

# WoW gets Trumped: Politics and Play in Azeroth during the Trump Era

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Play, Diversity, Inclusion, Politics, MMOs

## INTRODUCTION

With the launch of *World of Warcraft's* (Blizzard entertainment, 2004) eighth expansion – *Battle for Azeroth* – in 2018, it was evident that the game world and story had become infused with Trumpian rhetoric and aesthetics in a way that shifted what it meant to explore, play, and socialize in Azeroth. *Battle for Azeroth* (BfA) featured the most explicit shift towards faction warfare in the history of the franchise. The story, developed over the course of pre-expansion events, revolved around a serious of violent incitements – escalating to an act of genocide against one of the game's playable races, that resulted in a state of full war by expansion launch. Fighting over scarce resources on a planet that is dying, the two major factions in World in of Warcraft not only denied the possibility for communication and conciliation, they advocated for conflict and violence as the solution to environmental and economic uncertainty. In the time since *BfA*, these economic and socio-political tensions have only amplified, spilling into spaces within the game and its online communities. This is the case even as more recent expansions have attempted to stress reconciliation between the factions and a less overtly political, if still rife with conflict, game world. While Blizzard and its new parent company Microsoft have attempted to maintain a corporate neutrality, in-game chat channels and online forums are churning out discussions about 'free speech,' 'woke in WoW', 'games as escapism', 'female heroes and villains', and 'diversity and representation' that maintain the pattern of deep ideological polarization that formed the crux of *BfA's* artistic and narrative tone. Using *Battle for Azeroth* as a locus for this exploratory analysis, this research seeks to examine how the language and ideology of Trump era politics has become coded into *World of Warcraft*. It understands Trumpian politics (and rhetoric) as identified by the speech and actions of the former and current president himself: erratic, bombastic, often violent, typically vindictive, and deeply invested in intensifying political polarization. My focus here extends beyond the dissonance many players reveal when they at one and the same time infuse their play (and their talk about it) with Trumpian rhetoric while continuing to deny that games are political objects. Rather, what is most worthwhile is to explore how this community understands, frames and debates politics by reference to a game that has itself become increasingly coded in the language of political division and conflict. This work is in conversation with earlier

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research on identity, culture, politics and WoW, and in particular the edited collection by Corneliussen and Rettberg<sup>1</sup> as well as early research on MMO communities by T.L. Taylor<sup>2</sup>. This analysis will draw from Gee's seminal work on discourse analysis<sup>3</sup>, in addition to Gray and Leonard's research on diversity and representation in games and gaming communities<sup>4</sup>, Ruberg and Phillips' work on the politics of queer resistance in gaming<sup>5</sup>, and finally Steinkuehler's concepts of the 'mangle of play'<sup>6</sup> and 'online communities of practice,'<sup>7</sup> and how these emerge in these communities and facilitate both discourses and learning. This research will combine a textual analysis of Battle for Azeroth's pre-expansion events that guided gameplay and game story towards full-out conflict with a discourse analysis of official Blizzard forums, as well as community-led online spaces such as the WoW reddit and MMO Champion website. Data related to in-game events transpiring around this period and early expansion launch will be located and collected via keyword searches that aim to identify, collect, and analyze extended conversations happening in these spaces. Next, it will analyze the games journalism produced around the pre-expansion event period, with particular attention to the rise of the #notmywarchief moment among horde faction players. Finally, it will connect this period to more recent events in WoW, once again diving into key story beats and other major WoW news that has served as a locus for these contentious debates in online forums and community spaces. This exploration of more recent WoW related content will illuminate how the "Trump effect" very much continues to be woven into the core systems, narratives, and community spaces of the game. While it cannot offer a complete picture, this paper will explore how this community of gamers have come to view *World of Warcraft*, its core story, and aesthetic world, as explicitly political and divisive in the era of Trumpian politics. This research is part of ongoing work that will contribute to an edited collection of scholarship looking at World of Warcraft after 20+ years.

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## ENDNOTES

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