European Journal of International Security (2022), 7, 207–225
doi:10.1017/eis.2022.1

EJIS

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The limits of imagination: Securitisation and exceptionalism in the *World of Warcraft* video game

Vic Castro*

Department of Political Science, University of Copenhagen, Denmark
*Corresponding author. Email: vica@ifs.ku.dk

(Received 22 February 2021; revised 1 September 2021; accepted 3 January 2022; first published online 15 February 2022)

Abstract

Securitisation theory has too often been associated with the liberal state of exception and its problematic baggage. The Copenhagen School's early claims to deconstruct (not reproduce) the national security logic seem overlooked. Using the fantasy video game *World of Warcraft* as a large-scale thought experiment, this article asks how a distinct security mode is still possible when the normalisation of armed violence exceeds even what Carl Schmitt's political theory can provide for. Following a careful reading of Ole Wæver's formulation of the 'existential threat', securitisation asserts that without a certain referent object, the world becomes meaningless. As a tool for reshaping the limits of imagination, securitisation enacts political communities in *World of Warcraft* by turning upside down common wisdom about normalcy and security. While normal politics are violently conflictual, securitisation fills in the role of international norms and organisation, fostering supranational cooperation and erasing sovereign disputes. Securitisation thus far exceeds its contingent incarnation in the modern concept of security – a conclusion that has consequences for the normative debate on securitisation and for non-Western interpretations of the theory.

Keywords: Securitisation Theory; Popular Culture; Deconstruction; Exception; Carl Schmitt

Introduction

> To stop the Iron Horde, we must overcome prejudice and work together, if only for this purpose. Horde, Alliance, past, present … all meaningless in the face of this enemy. We will retake Shattrath together … or die trying.
>
> Archmage Khadgar, The Battle for Shattrath, *Warlords of Draenor.*

The 'cottage industry' of security studies was once specialised in pinning down new definitions of security beyond its traditional military focus.[1] It has since shifted its production to supply abundant criticism of arguably the most successful proposal to 'widen' the concept of security: securitisation theory. Coined by Ole Wæver within the broader Copenhagen School,[2] securitisation considers the fundamental essence of security to be a speech act that raises an issue above the normal workings of politics, by positing an existential threat to a referent object that must be defended through exceptional measures. Among many other aspects of the theory, this notion of exceptionality has been widely contested. As it 'reflects the traditionalist element in the

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[1] David A. Baldwin, 'The concept of security', *Review of International Studies*, 23 (1997), pp. 5–26.

[2] Ole Wæver, 'Security, the Speech Act: Analysing the Politics of a Word', working paper presented at the Research Training Seminar at Sostrup Manor (1989); Ole Wæver, 'Securitization and desecuritization', in Ronnie D. Lipschutz (ed.), *On Security* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1995), pp. 46–86; Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998).

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wide/narrow debate',[3] it has been accused by the more critical scholars of maintaining an essentialised if not statist view of security, informed by Carl Schmitt's infamous political theory of the sovereign exception[4] and predicated on liberal democratic 'normal politics'.[5]

Many securitisation scholars have thus moved away from this exceptional view, instead stressing an alternative logic of risk, how practitioners perceive their own actions, or mundane processes forming 'little security nothings'.[6] Nevertheless, without reference to exceptional measures or existential threats, much of the originality of the Copenhagen School's theory risks being lost, as securitisation could be reduced to a mere 'shorthand' for the 'social construction of security'.[7] Following Juha Vuori's suggestion to 'investigate security speech in as many contexts as possible',[8] this article explores the force of securitisation theory's 'logic of exception'[9] in an unusual and demanding context: the video game *World of Warcraft*. In this fantasy world without liberal modern states, and where armed violence is portrayed as a regular state of affairs, this article asks whether a distinct mode of exceptional security can still be identified.

World of Warcraft (WoW), launched by Blizzard Entertainment in 2004, is one of the first and most popular MMORPGs (massively multiplayer online role-playing game) in history, with 12 million players at its 2010 peak[10] and professional gamers attracting millions of followers on streaming platforms today.[11] What matters for this article is less its cultural and economic significance, or its role in co-constituting what its gaming audience perceives as security issues, than its potential as a thought experiment about security dynamics in a large fictional world. In one sense, a world of 'Warcraft' could be assumed to have securitisation as its premise, and thus lack contrasting normal politics.[12] In another sense, armed conflict is so pervasive in the game that it may qualify as 'normal', thus voiding the relevance of a distinct security realm – an issue also raised regarding societies marked by colonial violence.[13] By analysing the security discourse in the game's storylines, this article finds that exceptionalist securitisation

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[3] Holger Stritzel, *Security in Translation: Securitization Theory and the Localization of Threat* (London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 35.

[4] Jef Huysmans, 'The question of the limit: Desecuritisation and the aesthetics of horror in political realism', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 27:3 (1998), pp. 569–89; Michael C. Williams, 'Words, images, enemies: Securitization and international politics', *International Studies Quarterly*, 47:4 (2003), pp. 511–31.

[5] Martin Holbraad and Morten Axel Pedersen, 'Revolutionary securitization: An anthropological extension of securitization theory', *International Theory*, 4:2 (2012), pp. 165–97.

[6] Olaf Corry, 'Securitisation and "riskification": Second-order security and the politics of climate change', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 40:2 (2009), pp. 235–58; Felix Ciută, 'Security and the problem of context: A hermeneutical critique of securitisation theory', *Review of International Studies*, 35:2 (2009), pp. 301–26; Jef Huysmans, 'What's in an act? On security speech acts and little security nothings', *Security Dialogue*, 42:4–5 (2011), pp. 371–83.

[7] Matt McDonald, 'Securitization and the construction of security', *European Journal of International Relations,* 14:4 (2008), pp. 563–87 (p. 566).

[8] Juha A. Vuori, 'Illocutionary logic and strands of securitization: Applying the theory of securitization to the study of non-democratic political orders', *European Journal of International Relations*, 14:1 (2008), pp. 65–99 (p. 68).

[9] Philippe Bourbeau, 'Moving forward together: Logics of the securitisation process', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 43:1 (2014), pp. 187–206.

[10] Statista Research Department, 'World of Warcraft Estimated Subscribers from 2015 to 2030', available at: {www.statista.com/statistics/276601/number-of-world-of-warcraft-subscribers-by-quarter/} accessed 13 February 2021.

[11] A gamer such as Asmongold has 1.9 million followers on the game streaming platform Twitch. See Twitch, 'Asmongold – Twitch', available at: {www.twitch.tv/asmongold}, accessed 13 February 2021.

[12] Many thanks to Olaf Corry for formulating this point.

[13] Tarak Barkawi, 'Decolonising war', *European Journal of International Security*, 1:2 (2016), pp. 199–214 (p. 205). Using a Western fantasy video game to indirectly address postcolonial concerns may raise eyebrows. However, focusing on securitisation theory's applicability to the 'non-West' risks reinforcing the idea that the West does not display such qualities, and obscuring considerations on the theory's structure. See Sarah Bertrand, 'Can the subaltern securitize? Postcolonial perspectives on securitization theory and its critics', *European Journal of International Security*, 3:3 (2018), pp. 281–99 (p. 291).

is significantly present in WoW. Furthermore, what counts as normal and securitised is practically inverted[14] compared to the 'real' (Western) world.[15]

This article seeks to show that Copenhagen School securitisation is only contingently associated to the Schmittian or liberal state of exception and to their normative pitfalls. As a careful reading of the School reveals, classical securitisation is better understood around the possibility of an absolute loss of *meaning*. This article first reviews the critiques of the exception in securitisation theory and how they are tied to the assumption of the Western liberal state. Second, it exposes how popular culture and video games can stimulate theory development in International Relations (IR), and presents some of the existing work on *World of Warcraft* in other disciplines. Third, it examines what constitutes both normal and exceptional politics in WoW, finding that they require a closer reading of the deconstructive intents in the early Copenhagen School texts. Fourth, it analyses how securitisation shapes political ordering in WoW, where societal and supranational securitisation counterbalance the violence of normal politics, and where state securitisation opens a space for political contestation. The article concludes on the potential normative consequences of this reading of securitisation theory.

The 'liberal exception' assumption in critiques of securitisation theory

Since its inception in the 1990s, securitisation theory has mainly evolved through criticism directed at its original Copenhagen School formulation. Even though the Copenhagen Peace Research Institute (COPRI) was dissolved in 2003 and later, 'Copenhagen School' productions largely became synonymous with Ole Wæver's individual work,[16] two of the major securitisation books in the 2010s insist on calling themselves 'post-Copenhagen'.[17] While the state of the art in securitisation theory has considerably progressed beyond the theory's 'classical' version,[18] the latter's status as the 'mainstream' of critical security studies and as a 'foil' for much contemporary securitisation scholarship makes it important to study closely.

The focus here will be on one specific aspect of classical securitisation theory, the 'logic of exception', which has been contrasted to the 'logic of routine'.[19] The latter evolved from critiques emitted by scholars such as Didier Bigo or Jef Huysmans regarding the empirical relevance of locating security in the exceptional, as opposed to concrete institutionalised practices. This article will leave aside such routine-based criticisms, as they pertain more to the empirics than to the structure of the theory. While recent theoretical contributions have mostly been critical of the exceptionalist version, empirical literature remains largely reliant on the Copenhagen School,[20] which statement of securitisation may read as such:

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[14] This is surprising given that this mainstream game, being produced by an American studio, would have been expected to reflect American visions of security. Explaining this paradox is left to further research.

