The Production and Consumption of a Nation-Building Ideology: Contemporary Rhetoric and Normative Entertainment in *Black and White*

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> A standing U.S. government office to manage nation-building will be a hard sell politically, because we are still unreconciled to the idea that we are in the nation-building business for the long haul.
>
> —Francis Fukuyama, *The Atlantic Monthly*

> The key to *Black & White* is taking over the hearts and minds of other tribes and Villages. The more believers you have, the more power you get and the greater your Influence will become.
>
> — *Black and White*'s Game Manual

Start Play

Among the range of social functions residing in Peter Molyneux's best-selling computer game *Black and White*, one of considerable current significance is the political work the game does in reinforcing and extending an ideology of nation-building—one that defines the world and its people as finite, quantifiable resources and morally sanctions global hegemony in the pursuit of economic and political gain. In making such a claim, I do not mean to suggest that *Black and White*'s ideological outcome is intentional. In fact I would argue just the opposite: that its primary purpose is merely to entertain, not unlike television shows, movies, magazines, and countless other artifacts of popular culture. But like those artifacts, computer games are unavoidably rhetorical; they are situated within, responsive to, and (re)productive of specific discourses marked by time and place. And like all rhetorical prod-

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ucts and producers, computer games are inherently politicized and socialized; they are enmeshed in the always-already of postmodern politics, and as such they cannot be dismissed as "merely" value-neutral entertainment commodities unworthy of critical scrutiny or social dialogue.

There are certainly plenty of ways to engage in critical discussions of computer games. Among them are academic methodologies and theoretical frameworks established in the humanities for examining a range of cultural forms, now usefully being employed to better understand and shape the direction of computer games and their integral relationships with social contexts: scholars of cultural, literacy, English, and media studies, for example, are applying models of analysis and interpretation from film, literature, and discourse to computer games, examining practices of narrative form, identity construction, and ideological interpellation, to name just a few applications (Murray; Bolter and Grusin; Ryan; Gee). Some game scholars, such as Gonzalo Frasca and Espen Aarseth, argue against—or at least wish to complicate considerably—such borrowings: Frasca's basic position is that computer games are an essentially new form of expression and interactivity and should be approached in newly critical ways; and Aarseth argues that games are not texts and are thus not intertextual, suggesting an inappropriate use of most poststructuralist examinations of them.[1] While I agree that computer games *are* new and make use of new media, they nevertheless tend to rely on narrative form, employ semiotic structures long the focus of academic study in the humanities, and are exceedingly intertextual—if by which one means the linking to and referencing of other texts, art forms, and cultural expressions. Given that, and given the inherent socio-political constitution of games as rhetorical artifacts, I believe contemporary rhetorical theory provides one of the most useful frameworks available for understanding how computer games contribute to the reproduction and evolution of a social imaginary, one that includes the ideologies and world views upon which public policies are developed and by which political actions are justified.

Rhetoric's purview includes, after all, nearly all practices of expression and interaction, regardless of whether they are mediated through face-to-face real-world settings or through digital interfaces and virtual reality environments; indeed by its own disciplinary definitions, rhetoric must account for the media and the contexts in which it occurs and is studied. The question *what rhetorical work does a computer game do*? is neither an anachronism nor a misappropriation in the context of a new, under-theorized medium. It is a question that instead opens up possibilities for understanding that medium and its role in producing, maintaining, or subverting certain social relations, identities, and positions of power.[2] Thus I offer here an analysis of *Black and White* informed by recent arguments about the social and epistemic roles of rhetoric and its embodiment in discursive and material culture. More specifically I argue that this game's rhetorical function has grown out of, and serves to perpetuate, an ethic of expediency evident in

the nation-building practices of dominant Western capitalist countries—particularly the US—in a post-Cold War world marked by global capitalism and the imposition of Western democracy across the planet.

Level One: Being and Playing in *Black and White*

Although *Black and White* can be played collectively and in different modes (which can involve a group of players defending their territory from outside invaders), it is most often experienced by a single player who, acting as a god, works his or her way through the material and spiritual development of five different lands. The player—represented metonymically by a maneuverable hand that hovers over the landscape and can perform a range of actions, such as gathering wood from forests and delivering it to people in need—oversees and intervenes in the evolution of rudimentary villages, during the course of which he or she garners devout believers and increases his or her "prayer power" through benevolent and malevolent deeds. As stated in the game's manual (and highlighted as part of the preface above because of its ideologocentric emphasis), "The key to *Black & White* is taking over the hearts and minds of other tribes and Villages. The more believers you have, the more power you get and the greater your Influence will become" (25, caps original). Throughout the process, a player must also defend villages from the aggressions of other gods who rule nearby lands. The culmination of the game's narrative involves a battle with the final, most powerful "other" god in the *Black and White* world.

