

The Virtual Geography of Racial Segregation: Exploring Racialization, Stereotypes, and Tropes in *World of Warcraft*

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Abstract

This study examines racialization processes in *World of Warcraft* (WoW), a popular massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG). We examine the playable characters, their places of origin and residence, and backstories to answer questions about the process of racialization in virtual environments. WoW sorts characters into “races,” including humans, orcs, and elves, and, though human characters are almost exclusively white, many of the other “races” present in the game convey stereotypical racial tropes represented through the physical characteristics of characters, their abilities and storylines, and their virtual communities. For example, Goblins described as “covetous schemers,” having previously experienced slavery, and represented as long-nosed “masters of mercantilism;” Pandarens, panda warriors skilled in acupuncture, who convey the Orientalist tropes of mystery, self-segregation, and obedience to an Emperor; and Trolls, a cruel and hate-filled race of island people, led by a witchdoctor, whose special abilities include “Da Voodoo Shuffle.” We discuss characters such as these within the longer legacies of the presumed normality and neutrality of whiteness and stereotypical representations of Jews, Asians, Black people, and other groups, respectively, and argue that these representations reflect and reproduce the racial stratification and dominant racial ideologies of United States society. We conclude with a call for further research into the processes of content creation and character development in the video game and other creative industries.

Keywords: Gaming, Geography, Racial segregation, Racism, Stereotypes, Virtual environments

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Introduction

Video games have long been a site of contentious debate. The prevalence of graphic violence, broad appeal to and frequent use by young people, and considerations of how, in contrast to the more “passive” experience of watching film or television, video games might have a stronger causal association with violent behaviors has been a subject of concern to researchers, politicians, and the public for decades. And, although the American Psychological Association cautions against presumed linkages between violent video games and violent behaviors (APA 2020), media researchers have also identified more subtle ways users of media content might be

influenced by imagery, such as inflated fears of violence and fears of others perceived as different (Gerbner, et al. 1980). Rather than focus on the somewhat dubious assumption that violent entertainment might cause violent behaviors, other media scholars emphasize how racial and gender imagery in content might reflect and reproduce systemic inequality, reinforce stereotypes, inform voting behaviors, and have a variety of deleterious effects on mental health, self-esteem, and related social problems (Collins 2000; Gilens 1999; Hall, et al. 2013; see also Miller and Summers 2007 for discussion).

The changing nature of “race relations” in the United States has long been of interest to social

scientists and others. Bonilla-Silva famously distinguished between racial ideologies prior to and after the Civil Rights Era, noting, “Whereas Jim Crow racism explained blacks’ social standing as the result of their biological and moral inferiority, color-blind racism avoids such facile arguments. Instead, whites rationalize minorities’ contemporary status as the product of market dynamics, naturally occurring phenomena, and Blacks’ imputed cultural limitations” (2014:2). According to Bonilla-Silva, as the structural mechanisms reproducing racial stratification evolved over time, color-blind racism, the “new racism,” became a “dominant racial ideology” as more subtle and implicit forms of racist practices came to accompany institutional and systemic forms of racism (2014:3). As the contours of race, racism, and “race relations” shift over time, these issues, and their relations to media imagery, have become increasingly “contentious” as examinations of mass media and popular culture content find both challenges to stereotypical representations and the reproduction of racialized ideologies (Smith and Thakore 2016).

Recent studies of racial imagery in popular culture gesture towards issues of the quality, quantity, and diversity of racial representations, often identifying subtle stereotypical images accompanying seemingly anti-racist messaging. Hughey introduces the notion of “cinematic racism” to describe how contemporary “anti-racist” films might include a sizable group of “empowered” performers of color while also trafficking in imagery perpetuating historically marginalized groups as “Other” (2009:552). Scholars identify tokenization, contradictory themes of social distance, and lingering old-fashioned stereotypes in a variety of mediums (Entman and Rojecki 2000; Smith and Thakore 2016; Yuen 2016) and even seemingly “progressive” content can subtly reinforce color-blind racism, structural racism, and white supremacy (Lewis and Jhally 2007; Lipsitz 2011; Bonilla-Silva and Ashe 2014). In light of this, we follow other scholars arguing that both newer and older forms of racism remain in popular media and the real world (Doane 2014).

