

World of Warcraft: Hardcoded Racial Essentialism and Its Effects on Player Interaction

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WRITER'S COMMENT: As a cinema and digital media major, I am interested in investigating how digital technology's binary codification of analogue information influences users' thinking patterns. When I witnessed the hate and intolerance that seemed to saturate America's sociopolitical environment following Donald Trump's inauguration, I became especially interested in exploring how cybertechnology users' near-constant consumption of digital videos, social networks, news platforms, and games frames racist, sexist, xenophobic, queerphobic, Islamophobic, and otherwise problematic, essentialist mental schemas. When Professor Boluk assigned our class to read an article about North American World of Warcraft players' social stigmas toward Chinese "goldfarmers" who are paid "real" money to earn in-game virtual gold, I knew I had found a topic for my final paper. By analyzing the racially essentialist mindsets and consequential racist behaviors resulting from World of Warcraft's digitization of analogue human races, it is my hope that readers become more aware of the ways in which their interactions with their digital devices are supporting (or, hopefully, resisting) the intolerant attitudes that seem to be pervading modern America.

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: In 2004 and 2005, social media platforms like Facebook, video streaming services like YouTube, and massively multiplayer online games like World of Warcraft changed the world. Yet as much as these systems of networked communication extended the promise of global connectivity, digital currency, and a post-racial utopia, two decades later the failures of these utopian impulses are

evident. While numerous scholars have critiqued the blatantly stereotypical racial imagery of World of Warcraft, Sophie Horwitz-Hirsch follows in the tradition of critical race scholars like Lisa Nakamura and Alex Galloway to push further in order to research how these digital playspaces intersect with racialized capitalism in the form of gold farming, trading, and selling online. Horwitz-Hirsch deftly moves away from a formal analysis of the software to analyzing the embedded practices of play and critiquing how deeply race is imbricated within this massively-multiplayer online game.

– Stephanie Boluk, Department of Cinema and Digital Media

“**T**he open societies of global neoliberalism have reached a state in which race matters absolutely, but only because it does not matter at all anymore,” writes media scholar Alexander R. Galloway in his book *The Interface Effect* (124). Galloway’s paradoxical statement refers to an increasingly popular conviction that the issue with equalized racial representation in digital gamespaces is not its absence, but the reductive essentialism that segregates its presence. In other words, the desire to either be or be perceived as racially inclusive (or at least not racially exclusive) has motivated game developers to incorporate a racially stratified range of characters who function as singular, absolutized icons for particular human races,¹ the majority of which are only familiar to game developers in stereotypes. The result of such diverse yet essentialist racial representation is akin to the homogenization and discrimination which civil rights activists risked their lives to eradicate. Playable characters’ hardcoded² “races” in Blizzard Entertainment’s 2004 massively multiplayer online role-playing game³ *World of Warcraft*

1 It is worth noting that the popular belief that humans are divided into discrete races has been steadily discredited since the publication of M.F. Ashley Montagu’s book *Man’s Most Dangerous Myth: The Fallacy of Race* in 1942. For the purpose of this paper, however, I will be referring to race as a stratified classification system.

2 The Cambridge Dictionary states that to “hardcode” is “to put information into a software program so that it cannot be easily changed by a user.”

3 For the remainder of this paper, I will refer to massively multiplayer online role-playing games as MMORPG’s.

are particularly exemplary of this phenomenon—the “pandaren” race, for example, clearly reifies a stereotyped, essentialist simplification of Chinese culture. Player-to-player interaction within *World of Warcraft*’s gamespace demonstrates both the virtual and “real” racial hominization and alienation that these hardcoded, essentialist character races inspire; North American players’ presumptive means of identifying Chinese gold farmers⁴ and the systematic abuse with which they bombard them is especially demonstrative of this legitimization.

World of Warcraft has thirteen playable “races,” the majority of which are mythological creatures characterized by conspicuous racial stereotypes. Each member of each playable race has a homogenous, hardcoded visage, set of abilities, speech pattern, animation pattern, and voice, each of which is directly contingent upon their specific race. But because almost all of *World of Warcraft*’s playable races are stereotyped reductions of human races, this contingency results in almost every facet of each playable character virtually substantiating a stereotype associated with the “real” human race it essentializes. Although each member of each race has the option of adjusting their class traits⁵ by consuming different substances or wearing different clothing items, the basic personality and appearance of each fictional race remains uniform throughout its members. Within its virtual, fantastical context, the racial essentialism underpinning the *World of Warcraft* universe is often overlooked, “as in a dream when the most important or traumatic details are paraded before the mind’s eye in such flagrant obviousness that one is blind to them in their very immediacy” (Galloway 132).

