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game rule system representation WoW blessing noob kills Demor face body fight PVP contest
religion gamer analysis healing roleplay o-scape SOO diablo class tradition experience Authentic
simulation ludology The Last of Us death resurrection funeral runes Twitch rebirth in-game
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Interview with Third Faction

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Abstract

Interview with Third Faction.

Keywords: Third Faction, /hug



Q1: Who is Third Faction?

Third Faction is an affiliation of avatars, or game-based characters, and the real-life people who inhabit them. Third Faction members share a collective interest in exposing unfair hierarchical systems imposed in synthetic environments. Our focus is to develop a democratized and non-hierarchical presence in game-based spaces, as well as assisting players to develop ingame self governance. Our current members include a global cabal of internationally based artists and performers, but we welcome new memberships of all kinds. This open system of Third Faction membership promotes participatory practice. As a group we participate in performative actions, cross factional missions and subversions of a dominant (and often domineering) game culture. The original members of the collective include:

- Thomas Asmuth (MyriamMoore),
- Mez Breeze (BowwToxx),
- John Pierre Bruneau (Cretivcowman),

- Jenene Castle (Mohana),
- Steve Durie (Tookis),
- Kyung Lee (Sootso),
- James Morgan (Deaxter),
- Ali Sajjadi (Layli), and
- Liz Solo (Sliz).

Third Faction members question the politics, allegiances, and narrative conventions of Synthetic Worlds. The collective officially formed in *World of Warcraft* on Valentine's Day 2008 via a group meeting of both Horde and Alliance players in a self-declared Temporary Autonomous Zone.





As a collective, our origins lie in intervention-like performances occurring in the MMO game *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*). Since these initial ingame interventions, our scope has expanded to include considerations of the nature, rights and ethics of both the avatar and their physical counterpart (the player) in multiple synthetic worlds/spaces. We use a range of tools in such spaces to critically examine hegemonic narratives and the corporate, game-directed contract which governs engagement - think the Terms and Conditions to which players must agree before being allowed to game-engage. We are constantly recruiting performers, volunteers and agents through our videos, website and public presentations/appearances.

Q2: What are the objectives, aims or concepts you want to share in gameenvironments?

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Our events frequently take place within game environments in direct response to the concepts and narrative issues encountered there, but our events also spill over into mixed reality spaces. Our actions and interventions occur (both online and off) to highlight concepts surrounding fairness and decency, and how they effect, or should effect, narrative constructions. We also seek to question governance issues presented in such game-spaces by promoting social justice, philanthropy, avatar agency, and user-based rights as they relate to avatars. We aim to explore the notion of law as a universal standard of public decency, and to explore the promise of penalties for not adhering to such laws. Additionally, we delve into the applied discipline that emerges from application of punishments, again looking at normalizing forces that lead groups to adopt certain behaviors. In our work, we are questioning such operational devices in game/online narratives, as we see the omissions - or plain dismissal - of humane ideas in such 'laws'. Concepts from Discipline Theory and Fascism as a Foucaultian idea inform

our projects and interventions. If the overall game (or virtual environment) narrative under examination is informed by ideologies that are skewed or lopsided, and involve the encouragement of questionable interpersonal interactions and top-heavy power dynamics (thereby normalizing them within the space), then we promote bending these laws in order to redress this imbalance by encouraging humane treatment of other avatars - and hence - players.



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Q3: In which way are video games/gaming related to your work?

As a collective, we provide commentary on real world issues that parallel virtual game environments. Social structures mirror each other in game spaces and in "reality." In fact the virtual is a subset of the real, and as humans we bring all of our issues, emotions, prejudices and negativity with us into these spaces. Some aspects are easier to anonymize, but others linger. The genesis of our collective centres in our participation in

the game *World of Warcraft*. During our time spent in WoW, we observed that the negativity that infects and effects players there mapped directly to real world experiences of hate and fear-mongering, so we offered players alternative methods of interacting.

After experiencing the power of being thoroughly immersed in games, we realised we could create action within these spaces that both commented on and provoked corresponding actions in "real life". We aim to show that there is a permeable membrane around the gamespaces in which we engage. Our first steps were somewhat insular, but as we grew and shifted as a collective, our focus changed to include more direct intervention in the established narrative of such games. We often use performance to create direct actions around certain issues.



Q4: What is the appeal of working within the constraints of MMORPG social environments?

