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Commodifying Scarcity: Society, Struggle, and Spectacle in *World of Warcraft*

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Blizzard Entertainment's massively multi-player online role-playing game (MMORPG), *World of Warcraft* (2004), has inspired a remarkable amount of scholarship. In addition to the essays collected in Hilde G. Corneliussen and Jill Walker Rettberg's 2008 *Digital Culture, Play, and Identity: A World of Warcraft Reader*, the game has been the subject of a number of journal articles, as well as a work of popular philosophy: Luke Cuddy and John Nordlinger's 2009 collection, *World of Warcraft and Philosophy: Wrath of the Philosopher King.* This wealth of scholarship is without a doubt a reflection of the game's success. It is also, however, a reflection of the degree to which the game appears to embody what, to many futurists, is one of the principle symptoms of ongoing and all-pervasive societal change brought about by high technology capitalism: the blurring of traditional distinctions between work and play. Many scholars explicitly approach *World of Warcraft* in these terms. Citing the enormous amounts of time and resources players dedicate to the "grind" of playing the game, the complex cultures and behaviors that it has inspired, and fact that a parallel black-market economy of sweatshop-based gold-farmers and power-leveling services has emerged around the game, they argue that *World of Warcraft* offers incontrovertible proof that digital technologies are bringing about an information revolution in which, according to Nick Dyer-Witheford's (1999, p.30) critique, the "capitalist development of technology leads to social salvation, whether through the perfection of the market or its transcendence."

Mark Silverman and Bart Simon make this claim explicitly in their 2009 article, "Discipline and Dragon Kill Points in the Online Power Game." Writing that MMORPGs offer one of the most "interestingly curious" (Silverman and Simon 2009, p.355) sites at which to explore the implosion of the traditional capitalist dialectic between work and play, they use Michel Foucault's concept of disciplinary power to understand how the intricate Dragon Kill Point (DKP) systems developed by high-end raiding guilds function as panoptic technologies of surveillance and rationalization through which power gaming is simultaneously produced and policed as a mode of subjectivity.[1] As they (2009, p.373) explain,

> The basic leveling mechanics of "the grind," power gaming guild structures, and DKP produce what we might call a power gamer subjectivity and power gaming as we understand it today is inseparable from this combination of forces. The combined effect of these is the production of a particular kind of play that resonates with the rationalized and bureaucratized conditions of social life in late modernity.

Silverman and Simon, however, argue that power gamers ultimately function to subvert rather than reproduce this apparatus. In a conclusion that is almost Baudrillardian in its nihilistic implications, they (p.374) claim that "power gamers produce nothing and consume nothing" and should therefore be seen as "hyper

workers" (p.373) who, in playing at work, enact a version of work that "can be read as a critique of hyperrationalized post-industrial work rather than an instantiation of it" (p.375). By foregrounding the futility of play as a mode of production in MMORPGs, power gaming functions as a site of subversion rather than submission. As Silverman and Simon (2009, p. 374) explain, "The extreme work-likeness of the power game ultimately short-circuits the composition of forces it derives from. The result is less a docile subject ready for mobilization in the post-industrial workplace than a cynical subject who would rather be playing at working than actually working."

Silverman and Simon thus use the implosion of work and play in MMORPGs to justify a more problematical assertion: as the exemplars of a new and emerging medium, games such as *World of Warcraft* require a reexamination and, ultimately, a reworking of critical approaches that might otherwise suggest that these games are not as empowering nor as subversive as they claim. Silverman and Simon make this point explicitly in the introduction to their article when, after acknowledging their debt to Foucault, they argue that his work is outdated. Conflating technological innovation with societal progress, they (2009, p.355) write, "Foucault's subjects and institutions were analog, ours are digital, and this presents a problem for the core link between discipline, subjectivity, and corporeality. This, if anything, is the core reason for taking MMOGs seriously as an object of scholarly investigation." As this passage makes clear, Silverman and Simon not only suggest that the panoptic systems of disciplinary power and rationalization that were introduced and perfected during the industrial revolution are no longer viable in the digital age, but have begun to disintegrate in the face of changes brought about by high technology. In making this argument, they invoke what Dyer-Witheford (1999) identifies as one the central tenets of the information revolution. Fetishizing computers and the information technologies they enable, Silverman and Simon cite the game play of MMORPGs as evidence that these technologies are bringing about a "gradual, spontaneous and nonantagonistic relaxation of capitalistic relations—with corporate ownership gradually assumed by technologically participatory workers and citizens and the abundance of information-generated resources dissolving commodity exchange" (Dyer-Witheford 1999, p.30).

Silverman and Simon, in short, implicitly present some of the most troubling aspects of the games—aspects that they acknowledge in their own analyses—as if they are transitory: the "analog" failings of both game designers and game players who struggle to live up to the potential afforded by the technology. In doing so, they preempt any discussion of a perhaps more difficult and significant question: whether or not this societal progress is actually happening, or whether the reason that the "analog" work of theorists such as Foucault is still relevant to high tech genres is that, as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (1972) argue, the techniques of production have changed, but not the underlying imperatives through which these techniques gain their representational power. Explaining that the culture industry's "characteristic innovations are never anything more than improvements of mass reproduction," Adorno and Horkheimer (1972, p.142) write,

> It is with good reason that the interest of innumerable consumers is directed to the technique, and not the contents—which are stubbornly repeated, outworn, and by now half-discredited. The social power which the spectators worship shows itself more effectively in the omnipresence of the stereotype imposed by

technical skill than in the stale ideologies for which the ephemeral contents stand in.

Building on (playing off) this observation, I propose an alternative approach. Using Guy Debord's (1994) *Society of the Spectacle* to understand the representational strategies through which *World of Warcraft* produces the "unreal unity" (Debord 1994, p.42) of its spectacular world, I examine the way that the game commodifies struggle, constructing it as a technology and thereby ensuring the reproduction of the very thing in which its commodity value is manifested: the consent of players to produce themselves and perform as fetishized images within the three-dimensional space of the game. I thus argue that what *World of Warcraft* sells players is not liberation and fulfillment, but a spectacular version of the present tense in which the race- and the class-based antagonisms that define the status quo of late capitalism are represented (fetishized) as magical and fantastic. *World of Warcraft,* in short, sells players a relationship with the present-tense in which it is futile to resist technological innovation or to otherwise struggle against the excesses of the political, social, and economic systems of production upon such innovations depends—excesses that, though horrendous, are predestined, according to the implicit positivism of the information revolution, to soon become a thing of the past. As Dyer-Witheford (1999, p.27) writes, "Struggle against capital is irrelevant, because everything once (and so deceptively) signaled by the red flag—the classless society, nonalienated work, the dissolution of property, will be achieved simply by the operation of technology that capital is so frenetically developing."

