

WHY THE HUMANS ARE WHITE: FANTASY, MODERNITY, AND THE RHETORICS OF
RACISM IN *WORLD OF WARCRAFT*

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Abstract

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This dissertation analyzes constructions and representations of racial identity in the world's most popular massively multiplayer online role-playing game, *World of Warcraft*, vis-à-vis the ideological and political-economic history of racism in the United States. Chapter 1 uses Ken McAllister's Grammar of Gameworlds to map the game's racial design and its ideological influences. Chapter 2 shows how *WoW* operates upon biologicistic definitions of race and then traces those definitions' historical and literary origins from the Enlightenment through the twentieth century. Chapter 3 offers multimodal rhetorical analyses of the game's ten playable races, finding each to be a pastiche of nostalgic, Eurocentric representations. Chapter 4 uses Ian Bogost's theory of procedural rhetoric to interpret the meanings generated in the context of *WoW*'s player-versus-player combat, which splits its players into permanently warring, racially divided factions. It concludes that although *WoW* offers a simulation of racist war, the game (and its players) have avoided mainstream labeling as racist by re-framing the conflict in terms of nationalism, following the racial discourse of the "War on Terror." Finally, through a critical reflection on my own continuing participation in the game, I discuss the ways that white privilege and neoliberalism let players ignore or sidestep the many varieties of racism inherent in *WoW* and other fantasy games. Ultimately, I argue that *World of Warcraft* is a metaphor for the ambivalence that mainstream U.S. culture feels as it questions modernity's ways of being and communicating, but has yet to shift into the next paradigm.

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CHAPTER 1: TOPOGRAPHY

Acts

Act 1: Late 2005/early 2006.

My best friend Dan and I are in our 40s with our first characters, and we're in the [Hinterlands](#). One group of quests in this zone involves fighting up a Troll city called [Jintha'Alor](#). It's a nasty area for a level 40ish character because it's big - comprised of seven or eight tiers that have to be navigated linearly - and because it's densely populated with [elite mobs](#) - [NPCs](#) with higher-than-average hit points. (Or it was - it's been [nerfed](#) now, as part of Blizzard's ongoing effort to make the game easier; but more about that elsewhere.) So they're very hard to kill. Which means that the area isn't soloable - it forces players to group up. Dan and I, playing our hunters, are doing okay in here, operating more or less at the edge of our competence. And then we see a lone Orc. He's¹ the same level as we are, but alone, he's going to have trouble in here. We regard one another silently, since that's pretty much our only option, and he follows us for a little while, kind of waiting behind us while we kill the Trolls. This doesn't bother us - like I said, we're doing okay, and we're getting the [XP](#) and [loot](#) from these mobs, while the best he can do is follow us through the city. The problem for him is that the main quests for the area involve fighting an even tougher boss at the top of the city, and there's no way he's going to be able to do that alone.

¹ The male pronouns refer to the character, which was male. Of course, I have no idea about the gender of the player.

At a certain point, we notice that the Orc (whom I'll call Olive; I never wrote down his real name) is helping us kill our mobs. This is an unusual act, because it does nothing for him by way of XP/loot: once one of us pulls the mob, he gets no credit for it, even if he helps us kill it. After a couple of these assists, we walk up to a live Troll and stop and wait. I wave at Olive. After an awkward pause, he pulls the mob, and we help him kill it. Effectively, we've done for him what he's been doing for us: helped him kill and get XP/loot for a mob without any gain to ourselves.

For the next hour, the three of us fall into a pattern in which we trade off pulls, splitting the rewards. We fight all the way to the top of the city, to the boss. He helps us kill it, and we wait around about 5 minutes for it to [respawn](#) and help him kill it. Then the three of us exit the city the way we came, fighting back down through the mobs that have respawned behind us.

Outside the city gates at the bottom, Olive bows to us. We bow to him and part ways.

Act 2: Early April 2007.

A weekday evening. My wife, Annie, is logged on, selling herbs on the Auction House in [Stormwind](#). I'm at my desk, 90 degrees to hers, writing a seminar paper. It's about *WoW* and race - the prototype of this chapter, actually. I'm fascinated by what I'm seeing when I look closely: that *WoW* is not only *full* of what I'm pretty sure I can reasonably confidently call racist stereotypes; but that the whole Alliance/Horde thing is some kind of racist war. It's really obvious to me, anyway. I'm very curious about whether other players see it too.

And so I'm typing away about the Humans being white and the Trolls being black and so forth, and Annie mutters, "Stupid Mehet."

Mehet, our guild's obligatory 17-year-old dipshit, is mouthing off in guild chat. "Such a tool," I answer. "What's he saying?"

"Come look."

I turn around, scoot my chair two feet, read over her shoulder. Mehet and Killa, one of his like-minded buddies, are typing to each other in sloppy African American Language. Here's the part of the conversation I've preserved:

Killa: Can someone run me through stocks?

Mehet: HELL NO.

Killa: Not u ur only 43 [Mehet's level – too low to escort Killa through that dungeon]

Mehet: YOU dont EvEN know who I be

Killa: nope, u don't know who i be

Mehet: I KNOW who u be

Killa: who do I be?

Mehet: Zingo [the name of Killa's main]

The composition theory class I'm taking has introduced me to the linguistic practices of code-switching and -meshing, so the first thing I notice is that these guys are doing both. Killa's first question, and perhaps Mehet's reply, seem to follow the conventions of Standard American English. Killa's second remark, and a couple of later remarks by both of them, use the features of [Netspeak](#): "u" for "you," "ur" for "you're." Then they use some African American Language, both in their vocabulary and emphasis. In Internet discourse, capital letters usually connote shouting (as with Mehet's "HELL NO"), but they can also suggest emphasis on certain syllables. In this case, both players attempt to transmit the spoken rhythms of AAL in their use of caps. They also substitute "be" for "am," aping the habitual "be" of AAL grammar. But they don't do it right, and Mehet's attempt to convey shifting emphasis with "EvEN" doesn't make sense if one tries to say it aloud (though it might just be a typo). To me, their mistaken usage of AAL suggests that neither of them really know that code, and they're mimicking it as a racial (or racist?) joke.

At this point, I want to know more about Mehet and Killa's real-world identities vis-à-vis their projective ones. (I'd like to think, looking back, that I wanted to find out how, based on their cultural and racial identifications, they identified with SAE and AAL, since everyone in *WoW* speaks some degree of Netspeak. Get a sense of whether they were speaking home discourses or appropriated ones. However, new as I was to this race theory stuff, my thoughts were probably something like, *find out what race they are*.) So I commit what I'm sure a sophomore sociology student would consider a rookie ethnography mistake: I slap the Academic Credentials on the table first. Leaning over Annie to reach her keyboard, I [whisper](#) to Mehet:

Me: Hey Mehet - I'm a student, and I'm studying linguistics. I couldn't help but notice that you and Killa were just now mixing some conventions of Standard American English and African American English. Would you mind telling me what race you are in RL?

Mehet: [Fifteen-second pause.] It was only a kid.

Me: No - I'm not criticizing you guys at all; I'm just interested for academic reasons.

Promise.

Mehet: [Another pregnant pause.] I be a troll in RL, mon.

Killa ignored me, so that was as far as I got with either of them. But my poorly conducted interview wasn't a complete bust: Mehet read the 'Trolls the same way I did.

Act 3: Late April 2007.

I show up at my office one morning and discover a message on the whiteboard by my door:

"For the Horde!"

An expression of *esprit de corps* for the other side. The anonymous wag - a student waiting in the hall for an end-of-semester conference? - must've noticed the screenshot of my Night Elf

hunter, [Hemingway](#), on my door. I laugh and leave the message up, even though the kid stole my marker.

Act 4: October 2008.

My brother Dave has somehow talked our sister, Betsy, into trying out *WoW*. He's been playing for about nine months, and he's walking her level 14 character through [Westfall](#) with one of his 70s. I'm somewhere else with Hemingway, but we're all in a [party](#), so I can see what they're typing to each other.

During some downtime, she starts asking him about various gameplay details: how could she repair her armor, add people to her [Friends list](#), find a class trainer, etc. He's answering them calmly and patiently, being a good teacher and older brother.

Out of questions for the time being, she tells us that Peter, our youngest sibling, has also started a character, but that it's on the Horde. He wanted to play with some friends from school.

Dave's immediate response: "Tell him he's dead to me."

We all laugh.

Act 5: January 2009.

I'm at the Job Talk of a visiting rhet/comp candidate. It's a rhetorical analysis of the National Museum of the American Indian, a space whose representations of America's indigenous cultures are under constant scrutiny and debate. It's good work on a serious subject, the kind I sometimes feel guilty for not studying.

However, I find that the candidate and I have something in common. Discussing her digital life, she cites her tendency to work *WoW*'s [Auction House](#) while she's writing and grading papers. And the writing sample she's brought is a rhetorical analysis of "[Leeroy Jenkins!](#)"

After her presentation, I approach her with a question that reveals my own insiderdom:

"So, what [server](#) do you play on?"

"Aggramar. You?"

"Baelgun."

This means we can't play together. But there's no surprise or disappointment from either of us: there are 243 servers, so the chances were low.

Then she asks the inevitable next question in conversations like these: "Horde or Alliance?"

"Alliance."

Now she looks disappointed. "Too bad," she smirks. "The Horde is better."

Manifestations

The separation of players into ten races, and the rules that govern their interactions, are some of the most significant regulators of identity in *World of Warcraft*. They are also intimately tied to racism as it's been represented and enacted in the U.S., from its "discovery" to the present day. What's interesting about this is that nobody seems to notice or care. Including me, until a single act by a friendly Orc made me start to see the system in a new way. This project tries to figure out why it's so easy to see only part of what's right in front of our faces, or more appropriately, what's right in front of the faces we put on.

First, some formal exposition. An avatar's² place in the Warcraft world is mainly governed by three identity markers: [class](#), [level](#), and [race](#).³ Like all RPGs, *class* in *WoW* means "profession" rather

² *Avatar* is the common term for the little figure a player inhabits and controls and speaks through. *WoW* players also use *character* pretty often, and you'll occasionally see me use it. The problem with *character* is that it suggests that the player is a character in a narrative; and to very quickly summarize the result of the game studies field's famous ludology/narratology debate, videogames may *contain* narratives, but they also host play activities, and play and narrative are fundamentally different things. So *avatar* is a more appropriate term than *character*, and it's favored by game studies scholars.

than "social standing." An avatar's class has enormous effects on the player's experience with the game, since it is the most important factor in how the avatar fights; it also affects how the player interacts with other players, since it determines her role in raids and guilds. The avatar's level determines what levels of enemies it can kill, what zones it can enter, and to some extent, how good and/or dedicated the player controlling it is. And the character's race governs its political place in the world - its predetermined and immutable allegiance with half of the world's races and enmity with the other half. I.e., its membership in the Horde or Alliance faction.

Race is the most important identity marker for a *WoW* character early in the game, its importance emphasized in the first thing a player does: create her character. The [character-creation process](#) takes place in a menu screen in which the player chooses the character's race (and by extension, faction), gender, class, facial appearance, and name. The ten race options – Humans, Dwarves, Night Elves, Gnomes, Draenei, Orcs, Undead, Tauren, Trolls, and Blood Elves – appear at the upper left of the avatar-creation screen, a visual placement that suggests that the player should choose her avatar's race before choosing its other attributes. Actually, it's more than just a suggestion, because race *governs* all of the other attributes. There's the fore-mentioned faction membership, of course. Class is also dictated by race, because each race can only play certain classes. Even though gender and facial appearance are purely cosmetic attributes (they have no effect on gameplay), they're also affected by race, because each race/gender combination looks and sounds dramatically different. Only an avatar's name is totally customizable, though if the player can't think of a name, she can hit a button below the name form that generates a random one. If the player were to hit that button a bunch of times, she'd notice that the names fall into phonological and graphical patterns, patterns that follow each race.

³ There are others, like gender, title, achievements, guild affiliation, and guild rank. They're second-tier identity markers - not as fundamental to the gameplay as class, level, and race.

Race continues to be the most important element of the avatar's identity when the player enters the game world. After finishing with the avatar-creation menu and hitting the "Enter World" button, the player is shown one of ten short introductory movies, depending upon her avatar's race. In each movie, the "camera" flies cinematically over that race's starting zone, presenting its unique landscape and architecture, while a patriarchal narrator describes the race's history, temperament, allegiances and conflicts. Finally, the camera zooms in on the new avatar, who is standing in front of the first NPC who will give it a quest and begin its adventures in the game. These videos situate each avatar within its geographical and political context in the game world, and the fact that this context depends entirely on the avatar's race reveals how important it will be to the avatar's identity and the player's gaming experience. When the new player begins playing, she finds her starting zone almost entirely populated by NPCs of her avatar's race, and her initial quests circulate around that race's local problems. Furthermore, the starting zones geographically insulate new avatars from the outside world, so that they are unlikely to see many differently raced avatars for the first ten levels. This is partly a clever design feature that lets new players acclimate to the enormous, complex game world a little at a time, but it has the double effect of foregrounding avatars' races as their primary identities.

The most important way an avatar's race governs his identity is that it ties him to the Alliance or Horde faction. The Alliance and Horde are permanently engaged in a low-intensity conflict, in the sense that each faction occupies exclusive cities and fortresses (although there are a few "sanctuary" cities, which they can both enter), which they can attack without being able to permanently hold or destroy (as the cities' NPCs will always respawn). The conflict's permanence is one of its most significant features, especially because it's contradicted by the mythology of the Warcraft universe. According to this mythology, which players get little chunks of in the game and big chunks of in officially licensed websites and novels (not to mention the three Warcraft RTS

games that preceded *WoW*), the Alliance/Horde conflict is anything but inevitable or -alterable: the ten races have competed and collaborated in myriad ways, swayed by all manner of cultural clashes, charismatic leaders, and the occasional demonic possession. Sub-factions have formed; splinter groups have split off. Both sides have committed and suffered genocides. It's a long and tumultuous history indeed (and few players have the patience to absorb all of it). A lot of the recent narratives, like the Rise of the Lich King, have overshadowed the faction conflict by threatening *every* member of the game world. But on the ground, from the players' perspective, the faction system remains, insurmountable and unchanging.

At its most mundane level, the faction system fosters a separate-but-equal relationship between the two sides. Members of opposing factions each have the same number of zones, cities, quests, and abilities. However, they're attacked by NPC guards if they try to enter each other's cities. They can't form parties, raids, or guilds. They can't trade items, and they have separate auction houses.⁴ Most importantly, they can't speak to each other: the game's chat system renders all utterances by the other faction as gibberish. The only way they can communicate is through [emotes](#), which are pre-programmed gestures that the avatars can make. There are about 200 of these,⁵ and they're fairly expressive - they run the gamut from "salute" to "fart." But they still can't compare to good old language.

So it's possible, as Act 1 above shows, to communicate with the other side, albeit in a limited way. But talking and trading aren't *WoW*'s primary *raison d'être*. That would be combat. The player-versus-player (PvP) combat system in *WoW* is almost entirely couched within the war between the

⁴ The classic game had three "neutral" Auction Houses, but they were located in out-of-the-way areas and levied higher taxes on sales. Thus, they were almost totally ignored by players. Neither of the expansions has used neutral auction houses even though they've introduced neutral cities.

⁵ There used to be far fewer, but Blizzard added a lot in [the latest expansion](#). Is this a sign that they're softening their prohibition on cross-faction communication? Maybe, but it's still there in the [Terms of Use Agreement](#) (go to <http://www.worldofwarcraft.com/legal/termsofuse.html>) and check out Article 9, section B, subsection viii).

Horde and Alliance, with numerous opportunities for players in the two factions to fight each other. There are five instanced [battlegrounds](#) in which opposing-faction teams can fight, these fights following typical PvP videogame structures of deathmatch, capture the flag, and base-holding. There are also several [world PvP](#) areas (especially in the new expansion zones), in which players fight over bases that, when won, give their faction some kind of buff to damage or experience points (XP) for the next several hours. Finally, well organized raiding parties can invade the opposing faction's cities and deprive them of their trade and travel abilities for a while by killing their NPCs. The game provides numerous and significant [rewards](#) for all of this PvP combat, from [titles](#) that broadcast players' prowess, to powerful armor and weapons that players buy with the special currencies they earn from PvP play.⁶ Fighting the other faction, then, is not just about competition; it's about earning power and wealth and respect - the real fantasy that undergirds *WoW* or any role-playing game.

Influences

Looking at the level of influences - ideologies that are reified in *WoW* as a text - I see four at work behind *WoW*'s manifestations of race: agonism, racism, equal opportunity, and nationalism.

Agonism

The field of game studies is still casting about for a coherent theory of videogames, but one thing everyone seems to agree on is that videogames almost always involve conflict. That's because

⁶ Even if they don't fight each other directly, Alliance and Horde players can quarrel in subtler ways by competing for resources and harassing each other. In our encounter with Olive, Dan and I could have hit the area's NPCs before Olive and gotten all of the rewards; we could have also pulled mobs toward him and feigned death, which would have made them attack and overwhelm him. Or we could have ignored each other, which is what tends to happen in the big cities of the two expansions, [Shattrath](#) and [Dalaran](#).

most videogames are games - games in a shiny new medium, but games nonetheless. Johan Huizinga, writing in the late 30s about why games exist in just about every human culture, argued repeatedly that play and conflict are essentially the same thing: "Play is battle and battle is play" (41). Revising Huizinga twenty years later, Roger Caillois identified three other categories of play - *alea* (chance), *mimicry* (simulation), and *ilinx* (vertigo) - but he acknowledged that conflict (which he called *agôn*) was the most common type, especially in formal games. Current game-studies theory has continued emphasizing the importance of conflict; Jesper Juul, for instance, puts it at the very center of his definition of *game*, which revises not only Huizinga and Caillois' definitions but five other theorists' as well. Here's Juul's definition:

A game is a rule-based system with a variable and quantifiable outcome, where different outcomes are assigned different values, the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome, the player feels emotionally attached to the outcome, and the consequences of the activity are negotiable. (36)⁷

In explaining the six parts of this definition, Juul says this about the fourth part, "player effort": "Player effort is another way of stating that games are challenging, or that games contain a conflict" (40). The conflict might be between the player and the computer, or between one player and another player. Different videogames manifest conflict in all kinds of ways: get to point B before anyone else, hold a base from invasion, target the other guy before he targets you. Within a given videogame, conflicts might vary from the banal (eat white balls, avoid ghosts) to the hideously complex (kill [Yogg-Saron](#)). But conflict is inevitable.

⁷ This definition is what Juul calls the "classic game model," the archetype for all games in all media. Videogames, he shows, don't always fit this model, and may in fact be transcending it. MMORPGs, for instance, are pervasive worlds that continue existing when individual players log out of them; therefore, they defy the notion that a "game is bounded in time and space" that's inscribed in the "negotiable consequences" part of the classic game model. For other examples, see pp. 53-54 of *Half-Real*.

WoW is a complex enough environment that it contains games that fit every one of Caillois's categories. *WoW* players engage in *alea* every time they [roll](#) for loot from defeated mobs. On Role-Playing servers, players take *mimicry* very seriously, acting [In Character](#) at all times when communicating with each other. And *WoW* players alter their perceptions - Caillois's *ilinx* - by zooming around on flying mounts and by making their characters drink virtual booze (which makes the screen warp in a surprisingly realistic way). But most of the games that take place in *WoW* are of the *agôn* variety. And like most videogames, the most common way that *WoW*'s developers decided to manifest and represent agonistic play is martial conflict.

WoW players fight computer-controlled opponents from level 1 to level 80 - from their very first quest to the toughest endgame raid. And they fight each other in arenas, battlegrounds, and world PvP encounters. Consider the game's *title*: war is a craft. Something you practice regularly, hone your skill at, progress from apprentice to master. Most of *WoW*'s gameplay modes are set up for agonistic play, especially the faction system. It provides numerous opportunities for contest and a consistent pool of opponents. It tries to ensure that each side will always see the other side as their opponents. It fixes the teams, fixes their rivalry.

This is all completely obvious, by the way, this observation that play is conflict and videogames represent conflict as war. Obvious to the point of not being worth saying, really, unless you're an extreme pacifist and/or a parent/lawyer/legislator involved in the ongoing brouhaha over violent videogames' effects on kids. As an ideological influence behind *WoW*'s design, agonism alone is uninteresting; what *is* interesting is how it articulates with race and racism, in the myriad ways *WoW* represents them.

Racism

A hard truth to accept about *WoW* is that it's full of racism: there's racism in the ways the avatars are classified, in the ways they're represented, and in the ways the game allows them to interact with each other. It's really obvious, yet it's also somehow invisible. Or maybe, everyone wants to believe it's invisible.

There are two influences behind the racial coding in *WoW* - influences that are historically related.

The first is an essentialist definition of race. A character's race is a permanent facet of its identity, fixed when the player first creates it. As I've mentioned, each race can play only some of the classes, and these limits are described within the contexts of each race's essential interests and temperament. A player can't be a Dwarf Druid, because Dwarves are just not interested in nature. They are, however, into treasure, so all Dwarf characters have the ability to sense nearby treasure chests. This ability is called a *racial*, and each of the ten races has a set of them. For example, Gnomes, who are said to be obsessed with machinery rather than magic, are given a bonus to the engineering trade skill. And Trolls, depicted as barbaric warriors, are able to turn "berserk" and increase their attack speed. The fixity of the unique class options and abilities that distinguish each race reifies racial essentialism, playing into the "biologist paradigm" of race: the notion that different races contain "distinct hereditary characteristics" that explain "differences in intelligence, temperament, and sexuality (among other traits)" (Omi and Winant 15).

The second influence is that the representational design of race in *WoW* - the way the characters look, move, and sound; each race's architecture, history, and temperament - draws upon identifiable racist stereotypes. These are what I first noticed when I started to think about *WoW* and race, especially in the Horde races. The Trolls representationally draw upon modern Western stereotypes about Caribbean, South American, and African blacks: they live on islands and jungles in

thatched straw huts, they're into cannibalism, they're shamanistic. They [speak](#) in Caribbean English. Their architecture is a mishmash of South American and African stone ruins. One gets the sense that in the diegetic history of Azeroth, the Trolls used to be pretty advanced peoples, but have for some reason descended into relatively barbarous versions of their former selves: their cities are in ruins, and the huts they've erected within them are always in various states of disrepair. According to their [introductory video](#), they are “vicious,” “barbarous and superstitious,” and “renowned for their cruelty and dark mysticism.” It's basic Orientalism.

The Tauren, which walk erect like humans but have bovine heads and hooves, also evince a pan-ethnic semiotic, theirs being American Indian (their villages, for example, include both longhouses and totem poles). But they are depicted more positively than the Trolls, or any of the other Horde races, for that matter: their [introductory video](#) marks them as “peaceful” and “noble.” In many ways, the Taurens' representation parallels that of the Erudites in EverQuest, who, according to Taylor (2006b), were “the only representationally ‘black’ avatars in the game.” EQ's developers gave the Erudites high intelligence to in order to avoid “the familiar path in which black game characters are positioned... either as rappers or athletes,” yet “this kind of move can slip easily into the formulation in which the “other” is the exceptional, the model (minority), or the noble” (p. 114-15).