In this article, we examine the racial imagery in World of Warcraft (WoW), a popular Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG) created by Blizzard Entertainment, Inc. in Irvine, California. We draw upon previous research in this area, contribute our own analysis of recent changes to the game, and locate our findings within the longer histories of racial imagery in the United States. Though most of the playable and nonplayable characters in WoW are not humans in the literal sense, we follow other scholars who identify racial stereotypes among nonhuman characters in popular media, such the crows in Disney’s Dumbo who “depict

stereotypically negative characteristics often associated with racist depictions African Americans, such as being poor, unintelligent, and naïve” (Towbin, et al. 2004:32). Thus, as we discuss below, many of WoW’s mythical creatures and anthropomorphic animals, such as goblins and trolls, utilize stereotypical racist imagery ascribed to “real life” marginalized human groups in its development of nonhuman characters, their appearances and traits, and their spaces. After outlining the relevant research literatures and describing our research methodology, we present our findings, and conclude with a discussion of how researchers and content creators might move forwards.

Theoretical and Empirical Background

Race and Racism in Popular Culture

Popular entertainment in the United States has been rife with racial stereotypes since its infancy. Since viewers are likely familiar with stereotypical imagery, some media scholars argue that stereotypes remain common in popular culture as a “shortcut” to character development. Stereotypes signal information about a character’s morals and intentions to audiences, who then evaluate them based on their own knowledge and perspectives (Wilson, et al. 2003:65). Richard Butsch (2014) argues that time and dramatic constraints, the privileged social positions of many writers, and audience expectations, contribute to the repeated use of stereotypical tropes in popular media. The overrepresentation of white people in all aspects of the media production process also contributes to the comparatively limited representation of people of color in popular mediums (Yuen 2017). Though the quantity, quality, and diversity of racial representations has evolved over time, people of color remain underrepresented and frequently stereotyped in many areas of popular culture today.

Race scholars generally understand racial categories and meanings to be a product of social and political forces and, thus, subject to change over time (Omi and Winant 1994). Mass media, then, becomes site and subject for the reproduction and reinforcement of racial meanings while also offering potential avenues for resistance. As race and racial meanings evolve in society, media representations of race shift in kind. Historical accounts of the emergence of race often point to the era of European exploration and colonialism as a pivotal moment in this history.

Informed by religious beliefs, including those associating darkness with evil, as well as hegemonic understandings of white civilization, European explorers and colonists declared the peoples of Africa, India, and the land that came to be called the Americas “primitive” or “savage” due to their complexions, cultures, style of dress, and religious beliefs (Gossett 1963/1997; Jordan 197). The legacy of centuries-old stereotypes of people of color as primitive, inferior to whites, and less than human has lingering effects on the attitudes of whites (Plous and Williams 1995).

In *Racism, Sexism, and the Media: The Rise of Class Communication in Multicultural America*, Wilson, Gutiérrez, and Chao (2003) connect longstanding racial stereotypes in U.S. society to the history of racial imagery in popular culture. The ascription of savagery, primitivism, and inferiority upon Black and Native Americans and stereotypical notions of Asians as devious, violent, and deceitful were widespread as whites encountered difference. Racial stereotypes were a feature of popular entertainment in the United States beginning with its emergence. Westerns and minstrel shows were among the most popular American forms of entertainment through the 1800s and many of their tropes were imported into film and television as these mediums emerged. Many pioneering films in the history of U.S. cinema solidified stereotypical images of African, Asian, and Indigenous Americans in popular culture and the minds of whites (Wilson, Gutiérrez, and Chao 2003:72-6). Though racial imagery in popular American media shifted over time, contradictory representations of minority deviance, poverty, and success reflect and reproduce social distance between whites and people of color while supporting white beliefs about proclivities towards violence, laziness, and sexual immorality among members of minority groups (Entman and Rojecki 2000). Political scientist Martin Gilens (1999) finds that the overrepresentation of Black people in media coverage of issues like poverty and unemployment contributes to the social construction of an “undeserving” Black poor and informs whites’ opposition to welfare policies. Bonilla-Silva (2014) argues that color-blind racism came to be the dominant racial ideology among whites in the United States following the civil-rights era and researchers have sketched the contours of colorblind ideology in contemporary popular culture (Neilson and Turner 2014). However, racially diverse media representations, including images of extremely successful people of color, may erroneously inform whites that

racism is a thing of the past and, therefore, political remedies for persistent racial stratification and oppression are unnecessary (Bonilla-Silva and Ashe 2014; Lewis and Jhally 2007). Media content praised by audiences and critics for its realism and attention to issues of poverty and police brutality, such as HBO’s *The Wire*, has also been panned by race scholars for its erasure of the role of white elites and institutional racism behind these problems (Lipsitz 2011).