Virtual Environments, especially MMORPGs, collapse physical space and connect people. Third Faction exploits the porosity of these virtual/synthetic worlds (Castranova 2005); many of the group's major projects to date address human rights issues, societal normalizations, and power/control based dynamics. One of our most fascinating areas of investigation concerns the agency expressed by users in such virtual environments and game spaces. It is really common for the gaming community to be seduced by new graphics and technology that influences the user to train into limited narratives that are reinforced with perceived rewards. At the same time, an enormous amount of player-based back channel communication, strategy, and real-time socialization occurs in these highly popular game titles that exist well outside the protective bubble of the login portal. Such "bleedthrough" socializations are often presented in the media as apocryphal news items, such as couples who meet and marry through their guild, or academics who use the system to replace some other popular teleconferencing platform.

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Despite all the mixed reality bleedthrough, in MMORPGs and other AAA game-spaces it is not really common to see someone 'play' by another set of rules. In 2012, there was an upsurge in Peacenik activities in *WoW*, where veteran players and socially motivated individuals set up guilds to specifically employ different game strategies than those officially mandated. It was all very monastic, and many played Druidical classes; the challenge and discussion in such classes coalesced around the question of whether a player could "max out" their characters without ever slaying another PC or NPC. Was there enough slack and gap in the system that one could choose an anti-hegemonic lifestyle and still reap rewards from the experience point system? These players found

that it could, in fact, be done. So this challenge of going off script, considering the implications of the script, and choosing to game-space ad-lib are major areas of attraction for us Third Factioneers.

Q5: How do your interventions/performances puncture, or address, the idea of the 'Magic Circle'?

Our work straddles the boundaries of the magic circle. It is easy to shed ethics when playing a game and forget that your orchestrated in-game opponents are not merely pixels and code; that there are both costs and advantages to being able to adopt a more humane set of in-game behaviours. We prefer to approach this from the standpoint of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), and though the Terms of Service (ToS) may sit outside the magic circle, their effects are profound within. We are not opposed to players test-driving a new set of ethics, but we also want them to be aware of the way the ToS may affect and direct them, and how a game's overarching corporate directives effect the narrative. We often prefer to operate within the magic circle and to role play our convictions, as we see that this may promote a deeper relationship to, and understanding of, the players and the virtual environment.

Q6: To date, what have been your most important interventions or game performances? How did it/they come about?

Two of our most important intervention-based projects are "/hug" and "DPS". "/hug" (pronounced slash-hug). Our aim during "/hug" was to create a Non-Governmental Organization like the American Red Cross in the world of Azeroth (the fictional land in which WoW is set). We realized that there was no support mechanism or response to the inhumanity of the war setting in-game. We ended up creating a Third Faction to give

players an alternate option to standard "out of the box" game mechanics (like fighting and grinding), and worked instead to assist players (such as widows, orphans and those who lost loved ones to the in-game factionalised war). The /hug collective worked subversively in *World of Warcraft* to establish the humanitarian principles of a stereotypical non-governmental organization. NGOA members - both from the Third Faction group and volunteer players - were encouraged to perform in-game actions that satirically highlighted the competitive structure that underlies the game. "/hug" was exhibited during the [WoW: Emergent Media Phenomenon](#) show sponsored by Blizzard Entertainment at Laguna Art Museum in Laguna Beach, California from 14 June to 4 October 2009. At this exhibition, "/hug" promoted audience participation through in-game missions. These operations attempt to reorient *World of Warcraft* game conventions towards more humanitarian concerns. Examples of these missions include: flooding the neutral Auction House with inexpensive health items, donations of expensive health items (such as bandages) to resource-poor characters, and providing cross-factional assistance to low level characters in hostile environments. The aim of the project was to encourage players to participate in harmless game subversion while reflecting on issues such as real-world conflict resolution using NGOs as a model.



+/HUG MISSION CARD: 'It's In The Mail'



Difficulty: Moderate

What you Need: Mailbox +
miscellaneous trade goods

Objective: Donate collected
materials by using the mail
system

Estimated time: 5 minutes

Value: Supports daily operations
of /hug and volunteer efforts

Step 1: Is your inventory full?
Check by opening your bag
(press shift & "B" together).

Step 3: Find the nearest
mailbox. The easiest way is
by right clicking the "hearth-
stone" in your bag. This will
take you to an inn. The mail-
box should be outside.

Step 2: See if you have excess
trade goods in your bags (ie fish,
cloth, meat).

Step 4: If your hearthstone is on
cool down then see the map for
a route to an inn; Alliance follow
the blue path and Horde follow
the red.

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Alliance Mailbox

Step 5: Right click the mailbox,
then click the "send mail" tab on
the bottom of that menu. In the
"To:" section type "slashhug" if
you are horde or "slashhugs" if
you are alliance. In the "Subject:"
section type "donation".