Black and White's slogan—in the game's introduction, on the box cover, and in advertisements—is "Be good. Be evil. Be a God!" Despite the tagline, however, the goal of the game is not to "be" a god; that is simply the game's premise. The goal is, rather, to see how much power and influence one can garner as a god, and it matters not whether one is "a benevolent deity, ruling with a fair hand over your adoring tribes" or "a tyrant, terrorizing your subjects with an iron fist."[3] A player chooses benevolence or tyranny (or some combination thereof) simply as a rhetorical strategy, and success in the game is neither helped nor hindered by that ontological choice; each mode of being has its own consequences, equally balanced in terms of successful game-play. One can inspire worship, for example, through hostile deeds—picking up and tossing around villagers who aren't attentive, for instance—but that can result in unstable, reluctant worship. On the other hand, it's a more efficient method of gaining followers than providing villagers with only generosity and care.

Within the very premise of the game and running throughout its narrative, then, is what rhetorician Stephen B. Katz has called an "ethic of expediency," one realized in this case in a will to power that is ultimately its own end. Katz, following Aristotle and a host of contemporary rhetorical scholars, argues that discourse embodies and inscribes a moral basis for action; according to Katz, *tech-*

nical discourse constructs a specific moral foundation, one divorced from any teleological questions or concerns, by its tendency to place means over ends. This rhetorical function is at work in everyday business communication, and it is at least partially responsible for policies and practices that have cost human lives. Katz points to the Ford Pinto fiasco of the 1970s for one such example, suggesting that it was a discursively constructed ethic of expediency that led to industry statisticians' decisions to *not* recall the Pinto on the grounds that replacing a faulty gas tank on every extant Pinto would cost more than paying settlement charges in the handful of lawsuits that were sure to arise when the occasional car's tank exploded. In short, the number-crunchers at Ford were interacting, and thus thinking, in a discourse constitutive of a particular ideological position, one that values profit over life and rationalizes that valuation by attending to means over ends, not just at the level of content, but also at the level of sentence structures and lexicons (i.e., the statisticians' numbers-driven jargon). Katz furthers this argument with a large-scale example: the holocaust. He analyzes technical documents circulated by the Nazis that focused their attention on the construction and maintenance of instruments of genocide rather than on the uses of such instruments. In similar fashion, the rhetoric of *Black and White*'s basic premise and primary objective replace traditional conceptions of good and evil with a pragmatics of power, one that can be measured in economic terms—humans are steadily counted, as is their reproduction (which the player can facilitate by placing "mating" Villagers in close proximity to one another); trees, water, and fish are measured strictly as quantifiable resources and as such become indicators of successful gameplay; and even "prayer power" is assessed according to an assigned numerical value. The moral basis for acting within the game is thus founded on an assumed ontological status of superiority and is developed through a strategic imperative to increase that status—for no other reason than the tautological one of doing so.

Readers may object with a rather obvious counterstatement that the whole point is to strategize and win on whatever terms the game sets out: that's what one does in playing a game. True enough. But this is a game whose terms of play have embedded in them some rather specific politics. For the sake of comparison, consider the rhetorical work of another highly popular form of contemporary gaming/entertainment: reality television. In a recent article in *The New Yorker*, Nancy Franklin analyzes the plethora of reality games on network TV, arguing that their social function extends beyond entertainment to include reflecting and promoting the Republican ideologies now dominant in the US's most recent turn to the right—free-market competition, individualism, and the dismantling of any institutional structures that might hinder either of those complementary forces. Contestants on *Survivor* win not by building alliances, but by building *self-serving, ephemeral* alliances, ones that they inevitably turn their backs on as the competition grows more fierce. Moral obligations, community loyalties,

and the like are all subservient to and redefined by individual self-interest. The rhetorical work of reality games thereby continues a social project inherent in the action-movie genre that rose to dominance in the US's previous turn to the right: the Reagan-Bush years of the 1980s and early 1990s. Films from this time period featuring stars like Sylvester Stallone (the *Rambo* series; *Judge Dredd*; *Demolition Man*), Arnold Schwarzenegger (*Predator*; *Commando*; *Last Action Hero*; *True Lies*), and Bruce Willis (the *Die Hard* series) tend to have a common narrative structure underlying the surface of their separate but similar plotlines: social order and the alleged universal values upon which is it is based are threatened, and salvation comes when a lone man (or *Alone Man*) is forced to extricate himself from large-scale social and political structures and act on his own, often in opposition to such structures and through action-oriented practices that destroy them (they are destroyed only partially in a literal sense, with explosives, bullets, cars, and bodies, but they are destroyed more substantively at the symbolic level).[4]