Spectacular Antagonisms

World of Warcraft embodies what, to Debord, is the essence of the spectacle in late capitalism: a "social relationship between people that is mediated by images" (1994, p.12). Proof-positive of the power of contemporary media to mass produce and commodify the real, the game boasts an "epic" and "ever-changing" online world that, according to the claims published on its box (Blizzard Entertainment 2004), is not only measured by its wonders, but by the numbers of players it can accommodate:

> Descend into the World of Warcraft and join thousands of mighty heroes in an online world of myth, magic, and limitless adventure. Jagged snowy peaks, mountain fortresses, harsh winding canyons, Zeppelins flying over smoldering battlefields-an infinity of experiences await. So what are you waiting for?

Loosely based on the topography of previous games in the *Warcraft* franchise, this virtual world is comprised of three distinct continents and the vast, fragmented landmass of Outland, an alternative universe introduced in *The Burning Crusade* (Blizzard Entertainment 2007) expansion. These continents are subdivided into a number of unique zones, each of which is distinguished by distinct geography, climate, and settlements. The game also contains a staggering variety of objects of every size, shape, and description. From swords to shields to books, brooms, chairs, pirate ships, and paddleboats, *World of Warcraft's* material wealth is only exceeded by the sheer variety of creatures, both mundane and magical, that players encounter. *World of Warcraft* thus presents players with a world that is defined by its conspicuous and inexhaustible surplus—a world of limitless beauty and wonder,

whose material wealth is produced independently of labor and production, and whose creatures can be slaughtered to extinction only to respawn a few minutes later. As Debord (1994, p.26) writes about spectacle in general, the game presents players with a virtual world in which the "perceptible world is replaced by a set of images that are superior to that world yet at the same time impose themselves as eminently perceptible."

World of Warcraft produces this wealth in exactly the same way it produces the visual splendor of its world: through an aesthetic strategy of commodification in which scarcity is represented as wealth. Although the game appears vast, ancient, and permanent when rendered on the space of the screen, players quickly realize that its visual elements are relatively homogeneous. The wolves that stalk the borders of the otherwise tranquil farmlands of the game's Elwynn Forest zone, for instance, are almost indistinguishable from each other. Much of the same can be said for the zone's sheep, cows, and pigs, as well as its more fantastic creatures: the ever-encroaching kobolds, murlocs, and gnolls. Not even the zone's architectural elements are unique. The various buildings that comprise the zone's farms are identical, as are those that comprise its towns and citadels. Stored in its graphical, client-side libraries, these elements are the component parts of a larger aesthetic strategy through which *World of Warcraft* constructs its vast world in real time, piecing together the commodified images that are sold with the game in accordance with the dictates of its underlying programming.

Although this strategy depends on uniformity, repetition, and automation, it is surprisingly effective at producing *World of Warcraft's* majestic and narratively compelling landscapes. It is also, however, equally effective at producing many of the game's less savory aspects. Indeed, as if to illustrate Frederic Jameson's (1991, p.5) point that the underside of culture is "blood, terror, and torture," *World of Warcraft* sells players a spectacularly flawed version of reality that is characterized by what Debord (1994, p.41) understands as "spectacular antagonisms": fictionalized conflicts in which, as he (1994, p.36) writes, "Struggles between forces, all of which have been established for the purpose of running the same socioeconomic system, are thus officially passed off as real antagonisms." The most obvious of these antagonisms is the ongoing and irresolvable race war between the two major political factions in the game: the Alliance and the Horde (Howard 2008, p.20). Yet as the game's manual (2004, p.23) makes clear, this "black and white" conflict is overshadowed by (and to some degree, constructed through) a number of larger, religiously inspired struggles: the periodic demonic invasions and crusades launched by Illidan, Kil'Jaeden, Archimonde, and others who seek to subjugate the races of both the Alliance and the Horde. *World of Warcraft* is also the scene of a number of smaller though equally destructive economic conflicts, as purely mercantile factions such as the goblins of the Steamwheadle cartel and the Venture Trading Company seek to profit from the upheaval.

World of Warcraft's landscape is defined by these antagonisms. As Tanya Krzywinska (2008, p.130) and others (Langer 2008, p. 95; MacCallum-Stewart 2008, p.43) point out, the geography, architecture, and climate of the game's starting areas reflect the racial characteristics and cultures of the races that inhabit them. Other areas of the game's map reflect the ferocity of its racial and religious conflicts. Contested zones such as the Hillsbrad foothills and the Arathi Highlands, for

example, are littered with broken siege engines, ruined fortifications, and abandoned farms. Zones such as the aptly-named Blasted Lands and Hellfire Peninsula display wholesale environmental devastation. Located on either side of the Dark Portal, their parched, post-apocalyptic landscapes testify to the violence of the invasions and counter invasions. Much of the same can be said for Shadowmoon Valley in Outland and Zul'drak in Northrend, zones whose dark, foreboding, and inhospitable landscapes reflect the religious characters of the massive temples that sit within their borders. Other zones show evidence of the economic violence that is required to maintain these conflicts. The once lush forests of Windshear Crag, for example, have been reduced to acres of stumps and a few, spindly trees that have not yet fallen to the machinery of the Venture Trading Company. Searing Gorge offers an even more impressive scene of industrial devastation. Located in the shadow of Blackrock Mountain, its charred landscape is dotted with quarries, cranes, foundries, and forges, and is honeycombed with an elaborate network of mines and similar subterranean endeavors.

World of Warcraft's narratives are also constructed through these spectacular antagonisms. This is most obviously the case with the game's lore: the overarching and complex history of the *Warcraft* universe that is articulated through the previous games in the franchise as well as *World of Warcraft* novels, manga, and other ancillary products. The game's manual (Blizzard Entertainment 2004, pp.156-167) offers a condensed version of this lore in its appendices, employing a series of vignettes that explicitly present its history as a series of antagonistic conflicts between the various factions that claim the game's landscape. As such, these vignettes introduce the race-specific histories presented in the second appendix of the manual (Blizzard Entertainment 2004, pp.168-191), an appendix entitled "Races in Conflict." The game's quests fulfill a similar function. As Krzywinska points out (2008, p.129), their narratives not only reflect the racial, cultural, and political values of the non player characters (NPCs) who offer the quests, but communicate these values to players through the "rhetorical style in which they are spoken or written, their structure, and their content." Perhaps the best example of how the game's quests embody these antagonisms can be found in the system of daily quests introduced with patch 2.10. In addition to money and other rewards, many of these repeatable quests are designed to reward players with "reputation points" that increase their standing with individual factions within the game. Since factional reputation corresponds to specific rewards, privileges, and achievements, these quests make the spectacular antagonisms represented by the factions appear "real" (material) to players in much of the same way that the distinct geography, climate, culture, and flora and fauna of the game's individual zones makes the antagonisms that define the game's landscape appear natural.