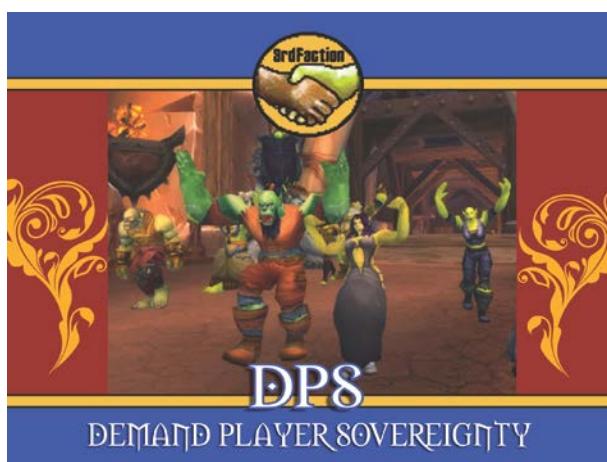


Horde Mailbox

Step 6: Then right click the
item(s) in your bag that you want
to donate. After you have selected
all the items you want to donate
click the "send" button.

Step 7: Now run back to your
appropriate faction area as outlined
on the map above.

Demand Player Sovereignty (or DPS) was a movement in civil disobedience based in *WoW*. One of our collective goals for this project was to promote greater autonomy for the players in order to support their diverse and creative play styles, and also to give the players a voice to change the rules of the game itself. The Third Faction Collective lead our members and volunteers in active engagement within both the game environment as well as outside it. The rules of *WoW* are strictly designed to keep the player's actions within the expected experience range which is engineered by the game's creators: that engineered experience is one of war and conflict. Attempts to push the borders of acceptable gameplay are met with resistance on the part of the game creators. At best, the game is patched to remove the offending potential actions. At worst, the player is punished and their account taken away. The Terms of Service, to which a player must agree in order to play the game, exist to control social mores. To achieve our goal, we subverted the deliberate factional conflict within the game by participating with our supposed enemies, exploring peaceful modes of play, and bringing the ideas of political player resistance to the in-game public forum. "DPS" was also presented in a mixed reality setting at ISEA 2011, Istanbul.



Q7: Is there an established process regarding how you formulate your projects? If yes, what is it?

We immerse ourselves into virtual spaces, engaging in it enough to thoroughly understand the environment. Then we discuss the game, and strategize about how best to intervene or highlight the discrepancies between the game structure/culture and UDHR or how individuals should be treated as humans.

Q8: How important is the collaboration to Third faction?

Our practice is founded upon collaboration. As a loose collective we need to respond to the needs of the group, but we also want to be part of the virtual worlds we intervene in. Therefore we actively seek public responses to our work.

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Q9: The Third Faction uses the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a founding document; can you explain how this relates to avatars, Terms of Service and other legal documents?

The state of contemporary contract law is vile. It is tragically easy to sign away your rights to protest, and to freedom of speech, in an end user license agreement. These contracts have to be held to account. Avatar Rights are your rights, as an avatar is an extension of the person who operates it. Human rights persist regardless of location. Unfortunately, human rights in virtual spaces can end up being an extension - and a narrowing - of those in the physical space. For example, from the UDHR: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brother[person]hood." This implies that in game spaces, we are entitled to a certain level of equality. This does not

prevent someone from levelling or gaining elite gear. The spirit of personhood may not prevent you from being killed in the field, but it should prevent you from being harassed.



Q10: As a humanitarian organization, is there irony in existing virtually in a game space?

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In a word, no. The implicit sense of irony focusing on virtual play comes from the notion that all gaming environments are escapist fantasies and the exclusive playground of a privileged class. Critique could rightly be leveled at our Third Faction work as being carried out in a privileged MMO space, but this wouldn't be completely accurate. Gaming is social; the abstraction into Orcs and Undead and cow-human hybrids doesn't change the fact that each avatar or character is being controlled by a human with very necessary needs, agendas, and desires. The design of the narratives in which we engage are critically oversimplified and abstracted, so there's a sense of losing the subtleties and difficulties of relationships (friendly and/or hostile). Usually human relationships are a combination of both of these sides. And our myth stories historically represent this very human idiosyncrasy; the Nordic myths as recorded by Sturlsson are a very good example of a more holistic abstraction of human experience. An example of this is the convoluted nature of Thor and Loki as brothers and as enemies; their stories are full of

contradictions, such as Thor's defense of his kin, Loki, and then betrayal soon after. These narratives illustrate the reflection of our fraught nature of relationships. This gets lost in the modern story traditions, where we are sold on the idea that it doesn't really matter. It is easy to choose to be on Team Good or Team Evil: this is where the notion of escapist fantasy gets reinforced, and perspectives about relationships and choice are made even more important. Every Avatar is attached to a human, so acting humanely in a game environment is incredibly important. This, perhaps, is the irony: that people find it so easy to shed their humanity in a fictive space.



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References

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