The characteristics of *World of Warcraft*’s newest “pandaren” race (Figure 1) are particularly demonstrative of the game’s racist reduction of “real” human races into stereotypically homogenized, virtual categories whose criticality within the game’s organizational structure legitimates

4 Alexander R. Galloway defines a gold farmer as “a gamer who plays online video games day and night in order to earn virtual gold and sell it for real money” (121). Gold farmers are especially prevalent in China, where “gaming sweatshops” hire farmers to play video games on a five days-per-week, twelve hours-per-day schedule. A Chinese gold farmer’s salary ranges from 40 to 200 USD per month (Jin).

5 Class traits refer to a character’s specific weaponry, abilities, powers, and skills.

racially assumptive, abusive player-to-player interaction. The pandaren race refers to a breed of giant panda bear hardcoded to embody an astounding number of conspicuously Chinese themes and stereotypes. Besides the fact that the giant panda bear is native to south central China (World Wildlife Fund), and that “rén” is the Pinyin Chinese word for “person” (“pandaren” thus translates to panda-person), the pandaren’s fighting style, speech patterns, philosophy, and wardrobe all distinctly reference Chinese stereotypes.



Figure 1.

Each playable race in *World of Warcraft* has a specific collection of phrases that are only spoken by its members, articulated by either the singular male or the singular female voice actor responsible for that particular race.

This means that every pandaren character’s speech is limited to the purposefully exaggerated Chinese accents of voice actors Matthew Yang King or Hira Ambrosino, which spout phrases like, “Teach a man to fish, and he is fed for a day. Uh, no, uh . . . he is fed . . . I . . . I messed it up, but we just make this stuff up anyway” and “Let’s see, uh, forward, down, forward, PUNCH! No . . . down, up, kick?” Limiting the entire pandaren race’s speech pattern to one of two voices butchering lauded expressions originating from Asian culture⁶ flattens and demeans the authentic Asian culture which these phrases reference. The pandaren race’s hardcoded, homogeneously Asian themes apply to almost all of its facets, including its ancient Chinese battle gear (Figure 2), Daoist philosophy, acupuncture practice, and penchant for martial arts.

The racial simplification is so extreme that it almost seems like a deliberate joke—which makes sense, for in fact it originally was. In the first episode of Blizzard Entertainment’s *BlizzCast*,⁷ released on January

6 The former alludes to the famous Chinese proverb “Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime”; the latter alludes to an attack phrase spoken by Chun-Li in the famous Japanese video game *Street Fighter*.

7 *BlizzCast* is a podcast series hosted by Blizzard Entertainment’s Community Team. Each episode is about an aspect of a Blizzard video game’s development.

10, 2008, senior art director Samwise stated that the *World of Warcraft* team originally introduced the pandaren race as a 24-hour April Fools' Day prank, but decided to keep it as a legitimate playable race due to players' positive reactions: "But so we put that up in there and everyone was like, 'Oh my God! A PANDA RACE? That's kind of cool!' And I'm like, 'Are you kidding me? Really? You want to see pandas in *Warcraft III* or whatever?'" What started as a racist joke has virtualized and popularized a stereotyped, homogenized reduction of Asian culture; the danger, of course, is that the essentialist implications of *World of Warcraft's* races have influenced, and continue to influence, players' in-game behavior toward one another.

North American players' presumptive means of identifying Chinese gold farmers, and the systematic abuse to which they subject them, is



Figure 2.

especially demonstrative of the impact that *World of Warcraft's* racial essentialism has on its players. In his article "Current Analysis and Future Research Agenda on 'Gold Farming,'" Richard Heeks states that "in-game recognition of gold-farming avatars relies on rather unscientifically putting together clues," the most revelatory of which is analyzing players' levels of English proficiency (46). To determine whether an avatar is a Chinese gold farmer, it is common for American players to ask them to type one or two sentences in English. If the sentences are error-free, the avatar is deemed acceptable; if they produce

grammar or spelling mistakes, the avatar is immediately deemed a Chinese gold farmer. The issue with this mode of identification is obvious: being unable to speak perfect English does not mean that somebody is Chinese, and being Chinese does not mean that somebody is a gold farmer. North American players' frequent assumptions that players who are not fluent in English are both Chinese and gold farmers relegates all non-English-speaking players of all races into the "unwanted foreigner" category that the Chinese gold farmer has come to represent, demonstrating the same racial essentialism exhibited by the game's playable races.