Yet, while Krzywinska is correct in stating that the intertextuality of many of *World of Warcraft's* narrative structures accentuates the game's visual and ludic elements, these structures do not, as she (2008, p.124) claims, "drive the logic that underpins *World of Warcraft's* stylistic milieu and provides the context for and of game play." Much of the same can be said for Jessica Langer's (2008, p.95) suggestion that *World of Warcraft's* often overt racism is a manifestation of a desire on the part of the designers to "make the game as mimetically realistic on its own terms as possible, which would include moral and ethical variation within a populace as in the real world." As two of the primary sites through which the game's spectacular

antagonisms are constructed, *World of Warcraft's* narrative structures and racial categories do not provide a context or mimesis that might otherwise be absent. Instead, the antagonisms produced through these narratives and categories function to disguise what Debord (1994, p.40) describes as the "false choice offered by spectacular abundance"—a false choice, in which, as he argues, "false conflicts of ancient vintage tend to be resurrected—regionalisms and racisms whose job it now is to invest vulgar rankings in the hierarchies of consumption with a magical ontological superiority." They function, in short, to disguise the fact that the context and the structure of all spectacular production is commodification and that what the spectacle represents mimetically is what Debord (1994, p.41) characterizes as the "*Unity of Poverty*" that characterizes all spectacular production: the social, economic, and political relationships upon which commodification depends.

Indeed, although Debord (1994, p.36) acknowledges that spectacular antagonisms often express material concerns about race, class, or other issues in which the systematic inequalities of capitalism are manifested, he argues that they ultimately serve the same purpose: to validate the spectacle as an aesthetic and economic strategy. Produced by commodifying the socio-economic and political issues that they depict, these antagonisms demonstrate the degree to which capitalism, working though the medium of the fetishized image, is able to commodify everything, even the most antithetical and revolutionary political views. These antagonisms, as such, validate the spectacle as a political strategy. Ostensibly authentic representations of "real" issues and struggles, they make it appear as if the commodification at the heart of the spectacle is simply a means to an end: the representational strategy through which the socio-political issues embodied by the spectacular antagonisms are articulated. These antagonisms are thus the primary means through which the spectacle produces the illusion in which its commodity value is ultimately expressed: the illusion that the spectacle and its underlying social relationships "authentically" represent the material conditions of the people who are subject to it.

World of Warcraft's spectacular antagonisms work in much the same way. By commodifying racial difference, religious fanaticism, and economic conflict as thinly veiled allegorical struggles, *World of Warcraft* does not simply present players with a spectacular world that appears at every moment to be on the verge of suffering a spectacular calamity of one type or another. It presents players with a spectacular world whose always imminent collapse echoes material concerns about the stability of contemporary society, a world that, with its labyrinthine conspiracies and distinctly steampunk undertones, can be read, as Jameson (1991, p.38) writes about Cyberpunk fiction, as a "representational shorthand for grasping a network of power and control even more difficult for our minds and imaginations to grasp: the whole new decentered global network of third-stage capital itself." *World of Warcraft's* spectacular antagonisms thus make the game appear relevant and valuable. They make it appear "real," or at least like what passes for "real" in the context of late capitalism: a product that is worthy of being bought, sold, and consumed. In doing so the game's spectacular antagonisms conceal the fact that what *World of Warcraft* ultimately offers players is, as Debord (1994, p.41) writes about spectacle in general, "no more than an image of harmony set amidst desolation and dread, at the still center of misfortune."

World of Warcraft thus sells players a world that embodies what Jean Baudrillard (1996, p.155) describes as one of the defining characteristics of consumer culture, a world in which "[e]verything is in motion, everything shifts before our eyes, everything is constantly being transformed—yet nothing really changes." Indeed, for all of its spectacular environments, conflicts, and creatures, the game's world is remarkably static. Its NPCs always follow the same paths, its quest-givers always offer the same quests, and its most fearsome tyrant, the Lich King, can be defeated only to return, as good as new, a week later. What *World of Warcraft* offer players, in this sense, is not a chance to escape their material conditions via the magical or the fantastic. Instead, it commodifies this desire. Using it as both a pretense and a justification, the game presents players with a virtual world in which everything is a commodity and in which everything, even the players themselves, is meant to be consumed—a world that, as Debord (1994, p.16) writes about spectacle, is "at once a faithful mirror held up to the production of things and a distorting objectification of the producers." As he (1994, p.26) explains,

> The world the spectacle holds up to view is at once here and elsewhere; it is the world of the commodity ruling over all lived experience. The commodity world is thus shown as it really is, for its logic is one with men's estrangement from one another and from the sum total of what they produce.

World of Warcraft, in short, sells players a virtual world in which the status quo of late capitalism is represented as magical and fantastic, a world whose spectacular antagonisms demonstrate the power of its underlying social relationships to represent and thereby shape the lived experiences of the people who are subject to it.

Fetishized Subjectivities

Overrun by monsters and tyrants, and ravaged by fanaticism, excess, and greed, *World of Warcraft* is thus implicated in what, to Debord (1994, p.36), is a larger strategy in which "division is presented as unity, and unity as division." In its fragmented, object-oriented approach to reality, the game presents players with a fully realized graphical world that, as a fetishized commodity, appears to exist independently of the people who produce it and the materials from which it is produced—a world whose "unreal unity" (Debord 1994, p.46) is comprised almost entirely of commodified images, yet which nevertheless appears seamless, contiguous, and "alive" when rendered on the space of the screen. *World of Warcraft* incorporates players into this world as images. Promising them a chance to participate in (consume) its spectacular wealth, it not only requires that they construct themselves as avatars in accordance with the race- and class-based categories defined by the game's spectacular antagonisms, but more significantly, requires that they construct their participation within the three-dimensional space of the game in accordance with the constraints imposed upon them by and through these categories. *World of Warcraft,* in short, requires players to consent to an essentially fragmented and alienated relationship with the game—a relationship that, defined by division, expresses their value through commodified images and data structures that, for all intents and purposes, are identical to those that *World of Warcraft* uses to represent all of the NPCs, creatures, and the various other types of resources

through which the "counterfeit life" (Debord 1994, p.32) of its spectacular wealth is manifested.