[15] As the idea of a 'real world' that excludes representations of itself (including fictional ones) has been amply rejected by critical scholars in IR and elsewhere, the inverted commas will be implied throughout the rest of this article.

[16] Amounting to two published articles and one widely circulated draft, arguably a droplet in a small ocean of theoretical securitisation literature. Ole Wæver, 'Politics, security, theory', *Security Dialogue*, 42:4–5 (2011), pp. 465–80; Ole Wæver, 'The theory act: Responsibility and exactitude as seen from securitization', *International Relations*, 29:1 (2015), pp. 121–7; Ole Wæver, 'Speech Act Theories of Securitization: Illocutionary Insistence and Political Performativity', working paper discussed at the Sydney Security Scholars conference, University of Sydney (27 November 2018).

[17] Stuart Croft, *Securitizing Islam: Identity and the Search for Security* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Stritzel, *Security in Translation*.

[18] See Thierry Balzacq (ed.), *Understanding Securitisation Theory: How Security Problems Emerge and Dissolve* (London, UK: Routledge, 2010); Thierry Balzacq, Sarah Léonard, and Jan Ruzicka, '"Securitization" revisited: Theory and cases', *International Relations*, 30:4 (2016), pp. 494–531.

[19] Bourbeau, 'Moving forward together'; Thierry Balzacq, 'Securitization theory: Past, present, and future', *Polity*, 51:2 (2019), pp. 331–48.

> The answer to what makes something an international security issue can be found in the traditional military-political understanding of security. In this context, security is about survival. It is when an issue is presented as posing an existential threat to a designated referent object … The special nature of security threats justifies the use of extraordinary measures to handle them.[21]

Given such a phrasing, it comes to no surprise that both empirical and theoretical literature assumed securitisation theory to reflect the state of exception as developed in the modern, Western, liberal sovereign state. This 'liberal exception' assumption is mirrored in many critiques.

The German jurist Carl Schmitt was brought into the discussion of securitisation theory by Jef Huysmans and later Michael Williams.[22] In *Political Theology* and *The Concept of the Political*,[23] Schmitt lays out two interrelated propositions: any legal order may be suspended with a sovereign decision to declare an exception; and the political is founded in a friend/enemy distinction that ultimate expression lies in the possibility of war and physical death. These positions influenced Schmitt's adhesion to the Nazi party in 1933–6.[24] Although Wæver had not engaged with Schmitt until these debates,[25] he now states that the theory's concept of security is Schmittian, coupled with an Arendtian concept of politics.[26] Despite these ambiguous roots, many scholars have assumed that exceptionalist securitisation is 'inspired primarily by Carl Schmitt'.[27] Claudia Aradau suggests that Copenhagen School securitisation 'activates a Schmittian politics' that endows it with a 'non-democratic, exceptional and exclusionary logic'.[28] Securitisation, as a form of 'panic politics' in which 'we must do something now, as our very survival is at stake', seemingly reduces the possibilities for deliberation to a minimum.[29] Not only it tends to enact normatively undesirable forms of politics;[30] by focusing on this manifestation of security, the securitisation analyst risks reinforcing the very forms of security she intended to question,[31] to the detriment of other security claims articulated by marginalised groups.[32]

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[20] Based on a review of the 75 most recent articles tagged with the 'securitisation' keyword on the Taylor & Francis website (as of November 2020), only 13 drew from a routine version of securitisation. Nevertheless, 21 articles used the word 'securitisation' with very little theory, making it difficult to distinguish between a nuance of routine or exception.

[21] Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde, *Security*, p. 21.

[22] Huysmans, 'The question of the limit'; Williams, 'Words, images, enemies'.

[23] Carl Schmitt, *Théologie Politique*, trans. Jean-Louis Schlegel (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1988); Carl Schmitt, *Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

[24] John P. McCormick, 'Fear, technology, and the state: Carl Schmitt, Leo Strauss, and the revival of Hobbes in Weimar and National Socialist Germany', *Political Theory*, 22:4 (1994), pp. 619–52.

[25] Ole Wæver, 'Autobibliography: The ten books that shaped me as a scholar', *Tidsskriftet Politik*, 4:7 (2004), available at: {www.academia.edu/2317814/Autobibliography_The_Ten_Books_that_Shaped_me_as_a_Scholar_} accessed 13 February 2021.

[26] Ole Wæver, 'Politics, security, theory', *Security Dialogue*, 42:4–5 (2011), pp. 465–80; Ulrik Pram Gad and Karen Lund Petersen, 'Concepts of politics in securitization studies', *Security Dialogue*, 42:4–5 (2011), pp. 315–28; Rita Floyd, *Security and the Environment: Securitisation Theory and US Environmental Security Policy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 17.

[27] Bourbeau, 'Moving forward together', p. 189; see also Rita Floyd, 'Extraordinary or ordinary emergency measures: What, and who, defines the "success" of securitization?', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 29:2 (2016), pp. 677–94.

[28] Claudia Aradau, 'Security and the democratic scene: Desecuritization and emancipation', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 7:4 (2004), pp. 388–413 (pp. 392, 405).

[29] Paul Roe, 'Is securitization a "negative" concept? Revisiting the normative debate over normal versus extraordinary politics', *Security Dialogue*, 43:3 (2012), pp. 249–66 (p. 254).

[30] Jef Huysmans, *The Politics of Insecurity: Fear, Migration, and Asylum in the EU* (London, UK: Routledge, 2006); Jef Huysmans, *Security Unbound: Enacting Democratic Limits* (London, UK: Routledge, 2014).

In Ken Booth's words, 'the language of "securitisation" freezes security in a statist framework, forever militarised, zero-sum, and confrontational',[33] inexorably bound to a certain conception of the Western state. The assumption that securitisation refers to 'the state's initiation of exceptional, sovereign interventions to protect its ongoing existence',[34] implying a 'militarized response',[35] is still commonplace in the empirical literature. The exceptional/normal divide is seen to reflect the 'long-critiqued distinctions between high and low politics' that feminism sought to problematize.[36] 'Exceptional measures', in short, are interpreted in the mould of stately 'exceptionalism', whether directly inspired by Schmitt or as later developed by Giorgio Agamben.[37] Given that such exceptionalism is bound to the development of the liberal state and to what Foucauldian security scholars called the 'liberal way of war',[38] earlier securitisation literature often supposed that '[i]t is in relation to the procedural "normalcy" of democracy that the "exceptionalism" of securitization can be theorized.'[39] Already too realist in the Schmittian sense, securitisation theory is now too liberal, and possibly unadapted outside the Western world.[40]

Some recent proposals[41] substitute the Schmittian exception in securitisation theory with Andreas Kalyvas's concept of the 'politics of the extraordinary', which sought the foundings of democracy in 'those infrequent and unusual moments when the citizenry, overflowing the formal borders of institutionalised politics, reflectively aims at the modification of the central political, symbolic, and constitutional principles and at the redefinition of the content and ends of a community.'[42] While Kalyvas's work may spotlight the security speech act's 'insurrecting potential to break the ordinary',[43] the existential threat is lost in translation. Indeed for the Copenhagen School, 'securitization is not fulfilled only by breaking rules (which can take many forms) nor solely by existential threats (which can lead to nothing), but by cases of existential threats that legitimize the breaking of rules.'[44] The 'existential threat' half of the speech act remains interestingly underdeveloped to this day. Juha Vuori, in pinning down a cross-cultural securitisation logic, tautologically claims that 'something is an existential threat for a referent object that should continue to exist',[45] while Holger Stritzel awkwardly defines securitisation as constructing 'a threat … that is *so* existential' that it legitimises special measures.[46] Jef Huysmans follows then-neorealist Barry Buzan in relating the existential threat to the 'autonomy' and 'functional integrity' of political entities.[47] One possible exception to this trend is Rita Floyd's theory of just securitization,[48] which defines the existential threat as pertaining to the 'essential properties' of the referent object.

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[31] Jef Huysmans, 'Dire et écrire la sécurité: le dilemme normatif des études de sécurité', *Cultures & Conflits*, 31–32 (1998), pp. 164–82.

[32] Roxanne Lynn Doty, 'Immigration and the politics of security', *Security Studies*, 8:2–3 (1998), pp. 71–93; McDonald, 'Securitization and the construction of security'; Sabine Hirschauer, 'For real people in real places: The Copenhagen School and the other "little security nothings"', *European Security*, 28:4 (2019), pp. 413–30.

[33] Ken Booth, *Theory of World Security* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 165.

[34] Sian Tomkinson, Tauel Harper, and Katie Attwell, 'Confronting Incel: Exploring possible policy responses to misogynistic violent extremism', *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 55:2 (2020), pp. 152–69 (p. 153).

[35] Sara Meger, 'The fetishization of sexual violence in international security', *International Studies Quarterly*, 60:1 (2016), pp. 149–59.

[36] Ibid., p. 156.