The ideology embedded in the narrative structure of such films, and thus central to their rhetorical impact, has been identified by Peter Parshall and others as solidly aligned with US Republicanism: The rights of the individual are almost always oppressed by a bloated and incompetent governmental (or government-like bureaucratic) system; "family values" are in need of restoration and are represented in ideal (and threatened) form as a heterosexual marital institution, from which the lone hero is unhappily disconnected; and immorality is brought down through the construction of and reliance upon a universal code of ethics, understood implicitly by the hero and, presumably, a like-minded movie-going audience. The ideology promoted by John Rambo, John Matrix, and John McLane[5] collectively was undoubtedly a product of the Reagan-Bush years. But it was also a producer—at least a co-producer among a vast array of material and discursive signs that serve to (re)produce micro- and macro-political ideologies. Similarly the rhetoric of the James Bond films of the 1970s—and of the political climate that fostered them—is marked by Cold War ideologies suspicious of large-scale weapons technologies and supportive of national defense at all costs.

Of course Cold War ideologies are still with us, as are those of the action movie and *Survivor*-like television programming; such ideological foundations shift more like waves that overlap than stages that come discretely separated. But those foundations are shifting alongside and within an evolving political landscape: we are now firmly entrenched in an era of globalization, a newly emergent large-scale condition of world order officially begun according to some in 1989—a date marked by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the destruction of the Berlin Wall.[6] A significant part of this era involves global capitalism, a system in which multinational corporations—often owned to a vast degree by members of one nation, often the US—not only have access to new markets of consumers and new locations for production, but one in which

the world's resources (including its human resources) are up for grabs and can be accessed, distributed, restricted, exploited, and exchanged strategically. Which brings us back to *Black and White*. It is a game with a relevant primary objective: to increase one's "ownership" of lands (and their resources) and one's power and influence across them. Notably, ownership in *Black and White* is not marked by legal titles; it is marked by conquering people's beliefs and being able thereafter to rely on their faith to support one's interests—not unlike American hegemony in a context of globalization. As we Americans "spread democracy and freedom" throughout the world, we don't necessarily acquire legal ownership of other lands; instead we convince others to believe our own master trope that the open market system of capitalism is equivalent to democracy, freedom, and prosperity. Those beliefs, when "shared" across the planet, increase markets for products, locations for cheaper production, and a wealth of human labor and natural resources to be exploited for material gain. Capitalism's new "playing field," then, is nothing short of the globe, and it should come as no surprise that a simultaneously emergent, highly popular form of mass entertainment in the US at this particular historical moment is a game that replaces ethical negotiations of good and evil with a global pragmatics of power. Nor should it come as any surprise that such a game also conflates that pursuit of power, the spread of influence, and reduction of the world to quantifiable resources into a singular project that is its own end.

Level Two: Globalization, Obfuscation, and Nation-Building

Anything more than a cursory description of globalization and global capitalism here would take up the rest of this article (and indeed the entire volume), so I refer the reader elsewhere for such information.[7] Suffice it to say that the globe is now a playing field of sorts, one upon which the haves and have-nots vie for their own interests and, respectively, their very survival. As Douglas Kellner points out in his efforts to theorize globalization, it is a dialectic combination of top-down domination and bottom-up contestation, each of which occurs on the global field. Kellner cites the battles between the World Trade Organization (WTO)—and by extension the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank—and grassroots protesters as one example; both "sides" involve international collectives fighting for or against the expansion of capitalism, an expansion that detractors believe will increase the power and wealth of a few nations and further impoverish those already in dire financial and environmental conditions. Such dialectic struggle demands networks of communication, political interventions, and continuous strategizing. Those traditionally in power have at their disposal access to policy-making procedures and practices in both corporate and governmental spheres: trade agreements, tariffs, and embargoes; legislation regarding corporate welfare and environmental laws; the ability to wage war. With every such move, though, comes a response from other stakeholders; the "bat-

tle for Seattle" and subsequent protests against the WTO in Prague and elsewhere in the world are an example of responses that served to disrupt and even prevent some of those moves.