Ultimately, almost all of *WoW*'s races draw upon racial stereotypes of one sort or another. Game studies critics have caught onto this and have produced a couple of excellent readings of it. One is Jessica Langer's ""The Familiar and the Foreign: Playing (Post)-Colonialism in *World of Warcraft*," which reads the Horde races as a hodgepodge of Western stereotypes about the Other. Along with the Trolls being Caribbean and Tauren being Native American, Langer sees the Orcs as representations of Western notions of ugliness (especially Orc women, who are both "unattractive and hypersexualized" (98)), the Blood Elf males as gay white men, and the Undead as the total

Other, in terms of Kristeva's theory of the abject. Langer also points out that all of the Alliance races are more or less white, influenced as they are by Tolkien. However, in "'Blackless Fantasy: The Disappearance of Race in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games," Tanner Higgin contends that the most representationally White characters, especially from an American perspective, are the Humans. Players can make a Human character's skin dark brown, but all of the prominent Human NPCs are fair-skinned. Their architecture clearly draws from medieval and early modern Europe, combining castles and Tudor-style buildings. Their programmed [voices](#) speak in Standard American English. And their introductory video establishes traits that are quite different from the Trolls: a "resilient breed," "They stand resolute in their charge to maintain the honor and might of humanity in an ever-darkening world." Higgin stresses (and laments) the rhetorical power of equating humanity with whiteness, which reinforces Eurocentrism and white supremacy. I agree.

The confusing and tricky thing about interpreting stereotypes in the races' designs is that they're not what Northrop Frye would call "naïve allegories" (Lanham 4-6) - that is, they don't have perfect, 1:1 connotations with real-life cultures. Why do the Tauren have both longhouses and totem poles? Why do the Humans live in English castles but speak Standard American English? Both Langer and Higgin note that this semiotic mixing is par for the course in the fantasy genre, from Tolkien onwards. Langer gives *WoW*'s designers the benefit of the doubt and posits that they might be trying to convey their awareness of real-life complexity and difference within races (95). Higgin is more critical:

Fantasy worlds are populated by re-imagined signs with real and significant meanings outside of the fantasy. Thus, a fantasy world's products cannot be solely regarded within the internal logic of that world because the various meanings of its parts still have an originary meaning that cannot be discarded without losing the decipherability of that product. (10-11)

In other words, fantasy worlds rely upon the very semiotic connotations they're supposedly escaping from. They might attempt to avoid racism by shuffling their racial signs around, but those signs depend on racism to mean anything in the first place.

I'm not the first critic that's connected racial essentialism to representational stereotypes in *WoW*. Both Langer and Higgin mention it, and they both connect it to Lisa Nakamura's concept of the "cybertype." Alexander Galloway puts an interesting spin on how the biologist paradigm combines with the mixture of representational stereotypes in fantasy settings:

That the game pleads innocence by placing the narrative in a fantasy world of fantasy races (trolls, gnomes, elves) does not absolve it from foregrounding a systemic, "cybertype" logic of naturalized group definition and division... The "innocence" of the sublimation is in fact apropos because it illustrates the neoliberal, digirati notion that race must be liberated via an uncoupling from material detail, but also that the logic of race can never be more alive, can never be more purely actualized, than in a computer simulation. Apparently one must leave this world in order to actualize more fully its mechanisms of management and ascendancy. Let me stress, the most interesting thing to observe here is *not* that *World of Warcraft* is racist. That would be absurd. The interesting thing to observe is precisely the way in which racial coding must always pass into fantasy before it can ever return to the real. (93-4)

So according to Galloway, the game doesn't have to (or want to) deal with the messy, complicated realities of race in actual life; instead, it can depict race as a simple, unchangeable, hard-coded part of a character's soul. A Dwarf will always be a little better with guns than a Human. A Night Elf could never pass as a Blood Elf.

The only argument I have with Galloway is the last few sentences in this passage. I would contend that it *is* interesting to observe that *WoW* is racist, because nobody seems to really notice or

care. The most interesting thing is that the connection between game race and "real" race is severed just enough that *racial segregation and war* arouse not only no anger but *no notice whatsoever*, that we players can choose to see the sides as teams or nations that we root heartily for, even outside of the game. *That* is what's absurd. And that's what we start to see when we look at how racism works alongside two of *WoW*'s other ideological influences: equal opportunity and nationalism.⁸

Equal Opportunity

It may sound counterintuitive, but the stasis of the game world w/r/t the Alliance and Horde's relationship is a manifestation of the ideology of equal opportunity. As an environment in which thousands of players exist together, an MMO presents a unique design problem: if one player is able to permanently change the game world (say, by harvesting all of the herbs in an area, or by destroying a town), another player will not have the same opportunities for navigating and advancing through that game world. Faced with the decision about how much to let players affect the world, most MMO designers choose "little to not at all." They want everyone to have a good time, the rules to be fair. This is a utopia, after all. So equal opportunity must exist. Eric Hayot and Edward Wesp identified the same ideology in *WoW*'s direct predecessor, *EverQuest*, attributing it to a desire by that game's developers to create "an idealized vision of American, and more broadly capitalist, culture" (par. 27). Caillois argued that equality is a fundamental ideology behind *all* games, even though it requires constant effort to maintain (e.g. handicaps) and may in fact be an impossible ideal (14-15).

⁸ You may be wondering here (or perhaps you were wondering a bit earlier): what about sexism? *WoW*'s avatars are gendered, and the representations of those genders follow patriarchal stereotypes: steroidal males and Barbie-esque females. I will indeed discuss gender in Chapter 3, as many of the game's gender representations are not only sexist but also intersect with the varieties of racism on offer in a lot of interesting ways. However, gender won't get a ton of play in this work overall, for a couple of reasons. First, as I mentioned above, gender is not as important to an avatar's (and thus a player's) experience of *WoW* as race is, since it has no impact on gameplay. Second, the subject of gender in videogames has already engendered some excellent critical work; if you're interested, I suggest Diane Carr's chapter "Games and Gender" from *Computer Games: Text, Narrative, and Play*; T.L. Taylor's *Play Between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture*, and of course Henry Jenkins' *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games*.

At least, most MMOs go this direction; [EVE Online](#) is a notable exception. Set in a massive simulation of interstellar space and housed in a single server that contains all 250,000 of its players, *EVE* gives more or less free reign to its players to exploit the game world and each other however they see fit. Its player-made corporations engage in Shakespearean power struggles, their [rises and falls](#) appearing occasionally in gaming news sites and feeding [forum discussions](#) for months afterward. It's been analyzed as an example of Hobbes' [state of nature](#). I, however, see it as free-market capitalism at its toughest and most volatile.

EVE offers an interesting counterpoint to *WoW* because it highlights the ways that equal opportunity influences most of *WoW*'s design decisions.⁹ Everyone starts at level 1 and has to work their way to level 80 themselves.¹⁰ The environment constantly replenishes the flora and fauna that players harvest. A player can, through shrewd trading, get extremely wealthy and buy a lot of [flashy stuff](#). But nobody can own land, and no single player or group can monopolize a good or service. It's capitalism at its friendliest.

Nationalism

The third ideology influencing *WoW*'s faction system is nationalism. According to their narrative histories, territories, and governments, the Alliance and Horde easily meet the OED's primary definition of *nation*: "A large aggregate of communities and individuals united by factors such as common descent, language, culture, history, or occupation of the same territory, so as to form a distinct people. Now also: such a people forming a political state; a political state." Each side is actually a conglomeration of five distinct groups (depicted as races, about which more soon), each

⁹ It also highlights their effects: *EVE* is notorious for being tough to start playing, because its dog-eat-dog atmosphere is hard on new players, whereas *WoW* has long been considered [noob](#)-friendly. This is sometimes hailed as one of the reasons why *WoW* is so popular. According to the current numbers, it has 46 times more players than *EVE*.

¹⁰ Unless the player buys a character from a leveling service or another player who wants out of the game. The disreputability of such acts of cheating is widely agreed upon, though they [seem to persist](#). A subject for another study.

with its own history, culture, language, and territory. But the history of the Warcraft universe - a *Silmarillion*-level epic whose plots are far too detailed to summarize - has united them under the two banners, which are more or less states. Supposedly, each race speaks a [different language](#), but the game's communicative rules make everyone in the same faction understandable to each other, and only each other. Each race possesses its own territory in the game world, and those territories are shuffled amongst each other around the world (so they're states, but they don't look like the United States); but the territory of any one race is considered the turf of that race's faction, its NPCs friendly only to members of that faction. And while the factions' (mostly monarchic) governments are, from the players' perspectives, purely decorative, the two sides have a clear political relationship: the fore-mentioned low-intensity war. They're nations, or we're meant to see them as such.

I've come to suspect that "the Alliance and Horde are two competing nations" is the preferred ideological reading of the faction system for several reasons. First, as I've just said, the narratives about their histories and ongoing relations all point in that direction. Second, each side's linguistic homogeneity (which would tickle any member of the [English Only Movement](#) pink) unifies its players in every activity they engage in. Third, although there are occasional references to tensions within the factions, they're always lighthearted, and every player has exactly the same access to his faction's resources. (For instance, one of the [jokes](#) that Blood Elf male characters can [emote](#) is, "We're allied with the Tauren? Fantastic! We'll be having steak twice a week.") Fourth, the game tries to make faction identity more important than racial identity in many ways. Each race has an officially-designed [crest](#), but they almost never appear in-game; the crests of the two factions, however, are plastered everywhere. The exclamations "For the Horde!" and "For the Alliance!" are ubiquitous. Most importantly, though, reading the factions as nations and behaving accordingly is what the developers want us to do because, let's face it, in this day and age, nationalism is an

acceptable way to draw lines between Us and Them. Much more acceptable, anyway, than other ways. Especially the one that I think is really there.

Articulations

World of Warcraft, like all videogames, is a rhetorical text. I mean that in the contemporary, Burkean sense - rhetoric as all conscious human expression - so I don't see *WoW* as being explicitly persuasive, like an educational or an advertisement game. However, if Burke's concept of *identification*, the most fundamental goal of human communication, just means "getting another person to understand what's in your head," then all expression is to some degree persuasive. That persuasion might be implicit; and a videogame, with all of its visual, aural, linguistic, and procedural elements, can be excellent at expressing something strongly without saying it directly. Especially an MMO, which A) changes very slowly (if at all) and B) immerses its players in its rhetorical broth for an extremely long time. So here, then, are the messages *WoW* gives players about race:

- Your avatar's representational features (physical appearance, recorded voice, diegetic history, current culture) correspond to representations of real-life peoples, though they may combine features of many real-world cultures.
- However you might feel about your avatar's representational features, its race is crucial to your gameplay:
 - It grants unique abilities.
 - It allows you to play some classes but not others.
 - It dictates where your avatar will be "born" in the game world and strongly influences where you'll play the first few levels.
 - It puts you in league with certain races and in opposition to others.

- Each faction has its own turf (encampments, towns, cities, zones). You should stay in your own faction's turf unless you want to fight the other faction. (One exception: both factions can inhabit neutral and sanctuary cities, in which fighting will get you in trouble.)
- You should fight the races of the opposing faction, because doing so will earn you prestige and power.
- If you don't want to fight the enemy races, you should ignore or avoid them, because dialogue is impossible, and the meager coalition-building you can accomplish will cost you power and wealth.
- Nothing you can do with the enemy races – fighting, avoiding, or cooperating – makes any difference in the larger political system, because players can't change the political structure of the game world.

WoW's ethos of equality lets it avoid a lot of the manifestations of racism in real life: job discrimination, denial of access to housing and loans, etc. All avatars start on equal playing fields, regardless of their race. But this utopian idea (which is not dissimilar from neoconservative claims about equal opportunity in U.S. life) is itself undone by the racial separation and warfare that the faction system encourages. The fact that this particular manifestation of racism (separation, warfare) is pretty much the only type of racism a contemporary U.S. white person will even *recognize* these days makes this whole thing stunningly ironic to me the more I think about it.

That's because not even I think about it all the time.

Three semesters ago, I went to a conference with an early version of this chapter. I told the Mehet story. I talked about the racism inherent in the faction system. At the end of my talk, in the Q&A, a person in the crowd said something like, "Okay, I get it: this game is really racist. So why does anyone even play it?"

I've spent the last year and a half trying to answer that question. Here's what I've come up with: *Players don't pay attention to WoW's racism because they can comfortably choose not to.*

WoW is a cornucopia of signs from which you can pick and choose the ones you like. When I chose my first character's race, I picked Night Elf for these reasons, in this order:

1. My best friend, Dan, had a Night Elf that he had just started so we could play together.
2. The [Night Elf males](#) were better looking than the other Alliance races that could be hunters.
3. The Night Elves reminded me of Tolkien's elves, who are both tough and artistic, which is how I'd like to imagine my identity in a fantasy world.

So #1 was a practical, small-group-social reason - what Ken McAllister would call the result of a homologous ideology. According to Nick Yee's always-handy Daedalus Project, which has taken hundreds of surveys on MMO players, [70% of us](#) claim to play with real-life friends. Dan was the biggest reason I got into WoW in the first place: he started it a few months before I did, and he cajoled and wheedled until I finally broke down and tried it. I even played on one of his accounts for a couple of months before getting my own. So my choice of race for my main character (who is still my main) was largely the influence of a friend.

#2 was an idiosyncratic aesthetic reason, so I have a hard time analyzing it. Doing so would involve figuring out where my visual tastes come from, which would lead me right into the whole nature-vs.-nurture debate about whether our perceptions are hardwired or culturally taught. Being a Humanities guy rather than a scientist, and a social constructionist, I tend to side with the latter view. In which case, I could get behind a visual interpretation of the Night Elf males that cited their extreme muscularity vis-à-vis popular representations of masculinity. Dunno about the blue skin and hair, though; or the pointy ears. Maybe they go with #3.

#3 is certainly a culturally created desire, one that deserves more attention than I've been giving it. The entire fantasy genre owes its existence to Tolkien, so to some extent, playing "find the Tolkien references" in *WoW* would be very easy and very tedious. However, w/r/t racism, there are a few ancestral influences worth noting. LOTR was meant to be the long-missing English national epic, a tale that would encompass the heritage of the nation. Tolkien always coyly denied allegorical readings of his work, but they've been easy enough to make: the Riders of Rohan are Norsemen with horses, the Shire is England, the bad guys are environmentally destructive industrialists. Tolkien's love of Old Norse and Old English cultures is sincere and obvious. But so is his antipathy towards people east and south of England, people who would be very recognizable foes for an Englishman in the early twentieth century. So Tolkien's heroes are fair-skinned and North European, and his villains are "swart" and Oriental.¹¹ What this all means is that as *WoW* has remediated a lot of the iconography of Tolkien's novels (and Peter Jackson's recent movies), it has reproduced their Eurocentrism and white supremacy.

Would I consciously recognize and be attracted to such iconography? No. There are other ideologies in these texts - and personal motivations outside of them - that I focus on, dig, draw from. But *WoW*'s characters definitely reminded me of Tolkien's characters. The Elves, Humans, Dwarves, and Hobbits/Gnomes are good guys. The Orcs and their cronies are bad guys. I know I'm not the only *WoW* player who has made this meaning.¹² Plus, as I said, the elves can write poetry and then go kick some ass, which is an English major's fantasy if I ever heard one.

¹¹ For a great reading of the racist symbolism in both the book and film versions of LOTR, see the first part of this [article](#) by Tof, a contributor to the academic blog [Gameology](#).)

¹² The Alliance=Tolkien's Good Guys, Horde=Tolkien's Bad Guys association has been cited as a possible reason for the demographic differences in the Alliance and Horde. Yee chews on it in an analysis of some of his *Daedalus Project* surveys ("[Does Horde PWN Alliance in PvP? A Baker's Dozen of Possible Reasons](#)"). Asking his respondents why they bought into the popular belief that Horde players are better at PvP combat than Alliance players, Yee notices, "Many respondents argued that players new to MMOs were more likely to choose Alliance because the character models more readily resonate with the "good guys" as portrayed in movies such as Lord of the Rings (i.e., human knights in armor

So I liked the Night Elves for several reasons, not all of which had to do with how they appeared in *WoW* itself. It took me several months playing my Night Elf before I noticed that much of their representational design comes from Asian cultures. They celebrate a [Lunar Festival](#) every year that corresponds with the Chinese Lunar New Year, for example; and their buildings look like pagodas.¹³ For me, the Asian signifiers just didn't matter, and still basically don't. I identified with a different set of signs, and I still pretty much do. The game enabled me to do that selective signification by combining so many signifiers.

The insidious thing about the cornucopia of signs is that it helps us pretend that race isn't there. Tanner Higgin notes that in forum discussions about the representational design of *WoW*'s races, people not only denied racist influences, they denied any symbolic correspondence at all. Usually angrily. He's got some interesting readings on what this hostile dismissal means:

This hostility to the question [of whether *WoW* draws on racial stereotypes] is rooted in the same contemporary tendency to immediately disregard any claims of racism as unnecessary or unproductive... [These comments are] illustrative of the myths of liberal freedom accompanying online sociality and MMORPGs wherein race does not and should not matter because everything is just made up of pixels. Disturbingly, what this implies is that in the real world race is not made up but is verifiable and very real. Beyond the troubling implications of [comments] in regard to race outside of gamespace, what this also claims more directly is that in the virtual everyone finally gets to be White. The White dominance of gamespace has been recast as a

and elven archers). And because new MMO players have less experience in raiding and coordination, the Alliance suffers from this in BGs" (2).

¹³ According to *WoWiki*'s entry on the Night Elves' capital city, [Darnassus](#), the design of the city's main gate is a nod to the South Korean [Sungnyemun](#). Further evidence, then, that *WoW*'s designers are unafraid of mixing real-life cultures, and counting on audiences not to know/mind.

racially progressive movement that ejects race in favor of a default, universal whiteness and has been ceded, in part, by a theoretical tendency to embrace passing and anonymity in cyberspace. When politically charged issues surface that reveal the embedded stereotypes at work amid an ostensibly colorblind environment, they are quickly de-raced and cataloged as aberrations rather than analyzed as symptomatic of more systemic trends. (7-8)

So two things are happening. There's the standard dismissal of the game's relevance - the infamous "it's just a game" argument. This dismissal is really common, even amongst gamers. [Tof](#) rebuts it well: "If nothing one does in a game matters outside the game, then games cannot be meaningful or useful in any way; but if games can be meaningful, their meaning can be objectionable." The second phenomenon that Higgin describes is more complex and troubling. If gamers deny the existence of race in the game, he argues, that's because they think that race exists *entirely* in our material bodies. We escape our bodies, we escape race. In doing so, we "finally [get] to be White," in the sense that whiteness is equated with not having a race. This is one of the features of white privilege, no?

I suspect that a lot of *WoW* players choose to see the Alliance/Horde enmity through the nationalism lens rather than the racism lens. How else could a college student in an English department hallway tease someone from the other side with his side's slogan without fear of arousing the punitive ire of the Center for Human Rights? How else could I, without shred of doubt, interpret the message as *esprit de corps* rather than bigotry? How else could I have laughed at a joke about disowning my kid brother for joining the other side? It wouldn't have been funny if, right then, I'd thought of the other side as black or Native American.

Transformations

The reason the friendly Orc's act of cooperation - an act, I might add, whose rarity continues to make it stand out for me after three years and hundreds of hours of gameplay - was so remarkable, was that it showed me what had previously been totally normalized. By bending the rules, I saw the rules for what they were. Reifications of certain ideologies about identity, gameplay, fun. Arbitrary separations of players who probably played the game for many of the same reasons. Rhetorical manifestations. What did our cooperation represent then? Was this some watershed moment of fraternity across battle lines - the *WoW* version of World War I's [Christmas Truce](#)? Or better yet, a beautiful moment of antiracism?

I can't argue that. I'm having a hard time not deleting it here. We acted out of good-natured reciprocity: Olive was aiding Dan and me, and we felt inclined to return the favor. The antiracism thing didn't even occur to either of us at the time. I didn't make that particular articulation until much later, after graduate classes in critical theory and a lot of contemplation.

And yet. The reason I remember this encounter is that I remember the elation I felt about it at the time. It wasn't itself a metanoia, but it was a catalyst for several of them. The first, most mundane one, was my realization that the game's rules could be defied - players can bend them to achieve certain strategies. Gamers call this exploiting: finding a hole in the game's rules and worming your way through it. The game told Olive and Dan and me that we couldn't play together, but we did it anyway. Our actions had negative consequences - we all sacrificed some XP and loot - but we didn't care.

More significantly, though, this event was the first time that I really made meaning of the faction system. It was the first time I'd thought about how the actions circumscribed by a videogame might be expressive, just like its setting and plot and characters. (Later, thanks to Ian Bogost, I

would recognize this as part of the game's procedural rhetoric). The first time I considered just how much the game encourages Alliance and Horde to fight, or to otherwise stay apart. And how these gameplay rules affect our virtual identities. And how those identities are reciprocally tied to our real-world identities.

Introspection and idiosyncrasies aside, why did it take so much training and effort to see *WoW*'s racial design? Why does a white middle-class male, born at the very end of the 70s and come-of-age in the 90s, self-defined as liberal and antiracist, need graduate-level training to see this stuff in the first place? What reasons - material and discursive, political-economic and cultural - could explain how race in a massively popular text/commodity/environment could be simultaneously conspicuous and concealed?

This project is my attempt to figure that out.

Theories

The section headings in each chapter mostly correspond to Ken McAllister's Grammar of Gameworks, a five-part scaffold for mapping the influences and effects of videogames in the broad realm of the societal dialectic. McAllister's idea for a "grammar" comes from Kenneth Burke, the father of contemporary rhetoric, who had himself devised a "grammar of motives" to name the reasons why and how people communicate. McAllister also adopts Burke's stance on rhetoric itself: that all human communication, even the simplest utterance, arises from a desire for "identification" or basic connection between separate individuals (20-22). Therefore, for McAllister, every element of a videogame - its gameplay rules and its representations - is a "manifestation of the developers' rhetoric" (56). Whether or not they are explicitly trying to persuade their players to think or act a certain way, game developers encode certain ideologies in the rules and representations of every

game. McAllister's grammar enables us to identify those ideologies - in his terminology, *influences* - by analyzing the purposes and transformations of all of the agents (both human and non-) in a given rhetorical situation, whether it's the creation, marketing, or consumption of a given game. From there, we can see how a given videogame is interpolated in the dialectic - the broad realm of ideologies percolating within a given society. The point of McAllister's approach is to understand how games and gameplay relate to political struggles in the material world:

An analysis of a particular computer game, game genre, or industry practice that uses the grammar of gameworks... will always have as its aim the explanation of how the ideologically determined rhetorical events of a computer game, a response to a computer game, or particular company's development cycle makes meanings that have consequence (or are intended to have the consequence) of creating or prohibiting transformative experiences - experiences that ultimately shape struggles under way in the real world and that may have no overt connection to the computer game complex itself. ... The objective of such analyses is to engage and transform the dialectic. (44, 64)

McAllister follows the strand of rhetorical criticism that Sonja Foss labels *ideological criticism*, specifically the strand informed by Marxism. I share this strand's basic ideologies and goals, though I slightly amend McAllister's position: rather than drawing directly upon Marx, as he does, I draw upon Antonio Gramsci's revision of Marxism, which establishes a more nuanced conception of how ideology functions in a given "historic bloc." Gramsci argued that while a certain group might control a given society's institutions and its cultural "common sense," this hegemony is neither stable nor monolithic: it contains a certain amount of dissent, and it also contains sediments, or remnants of older hegemonies from prior historic blocs. Therefore, a given cultural artifact - especially a

complex, mass-culture one, like a videogame - will often convey incongruent or even contradictory ideologies. This point is essential to understanding *WoW*.