Interracial friendship and cooperation have long been thought to be a remedy for racial prejudices and discrimination (Allport 1954). But interracial friendships appearing as a trope in popular U.S. media often comes at the expense of racialized others. Brian Locke (2009) introduces the concept “Orientalist buddy film” to describe a theme of whites and Blacks overcoming differences to unite against Asian enemies in U.S. films since the 1940s. Vera and Gordon (2003) argue that racially diverse films continue to valorize “white saviors” and perpetuate white privilege and superiority. Sociologist Matthew Hughey (2009) finds themes of interracial cooperation and empowerment alongside antiblack stereotypes of economic extremity, folk wisdom, primordial magic, and spirituality in many popular films. Thus, as noted by Ashley “Woody” Doane, “colorblind diversity” in popular culture and society prohibits “meaningful challenge[s] to the racial status quo” (19). Examining the “racial grammar of everyday life in contemporary America,” Bonilla-Silva (2012) argues that storylines in popular culture continue to reinforce racial boundaries, fictionalize race relations, and, thus, support the status quo of racial inequality in society.

Race and Racism in Virtual Realms

Although it is a comparatively newer medium compared to film, television, and literature, representations of race and gender in video games has not escaped the view of media scholars and other researchers. Conducting a “virtual census” of the 150 most popular games of 2005-2006, Dimitri Williams and his colleagues (2009) find an overrepresentation of white male characters. Video games tend to privilege hegemonic forms of white masculinity (Miller and Summers 2007) and research finds both “new” and “old” iterations of racism prevalent in video games and virtual worlds (see Daniels 2012 for review). Though video game players can distinguish between “real world dangers” and

those presented in fantasy contexts (Williams 2009), an analysis of survey data on college-age gamers' views of racial minorities finds an association between whites' hours spent gaming and unfavorable views of Black people, even after controlling for game genre (i.e. action or sports games) (Behm-Morawitz and Ta 2014). Though David Leonard notes that "the persistence of representational color lines...highlights the ways that gaming can be very disempowering for communities of color" (2020:114), he also argues that video games, such as those in which characters of color challenge stereotypes and battle white supremacists or corrupt political and corporate elites, can provide "oppositional and alterative narratives" to dominant white supremacy which, in turn, produces "spaces of resistance" (115).

As one of the most popular MMORPGs in the world, Blizzard Entertainment's World of Warcraft attracted the attention of researchers in the humanities and social sciences (Corneliussen and Rettberg 2008; Bainbridge 2010; Nardi 2010; Chen 2011). There has been some debate over the racial imagery in WoW among scholars and other observers. The game's factions, the Alliance and Horde, are easily read as simplistic good/evil, civilized/savage, white/other dichotomies. However, others highlight how Blizzard seems uniquely attentive to representing cultural diversity. A more critical view identifies how the cultural or ethnic traits of various WoW races borrow from a hodgepodge of cultural traditions from real minority groups, including Black and Native Americans (see Poor 2012 for discussion). Langer (2008) problematizes the game's treatment of (post)colonial themes, while Monson (2012) identifies essentialist constructions of race which draw upon real-world stereotypes. Ritsema and Thakore (2012) examine the "sincere fictions" of whiteness contained in games like *Lord of the Rings* or *World of Warcraft*. An issue here is the game's treatment of in-game "races," such as trolls, orcs, and elves, having innate, exclusive, and biologically determined skills, traits, and appearances, which ultimately serve to reinforce and naturalize white, Western hegemony and to create and maintain a "social hierarchy based on physical differentiation" (Monson 2012:57).

