World of Race War: 
Race and Learning in World of Warcraft

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ABSTRACT

Stereotypical portrayals of race are common in many modern video games. However, research on games and game environments has often overlooked race as an important consideration when evaluating games for their educational potential. This is particularly true of the educational literature on online games, which has tended to emphasize virtual game spaces as intrinsically exemplary learning environments while deemphasizing the narrative content of the games themselves. This article addresses this oversight. Through a close reading of game communications and fan-created content, the authors examined how developer-produced racial narratives influence players’ experience of the game world. The authors find that players and player communities reproduce and reinforce narrow developer-produced interpretations of race during in-game interactions as well as in player forums and virtual communities beyond the confines of the game world. Because the game environment is not conducive to players’ critical examination of race, the authors conclude that the game does not intrinsically provide a means for players to engage critically with game content. They further conclude that as educational environments these games must be situated and contextualized within the ideologies and discourses of the physical world.

Keywords: Communications, Game Narratives, Gameplay, Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs), Multiuser Virtual Environments, Race, Racial Narratives, Racialized Discourse, World of Warcraft (WoW)

The orc race originated on the planet Draenor. A peaceful people with shamanic beliefs, they were enslaved by the Burning Legion and forced into war with the humans of Azeroth. Although it took many years, the orcs finally escaped the demons’ corruption and won their freedom. To this day they fight for honor in an alien world that hates and reviles them. - Game text from World of Warcraft

Orcs: Disgusting savages. They fell for the Legion’s lies and nearly destroyed us with the power that they were given. A perfect example of why we must never tolerate corruption or heresy in any of the people we meet. Each one could potentially spell doom for us if left unchecked. - A player’s post in an online forum (Illanu, 2010)

Race is a central component of the massively multi-player online role playing game (MMORPG) World of Warcraft (WoW). The races of WoW, however, are not those of the
physical world. Rather, they are elves, dwarves, orcs, and other inhabitants of the medieval fantasy realm in which the game is played. Players must choose one of these races for their in-game character—a choice that defines the professional roles, fighting styles and other attributes that a player needs to survive and advance in the game. But race is not only important to the mechanics of game-play; race also defines relationships between characters and among races. The world is divided between two racially-based factions, the Alliance, which is made up of humans, elves, and dwarves, among other races, and the Horde, which is made up primarily of orcs, trolls, and zombie-like undead. These factions are exclusive racial domains; one cannot be an Alliance-aligned orc any more than a human can join the Horde. Not only are the factions exclusive, but they are at war, and if a member of a race steps into the territory of an opposing faction, they invite attack based on their race. To put it simply, World of Warcraft is a game of race war.

As educational researchers, we are interested in how players identify with these virtual races and perceive racial conflicts within the game and then how these understandings are then transferred to and interact with broader social discourses on racial identity. In particular, we examined how WoW acts as an educational platform where, through the performance of racial conflict, players engage with, discuss, and problematize their own racial identity and deepen their critical understanding of race. However, through a close reading of the game, interactions with other players inside WoW, and examination of player produced fan content in online forums and venues, we were persuaded that WoW is not an environment that either encourages critical engagement with race or encourages players to explore racial identity. Rather, we came to the conclusion that the game stifles a critical examination of race. The mechanics, role-playing, and other game attributes in WoW depend on essentialized notions of race where character behavior and actions are circumscribed and defined by particular racial attributes—properties of the game that hinder players’ active exploration of racial identity. Moreover, these racial components of the game sever ties between players’ physical and game world racial identities, limiting the players’ sense of responsibility or criticality in their approach to in-game racial behaviors and actions. Based on these conclusions, we argue more broadly that WoW does not provide an intrinsic means for players to learn higher-order interpretive or critical reasoning skills, but may, in fact, limit the acquisition of those skills.

**RACE IN DIGITAL GAMES AND THE MMORPG AS A LEARNING SPACE**

There has been growing critical and scholarly attention to the function that race plays in digital and online games (DeVane & Squire, 2008; Everett, 2005; Kang 2000; Leonard, 2006; Nakamura, 2008, 2009; Williams, Martins, Consalvo, & Ivory, 2009). These studies have a rich fodder—digital games often contain stereotypical representations of racial and ethnic groups (Brock, 2011; Monson, 2012). Fight games, such as Street Fighter, war games like Call of Duty, and urban fantasy games like Grand Theft Auto, have characters, storylines, and actions based on stereotypical characterizations of African American, Hispanic, and Asian cultures and peoples. Scholars concerned with critical media studies have situated these game characterizations into broader social discourses on race in the United States. Everett, Nakamura, and Leonard, for example, have argued that game narratives and racial representations in a host of different games, from historical simulations to fight games, reproduce essentialized and negative notions of non-white races and ethnicities—representations that serve as “the other” to sympathetic representations of white culture and people. These negative portrayals of non-white races are carried beyond the game spaces themselves into broader gamer communities. Nakamura and Everett have both discussed how online forums and other venues provide for racially charged expression based on their experiences in games. Everett, for example,
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