CHAPTER 2: RACES AND RACISMS

Race is one of those terms that everyone uses on a regular basis and feels like they implicitly know, yet whose definition is hard to pin down. That's because it's been defined so many ways, by so many groups, with so many political interests. A lot of books have been written on those definitions, books that are thorough and brilliant, books that I'll avail myself of here. But my task isn't to analyze all of those definitions; it's to parse out which ones *World of Warcraft* is using. And after I identify those definitions, to figure out where those definitions came from, historically - to trace them back to their political-economic and ideological roots. And finally, to see how those definitions have informed the cultural artifacts that have informed *WoW*.

So let's look at how *World of Warcraft* defines race.

Definitions

Race = Species

The most obvious way that the game defines *race* is *species*, the sense of the term we use when we refer to "the human race." It's the ["official" definition](#) that Blizzard uses, and they're pretty consistent about it. There's plenty of evidence that this definition is the one they want us to think of.

First of all, four of the game's ten races - the Orcs, Trolls, Dranei, and Tauren - all look decidedly non-human. The Night- and Blood Elves could maybe pass for human, if not for the Night Elves' blue skin and both races' absurdly long ears. Then there are the Dwarves and Gnomes,

both pretty much human in physique, but decidedly non-human in origin, according to the [lore](#).¹⁴ The Dwarves are descendants of [Titans](#), ancient giant gods who used to roam the earth. The Gnomes' origin is hazy, but one of the game's quests, "[The Mechagnomes](#)," suggests that they were originally robots that were assembled by the Titans and eventually somehow became organic creatures. Of course, the biggest proof that *WoW* wants us to regard *race* as *species* is that only one of the game's races is labeled as Human. The rest are, by implication, not.¹⁵

Just at the textual level, the problem with the *race=species* definition is that it's muddled by the text itself. The Blood Elves and Night Elves are actually the same species, separated by conflicts in their long and tumultuous [history](#). The Undead are former Humans and Elves who were [plagued](#), killed, zombified, and [enslaved](#) by the [Lich King](#). So just in terms of close but literal reading, *race* in the *Warcraft* universe is not simply defined as *species*; it can also denote groups who've been separated by politics, culture, and sorcery.

So the species denotation doesn't hold up by its own logic. The bigger problem with it, however, is that it fails under the most basic connotative reading. Like most fantasy and science fiction works, *WoW*'s various species - and here I'm talking about the playable ones - are really stand-ins for humans. They're all anthropomorphic, despite the occasional tusks, tails, bovine heads. They walk and talk and dance. When we control them, we think of them just as much as extensions of ourselves as characters in their own world.¹⁶ So it rings a little hollow to claim in earnest that the term *race* only refers to *species* here. *Especially* if you consider the representational connotations of the

¹⁴ The term *lore* is a shorthand for the "official" narratives that Blizzard (or other companies that own a given IP) has provided in all of the officially licensed games, novels, websites, etc.

¹⁵ The significance of which w/r/t racism is analyzed thoroughly by Tanner Higgin's "Blackless Fantasy: The Disappearance of Race in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games."

¹⁶ Here I'm referring to James Paul Gee's theories of projective and virtual identities. See *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*, pp. 111-12.

racism. More on this in the next chapter.)

Race as biological difference between people

If we're meant to see our avatars as human - or at least human enough to stand in for ourselves - then the differences between races in *WoW* become differences between human races. And so *race* starts to mean something other than *species*, yet something related: it corresponds to differences between people, biological differences. This is what Omi and Winant call the "biologicistic paradigm." And *WoW* is full of it.

As I mentioned in the introduction, *WoW*'s avatars are not created totally equal: each race can only play certain classes, and each race has special abilities and talents called *racials*. Lore-wise, both the class options and racials correspond to values and skills that each race has developed over its history: cultural rather than biological differences. From a purely narrativistic viewpoint, then, *WoW*'s races fit within a social-constructionist framework. For instance, the differences between the Night Elves and Blood Elves - who are, remember, the same species - are the result of a several-thousand-year [history](#). They were once castes within a single society, separated by their respective interests in druidism and arcane magic. After the Blood Elves' addiction to magic caused a massive [war](#) that destroyed their homeland, the Night Elves banished them, and the two eventually became enemies. Given all this narrative (which I've drastically summarized), you could read the Night- and Blood Elves' racials in terms of the cultural values they've developed over time. The [Night Elves' racials](#), like Shadowmeld and Elusiveness, correspond to an ideological disassociation with the rest of the world. The [Blood Elves' racials](#), Arcane Affinity and Arcane Torrent, correspond to their addiction to arcane magic. So purely in terms of narrative, the racials are socially constructed.

However, the lore is only one part of the experience of playing *WoW*. The other part is the gameplay elements - the rules that govern what players can and can't do. From the player's perspective, the racials are fixed entities; only Blizzard can change them. (The lore is fixed too, for that matter.) The first time a player encounters the racials is the character-creation menu, in which none of that lore even appears. So the racials are gameplay elements *before* they're narrative elements, physical attributes of each race that the player must consider when she is deciding what she wants her character to play like.¹⁷ This isn't to say that they're *less* important, by the way - I would argue that the gameplay and representational elements are both crucial parts of our understandings of videogames and their meanings. What I'm saying is that in the case of the racials and class options, the lore that depicts them as socially constructed is overshadowed by the immediate context of the gameplay, which depicts them as essential qualities of the character's race.

And but so from the player's perspective, *WoW* operates upon the biologicistic paradigm of race.

A Really Brief History of Racism

The definition of the word *race* as *species* and the notion that human race is comprised of biologically distinct groups called *races* come from roughly the same historical milieu. The word *race* entered Northern European languages between the 13th and 16th centuries, but it had a lot of meanings, from "rage" (Dutch *razen*) to "power" (Anglo-Saxon *rice*). The "species" sense comes from the Italian *razza*, which itself hails from *ratio* in good old Latin. According to the OED, both senses

¹⁷ In fact, in forums and conversations I've had with other players, I've noticed that players tend to refer to the racials - and often, the races themselves - primarily in terms of how they affect gameplay. E.g., my brother (an expert in both lore and gameplay if there ever was one) recently picked Draenei for a new warrior character because other races' warriors because their [Gift of the Naaru](#) gives him a healing spell (rare for warriors, who typically get healed by others) and their [Heroic Presence](#) makes him more likely to hit targets (and raise threat, thus keeping [aggro](#) on him rather than other party members).

were in play by around 1500. But the biologicistic sense - the more significant one for my purposes, since it's connected to Western racism - really took hold in the 17th and 18th centuries, the product and legacy of modernism.

The 17th and 18th centuries were the period in which Europe "discovered" the rest of the world and learned how to profit from it. Our modern conception of race grew largely out of Europeans' desires to rationalize the exploitation and destruction of the "Other" peoples of this "new world" under capitalism. If the peoples of the Americas, Africa, and the Indies were equal to the Europeans, it was a lot harder to exploit them. But if they could be classified as lesser beings - as "children," "savages," "benighted Christless souls," etc. - it was much easier to exploit, convert, displace, enslave, and kill them. This was the "first - and given the dramatic nature of the case, perhaps the greatest - racial formation project" (Omi and Winant 62).

Political economy wasn't the only factor. Operating from Gramsci's theory that a given historic bloc contains sedimentations from older ones, Victor Villanueva argues that 18th-century racism was actually informed by a variety of discourses, old and new: "the 'philosophical,' theosophical, theological, and scientific (not quite scientific)" (11). The major philosophers of the time, especially Kant and Hegel, penned treatises on the natural superiority of Europeans over Asia, Africa, even Spain. These works reinscribed in rational terms what religion had been doing for several hundred years, ever since various popes and monarchs had terrorized Jews, Arabs, and other "ethnics" (in the late Roman Republic, anyone without faith; narrowed by Paul to anyone without Christianity) (Hannaford 88). Furthermore, Enlightenment-era scientists, eagerly trying to classify everything and everyone they could see, gave the biologicistic paradigm the justification and ethos of their increasingly respected field. And so works like Johann Friedrich Blumenbach's *The Natural Varieties of Mankind* (1776) "illuminated" the "natural" differences between peoples, differences that

explained and justified the depredations that Europe practiced upon those that got in its way. After this, writes Villanueva,

The rest is a slippery slope: Darwin to Edmund Spenser to the British looking to be master races to the German creation of the Aryan as a Northern tribe that had invaded the lands of the South, where we know of the Aryans as Iranian and Indian, to the reinvigorated hatred of the Jews, along with Gypsies, to the attempted genocide of World War II. In the U.S. there is the Chinese Exclusion Act, Jim Crow, the forced expulsion of Mexican and Mexican Americans during the 1930s, and the continued colonization of American Samoa, Guam, the Marshall Islands, Micronesia, the Northern Marianas, Palau, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and Puerto Rico—to this day.

(15)

According to Omi and Winant, the biologicistic paradigm, maintained by social Darwinism, Spencerism, and eugenics, held sway in the U.S. common sense from the end of slavery until the 1920s. Far too overtly racist to achieve mainstream status since the "great transformation" of the 50s-60s, it survives today in the expressions of the far right.

And in mainstream fantasy texts. Of which *World of Warcraft* is currently the most popular.

Archetypes old and new

What are *WoW*'s immediate textual influences, and what does it take from them? Chris Metzen, the lead writer for the *Warcraft* games since the first one in 1994, admitted some of his influences in a 2008 interview. Here's what he says:

It's all about spin, right? We're essentially sponges -- especially artist types. If you're a songwriter, a dancer, whatever -- we're sponges. We take in data. We take in things

that we dig. In my case it's likely comics or *Star Wars* or *Dragonlance*. I absolutely devour the stuff. Strangely enough, I devour the same stuff over and over. It's really weird. I'm not very experimental. ...

We put out a game called *Warcraft III* a few years ago, and one of the things I really wanted to do was take orcs, who are the perennial bad-guy race -- the dark, subhuman, barbarous race in most fantasy -- and I wanted to take our orcs and spin 'em. They're still green and tusked and very brutal -- the visual of them plays to the archetype, so it's very familiar for someone coming to the setting. But we started to take them on a route where, what if they weren't innately evil? They're looking for identity. They've been roughed up, and now they're trying to become this noble thing again. That was a decided spin on a pretty classic archetype that, well, time will tell whether it worked well. But that's the trick, right? Keeping the archetypes in the foreground -- because that's ultimately what people want. It's part of the magic of the escapism of these fantasies.

What did we do with the latest one [*WoW*]? You know, we've got elves, right? Everybody gets Legolas from the *Lord of the Rings* film. Ultimately what we decided to do with our elves in the *Warcraft* setting was make them addicted to magic. They're like an entire race of crack addicts; they just can't get enough magic. And they're just on the brink of losing everything they've ever been, to this almost genetic addiction to something that may or may not be very dangerous to play with.

Looking at them, the visual archetype holds very strong. From Tolkien to *D&D* to where we are today, current fantasy -- "I get it! The long ears, and they're graceful, these other-worldly creatures." But inside there's a reflection of something that might be relevant to today. How often do we see stories of addiction in our extended

families? None of this is stunning; none of it's super innovative. But again, it's not coming up with a new race -- it's finding a way to make the older archetypes sing again.

There are several fascinating things about what Metzen says here. One of them is his admission of his influences, which are very specific and apparently very important. I'll come to that a little later. The other thing that's interesting here is his use of the word *archetype*, a significant and telling term. Its standard definition, according to Dictionary.com, is "the original pattern or model from which all things of the same kind are copied or on which they are based; a model or first form; prototype." It's possible that Metzen was thinking of this sense, thinking of his influences as merely models. But the second definition - the one that's most well known - is the one from Jungian psychology: "a collectively inherited unconscious idea, pattern of thought, image, etc., universally present in individual psyches."

Jung's theories were based on the notion that all people shared the collective unconscious, regardless of cultural differences. *Archetype* also featured prominently in the works of Joseph Campbell, another universalist, whose *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* articulated the essential structure of the "hero journey" and identified this structure in myths of cultures in many times and places. A student of Jung, Campbell believed that "the mythic story would be a clear form of access to the mysteries beyond conscious knowing" (Young).

As a social constructionist, I tend to squirm at Campbell and Jung and their ilk, but my point here isn't to debunk them. However you feel about universalist theories, something nobody can deny is the (somewhat ironic) fact that they've had massive cultural influence, particularly on artists. One of Campbell's most prominent followers - apparently, he claimed, his *best student* - was George Lucas. Lucas carefully emulated the hero journey in *Star Wars*, working with Campbell on the script.

Star Wars then became the most successful movie of its day, the turning point in American cinema and the granddaddy of the now-ubiquitous Summer Popcorn Flick (Becker and Burns).¹⁸

So there are two points here. One is that there are clear influences behind the *Warcraft* universe's narratives and other representational features. The franchise's lead writer admits them openly - *Star Wars*, *Dragonlance*, the *Lord of the Rings* films. *Star Wars*'s stamp on *Warcraft* isn't noticeable on the surface - *Warcraft* very much fits within the romantic medieval setting of [high fantasy](#); other than the intergalactic exodus of the [Draenei](#), it steers clear of space flight and lasers and whatnot. The influence is more tonal and thematic: grand narratives full of melodramatic characters with supernatural powers. In a word, *fantasy*.¹⁹ Which brings me to my second point, and the reason I've seemingly digressed on Chris Metzen's use of the word *archetype*: the rhetorical milieu from which Metzen has drawn - the "archetypes" he borrows and spins - is itself based upon the idea that there are archetypes to be found in the first place. Of rediscovering/-inventing who and what existed "a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away"; and, depending on the story, reentering that world, fighting for its survival, reviving it, or lamenting its loss. Of celebrating the ancient and pure. In high fantasy, *archetype* is both a trope and an ideology.

What is fantasy?

Novelist and critic L. Sprague de Camp defines *fantasy* stories as any that are "based on supernatural ideas or assumptions, such as demons, ghosts, witches, and workable magical spells"

¹⁸ Reproduced in hundreds of novels and games, the *Star Wars* universe also became one of the most popular [shared universes](#) of the last generation, a feature it shares with the other influences that Metzen cites as informing *WoW*. The *Dragonlance* novels, for instance, actually take place in the *Dungeons & Dragons* universe.

¹⁹ In fact, in its list of fantasy subgenres, Wikipedia even lists *Star Wars* as [science fantasy](#), delineating it from science fiction, which is more grounded in realism.

(6). That's a broad definition indeed: if the presence of the supernatural is the only requirement for a text to be called *fantasy*, we're talking about massive swath of literary territory. Tom Shippey claims that, given this definition, the fantastic is "the dominant literary mode of the twentieth century" (vii). I would argue that his claim is actually an understatement: if all we're looking for is supernatural elements, fantasy is the dominant mode of the last several *millennia*. The Greeks had the *Odyssey* and *Iliad*; the Anglo-Saxons had *Beowulf* (in both cases, the written versions being late transcriptions of much older tales, the only survivors of lost oral cultures). In *Christian Fantasy: From 1200 to the Present*, Colin Manlove notes that there really aren't that many "differences between Christian 'truth' and 'fantasy'" (5), because fundamentalist viewpoints notwithstanding, the Bible is full of fantastic elements - "a mythic paradise, talking beasts, gods, dragons, angels, visions, many miracles, accounts of other worlds" (2).

According to Manlove, the early Church kept a tight lid on any works that dealt with anything other than the "*miraculosus* - that is, issuing from God and Christ" (12). But in the twelfth century, the allowable scope of the miraculous widened, and legends of King Arthur's quest for the Holy Grail started appearing, most notably *the Queste del Saint Graal* (1215-30). Similar tales of knightly derring-do flourished through the Early Modern period in romances like *Le Morte d'Arthur*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and *The Faerie Queene*. Cervantes dealt the romance genre a blow by satirizing it in *Don Quixote*, but fantastic tropes survived in the works of Jonathan Swift and Cyrano de Bergerac. The Enlightenment was especially hard on fantasy, though: the realistic novel got really popular, and the prominent thinkers of the time - Hobbes, Locke, Cowley, Dryden - vilified fantasy as the opposite of the rationality they loved so much (though they gave Christian stuff a pass) (Manlove 2). But fantasy didn't disappear altogether in the 18th century; according to de Camp, three things kept it alive: *The Book of Thousand Nights and a Night* was translated into English, *The Castle of*

Otranto initiated Gothic fiction, and the Grimm brothers published their collections of Germanic fairy tales.

By the nineteenth century, the supernatural was coming back: Poe, Hawthorne, Melville, Dickens, Verne, Kipling, Conan Doyle, and Henry James all dabbled with it to varying degrees. More important, this was when authors began looking back to medieval Europe with nostalgic eyes. Sir Walter Scott's "romantic medievalism" inspired medieval-revival tournaments and buildings all over Britain. And near the end of the century, mixing "the antiquarian romanticism of Scott and his imitators with the supernaturalism of Walpole and *his* imitators," William Morris brought sword-and-sorcery fantasy into the modern age (de Camp 13-14).

Nowadays, there are dozens of [sub-genres](#) within the broad generic rubric of *fantasy*, and they diverge so much in content and form that dealing with them all here would be both daunting and pointless. Instead, I'll trace the ones that matter most: the ones that lead to *World of Warcraft*.

WoW owes its roots primarily to the subgenre called [high fantasy](#), which is what most of us think of when we say "fantasy" in the first place. It's sort of the quintessential form - stories that take place in parallel worlds and concern epic battles of good and evil. The progenitor and epitome of high fantasy is *Lord of the Rings*. *LOTR*'s influence on *WoW* is indirect - Chris Metzen claims to have been much more interested in the *Dragonlance* novels, which take place in the *Dungeons & Dragons* universe. But *D&D* drew from Tolkien, as did the videogames that Metzen and his friends at Blizzard were playing when they made their *Warcraft* games (like the [Ultima](#) series, another long-running franchise that has leapfrogged influences with the *Warcraft* games). All roads lead to Tolkien. So let's figure out where his roads lead.

As a medievalist, Tolkien admired William Morris's work, as well as Robert E. Howard's *Conan the Barbarian* books. His essay "Beowulf: the Monsters and the Critics," is still regarded as essential literary criticism by medievalists. But what he loved most was ancient European languages:

Old English, Old Norse, Finnish. As a professor of philology at Leeds and Oxford, Tolkien was a student of language and literature together. But the former always came first. He said about his novels, "The invention of languages is the foundation. The 'stories' were made rather to provide a world for the languages than the reverse. To me a name comes first and the story follows." (qt. in Shippey xiii)

Tolkien believed that history and identity are embedded within language, even if we're not aware of it. Just as "languages could be intrinsically attractive, or intrinsically repulsive" (Shippey xiv), their attractiveness or repulsiveness reflected the character of the person or group that used them. So when Tolkien began inventing his own languages and stories, remixing the ones he loved, he gave his narratives' heroes beautiful tongues and his villains ugly ones. For example, his elves' Sindarin and Quenya, based on Welsh and Finnish, reflected their virtue; but his orcs' Black Speech reflected their evil.

The high fantasy genre is characterized by its entirely [fictional worlds](#). But just as Tolkien had remixed real languages to create his fictional ones, he also remixed the real world to create his fictional world, [Middle-earth](#). The term itself, from the Old English *Middangeard*, just means "the world men inhabit" - the space "between ice of the North and the fire of the South" (*Letters* 211). Its [famous geography](#) is made up, but its general layout - particularly the locations of its good guys (west, north) and bad guys (south, east) - is very Eurocentric. According to Tom Shippey in *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century*,

However fanciful Tolkien's creation of Middle-earth was, he did not think that he was *entirely* making it up. He was 'reconstructing.' He was harmonizing contradictions in his source-texts, sometimes he was supplying entirely new concepts (like hobbits), but he was also reaching back to an imaginative world which he believed had once really existed, at least in a collective imagination. (xv)

Lord of the Rings was a fictional story in a fictional world, but Tolkien wanted it to "make a body of more or less connected legend" encompassing English language and literature, the equivalent of Finland's *Kalevala* and Germany's *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, both myth-reconstruction projects published in the 19th century (Shippey xv-xvi). England still didn't have a national mythology by World War I, when Tolkien began writing the [mythologies of Middle-earth](#), and he wanted to give it one.

Tolkien always coyly denied allegorical readings of his work, but they've been easy enough to make: the Riders of Rohan are Norsemen with horses, the Shire is England, Sauron is Hitler(ish), and Saruman is an environment-hating industrialist. Tolkien's love of Old Norse and Old English cultures is sincere and obvious. But so is his antipathy towards people east and south of England, people who would be very recognizable foes for a medieval Englishman – and for one in the early twentieth century who was a devout medievalist. So Tolkien's heroes are fair-skinned and North European, and his villains are "swart" and Oriental. L. Sprague de Camp, writing in the 70s, calls this positionality "traditional":

Traditional [...]is Tolkien's making the swarthy southern Haradrim and the nomadic Easterlings villains, sent by Sauron against Gondor. Europe has a long tradition of invasions from the East and the South, by Persians, Carthaginians, Huns, Arabs, Mongols, and Turks, to whom the attackers of Gondor roughly correspond. (248)

Tolkien's definitions of race are "traditional" too: the senses of "different species of beings" and "different breeds of men" are both here, and there are definite hierarchies. As Tof puts it,

Good breeding retains its old meaning: capability and manners are inherited and can be diluted though mixing with inferior bloodlines. One potential is determined by one's breeding: Aragon is of the lineage of Kings, whereas Boromir and his father, Denethor, are stewards and the descendants of stewards – when they seek to rise

above their station, they become corrupt. ... Also in accordance with the old racial and eugenic model, it is possible to fall (there is no shortage of evil or low men in Middle Earth, and Elves and even the semi-divine Wizards are not immune to temptation; but it *is not* possible to rise. There are no redeemed Orcs in Middle Earth, nor even any Southrons who see the light. Virtue as well as strength is in the breeding, and while it can be lost, it cannot be regained.

So Tolkien, an early-20th century Englishman with an intense love of Old English and Norse who published in the wake of 19th-century medievalist revivalism, wound up inscribing modern racism into his pre-modern myth. Is this surprising? Nah. What's surprising is how popular he got, and why.

Whose fantasy is it?

LOTR had been first published in 1954-5, but it didn't get really popular in the U.S. until it was reissued in paperback in 1965-66. Other reprints of old fantasy novels followed, like Robert E. Howard's Conan stories, as did a whole slew of new works. A decade later, Tolkienistic fantasy jumped media from books into games with Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson's tabletop wargame *Chainmail*, which quickly morphed into the role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974). *D&D* was heavily inspired by Tolkien, and it did for gaming what Tolkien did for novels: it sold a bazillion copies, and it inspired a bazillion imitations.

Why did fantasy get so popular in the 60s and 70s? According to Lin Carter, the genre "created a unique neomythology" in the U.S., "a nation too young to have a mythology of its own" (xii). L. Sprague de Camp chalks it up to the reemergence of the Hero: "He strides through landscapes in which all men are mighty, all women beautiful, all problems simple, and all life

adventurous." Contrast this, he argues, to the often-bleak realism of the period's literary fiction, and even the "anti-hero[ic]" and "sentimental" sci-fi and fantasy just after World War II. The world of a fantasy story is a highly dramatic place - "the fate of kingdoms is balanced on the bloody blades of broadswords brandished by heroes of preternatural might and valor" - but everyone in it knows who they are, what they stand for, and why they fight. It's "the purest escape fiction there is," de Camp writes; "the reader escapes clean out of the real world" (5). De Camp's description of the Hero of sword-and-sorcery fantasy is telling. Notice the macho element: the Hero is male; he and every other man are "mighty," and women are simply "beautiful." Gender is simple, stable. In the fantasy world, there's no such thing as feminism.