World of Warcraft makes this relationship explicit through two parallel and essentially identical transactions that, when taken together, require players to ritually enact what Louis Althusser (1971, p.181) describes as the "duplicate mirror-structure of ideology":

> the interpellation of 'individuals' as subjects;
>
> their subjection to the Subject;
>
> the mutual recognition of subjects and Subject, the subjects' recognition of each other, and finally the subject's recognition of himself;
>
> the absolute guarantee that everything really is so, and that on condition that the subjects recognize what they are and behave accordingly, everything will be all right: Amen—'So be it.'

Players encounter the first of these transactions—the game's End User License (EUL) and Terms of Use (TOU) agreements—immediately after installing the software. Contained within semi-transparent dialog windows, these agreements fill the space of the login screen, barring players from seeing and entering the spectacle until they read (or at least scroll down) to the bottom of the window and click "accept." Thus, while *World of Warcraft* hails players as individuals, recognizing that they have the free will (the legal ability) to either accept or decline its conditions, it does not allow players to perform this individuality freely, but only in accordance with the constraints imposed by the interface: the binary choice of the "accept" and "decline" buttons and the illusion of vertical movement afforded by the scroll bar on the right margin. The various terms and conditions published in these windows simply formalize these constraints. Organized hierarchically, they explicitly limit the ways that players can perform as subjects in relationship to the game, prohibiting them from engaging in disruptive behaviors and practices such as using profanity and employing bots and other third-party programs to automate their characters. More significantly, these agreements prohibit players from claiming ownership of the characters, the character names, the chat logs, screen shots, or any of the other myriad forms of intellectual property that they generate. *World of Warcraft*'s EUL and TOU agreements thus construct players as fragmented subjects, requiring them to not only agree to limit the way they perform as individuals within the game, but to relinquish any claim to the materials they produce as they do so.

Much of the same can be said for the second of these two transactions: the process of character creation. Character creation in contemporary MMORPGs is often celebrated as an inherently liberating activity, one in which, as Scott Rettberg (2008, p.23) writes, players are given the "opportunity to wipe the slate clean, to start again and choose new lives in a new world."[2] As he (2008, p.23) explains,

> From the first moment a player "rolls" a character and gives it a name, she is defining an avatar, a character that will be distinct from all of the other characters in the game. The player defines a second self, with traits and physical qualities far different from his or her own real embodied personality. For many players, this represents an opportunity to escape from their own situation...in the world.

Although Rettberg is correct that character creation in *World of Warcraft* affords players a significant amount of choice, he does not recognize that, like the windows that contain the game's EUL and TOU agreements, this choice requires players to subjugate themselves to the game's representational strategies. Indeed, players cannot construct themselves as they wish, but must do so in accordance with the hierarchical categories of race, gender, and class through which the game defines identity: categories that are themselves constructed through *World of Warcraft's* spectacular antagonisms. The act of creating a character thus involves players in a ritual of mutual recognition in which the game recognizes (and thereby represents) players as subjects in return for their recognition of and submission to the representational power of the version of reality that is valorizes as "true" or "correct." Understood in this sense, character creation marks the moment when individuals, having always already been interpellated as players (subjects) by purchasing, installing, and accepting the game's EUL and TOU agreements, are recognized as and recognize themselves as characters. This mutual recognition guarantees players a place in the three-dimensional space of the game proper (providing, of course, they continue to behave according to policies stipulated by the EUL and TOU agreements).

The visual rhetoric of *World of Warcraft's* character creation screen makes the doubly-specular nature of this transaction explicit. Organized around a three-dimensional model of the character the player is creating, the foreground of the screen is occupied by a menu and a series of text boxes in which instructions, tips, and other types of information are displayed. These two-dimensional elements are arranged vertically on the left and right margins of the screen and frame the three-dimensional model of the player's character. Since the background is comprised of various scenes taken from the game itself, the contrast between the screen's two-dimensional and three-dimensional elements is very much like that of a portal or a mirror standing between the outside of the material world and the inside of the game. Accordingly, the choices players make as they navigate the various categories and options on the two-dimensional character creation menu are reflected in the three-dimensional space of the screen. Choosing a race, for example, not only changes the appearance of the character, but also changes the scenery that is displayed in the background. Choosing a gender and a class also affects the appearance of the character, as do the adjustments players make to variables such as skin tone, hair style, and facial characteristics.

These choices, however, are not simply aesthetic in nature, but as the tips and instructions that appear in the text boxes make clear, ultimately determine the skills, spells, and other abilities through which players can consume the spectacle of the game. Players who create mages, for instance, gain access to a number of spells and abilities that allow them to quickly deal damage to hostile players and NPCs. Mages, however, are extremely vulnerable to melee attacks. As a result, mages are "tuned" to consume the game from a distance, exchanging the currency of their health and mana for loot through spells and other ranged attacks in the hope of quickly defeating opponents before they can get close. Warriors, by contrast, employ a very different strategy. Unlike mages, they are able to wear heavy armor and have a relatively large amount of stamina and hit-points. Yet because they cannot deal large amounts of damage from a distance, they must approach enemies as quickly

as possible, spending health and armor to absorb damage until they can get close enough to be effective.

The choices players make on *World of Warcraft's* character creation screen thus function to constrain and compartmentalize them. Articulated through an intricate system of checks and balances, they grant players access to a specific repertoire of the game's spectacular skills, spells, and abilities, but simultaneously make it impossible for them to access the vast majority of others. The result is not liberation or empowerment, but as Adorno and Horkheimer (1972, p.140) write about the culture industry, quantification:

> Marked differentiations such as those of A and B films, or of stories in magazines in different price ranges, depend not so much on subject matter as on classifying, organizing, and labeling consumers. Something is provided for all so that none may escape; the distinctions are emphasized and extended. The public is catered for with a hierarchical range of mass-produced products of varying quality, thus advancing the rule of complete quantification. Everybody must behave (as if spontaneously) in accordance with his previously determined and indexed level, and choose the category of mass product turned out for his type.