[37] Schmittian exceptionalism is taken for granted in Lise Philipsen, 'Performative securitization: From conditions of success to conditions of possibility', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 23 (2020), pp. 139–63; and in Balzacq, 'Securitization theory: Past, present, and future'. Agambenian exceptionalism is one in which the state of exception becomes the norm. This form of exceptionalism may be jarring for classical securitisation theory, which separates normal and exceptional politics, but what matters here is that Agamben sees it as characteristic of the modern liberal state. See Jef Huysmans, 'Minding exceptions: The politics of insecurity and liberal democracy', *Contemporary Political Theory*, 3:3 (2004), pp. 321–41; Michael Lister, 'Explaining counter terrorism in the UK: Normal politics, securitised politics or performativity of the neoliberal state?', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 12:3 (2019), pp. 416–39; Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

[38] Mark Neocleous, *Critique of Security* (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2008); Michael Dillon and Julian Reid, *The Liberal Way of War: Killing to Make Life Live* (London, UK: Routledge, 2009).

[39] Aradau, 'Security and the democratic scene', p. 392.

[40] Ulla Holm, 'Algeria: Securitization of state/regime, nation and Islam', in Stefano Guzzini and Dietrich Jung (eds), *Security Analysis and Copenhagen Peace Research* (London, UK: Routledge, 2004), pp. 217–28; Holbraad and Pedersen, 'Revolutionary securitization'; Monika Barthwal-Datta, *Understanding Security Practices in South Asia: Securitization Theory and the Role of Non-State Actors* (London, UK: Routledge, 2012); for a reply, see Maja Touzari Greenwood and Ole Wæver, 'Copenhagen–Cairo on a roundtrip: A security theory meets the revolution', *Security Dialogue* 44:5–6 (2013), pp. 485–506.

[41] Michael C. Williams, 'Securitization as political theory: The politics of the extraordinary', *International Relations*, 29:1 (2015), pp. 114–20; Balzacq, 'Securitization theory: Past, present, and future'.

[42] Andreas Kalyvas, *Democracy and the Politics of the Extraordinary: Max Weber, Carl Schmitt, and Hannah Arendt* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 7.

This article argues that the 'liberal exception' assumption in securitisation theory is informed by an inattentive reading of Wæver's early work, particularly of his formulation of the 'existential threat', and that the links between securitisation and 'the traditional military-political understanding of security'[49] are contingent, not constitutive. This theoretical argument could be made in a detached way, simply on the basis of Wæver's writings. Yet this would raise questions for the argument's relevance: can securitisation *actually* work in an unambiguously non-Schmittian mode, and what happens when it does? To answer that question, I rely on the fact that securitising discourse can be used in Western popular culture in a mode that is far removed from the state-centric, authoritarian, and ironically Western view of security. The next section explores the place of popular culture and video games in IR, and lays out this article's use of *World of Warcraft*.

Popular culture, video games, and IR

Securitisation theory has been deployed to analyse how popular cultural artefacts may be leveraged in real-world securitising discourse.[50] Beyond the role of visuality in constructing security issues, its engagement with popular culture remains limited.[51] This is perhaps surprising given how securitisation patterns can be very explicit in fiction, as when the main character in the *Splinter Cell: Blacklist* video game reflects on having been granted 'the right to defend our laws, by breaking them'.[52] Many IR frameworks have been proposed for the study of popular culture.[53] Charli Carpenter summarises three main approaches: 'pedagogical', drawing analogies between popular culture and IR concepts; 'interpretive', providing data for how societies think of themselves; and 'explanatory', examining causal or constitutive effects of popular culture on world politics.[54] The first relates to Iver Neumann and Daniel Nexon's 'mirror' approach, which describes the use of popular culture as both an analogical 'medium for exploring theoretical concepts, dilemmas of foreign policy, and the like'[55] and a tool for communicating IR to the classroom or to a broader audience.[56] Most studies in the 'mirror' approach have a pedagogical or illustrative purpose[57] rather than try to draw novel theoretical arguments from popular culture itself. An attempt to the latter may be the use of *Battlestar Galactica* as a 'quasifactual' world where the nuclear taboo does not exist,[58] but even these authors claim only to '[raise] awareness of the contingent nature of the real-world nuclear taboo' through a 'fruitful exercise' providing 'illustrative material'.[59]

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[43] Ole Wæver, 'The EU as a security actor: Reflections from a pessimistic constructivist on post sovereign security orders', in Morton Kelstrup and Michael C. Williams (eds), *International Relations Theory and the Politics of European Integration* (London, UK: Routledge, 2000), pp. 250–94 (p. 286).

[44] Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde, *Security*, p. 25.

[45] Vuori, 'Illocutionary logic and strands of securitization', p. 77.

[46] Holger Stritzel, 'Towards a theory of securitization: Copenhagen and beyond', *European Journal of International Relations*, 13:3 (2007), pp. 357–83 (p. 360), emphasis added.

[47] Huysmans, *The Politics of Insecurity*, p. 48; Barry Buzan, *People, States & Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era* (Hemel Hempstead, UK: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991).

[48] Rita Floyd, *The Morality of Security: A Theory of Just Securitization* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press), p. 75.

[49] Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde, *Security*, p. 21.

[50] Lene Hansen, 'The politics of securitization and the Muhammad cartoon crisis: A post-structuralist perspective', *Security Dialogue*, 42:4–5 (2011), pp. 357–69.

[51] Myriam Dunn Cavelty, 'The materiality of cyberthreats: Securitization logics in popular visual culture', *Critical Studies on Security*, 7:2 (2019), pp. 138–51.

[52] Quoted in Robert Young, 'Going fifth freedom: Fighting the War on Terror in the Splinter Cell: Blacklist video came', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 8:1 (2015), pp. 147–62 (p. 153).

[53] Daniel H. Nexon and Iver B. Neumann (eds), *Harry Potter and International Relations* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield: 2006); Abigail E. Ruane and Patrick James, 'The international relations of Middle Earth: Learning from *The Lord of the Rings*', *International Studies Perspectives*, 9:4 (2008), pp. 377–94; Kyle Grayson, Matt Davies, and Simon

Literature on video games and world politics is primarily rooted in the field of game studies, which largely examined the links between military games and militarism broadly speaking, as well as video games' colonial and capitalist underpinnings.[60] IR scholarship on the matter tends to focus on military video games, mainly first-person shooters but also strategy games and role-playing games.[61] While IR attention has also been cast on the utopian and dystopian aspects of virtual worlds, as well as on humanitarian anti-trafficking games,[62] the discipline has retained,

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Philpott, 'Pop goes IR? Researching the popular culture—world politics continuum', *Politics*, 29:3 (2009), pp. 155–63; Jutta Weldes and Christina Rowley, 'So, how does popular culture relate to world politics?', in Frederica Caso and Caitlin Hamilton (eds), *Popular Culture and World Politics: Theories, Methods, Pedagogies* (Bristol, UK: E-International Relations Publishing 2015), pp. 11–34.

[54] Charli Carpenter, 'Rethinking the political / -science- / fiction nexus: Global policy making and the campaign to stop killer robots', *Perspectives on Politics*, 14:1 (2016), pp. 53–69.

[55] Nexon and Neumann (eds), *Harry Potter and International Relations*, p. 12.

[56] Kevin C. Dunn, 'Never mind the bollocks: The punk rock politics of global communication', *Review of International Studies*, 34:1 (2008), pp. 193–210; Erin Hannah and Rorden Wilkinson, 'Zombies and IR: A critical reading', *Politics*, 36:1 (2016), pp. 5–18.

[57] Jennifer Sterling-Folker and Brian Folker, 'Conflict and the nation-state: Magical mirrors of muggles and refracted images', in Nexon and Neumann (eds), *Harry Potter and International Relations*, pp. 103–26; Priya Dixit, 'Relating to difference: Aliens and alienness in Doctor Who and international relations', *International Studies Perspectives*, 13:3 (2012), pp. 289–306; Christina Rowley and Jutta Weldes, 'The evolution of international security studies and the everyday: Suggestions from the Buffyverse', *Security Dialogue*, 43:6 (2012), pp. 513–30; Craig Hayden, 'The procedural rhetorics of Mass Effect: Video games as argumentation in international relations', *International Studies Perspectives*, 18 (2017), pp. 175–93.

[58] Marco Fey, Annika E. Poppe, and Carsten Rauch, 'The nuclear taboo, Battlestar Galactica, and the real world: Illustrations from a science-fiction universe', *Security Dialogue*, 47:4 (2016), pp. 348–65.

[59] Ibid., pp. 349, 351.

[60] Among others, see Roger Stahl, 'Have you played the War on Terror?', *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 23:2 (2006), pp. 112–30; Nina B. Huntemann and Matthew Thomas Paine, *Joystick Soldiers: The Politics of Play in Military Video Games* (London, UK: Routledge, 2009); Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter, *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2009); Souvik Mukherjee, *Video Games and Postcolonialism* (London, UK: Palgrave Pivot, 2017); Michelle Lee Brown, 'Never alone: (Re)coding the comic holotrope of survivance', *Transmotion*, 3:1 (2017), pp. 22–44.