We extend Monson's (2012) findings by examining a greater number of WoW races, including some released after her analysis, and identifying WoW as an example of what Hughey (2009) dubbed, "cinethetic racism." "Cinethetic racism" is a "synthesis of overt manifestations of

racial cooperation and egalitarianism with latent expressions of white normativity and [racist] stereotypes" (Hughey 2009:543). We locate WoW's racial imagery within the broader historical context of racial stereotypes in the United States and further extend Monson's analysis arguing WoW's racial essentialist imagery not only naturalizes difference but reflects and reproduces ideas regarding "group cultural deficiencies" (Bonilla-Silva 2014; Doane 2014).

Methods

World of Warcraft is a popular MMORPG, initially introduced in 2004. By 2007, 8.5 million gamers in North America, Europe, Asia, and Australia subscribed to the game (Corneliussen and Rettberg 2008) and WoW listed 12 million active subscribers at its peak of popularity in 2010. Though its subscriptions have dwindled in the face of stiff competition from other games and games on other platforms, such as consoles and mobile devices, Blizzard Entertainment, the game's creator, continues to produce expansion packs and reported selling 3.3 million copies of a new expansion in 2014.

Players begin tasked to build a new playable character (often called a "toon") by first choosing between the Alliance and Horde, two opposing factions. They then select a "race" from a list that includes humans, trolls, orcs, goblins, taurens, nightborne, blood elves, night elves, vulpera, undead, mechnagones, dwarfs, gnomes, draenai, worgen, and pandarans who come from distinct lands and are assigned to these factions. Players give their toons skills and other traits, called "classes," that shape how they will play the game in individual and group settings (such as a mage, paladin, shaman, hunter, warlock, or rogue). A variety of players' guides available online detail the advantages and disadvantages of various racial and class configurations. As noted on one such guide, "The race you choose for your character determines their looks, voice, starting location, classes available, some racial traits, and the faction he or she will belong to." Some combinations of race and class are not available to players while other combinations are more popular among players than others. This is supported by the unique characteristics and abilities of the game's various races, called "racial traits" or simply "racials." Racial traits include fighting and healing abilities, and unique skills in areas like cooking or blacksmithing, which are used to produce needed in-game goods.

In this article, we present findings from our examination of the playable races in World of

Warcraft. We draw upon profiles presented on Blizzard's official website (worldofwarcraft.com), information detailed on fansites (such as wowpedia.fandom.com and wowhead.com), and our own virtual ethnographic data. The second author has been conducting field observations in-game for over 10 years, documenting his own experiences playing WoW and recording other players' interactions. The first author served as a research assistant to this larger project for one academic year and immediately took note of the similarities between the characteristics of WoW races and real-world histories and stereotypes. He was struck by the resemblance of the "Goblin Slums" in the Horde's central city of Orgrimmar to those that housed turn of the century immigrants in cities like New York and Chicago and trolls' speaking in exaggerated Jamaican accents and performance of "Da Voodoo Shuffle," among other observations. Racial epithets used by players and online discussions of "Asian gold farmers" (professional players who aggressively collect in-game materials to exchange for real money) were also observed with great interest during the first author's introduction to WoW (see also Ortiz 2019; Nakamura 2009).

Results

Humans

Humans are among the most popular playable races chosen by WoW players. WoW's webpage for the human race begins with a depiction of an armed and armored white man wearing a black ponytail, mustache, and soul patch beard. Humans are described as "adaptable," diplomatic, and well-trusted by members of the other Azeroth races. Their home, called Stormwind City is a bright metropolis surrounded by sprawling mountains and lush forest. Upon entering the city, players are met by a nonplayable character who offers the greeting, "Light bless you." Next to a picture of a team of masked humans on horseback, a blurb about Stormwind City reads, "No city better demonstrates human determination than Stormwind...the city truly represents the courageous heart of humanity." The only other visible character on the page is a white woman with red hair beside a tall, armored horse. Light, purity, and courage are defining features of Stormwind's (almost exclusively white) human culture.