Particularly important to the struggles that characterize globalization is the dual employment of force and ideology, created and used by everyone involved, but varying according to their collective capacities. The Bush administration's current war on Iraq is an illustration of this duality—at least to those who see the military actions of the war, the *force*, as part of an attempt to secure the continuation and expansion of Middle Eastern oil markets that will serve the US. Accordingly, the moral sanctioning for such force, the continued support for it, and the justification for exercising violence against those who protest are *ideologically* reinforced through a proliferation of material and discursive practices produced and circulated in part by the administration and in even larger part by networks of supporters through their own production and consumption of ideologically inscribed goods, services, and information. Consider, for just a few examples, the re-naming of French fries to Freedom fries after France refused to join forces with the US against Iraq, "Support our Troops" bumper stickers, news stories highlighting the personal and public atrocities of Saddam Hussein and his sons, the endless replay of the World Trade Center towers collapsing on 9/11/01, and the "terror-alert" status that shifts routinely between "elevated," "high," and "severe" (but has not yet fallen to "low" or even "guarded" since it was established); for those interested, at Terror-Alert.com, one can download a real-time terror-alert display to be ever-present on one's computer screen.

Notably these need not be—and often are not—explicit arguments in favor of a particular political action; they are instead quiet and continuous rhetorical reinforcements, what theorists of contemporary rhetoric like Richard Ohmann, Kenneth Burke, Richard Weaver, and Robert Scott would regard as *epistemic*, as creative of knowledge about the world and the self, and as (re)productive of social relations and identities.[8] Within what James Berlin has called *social-epistemic* rhetoric, discourses and more broadly defined textual practices and material signifiers are always-already situated in and contributive to a social order, even when they appear on their surface to be apolitical or benign. The popular entertainment forms referenced so far provide one such example, particularly of the apolitical appearance of inherently political texts. The "objective" discourse of science is yet another example: As Charles Bazerman and James Paradis have demonstrated, and as Thomas Kuhn has argued time and again, science moves forward through textual practices that obscure scientists' interventions in observations and experiments; the result is a rhetoric that offers the illusion of non-agency—marked most obviously by the prevalence of subjectless, passive voice in scientific writing—but one that is in fact produced by socially situated beings and their varying subjective positions. Along similar lines, Susan Jarratt, Lynn Worsham, and other feminist rhetoricians have unmasked academic discourse

for its masculinist ideologies, demonstrating the indirect ways in which the very form of academic discourse helps to maintain particular paradigms of patriarchal order.

Thus rhetoric—both directly and indirectly, in its form as much as in its content—constitutes one half of the force/ideology duality mentioned above. As Marxists such as Berlin note, that duality comprises what Antonio Gramsci would refer to as a *hegemonic* practice in the pursuit of state power.[9] The US's adeptness at practicing hegemony on a global (rather than merely state) scale has been well documented in the past fifteen years, enough so that "globalization," "global capitalism," and "American hegemony" are often conflated and used interchangeably—an academic inaccuracy to be sure, but a common enough construction that acknowledges this country's powerful position in the struggle for global capital and its routine combined use of force and ideology. The more specific example of this mentioned above—the US-led war on Iraq as a disguised bid for oil—is particularly apt since it so clearly involves a primary component of globalization that is also a significant hegemonic US practice: nation-building. Often labeled as a "peace operation," nation-building involves temporarily occupying another's country (usually after dismantling much of its political and military infrastructure), "stabilizing" it, and assisting in the rebuilding of it (which usually means introducing and establishing a form of Western democracy—which comes bundled with market capitalism as a key component—regardless of what existed before). It's a highly contested political move, as it is inevitably marked by violence and, often, the reconfiguring of other countries' social and cultural practices. Some might suggest that it is a form of playing god, or at the very least, proceeding from an assumed position of moral authority and physical superiority. As unsettling as that might sound in these enlightened times, nation-building *is* central to global capitalism in its current configuration: of the 55 "peace operations" mounted by the UN since 1945, 41 have come after 1989 (Vidal).

The need for normative rhetorics to make nation-building attractive, then, should be clear to any of its proponents, particularly those who wish to further institutionalize it as a political mainstay. As Francis Fukuyama, whom I invoked at the start of this essay, argues, we need to establish nation-building as part of our governmental structure in the US, even if we have not yet "reconciled" ourselves to the idea. He writes:

> international relations is no longer just a game played between great powers but one in which what happens inside smaller countries can have a huge effect on the rest of the world. Our "empire" may be a transitional one grounded in democracy and human rights, but our interests dictate that we learn how better to teach other people to govern themselves.