[61] Nick Robinson, 'Videogames, persuasion and the War on Terror: Escaping or embedding the military—entertainment complex?', *Political Studies*, 60:3 (2012), pp. 504–22; Nick Robinson, 'Militarism and opposition in the living room: the case of military videogames', *Critical Studies on Security*, 4:3 (2016), pp. 255–75; Brandon Valeriano and Philip Habel, 'Who are the enemies? The visual framing of enemies in digital games', *International Studies Review*, 18:3 (2016), pp. 462–486; Nicolas de Zamaróczy, 'Are we what we play? Global politics in historical strategy computer games', *International Studies Perspectives*, 18 (2017), pp. 155–74; Hayden, 'The procedural rhetorics of Mass Effect'; Helen Berents and Brendan Keogh, 'Virtuous, virtual, but not visceral: (Dis)embodied viewing in military-themed videogames', *Critical Studies on Security*, 6:3 (2018), pp. 366–69; Aggie Hirst, '"Videogames saved my life": Everyday resistance and ludic recovery among US military veterans', *International Political Sociology*, 15:4 (2021), pp. 482–503.

[62] Marcus Schulzke, 'The critical power of virtual dystopias', *Games and Culture*, 9:5 (2014), pp. 1–20; Erin O'Brien and Helen Berents, 'Virtual saviours: Digital games and anti-trafficking awareness-raising', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, 13 (2019), pp. 82–99.

in Felix Ciută's words, a 'narrow focus on war-themed blockbuster games'.[63] Methodologically, Nick Robinson encourages to approach video games from the three angles of the narrative, the visual, and the gameplay; while Ciută, in line with a broader movement in popular culture and world politics, calls for analysing the dynamics of whole game genres and of audience circulation instead of taking individual games out of their socioeconomic context.[64]

From these regards, the present article may first appear conservative in its methodology and choice of case. First, it strictly focuses on *World of Warcraft*'s discursive *content* and eschew gameplay mechanics, audience reception, and the broader industry WoW is located in. This choice is nevertheless motivated by the scale of the fictional world the MMORPG genre (and WoW in particular)[65] can accommodate, which provides in itself considerable discursive material. WoW storylines are furthermore unaffected by player choice.[66] By using a fictional world as a thought experiment to observe and stimulate an existing theory, this article further develops Robinson's claim that video games can 'enhance theoretical understanding', in particular through 'foundation-revealing' scholarship that uses video games to 'open up gaps and reveal the foundations upon which theory is based'.[67]

Second, WoW is indeed a war-themed blockbuster game. Yet contrary to the realistic settings of most games studied in IR, WoW's fantasy world seeks little to emulate the real-world conduct of politics. It is rife with cartoon-like, visually non-realistic violence, and shuns the overt philosophical depth that is more frequent in science fiction. Academically, WoW has been the object of extensive scholarship in fields including cultural and communication studies, psychology, anthropology, sociology, or philosophy.[68] While scholars have approached the game on the performance of gender and sexuality, the racialisation of both players and the game world, or the embeddedness of capitalist ideology in the game,[69] few works have specifically addressed the game's relationship to other aspects of politics – mostly war, through cultural or legal angles.[70]

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[63] Felix Ciută, 'Call of duty: Playing video games with IR', *Millennium*, 44:2 (2016), pp. 197–215 (pp. 199–200).

[64] Nick Robinson, 'Videogames and IR: Playing at method', in Frederica Caso and Caitlin Hamilton (eds), *Popular Culture and World Politics*, pp. 91–100; Ciută, 'Call of Duty'.

[65] Tanya Krzywinska, 'Blood scythes, festivals, quests, and backstories: World creation and rhetorics of myth in World of Warcraft', *Games and Culture*, 1:4 (2006), pp. 383–96.

[66] A game designer noteworthily criticised the fact that *World of Warcraft* does not allow the player to reject a securitising move. See Richard Bartle, 'Torture' (19 November 2008), available at: {www.youhaventlived.com/qblog/2008/QBlog191108A.html} accessed 31 August 2021; Richard Bartle, 'Tortuous Replies…' (26 November 2008), available at: {www.youhaventlived.com/qblog/2008/QBlog261108A.html} accessed 31 August 2021.

[67] Nick Robinson, 'Have you won the War on Terror? Military videogames and the state of American exceptionalism', *Millennium*, 43:2 (2015), pp. 450–470 (p. 453); see also Cynthia Weber, *International Relations Theory: A Critical Introduction* (London, UK: Routledge, 2005).

[68] Katherine Bessière, A. Fleming Say, and Sara Kiesler, 'The ideal elf: Identity exploration in World of Warcraft', *CyberPsychology and Behavior*, 10:4 (2007), pp. 530–5; Bonnie Nardi, *My Life as a Night Elf Priest: An Anthropological Account of World of Warcraft* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2009); Luke Cuddy and John Nordlinger (eds), *World of Warcraft and Philosophy: Wrath of the Philosopher King* (Chicago, IL: Carus Publishing Company, 2009); William Sims Bainbridge, *The Warcraft Civilization: Social Science in a Virtual World* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2012);

[69] Lina Eklund, 'Doing gender in cyberspace: The performance of gender by female World of Warcraft players', *Convergence*, 17:3 (2011), pp. 323–42; Lisa Nakamura, 'Don't hate the player, hate the game: The racialization of labor in World of Warcraft', *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 26:2 (2009), pp. 128–44; Melissa J. Monson, 'Race-based fantasy realm: Essentialism in the World of Warcraft', *Games and Culture*, 7:1 (2012), pp. 48–71; Scott Rettberg, 'Corporate ideology in *World of Warcraft*', in Hilde Corneliussen and Jill Walker Rettberg (eds), *Digital Play, Culture, and Identity: A World of Warcraft Reader* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), pp. 19–38. Literature on colonialism and imperialism, which are perhaps more directly relevant to IR, mostly consists in master's theses. See Beth K. Fukumoto, 'The Infinite Frontier: Imperialism, Fronterism and Nostalgia in World of Warcraft' (Master's thesis, English, Georgetown University, Washington, DC, 2013); Levi Pressnell, 'Building a World of Warcraft: Cyber-Colonialism Through "Othering" Strategies' (Master's thesis, Communication Studies, University of Alabama, 2013).

[70] Esther MacCallum-Stewart, '"Never such innocence again": War and histories in *World of Warcraft*', in Corneliussen and Rettberg (eds), *Digital Play, Culture, and Identity*, pp. 39–62; Lisbeth Klastrup, 'What makes *World of Warcraft* a world? A

This article hopes to highlight overlooked elements of the game thanks to the lenses of international politics and security studies.

In *World of Warcraft*, the player creates and controls a character that can explore a virtual world, fight creatures, interact with in-game characters, and engage in various activities. Although the game is online and multiplayer, all characters mentioned beside the player's will be assumed to be non-playable. Characters utter greeting sentences and sometimes have written lines; some of them give quests, tasks that the player must perform for a reward, and which are the main support for the game's various storylines. A story arc is usually made of one or several 'quest chains' taking place in a given geographical zone. The original WoW from 2004 has been modified through successive 'expansions', which added new main storylines associated to new regions. These expansions are *The Burning Crusade* (*TBC,* 2007), *Wrath of the Lich King* (*WotLK*, 2008), *Cataclysm* (*Cata,* 2010), *Mists of Pandaria* (*MoP*, 2012), *Warlords of Draenor* (*WoD,* 2014), *Legion* (2016), *Battle for Azeroth* (*BfA,* 2018), and *Shadowlands* (*SL*, 2020). Besides *Cataclysm*, which altered many zones from the original WoW, each expansion is relatively standalone, and all expansions can be played today.

Empirical data for this article includes text from quests, in-game dialogues, and dungeon and raid descriptions, including content deleted during later updates. I have been a player since 2013, and have additionally taken notes while playing the *WoD*, *Legion*, and *BfA* expansions with characters from both Horde and Alliance, the game's two umbrella factions. For practical reasons, I later gathered the text from the user-maintained website Wowpedia,[71] which I consider by experience to be largely reliable regarding such material. I only downloaded text from quests and dialogues that I had played beforehand in the game. References to in-game content are indicated in brackets by the name of the quest followed by the expansion it takes place in. To limit data collection, I have overlooked the earlier *Warcraft* games (starting from 1994), the many books (including 29 novels) considered part of the franchise, as well as the latest *Shadowlands* expansion.

Results are highly consistent within and across all expansions. The *World of Warcraft* universe exceeds even the levels of hostility expected by Schmittian political thought, rendering this common assumption about exceptionalist securitisation inapplicable. It pushes to redefine what counts as an existential threat through Wæver's early arguments about the *loss of all meaning*. This logic allows to better understand securitisation as shaping the limits for 'what can be imagined' within a political community, and therefore setting what does or does not qualify as normal politics therein.

World of Warcraft's challenge to securitisation

The existential threat: Schmitt and the deconstruction of realism

On the surface, *World of Warcraft* seems to depict a very Schmittian understanding of politics. Sharply defined 'factions', which names are indicated in or under their members' onscreen names, routinely engage in physical violence and discursive otherisation against each other. However, a closer reading of Schmitt reveals an important mismatch between his theory and WoW. The possibility of violent death is fundamental to his concept of the political, as 'the friend, enemy, and combat concepts receive their real meaning precisely because they refer to the real possibility of physical killing', as opposed to mere 'competition' or 'symbolic wrestlings'.[72]

note on death and dying', in Corneliussen and Rettberg (eds), *Digital Play, Culture, and Identity*, pp. 143–66; Christian Hoffstadt and Michael Nagenborg, 'The concept of war in World of Warcraft', in Stephan Günzel, Michael Liebe, and Dieter Mersch (eds), *Conference Proceedings of the Philosophy of Computer Games 2008* (Potsdam, Germany: University Press, 2008), pp. 126–41; Elizabeth Losh, 'Regulating violence in virtual worlds: Theorizing just war and defining war crimes in World of Warcraft', *Pacific Coast Philology*, 44:2 (2009), pp. 159–72.