World of Warcraft's character creation system fulfills a similar function. Using stereotyped categories such as race, gender, and class, it commodifies identity, packaging it for players in much of the same way that automobile manufacturers advertise vehicles on their web sites: as a series of base models that customers can upgrade and "customize" by clicking various options. Rettberg (2008, p. 23) is correct, in this sense, in stating that the game allows players to assume a "second self, with traits and physical qualities far different from his or her own real embodied personality." Yet while this version of self is undeniably "different," it is perhaps not as unfamiliar, unique, or radical as Rettberg implies. It is, instead, a version of self that has become all too familiar in late capitalism—an objectified version of self that demands that individuals not only construct themselves in the image of the products they consume, but measure their worth almost entirely in abstract units of currency: experience points, achievement points, strength, mana, health, intellect, energy, stamina, spirit, honor, and gear score, to name a few. This is a version of self in which, as Baudrillard (1996, p.191) explains, "[o]bjects work as categories of objects which, in the most tyrannical fashion, define categories of people—they police social meanings, and the significations they engender are rigidly controlled."

Understood in this sense, it is not surprising that character creation in *World of Warcraft* takes place outside of the three-dimensional space of the game proper and functions as a prerequisite to gaining entry into that space. Explicitly constructed as a liminal activity, it is the means through which players gain access to what Althusser (1971, p.181) describes as the Subject with a capital "S"—the master construct of the game against which and through which players are interpellated as subjects. Or more precisely, it is the means through which players gain access to a copy of the master construct, a version of the game that is assembled in real time from the game's libraries of commodified images and sounds in accordance with the player's status as a subject (data) in the game's database. Nor is it surprising that character creation in *World of Warcraft* culminates in a signatory moment when, having recognized themselves reflected in the finished avatar standing at the center of the character creation screen, players give this character a name, and, as with the windows that

contain the game's EUL and TOU agreements, click the "accept" button. In doing so, players ritually acknowledge a relationship that, by this point, has already become obvious. As Althusser (1971, p.181) writes about Christian Ideology: "They 'recognize' the existing state of affairs. . ., that 'it really is true that it is so and not otherwise', and that they must be obedient to God, to their conscience, to the priest, to de Gaulle, to the boss, to the engineer,. . .. Their concrete, material behavior is simply the inscription in life of the admirable words of the prayer: 'Amen—So be it.'"

Commodifying Struggle

Character creation in *World of Warcraft*, however, does not simply interpellate players into the various rules and categories that define its gameplay. In doing so, it simultaneously interpellates them into the larger social, economic, and political relationships that make the gameplay possible: the complex networks of power and production through which the spectacle of the MMORPG is produced and disseminated. Accordingly, the relationship between players, the characters that represent them, and the spectacle of the MMORPG is characterized by a sense of alienation and fragmentation that, according to Debord (1994, p.23), defines the relationship between the spectator and the spectacle:

> The spectator's alienation from and submission to the contemplated object...works like this: the more he contemplates, the less he lives; the more readily he recognizes his own needs in the images of need proposed by the dominant system, the less he understands his own existence and desires. The spectacle's externality with respect to the acting subject is demonstrated by the fact that the individual's gestures are no longer his own, but rather those of someone else who represents him.

Indeed, players are unable to act directly on the three-dimensional space of game, but can only do so through the intermediary of the characters (the fetishized images) that represent them, and only then by commanding their characters to act through the icon-driven interface of the game. Participation in *World of Warcraft* is thus constructed as an essentially alienated series of actions that is never performed by players themselves, but by the characters that represent and constrain them. The game's third-person oblique perspective ensures that players watch as this drama "plays out" on the space of the screen—as their characters carry out, or depending on various in-game circumstances, refuse to carry out their commands. Caught in this schizophrenic and panoptic regime of surveillance and counter-surveillance, players become the chief agents of and the chief witnesses to their own subjugation.

As Jameson (1991) writes about postmodernism in general, however, the resulting sense of fragmentation and alienation does not appear oppressive, disabling, or insurmountable to players. Instead, it appears exhilarating, as a challenge and an opportunity that is defined by an "intoxicatory or hallucinogenic intensity" (Jameson, 1991, p.28). Blizzard Entertainment promotes *World of Warcraft* in almost exactly these terms, designing the game's packaging to highlight the disorientating and chaotic intensity of its gameplay. The *Wrath of the Lich King* (Blizzard Entertainment 2008) box, for example, features the two-part tag line "If you stare long into the abyss...the abyss stares back at you." Divided at the ellipses, the first part of this tag

line is printed on the inside right flap of the box just beneath a comparatively tranquil and Tolkienesque rendering of Northrend's geography. What players discover when they open the tri-fold panels of the box, however, is anything but tranquil. Hordes of blue and gray skeletal soldiers jostle and wave weapons while wyrms and gargoyles circle overhead. Vivid, brightly colored screen shots of various sizes are pasted, scrapbook style, over this chaos. Although these images are presumably all taken from the game, they depict very different, and ultimately disjunctive scenes: two Gnomish planes dog fighting over Wintergrasp Fortress; a purple, shark-like Zeppelin pulling away from the gothic spires of Vengeance Landing; a human warrior battling a Norse-like vrykul; an undead and tauren player traveling across the Borean Tundra on an improbably engineered motorcycle. Centered amidst this panoramic chaos, the second half of the expansion's tag-line makes the message of the box's imagery and layout explicit: installing and playing the game is tantamount to a descent into a version of the postmodern in which the careful, measured, Tolkienesque cartography of the fantastic explodes into violent pastiche.

World of Warcraft thus commodifies what Jameson (1991) describes as the central challenge of postmodernism. Calling for an "aesthetic of cognitive mapping—a pedagogical political practice which seeks to endow the individual some new heightened sense of its place in the global system," he (1991, p.54) writes,

> the new political art (if it is possible at all) will have to hold to the truth of postmodernism, that is to say, to its fundamental object—the world space of multinational capital—at the same time at which it achieves a breakthrough to some as yet unimaginable new mode of representing this last, in which we may again begin to grasp our positioning as individual and collective subjects and regain a capacity to act and struggle, which is at present neutralized by our spatial as well as our social confusion.

As if to digitalize this struggle, *World of Warcraft* presents players with a seamless, self contained world that is not, as Espen Aarseth (2008, p.111) dismissively argues, "hollow," but one which is comprised almost entirely of surfaces and textures—of commodified images that are mass produced many times a second in accordance with the game's programming. Produced entirely through pastiche, this is a world in which jungles, deserts, and tundra lie within walking distance of each other, in which players encounter allusions to J. R. R. Tolkien's and Earnest Hemingway's fiction, in which gnomes reenact scenes from *Starship Troopers* (1997), and in which goblins race in vehicles that look suspiciously like steampunk versions of the pod racers in *Star Wars: Episode I -The Phantom Menace* (1999).