"Our interests" in the emerging worldwide "game" that Fukuyama is referencing include, of course, oil. They are indeed crude interests—not exactly in line with alleged American values of freedom and democracy. Such values, however, are the rhetorical vehicles for the project; they serve to obfuscate material interests and justify violence. The "liberation" of Afghanistan following 9/11, for instance, included the installation of its new leader, Hamid Karzai. Karzai is considered by many to exemplify the kind of "puppet government" that ultimately serves US interests and is thus hardly a model of liberation: shortly after taking office, Karzai endorsed the construction of a trans-Afghanistan pipeline to transport oil from deposits in Turkmenistan with processing centers in Pakistan. Karzai is a former top adviser to Unocal and worked on the pipeline deal with Zalmay Khalilzad, who is now President Bush's Special National Security Assistant and presidential Special Envoy for Afghanistan.[10] The ethical problems with this kind of political action—one further marked by the facts that Enron conducted the feasibility study for the pipeline and Vice President Cheney's former company Halliburton will be a major benefactor of the project—are obvious: for those in power, ideological interpellation is sorely needed. If global domination of the kind suggested by nation-building at its ugliest is to succeed, it must involve a re-orientation of people's thinking at everyday levels.

Amidst the broad circulation of discourses and material products that do such rhetorical work are those forms of popular entertainment designed for mass consumption—including of course video games, which are now outselling Hollywood films. Consider, for instance, that players in *Black and White* manage resources and maintain control over an ever-increasing number of lands with the assistance of well-trained leaders who act, essentially, as puppet-gods. Each player is granted a "Creature" (my own Creature of choice from the available options is a giant cow), which must be reared from infancy and trained to keep control over a land when the player is working on expanding his or her influence. The Creature, however, is not an automaton; the player must attend to its needs and never has full control over its behavior toward humans. If the Creature is neglected by the player, there will be consequences: for example, its food supply may run low, and it may begin taking the food from villagers. If the Creature is trained by efficient but violent means (a player can adopt Skinnerian methods of behaviorism by rubbing the Creature's tummy as reward and slapping its face as punishment), it may in turn treat villagers in similar fashion.

None of this is to suggest that the makers of *Black and White* purposefully promotes ideologies amenable at the micro-political level of Skinnerian behaviorism or at the macro-political level of puppet-government installations and US-led global domination. Indeed Molyneux, the principle architect and the considered inventor of the computer god-game genre (which he began with *Populus* in that notable year of 1989), is British and has directed the production of the game with programming and design teams

based in the United Kingdom. But games, like all rhetorical artifacts, do embody, express, and perpetuate ideologies in circulation at the time and place of their creation. It's worth noting, in that context, that Great Britain has a long history of colonial expansion and is a current player in global capitalism; also worth noting is that Bush's strongest and most visible ally in the "War on Terror" that many see as a guise for nation-building and global capitalist expansion has been England's Prime Minister, Tony Blair.

Level Three: Expansion and Defense as Policy and Play

Comparing Hamid Karzai to a giant cow might, I confess, be a stretch. But comparisons between the basic goal of *Black and White* and the basic project of global capitalist expansion are harder to dismiss. The effort to take over the hearts and minds of villagers in multiple lands, and in turn to "possess" their material and human resources, is not far off from the agenda outlined in the US's National Security Strategy (NSS), a document begun, not surprisingly, in 1989, revised primarily during the global capitalist expansion decade of the 1990s, and tweaked slightly and officially published (rather opportunistically) as a response to 9/11 in 2002.[11] In its introduction is the following statement:

> Russia is in the midst of a hopeful transition, reaching for its democratic future and a partner in the war on terror. Chinese leaders are discovering that economic freedom is the only source of national wealth. In time, they will find that social and political freedom is the only source of national greatness. America will encourage the advancement of democracy and economic openness in both nations, because these are the best foundations for domestic stability and international order. We will strongly resist aggression from other great powers—even as we welcome their peaceful pursuit of prosperity, trade, and cultural advancement.

In other words, the dual project of expansion and defense is the primary objective, just as it is in *Black and White*'s fixed narrative. In the case of the NSS, what are being expanded and protected are not named as geopolitical locations for commerce, new markets, or natural resources; they are referred to as ideological abstractions—democracy and freedom, two of what Weaver would call "god terms" for their commonly accepted ontological status as universally good.