[71] Accessible at: {wow.gamepedia.com}.

[72] Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, p. 33.

Conversely, ‘the readiness of combatants to die’ and ‘the physical killing of human beings who belong on the side of the enemy’ can only be justified within the political, as it ‘has no normative meaning, but an existential meaning only’:[73]

> There exists no rational purpose, no norm no matter how true, no program no matter how exemplary, no social ideal no matter how beautiful, no legitimacy nor legality which could justify men in killing each other for this reason. If such physical destruction of human life is not motivated by an existential threat to one’s own way of life, then it cannot be justified.[74]

Herbert Marcuse comments this passage: ‘What, then, remains as a possible justification? Only this: that there is a state of affairs that through its very existence and presence is exempt from all justification.’[75] Yet many, if not most, recourses to physical killing in WoW are justified by mere norms and rational purposes. This is true for most in-game peoples, despite stark differences in their handling of politics. A peaceful Pandaren invokes limited justification to send the player killing sprites, small wooden humanoids who are capable of speech: ‘Ugh! I hate sprites! They totally give me the creeps! They’re so small, and … and … they jump on you and … and … they have cold, dead little stick hands! … Get rid of those things, please!’.[76] At the other cultural extreme, when the player frees an Orc gladiator of the Laughing Skull clan who is forced to fight in an arena, he exclaims ‘Now I can kill who I want, when I want!’.[77] While Schmitt judges that ‘to demand seriously of human beings that they kill others and be prepared to die themselves so that trade and industry may flourish for the survivors … is sinister and crazy’,[78] two in-game peoples with highly capitalistic cultures, the Goblins and the Ethereals, engage precisely in this.[79] One thing that Schmitt does accurately suggest is that ‘war’, even in WoW, must involve securitisation. The word ‘war’ is used sparsely in the game and only applies to large-scale military campaigns: the Horde and the Alliance are not described as being at war until *Battle for Azeroth*, despite being engaged in deadly military clashes throughout every expansion.

In WoW, and contrary to Jef Huysmans’s argument, the ‘ordering force of the fear of violent death’ found in ‘Schmittean political realism’[80] would seem an inadequate basis for the ‘existential threat’ of classical securitisation. But before suggesting another definition of the ‘existential threat’, the Copenhagen School’s relationship to exceptionalist state security must be specified. Ole Wæver’s wording can make it easy to interpret securitisation as conservatively *reproducing* the traditional security logic and extending it to non-military sectors.[81] But this reliance is based on the claim that ‘security, as with any other concept, carries with it a history and a set of connotations that it cannot escape’ and on the contingent observation that ‘[t]here is no literature, no philosophy, no tradition of “security” in non-state terms.’[82] This has important normative implications: as Wæver argues in ‘Security, the Speech Act’ in a critique of the critical IR scholars of the late 1980s, ‘metaphysical concepts like sovereignty and state’ keep ‘show[ing] up in new forms’ when denounced.[83] Such a view is indebted to Jacques Derrida who, speaking of some of the founding blocks of Western metaphysics, claimed that:

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[73] Ibid., p. 48.

[74] Ibid., p. 49.

[75] Quoted in ibid., p. xvii.

[76] Sprite Fight, *MoP*.

[77] Slave Hunters, *WoD*.

[78] Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, p. 48.

[79] Obsidian Warbeads, *TBC*; Halo Drops, *Cata;* When Science Attacks, *Cata;* Avoiding Lawsuits 101, *BfA*.

[80] Huysmans, ‘The question of the limit’, p. 571.

[81] Roe, ‘Is securitization a “negative” concept?’, p. 258.

[82] Wæver, ‘Securitization and desecuritization’, p. 47.

[83] Wæver, ‘Security, the Speech Act’, p. 37. Wæver’s scepticism of denunciation as a mode of critique today finds echo around actor-network theory and other parts of science and technology studies. See Bruno Latour, ‘Why has critique run out of steam? From matters of fact to matters of concern’, *Critical Inquiry*, 30:2 (2004), pp. 225–48; Jonathan Luke

> it is not a matter of 'rejecting' these notions: they are necessary and, at least today, for us, nothing is thinkable without them anymore … We must even less give up these concepts in that they are today indispensable for us in order to shake the legacy they are part of.[84]

These 'movements of deconstruction' are 'necessarily operating from the inside'[85] of the established system of thought, from the inside of what Derrida calls the *clôture* ('closure' or 'enclosure'). Indeed, any break in the tradition 'reinscribe[s] itself, fatally, in an ancient fabric which must be interminably unraveled'.[86] 'There *is not* a transgression' if it means installing oneself in some kind of outside, superior truth that was alledgedly not born in the enclosure.[87] Wæver closely follows Derrida's deconstructive approach when he calls for working with realist concepts 'in a way which is faithful – but too faithful', by 'asking patiently for the intrinsic meaning of the concept' until it is 'not able anymore to function in the harmonious self-assured standard-discourse of realism'.[88] Wæver's deconstruction of the existential threat is first found in 'Security, The Speech Act' and then reiterated in 'Securitization and Desecuritization':

> The basic definition of a security problem is something that can undercut the political order within a state and thereby 'alter the premises for all other questions'. Threats seen as relevant are, *for the most part*, those that effect the self-determination and sovereignty of the unit. Survival *might sound overly dramatic* but it is, in fact, the survival of the unit as a basic political unit – a sovereign state – that is the key. Those issues with this undercutting potential must therefore be addressed prior to all others because, if they are not, the state will cease to exist as a sovereign unit and *all other questions will become irrelevant*.[89]

As restated in the *Framework* book, 'If one can argue that something overflows the normal political logic of weighing issues against each other, this must be the case because it can upset the entire process of weighing as such: "If we do not tackle this problem, everything else will be irrelevant …".'[90] The basic argument of securitisation is that if the threat is left unchecked, everything else will lose its *meaning*. The securitising speech act constructs the referent object[91] and frames it as what holds the world together.[92] If the referent object is removed, all meaning falls apart, making it impossible to grasp or deal with any reality. The world cannot be imagined without it. Physical death is only one possible case of such a breakdown, and whether this death is violent

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Austin, 'A parasitic critique for International Relations', *International Political Sociology*, 13:2 (2019), pp. 215–31; Marieke de Goede, 'Engagement all the way down', *Critical Studies on Security*, 8:2 (2020), pp. 101–15. For a discussion of Derrida specifically, see Aggie Hirst, 'Derrida and political resistance: The radical potential of deconstruction', *Globalizations*, 12:1 (2015), pp. 6–24.

[84] Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie* (Paris: Éditions de minuit, 1967), pp. 25–6; translation my own.

[85] Ibid., p. 38.

[86] Derrida, *Positions*, p. 35; translation my own.

[87] Ibid., p. 21.

[88] Wæver, 'Security, the Speech Act', p. 38. Rita Floyd, possibly confusing poststructuralism with Frankfurt School-inspired critical approaches, regrets that 'Wæver has been influenced by … deconstruction only in so far as the possibility of the "event" of deconstruction made him think beyond the horizon of mainstream IR theory.' Furthermore, 'he offers no theory' on how to spot this event – a strange point, given that deconstruction is always already at play in all concepts and has no need to be spotted. See Floyd, *Security and the Environment*, pp. 27–8.

[89] Wæver, 'Securitization and desecuritization', p. 47, emphasis added.

[90] Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde, *Security*, p. 24.

[91] Cai Wilkinson, 'The Copenhagen School on tour in Kyrgyzstan: Is securitization theory useable outside Europe?', *Security Dialogue*, 38:1 (2007), pp. 5–25.

[92] Those familiar with actor-network theory will recognise the referent object as an 'obligatory passage point' that allows meaning to be translated between different parts of the assemblage. This meaning is material-semiotic, not just discursive. See Michel Callon, 'Some elements of a sociology of translation: Domestication of the scallops and the fishermen of St Brieuc Bay', *The Sociological Review*, 32:1 suppl. (1984), pp. 196–233; John Law and Annemarie Mol, 'Notes on materiality and sociality', *The Sociological Review*, 43:2 (1995), pp. 274–94.