World of Warcraft, in short, immerses players in a world that is consciously designed to disorient, confuse, and bewilder them: a world in which, as Jameson (1991, p.43) writes about the Bonaventure hotel, a "constant busyness gives the feeling that emptiness here is absolutely packed, that it is an element in which you yourself are immersed, without any of that distance that formally enabled the perception of perspective or volume." Moreover, *World of Warcraft* challenges players to make something of this world—not simply to make sense of it or map its contradictory spaces, but to produce value from it. To rephrase the spectacular *Wrath of the Lich King* tag line quoted above, the game challenges players to stare into its fractured, fragmented, and ultimately disorienting reality and to produce reflections of themselves that appear whole and heroic: reflections that, in their capacity to hold

their own and flourish against the world's tendencies, transcend their status of commodified images and instead manifest themselves as a form of the "new political art" that Jameson calls for. What *World of Warcraft* "sells" players, in this sense, is a chance to struggle metaphorically against the very thing that oppresses them: the excesses of the spectacle as they are manifested through the game's spectacular antagonisms.

Accordingly, new players are not introduced directly into *World of Warcraft*, but as Jameson (1991, p.39) writes about the entrances to the Bonaventure hotel, enter the world laterally:

> The entryways of the Bonaventure are, as it were, rather lateral and backdoor affairs: the gardens in the back admit you to the sixth floor of the towers, and even there you must walk down one flight to find the elevator by which you gain access to the lobby. Meanwhile, what one is still tempted to think of as the main entry, on Figueroa, admits you, baggage and all, onto the second story shopping balcony, from which you must take an escalator down to the main registration desk.

Players first encounter the three-dimensional world of the game in the first person, through the viewpoint of the disembodied camera of the game's initial cut-scene movie. Moving in wide, lazy arcs around trees, buildings, and similar obstacles, the camera follows a scripted path through the game's landscape as a narrator describes the spectacular antagonisms through which the gameworld's racial identities are constructed. The camera then descends to show the player character standing opposite a quest giver, and, as the cut-scene ends, settles into the default third-person position, just behind and over the character's shoulder. Players are thus deposited "baggage and all," not in one of *World of Warcraft's* spectacular cities or other high population areas, but in its relatively rural starting areas. There they discover that their characters are conspicuously incomplete. With just enough clothing and equipment to satisfy the basic demands of modesty and survival, they possess little health and mana, empty experience bars, empty bag and equipment slots, and empty purses. Moreover, players discover that their interfaces are incomplete; their action bars contain only one or two rudimentary spells, large portions of their maps are blank, and a number of options that should be available to them are either missing or disabled. Players, as such, are not incorporated into *World of Warcraft's* spectacular surplus as whole individuals or even whole characters. Instead, they enter the game through the proverbial backdoor: from a position of conspicuous poverty, frailty, and fragmentation.

Constructed in this manner, players quickly realize that their ability to consume the game's spectacle is severely limited. Anchored visually to the three-dimensional space of the game by their characters, their view of the game and, therefore, their ability to access its content is dependent on their ability to reposition their characters. This is easier said than done, however. While most of the creatures in the game's starting areas are neutral and will not attack unless first attacked, the same cannot be said for the creatures that players encounter outside of these areas. Openly aggressive, the majority of these creatures are programmed to attack players who come within a predetermined attack zone or "aggro radius." Since this radius is determined by the level of the player's character in relationship to that of the creature in question, low-level characters cannot venture far from the relative safety of the

game's starting areas without being repeatedly attacked and killed. Players thus discover that their ability to consume the spectacle of the game depends on the relative strengths and weaknesses of their characters. Or more precisely, they discover that the ability to consume the spectacle depends on the spending power of their characters: on the amount of health, mana, and similar attributes that they possess, as well as the level of the spells and the abilities through which their characters spend this currency.

Players, as such, are only able to consume the spectacle of *World of Warcraft* to the extent that they are able to struggle against it. Yet they are paradoxically only able to struggle against the spectacle by consuming it. Limited to the specific set of spells, skills, and abilities that are conferred by the class and race of their characters, they can only confront the excesses of the spectacle by consuming the resources it provides in accordance with the agency it affords them. Struggle thus fulfills a disciplinary role in *World of Warcraft.* Quantified and commodified, it not only structures the way that players consume the spectacle, but in doing so, determines how they produce themselves as subjects (characters) in relationship to the game. Struggle, in this sense, is one of the primary means through which the game polices players and through which players police each other and themselves. As Foucault (1979, p.192) writes about the examination in *Discipline and Punish*, struggle provides a means of "fixing, at once ritual and 'scientific' of individual differences." As he (1979, p.192) explains,

> The examination is at the center of the procedures that constitute the individual as effect and object of power, as effect and object of knowledge. It is the examination which, by combining hierarchical surveillance and normalizing judgment, assures the great disciplinary functions of distribution and classification, maximum extraction of forces and time, continuous genetic accumulation, optimum combination of aptitudes, and, thereby, the fabrication of cellular, organic, genetic, and combinatory individuality.

Struggle, in other words, functions as a technology in *World of Warcraft*. Constructed at the intersection of the game's spectacular antagonisms and the desire of players to function within the game as complete individuals, it is a means of converting knowledge (capital) into power: converting the abstract and ideological principles that the game valorizes as "good," "worthwhile," and "productive" play into situations and outcomes that can be evaluated and therefore rewarded or punished. Struggle, as such, is the means through which the play of consumption in *World of Warcraft* is channeled and controlled.

Perhaps the most obvious example of how *World of Warcraft* accomplishes this can be found in the game's system. Constructed through its spectacular antagonisms, many of its quests explicitly reward players with experience, money, and equipment for confronting the excesses of the world as they are embodied by specific populations of NPCs. For example, players acquire the quest "Harpy Raiders" upon arriving at the Crossroads quest hub in the Barrens. Explaining that a group of harpies has been ravaging supply caravans, the quest giver, Darsok Swiftdagger, asks the players to seek out the harpy encampment and obtain eight Witchwing talons by defeating two specific types of harpies: Witchwing Harpies and Witchwing Roguefeathers. When players return with the talons, Swiftdagger offers a follow-up quest, "Harpy Lieutenants," which requires them to return to the encampment and

collect eight Lieutenant's rings from Witchwing Slayers. Successfully completing this quest leads to the final quest in the chain, "Serena Bloodfeather." As its title suggests, Swiftdagger asks players to assassinate the leader of the Witchwing harpy clan, offering them a reward for her head. Justified by the threat that the harpies' matriarchal society poses to the patriarchal stability of the orcish settlement at the Crossroads, this series of quests uses the racial and political enmity between the harpies and the orcs as a pretense to direct players to specific content in the game. Moreover, it requires them to consume the content in a very specific manner: to harvest the NPCs until they have obtained the prerequisite number of quest items. The effect is structurally very similar to the way that Jameson (1991, p.42) describes the elevators and escalators in the Bonaventure Hotel:

> the escalators and elevators here henceforth replace movement, but also, and above all, designate themselves as new reflexive signs and emblems of movement proper.... Here the narrative stroll has been underscored, symbolized, reified, and replaced by a transportation machine which becomes the allegorical signifier of that older promenade we are no longer allowed to conduct on our own...