Weaver's definition of the phrase "god term" does not necessarily imply that those using it are playing god, but in the context of this article, I see it as a fitting implication. As evidence, consider that the NSS's introduction also makes this absolutist claim:

> The great struggles of the twentieth century between liberty and totalitarianism ended with a decisive victory for the forces of freedom—and a *single* sustainable

> model for national success: freedom, democracy, and free enterprise. In the twenty-first century, only nations that share a commitment to protecting basic human rights and guaranteeing political and economic freedom will be able to unleash the potential of their people and assure their future prosperity. People everywhere want to be able to speak freely; choose who will govern them; worship as they please; educate their children—male and female; own property; and enjoy the benefits of their labor. *These values of freedom are right and true for every person, in every society—and the duty of protecting these values against their enemies is the common calling of freedom-loving people across the globe and across the ages*. (Italics mine.)

The expansion and defense project is thus morally sanctioned; its beginning point is the alleged "end" of the struggles between totalitarianism and liberty. The project is discursively construed as outside, or beyond, such struggles, rather than being implicated in and contributive to them. In this way, the NSS shares with *Black and White* a premise that grants moral authority to its agents/players and encourages considerations of the strategic means (rather than the ends) of an already-rationalized project. In short, both embody and express the ethic of expediency that Katz has identified as contributive to corporate malfeasance and genocide. The quotation above is from the NSS's *Introduction*, serving thereby to set the context for (or the *premise* of) the actions necessitated by the document itself; like the floating hand that rises over the landscape of *Black and White*, the introduction marks an apriori position of authority for its users—this in a document that David Armstrong in *Harper's* has called, rather simply, a plan for global domination. It is this same document that includes the Cheney-Powell doctrine of preemptive warfare, responsible, at least in part, for the war now being waged against Iraq. (This document is also the subject of Michael Burns's documentary film, *Preventive Warriors*, which supports the claims about the NSS that I'm making here.[12])

All of this sounds, I know, quite bleak—to the extent that readers may wish to downplay what I'm making of a game's premise, its narrative structure, and just a few of its visual and textual details. But rhetoric, as a field of inquiry and as a theoretical framework, is also concerned with the social and political impacts of the very *medium* of communicative practice; and even on that level, the specific ideological work I'm highlighting is consistently furthered. For instance, *Black and White* is part of a new generation of digital games that work hard to situate players in virtual environments that, as part of the entertainment function, enable "escape" from the real world. Accomplishing such escape often comes, ironically, in the form of realism—media simulations made possible by motion capture technologies, high-end graphics, and artificial intelligence engines that help to facilitate game play. *Black and White* utilizes the gaming industry's most sophisticated technologies in the pursuit of realism, going so far as to include an option

in which the virtual world's weather can be set to mimic the real-world weather at the player's location.[13] What such realistic simulation does, in addition to providing escape, is enable players to temporarily forget that what they're engaging in is an artificial construction. Realistic simulation becomes, then, a context that helps to conceal the artifice of the experience.[14] Within such artifice are constraints and conditions for action, even for mere existence, made less visible by the player's ease of immersion into the game.

In the case of *Black and White*, as Ken McAllister demonstrates, those constraints and conditions include forms of patriarchy, heterosexism, and—most notable to my own argument—the reduction of the world to quantifiable resources usable within various social and political economies: He writes, "With a few sweeps of one's in-game god-hand, a player can water and harvest several large forests—or raze them if one is so inclined—a job that would take the villagers many generations. One of the main advantages of being god in the context of a natural resources economy, then, is the ability to cash in on their value easily and rapidly" (202-3). McAllister further notes, referring implicitly to the constraints mentioned above, that *Black and White* "works ideologically through its imposition of economic force such that agent/players must submit to the rules of the system in order to exercise the power imputed to them by agent/developers for the purpose of having 'fun'" (221), and that "this latter point is at the heart of all game rhetoric: the fun of a game begins with submission to *all* of its rules" (221, italics original).

Even the gaming category to which *Black and White* belongs—that of immersion-games—is itself rhetorical, and not just an aid to ideological obfuscation. As Jonas Heide Smith points out, there are obvious competing macro-political analogies between narrative-based games (such as adventure games with rigidly fixed plots and an enforced progression through them) and immersion games like *Black and White* (in which there is a simple core plot, but the player is able to move much more freely and, to a considerable extent, follow the plot at his or her own pace): namely, the former are ideologically aligned with socialism and the latter with libertarianism. That is, the player in a game built heavily on narrative progression is constrained much more so by a set of rules established by a higher, central authority (the designer of the game) than is a player in an immersion game, who can choose to explore and interact with a simulated environment in a far greater number of ways. While one might normally think of libertarians as individuals who want to be rid of governing structures within a single nation, it's not a stretch to see the libertarian ideology at work on a global scale, with an *individual nation* acting on its own, refusing, say, to sign international environmental accords, or waging war without official approval by the United Nations, or choosing to "manage" other lands unilaterally—to reference just a few timely examples.

