# Final Essay Assignment: Media Microecologies of *World of Warcraft*

**Final Paper Proposal**
1-2 pages
due Tuesday, April 14th

**Final Essay**
7-10 pages
due Thursday, April 23rd in my mailbox in CL 501 and uploaded to SafeAssign

> *Any medium—poetic, literary, cinematic, computational—can be read as a configurative system, an arrangement of discrete, interlocking units of expressive meaning. I call these general instances of procedural expression* unit operations.
> Ian Bogost, *Unit Operations*[1]

> *Play is no longer a counter to work. Play becomes work; work becomes play. Play outside of work found itself captured by the rise of the digital game, which responds to the boredom of the player with endless rounds of repetition, level after level of difference as more of the same. Play no longer functions as a foil for critical theory. The utopian dream of liberating play from the game, of a pure play beyond the game, merely opened the way for the extension of gamespace into every aspect of everyday life. While the counter-culture wanted worlds of play outside the game, the military entertainment complex countered in turn by expanding the game to the whole world, containing play forever within it.*
> McKenzie Wark*, Gamer Theory*[2]

> *Failure in games tells us that we are flawed and deficient. As such, video games are the* art of failure*, the singular art form that sets us up for failure and allows us to experience and experiment with failure.*
> Jesper Juul, *The Art of Failure*[3]

Ian Bogost's book, *How to Do Thing with Videogames* (2011), takes up a deceptively modest project. Rather than attempt to formulate some all-encompassing theoretical approach to videogames and what they do in our world—what famous media theorist Marshall McLuhan and others would call a "media ecology"—Bogost wants to dig into the dirt of videogames, to look at small, overlooked aspects of games, and to study them "microecologically." He wants to approach videogames as an entomologist or a nanotechnologist or an archaeologist would. This approach is genealogically tied to McLuhan's famous dictum, "the medium is the message"— that whatever content or meaning may reside in any particular text, it is fundamentally shaped by the formal properties of the medium—but it also comes from Bogost's awareness that the message is *also* the message. In a staggeringly diverse approach to many aspects of videogames, Bogost's book is a first, albeit small step toward a media microecology of videogames.

      For your final essay I would like you to take up Bogost's project, to approach *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004-2015) from the position of a media microecologist. *Warcraft* is an immense game, one that cannot conceivably be traversed over even the course of a month of play. Indeed, people who have been playing for years still encounter new aspects of the game. And further, it is a game that is constantly in flux, changing over time, becoming something different than what it once was on a near daily basis. In short, one cannot conceivably

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[1] Ian Bogost, *Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 3.
[2] McKenzie Wark, *Gamer Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), section 16.
[3] Jesper Juul, *The Art of Failure: An Essay on the Pain of Playing Video Games* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), 30.

approach the entire, whole text, perhaps as one would a novel or film. As such, it is an excellent site for doing media microecology, for honing in on some small, specific aspect of the game, and analyzing, reading, and interpreting that aspect in order to come to a greater understanding of how *Warcraft*, and perhaps games in general, do certain kinds of work and make certain kinds of meaning.

For this essay I would like you to choose some *specific* aspect of *Warcraft* to investigate, to interpret, to analyze, to approach as a media microecologist, and to write an essay making an argument about that aspect of the game, an argument with critical stakes, an argument you think is significant and important to make. You will note that each of Bogost's short chapters in *How to Do Things With Videogames* makes some kind of argument. Often these arguments are fairly modest, but even the simplest ones have wide-ranging implications. I would like see you critically engaging with *Warcraft* in a similar way: by analyzing and interpreting some small aspect of the game, articulate at an argument about what kinds of work and/or what kinds of meaning *Warcraft* produces.

Further, I would like your analysis of *Warcraft* to engage with at least two of the critical texts we will have read so far, and with new critical texts that you find through research. I imagine that texts by Bogost, Alexander R. Galloway, David Golumbia, Patrick Jagoda, or Lisa Nakamura that we're reading alongside *Warcraft* might be useful, as would be any of the specific essays we will have read in *The World of Warcraft Reader*, but I could also see that one might productively engage with other theoretical texts we've read this semester, namely those by Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, Donna Haraway, Martin Heidegger, Frank Kermode, *Protocol* (2004), and others. What you choose to discuss is up to you, and there are a number of ways to go here, but your essay should show that it is clearly in conversation with the larger theoretical discussions we are having in class about narrative, technology, and videogames. Your essay should also show thoughtful and careful research into your topic (more on this below in the "requirements").