In providing players with a ready-made, mechanized path up and through the otherwise disorientating space of the game and offering them incentives (equipment, experience points, and currency) for taking this path, *World of Warcraft's* quest system ensures that players not only follow more or less the same route but are treated to an essentially identical view of the space.

World of Warcraft's quests, however, also fulfill a more subtle function. As with the game's limited mineral and herb resources, many implicitly cause confrontations between players. Take the quest chain described above. Although the first quest in the chain only requires players to collect twelve talons, these only drop about two-thirds of the times that players kill the designated NPCs. This drop rate is not a problem if a player is questing alone, or even if two players are attempting to finish the same quest simultaneously. Since three or more players can quickly exterminate the population of the NPCs, however, the quest becomes proportionally more difficult to complete quickly. This problem is amplified with the second and the third quests in the chain. These quests require players to harvest materials from NPCs that are not only more difficult to defeat, but proportionately rarer. Players, as such, find that they must either compete with each other for kills or cooperate by grouping together via the game's party interface. In either case the result is that same. Confronted with the presence of others, players must adapt their play styles in accordance with the social practices legitimized by the player-community at large: the complex etiquette that manifests itself, for example, in the decision whether to select "need" or "greed" when an item of uncommon or better quality drops. Struggle, as such, provides the impetus for the way that players construct themselves in relationship to others and thereby produce what T.L. Taylor (2006) describes as the "sociotechnical apparatus" of the game: the social practices that develop in and around the game and that, as she writes (2006, p.32), "form a much broader game apparatus . . . that goes well beyond the artifact contained within the off-the-shelf box that the game purchaser first encounters."

While this sociotechnical apparatus functions, as Taylor points out, to produce much of the commodity value of MMORPGs like *World of Warcraft*, it also functions to

constrain and limit the ways that players construct themselves in relationship to the game. This is especially the case with activities such as player-versus-player (PVP) combat that explicitly require players to struggle against each other. Although many players argue that *World of Warcraft*'s PVP combat is fundamentally different than player-versus-environment (PVE) combat, both forms involve players in essentially the same mode of game play, one that measures their ability to consume the content of the game through the skills, spells, and abilities that are available to their characters. PVP combat, however, is designed around and rewards players for consuming a different type of resource than PVE combat: other players. PVP combat thus explicitly reinforces the status of players as subjects in the game, requiring them to construct and approach each other as commodified objects who can be harvested (farmed) for reputation, honor points, gold, and other units of currency. Moreover, the collaborative nature of the game's instanced battlegrounds and arenas ensures that players actively encourage and police this subjectivity in each other. Required to work together on teams ranging in size from two to forty, players routinely critique each other's performances, often using in-game tools and add-ons to measure damage and healing done, killing blows, deaths, and other variables such as bases and flags captured. Players, as such, learn to construct themselves as commodities. Constantly comparing and testing themselves (their characters) in combat against one another, they not only learn to measure their worth almost entirely in abstract units of currency, but learn that the quickest route to success is to adopt the "cookie-cutter" talent builds and play styles that the player community as a whole endorses as the most effective. The sociotechnical apparatus of the game thus harnesses the power of the player community that has developed around PVP combat, channeling players into the mechanical and prescribed patterns of behavior that *World of Warcraft* constructs as valuable and productive play much more effectively than is possible through the rules and other disciplinary structures hard coded into the game.[3]

World of Warcraft achieves a similar effect through its dungeon and raid instances. Featuring some of the game's most spectacular and inaccessible content, these instances are typically organized around a series of "boss" fights against powerful NPCs who embody the game's spectacular antagonisms. Too difficult for players to attempt alone, many of these bosses (and the "trash" NPCs who surround them) require groups of five to forty players to defeat. Players, as such, must structure their consumption within the group in accordance with the generic and narrow definitions of the three primary class roles that *World of Warcraft* recognizes: tanks, healers, and damage-per-second (DPS).[4] Tanks, for instance, must maximize their armor, stamina, dodge, parry, and other defensive abilities so that they can keep the attention of the boss. Healers must spend mana replenishing the health of the tanks and the other group members. Ranged and melee damage-per-second (DPS) must spend their mana, rage, and energy as efficiently as possible, whittling down the health of the boss in the time allowed. Moreover, all of the players in the group must accomplish these performances while moving strategically to avoid or negate specific abilities that each boss possesses. Consuming the spectacle of a boss fight thus requires players to perform what, in *World of Warcraft's* parlance, is often referred to as a "dance" both within and outside of the dungeon or raid instance. Accordingly, players cannot configure their characters as they wish, even within the narrow confines of the choices afforded to them by their race and class. Instead they must subordinate themselves to the demands of the spectacle, choosing talent points that

allow them to most effectively perform their assigned roles, and actively working to acquire, enchant, and gem the specific pieces of equipment that the player community at large deems "best in slot." As with PVP combat, the result is conformity. Wearing identical equipment, with identical talent builds, enchants, gems, and glyphs, players not only become visually indistinguishable from others who share their race, class, and role, but, to a large degree, their behavior becomes indistinguishable as well. Caught in an endless regimen of farming, daily quests, and raid and dungeon instances, they tirelessly repeat the same patterns day in and day out, performing their individuality within the three-dimensional space of the game with an autonomy that, for all intents and purposes, is indistinguishable from the automation through which the game endows its NPCs with the illusion of being alive.[5]