Such an analogy is admittedly reductive, and one I do not wish to pursue too far here, particularly since *Black and White* has *both* an immersive environment that allows for some freedom *as well as*

a narrative and structural conditions to which players will ultimately submit. This can be seen as contradictory; yet it can also be seen, at least in the context of comparisons with nation-building and global capitalist expansion, as a necessary, rather than hypocritical, coexistence—one that encourages governmental interventions but within the spirit of a lone savior acting on allegedly universal principles that unenlightened others may not see. George W. Bush's infamous slip after 9/11 in saying that the war against terror was a "crusade" is a stark reminder of such ideologies at work and in circulation in the real world. That it was a slip of the tongue and was quickly downplayed is also a reminder that ideologies function most successfully when they are implicit and are reproduced in vehicles less obvious and open to critique—like games.

End Play: Save Game?

There are computer games that do in fact perform "obvious" rhetorical work. Frasca's *September 12th* is one example: players in the online game are placed in the uncomfortable position of dropping bombs on Arab terrorists milling about in a town crowded with ordinary people. No matter how carefully players aim, they kill civilians; moreover, the result of the collateral damage is always an increase in terrorists. As Jim McLellan writes, "Think of it as SimChomsky." Frasca, along with games researcher Ian Bogost, has developed an online forum, *Water Cooler Games*, to discuss the emerging field of explicitly persuasive computer gaming.[15] The games linked to and discussed there resemble satires and polemics, including, for instance, the Republican campaign game *John Kerry: Tax Invaders*, the title and sponsors of which make clear its central message.

While the messages of such games are easily discerned, I would argue that they are also, therefore, far less in need of critical explication. The messages in *Black and White* are not so obvious; they are not clear articulations of why global capitalism is necessary and good and why nation-building, as an integral part of that project, is something we need to get used to (or, as Fukuyama says, reconcile ourselves to). The rhetorical function of *Black and White* that I'm most concerned about is what McAllister calls an "implicative function," wherein persuasion occurs at a largely unconscious level and works by tapping into our existing "commonsensical" understandings of how and what to think—in other words, our ideological orientations. This happens first at the production stage, when circulating ideologies make their way into, and are quietly perpetuated by, the logics, aesthetics, and narrative thrust of games. (And it's certainly not just in *Black and White*: consider that in *SimCity*, a game of managing a municipal environment, which was conceived in the US, players are unable to set tax rates any higher than 20%.)

The implicative function of a game's rhetoric also happens when it is played—especially when the play happens uncritically, without any attention to what kinds of ideologies might be at work.

When we "lose ourselves" in a game like *Black and White*, we open ourselves up to absorbing, as Marshall McLuhan might say, the messages of the medium: in this case, the medium includes a game rendered in an immersive, interactive form that encourages freedom from certain structural authorities and is hi-tech enough to begin to blur lines between virtual worlds and the real one in which our ideological commitments lead to actions that matter. It involves a game in which "playing god" is necessary for and accomplished by the colonizing of other lands and their people, all of which are to be viewed as utilizable resources from a position of higher (literally and figuratively) authority. And finally, it is a game that draws us ever closer to accepting as normal the supposedly self-evident drive to "influence others," to "win the hearts and minds" of followers, and to gain, in the process and as a goal rather than a byproduct, material wealth and supreme power. My suggestion—and the point I wish to end on here—is not to argue that *Black and White* is a negative form of entertainment. It is rather to encourage players and scholars to continue the work briefly begun here: to ruthlessly critique the game's rhetoric as a way to stay conscious of its meanings and to respond to the game on its own inevitably politicized terms.

Notes

[1]For recent articulations of their positions by Frasca and Aarseth, see 2004's *First Person*.

[2]These same ends of inquiry are sought and served by both contemporary and classical rhetoric; the difference, however, is that classical rhetoric's answers will be determined to a degree by its theoretical framework, which largely denies the epistemic role of rhetoric, ignores ideology, and constructs an arguably homogeneous audience receptive to "universal" forms of persuasion and identification.

[3]These descriptions come, like the tag line, from the box cover and the promotional materials.