To understand the rise of fantasy texts (by which I mean books, comics, and games) in terms of racism, let's look at the broader social landscape. After World War II, The U.S. had experienced a what Omi and Winant call a "great transformation," a paradigm shift in definitions of race and an upsurge of social movements that challenged the prevailing racial politics. The paradigm shift to which Omi and Winant refer, begun in the early 60s by the civil rights movement, challenged the overt racism and segregation in the South by advocating individual equality over "race-thinking" (96). The black movement (and, following its lead, movements by other minority groups, as well as student, feminist, and gay rights activists) also challenged political systems' racisms on a variety of fronts:

The struggles for voting rights, the sit-ins and boycotts to desegregate public facilities, the ghetto rebellions of the mid-1960s, and the political mobilizations of the Latinos, Indians, and Asian Americans, dramatically transformed the political and cultural landscape of the U.S. (Omi and Winant 95)

The effects of the "great transformation" were massive and, to this day, indelible; but they've never been completely progressive. Almost as soon as the civil rights movement had begun to

rearticulate notions of racial equality, conservative whites began fighting it. There were the obvious reactionary elements - the KKK, "Bloody Sunday," George Wallace - but the far right has never had much mainstream sway; far more effective (and insidious) have been the efforts of the new right and neoconservative movements. One of their most effective and lasting efforts has been the *counter*-rearticulation of racial equality, one of the best examples being the labeling of "equality-of-result" endeavors like affirmative action as "reverse discrimination" - a phrase I still hear about once a week on my university campus. (Neoconservatism, still a major force in U.S. politics, plays an important role in *WoW*, and I'll discuss it in Chapter 4). Ultimately, Omi and Winant argue, the conservative reaction came from fear:

The appeal of the new right is based on the way many people experienced "the great transformation" and the transformations and dislocations of the 1970s and 1980s. These shocks inspired fear. They portended the collapse of the "American Dream" - the apolitical, perpetually prosperous, militarily invincible, and deeply self-absorbed and self-righteous "mainstream" American culture was, we think, shaken to its foundations by developments over this period. Commonly held concepts of nation, community, and family were transformed, and no new principle of cohesion, no new cultural center, emerged to replace them. New collective identities, rooted in the "new social movements," remained fragmented and politically disunited. (121-22)

It's in this climate of social and economic upheaval, of crises of identity on a variety of fronts, that high fantasy starts to get really popular. That popularity has continued throughout the 80s, 90s, and 00s; fantasy novels continue to be a major component of the publishing world, and fantasy games, following their transmedial shift from tables and cards into computers, are a major component of an [\\$41.9 billion dollar industry](#). (Especially MMORPGs, in which *WoW*, with its 11.5 million subscribers, is just the leader of a [well established trend](#).) I'm not suggesting that these texts

are *purely* attractive for their conservative racial representations - there are lots of other elements in them that gain traction with audiences (as my work here will reveal with *WoW*). And every text is unique, of course. But it's no coincidence, I argue, that stories that harken back to a romanticized medieval Europe, in which men are men and orcs are orcs and everybody knows who and what they're about, hold a certain attraction for people living in a society that's challenging their notions of identity.

See, high fantasy is all about nostalgia, and nostalgia is a powerful force indeed. Susan Stewart defines it well: *nostalgia* is a "sadness without an object, [a feeling that is] "always ideological: the past it seeks has never existed except as narrative, and hence, always absent, that past continually threatens to reproduce itself as a felt lack." (qtd. in Nakamura 26). According to Lisa Nakamura, racial constructions in virtual worlds (which she calls *cybertypes*) are frequently nostalgic in this sense. They're tied to "precisely the idea of race itself," particularly in imperialist societies: "Cybertyping works to rescue the vision of the authentic raced 'native' that, first, never existed except as part of an imperialist set of narratives, and second, is already gone, or 'destroyed' by technologies such as the Internet" (26). *World of Warcraft* is thick with racial nostalgia - including, as I'll show in the next chapter, varieties of nostalgia that are right out of European and American imperialism - but it didn't invent that nostalgia. Nor, like the cybertypes Nakamura identifies throughout her book, did racial nostalgia originate with the Internet. In *WoW*'s case, it originated with Tolkien, proliferated with his followers, like Gyax and Arneson, and found its way to *their* followers: Chris Metzen and the rest of the guys at Blizzard that designed the *Warcraft* games. High fantasy really is a fantasy, and it belongs to Western whiteness. It's a fantasy in which this culture's historical ideas of morality - loyalty, bravery, perseverance - are essential, clearly recognizable qualities. Unfortunately, so are its historical ideas about race - that it's biologically determined, and thus the determining factor in that

morality. And in $\mathbb{W}\mathbb{0}\mathbb{W}$, this fantasy is accessible all day, every day, a simulation of a world rather than just a story about it.

CHAPTER 3: REPRESENTATIONS

In the last chapter, I argued that between its gameplay and representational elements, *WoW* evinces two ways of defining race, both of which come from white western racial formations that arose in the last couple of centuries. The intersection of gameplay and representation is essential to this reading, because the ways those two broad elements combine or separate in a given instance strongly influences the meaning we can draw from the videogame as a whole. I stand by that position, but in this chapter I want to diverge slightly from it and focus solely on representational elements: the narratives told about each of *WoW*'s races, as well as the way each is designed visually and aurally.

The narratologists may have been overly narrow in their focus, but they were right to point out that analyzing a given videogame's representational design is crucial to understanding its meaning. In the broad arena of U.S. pop culture, videogames stand easily beside movies and TV as agents of The Spectacle: the slick and beautiful parade of images and sounds meant for our entertainment and consumption. That definition has its roots in Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*, though I don't share Debord's pessimism about The Spectacle's inverse relationship to reality - that it comprises some kind of false consciousness, "an image of happy harmony surrounded by desolation and horror, at the calm centre of misery" (31). (Most of the time, anyway.) I do, however, think Debord was right about the relationship between The Spectacle and political economy - that it's "the materialization of ideology brought about by the concrete success of an automatized system of economic production (116). In other words, The Spectacle reifies ideologies, which are tied to distributions of power and wealth; therefore, The Spectacle is tied to distributions of power and wealth. It's not "just entertainment."

At any rate, videogames are complicated combinations of rules and representations; but sometimes, those representations are significant enough to study on their own. That's what this chapter is about. *WoW*'s representational designs - the way its avatars look and talk, the styles of their architecture, the narratives that are told about them - are fascinating in terms of racism, because they convey all manner of racial paradigms. Some of these mesh with the racist paradigms I discussed in the last chapter. Some are decidedly more progressive. Altogether, they illustrate the sheer complexity of *WoW*'s racial design: my thesis that every major racial paradigm that's ever existed in the U.S. appears in *WoW* in some form.

WoW's racial representations aren't uncharted critical territory. At least three scholars - Alexander Galloway, Tanner Higgin, and Jessica Langer - have published analyses of them, and I'll refer to their good work a lot here. I'll try to push beyond them too, and get at some historical connections they don't touch on. I'm also going to take advantage of my digital format and show you these representations in ways the print-based scholarship hasn't been able to do.

What follows, then, are profiles of each of the ten playable races in *WoW*. Each profile contains the following information:

Introductory video

This is the video that new players are shown when they create a new avatar. In each, the “camera” flies cinematically over the starting zone of that avatar’s race, presenting its unique landscape and architecture,²⁰ while a patrician male voice narrates the race’s history and describes its temperament, allegiances and conflicts. Finally, the camera zooms in on the new avatar, who is standing in front of the first NPC who will give them a quest and begin their adventures in the

²⁰ Or at least their home base – within the diegetic history of the *Warcraft* series, there have been significant migrations and displacements of the ten races.

game. These videos situate each avatar within their geographical and political context in the game world, and the fact that this context is entirely focused on the avatar's race reveals how important it will be to the avatar's identity and the player's gaming experience.

Physical appearance

This section analyzes the ways that the avatars' bodies look and move. I analyze both male and female avatars – gender of course intersects with race in all kinds of important ways. I also include the dances that they perform when a player presses '/dance' in the game. All of these dances are pop-culture allusions, so they're significant parts of the avatars' representational gestalts.

Language

Each avatar can produce an array of pre-recorded phrases – salutations, cheers, and jokes that the player can have them utter whenever she wants. The [jokes](#) contain the most recorded speech, so I display video clips of each avatar cycling through them.

A caveat about the jokes: I know they're jokes. I know they're supposed to be funny. I know I will be "ruining" some of them. About that, I quote Robert Jensen, from *The Heart of Whiteness: Confronting Race, Racism, and White Privilege*:

Jokes are funny only in context. There is no such thing as abstract clever word play. Words have meaning in the world in which we live, not in the abstract. Take away the politics, and there is no joke. The joke wouldn't make any sense. If the [racist and/or sexist] joke is funny, it's funny precisely because it's racist and sexist. (xvi)

At any rate, the jokes the player characters tell in *WoW*, which are unique to each gender of each race and are the longest pre-recorded utterances the avatars possess, are just too important to

pass up, analytically. They reveal a lot about the representational design of each race, because each voice speaks a different variety of English. And sometimes they say things that line up with racism.

Architecture

The artistic design of *WoW*'s world is one of its most prominent and impressive features: Azeroth, Outland, and Northrend are beautiful, even though the game engine is almost five years old. *WoW*'s artists have gone to great lengths to give each race its own turf with its own style, so analyzing the real-world influences of that architecture becomes important. This is tricky, because many of *WoW*'s buildings don't (and couldn't) exist in the actual world, and *WoW*'s artists have no qualms about mixing styles and inventing their own. But influences are there, and many of them are quite significant vis-à-vis race and racism.²¹

Lore

The final section contains my summaries of the narrative history and culture of each race – known in role-playing games as [lore](#). I've gotten the vast majority of my lore from [WoWWiki](#), an online compendium of all things *Warcraft*. It's an incredible resource: its information is culled from all of the official sources in the game and outside of it, and it's maintained by fans that take their work very seriously. I don't summarize all of each race's lore – you can follow the links and read it yourself – but I pull what I see as the most rhetorically significant elements out of it.

Here, then, are links to each of the subsections of this chapter.

[Humans](#)

²¹ Many thanks to Jeff Hatch for the assistance on the architectural styles.

[Dwarves](#)

[Night Elves](#)

[Gnomes](#)

[Draenei](#)

[Orcs](#)

[Undead](#)

[Trolls](#)

[Tauren](#)

[Blood Elves](#)

[Conclusion](#)

Humans

Introductory video



<http://www.youtube.com/v/ZMIQOOw5ndo&hl=en&fs=1&>

Physical appearance

The Humans follow typical fantasy representations of gender: ultra-masculine men, ultra-feminine women. Big muscles in the former, and big breasts in the latter.



Fig. 1. Human male.



Fig. 2 Human female.

The men do one of Travolta's discos from *Saturday Night Fever*, and the women do the Macarena.



<http://www.youtube.com/v/2KJ5McQ0kP4&hl=en&fs=1&>



<http://www.youtube.com/v/QxfHwhUvqH0&hl=en&fs=1&>

Language

Standard American English, the variety associated with not only whiteness but with correctness.



<http://www.youtube.com/v/LNwZcoJU1mM&hl=en&fs=1&>



<http://www.youtube.com/v/PpesuInqn2A&hl=en&fs=1&>

Architecture

Stormwind, the Humans' capital city, is decidedly European: [Medieval](#) in style, with some [Romanesque](#) elements to the main buildings of interest. It boasts an early-mid [gothic cathedral](#), the [Cathedral of Light](#). It also contains a lot of smaller buildings with the [half-timbering](#) characteristic of the [Tudor](#) style.



Fig. 3. The front gate of Stormwind City. Source: http://www.wowwiki.com/Category:City_screenshots



Fig. 4. The Old Town section of Stormwind. Notice the Tudor framing.



Fig. 5. Stormwind's Cathedral of Light. Source: http://www.wowwiki.com/Category:City_screenshots

Lore

They're technologically and scientifically medieval. Existing in a universe in which magic exists, the Humans tend to practice it more than engineering or science. They rely on their more engineering-inclined allies, the Dwarves and Gnomes, for siege weapons, airships, and various other machines. Humans prefer medieval-level metallurgy and weaponry: swords, shields, plate armor. In this, they are no different than the humans in Tolkien or other high fantasy.

They're Catholic, sort of. The humans' religion, the [Church of the Holy Light](#), is an organization of bishops and priests devoted to the virtues of respect, tenacity, and compassion. The Church doesn't worship a particular deity, but it follows a Judeo-Christian ethic, and its similarities to the medieval Catholic church are numerous - all-male clergy organized hierarchically, cathedrals, a [militant wing of paladins](#).

They're white America. If it weren't obvious from the evidence already presented, the Humans are representationally white in all kinds of ways. One of the primary characteristics of

WoW's Humans, especially in contrast to most of the other races, is that they're a young race, and relatively short-lived; but they make up for it in population and ambition. I read this as a potential parallel to the U.S., a young country that rose to power incredibly quickly. I also see parallels between the ways the Humans are described and the ways that white Americans have historically described themselves. The avatar-creation menu, with only one adjective to give each race, applies “noble” to the Humans; and their opening video calls them a “resilient breed” that “stand resolute in their charge to maintain the honor and might of humanity in an ever-darkening world.” Interestingly, the lore narrates a number of Human acts that have been decidedly *ignoble*; for instance, in the [Troll Wars](#), they helped Elves settle in Troll territory and destroy the Trolls that fought the incursion. However, the lore dwells much more on the Humans’ good deeds than their crimes, not unlike most versions of U.S. history written by and for whites.

Dwarves

Introductory video



http://www.youtube.com/v/xMLB7_6SqTk&hl=en&fs=1&

Physical appearance

Both genders of Dwarves are short (only about 4.5 feet tall) and stocky. Male Dwarves have long, bushy beards. While female Dwarf avatars can't have beards, there is offhand reference in the lore to some famous bearded Dwarf women.²²



Fig. 6. Dwarf female.

²² An oblique reference to that scene in P. Jackson's *The Two Towers*?



Fig. 7. Dwarf male

The males perform a [Cossack folkdance](#), and the females perform an Irish step-dance like the one in [Riverdance](#).



<http://www.youtube.com/v/FxzbIoPojKs&hl=en&fs=1&>



<http://www.youtube.com/v/j6H8AsEI6UE&hl=en&fs=1&>

Language

Scottish English. There are a lot of Celtic influences in the Dwarves (especially their architecture), but I suspect that the Scottish accent in *WoW*'s Dwarves has its roots in Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* films, in which Gimli, played by John Rhys-Davies, speaks with one.



<http://www.youtube.com/v/QRGfVQbSYzk&hl=en&fs=1&>



<http://www.youtube.com/v/vPiKaVOg4qI&hl=en&fs=1&>

Architecture

[Ironforge](#), the Dwarves' capital city, largely expresses industrialism through a lot of raw steel and ironwork. There are also some ancient, pre-industrial details, such as the Norse and Celtic inscriptions in these columns:



Fig. 8. The outside column contains Celtic patterns, and the inner column contains Nordic runes. The prominent horizontal band around the tops of the columns, and at their plinths, is the heavy steelwork that expresses industrialism.

The scale and form of a lot of the Dwarves' buildings is influenced by ancient Egyptian styles:



Fig. 9. Another Ironforge doorway

Lore

They're western Europeans. Like most high fantasy dwarves, *WoW*'s generally follow the stereotype of the beer-swilling Scottish/Irish galoot. If we look closely, they're a semiotic mix of Norse, Celtic, and German signs, in roughly that order of amount. The conception of stocky, mountain-dwelling creatures called Dwarves comes from Norse myth (the word *dwarf* coming from Old Norse *dvergar*). Their gods are called [Titans](#), and their two divisions, [Æsir](#) and [Vanir](#), are also the names of the pantheon of Norse gods.²³ As I've shown, the Celtic influences are in the Dwarves' language and architecture, and in the females' dances. The primary German influence is their yearly holiday, [Brewfest](#), which is clearly based on Oktoberfest (it takes place in early October, there's a lot of polka, etc.

They're hardy. The galoot connotation (see above) necessarily involves a certain toughness, which the Dwarves display plenty of. Their lore actually presents them as almost golem-type figures: they're descendants of the [Earthen](#), an ancient people crafted out of stone by the [Titans](#). An ancient calamity made the Earthen lose their stone skin and turn to flesh, but the playable Dwarves have a racial ability called Stoneform that lets them turn into stone temporarily.

²³ Tolkien went to the Norse, too - he got his Dwarves' names from the Icelandic [Poetic Edda](#).

Night Elves

Introductory video



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2NmOYDa3bxk>

Physical appearance

Similar to the Humans, the Night Elves follow the classic fantasy paradigm: ultra-muscular men and ultra-willowy women. (Annie refused to play a Night Elf because their female models were "slutty.")



Fig. 10. Night Elf male.



Fig. 11. Night Elf female.

In fact, one of the female avatars' jokes makes tongue-in-cheek reference to the bizarrely popular practice of putting one's Night Elf somewhere prominent, like the fountain in front of the Stormwind bank, and having her dance in naught but her leathery underthings: "Oh, look, I'm dancing again! I hope all your friends are enjoying the show..."

Blizzard could never be accused of ignoring their players.

The male Night Elf dance is based upon that of the late great [Michael Jackson](#).



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4qUmWJnj498>

The female Night Elf dance is based upon French pop star [Alizee's](#) concert performance of "[J'en ai Marre](#)".



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G8SWqKWYNzI>

Language

The Night Elves also speak SAE, though they tend to sound more dreamy and enigmatic, which fits the whole Elfy tradition.



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sN8ZND-8YLM>



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nVQ5JY-ebRs>

Architecture

WoWiki cites lead writer Chris Metzen as claiming Nordic and Japanese influences in the Night Elves' buildings, particularly their main city, [Darnassus](#), which apparently follows the style of the Pagoda at [Yakushi-ji \(薬師寺\)](#). There are indeed elements of Nordic and Japanese styles here, as this image shows:



Fig. 12. The inn at Auberdine. Nordic: over-exaggeration of wood, elongated floor plan. Japanese: roof shape/texture, openings in the walls.

However, there's another influence: [Classical](#) styles, as in Greece:



Fig. 13. The Warrior's Terrace in Darnassus. Note the Greek columns and marble construction, and Japanese roof.

Lore

They're nature-lovers. Just like Tolkien's elves, *WoW*'s Night Elves are a druidic people whose power and fates are tied to the earth. Their historical conflicts revolve around preserving their environments, especially their World Trees (in which they build their cities), from various blights and corruptions from encroaching evil forces.

They're in decline. The Night Elves were once immortal, but they became mortal in an ancient war. This element comes from Tolkien too: his elves are consistently presented as having already had their day, and by the events of *The Lord of the Rings*, they're leaving Middle-earth in droves for the Grey Havens, their version of Heaven. In *LOTR*, the elves' *ubi sunt* motif is a metonymy for the larger theme of ancient magical forces leaving the earth and being replaced by the much less magical and more industrial "Age of Men." *WoW* shares this to an extent - you can see a lot of Elf ruins lying around in various zones - but *WoW*'s Elves don't seem to be going anywhere, and the other races are just as handy with magic as they are.

They're gender-neutral. The Night Elf government is run by the [Sisters of Elune](#), a cabal of priestesses. The lore claims that Night Elves' classes used to fall into strict gender separations: the men were druids, and the women were warriors or sorcerers. Now, apparently, those separations have disappeared - both genders can play all of the race's classes. So the narrative might reflect the egalitarian design ethos of the game - avatars of both genders having equal gameplay abilities, even though their representational designs fall into standard gender stereotypes.

They're inscrutable.

According to *WoW*Wiki, the Night Elves were “originally based on the [Drow](#) from the various *Dungeons & Dragons* campaign settings” – “dark elves” that, in *D&D*, are essentially evil.

(Slated for the Alliance, the Night Elves couldn't be evil, but they're definitely aloof.²⁴) So their main source is ultimately Germanic – elves as the mysterious denizens of the realm of Faerie. Their other main representational influences, reflected in the architecture and the [lore](#), are Chinese, Korean, and Japanese.

So what, right? Pagodas with Doric columns look cool.

Whether or not Blizzard's artists consciously thought about it, they blended the Mysterious Elf with the Mysterious Asian. Why the two tropes fit together seems kind of obvious, now that I put it that way. And sure, it's innocuous at the surface level. It makes for wicked scenery and so forth. Furthermore, it's not like either of these tropes is new, or rare, or even popularly recognized as a problem.

I would say that one isn't a problem but the other is. The Mysterious Elf is a totally fictional figure, and the Mysterious Asian is grounded in material reality. It's been historically used, along with a lot of related tropes, not just to [romanticize](#) Asian cultures and people, but also to [fear](#), [exploit](#), [detain](#), [invade](#), and [bomb](#) them. *WoW*'s use of these representations is about as benign as possible, but it doesn't change the fact that they have a grim history.

²⁴ They live on an island off the coast of one of Azeroth's continents, and they're depicted as having only recently come into regular contact with the other races. Even this was a matter of necessity: the Night Elves were forced to ally with the Humans and Orcs to defeat the [Burning Legion](#) in the [Third War](#). Now part of the Alliance, they're still kind of standoffish and mysterious to the other races.

Gnomes

Introductory video



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=goZsE5Vq660>

Physical appearance

The Gnomes basically resemble little people: very small stature, large heads. They're cute, but not conventionally beautiful (like the Humans and Night-/Blood Elves).²⁵

²⁵ Annie chose a Gnome for her main character primarily because the female Gnomes *didn't* look like the Humans and Night Elves.



Fig. 14. Gnome male.



Fig. 15. Gnome female.

The male Gnome dance comes from Bloodhound Gang's [video for "Bad Touch."](#)



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9yKAD1fguw4>

The female dance's source isn't as clear, though *WoWiki* attributes it to salsa.



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yi106gXbl-0>

Language

High-pitched, nasal SAE. Basically, they sound like nerds, which fits their lore.



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wn5fQsEJHec>



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3bxKCl5V2JM>

Architecture

The Gnomes' subterranean capital city, [Gnomeregan](#), combines elements of primitive Technoism with the comical exaggeration of [Adolf Loos](#) and Carlos Scarpa:



Fig. 16. A hallway in Gnomeregan. The Technoism is in the gears, pipe work, and the metal trim.

Lore

They're geeks. The Gnomes' most notable feature, which infuses their architecture, narratives, racial abilities, etc., is their interest in engineering. Gnome areas are full of mechanical gizmos; even their [mounts](#) are large gas-powered ostriches. Their technological expertise is portrayed with a lot of ambivalence, though. On one hand, they're described as being brilliant engineers, having built most of the Alliance's technological wonders, like the [Deeprun Tram](#). But on the other hand, it's responsible for a lot of mishaps: a lot of crashed Gnome airplanes dot the landscape, and the Gnomes were actually forced to evacuate their home city, [Gnomeregan](#), because their overzealous excavation awakened some evil Troggs. Now the Gnomes are basically wards of the Dwarves, occupying a small section of Ironforge called Tinker Town. So their love of technology is presented as cute and humorous at best, and as foolish at worst.