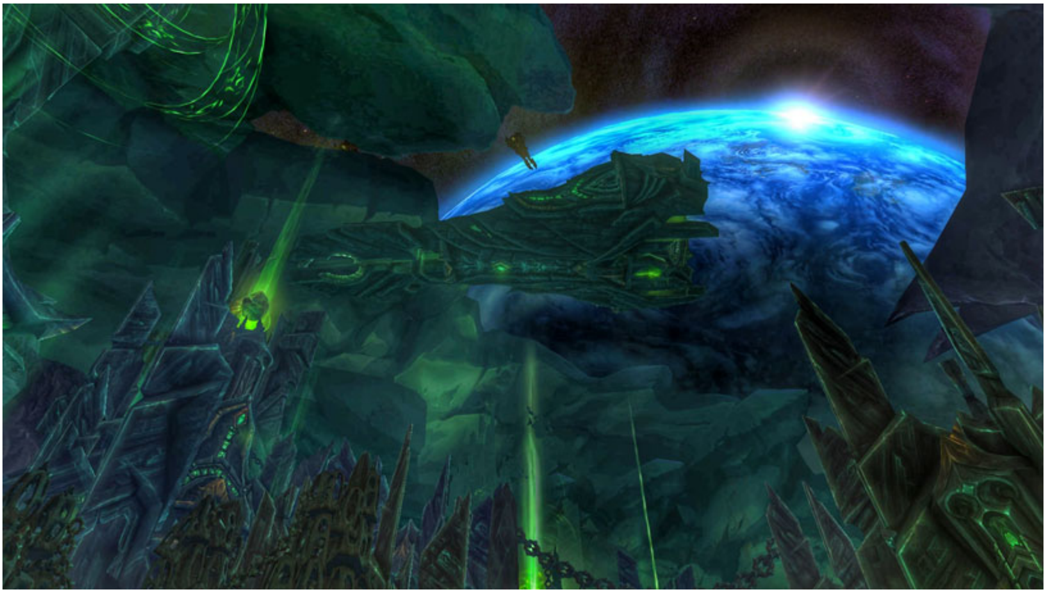

Figure 1. The world of Azeroth seen from the demon world Argus.
Source: *World of Warcraft: Legion*, courtesy of Blizzard Entertainment, Inc.

matters little. In this reading, the friend-enemy distinction and its controversial baggage are unnecessary.

Securitisation enacts the boundaries for what can or cannot be imagined. Rather than by referring to a mythical past state of nature, securitisation works by intensifying the possibility of a future where the 'world' falls apart.[93] In this 'barely imaginable future', the only depictable thing is the destruction of the referent object; by definition, none of the rest can be grasped. Visions of a barely imaginable future, sometimes through past examples of 'the unthinkable' happening, are fundamental to the construction of security in *World of Warcraft*. The two worlds in the game, Azeroth and Draenor/Outland, are overwhelmingly scarred by past demon invasions: the first was flooded undersea and is marked with a maelstrom where the demons arrived; and the second exploded into floating debris. Such references can be explicitly leveraged in securitising discourse, as when one enemy 'is channeling too much power to this place. If he's not to stop, Azeroth will be the next Outland!'.[94] When the demons invade Azeroth again in *Legion*, their devastated homeworld Argus becomes the ominous exhibit for a demon-dominated future, and is contrasted both with the pristine blue planet of Azeroth (Figure 1) and the still-glorious ruins from the demon world's former inhabitants (Figure 2). Elsewhere, forms of time travel are used to depict what the world could become if a threat is not stopped, or what it used to be before falling to an uncountered threat.[95] Numerous antagonists in WoW visually demonstrate their capacity for unprecedented destruction at their first appearance, and environmental devastation is often involved, to the point of being colour-coded to signal a given antagonist.[96] When

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[93] A focus on the future is admittedly more commonly associated to risk than to securitisation; see Louise Amoore, *The Politics of Possibility: Risk and Security Beyond Probability* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).

[94] Reading the Meters, *WotLK*.

[95] Such as the End of Times dungeon, *Cata*; the Visions of N'Zoth events, *BfA*; or the entire *Warlords of Draenor* expansion.

[96] For example, green for demons (*TBC, WoD*, and *Legion*), orange for the undead (*WotLK*), black and white for Sha spirits (*MoP*), or red for the druidic Nightmare (*Legion*).

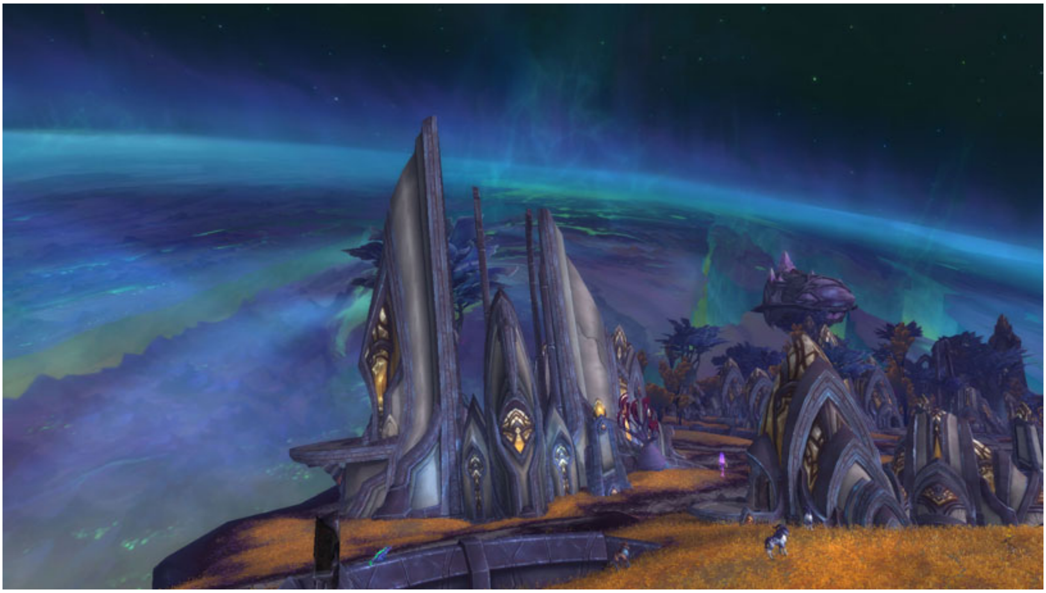

Figure 2. Remnants of Argus's past civilisation floating above the ravaged planet.
Source: *World of Warcraft: Legion*, courtesy of Blizzard Entertainment, Inc.

playing the game, the visual securitising power of such displays of destruction is obvious.[97] Securitisation is indeed abundant and significant in WoW, where it plays a major role in moving storylines forward and endowing them with emotional force.

Exceptional measures: Rules, honour, and magical powers

The theoretical arguments above suggest that securitisation can function in *World of Warcraft*, despite the prevalence of normalised violence in that universe. This subsection shows how securitisation works in WoW by separating normal politics, associated with honour and revenge, from exceptional politics, often linked to powerful magic. As WoW is already used to inform securitisation theory, one cannot *apply* a detailed securitisation analysis to WoW without falling into methodological circularity.[98] This is why it would be unwise here to study the representational politics of how security is portrayed in the game, as would be more obvious to do in many IR works on pop culture.[99] The aim is rather to expand on a corollary of the 'barely imaginable future': facing the unimaginable suggests the use of hitherto scarcely imaginable means to thwart it. A properly constructed existential threat thus implies the legitimation of exceptional measures.

Indeed, the *Framework* book poses a very low threshold for what counts as exceptional, defined counterfactually as having broken 'free of procedures and rules [one] would otherwise be bound by' had securitisation not occurred.[100] The 'exceptional measures' of classical securitisation theory, in other word, have no meaning independent of the securitising act. Indeed, following Juha Vuori, 'we cannot define "special politics" very specifically. However, we can say that all societies have "rules".'[101] For Huysmans, securitisation 'defines what counts as normal or democratic in the very act of identifying what is considered abnormal or non-democratic'.[102] In the rest of this article, I rely on a narrow criterion for WoW securitisation, only considering explicit speech acts[103] constructing an existential threat. This deliberately leaves out institutionalised forms of security, where certain matters have been integrated as inherently securitized,[104] as well as phrases that have become 'master signifiers' with securitising connotations.[105]

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[97] Lene Hansen, 'Theorizing the image for security studies: Visual securitization and the Muhammad cartoon crisis', *European Journal of International Relations*, 17:1 (2011), pp. 51–74.

[98] Many thanks to Philippe Beaulieu-Brossard for this point.

[99] On representational politics in popular culture, see Laura J. Shepherd, *Gender, Violence and Popular Culture: Telling Stories* (London, UK: Routledge, 2012).

[100] Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde, *Security*, p. 25.

A substantial part of the armed violence in WoW is justified by the logic of 'crimes to be punished' or of 'honour to be avenged'. This justice-like logic is not usually combined to claims of existential threat, though it often constructs a radical Other.[106] Compare the following declarations:

1. A Tuskarr villager: 'Everyone I knew was slain, including my father Ariut. By tuskarr *law* I must seek *retribution* against those who shed my kin's blood.'
2. A Human ghost: 'The very men who destroyed our village and slew our fellows toast their "amazing victory" while we are helpless to *avenge* the fallen. We must not allow these *crimes* to go unanswered! Be the instrument of our *vengeance* … Go to Sunfury Hold and claim the lives of those responsible for this *crime*.'
3. A Thorignir dragon: 'The dragon who guided you to me awaits his *vengeance* against the vrykul. Together I wish for you to show these Drekirjar what it means to cross the Thorignir. Their *toll* must be paid in blood.'
4. An Orc warrior: 'These defilers – the lice-ridden wolf-men running rampant over the shrine – *dishonor* this memory of the wolf god. They arrived with the Twilight's Hammer, howling with their own twisted religion. They seek to corrupt noble Lo'Gosh to fit their own warped pantheon. Kill them!'[107]

The difference between the logic of justice and that of securitisation is sometimes explicit. The Grummles of *Mists of Pandaria*, whose worldview is based on notions of good and bad fortune, move packages on roads that are regularly attacked by the Hozen people. Their violent deaths at Hozen hands appear as limited matter for concern: 'The Broketooth hozen south of here killed all of my grummles. What is worse, their packages are undelivered. Fortune frowns on a grummlepack undelivered.'[108] Yet one Grummle insists that 'we have very few grummles these days' and asks the player to ‘destroy some of the Broketooth hozen’, arguing that ‘this is not *vengeance or fortune*, it is *survival.*’[109]

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[101] Vuori, 'Illocutionary logic and strands of securitization', p. 69.