Lastly, though I am asking you to write about something that is not necessarily a text in the "traditional" fashion, I will still be primarily interested in the *strength of your argument and the quality of your idea*, and much of how and why you construct your argument in the way you do will be based on the perceptiveness and care of your close, careful reading of the game. So being specific in your engagement will immensely help you here, as will being creative, attempting to look at something, like Bogost does, that might be easily overlooked by most players of the game. As you can see, there are a *host* of directions you might take with this assignment, and I am quite looking forward to see where you go.

**Final Paper Requirements**

*Final Paper Proposal*: Due Tuesday, April 14th. I would like you to hand in a brief proposal (1-2 pp.) of what you are going to write on. The paper proposal should include:
1) What *specific* aspects of *World of Warcraft* you are planning on writing about.
2) A brief outline of the issues you are interested in investigating.
3) Your thesis/argument (which can still be exploratory in nature).
4) A bibliography of what critical articles and other sources you are planning on using.

You do not need to stick to the letter of your proposal for your final paper, and may find it differs dramatically, but the proposal is intended as a way of doing some of the legwork necessary for your final paper before you write it.

*Final Paper*: 7-10 pages, due Thursday, April 23$^{rd}$ by 4:00 pm in my mailbox in room 501 of the Cathedral of Learning and uploaded to SafeAssign on CourseWeb. The final paper is meant as both a synthesis and culmination of the work you've done in the class. The requirements are:

—*Close Reading/Critical Play*. Unavoidably, whatever you are writing on will incorporate close, careful attention to the game/text, analyzing its forms and structures, engaging with its content, paying attention to its procedures and mechanics. In short, you should primarily think of the work you are doing as *interpretation*. *World of Warcraft* offers *many* paths for close, careful engagement, so the more specific you are in your approach the more complex your reading will be.

—*Theory and Criticism*. Whatever you choose to write on, you must address *at least two* of the critical or theoretical texts we have read and discussed in class in some way (anything from Kermode to Jagoda, anything from the *Warcraft Reader*, etc.). This may be a lengthy engagement or may be as small as a footnote. Either way, this requirement is intended to put your writing within the context of this course's project, to show that your writing and thinking are informed and conversant with the theoretical discussions we have had about narrative, technology, and videogames, and you are free to choose how you do this.

—*Research*. You are required to have *at least two* outside sources informing your work as well. These sources *must*, without exception, have been *originally* published in an academic journal or book (i.e., *not the internet*), but you are welcome to use purely internet sources in addition to these sources. There have been a *number* of interesting critical and scholarly readings of *World of Warcraft* specifically and videogames in general over the past decade, and I want you to engage with some of this conversation. You can also use *one* of the essays in the *Warcraft Reader* that we have *not* read to fulfill one of these sources, but only one. The other must come from somewhere else. (Obviously, feel free to draw upon other essays from the *Warcraft Reader*, as there are some interesting things there.)

Research can be pretty fun (I swear). Let this be a chance for you to really delve into the library. If you are having trouble finding sources, *do not hesitate to ask a librarian for help.* Librarians are there for you to ask questions of and they are an incredibly useful resource. Also, PittCat is very useful for finding critical essays, and will link you to sites like JSTOR, Project Muse, and Academic-Lexis Nexus, all of which have a number of essays on *Warcraft* and videogames that originally appeared in academic journals. (These are all general databases that can be found under: ULS Homepage → Databases → By Title.)

You should keep in mind that I will be considering *what* you find and use, along with *how* you use it, when considering your grade. Students will not be penalized for

the "bare minimum" of sources, but showing that you have done careful and thoughtful research into your topic will greatly help you.

Regarding research: it can be quite tempting to simply ape another critic's reading of a text, simply rephrasing their thinking in your own words. This final paper expects that you go considerably beyond this, and that you use the work of other critics and scholars writing about *Warcraft* or videogames as things to rigorously and complexly work with and against. Basically, your research will introduce you to a conversation that is already going on. I am asking you to participate in that conversation in a new and original manner, rather than just repeat what other people have already said.

Other than that, where you go is up to you.

You have well over a month to work on this assignment, so as always I will be happy to talk and work with you, talk about ideas, look at drafts, etc., either in person or through email. I will also be playing *Warcraft* frequently, so please feel free to take advantage of my, our Teaching Assistant, and other students' in-game presence to critically engage with the game *while* you are playing; indeed, I implore you to do so (and this of course, will help your participation in the class). This is both a broad and specific assignment, which means that there are a *number* of interesting paths you might take here, so I urge you to write about something that interests you and I look forward to see where your thinking takes you. And please do not hesitate to ask questions.