The ambivalence about engineering is an interesting feature of the Gnomes' design because it resonates with the ways technology is presented in high fantasy. To the extent that it's presented

negatively, it fits with the Tolkienistic representation of technology: that it's destructive, especially to nature. But in Tolkien, the industrialists are all unequivocally the bad guys, and in *WoW*, Gnomes are on the good guys' side. So tech isn't all bad here.

They're played for laughs. There are a lot of references in the quests and NPCs' utterances that make light of the Gnomes' size and general goofiness. I've noticed that players of other-raced avatars tend to refer to Gnome avatars diminutively; it was a favorite joke of Dave's in idle moments to turn in to bear form with his druid and sit on Annie, which totally obscured her. This is all playing into pop-culture representations of little people (often referred to as *midgets*) - n.b. Mini-Me in *Austin Powers*, *Jackass's* Wee Man, the Munchkins of good old *Wizard of Oz*.

Draenei

Introductory video



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2BSOGVy3NKg>

Physical appearance

The Draenei are one of the more bizarre-looking races in *WoW*. According to lore, they're descendants of a species of benevolent demons, the [Eredar](#), and they display some of the standard physical markers of Western demons: horns, beards, goat-like hooves. But Draenei are *good* demons, so they're beautified, especially the females.



Fig. 17. Draenei male.



Fig. 18. Draenei female.

Dances

The males perform a pretty exact copy of Indian pop singer [Daler Mehndi's](#) dance from his music video "[Tunak Tunak Tun.](#)"



http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9qBOyDr8_E4

The females' dance is based on [Shakira's](#) unique style of [belly dancing](#).



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D7a6ei2zwk>

Language

Draenei avatars speak with a vague Russian accent.



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-zBhWiT0OSY>



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jZB33XoZhLU>

Architecture

The Draenei city, the [Exodar](#), is actually a crashed spaceship, so it's kind of wrecked on the outside. Inside, its style evokes mysticism (crystals, runes, radiant light) with a strong use of the [sublime](#). The overall form and interior walls may also have influence from the “blob”- forms that can be found in modern [Deconstructivism](#).



Fig. 19. The Exodar, with my Draenei death knight in the foreground.



Fig. 20. Inside the Exodar. Note the scale of the doorway.

Lore

They're a little bit sci-fi, a little bit fantasy. The fact that the Draenei appeared in Azeroth in a ship, traveling from another planet, caused some [controversy](#) amongst fans who took umbrage at the intrusion of science fiction tropes into a fantasy world. It was apparently heated enough to prompt a response from Chris Metzen, who wrote a long [post in the official forums](#) defending his narrative decisions. (Apparently, a "trans-dimensional" ship running on magic is different enough from a "spaceship" running on "technology" to be considered okay by fantasy standards.) Ultimately, the fans' outcry and Metzen's response reveal that there are hotly contested, if fuzzy, lines between science fiction and fantasy, lines that *WoW* blurs.

They're Jewish immigrants. Like many of *WoW*'s races, the Draenei contain a lot of different rhetorical influences, but a lot of them line up with Jewish history. The playable Draenei, whose ancestors resisted the demonic corruption that the other Eredar fell prey to, are consistently described as holy people with ties to the [Holy Light](#); they're directly aided by some of that religion's angelic representatives, the [Naaru](#). The word *Draenei* means "The Exiled Ones" in their own

language, and the Draenei have suffered two genocides and undergone two exoduses to escape them. Then there's their ship/city, the rather overtly named [Exodar](#). There's also some evidence that we're meant to see the Draenei as *Russian* Jews. As I've mentioned, the avatars' accents are Russian. And one of the male avatars' [jokes](#) alludes to the Russian Jewish comedian [Yakov Smirnoff](#):

"I love this planet! I come here; I see cow and chicken and ride little horsies. THIS PLANET HAS EVERYTHING!"

A lot of Smirnoff's humor revolved around being a newcomer to the U.S., and the Draenei play on the immigrant connotation heavily. That they're depicted as *Jewish* immigrants means that, along with the Night Elves, they draw on the notion of the model minority.

Orcs

Introductory video



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bi0E1ApnPp8>

Physical appearance

Orcs are green-skinned, with heavy brows and jutting, tusked jaws. Both the males and females are large and muscular, though the females are slightly smaller.



Fig. 21. Orc male.

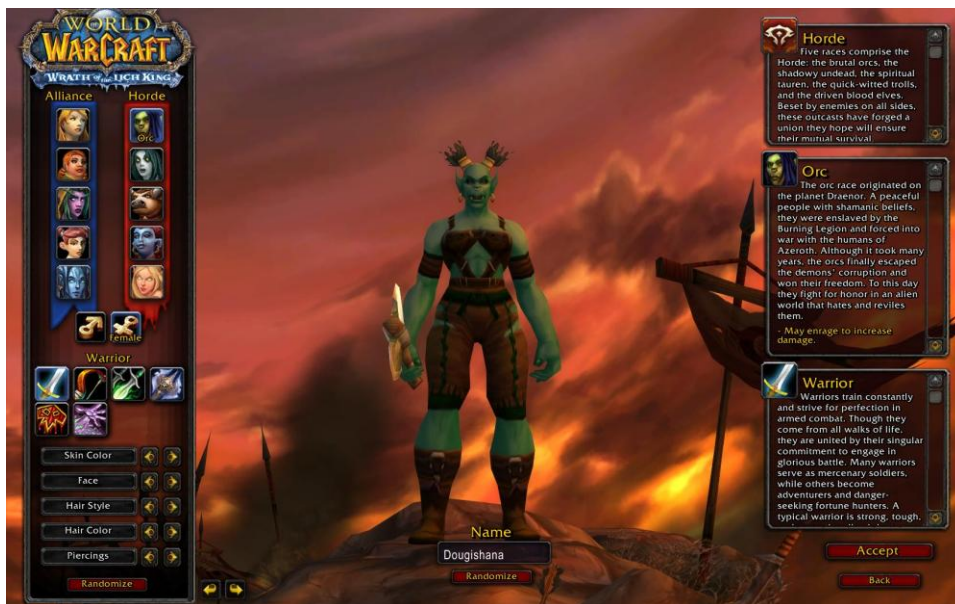


Fig. 22. Orc female.

Neither the males nor females are conventionally attractive, but the females are portrayed as overtly un-sexy and -feminine. This is exemplified by their [jokes](#), most of which directly refer to their lack of femininity:

"Darn, I need my chest waxed again!"

"I have no respect for people with small piercings. I say go full hog. Put a spear through your head."

"I'm very *feminine*. And I'll beat the crap out of ANYONE who disagrees!"

"What's estrogen? Can you eat it?"

"Man. I think that boar meat's comin back on me. I gotta hit the can. Anyone have a hearthstone?"

"Get between me and my food, and you'll lose a hand."

I agree with Elizabeth Langer that the Orc females are simultaneously "unattractive and hypersexualized" (98): their jokes refer to stereotypical feminine things – body waxing and piercing, passivity/aggression, estrogen, daintiness with food – but in decidedly *un*feminine ways.

Interestingly, both the Orc male and female dances allude to hip-hop: the males perform MC Hammer's moves from ["U Can't Touch This"](#) and the females dance like the women in the video for Juvenile's ["Back that Azz Up."](#) These are really the only Black representations for the Orcs, though.



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cZDoCV-iMGk>



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fh7Zs68Rq4w>

Language

Husky-voiced SAE.



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=azbYLbSDvAg>



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ttvm6y6O55g>

In the context of *WoW*, this isn't unusual - as you can see, most of the avatars speak Standard American English - but it is a divergence from other texts' depictions of orcs. In the *Lord of the Rings* films and the *Warhammer* games, the orcs speak Cockney, a variety of English that's long been associated with the working class and consequently derided. (Give *My Fair Lady* another viewing, to see what I mean.) This linguistic representation of classism aligns with the broader characteristics of the orcs in Tolkien (/Jackson). In Middle-earth, orcs aren't a distinct species; they're elves that have gone over to Sauron's dark side and have been physically, mentally, and morally deformed by evil. They are, to quote Tof, "primitive [sic], bestial, tribal, simple-minded, easily fooled, ferocious, even fearless in battle but also cowardly, treasonous and feckless." The same is basically true in the *Warhammer* universe. But *Warcraft's* Orcs avoid these classist stereotypes. More about this below.

Architecture

The Orcs' main city, [Orgrimmar](#), is a fortress with a strong expression of [brutalism](#). There is a mixture of [medieval](#) elements such as the bastion turrets and wooden merlons used in some portions of the exterior curtain wall.



Fig. 23. Orgrimmar's exterior.



Fig. 24. Orgrimmar's interior.

Lore

They're reformed sinners. Orcs are, since Tolkien, the traditional Bad Guys in high fantasy; and in the first two *Warcraft* games, this representation holds true. With *Warcraft III* and *WoW*, however, Blizzard altered the Orcs' narrative considerably. Here's what Chris Metzen says about them:

We put out a game called *Warcraft III* a few years ago, and one of the things I really wanted to do was take orcs, who are the perennial bad-guy race -- the dark, subhuman, barbarous race in most fantasy -- and I wanted to take our orcs and spin 'em. They're still green and tusked and very brutal -- the visual of them plays to the archetype, so it's very familiar for someone coming to the setting. But we started to take them on a route where, what if they weren't innately evil? They're looking for identity. They've been roughed up, and now they're trying to become this noble thing again. <<http://about-creativity.com/2008/04/an-interview-with-chris-metzen-part-1.php>>

The lore on the Orcs explains that their temporary evilness was the result of manipulation and [possession](#) by the nefarious demon [Kil'Jaeden](#). Thus, their worst crime, their genocide against their former neighbors, the Draenei, is meant to be read as a forgivable offense. After they were defeated by the Alliance at the end of the Second War, the remaining Orcs were put in internment camps to languish, where they were rescued and reunited by the Moses-like [Thrall](#). In the narrative context of *WoW*, the playable Orcs²⁶ are presented as a band of survivors that are trying to live down their dark past.

²⁶ I emphasize "playable" because there are various NPC Orc tribes that are still in league with the Burning Legion and are regarded as evil. There are a handful of similarly evil splinter groups of other races, too, actually, which I read as evidence that Blizzard is trying to avoid essentialist readings of *Warcraft's* races. I don't think they succeed - players still only have access to the races in limited, structured ways - but the attempt is worth noting.

They're Spartans. Like the Klingons of *Star Trek* - also sometime-enemies/sometime-friends of the Federation's protagonists - the Orcs have a Spartan warrior culture: they're students of the art of war, adherents to a strict code of honor, etc. Some of their clans even follow the practice of drowning sickly babies. Here's the way their *WoWiki* entry puts it:

For an orc, skill in battle brings great honor. It is the concept of personal honor that pervades orcish society, a concept that has made the race more cohesive and more of a threat to their adversaries in the [Alliance](#). The concept of honor pervades all echelons of orcish society. Even the naming of an orc is temporary until he has performed a rite of passage. Once an orc has brought honor to his name and the name of his clan, the elders give him a second name based upon his deed.

Undead

Introductory video



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7bXT3nizo7E>

Physical appearance

The Undead are some of the least gendered avatars in the game, pretty much all looking like rotting corpses.



Fig. 25. Undead male.



Fig. 26. Undead female.

They're supposed to be former Humans, so their skeletal builds more or less match the Human models'. However, like the Orcs, the Undead females are presented as explicitly un-sexy, as two of their jokes reveal:

"Yes, they're REAL! They're not mine, but they're real!"

"I'd paint my toenails, but I'm not sure where they FELL OFF!"

(The rest of the Undead female jokes, like those of the males, are gallows-humor plays on their condition as zombies.)

The males perform a type of [headbang](#) dance, which, *WoW*Wiki posits, might be an allusion to a character in the *Darkstalkers* franchise, a series of monster-themed fighting games from the mid-90s. (More important is the association of head banging with heavy metal, which likes occult imagery. That's probably why Blizzard has used [Ozzy Osbourne in *WoW* commercials](#).)



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P9OpiZVg2rg>



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T6pbw2czfcA>

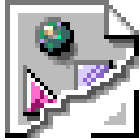
The females' dance is [liquid dancing](#), a style whose roots are 80s and 90s raves. Both dance styles are associated with countercultural groups, a significant part of the Undeads' rhetorical gestalt.

Language

Gravelly SAE.



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xK5jEA0v7Mk>



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JaPQeNxry4Q>

Architecture

The Undead capital, the [Undercity](#), exists in the cavernous sewers underneath the ruined Human city of [Lordaeron](#). Architecturally, it's a [Romanesque](#), Medieval dungeon city with many [Gothic](#) elements.



Fig. 27. The Undercity.

Lore

They're countercultural. Since, according to the lore, the Undead used to be Humans, they share a lot with the Humans, representationally, particularly British architecture and naming conventions. But as members of the Horde, they are, of course, the Humans' enemies, and they're even regarded by their Horde allies as being creepy and separate. They aren't evil, per se - the playable Undead (officially named the Forsaken) are former soldiers of the [Lich King](#), the game's latest arch-enemy, and their *raison d'être* is getting even with him for plaguing and enslaving them. They really only serve their own agenda, so they aren't particularly good either. *WoW*Wiki's entry describes them as "nominally allied with the Horde but serv[ing] only themselves."

Perhaps an element of the Undeads' countercultural semiotic is the fact that they don't really fit into the high fantasy genre. High fantasy does have its share of zombies, walking skeletons, and the like; but *WoW*'s Undead are more horror than fantasy. I don't have much to say about this other than that Blizzard seems relatively unafraid of blending genres, and that the Undead aren't the only evidence of this practice (e.g., the next expansion, *Cataclysm*, will introduce a new playable race of werewolves called [Worgen](#)).

Trolls

Introductory video



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xxqpvf-dGHM>

Physical appearance

Size differences between the male and female Trolls follow the game's other races. Like the Draenei, the male Trolls are quite a bit larger than the females. The males also have a slouching, simian posture, whereas the females stand straight. Both genders have wild, unkempt hair.



Fig. 28. Troll male.



Fig. 29. Troll female.

Like the Orcs and Undead, the 'Troll females' lack of sexiness is one of their most prominent features, as you can see from their jokes:

“Da way to a man's heart is through his stomach, but I go through da ribcage!”

“Strong halitosis be but one of my feminine traits.”

“I feel pretty. Oh so pretty. <spitting sound>.”

“If cannibalism be wrong, I don't *want* to be right!”

“I got all this, and personality too.”

The male 'Trolls' dance is comprised of various kicks, punches, and sweeps from the Brazilian martial art [Capoeira](#).



http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yIzV_OuQckg

The females' is [Shakira's](#) dance from her video for "[Whenever, Wherever.](#)" A Colombian pop singer whose music, dance, and appearance blend Latin, Middle Eastern, and American influences, Shakira almost perfectly embodies the 'Trolls' representational mishmash.²⁷



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cRESon2k75I>

Language

Troll avatars speak Caribbean English.



http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MTO19WK_5fc



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n66365otwUE>

Architecture

Many Trolls live in grass huts evocative of the Caribbean or South Pacific.

²⁷ In a fascinating rhetorical analysis, [Adel Iskandar](#) reads Shakira as the center of a revival of Orientalism in the music industry.



Fig. 30. Trolls in their homeland, Stranglethorn Vale.

Others live in the ruins of their lost empires' great cities. The playable Trolls are descended from the tribes of the [Gurubashi Empire](#), whose capital city is [Zul'Gurub](#). That city's architecture is a blending of many Pre-Columbian architectural styles seen in South and Central America, especially [Mesoamerican pyramids](#) with large staircases and small temples atop. However, there are some Middle-Eastern and Indian elements in the [ziggurats](#) and Indo-khmerist tower elements, respectively. (Their homeland, [Stranglethorn Vale](#), looks like the Indian subcontinent.)

Lore

They're degenerates. The lore states that the Trolls once had massive empires that spanned the entire world, but Night Elves, empowered by magics the Trolls didn't have,

systematically destroyed them.²⁸ Now the Trolls are a shadow of their former society, split into disparate and contentious tribes, living in ruins. The playable Trolls, officially the Darkspear Tribe, were almost destroyed by some [murlocs](#) - some of the game's smallest and silliest creatures, which suggests that the poor Trolls were weak indeed - but were rescued by Thrall and his own motley crew of Orcs. Like the Gnomes, the Trolls are refugees; they live amongst the Orcs, to whom they owe allegiance for their salvation.

The theme of living amongst the detritus of an ancient and better world is all over *WoW*, and it's a feature of high fantasy in general. Tanya Krzywinska argues that this theme, especially its manifestations in the game's lore and environments, is essential to *WoW*'s "worldness" - its "spatial coordinates, style, and physics but also... the past events that constitute the current state of affairs within the world and to which the player-character is subject" (386). Krzywinska reads the ruins through Walter Benjamin's claim that the "cultural use of ruins... cast[s] an aura of mystery and nostalgia" (389). It's a compelling claim, especially since it aligns with the nostalgia inherent in high fantasy. But while all ten races have ruins dotting the landscape somewhere, there's something different about the Trolls. The Dwarves are also less powerful than they once were; but the Dwarves are still portrayed as a proud people with a strong society, whereas the Trolls are portrayed as both physically and culturally weak. Like the Night Elves, they're ancient; but again, the Night Elves are still considered powerful. The Trolls have historically suffered genocide, like the Draenei; but unlike the Draenei, the Trolls aren't portrayed as holy people. Overall, there's a degenerate quality to the Trolls, a sense that their history, sad as it is, has corrupted their essential character. Note, for instance, the ways their introductory video describes them: "vicious," "barbarous and superstitious," and "renowned for their cruelty and dark mysticism." Contrast this against the Humans, described

²⁸ Further proof of Langer's assertion that the dichotomy between Alliance and Horde isn't good/bad.

by *their* introduction as a “resilient breed” that “stand resolute in their charge to maintain the honor and might of humanity in an ever-darkening world.” The best the poor Trolls can do, adjective-wise, is "quick-witted," which really isn't a very positive appellation when paired with those others.

Unfortunately, vis-à-vis racism, the negativity in the Trolls' representation dovetails with the sense that:

They're the most Other of all *WoW*'s races. Semiotic pastiches of Caribbeans, Mesoamericans, Africans, and Indians, the Trolls exhibit many of the characteristics of [primitivism](#) and [Orientalism](#). Both are artistic movements that arose in the 19th century, at the height of European imperialism; as such, both are implicated in the ideological separation of "West" and "East," with its notions of Westerners and Easterners' relative intelligence, civilization, morality, etc. According to Adel Iskandar, the representational mixture of actual cultures is one element of Orientalism: “Even in situations where the occidental appropriates attributes from the orient, the process is a selective one, incomplete and leaves behind much of the cultural logic behind these appropriated characteristics.” While primitivist art often celebrated (or at least fetishized) the non-Western Other, Orientalism tended to level revulsion upon its subjects: "traditional orientalist depictions showcase an irrational, barbaric, sensual, lazy, static, feminine, backward, primitive, quaint, oriental that lives far away from civilization, close to nature" (Iskandar). Hence the Trolls.

By the way, primitivist representations of Caribbeans are by no means unique to *WoW*: take a look at Peter Jackson's *King Kong* remake or the *Pirates of the Caribbean* trilogy (especially the second movie).

Tauren

Introductory video



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tHwD8G6SmVw>

Physical appearance

Tauren are basically [minotaurs](#): they walk erect like humans but have bovine heads and hooves. Both the males and females are large - 7-8 ft. tall - and the males are especially bulky, with humps like bulls. Most of their hairstyles involve braids.



Fig. 31. Tauren male.



Fig. 32. Tauren female.

The Tauren males' dance is a combination of the viral YouTube video "Peanut Butter Jelly Time" and the "[Chicken Noodle Soup](#)" dance, which came out of Harlem and also went viral on YouTube. The females perform the [Electric Slide](#).

Language

Both the male and female avatars speak in deep-voiced SAE.



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HYc1N078hog>



http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0H2zWf7k_7Q

Architecture

Tauren architecture is a mishmash of various Native American tribes' buildings: Iroquois longhouses, Plateau tule lodges, Plains teepees, and Pacific Northwest Coastal totem poles.



Fig. 33. The Tauren capital, Thunderbluff.

Lore

They're Native Americans. The Tauren are one of the most obvious races, representationally; it's easy to spot their Native American influences. They're deeply tied to nature - their god is the [Earthmother](#); they practice shamanism; they're one of the two races that can be [druids](#). They're described in their intro as both peace-loving folk and ardent hunters: "Though the noble Tauren are peaceful in nature, the rites of the Great Hunt are venerated as the heart of their spiritual culture." The notion that an entire culture is built around nomadic hunting of beasts is, I think, a nod to Plains tribes' cultural relationships with bison.²⁹

²⁹ Of course, the fact that the Tauren *look* like bison means they can't be hunting them, so they hunt [kodo](#), which look like Triceratops.

Of course, the influences behind the 'Taurens' design are more cartoony than realistic, and they ultimately draw more from white representations of Indians than from Indians themselves. Their name comes from the Greek word for "bull," *tauros*, rather than an Indian word. Their leaders go by the name of "chief," a term that was applied to Indians by English colonists in the seventeenth century. *WoW*Wiki describes them as temperamentally "stoic, embodying the strong and silent type with their quiet contemplation," evoking the stereotype of the "silent Indian." Then there's their architecture, about which see above. Semiotic mixtures exist in almost all of *WoW*'s races, and you could explain the diversity in their buildings through the lore, which states that there are many tribes of Tauren united under a single leader for political stability and defense. However, vis-à-vis representational mixtures, the Tauren are a special case: there's historical precedent of lumping together the various peoples they stand for, often in the context of conquest and colonialism. So they, and the Trolls, mean something different than the Humans. But there's one big difference between the Trolls and Tauren:

They're noble savages. Like the Trolls, the Tauren are portrayed in primitivist terms, but the Tauren are an interesting inverse of the Trolls in terms of their supposed virtue and strength. Where the Trolls are both physically weak and evil, the Tauren are "strong" and "noble." (The unerring positivity in the Taurens' description actually sets them apart from all of the other Horde races, who are each portrayed as flawed in some way.) In terms of primitivism, then, the Tauren represent the flip side of the Trolls' coin: the [noble savage](#).

Blood Elves

Introductory video



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vwEaCe1FZ7U>

Physical appearance

The Blood Elf avatars perfectly conform to contemporary white American standards of beauty: athletic builds, fair skin, green eyes, blond hair.



Fig. 34. Blood Elf male.



Fig. 35. Blood Elf female.

The male avatars ape *Napoleon Dynamite's* famous [dance scene](#).



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-eW3SHuVjNs>

The females' dance, according to *WoWWiki* (citing the *Burning Crusade Collector's Edition* DVD), is an amalgam of dance moves from [Britney Spears' performances](#).



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vLltmmSFLrU>

Language

Haughty-sounding SAE.



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NzLaHpYyidM>



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qMfONbE6kAU>

Architecture

The Blood Elves' capital, [Silvermoon City](#), contains many expressions of the sublime in the use of scale and prominent forms. There are many [Medieval](#) and [futurist](#) elements, but the most prominent influence in the Blood Elves' architecture is [Islamic](#), with the repetitious use of the horseshoe arch.



Fig. 36. Silvermoon City.

Lore

They're snobs. Here's the text for all of their jokes:

Female

"Ugh I hate Thunder Bluff! You can't find a good burger anywhere."

"So I went to this troll spa the other day and I wound up with dreadlocks and a frigging *bone* in my nose! I mean come on! Who PAYS for that?"