Although players are afforded some customizability in designing the appearance of their characters, WoW did not introduce an option to play a human of color until over ten years following the game's release, mirroring the relative lack of

representations of people of color in many mediums. This change finally happened in the most recent expansion of 2020. Players can now not only customize their character's hair, decorations, equipment, and facial features, but can also switch genders and change their skin color from dark brown to white. Non-human races can change skin color tones from blues to greens. Higgin (2009) notes that the most prominent image of blackness in WoW up until 2009 was the viral "Leeroy Jenkins" video, in which a white player's, the video's namesake, buffoonish performance recalls the "Zip Coon" caricature of the minstrel show era. Following an ill-conceived attempt to battle a large group of monsters alone and the ridicule of his teammates, the real person behind the character is heard to remark, "At least I have chicken" (Higgin 2009:6). This viral video is of particular note as, up until this time, "Leeroy [was] one of the only significant representations of blackness in World of Warcraft and...his character depends on Black stereotypes" (Higgin 2009:8).

Blizzard introduced the option for players to select a human character with a darker complexion in a subsequent expansion of the game, but players electing to play a Black character are uncommon. As a WoW player told an NPR interviewer in 2014, "There are also reflections of real-world attitudes that you can see in the game, like the lack of darker-skinned human characters...There are a wide range of skin tones available in character creation, but you always tend to see the lighter shades in-game" (quoted in Demby 2014). The second author of the present article lists a Black human warrior character among his many toons. As he began playing this character, following the 2020 expansion, he observed another player approach him while he was fishing, point directly at him and then depart, an interaction he had not previously observed in over 10 years in the game. The character was designed with a bare chest, facial hair and bald head revealing his skin color as dark brown, not concealed by armor. As Higgin argues, the relative lack of representations of Black people in WoW, "reinforc[es] the idea that Blacks simply do not belong in this space" (2009:10). Dietrich (2013), examining over 60 MMORPGs finds that very few offer the option of playing a nonwhite character and argues this reinforces "normative whiteness" and produces a "virtual white habitus." In-line with much of the fantasy genre across mediums, WoW uses mythical creatures to stand-in as racialized Others in the absence of people of color (Higgin 2009; Poor 2012). We examine these racialized Others in the following sections.

Goblins

WoW's webpage for the goblin race displays a green-skinned character with a prominent hooked-nose appearing before a sprawling, industrial city. Immediately beside the character reads the heading "Covetous Schemers," which begins the entry on the goblin race's history and traits. The long hooked-nose and associations with monetary greed are among the most common and immediately identifiable antisemitic stereotypes. A line from the history of the goblin race reads, "The goblins'...craftiness and greed soon lifted the race to preeminence as masters of mercantilism," and makes several additional mentions of "swindling" others for profit. Half of the "racial traits" listed on this profile page pertain to money: unlike other WoW races, goblins can access their vault of in-game currency and other possessions; they receive discounts in some monetary transactions because "wheeling and dealing is second nature to goblins," and because "time is money," they have increased attack speeds.

The paragraph description of the goblins' city, called Bilgewater Harbor, notes, "Bilgewater Harbor sprang up in record time after...and its' quintessentially goblin construction has fostered an atmosphere of debauchery and disorder...the harbor's value as a strategic front conflict with some pushy goblins' desire to turn it into a new version of their ancestral home (abounding with gambling dens, pleasure houses and other commercial luxuries)." Combined with other Jewish stereotypes, the suggestion that the goblins would take over and corrupt the harbor recalls "Replacement Theory" – the antisemitic conspiracy theory positing that, "the white race is doomed to extinction by an alleged "rising tide of color purportedly controlled and manipulated by Jews" (ADL 2017).

Though WoW does not explicitly identify its goblin race as Jews, Blizzard draws upon both "benign" and "malevolent" antisemitic stereotypes in the construction of these characters, stereotypes often ascribed onto real Jewish people (Wilson 1996). Scholars of anti-Semitism have long identified concurrent greed and dishonesty among stereotypes of Jewish people (Adorno 1950/2019). WoW's characterization of the goblin race thus reflects and reproduces longstanding Jewish stereotypes. These stereotypes continue to designate Jews as an Other, which likely plays some part in the continued prevalence of antisemitic hate crimes in the United States and elsewhere (ADL 2020).