The Triumph of the System

This is the central paradox of the way that *World of Warcraft* commodifies struggle: that as players struggle against the excesses of the spectacle, working to remedy its spectacular antagonisms and, in doing so, the fragmentation imposed by their characters, they become subsumed by the spectacle. Indeed, as they spend their characters' health, mana, and other forms of currency to purchase access to portions of the spectacle that had heretofore been too expensive or cost prohibitive for them to afford, they do not simply accumulate more experience, levels, skills, spells, and abilities. They accumulate more images: more armor and weapons, mounts, vanity pets, and any number of other, fetishized items. Color-coded according to value, and, depending on their rarity, given unique textures and animations, these images function symbolically within the game as a sort of visual shorthand, allowing other players to understand, at a glance, the accomplishments, dedication, and prowess of the player-characters who display them. Players thus become spectacles in their own right. Constructed entirely through the fetishized images they acquire, they become the exemplars of the very thing in which their alienation and fragmentation is rooted: their submission to the spectacular logic of the game as it is manifested in its race- and class-based antagonisms. The result is very similar to the way that Debord (1994, p.39) describes the figure of the celebrity in the spectacle:

> The individual who in the service of the spectacle is placed in stardom's spotlight is in fact the opposite of an individual, and as clearly the enemy of the individual in himself as of the individual in others. In entering the spectacle as a model to be identified with, he renounces all autonomy in order himself to identify with the general law of obedience to the course of things.

To achieve renown in *World of Warcraft,* then, players must not simply capitulate to, but celebrate and proselytize the demands that the spectacle makes of them. As with the bosses who rule over the game's instanced dungeons and raids, they must embrace what Debord (1994, p.40) describes as a "level of reality lower than that of the most insignificant individual life."

The primary site of struggle in *World of Warcraft* is thus not the game's intricate quests, spectacular environments, PVP battlegrounds, arenas, or even its dungeon and raid instances. Metaphorical in nature, these things are only the outward representations of conflicts that players are meant to internalize. The primary site of

struggle is, instead, the players who consume the game's spectacular content and, in doing so, reproduce the illusion in which its commodity value is manifested: the illusion that the game has a life of its own and exists independently of the people who produce it. Indeed, although *World of Warcraft* hails players as sovereign individuals, promising them a chance to distinguish themselves, players ultimately realize that the only thing in the game that they are capable of mastering is themselves. Unable to substantially affect the world or transcend the fragmentation and alienation imposed on them by their characters, they discover that in order to make meaning and thereby produce value from *World of Warcraft*, they must construct themselves and perform in accordance with the game's inviolate race- and class-based categories. Players, in other words, discover that they must police themselves—that they must construct themselves outside of the three-dimensional space of the game in accordance with the way that they are represented within it. In the context of *World of Warcraft*, and by implication, the complex networks of social, political, and economic production upon which it depends, this is the only struggle that players can win: the struggle to conform, despite their desires otherwise, to the systematic inequalities that third-stage capitalism represents as natural, unquestionable, and inevitable.

It is not surprising, in this sense, that a particular form of narrative has emerged as the elite of MMORPGs, the oft-celebrated power-gamers and high-end raiders, attempt to come to terms with their decisions to stop playing. Silverman and Simon (2009, p.374) quote such a narrative at the conclusion of their article:

> One day I just stopped raiding for a few weeks and realized that I didn't miss it...that I didn't care...I just stopped giving a shit about the loot...I realized I never had fun raiding...I realized that it was a second job, and that I didn't care anymore about my character advancing...so I just quit...If I had to do it again I would probably wish to never have played...but it is what it is.

This is not, as Silverman and Simon (2009, p.375) argue, the triumph of a player who has recognized *World of Warcraft* for what it is and who, in transcending his or her desire to play the game, has somehow escaped the "iron cage of bureaucratic consciousness." Rather, this is the triumph of third-stage capitalism as it is articulated and "plays out" through *World of Warcraft*. Indeed, as players consume the game, struggling to restore order to a world that has been torn apart by its spectacular antagonisms and thereby remedy the fragmentation imposed upon them by these antagonisms, they do not somehow "earn" or secure their liberation. Unable to do so, they instead reproduce the illusion in which their alienation is rooted: the illusion that the categories through which the spectacular hierarchies and inequalities of late capitalism are manifested—race and class—are incontrovertible rather than socially constructed. Players, as such, "do not produce themselves," but as Debord (1994, p. 23) writes about workers, "produce a force independent of themselves." They produce the society of *World of Warcraft's* spectacle: the commodified social relationships through which their alienation is simultaneously represented and policed. Quantified, commodified, and caught in a system in which, as Adorno and Horkheimer (1972, p.123) write, "[s]omething is provided for all so that none may escape," it is not surprising that many players ultimately refuse to struggle. As the resignation, disillusion, and weariness in the narrative above illustrates, this is all that is left for them. This is the triumph a system in which the only viable means of struggle is, paradoxically, not to struggle at all.

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Notes

[1]   As Simon and Silverman (2009, p.358) explain, power gaming in MMORPGs such as *World of Warcraft* describes a loosely-defined mode of game play characterized by a desire to not simply enjoy but master the content of the game world. Highly collaborative, power gamers work together to understand and thereby defeat the most difficult content in the game before anyone else. In addition to dedicating large amounts of time to the game, power gamers also engage in activities such as "theory-crafting," which involves reverse engineering the mathematics by which the game calculates damage and healing to determine how to optimally configure their characters. Power gamers, as such, are often celebrated as elite players.

[2]   Jessica Langer (2008, p.100) offers a similar claim, arguing that character creation in *World of Warcraft* functions as a site of resistance through which players can challenge the game's otherwise problematical portrayals of race.

[3]   Evidence of how the sociotechnical apparatus of *World of Warcraft* functions to channel players into specific patterns of behavior is readily apparent on the game's official PVP forum. Players who post seeking advice on how to deal with particular situations they encounter in the game's instanced battlegrounds and arenas often receive replies that are openly critical, if not insulting. The following post, for example, appeared in response to a warlock and druid team seeking advice on how to effectively handle shadow priests in the arena:

> either your druid fails at healing your pet or you don't control it
>
> coex and cot the priest as needed dot and mana drain, unless he's human with double solaces or bauble he should be oom fast.
>
> and as a druid with a lock partner he should be taking very few burns if any at all. (Stormspellz 2010)

[4]   *World of Warcraft*'s dungeon finder utility explicitly encodes this division of labor, requiring players to choose whether they intend to tank, heal, or DPS in the instance group before allowing them to join the queue.

[5]   Players sometimes even resort to botting programs to lessen the tedium of the farming. Expressly forbidden by the game's EUL and TOS agreements, the fact that there is a demand for these programs testifies not only to the degree to which players find themselves mimicking the behaviors of the game's NPCs, but to their frustration that the game's mechanics require them to do so.