[102] Huysmans, *Security Unbound*, p. 69.

[103] The 'speech act' element of classical securitisation theory has generated abundant controversies. This article will not partake in these discussions and will remain concerned with security 'discourse' in the general sense, without engaging with either speech act theory or issues of audience and context – the latter two which would be impractical to develop in a fictional video game setting. See Felix Ciută, 'Security and the problem of context: A hermeneutical critique of securitisation theory', *Review of International Studies*, 35:2 (2009), pp. 301–26; Thierry Balzacq, 'A theory of securitization: origins, core assumptions, and variants', in Thierry Balzacq (ed.), *Understanding Securitisation Theory: How Security Problems Emerge and Dissolve* (London, UK: Routledge, 2010), pp. 1–30; Stritzel, *Security in Translation*.

[104] Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde, *Security*, p. 27.

[105] Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, 'Macrosecuritisation and security constellations: Reconsidering scale in securitisation theory', *Review of International Studies*, 35:2 (2009), pp. 253–76 (p. 275).

[106] Poststructuralist scholars have argued that otherisation is a core aspect of securitisation; see Croft, *Securitizing Islam*, pp. 86–92; Clara Eroukhmanoff, 'The remote securitisation of Islam in the US post-9/11: Euphemisation, metaphors and the "logic of expected consequences" in counter-radicalisation discourse', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 8:2 (2015), pp. 246–65; Julie Wilhelmsen, 'How does war become a legitimate undertaking? Re-engaging the post-structuralist foundation of securitization theory', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 52:2 (2017), pp. 166–83. The fact that WoW's logic of justice relies heavily on otherisation does not mean that WoW securitisation is 'not otherising'; however, it underlines that extreme otherisation can occur without any securitisation.

[107] Karuk's Oath, *WotLK*; The Sunfury Garrison, *TBC*; Cry Thunder!, *Legion*; Howling Mad, *Cata*; emphasis added in all.

[108] No Pack Left Behind, *MoP*.

The WoW logic of securitisation, defined by reference to an existential threat, often involves recourse to heroic actions by the player[110] or to especially powerful magic. In a lush jungle that is partly devastated by the undead Scourge (*WotLK*) – a vision of a barely imaginable future – the use of an ancient weapon is framed in explicit and detailed securitisation grammar:

> the Scourge’s invasion has not slowed down. The situation is becoming desperate … There exists a last resort … To ensure the safety of their experimentation sites, the titans created a defense mechanism. Its destructive force is unparalleled … It borders on sacrilege that these secrets be revealed to a mortal such as yourself, but I have little choice. … Life must be protected at any cost.[111]

More generally, the grammar surrounding such magical measures insists on them being uncommon, distant in place or time, difficult or dangerous to attain, rare or unique in kind, and/or historically significant. Rarely are these magical measures entirely ‘new’, as they are often rooted in a mythical or legendary past; it is their invocation ‘here and now’ that is framed as extraordinary. As a village cleric says in *MoP*:

> I was taught many rituals, and have performed *all of them, save one*. There was one, an *extremely ancient one*, that we were told to call upon if our people ever turned against us. This must have happened *in our people’s distant past*, because we haven’t needed to use it in our village’s memory. I suppose *now is the time to do so*.[112]

Exceptional measures in WoW are defined less negatively as the breaking of rules than positively as the recourse to awe-inspiring magic. This hints at normative implications: in WoW, securitisation is largely seen as desirable. The next section will develop how securitisation maintains order in the game universe.

Securitisation as world order: Enacting political communities

By declaring which objects are necessary for imagination, and by separating normal from exceptional politics, securitisation shapes political communities. This extends beyond democratic communities;[113] a community that securitises the nation is different from one that securitises its territory, or from one, like the capitalistic Goblins in *World of Warcraft*, that rarely securitises anything. Such a reasoning can be extended to the international order. This section’s argument falls in line with Jonas Hagmann’s claim that ‘securitisation produces worlds imageries’ and ‘effectively systematises the international’. In asserting ‘who threatens whom and why’, securitisation ‘populates the international with distinct relations and actor formations’, and thus ‘describes nothing less than the international reality in which a country finds itself’.[114]

An attentive player of WoW can be struck by how the relative importance of securitisation *sectors* differs from the real world. The sectoral analysis of security was first presented in Barry Buzan’s *People, States and Fear*,[115] 15 years before it was combined with securitisation theory in the *Framework* book. While there have been later attempts to delimitate additional sectors in religion or cybersecurity,[116] the sectoral framing has faded out of securitisation scholarship, which nowadays focuses on specific topics rather than pinning them to a concept of sector. Several of Buzan's sectors nevertheless emerge in *World of Warcraft* with distinctive securitisation dynamics. This is additionally noteworthy given that, due to the ubiquity of armed violence, the military sector should have overshadowed the other ones and voided the interest of a sectoral analysis. Instead, the opposite seems to have happened: the military sector in *WoW* is emptied of its substance, made of small-scale securitisations with little impact on the broader pattern of relations.

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[109] Breaking Broketooth, *MoP*; emphasis added.

[110] The Avatar of Terokk, *WoD*.

[111] Freya’s Pact, *WotLK*.

[112] The Ritual, *MoP*; emphasis added.

[113] Huysmans, *Security Unbound*.

[114] Jonas Hagmann, *(In)Security and the Production of International Relations: The Politics of Securitisation in Europe* (London, UK: Routledge, 2014), pp. 8–9.

[115] Barry Buzan, *People, States and Fear* (Brighton, UK: Wheatsheaf, 1983).

This section will describe the international order in WoW through its sectoral dynamics. Its claims are based on the whole of WoW, but it relies on the *Legion* expansion for examples.[117] Released in 2016, *Legion* is one of the most appreciated expansions among current WoW players.[118] The storyline revolves around an invasion of the Burning Legion demons, who threaten to wipe out all life on Azeroth after having ravaged countless other worlds. They established a foothold in the Broken Isles, where they occupy the ancient city of Suramar to exploit its magic resources for their war efforts. The player is part of a worldwide military coalition against the demons and must retrieve powerful artefacts scattered around the Broken Isles. She must convince the locals to offer their help, usually in return for support in their own political issues. In WoW, securitisation fills in the role of international norms and organisation and compensates the violence of normal politics.

In the real world, military security is traditionally about the protection of the state.[119] In *World of Warcraft*, the state is not a distinctly military concern until the seventh expansion, *Battle for Azeroth*. Once the state is removed, the military sector is left concerned with territorial losses and military bildups in the opposite camp. Both concerns are found throughout the game. Calls for protecting a military position or village are common, but often fail to invoke measures beyond ordinary fighting, except perhaps when an enemy is suspected to acquire a powerful weapon.[120] In the absence of the state object, and given the strong normalisation of military violence, military securitisation is often subordinated to other kinds of securitisation and cannot propel a major storyline on its own.

Rather than a state, the referent object that is most often constructed as existentially threatened by armed violence is a 'people' or nation. The coincidence between nation and state has been associated to modern statehood, yet this coupling is often so strong in WoW that it makes little sense to securitise the state instead of the nation. The societal sector thus absorbs most of the military sector's substance. The three main 'threats' to societal referents in the *Framework* book – migration, external cultural influence, and integrating or secessionist projects – are practically unheard of in WoW securitisation. Yet 'depopulation', which 'is not specifically part of the societal sector's logic of identity, except perhaps in cases where extermination policies are motivated by the desire to eliminate an identity and in extreme cases – such as AIDS in Uganda – where quantity turns into quality',[121] is commonplace following these two cases. Societal securitisation then seems to safeguard against the extinction of entire collectives through armed violence. On the Broken Isles, a group of blue dragons, guardians of magic, try to survive after the political institution they belonged to was disbanded. They are attacked by exiles from Suramar who try to fulfil their addiction to magic. The exiles both tap into the region's magic faultlines, on which rests the blue dragons' culture ('Without the power of the ley lines, we are nothing'),[122] and try to vampirise young dragons for their magic ('we can no longer bear eggs. My whelplings are the last of the last. I need you, champion. Help defend my whelplands').[123] By securitising the survival of their culture and people, the blue dragons draw the involvement of the player, who eventually saves them.

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[116] Carsten Bagge Laustsen and Ole Wæver, 'In defence of religion: Sacred referent objects for securitization', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 29:3 (2000), pp. 705–39; Lene Hansen and Helen Nissenbaum, 'Digital disaster, cyber security, and the Copenhagen School', *International Studies Quarterly*, 53:4 (2009), pp. 1155–75.

