grayse asked about where to get one for herself. Rafayel ignored Grayse. Nirvano repeated the question, and Rafayel 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). Rafayel initially offended both of us, for completely different reasons. We both assumed, throughout the encounter, that Rafayel was a male player. There is of course, no reason to believe that is the case – 'Rafayel' might well be an adolescent girl or a grandmother, but while in this particular embodiment, he was male to us. In his chat (even when 'out of character') Rafayel presents himself as male. Nirvano and Grayse (and Andrew and Diane) experience him as a male presence, because of the way he looked, the way he acted, and the things that he typed. Nirvano and Rafayel met by accident later that same afternoon and had a friendlier conversation. Rafayel 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 (representational, ludic, communal) that we have examined all mesh during play, proliferating, compounding and informing one another. In practice these motivations become ambiguous and multiple. The invented persona of the avatar remains curiously shot through with aspects of the everyday. The game's elaborate science fiction locale plays against the abbreviated pragmatics of chat, levelling and team formation, and the available semiotic modes of animation and speech-like chat allow for these ambiguities.

5. References

1. We have changed this avatar's name.

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