Pandarens

Pandarens are another more recent addition to the playable races in WoW. Pandarens are humanoid panda bears, often depicted wearing red clothing,

straw hats, and stereotypical Chinese facial hair styles. They practice the "Art of Acupressure," are martial arts experts, and have a particular fondness for food, often prepared in woks, and drink, including alcohol and tea. The pandarens' home, called Pandaria, features buildings with tiled, overhanging roofs, recalling traditional Chinese architecture. Many of the key figures in the pandarens' realm have vaguely "Chinese sounding" names, like Liu Lang and Shen-zin Su, a giant turtle on which a colony of pandarens lives. Pandaren lore includes a bloody revolution, nomadic travel, and mysticism.

In addition to the numerous references to food, alcohol, and martial arts on the official web page for pandarens, much the language used to describe them emphasizes mystery, secrecy, and ancient traditions. WoW calls them "enigmatic" and notes, "history of the pandaren people stretches back thousands of years, well before the empires of man and before even the sundering of the world." Pandaren history states, "Honorable and filled with a love of good company, good food—and every now and then, a good friendly brawl—the pandaren have been content to live in seclusion, allowing their culture to flourish and thrive away from the influence of the outside world." Their "ancient" land is obscured by a mist and pandarens are poised to bring either "salvation" or "total annihilation" to the rest of Azeroth.

Interestingly, pandarens are the only WoW race that can be played in either the Alliance or Horde factions. After beginning on Shen-zin Su, the giant turtle, a player having selected a pandaren character must advance at least to level 10 prior to choosing a faction. Some players' guides describe pandarens as the games only "neutral race," yet it is noteworthy that the only race able to choose sides in the game is one that recalls Chinese imagery. As John D. Foster notes, "Hollywood has traditionally depicted Asians and Asian Americans as interchangeable and malleable, capable of turning from good to evil in an instant" (2016:199). Presumed secrecy, self-segregation, and disloyalty are also aspects of the "forever foreigner" (Tuan 1998) and "perpetual foreigner" (Wu 2002) stereotypes long imposed upon Asian immigrants to the United States.

Trolls

WoW's description of Trolls begins, "The savage trolls of Azeroth are infamous for their cruelty, dark mysticism, and seething hatred for all other races." They are a "proud tribe," led by a "warchief," whose history includes having been betrayed by a witch doctor who turned them into slaves. Trolls split into several tribes with one living on an island called Darkspear. They are skilled hunters, tend to be tall and

lanky with boar-like tusks and wild hair and are often adorned with human skulls. Trolls are able to regenerate lost or damaged limbs and can manipulate this ability at will. In addition to regeneration, their “racials” include an increased attack speed, called “berserking,” and “Da Voodoo Shuffle,” a defense against attacks that slow their movements. Trolls speak with an unmistakable and stereotypical Jamaican accent (“How you doin, mon? Be seein’ ya”).

Though some players’ guides argue that WoW trolls are more intelligent than trolls in other fantasy content, here they are mystical, hate-filled, primitive, and savage. Their official profile, on WoW’s website, makes frequent mentions of these characteristics. One troll tribe lives on an island inhabited by raptors and tigers and are tormented by a mystical sea witch. Trolls can tame and ride raptors as, “the tribe considers a raptor to be the purest embodiment of the hunter’s essence, and as such, a tamed reptilian is prized as a mount. Skilled Darkspear riders have even been known to channel their raptors’ savagery to suit their will.”

It is noteworthy that in a game in which teams of players unite against enormous demons and dragons, it is the race of characters most likely to be read as Black who are identified as particularly “savage.” Stereotypical representations of Black people, particularly Black men, as violent and criminally deviant are a mainstay in US mass media, with the 1915 film, *The Birth of a Nation* often identified a significant early case (Wilson, Gutiérrez, and Chao 2003; Collins 2005). U.S. mass media also tends to associate voodoo with violence, mysticism, and “bizarre” beliefs and behaviors which contributes to stereotypes about racial “otherness” (Bartkowski 1998). Examining WoW trolls specifically, Langer (2008) notes that voodoo, or Voudoun, which is a distinct set of religious practices in Haiti, is routinely mocked and disparaged in U.S. mass media.