[4]Anyone who has watched enough of these films can predict the clichés that mark such a narrative structure: the rogue cop is told he's (yes, *he's*; not *she's*) off the case and hands in his badge and gun, only to recover his personal weapons from the glove box of his car and continue his quest free of the constraints of the law; incompetent, bureaucracy-heavy governmental administrations are baffled by whatever the threat is, whether it is an alien, a natural disaster, or an evil villain driven by greed or psychotic behavior; the fight against evil is always made personal by a direct threat to the hero's family or friends; and so on.

[5]John Rambo is Stallone's character from the film series of the same name (beginning with *First Blood* in the early 1980s); John Matrix is Schwarzenegger's character from *Commando*; and John McLane is Willis's character from the *Die Hard* film series.

[6]See, for example, Robert Gilpin's *The Challenge of Global Capitalism:The World Economy in the 21st Century*.

[7]See, for example, Hardt and Negri's *Empire*; Stiglitz's *Globalization and its Discontents*; Lechner and Boli's *The Globalization Reader*; Khalidi's *Resurrecting Empire*; or Garrison's *America as Empire: Global Leader or Rogue Power?*

[8]For a basic foundation in contemporary rhetoric's early formulations, see Scott's "Rhetoric is Epistemic," Weaver's "Language is Sermonic," Burke's *Language as Symbolic Action*, and Ohmann's *Selling Culture and English in America*.

[9]See *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*.

[10]"Afghan Pipeline Revived: The New Agenda Behind the War Against Terrorism?" Green Party Press Release, March 3, 2002. <http://www.gp.org/press/pr_03_04_02.html>. Accessed 10/04/04.

[11]Michael Burns's film suggests that this document was essentially begun by Paul Wolfowitz in 1992; David Armstrong, however, argues that Wolfowitz's draft built on an earlier document on Defense Planning Guidance, penned by Colin Powell and presented to Dick Cheney and George Bush Sr. in 1989.

[12]Full screen text for Preventive Warriors is available at <http://www.journeyman.tv/?lid=15555&tmpl=transcript>.

[13]When this option is chosen, the game gathers local weather information from the web and simulates it during play.

[14]One might argue that such realism is a product merely of technical advance—that there is nothing ideological about it. Undoubtedly most people involved in creating computer games are interested in creating realistic looking environments and actions for the sake of realism and entertainment, just as the Hollywood film industry continues to set new standards in special effects productions. A significant part of the pleasure in such forms of entertainment lies in the enjoyment of illusions. But, again, I'm more interested in rhetorical *effects* than intentions, for that is where ideology can be more readily understood as a rhetorical product and less easily dismissed as an unlikely conspiracy.

[15]From the Water Cooler Games website: "Water Cooler Games explores the emerging field of games [that] want to do more than simply being fun: they want to make a point, share knowledge, change opinions. This includes new genres such as advergaming, newsgaming, political games, simulations and edutainment." <http://www.watercoolergames.org/about.shtml>. Accessed 10/04/04.

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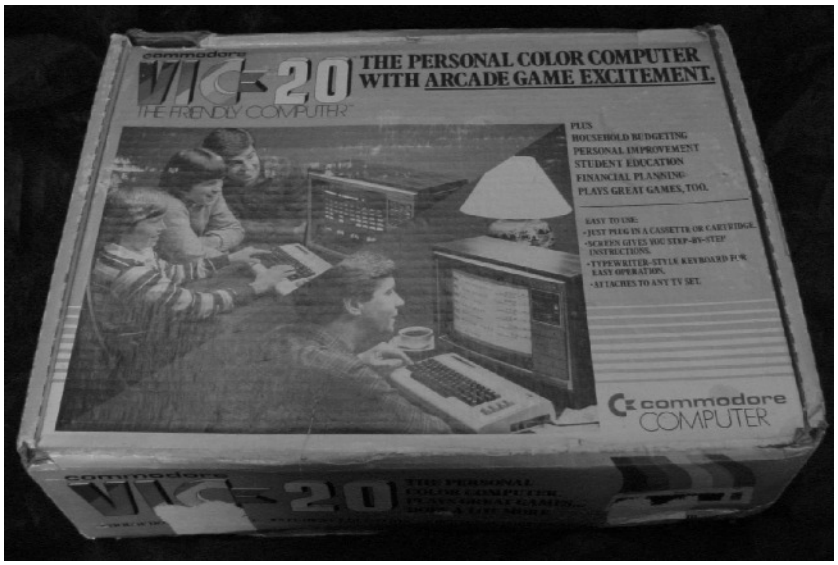
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