"I went to Undercity to get a facial. Ha! Have you seen these people? I said, 'You don't have a lower jaw and you're going to give ME a facial?' She got mad...at least I think she did. You ever heard someone talk without a lower jaw? 'Rawe-rau-werew' Ho-ho! She sounded like a murloc!"

"Do you think the expansion will make me fat?"

"So you mean I'm stuck with this hair color?!"

"How can I miss you if you don't go away?"

"Mirrors can't talk. Luckily for you, they can't laugh either!"

Male

"Give me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to... *angry grunt* Just give me some freakin' magic before I kill somebody!"

"I'm trying to cut back on arcane magic... look, I got the patch."

"We're allied with the Tauren? Fantastic! We'll be having steak twice a week."

"Don't you wish your girlfriend was hot like me?"

(Sighs) "I could really use a scrunchy... yeah, you heard me!"

"So I was in line to the Bat Handler yesterday with some undead guy in front of me and all of the sudden he just lets one go! Didn't even try to disguise it! I don't know

what he ate but it did not agree with him. I thought, 'What crawled up YOU and died?'"

"The problem with these Horde characters is they lack sophistication. *farts*"

What do these jokes tell us about the Blood Elves? They're vain (both the men and women - a significant departure from the other races, about which more in a second), and they see themselves as better than the other races in their faction.

They're addicts. Not drug addicts, but magic - though magic can stand in for drugs (e.g. Willow in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*). The Blood Elves are the remnants of the [Highborne](#), the upper caste of the first elf society, thousands of narrative years before the events of *WoW*. Unlike the Night Elves, the Highborne were into arcane magic, so much so that they would pursue any means to get it. Their overuse of the [Well of Eternity](#), the source of their magic, attracted the attention of the [Burning Legion](#), which invaded Azeroth and destroyed a large portion of it in the [War of the Ancients](#). Many of the Highborne devolved into [naga](#); but the remaining ones, known as the High Elves, served with the Alliance for hundreds of years, until they allied with the naga in order to regain access to arcane magic. Now, shunned by the Alliance for this treachery, they are members of the Horde, but largely out of convenience.

Lore-wise, the Blood Elves are definitely the darker of the two Elf societies. Even though they've suffered greatly, it's their fault, and it's because they are ruled by their addiction. This portrayal of addiction, while often tongue-in-cheek (i.e. the jokes, above), is in line with contemporary U.S. myths: that certain kinds of addiction - to drugs, videogames, sex, etc. - befall only weak people, who become criminals if they weren't already.

They're gay. The Blood Elf males illustrate the ways that representations of gender and sexuality intersect with those of race. Look at them: thin, lithe, fair-featured. Listen to what they say and how they speak. They conform perfectly to the stereotypical representation of gay men as

flamboyant, vain, and feminized. Put the homosexuality and addiction together, and the Blood Elves look a lot like stand-ins for 80s-era fears about gay men and AIDS. Even their name resonates within that context.

Conclusion

September 2009. I'm in the main expo hall of the Penny-Arcade Expo (PAX), the country's biggest fan conference for gaming. I'm talking to Robert Mull, the community-relations director for *Warhammer Online: Age of Reckoning*, a fantasy MMO released last year. *WAR* is doing okay on the market, Bob says – at 350,000 subscribers, it's profitable; but it doesn't have as many players as its developers had hoped for. Then he looks over at the Blizzard booth, which takes up an entire corner of the expo hall, 20-foot banners looming over 54 computer stations, each with 5+ players in line for their demos.

“At least we're not the McDonald's of videogames,” he says.

It's an interesting metaphor, and it sticks with me. Thing is, it's only partially accurate.

The scale is definitely right: *WoW* can't claim “billions and billions served,” but compared to 350,000 players (which is totally decent for one of its competitors), its 11.5 million might as well be a billion. Every time a new MMO hits the market, the gaming media debates whether it'll be the “*WoW* Killer.” None have come close.

On the other hand, the qualitative comparison is all wrong. True, the haters – curmudgeonly legislators, parents of addicted kids – would agree that like McDonald's, *WoW* rots the mind and atrophies the body. But for those of us in the know, who have seen firsthand what *WoW* has to offer, it's anything but junk. Like McDonald's, *WoW* has something for everyone – but *unlike*

McDonald's, everything *WoW* offers is excellent. It's smart and balanced and polished. It's beautiful and fun.

World of Warcraft isn't the McDonald's of gaming; it's the *Disneyland* of gaming.

Think about it: *WoW*, like Disneyland, is a privately created/controlled environment made for public entertainment. A good chunk of that entertainment comes from just taking in the scenery – of flying through wondrous landscapes, of strolling through crowded but immaculate cities. It's a theme park. There are tons of things to do in this theme park, all of which are based around play. The people that come here have a lot of freedom to choose how and when they play, and there's no one right way to go about it.

The parallels between *WoW* and Disneyland aren't all positive, however. Both environments are cartoonish, over-the-top worlds, reproductions that leave out the unpleasant and mundane elements of the actual one. Both environments are pastiches of actual places, filled with pastiches of actual people. These pastiches, given their own fictional histories, seemingly obviate the real histories of the real places and people they're based on. Ultimately, none of these de-and-then-re-contextualized, seemingly ahistorical representations can fully escape their pasts. Especially when those pasts are bloody.

In the end, both *WoW* and Disneyland claim to have “something for everyone,” but what they really mean is “something for everyone who identifies with the identities we've represented.” What identities are those?

Frankly, most are white. Not in terms of skin color – or not *just* in terms of it – but in terms of language, architecture, religion, ethics, morality. In terms of the sense of whiteness as the invisible, pervasive norm (Dyer 458). There's some ethnic variation, but the ethnicities on display have either been historically subsumed *into* whiteness (i.e. the Scottish/Irish Dwarves) or have been counted as model minorities by whites (i.e. the Asian Night Elves). Some identity positions are

portrayed as deficient or debased via other discourses: the addict/homosexual (the Blood Elves), the non-white woman (the Orc, Troll, and Undead females). One, the Draenei, stands in for the people for whom racism as we know it was invented, presented here in the most positive of lights. But even positive connotations can't overcome the inherent condescension in the "noble savage" view of Native Americans that underlies the Tauren. And the Trolls – well, they're just plain old-fashioned racism.

Why does *WoW* draw on the representations that it does, and why does it mix and match stereotypes the way it does?

Elizabeth Langer theorizes that the game's non-"totalized depictions of racial attributes... possibly suggest[s] [Blizzard's] awareness of real-life complexity and difference within races" (95). I'd buy this if the game didn't otherwise present race in an essentialist way (see Chapter 1). Another possibility is that Blizzard wants to portray *WoW*'s cultures as multicultural or even transnational. According to Adel Iskandar, the concept of transnationalism "views culture not as a stagnant entity with nascent beginnings and a demarcated finitude, but as a ceaseless process of change and continual redefinition." This reading does work if we look at *WoW* solely through its lore, in which the ten races have collided and mixed in myriad ways. Iskandar even suggests that the hybrid identities that emerge in transnationalism are "a symptom of the colonial venture," which means that we could read *WoW* as a postcolonial text. This is how Langer sees it, especially on the Horde side: "the common thread linking the playable Horde factions is not a mutual moral compass but rather a shared experience of colonization and oppression and a shared project of resistance" (94). I buy the oppression and resistance bit, and the Horde are definitely portrayed as a band of survivors. But the colonization is a stretch: there are no real post-colonization narratives in the lore. And as I've shown, the Trolls and Tauren draw on representational contexts that are highly colonialist. Plus, even postcolonialism can be appropriated and commodified.

Of course, as I've shown, there's artistic precedent behind Blizzard's rhetorical choices: many of the representations that *WoW* uses are drawn from the narrative genre of high fantasy – a genre whose roots are a nostalgic, white-supremacist view of Western history. There's also precedent in the broader games industry. In a 2009 study, Dmitri Williams and a cadre of researchers examined the top 15 games on each of the major game platforms between 2005 and 2006, comparing the distributions of their characters' gender, race, and age to those in the real U.S. population. They found that whites and Asians are overrepresented in games, whereas Blacks, Hispanics, and Native Americans are underrepresented. (Male characters also grossly outnumber female characters.) If we count the Tauren as 1/10 of *WoW*'s population, *WoW* bucks the trend on Native Americans (who comprise about a tenth of the U.S. population but only 1% of game characters). But otherwise it follows the industry.

Thing is, so do *WoW*'s players. Because it accounted for the popularity (in sales) of the games it was analyzing, Williams' study showed that players perpetuate the white (male) supremacy of game representations through the games that they buy: "The most popular games are less representative than the typical game produced by developers, indicating that players also play a role in the cycle of creation and consumption" (828). If that's true, *WoW*'s players are powerfully reinforcing the status quo, given their choices in their avatars' races. The [Warcraft Census](#), a report generated by a game [mod](#) that counts the race, level, and class of all of the players on a given *WoW* server (which is then combined with that of all of the other servers on [WarcraftRealms.com](#)), reveals some interesting things about the relative popularities of each race. You can see the current numbers via the link above, but here is what they looked like on October 5, 2009:



Here's the same data, taken on July 14, 2007:



How to interpret these numbers? As you might suspect, I'm inclined to read them through the lens I've been wearing this entire chapter: the ways that each race is represented, and the links between the game's representations and the history of racism. This lens makes me raise my eyebrows at some of the trends in the races' popularity. Viz.:

The Humans are the most popular race. They're also the most representationally white, and the most in line with traditional fantasy heroes.

The next most popular race is the Blood Elves, who are not only very representationally white, but are also the only white race in the Horde faction. Introduced in January 2007 with the *Burning Crusade* expansion, the Blood Elves were designed to give the Horde an attractive race, presumably to boost the number of players in that faction, according to *WoW*'s former lead designer, Jeffrey Kaplan (Yu and Park). It seems to have worked. In fact, since I last looked at the Warcraft Census about a year ago, the Blood Elves have passed the Night Elves, who used to be the second-most-popular race. Thus, the conclusion that Nicolas Duchenaut et al. reached in a 2006 article has become only half right:

“The players’ apparent reluctance to play ‘ugly’ and ‘bad’ characters could indicate that despite the anonymity of virtual worlds and their potential for experimenting with different identities (Turkle, 1997), social and cultural norms still shape an individual’s choices in virtual worlds powerfully.” (294)

When this article was published, before *Burning Crusade* introduced the Blood Elves, players really were avoiding the "ugly" and "bad" characters: the number of players with Alliance characters

outnumbered those on the Horde by 2 to 1. That ratio has relaxed somewhat - the current census lists it as 1.2:1 - but the general majority/minority balance remains. So players are still avoiding the "ugly" characters, but "badness" isn't as much of a factor.

All this being said, I have to acknowledge that players - including me - have any number of idiosyncratic reasons for picking their avatars' races. Those reasons might intersect with the politics of race and historical representations of certain races; they might not. Ultimately, the question of what motivates players to choose their avatars' races is best left to a sociologist (of which there are many working in game studies). My aim, however, is to point out that 1) the images and voices and stories that comprise the characters in *World of Warcraft* have identifiable rhetorical influences; 2) those influences are part of larger contexts in the actual world; and 3) many of those contexts relate to the history of racism, and its attendant distributions of money, health, housing, land, life. In many ways, *WoW* subverts or sidesteps racist representations, and in many ways, it plays right into them.

CHAPTER 4: PROCEDURES

At this point, we've spent a lot of time with *WoW*'s representational elements - the environments of the fictional world, and the characters and stories that inhabit it. As the game studies field's narratologists have argued, these representational elements are essential parts of videogames' meanings: they are the media through which players experience the games, and players have profound intellectual and emotional reactions to them. But the narratologists' frenemies, the ludologists, were also right: videogames are *games*. Without the element of interactivity,³⁰ a videogame would be some other type of text - a comic, a [machinima](#), or a movie. The representational elements would mean very little without gameplay elements being there to guide the player's experience of them. Jesper Juul, one of the most clear-headed theorists of videogames' structures, uses this fact to label videogames *half-real*: they combine fictional stories and settings (called *representational elements* in my schema) with real game rules. Both, he argues, are crucial to the meanings the player can/will make from a game:

Even though fiction and rules are formally separable, the player's experience of the game is shaped by both. The fictional world of a game can cue the player into making assumptions about the game rules... The way a given object or character behaves will characterize it *as a fictional object*; the rules that the player deduces from the fiction and from the experience of the playing of the game will also cue him or her into imagining a fictional world. (177)

³⁰ By which I mean *explicit interactivity* - "participation with designed choices and procedures in a text" - as opposed to *cognitive, functional, or meta-interactivity* (Zimmerman 158).

In other words, a videogame's total rhetorical meaning can only emerge by reading its representational and gameplay elements together. That's what my analysis of *World of Warcraft* needs to address now.

Here's where Ian Bogost's theory of *procedural rhetoric* becomes crucial. It begins with a definition of *procedurality* from the computer science field: the "ability to execute a series of rules" (4). Executing rules in sequence is the fundamental action of computer code, so a computer program is fundamentally a set of algorithms for running procedures. Lots of them. Users tell programs to enact procedures, and programs in turn help users enact procedures. As a program, a videogame presents a great number of procedures that its user can enact, and a (greater) number of procedures s/he can't. All of these are contextualized within the goals of gameplay: press A to jump on Goombas and kill them, press A below question-mark blocks to get fireballs, jump across the chasm to reach the end of the level, etc. And because the videogame's gameplay is mediated through its representations, the representations are what give the procedures most of their meaning. Potentially, then, videogames can "invoke interpretations of processes in the material world" (5).

As a critic and a game developer, Bogost is interested in the persuasive potential of procedural rhetoric. His book focuses on analyzing and creating videogames that have explicitly suatory purposes: games in the domains of politics, advertising, and education. Hence its title, *Persuasive Games* (which is also the name of the [game development company](#) Bogost runs), as well as his definition of *procedural rhetoric*: "the practice of using processes persuasively" (28). In other words, he's most attracted to the classical model of rhetoric - rhetoric as persuasion. But he also acknowledges the contemporary, Burkean notion of rhetoric as the conscious use of symbols to achieve connection between individuals. Under this broad definition, rhetoric becomes something more like the way we define *expression*: Person A might want person B to think or act in a new way, but she might also (or alternately) have more general motives in mind - conveying her worldviews or

identity positions, for instance. Here's where my lens is. Whether or not they're explicitly trying to persuade their players to think or do something, game developers consciously make every line of a game's code, every line of its art. The procedures players enact, then, are "a *manifestation* of the developers' rhetoric, each rule corresponding to a meaning-making or meaning-managing event" (McAllister 56).

The meanings that critics can draw from a game's procedural rhetorics depend on the values those procedures are accorded within the game and their symbolic meaning outside the game. Because games are goal-driven (leading players towards some desired *victory* or at least *termination condition*),³¹ their procedures carry values. Some are positive, leading the player towards victory; others are negative, leading the player towards defeat. Some are more or less value-neutral in terms of the game's goals; players can enact them, but they lead to neither victory nor defeat. Some are purely connected to a videogame's narratives and deal less with winning and losing than with character development, as they shape the ways that NPCs respond to the player's avatar in various ways.³² At any rate, all of the procedures a player can enact in a game are meaningful in some way. That's especially true when they symbolize procedures in the material world. Not all videogames do so, of course - the abstractness of *Tetris* makes any kind of symbolic reading of it a stretch (which isn't to say critics haven't tried³³ - but every game with anthropomorphized characters in a fictional world will symbolize *something* we can connect to the world outside it, however fantastic it may be. "Procedural rhetorics," Ian Bogost claims, "afford a new and promising way to make claims about *how things work*" (29).

³¹ These terms, and other useful definitions of videogame structures, are from Ernest Adams' *Fundamentals of Game Design*, page 8.

³² BioWare's RPGs (*Neverwinter Nights*, *Dragon Age*, *Mass Effect*) are extremely good at this.

³³ E.g. iconic narratologist Janet Murray, who read *Tetris* as "a perfect enactment of the overtasked lives of Americans in the 1990s - of the constant bombardment of tasks that demand our attention and that we must somehow fit into our overcrowded schedules and clear off our desks in order to make room for the next onslaught" (qt. in Juul 133).

So now it's time I talked about how *World of Warcraft* works in terms of procedural rhetoric - how some of the procedures that it allows (and prevents) invoke procedures that resonate with the material world, and how some of the representational features covered in the last chapter work with the game's rules to make even more significant meanings than either could do alone.

Which means it's time to look at the faction system.

But first, an imagined (but *not totally fictional*) conversation:

Blizzard Entertainment head offices, 2001. A meeting between [Tom Chilton](#), [Jeffrey Kaplan](#), and [Allen Adham](#), a few of the lead designers of Blizzard's [recently announced](#) MMO project based on the *Warcraft* universe.

Chilton: Boyos, the topic of the day is PvP. Should we have it? How's it gonna work?

Adham and Kaplan, in unison: PvP! Yes!

Adham: I propose permanent teams for the players, like *Dark Age of Camelot*.

Chilton: That could work. You'll have people who are friendly to you and willing to help you, who you could join up with - and you'll know who the bad guys are.

Kaplan: What's the point in splitting up the player-base? Let's do it like *Ultima Online*: no boundaries.

Chilton: But in *Ultima*, I didn't feel like I was part of anything. I never knew who my friends were, who I was supposed to be fighting against, what I was supposed to do.

Kaplan: But people are going to want to play with, well, the people they want to play with!

Adham: But they also want to feel like they're a part of something. Times like these, people need to know whose side they're on.

Chilton: I agree. Plus, it'd be a piece of cake to work it into the *Warcraft* lore. We'll just make players join the Alliance or the Horde.

Kaplan: I still think it's a bad idea to divide players.

Chilton and Adham: Tough shit, noob!

A crucial rhetorical decision

About a decade ago, Blizzard's wunderkinds, fresh off the staggering success of *Starcraft* (played as a [professional sport in South Korea](#)) and *Warcraft III: The Frozen Throne*, were looking around for a new game idea. They were playing some of the new massively multiplayer online role-playing games - *Ultima Online*, *Dark Age of Camelot*, *Baldur's Gate*, *EverQuest* - and they thought they could make their own MMO, which would improve on these games' mechanics and use one of their own intellectual properties. No fools, they knew that this game had to involve some kind of player-versus-player conflict - how could it not, with so many players running around the game world together? Plus, they knew how to make PvP games; PvP is the *raison d'être* of the [real-time strategy \(RTS\)](#) genre, which had been their specialty. How to artfully implement PvP mechanics in an MMORPG's persistent world was the question.

Their answer was the faction system: the division of players into the [Alliance](#) and [Horde](#), and the attendant rules governing their interactions (no cooperative play, trading, or dialogue; lots of incentives for PvP combat). It must have been an easy idea to conceive, since the Alliance and Horde had featured prominently in all three of the previous *Warcraft* games. But a recent article in *Eurogamer MMO* called "[The Making of World of Warcraft](#)," which features an extensive interview with Tom Chilton (and is the source of the only-slightly-fictionalized conversation above), reveals that the faction system wasn't a foregone conclusion. Kaplan (who later held the title and [promotional](#)

[duties](#) of Lead Designer) opposed it from the very beginning, and according to Chilton, some like-minded members of the development team fought it "right up to launch" ([Fahey 5](#)).

Where did this disagreement come from? Was it merely about splitting the player base in half, as Chilton says Kaplan protested? Is it possible that the designers discussed the significance of players inhabiting avatars that were in a permanent war with each other, its sides drawn across racial boundaries?

Maybe. I suspect that the ambivalence in the game's representational elements – the semiotic pastiches I discussed previously – is a sign that some of Blizzard's designers are aware of their larger connotations and want to diffuse some of their racist elements. Furthermore, in its expansions and patches over the last four years, the game has evolved in the direction of grand, sweeping narratives that endanger the whole world, and thus transcend the Alliance and Horde's conflict.³⁴ As I've mentioned, one patch added more emotes to the avatars' repertoire, effectively enhancing their rhetorical potential in cross-faction communication. The major cities of the *Burning Crusade* and *Rise of the Lich King* expansions, [Shattrath](#) and [Dalaran](#), have been faction-neutral, allowing all players inside and preventing them from fighting. And now players can actually pay Blizzard to [switch their avatars' races and factions](#).

But maybe not. Keep in mind that when Blizzard got going on *WoW*, both *EverQuest* and *Ultima Online* - the most popular U.S. MMOs at the time - had maybe [200,000 players each](#). Blizzard hoped for a [million at the outside](#) (Elliott 4). (*WoW*'s popularity took *everyone* by surprise, its creators included.) So maybe they didn't think about how many players would be inhabiting their world, or how much time they'd spend there, or how they'd feel about their avatars. Moreover, the developers had already committed to a fictional genre (high fantasy) that reifies racist paradigms, which

³⁴ As the upcoming third expansion, [Cataclysm](#), will apparently do even more.

paradigms (especially biologism) they *further* reified by their choice of *procedural* genre, the role-playing game. Their new character and world art - of which they created a vast amount of original content for the new game - played into even more racist paradigms. Finally, as many changes as they've made to the faction system, as many ways as they've deemphasized it, they still haven't done away with the Alliance and Horde altogether. Or let players do away with them, for that matter.

At any rate, the most crucial thing to remember about the faction system is that it was, and is, a rhetorical choice. As were the rules that Blizzard devised to manage players' interactions across the factions' lines. Let's look at each of those in turn.

The procedural rhetorics of the faction system

Know thine enemy

As I mentioned in the first chapter, many elements of an avatar's identity in the game world are established through its race. The introduction video situates the avatar's geographical and political context entirely in terms of its race and faction. The starting zones for newbie avatars are unique for each race, and the first few quests that players complete are narratively tied to their race's local problems. While the main elements of the faction conflict don't appear in the early game, players aren't totally insulated from it. In fact, the game uses NPC encounters in quests to teach players how to spot and kill the racial enemy very early on. For example, let's look at [an early quest chain](#) for new Draenei. As I discussed in my profile of the Draenei in Chapter 3, their narrative explains that they have crashed on Azeroth after fleeing their home world in a spaceship. The first few missions as a Draenei avatar revolve around the recent crash and the people's efforts at recovery: gathering food and salvaging ship parts, scouting out the alien terrain, reuniting Draenei

who were scattered here and there in the crash. The first quest that involves encounters with more than just local flora and fauna, obtained at level 5, involves finding a Draenei scout that has disappeared in some nearby woods. It turns out that he has been snatched and murdered by a band of Blood Elves, who intend to attack the weakened Draenei while they regroup. The player has to solve this problem by fighting and killing the Blood Elves and their leader. This small quest line establishes from a very early point in the game that the opposing faction will kill you unless you kill them first.

Divide and contest

As “predefined sequences of events” (Juul 17), [quests](#) are usually the most significant procedural rhetorics of a given videogame. Jill Walker argues that quests are tremendously important in establishing ties to the narratives of the virtual world: they “build up a sense of knowing an area and making a difference to the people who live there,” and thus “flesh out the world, making it interesting” (309). They’re essential to all role-playing games, as they get players to explore the world and undertake adventures in it. Single-player RPGs use quests as their means of progression through a plot. MMORPGs do this too, but their plots can never conclude, because their worlds are persistent. Therefore, in addition to quests, an MMO has a default environment, an “everyday” world in which players trade, form groups for quests, [dance on fountains](#), and so forth.