Taurens

Taurens are a race of bovine humanoids. WoW’s webpage for the tauren race begins with a picture of a horned, bull-like character wearing two long braids, a breastplate made of bones, and leather jewelry adorned with turquoise stones. The text beside the character begins with “honorable conservationists,” and describes the race as “peaceful,” nomadic hunters, “striving to preserve the balance of nature at the behest of their goddess, the Earth Mother.” Taurens had been led by a chieftain named, Cairne Bloodhoof and their home city, called, Thunder Bluff, includes canoes, teepees, and totem poles. Official and unofficial materials on taurens emphasize hunting, shamanism,

stoicism, peace and honor, and nature-worship. Tauren racials include bonus attacks, because they are “able-bodied warriors,” skills in herbalism, resistance to Nature magic, and a stunning maneuver called the “War Stomp.”

A WoW fan page notes that tauren culture is “based on a conglomeration of Native American tribes from the Southwest, Northwest, and most notably [sic] The Great Plains regions of the United States and Canada.” Taurens are “noble race” whose culture includes feathered headdresses, smoke signals, peace pipes, speaking sticks, and beaded jewelry. They are organized into tribes, respect “elders,” and share mythology-based oral histories. Taurens also have elaborate religious beliefs and practices, with ceremonies, funeral pyres, and feasts celebrating the change of seasons. Members of the tauren race often have stereotypically Native names and their homeland’s soundtrack includes pipes and drums. As Langer argues, “these factors combine to make an environment that is stereotypically, but not authentically, Native” (2008:97).

Media representations of indigenous peoples are rare and tend to rely upon stereotypes relating to savagery, spirituality, and nobility (Russell-Brown 2009:8). Fictional accounts of white encounters with Native Americans in US literature of the 1800s presented battles of white “civilization” against savagery, with many tales of Native peoples viciously attacking innocent whites (Wilson, et al. 2003:66-7). “Noble savage” imagery continues in the popular media of today, with controversy surrounding Adam Sandler’s film, *The Ridiculous Six*, a particularly noteworthy example. Native American actors and actresses walked off the set of the film due to its ridicule of Native culture and the emotional trauma this imagery caused the performers (see Yuen 2017:74-5 for discussion). Discussing “Noble Savage” imagery in popular culture, Hughey notes, “Public discourses concerning the inherent and primordial nobility of dark-skinned savages served as both a reflection of and a rationale for, the burgeoning ideas of renaissance humanism, classic liberalism, and the romantic philosophy of sovereign individualism. As the growing colonial contact and imperialism, of Europeans and Euro-Americans extended in breadth and depth, violently over-simplified (mis)understandings of dark-skinned cultures were structured by the assumptions of romanticism” (2009:564). Examining the use of Native American imagery in professional sports, King argues that these images, “have pressing significance because of how they encourage anti-Indian racism, reinforce white privilege, and perpetuate distorted understandings of people and the past” (2016:9).

Discussion and Conclusion

In this article, we presented findings from an examination of the racial imagery in World of Warcraft, a popular massively multiplayer online role-playing game. We follow other studies of imagery in WoW highlighting the use of racial stereotypes in the development of in-game “races.” Goblins, trolls, pandarans, and taurens utilize and reproduce longstanding stereotypes of Jews, Black people and people of the Caribbean, Chinese and Asian people, and Native Americans, respectively. Although, as Packer (2014) argues, players’ textual readings and appropriations of WoW races may potentially overshadow stereotypical racial imagery, we follow others who identify such imagery as examples of “old racism” still prevalent in popular culture, which essentializes race, naturalizes difference, and reflects and reproduces structural racial inequality (Bonilla-Silva 2014; Doane 2014). We show how the racial stereotypes often associated with “old racism” and thought to be a product of the distant past are still perpetuated in “newer” mediums like online video games such as WoW. As bell hooks argues, “When race and ethnicity become commodified as resources for pleasure, the culture of specific groups, as well as the bodies of individuals, can be seen as constituting an alternative playground where members of dominating races...affirm their power-over in intimate relations with the Other” (2015:23).

Future research might examine how both older and newer forms of racism persist in various forms of “new media” such as video games. Additional questions approaching this topic from the vantage points of creators and players would also provide a more complete understanding of how and why racial representations in popular culture are produced and consumed. Debates surrounding racial imagery in both newer and older forms of media remain a topic worthy of examination (see King 2016; Smith and Thakore 2016). The contours of these discussions with online realms as site and subject become more pressing in light of current controversies surrounding “cancel culture” and what these debates might tell us about race and racism today (Bouvier and Machin 2021).

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