[117] In the following, in-game references will come from *Legion* unless otherwise specified.

[118] Ryura, 'Which is your favourite expansion?', Blizzard EU forums, available at: {https://eu.forums.blizzard.com/en/wow/t/which-is-your-favorite-expansion/77449} accessed 22 February 2021.

[119] Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde, *Security*, p. 22.

[120] In a purely military form, this can be seen in the Terokkar Forest quests, *TBC*.

[121] Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde, *Security*, p. 121.

In WoW, the environment is highly institutionalised, with nature spirits able to securitise their own survival and with immediately visible threats. These factors all lack in the real world and contribute to the success of environmental securitisation, effectively framing ecosystems as state-like entities with a physical and political integrity. However, due to the extreme correlation between nation and state and the pervasiveness of the environment for the rest of the international order, these 'environmental states' do not give rise to distinct securitisation dynamics, which remain societal or supranational. On the Broken Isles, druids from the forest of Val'sharah cannot wake up from their magical sleeps, and pacifists must resort to killing aggressive creatures. Alongside this institutional disturbance, the druids' 'precious land'[124] turns red, with the flora and fauna corrupted by the 'greatest threat Val'sharah has ever faced'.[125] The securitisation of this red corruption has a societal referent object made of a community of druids, animals, and plants. At the same time, it is made clear to the player that the threat to Val'sharah would impact other national groups in the broader world, not least those who are part of the player's international coalition.

The securitisation of a supranational referent, while seldom considered effective in the real world, is fundamental in WoW. Every expansion is driven by at least one main antagonist posing an existential threat to 'the world' as a whole, and lesser examples of supranational securitisation also exist at the scale of a region or zone. Supranational securitisation overcomes the strong national cleavages in WoW's political order. A local faction may use it to draw the attention of other parties, such as that of the player and of larger factions she works for, in a way that Hagmann also noticed at play in real-world Europe.[126] Supranational securitisation is regularly leveraged to call for cooperation between multiple entities ('They thought they were ready for us, but they've never seen the forces of Azeroth work with such unity')[127] or to maintain it ('we cannot allow the rest of this land to fall into the demons' foul grip. [The demon general] has dispatched his forces across the Broken Isles, threatening the homelands of the allies you have made').[128] Rejecting supranational securitisation then paradoxically becomes a way of reasserting one's sovereignty, as when a local queen declares that her domain is exclusively under her ordinary rule: '"Demons" you say? A "Burning Legion?" Hrmph! Nothing burns here but for my ire, shaman, and if these monsters think to corrupt my domain, they will be crushed beneath my dainty beautiful feet!'.[129] Because they put in check the everyday violence, national and supranational securitisation are overwhelmingly cast as normatively positive in WoW, with a couple noteworthy exceptions.[130]

WoW's the later expansions, which are more sophisticated in terms of storyline and gameplay, complicate this international picture through the rise of state referents in *Legion* and *Battle for Azeroth*. The Broken Isles have two such examples, Highmountain and Suramar. These state referents are forged through repeated securitising acts that invoke a territory, people, and political institution interchangeably. The ‘Highmountain’ referent thus simultaneously designates a geographic region, an economy and ecosystem, the various peoples who live therein, a ruling dynasty, the dynasty’s legendary founder, and a shared history. The securitising moves of Highmountain’s various leaders assert that these heterogeneous things are not only tied together, but are also *fundamental to any imaginable idea* of ‘Highmountain’. Such securitisation would thus order members of the majority Tauren people not to imagine a ‘Highmountain’ that rejects the minority Drogbar people, or one that is not united under the ruling dynasty. Securitising moves can thus become part of a battleground over what the state *ought* to be imagined or imaginable as a political entity. Indeed, normative contestation or rejection of securitising moves becomes much more common starting from *Legion*’s Suramar and into the main political players of *BfA*.

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[122] Leyline Abuse.

[123] The Last of the Last.

[124] The Emerald Queen.

[125] Return to the Grove.

[126] Hagmann, *(In)Security and the Production of International Relations*, p. 28.

[127] Assault on Broken Shore.

[128] Defending Broken Isles.

[129] The Troggs that Fell to Earth.

[130] The Burning Legion and the demon hunters, both of which owe their existence to extreme supranational securitisation, are the main antagonists of *Legion* and *TBC*, respectively.

The city-state of Suramar was shaped by a chain of securitising moves. Each attempted to counter the damage caused by the previous one, profoundly affected the city’s political structure and the life of its citizens, and each took as referent object ‘Suramar’, defined as both the city and its population. First, Suramar took the ‘desperate choice’ of shielding itself from the world to survive the first demon invasion.[131] Second, it had to build a powerful source of magic, the Nightwell, as a drastically addictive food substitute that effectively sentenced to death any Suramar citizen cast outside of the city’s limits. Third, as the Nightwell’s power attracted the demons again, the queen surrendered the city as a price for not being deprived of the vital Nightwell (‘I could not allow my people starve … Now I see a future where the Legion is victorious and my people endure … I will do *everything in my power* to make it so!’).[132] Crucially, the queen came to this decision after having failed to see (or imagine) any future where the demons would be defeated – or alternatively, any future where Suramar would not depend on the Nightwell.[133]

The storyline follows an exiled Suramar official who rejected the queen’s securitising move and organises a popular rebellion. For the rebels, an alternate mode of organisation is possible for Suramar: one where its inhabitants would be cured of their dependency to the Nightwell, and where Suramar would break its isolation to join forces with the international coalition against the demons. While the concrete insurgency is played in the registers of justice and normal politics, the rebels’ two ideals involve securitisation. With the first, extreme efforts are required to nurture a magical tree (‘If we fail, Suramar is doomed’).[134] As for the second, in the xenophobic Suramar society, foreign help can only be justified by an existential threat: ‘The fate of my people rests in the hands of outsiders … all of you … to save us from the terrible bargain made by our queen.’[135] While all securitise the ‘Suramar’ referent object, it is the object’s content that is contested. To justify her defection, an officer affirms that ‘I serve Suramar. *All* of Suramar.’[136] In WoW’s states, securitisation opens alternative futures, rather than close them.

Conclusion

Much of securitisation scholarship still constitutes itself in opposition to classical securitisation theory, making it worthwhile to clarify the latter’s foundations. This article identified a widespread assumption about the Copenhagen School formulation of the theory, namely that the concept of securitisation reproduces the Schmittian state of exception as found in modern liberal states. This assumption, which would suggest securitisation theory to be normatively problematic, misreads Ole Wæver’s early work and overlooks the role of Derridian deconstruction in motivating the theory. Classical securitisation theory should instead be viewed around the concept of

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[131] Suramar Intro cinematic.

[132] Battle against Grand Magistrix Elisande, Nighthold raid; emphasis added.

[133] Battle against Grand Magistrix Elisande, Nighthold raid.

[134] All In.

[135] Battle against the Chronomatic Anomaly, Nighthold raid.

[136] Victoire farewell quote, emphasis in the original.

'existential threat', that is, the possibility of an absolute loss of meaning, in which the disparition of a central referent object would open the door to an unimaginable future. Securitisation frames certain referent objects as a necessary condition for imagining the world. As such, securitisation plays a fundamental role in shaping all forms of political ordering, even through its rejection or absence, and draws the limits for normal and exceptional politics within particular communities.

Such a reading of securitisation allows it to be more adapted to non-Western settings, and brings the question of how securitisation was involved in building the modern state. It also raises possibilities for the normative debate. If securitisation can produce a desirable international normative order in WoW, it might do so in the real world, especially against supranational or environmental threats. While there would be tremendous utility in establishing forms of securitisation that overcomes antagonism between hostile parties, or that ensures protection to threatened populations, significant issues complicate such a vision. Supranational threats in WoW usually take the shape of demons, undeads, or malevolent gods, to whom no compassion nor dignity is offered; and when a less personified threat to the environment arises, the latter can speak and securitise for itself. More importantly, the international order of WoW presupposes possibly unacceptable levels of normalised violence, which may offset the cooperation gained with securitisation. One could still counter this last point by referring to the pervasive violence of colonialism,[137] which may – or may not be – a sufficient condition for the production of WoW-like securitisation dynamics.

Empirically, the frequent occurrence of securitisation in popular culture narratives would require further attention, especially given the divergence between the ways securitisation is used in such narratives and in the real world. This article finally reiterates the usefulness of popular culture and video games for the study of international politics, including as thought experiments that put forward novel theoretical claims.

Acknowledgements. I would like to thank Philippe Beaulieu-Brossard, Thorsten Brønholt, Christian Bueger, Rosie Collington, Olaf Corry, Maja Touzari Greenwood, Nicklas Johansen, Mathilde Kaalund, Tobias Liebetrau, Cecilie Tobias-Renstrøm, Natalia Umansky, Anders Wivel, and Ole Wæver for discussions and comments on earlier drafts of this article.

Vic Castro is a PhD Fellow at the Department of Political Science of the University of Copenhagen. Their main research is focused on cybersecurity, science and technology studies, materiality, and securitisation theory, with additional work on popular culture.

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[137] Barkawi, 'Decolonising war'.

Cite this article: Castro, V. 2022. The limits of imagination: Securitisation and exceptionalism in the *World of Warcraft* video game. *European Journal of International Security* 7, 207–225. https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2022.1