W/r/t the faction system, the everyday world of *WoW* operates upon rules that try to prevent any player procedures related to talking, trading, and teaming up with the other side. The game software automatically converts all utterances by the other faction into gibberish, and the options for cooperative play that exist for members of the same faction - forming a party or guild, sharing quests and their rewards - simply don't exist for members of the opposite faction.

Players occasionally subvert these rules, and Blizzard has relaxed them slightly, but they're generally pretty strict about them. An interesting example of this strictness in action occurred in 2005, not long after the game had released, when players cracked the game's algorithm for scrambling cross-faction language. Some plucky hackers, who noticed that "lol" from a Hordie always got translated into "kek" for the Alliance, and vice versa, invented a [mod](#) that would translate the gibberish back into English. Blizzard quickly banned it, citing the "Malicious UI Modifications" clause of their ["Exploitation and Client/Server Manipulation Policy."](#) Apparently, Blizzard regards cross-faction communication as providing an "unfair advantage over other players." I can see how this could be true - groups could send moles into battlegrounds in order to spy on the other team's tactical communication, for instance - but the fact that Blizzard is willing to punish or ban players for doing it says a lot about how essential cross-faction unintelligibility is to their conception of their game.

Setting Blizzard's intent aside for a second, consider the rhetorical effects of these rules - specifically, the procedures they allow and deny. Consider their symbolic translation to actual life. What would the relationships be like between people who could only communicate through gestures, who couldn't learn how to speak or write to each other, who couldn't share an economy or pursue similar goals? And who are prevented from ever doing any of these things by repressive state apparatuses, or punished if they do? How do we feel about governments that constrain their citizens like this?

The most dangerous game

Although an enormous chunk of the *WoW* experience involves killing NPCs, it's much more fun to fight other players. Videogames have yet to pass the Turing Test; AI opponents are simply not as challenging, unpredictable, or exciting as human opponents. There are several contexts and

locales for PvP play in *WoW*, and each evokes a slightly different reading of its representational and procedural rhetorics. Therefore, I separate *WoW*'s PvP into two categories - *random* and *goal-oriented* - which reflect their degree of formality as games.³⁵

Random PvP

Because the game world is really big, players are spread out all over it, even on a highly populated [realm](#). But it's fairly common to run across players of the other faction. On a [PvE realm](#), players can only fight each other if they choose to turn their [PvP flag](#) on. On a [PvP realm](#), players are constantly flagged and are at risk everywhere but noob zones and [sanctuary areas](#). Either way, the idea is that you can be running around doing quests somewhere, and if you see a member of the other faction, you can duke it out.

Random PvP lends an air of chaos and danger to the often banal questing experience. There's no telling when you might get pounced on by some opportunistic foes, or what their numbers or levels will be. In fact, I've always played on PvE realms because of this - PvP realms have reputations as notoriously cutthroat places, wretched hives of all manner of [scum](#) and [villainy](#). On a PvE realm (also called, significantly, *Normal*), the fact that the player is only vulnerable to attack *by choice* makes an enormous impact on her experience of the world: the other faction's players are essentially rendered untouchable, annoyances rather than threats. The faction conflict doesn't disappear - the other side's hostile NPCs are still around, and the exclusive turf, and the segregation - but it's less a persistent feature of the world than, well, a *game*.

³⁵ My distinctions basically correspond to Roger Caillois' *paidia* and *ludus*, which respectively mean spontaneous/unregulated play and premeditated/controlled play (12-14). Caillois envisioned *paidia* and *ludus* as poles on a continuum, between which all types of play exist, from spinning around in circles until you're dizzy to playing in the World Series.

Goal-oriented PvP

What I mean by "goal-oriented" PvP is that which is contextualized in some kind of game activity: assault/defend a base, capture the flag, kill as many rogues as possible before time runs out, etc. Mostly, goal-oriented PvP takes place in [battlegrounds](#), which are [instances](#) made for team-based games. There are also [world PvP areas](#), which have similar goals as battlegrounds but exist in the main game world; as well as [arenas](#), which are last-man-standing battles between teams of two, three, or five players.

As my names for them suggest, the main difference between random and goal-oriented PvP is that the gameplay is more tightly controlled in the latter than the former. These encounters are games, in the classic definition of that term.³⁶ Players elect to enter battlegrounds and arenas by queuing for them. There are level brackets in the battlegrounds, so players won't get mowed down by anyone higher than nine levels above them. Arena teams are automatically pitted against others of similar rank, so the fights will be fair. Goal-oriented PvP always has a definite beginning and ending, with explicit conditions for winning and losing. And it comes with its own [sets of rewards](#).

A notable hybrid of random and goal-oriented PvP is the ability to attack the other faction's population centers - their camps, towns, and cities. (I call it a hybrid because these encounters are random in their time and size, like random PvP; but they do involve goals and rewards, like goal-oriented PvP.) These kinds of assaults have the most potential effect on the main game world, because they can disrupt the services that the cities provide, from the auction house to transportation in and out. I say *potential* and *can* because these assaults are difficult and temporary: cities are always staffed by elite NPC guards (not to mention whatever players might be around), requiring large raiding parties to conquer them. Furthermore, the NPCs quickly and perpetually

³⁶ By which I mean Jesper Juul's, from *Half-Real*: "A game is a rule-based system with a variable and quantifiable outcome, where different outcomes are assigned different values, the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome, the player feels emotionally attached to the outcome, and the consequences of the activity are negotiable" (36).

respawn, making it difficult to hold a city for very long and impossible to capture. Population centers can't be destroyed, either. However, despite their difficulty, city attacks are the most significant manifestations of the faction war: there's nothing like having your home town invaded to make you want to fight. I haven't seen that many of these invasions, but they always draw big, energetic crowds. And the chat window is rife with jingoism.

The meanings of PvP

Other than the [arena battles](#), which are contests of individual prowess and can be between members of the same faction, all of *WoW*'s player-versus-player combat is couched within the narrative frame of the Alliance/Horde war. Although they are technically [instances](#), the battlegrounds are meant to be understood as parts of the main world: their landscapes correspond to those in the regular game world, and their main entrances are in the zones to which they correspond. More important, the battlegrounds are all presented narratively as skirmishes over territory between the two factions. For example, [Alterac Valley](#), one of the most popular ones, is contextualized through a story of territorial incursion and resistance. According to the lore, a contingent of Dwarves, the [Stormpike Guard](#), had entered the valley looking for ancient relics and natural resources, not knowing that it was already occupied by the [Frostwolf Clan](#), a band of Orcs that had settled there long ago in order to avoid conscription into the demonic [Burning Legion](#). The Orcs had attacked the Alliance without warning, setting off a bitter struggle over control of the area. The area's quests imply that the Alliance sees the Horde as unreasonable aggressors that deserve retribution, and the Horde sees the Alliance as imperialistic invaders that have no right to the area. Both sides' viewpoints are partially right: there are indeed some Orcs that want to eradicate the Dwarves without mercy, and there are some Dwarves (including their king) that are motivated by a

Manifest Destiny-esque ["sovereign and territorial imperative."](#) Ultimately, both sides' goals are the same: destroy the enemy's defensive towers and bases, and kill every member of their army.

Of course, neither side ever permanently wins, in this or any battleground. The battle ends; the armies teleport back to wherever they were beforehand; those with their blood still up re-queue for another one that's an exact copy of the last, all rebuilt and swept clean. The narrative runs in a perpetual loop. Such is the case in a world that evolves only when its gods, who value equal opportunity over change, want it to. If the battlegrounds were more like real battles, there would be a finite (and very small) number of winners; if the war ended, half its population would suddenly be losers. And let's not even get into how un-fun it would be to play out occupation, colonization, nation-building, insurgency, etc. - from the losing side, at least.³⁷

There's very little realism in the Alliance/Horde war, and there shouldn't be: good game designers recognize the tedious or unfair or horrific features of the material world, and iron those elements out accordingly. *WoW*'s designers made its battlegrounds something like ball fields, settings for games that occur whenever people want to play them. Which is all well and good, except for the way they chose to *represent* those games - as martial conflicts between racially defined armies.

Granted, the rhetorics of each battleground are nuanced, and their meaning often depends on whose side you're on. If you're Alliance, you're playing out standard Western imperialism when you play Alterac Valley: never mind that these Orcs were here first; you have a sovereign right to loot this land, and anyone in the way must go.³⁸ If you're a Hordie, Alterac Valley is about anti-imperialism: you're just protecting your people, who were only there to escape conscription and

³⁷ Games that simulate colonization from the colonizers' perspective are actually pretty common; the [Civilization](#) franchise and [Empire: Total War](#) are good examples.

³⁸ Fun fact: In most of the battlegrounds, the home base or starting point of the Alliance is in the north of the map, and the home base/starting point of the Horde is in the south. Yet another piece of the North/West-vs.-South/East positionality of the factions' representational design.

corruption in the first place. Conversely, in [Warsong Gulch](#), the Alliance takes the moral high ground, defending the Night Elf lands of Ashenvale from deforestation by the Horde. Oddly, the new expansion battlegrounds, Eye of the Storm, Strand of the Ancients, and Isle of Conquest, don't even *have* narrative frames, other than being territory the factions are interested in mining or holding for their war efforts. As *WoW* has evolved, as its quest and raid narratives have generally extended and deepened, its battleground narratives have simplified or disappeared altogether. Whatever their reasons for doing this, the developers have, in a way, reduced the battlegrounds to their simplest, deepest *raison* and meaning: racist war.

Yes, the faction conflict in *World of Warcraft* is a representation of racist war. It's a systemic fact of the game world, coded into the algorithms that comprise the world's rules. And players are interpolated in this racist war, even if they don't want to be. They can choose not to actively participate in it, and they can subvert it a little bit, but they can't avoid it altogether, and they certainly can't change it. The most they can do is not play.

"For the _____!"

Racist discourse is the primary vehicle for identification in the Alliance/Horde war, but nearly as important is the discourse of nationalism.

As I've said many times by now, an avatar's faction is one of the most important elements of its virtual identity. The game's procedural rhetorics make sure of that. The representational rhetorics of the game emphasize this importance; e.g., banners with the [Alliance](#) and [Horde](#) crests on them are ubiquitous, as are the slogans "For the Alliance!" and "For the Horde!" (As my first chapter showed, "For the Horde!" is popular enough to transmediate from *WoW* onto random whiteboards. Hordies generally show more *esprit de corps*, for some reason.) I can't help compare this chant to "U.S.A! U.S.A!" or some similar nationalistic slogan.

But are the Alliance and Horde really nations? Each of the ten racial groups is basically a separate state with its own ruler and its own form of government. They're all monarchies with distinct modes of ascension, and cultural features of their ruling classes are different. The [Humans](#) and [Dwarves](#), are ruled by hereditary monarchs; the [Undead](#), [Orcs](#), [Blood Elves](#) are ruled by military leaders; the [Night Elves](#), [Draenei](#), [Trolls](#) are ruled by theocrats; and the Gnomes are ruled by a democratically elected master engineer called the [High Tinker](#). The Undead, Blood Elves, Night Elves, Draenei, and Gnomes are culturally homogenous, but the Humans, Dwarves, Orcs, Trolls, and Tauren are alliances of many smaller subgroups, called [kingdoms](#), [clans](#), and [tribes](#), respectively. Like so much of *WoW*'s design, the two factions' governmental systems are pastiches of various histories, places, and mythologies; and the Alliance and Horde are more like [confederations](#) than states. Actually, they resemble the multinational alliances of the twentieth century's world wars.

The strange thing about the races' individual governments is that they exist almost entirely on the representational level and have very little to do with players' procedures, especially in the everyday game world. In the first three Warcraft games, when the player controlled the heroes and heroines that were or would become the monarchs in *WoW*, those characters' roles in the world's structures were at least part of the games' procedural rhetorics (though the procedures were just military tactics). In *WoW*, however, the monarchs are NPCs standing in throne rooms, little more than dolls. Players can occasionally go on adventures with them, or witness their dramas, but we simply can't engage with these leaders or the governments they supposedly run in any significant way. They have neither authority nor influence. To some extent, that's because of the genre; single-player games can simulate ruling a society, but MMOs are about being a citizen. More important, it's because of *WoW*'s purpose as a game. It's not a simulation of a complete society, with different players taking on different jobs, because every player has the same job: warrior/adventurer/merchant. (The degree to which each player pursues each aspect of that job is

up to him, of course.) Maybe it's unsurprising, then, that the type of group identity the game emphasizes is the faction, not the state. If you're a craftsman of war, you need to know whom to fight.

So even though the Alliance and Horde aren't neat allegories for nations, their political relationships (both within and between them) share some connotations with our modern conceptions of real nations and their relationships. The most significant of these is the conflation of nation and race.

This is as old as the two concepts themselves.

Racism and nationalism: ideological siblings

The concept of 'race' is related to the axial division of labour in the world-economy, the core-periphery antinomy. The concept of 'nation' is related to the political superstructure of this historical system, the sovereign states that form and derive from the interstate system. (Emmanuel Wallerstein, *Race, nation, class*, 79)

Wallerstein is a little classical-Marxist here on racism, for me - as I showed in Chapter 2, it's not *entirely* the product of political economy - but I think he puts the race-nation relationship well.

His collaborator does too:

[T]he connection between nationalism and racism is neither a matter of perversion (for there is no 'pure' essence of nationalism) nor a question of formal similarity, but a question of historical articulation." (Etienne Balibar, *Race, nation, class*, 50)

To understand the historical articulations that lead to *WoW*'s nationalism and racism requires a peek at two historical periods: the period in which race and nation were invented and the period in which *WoW* was created.

The EnLIGHTENment

The works of Enlightenment philosophers reveal that as they struggled with the emerging modern definition of nation, they often conflated it with the also-emerging modern definition of race. Kant, for example, argued that the "character" of a given nation was shaped by the purity of the race(s) within it; nations like England and France were respectively "insular" and "continental," but Spain, Italy, Germany, and Russia lacked national character because they were mixtures of "original" races (Hannaford 222).

As for the U.S.'s particular race-nation relationship, critical race scholars³⁹ consistently maintain that racism has been an essential part of the formation of American national identity from the beginning of European colonization onward. Balibar and Wallerstein argue that "the American 'revolutionary nation' built its original ideals on a double repression: that of the extermination of the Amerindian 'natives' and that of the difference between free 'White' men and 'Black' slaves" (qt. in San Juan, Jr., 35). Robert Jensen labels these acts genocides.

The agony of undirected agonism

I mentioned earlier that the Alliance and Horde resemble the multinational alliances of the two World Wars. In terms of *WoW*'s genre pedigree, that makes a certain metafictional sense: the [Don of fantasy](#) was a veteran of World War I, and his magnum opus's fictional conflicts have been compared to those of WWII. But in the context of the first years of the millennium, when *WoW* was made, the faction conflict represents a type of war that hasn't existed in fifty years, a clash of nations

³⁹ E.g., in addition to the ones I've already cited, Gabriel Kolko, Howard Zinn, Manning Marable, Peter Carroll, David Noble, and E. San Juan Jr.

that spanned the entire world. *World of Warcraft* doesn't portray the WWII myth's moral clarity, but it does have its clear lines. You know whose side you're on, and can tell friend from foe. That must strike a contemporary nerve.

Incidentally, I don't mean to suggest that *WoW* is an allegory for the *real* World War II, in all of its moral complexity;⁴⁰ I mean the *mythic* World War II. The WWII of *Band of Brothers*, *Saving Private Ryan*, *Call of Duty*, *Medal of Honor*. Horrific, yes, but also heroic. Unlike the proxy- and neo-imperialistic wars of the late twentieth century, it was a *good* war, a *just* war. For which we have come to feel another kind of nostalgia.

World of Warcraft's development was [announced](#) at the European Computer Trade Show on September 2, 2001. It was released on November 23, 2004, a few weeks after G.W. Bush was elected reelected. So it was developed almost entirely between 9/11 and the height of the second Iraq War. A time when our collective pain and fear were channeled into support for an invasion of a nation uninvolved with the crime. A time of great militarism and nationalism. A time when overt racism hit fifty-year highs.

I think *WoW* soaked up some of the zeitgeist. How could it not?

The sneakiest aspect of the "War on Terror" is that the Enemy is amorphous. It's not another nation; it's an ideology with adherents all over the place, many of whom are loosely connected, if not antagonistic to each other. (It is a certain race, though, which is convenient.) *WoW's* clearly defined factions are pretty far from this element of material life, and this incongruity between life and art helps explain the art. Amorphous enemies are *frustrating*. They're also bad for nationalism. Wallerstein claims that the manufacture of nationalism, the process by which it's made, requires unifying citizens against external threats:

⁴⁰ See the late great Howard Zinn on WWII in *The People's History of the United States*.

Once recognized as sovereign, the states frequently find themselves subsequently threatened by both internal disintegration and external aggression. To the extent that 'national' sentiment develops, these threats are lessened. The governments in power have an interest in promoting this sentiment, as do all sorts of subgroups within the state. Any group who sees advantage in using the state's legal powers to advance its interests against groups outside the state or in any subregion of the state has an interest in promoting nationalist sentiment as a legitimation of its claims. (Wallerstein 81-2)

In other words, nationalism is born of powerful interests' need for the people's unity, and their methods of constructing that unity by establishing common enmity. External aggression works best if it has a clear object, which had to be invented in 2001-3 but not in 1941-5. *There* is the enemy. *There* is their turf; *here* is ours. *They* look like *that*; *we* look like *this*. They even put their names in red. Does this sound familiar?

WoW has no trouble preserving its society's historical articulation of racism and nationalism because it's still preserved in the society. However, it also preserves the ideal conditions for nationalist war. It's a fantasy of war modeled on our society's most esteemed war fantasy.

Maybe *that's* why the Alliance/Horde war never ends.

CHAPTER 5: TRANSFORMATIONS?

Acts

Act 1: October 2007.

I post a short version of the ["I be a Troll, mon" conversation](#) on [Gameology.org](#), a group blog devoted to academic discussion of videogames. I don't say much about what I think about the encounter; I just ask readers what they make of it. Amongst the replies, there's this:

Personally I think it's just people having a laugh and lightening the tone by injecting some game references into a discussion that is too serious for them to feel comfortable participating in. Not to generalise, but a lot of people go into virtual environments (be they virtual worlds or mere forums) to escape the so called "real" world.

Yet another variation on "It's just a game!" It never ceases to amaze me how often this argument comes from gamers.

Act 2: November 2009.

I'm running [Trial of the Crusader](#) with Dan and Dave's guild, tagging along with the big boys so I can gear up and be less squishy in battlegrounds. We're talking over their [Ventrilo](#) channel as we play; and in some downtime, Dave asks me how the dissertation's coming along.

"What's your dissertation about?" one of his guildies asks.

I give him the sound bite version I've been practicing for my MLA interviews: "It's about how *WoW* contains most of the varieties of racism that have existed in U.S. history."

Long pause. Then, cautiously: "Huh. That's... weird."

Act 3: December 2009.

[Alterac Valley](#). Dan and I are running south at the beginning of the game, staying with the rest of the pack. We get to the Iceblood Garrison, but instead of running in to kill Galvangar with everyone else, Dan turns left, and we run up the tower next door. We cap the tower and the nearest graveyard. Our offense runs by on its way to the Horde base, but we don't follow them. We're going to take the middle and gut the Horde's reinforcements as they attack our base.

After we cap the graveyard, we run back north to re-take our side's center graveyard and the nearby towers. Here we meet a handful of defenders, mostly rogues.

God I hate rogues.

Good thing Dan's there to heal me when the first one saps me inside the tower. I stay alive while I'm stunned, spamming Disengage to jump out of the way when I can move again. It hits and I sail backwards down the stairs and drop a snake trap. Hunter's Mark on the rogue keeps him visible. He goes down fast: rogues have glass jaws. The other ones screw up and blow their cover early, and we make quick work of them. There's the tense 30 seconds where we stand by the flag inside the tower and wait for it to cap, and see if we get jumped by reinforcements. We don't.

Next it's the graveyard - the real prize. If we capture it, the Horde's offense will have to start way down south whenever they die up at our main base, which'll stretch them out and prevent them from a concerted assault on our boss. They know this, so they've left six or seven defenders here. We approach carefully from the narrow cliff-lined road to the south. A couple of hothead warriors

charge us, and we pick them off. Then everyone knows we're there, and we get rushed by the remaining four. I can see more spawning in from the graveyard.

We put up a fighting retreat, checking their pursuit with traps, letting the road funnel them. Numbers are on their side. Dan turns into tree form - instant bait - and I kill one of his attackers. A death knight gives up on Dan and runs my way. The big red arrow is over my head now - their hunters have noticed me. The Hordies and Dan play tug-of-war with my ass, my health at 100%, 20%, 75%. I'm smacking my keyboard as fast as I can think of counters - Feign Death to drop hunter pets, Frost Trap to slow down the death knight, Silencing Shot on the mages - and just as I start to yell, "Gah! I'm down!" the death knight about to kill me erupts in flames.

Reinforcements! I collect my wits and follow them back to the graveyard, and we take it in a couple minutes. Our tactic pays off - we've slowed their offense just enough so that ours can kill their boss. In five minutes, the battle's ours. Dan and I are the high scorers.

It's hard to describe the thrill of games like this. Thrills, rather. The tactics well executed, the defeat of real players rather than computers, the abrupt shift from imminent death to imminent victory (what Tolkien called a *euclastrophe*): these moments cured my boredom with *WoW*.

I love PvP.

WoW's PvP depends entirely on the faction conflict, the most racist element of the game.

What the *fuck*?

Transformations?

I've just spent a year deeply considering the links between the faction conflict and racism. Regardless of whether this work teaches anyone else about the rhetorics of racism that permeate this

game, creating it has taught *me* about them. If I'm opposed to racism, should I still play this game? Why *do* I still play this game?

I've grown accustomed to *WoW*'s face

The obvious and superficial reason is that I've made *WoW* the subject of this very dissertation, and so I need to maintain contact with it for at least referential purposes. Also, *WoW* is the subject with which I taught myself how to read games, and through that, discovered and joined the field of game studies. The living textbook, lab, field site. I owe it for giving me my profession.

Omnia vincit amor

A more significant reason is that I came to *WoW* for the world and the adventures in it, but I stayed for the people. Specifically, some of the people that I'm closest to: my wife, my brother, and my best friend. Annie played *WoW* to understand and participate in my obsession. With Dave and Dan, since we live 300 miles apart, *WoW* is the setting and occasion for most of our time with each other.

In her four-year-long ethnography of *EverQuest* players, *Play Between Worlds*, T.L. Taylor argues strenuously and convincingly that MMOs are significant parts of players' social lives, that the relationships they form and maintain there are as real and deep as any in so-called "real" life. I haven't formed any close friendships with strangers - chalk it up to shyness about meeting new people - but Dan and Dave have.⁴¹ What I have experienced is immediate interaction with people I

⁴¹ Case in point: a year or two ago, Dave befriended three Australian players while in a [PuG](#). They were already friends outside of the game, but they basically let Dave into their group. He played with them all the time, and they talked about their personal lives with one another. One of the Aussies' personal details was that his wife had late-stage cancer. On the day she died, he logged on and played *WoW* with Dave and the other guys. He didn't want to talk; he just wanted to play. And they honored his request. The kneejerk mainstream reading of this act would see it as unhealthy escapism to a fake world with fake friends. I've seen plenty of that (and done some of it myself from time to time, when the material world needed escaping.) In this case, a little escapism is warranted - how many of us would find real refuge in a world where

would otherwise only see a couple of times a year. As a result, we've stayed close - closer by far than I am with other long-distance friends and family.

I still play *WoW* because my best friend and brother are more important to me than my disapproval of the game's racism. I feel bad about that; guilt appears to be an inevitable byproduct of facing my complicity in a racist system. But still I play.

Were the ludologists right?

Personally true though they may be, my deep idiosyncratic motives don't really account for why I'm able to temporarily ignore the racism inherent in the rhetorics of the faction conflict. I'm an English major; I'm interested in and trained for reading narratives. I therefore feel much more affinity with the narratologists of the game studies field, who are mostly also English and film studies people. But in this case, I'm clearly setting *WoW*'s narratives and its other representations aside and focusing solely on the gameplay. Thus, I have to consider the possibility that the ludologists are right: gameplay is more important to videogames than representations.

Here is an iconic ludological claim by Espen Aarseth, one of the iconic ludologists:

"Any game consists of three aspects: (1) rules, (2) a material/semiotic system (a gameworld), and (3) gameplay (the events resulting from application of the rules to the gameworld). Of these three, the semiotic system is the most coincidental to the game." (47-8)

Aarseth applies his claim to the famous [Lara Croft](#), heroine/avatar/doll of the *Tomb Raider* games and the world's first digital pinup model. Lara has gotten a lot of attention, both positive and negative, from both the mainstream and academia, for the ambivalences in her character: on one

leukemia doesn't exist and spouses don't die? But I think there was something else going on here too: this guy was grieving, and he mostly needed to be around his friends in a positive place. I have a hard time seeing that act as unhealthy, or the friendship or its activities as somehow fake or weak.

hand, she's an ass-kicking treasure hunter who takes exactly zero shit from any human, beast, or god; on the other hand, she does all of her ass-kicking with impossibly long legs atop an impossibly exaggerated hourglass figure. She's supermodel Indiana Jones. As you might imagine, the narrativist critics who've analyzed *Tomb Raider* have focused on Lara's body, reading it as an example of patriarchal gender constructions and the Male Gaze. Here's what Aarseth says about her, though:

"[T]he dimensions of Lara Croft's body, already analyzed to death by film theorists, are irrelevant to me as a player, because a different-looking body would not make me play differently. When I play, I don't even see her body, but see through it and past it. (48)

From Aarseth's point of view, the representational design of a videogame is merely the skin on top of which the game's rules are running. Lara Croft's body could look like anything and do the same stuff. Therefore, it means nothing.

There are definitely times when gameplay completely overtakes representation in my mind. When I'm playing a battleground, I pay no attention to the races of the avatars I'm fighting, nor to the narrative frame of that particular place. I'm thinking mostly about my opponents' classes: priests and other healers need to die first, druids are unkillable unless I'm with others, rogues can kill me faster than anyone. I'm also thinking about tactics: capture and hold the Blood Elf Tower because it's easy to defend, get in a siege tank and demolish the enemy castle's gates, use artillery on the siege engines battering our castle. And because I'm always playing battlegrounds with my brother and friends, I'm always thinking about where my friends are and how I can assist them. That's all plenty of work - I am by no means a great PvP player, and the dozens of split-second actions it requires are more than enough to keep up with, mentally. The Alliance/Horde thing, and its rhetorical significance, go right out the window in those moments.

However, battlegrounds are temporary. When they end, I'm teleported back to the normal game world, where the demands on my brain for winning the game of the battleground are gone, and I'm back in the simulation of a society, with its contexts of racial essentialism, segregation, war. I notice and care about these things, at many if not all times. So while I find Aarseth's point valuable, I also find it too simplistic. I'm inclined to agree with Stuart Moulthrop's response to Aarseth, in fact:

Certainly one could swap Lara Croft for a digitized Rowan Atkinson without technically changing the feedback loop between player and program. It seems unlikely, though, that *Mr. Bean: Tomb Raider* would sell nearly as well to its primary audience. Lara Croft's physique may consist of raw data but it cannot be treated as such for critical purposes. While one may look past or through the avatar body during play, the significance of games as cultural forms goes beyond the player's time in the loop. (48)

Every videogame player I know cares about the representational elements of games to some degree. We're all attracted to certain settings, genres, and storylines; and the games industry gives us plenty of variety. Why play a MMO set in the Wild West when there's one in the Star Wars universe? Why play a multiplayer FPS involving survival against zombies when I can play one involving treasure hunters in a post-apocalyptic wasteland? I don't mean to suggest that all games in a given genre are the same - there are a lot of meaningful gameplay differences between games within the same genres - but the representational features of games are easily as important as the gameplay in determining how each of us feels about a given game, and whether we're even willing to play it.

I'm a fraud

Another, darker possibility for why I still play *WoW* (and enjoy it) is that I'm not as critically conscious as I think I am. Maybe I can wrap my head around the concepts and histories of these kinds of racisms, but I apparently don't *feel* it enough to change my actions.

As you might imagine, I have a self-preservation-type desire to step back from that [Sarlacc](#) of insecurity and despair. However, like so many things that are scary to look at, my tolerance of *WoW*'s racisms reveals a few truths about my place in the racisms of this system.

The privilege to escape

White privilege is the term critical race theorists use to name the systemic political, economic, and social advantages that the peoples defined as "white" have in the U.S. As Eduardo Bonilla-Silva points out in *Racism Without Racists*, white privilege is a historical legacy of European colonialism, and it manifests everywhere European colonies have been (albeit with local variations). In the U.S., white privilege is both a horizontal and vertical phenomenon: it affects everyone, and its reach extends from the mundane (surveillance in stores) to the profound (access to jobs and housing).

The worst thing about white privilege is that it's tremendously hard to get whites to admit that it's there. According to Bonilla-Silva, there are several reasons for this, but the most important is that people have a hard time abandoning systems that benefit them, especially when they don't have to see the negative effects of those systems daily. Thus, our *racial* structure - "the totality of the social relations and practices that reinforce white privilege" (9) - gets reproduced for reasons that are ultimately obvious:

"Racial structures remain in place for the same reasons that other structures do. Since actors racialized as 'white' - or as members of the dominant race - receive material benefits from the racial order, they struggle (or passively receive the

manifold wages of whiteness) to maintain their privileges. In contrast, those defined as belonging to the subordinate race or races struggle to change the status quo (or become resigned to their position). Therein lies the secret of racial structures and racial inequality the world over. They exist because they benefit members of the dominant race. (9)

I can say from personal experience that white privilege is a bitter pill indeed. Acknowledging my unearned place in an unfair hierarchy has been a tough, slow process; and I continually renew it the more I learn about the world. I have to consciously remind myself to look it in the face, both because it's ugly and because it thrives on invisibility. Often, I fail.

One reason I fail to see white privilege is that there are so many opportunities to ignore or escape it. Unfortunately, videogames like *World of Warcraft* offer a lot of those opportunities. One of the reasons videogames are attractive is that they temporarily let us escape our fraught bodies and pretend that we have other bodies in worlds that are supposedly free of the political problems of our own. It's a head-in-the-sand maneuver, because the fantasy is just as interpolated in our politics as we are.

The blindness of colorblindness

Another reason I fail, as Act 2 illustrates, is that my definition of racism is unpopular. Just as it's hard for whites to acknowledge white privilege, it's hard for us to acknowledge racism, as our discourse about race has become very good at camouflaging, averting, and downplaying the manifestations and even existence of racism. In the U.S. mainstream common sense, racism has come to mean a very specific thing - individual acts of meanness - and most people are loathe to see it any other way. Racism is something that bad people practice. Bad individual people, who don't see

past skin color to appreciate everyone's subdermal equality. Our everyday word for this is *colorblindness*; Bonilla-Silva names it *color-blind racism*.

Bonilla-Silva identifies four rhetorical frames - "set paths for interpreting information" (26) - through which color-blind racism operates. The first is *naturalization*, the idea that things are the way they are because they're supposed to be that way. This frame is easy to use in everyday life because change is slow and our memories are short; in other words, we forget (repress?) how things came to be this way, and our daily routines come to seem normal. Especially if we're comfortable with them. Videogames, and MMOs in particular, contribute to naturalization in several ways. For one thing, they reproduce narratives that vary in details but not in ideological influences. Fantasy, for instance, is the most popular videogame genre; it existed before *WoW* and will exist after it. Therefore, *WoW* is just one of many games to reify its nostalgic Eurocentrism. Another way that MMOs in particular lend to the naturalization frame is that they are static worlds - static for an understandable reason, but static nonetheless. The citizens of these worlds have very little power to change them, despite their active participation in them. Unfortunately, then, MMOs reinforce the notion that political systems are natural and unchangeable by regular people.

The second frame that Bonilla-Silva identifies in color-blind racism is *cultural racism*, the sense that a given race's intellectual/moral defects are reflected its cultural practices, with little attention to the real contexts of those practices. This is one of the more openly hostile frames, and it seems to be mainly a redirection of biological racism. Videogames reify cultural racism by resorting to culturally racist stereotypes in their representational designs. For example, *Grand Theft Auto* reinforces the stereotype that all blacks are gangsters and *Resident Evil 5* reinforces the stereotype that Africans are

uncivilized and diseased.⁴² *WoW* plays into culturally racist beliefs about Caribbeans and South Americans through its intellectually and morally degenerate Trolls.

The third frame of color-blind racism is *minimization*, which comes in two varieties: the "things aren't really so bad" argument and the "things are better than they used to be" argument. I see the minimization frame at play in one of the most frustrating things gamers often say about videogames: that they're "just games." It's the essence of the response I got in Act 1 above, which is representative of pretty much every discussion I've had about racism with other *WoW* players. Other games researchers have run across it too; Tanner Higgin, for instance, found that a suggestion of racial stereotypes in the famous "Leeroy Jenkins!" video made in an online forum earned immediate criticism and dismissal. He posits that players' acts of minimization are "illustrative of the myths of liberal freedom accompanying online sociality and MMORPGs wherein race does not and should not matter because everything is just made up of pixels." I agree - the apparent ephemerality of digital representations makes them easy to dismiss.⁴³ However, Higgin goes on to claim, "[W]hat this implies is that in the real world race is not made up but is verifiable and very real" (7), whereas I'm inclined to see minimization of a game's racism as an extension of minimization of racism elsewhere.

A related maneuver, maybe a variation of the minimization frame, is the notion that racism just goes away if you change a couple of variables. By this logic, *WoW*'s Trolls aren't racist, because they don't actually look like Caribbean blacks; they're big blue guys with tusks. Or the Humans can't represent whites because you can make their skin dark brown as well as pale. The semiotic mixtures in *WoW*'s representational designs help people make these claims. They're part of the trick. Of course, it's entirely possible that the developers don't see this as a trick, that they see it as the single

⁴² For the former claim, see David Leonard's article, "Live in your world, play in ours': Race, video games, and consuming the other." For the latter claim, see MTV Multiplayer's [interview](#) with Newsweek games editor N'Gai Croal.

⁴³ E.g., witness the mainstream press's horror at the real-world trade of game characters and money, because "It's all just ones and zeros!"

necessary key to avoiding (or transcending) racial stereotypes. At the very least, it's a sign that the developers are trying not to reproduce racism as many people define it. What they don't understand, though, is that race is comprised of more than bodies. Race is a social construction that begins with bodies but extends to all manner of practices, beliefs, rhetorics, and material conditions.

The fourth and most important frame of color-blind racism in Bonilla-Silva's rubric is *abstract liberalism*, a vaguely applied appeal to the tenets of liberal humanism, especially individualism and egalitarianism, in explanations of non-whites' continued inequality. I.e., "It's their fault because they don't work hard enough." I've come to realize that liberalism is massively important to *WoW*, and indeed most videogames - it is, perhaps, their deepest ideological influence. What has surprised me is how closely liberalism and racism are related.

We can be heroes!

I've long wondered if the biggest reason players don't see/mind *WoW*'s racism is that the allure of the game's central rhetorics was just too great. Ultimately, the main allegorithm⁴⁴ of *World of Warcraft* is the American fantasy, distilled - a combination of liberal humanism's egalitarianism and individualism, plus a friendly version of capitalism. As a *WoW* avatar, you have special abilities that make you unique, but you're no more powerful than anyone else, at least initially. You put in a certain amount of work, and for your effort and skill, you'll get power, wealth, and prestige. You'll have equal opportunity to earn this power/money/prestige because the same rewards are available

⁴⁴ *Allegorithm* is a term coined by McKenzie Wark in his Baudrillard/Debord-esque treatise on the role of videogames in contemporary life, *Gamer Theory*. It's his name for the meaning expressed by a videogame's procedural and representational gestalt. As you might guess, the term is a portmanteau of *allegory* and *algorithm*. Many games are allegorical, Wark argues, as their representational elements stand for ideas and identities in the material world. Games also contain algorithms - rules for making things happen in a certain number of steps. (In my schema, these are the game's procedural rhetorics.) The combination of representational/allegorical and procedural/algorithmic elements is an allegorithm. There are thousands of allegorithms running in a videogame, but, Wark argues, you can oftentimes see them coalescing into one big one: the game's *main* allegorithm.

to all and the virtual world produces unlimited resources. You can get rich by farming and making resources, but you have to earn your power/money/prestige yourself; there's no way to employ other people to do it for you.⁴⁵ There is always a clear correlation between effort and reward in *WoW*. The player kills 50 enemies, and his avatar levels up. The player gains honor points from playing battlegrounds and gets to buy special armor. And that power and wealth are displayed in really obvious, spectacular ways: flashy spells, ornate armor, enormous mounts, and so on.

In *WoW*, people experience what material life promises but never delivers: "*a fair fight, a level playing field, unfettered competition*" (Wark 21). It's a utopia in every sense of that word: a perfect no-place. We recognize it as such, but that dims its appeal not one whit. All role-playing games offer this allegorithm; *WoW* just executes it better than most. This is its main draw.

I used to think that *WoW*'s liberal humanist/capitalist allegorithm was one of the reasons that players ignored the game's racisms, that the appeal of the former simply outweighed the repulsiveness of the latter. I still think that's true, but it's not quite that simple. First of all, as Eduardo Bonilla-Silva notes, "modernity, liberalism, and racial exclusion were all part of the same historical movement" (27). As modernity took hold and reshaped Europe from a feudalist paradigm to a capitalist paradigm, the emerging bourgeoisie sought an ideology that would support their goals of workforce exploitation and personal accumulation of wealth. What their intellectuals developed was liberal humanism, a combination of "individualism, universalism, egalitarianism, and meliorism (the idea that people and institutions can be improved" (26). Of course, as their goals were to make money for *themselves*, they had to frame their underlings as unqualified for "Life, Liberty, and the

⁴⁵ I hasten to add that the game isn't *perfectly* egalitarian, mostly because of player cultures that have developed over the last four years. For instance, guilds often pool some money and gear so that new avatars can level up more quickly than they would if starting from scratch, giving well-connected players advantages over true noobies. Then there are the infamous "gold farmers" - outfits that employ people (often Chinese kids) to spend tedious hours farming resources to make game money, which the companies then sell to other players for real money. So the imperfections of liberalism in the material world have bled into the synthetic world.

pursuit of happiness" - specifically, as not fully human. Racialization and racism proved handy for that job, the necessary flipsides of liberal humanism's ideological coin.

WoW is the product of a more cohesive historical legacy than it first appears. Its liberal humanist rhetorics and its racist rhetorics aren't competing with each other; they're *complementing* each other. They're historically linked, even if they've separated somewhat over time. *WoW* is merely rearticulating them.

What's interesting about this rearticulation is that it's actually several rearticulations. The construction of *WoW*'s avatars upon a biological definition of race harks back to the original articulation of liberalism and biologist racism, an articulation that has mostly disappeared since the 60s. The colonialist and Orientalist connotations behind some of the avatars connect to representations of the peoples that the West enslaved, colonized, and killed during the entire modern period (which still isn't quite over). Individualism and egalitarianism, both still at the ideological core of U.S. society, have both been attached to opposing positions in race politics since the 1960s. Bonilla-Silva provides some perfect examples:

"For instance, the principle of equal opportunity, central to the agenda of the Civil Rights Movement and whose extension to people of color was vehemently opposed by most whites, is invoked by whites today to oppose affirmative-action policies because they supposedly represent the 'preferential treatment' of certain groups. This claim necessitates ignoring the fact that people of color are *severely* underrepresented in most good jobs, schools, and universities and, hence, it is an abstract utilization of the idea of 'equal opportunity.' Another example is regarding each person as an 'individual' with 'choices' and using this liberal principle as a justification for whites having the right of choosing to live in segregated neighborhoods or sending their children to segregated schools. This claim requires ignoring the multiple institutional

and state-sponsored practices behind segregation and being unconcerned about these practices' negative consequences for minorities." (28)

So with all of the links between liberalism and racism in mind, what does this mean for *WoW*? On one hand, it's a utopia, a simulation of a world system in which equal opportunity for hard-working individuals really does exist. On the other hand, it's reifying a myth that many whites believe *does* exist in the material world, and is thus potentially contributing to the perpetuation of a delusion. A delusion that continues to harm millions of people.

WoW and the crisis of modernity

Victor Villanueva likes to say in seminars that postmodernity is merely the crisis of modernity, the end of a paradigm rather than a new one. This claim has stuck with me. It occurs to me now, in a classic case of finding my thesis at the end of my draft, that it applies perfectly to *WoW*.

World of Warcraft is very much a metaphor for the ambivalence that mainstream U.S. culture feels as it questions modernity's ways of being and communicating, but has yet to shift into the next paradigm.

On one hand, there's all this postmodernism in *WoW* - both literary (fractured narratives, metafiction, intertextuality, irony, pastiche) and social (we pilot avatars in a synthetic world whose scope in the material world is international and which is owned and operated by a staggeringly successful development company, itself owned by an even bigger publicly traded corporate conglomerate). And yet so many of the game's structures and narratives are so very *modern*: bodies, organizations, language, hierarchies. Then there's its fictional setting, which is mostly *pre-modern*,

but, like everything else, exhibits crazy admixtures - cyborgs and spaceships alongside knights and castles.

I might say it's all just quaint or goofy and leave it at that. Much of it *is* quaint and goofy. But that would rob this text of its rhetorical power, which is significant.

Like all media in their childhood, the videogame mixes its parents' traits and creates a few of its own. From storytelling media, videogames inherit the capacity to represent ideas and identities that their audiences have profound intellectual and moral affinities with. From games, videogames inherit the capacity to let their audiences try out these ideas/identities - model them in action, and experience the consequences. To push the childhood metaphor further, videogames are subject to the influences of both nature and nurture as they grow; they (and their parents) exist in a world that seeps into them. To some degree, they'll have to fit into that world's ways of doing things. Hopefully they can change some of them.

Videogames are rhetorically unique in general, but massively multiplayer online games are unique amongst videogames. MMOs run in constant parallel existence to the material world - always on, always populated. *WoW's* sun rises and sets with ours. At the end of the day, it's a simulation of a social existence, a kind that's fun and competitive and gratifying in all kinds of ways that so-called "real" life can only hope to be. Fantasy is the right word for it. However, it's important that we know that this fantasy is the conscious creation of a few dozen people, employees of an entertainment industry that wants our money more than anything else. And gets a lot of it. This particular company, maybe more than any of its peers, is exceptionally good at giving its customers what they want. What they didn't even know they wanted, maybe. That's because it speaks to some of our deepest cultural values, fulfills some of the basic promises we're told that life is supposed to fulfill for us.

What could be wrong with this? For one thing, there's the danger that the fantasy will be so compelling that we'll turn away from reality. The *Matrix/Infinite Jest* scenario. I don't think that's as likely as the Luddite types would have us believe, but I do see an element of truth there vis-à-vis *WoW* specifically and the high fantasy genre in general: we need to be extremely wary of our own nostalgia. It's a sweet drug, nostalgia, but it's dangerous too. By reveling in some parts of history while ignoring others, nostalgia can turn our attention away from things that attending to. The history of racism is especially plagued by this forgetfulness and avoidance.

Another danger with modernity's fantasies, and with videogames that reify them, is that modernity's ideals - life/liberty/happiness, equal opportunity, individualism - are as elusive as they are lofty. They have always eluded us. They've also *excluded* a lot of people; or rather, a lot of people have been kept from pursuing them. Or, worse, these people have been not just excluded from the fruits of modernity but *victimized* by it - exploited, enslaved, and murdered by modernity's inventors and the political systems they created. And they continue to be.

Of course, the positive evolution of this system has to involve a lot of effort on a lot of fronts, but artistic fronts are usually ahead of the curve. Videogames are some of our society's most popular art forms, and their most unique feature is that they can teach as well as reify. If they can be made to simulate world systems that transcend modernity's dark sides, they should.

There are some signs that the videogame industry is moving in the right directions. BioWare's games, for instance, are continually pushing the boundaries of role-play in complex branching narratives. Even *WoW* lets you change your avatar's race now (for a fee, of course). But they can evolve faster and further. How can videogames evolve progressively? Or better yet, what can we do to make them?

It would be hypocritical and unrealistic of me to say that white gamers should stop playing *WoW* or other games with racist rhetorics. (Well, *some* of them we should definitely avoid.) What

should we do, then? We need to start by admitting what's in front of us. We need to own up to history, see it from the long view, admit that its effects are longer-term than the media and our politicians would have us believe. We need to acknowledge that racism not only still exists but that it's more pervasive than we've been admitting. We need to recognize the representations and procedures of racism and white privilege, both historical and current. And we need to admit that we are implicated in these systems, even if we didn't choose to be. We benefit by them, and the world's rich, whom the status quo is really serving, benefit even more than most of us do.

Gamers of all races (actually, of all types of identity positions) need to demand new narratives. We need to become open to the texts of the people that our system has marginalized - not in an appropriative way, but in a way that respects their cultures and honestly considers what our history has done to them. These can be serious games, but they can also be fun ones with well-written algorithms. We should tell developers, "Don't give us the same old world, give us new ones." We owe that to our beloved new medium, to the earnest, talented people that make it, and to the people that suffered for our abilities to enjoy it.

There are lots of ways to do this, because videogames are one of the most popular parts of a national movement towards direct interaction between authors and audiences at a level not experienced with other mass media.⁴⁶ There's fan fiction (in text and comic forms), a longtime staple of geek culture, and a documented method of dialogue between fans and authors. There's machinima, a fascinating, evolving art form in its own right, which makes games into movie sets and uses them to comment on themselves. There are mods, which players make to shape the game into

⁴⁶ It's an international movement, really. I've deliberately stayed away from discussing the meanings that players outside the U.S. might make of *WoW*, and that's been intentional. That's because 1) *WoW* is a U.S.-made text, and 2) I can't claim any knowledge about how this text translates outside of the U.S. (I hope to remedy that someday, but I need to graduate and get a job first.) I *do* know, however, that *WoW* is very popular internationally; in fact, more of its players are outside the U.S. than inside. The rest of the world may hate our foreign policy, but it tends to like our pop culture. Therefore, it's worth closely considering the ideologies conveyed by the texts and artifacts we're exporting. They have a good chance of meeting a receptive audience, after all.

the one they want, both in terms of making gameplay more efficient and in terms of telling new stories. Dialogue between players and developers is often direct as well as symbolic; despite their hyperbolic tendencies, the players that participate in forums and beta tests always have developers' ears. Then there's good old f2f, which we get at conventions like [PAX](#).

Better yet, gamers: join the games industry and start changing it from the inside.

In the meantime, go play with the friendly Orcs.

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