By identifying Chinese gold farmers via digitized language,

North American players' diagnostic adopts a design similar to those of a captcha⁸ or Turing test,⁹ positing North American players in the positions of "real" humans and Chinese gold farmers in the positions of homogeneously automated machines. This linguistic test perpetuates an extensive history of North Americans objectifying Asian bodies as uniform, mechanic automata; in her article "White Sexual Imperialism: A Theory of Asian Feminist Jurisprudence," Sunny Woan states that, while America occupied the Philippines in the early twentieth century, American soldiers frequently referred to Filipinas as "little brown fucking machines powered by rice" (283). When American soldiers returned home, they brought their homogeneously mechanical comprehension of Asian bodies with them, contributing to an already racially essentialist American environment that would soon beget the techno-orientalist¹⁰ ideology that now dominates American cyberpunk¹¹ literature, film, and videogames. The implicitly robotic objectification of foreign *World of Warcraft* players inherent in North American players' lingual diagnostic test of anybody whom they suspect to be a Chinese gold farmer extends *World of Warcraft's* hardcoded racial essentialism into players' live interactions.

As expected, North American players' in-game treatment of players who have failed their essentialist lingual assessments illustrates the inevitable translation of a gamespace's hardcoded, racism into its player-to-player interactions. In an online interview for Nick Yee's psychological study of MMORPGs entitled *The Daedalus Project*, an anonymous

8 Dictionary.com defines a captcha as "a computer-generated squiggly-letter test that must be typed in by Inter/Web users to prove they are human."

9 Dictionary.com defines a Turing test as "a proposed test of a computer's ability to think, requiring that the covert substitution of the computer for one of the participants in a keyboard and screen dialogue should be undetectable by the remaining human participant."

10 In his article *Techno-Orientalism and Media-Tribalism*, Toshiya Ueno describes techno-orientalism as "the Orientalism of cybersociety and the information age" (97).

11 The online *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* defines "cyberpunk" as a genre of writing which foregrounds "a future in which machine augmentations of the human body are commonplace, as are mind and body changes brought about by drugs and biological engineering." Although this definition describes cyberpunk literature, it also applies to cyberpunk film and videogames.

24-year-old male wrote, “I’ve encountered a lot of ‘probable’ gold farmers in high level zones. I tried speaking to them asking them to stop. If they answered in Chinese, I harassed them by luring mobs to them to interrupt their game-play. If they speak English or any other non-Chinese language, I leave them alone” (6). Although this player’s harassment of Chinese players (only some of whom are, in fact, gold farmers) is virtual, its consequences transgress *World of Warcraft’s* digital gamespace; by assaulting Chinese gold farmers’ avatars, North American players make it more difficult for tens of thousands of people to successfully perform literally the only jobs available to them.

Even without the additional difficulty of targeted assaults by other players, being a gold farmer in China requires intense effort for little payoff. In an interview conducted by Steve Inskeep of National Public Radio’s “Morning Edition” show, Robin Chin, a gold farmer in China, said (through a translator), “It’s a very tiring job, and rewards are low. It’s mentally tiring, as you have to keep in character for twelve hours, and your eyes get very tired.” He continued, “In the U.S., a gold farmer can sell the virtual currency that they earn in a day’s work for around thirteen dollars. In China, it would sell for just four dollars.” Alan Chiu, a former Wall Street banker who founded a popular online trading platform for virtual currency, added, “It’s a very labor-intensive job. I don’t see it any different from low-cost Chinese workers working in Guandong, producing Nike shoes, and for Nike to be sold eventually—sold at retail stores for maybe a six-hundred-percent margin.” When American players team up against avatars whom they suspect are Chinese gold farmers, they perpetuate an already exploitative system for no reason other than delusional American chauvinism and an essentialist attitude adopted from the very framework of the game.

North American players’ digital violence toward Chinese gold farmers is not restricted to *World of Warcraft’s* gamespace; in response to a thread titled “Stop calling people Chinese farmers” in an online forum unaffiliated with Blizzard Entertainment, an anonymous thirty-eight-year-old male wrote, “I’ll not only call them CHINESE FARMERS . . . I’ll call them a disease that has inflicted this game. Gold farmers are the rats of every game. They are everywhere and they multiply in a blink of an eye” (Yee 3). This user’s comparison of Chinese gold farmers to “a disease” and “rats” perpetuates racist American rhetoric that has been prevalent since the nineteenth century, when American laborers

compared Chinese immigrants to diseased rats “stealing” their jobs and “infecting” their territory (Mahajan). Calling all Chinese gold farmers “a disease” converts thousands of individual Chinese workers into a singular, invasive entity; calling them “rats” dehumanizes Chinese gold farmers into identical, non-human creatures devoid of recognizable traits—much like pandarens themselves.

Internet users’ reactions to a short video created by Mad Cow Studio’s famous machinimator¹² “Nyhm” exhibits the popularity of the anonymous thirty-eight-year-old man’s discriminatory, essentialist view of Chinese gold farmers. The video, entitled *Ni Hao (A Gold Farmer’s Story)*, has earned a “4 x Platinum” rating on *Warcraft Movies* (the most popular *World of Warcraft* machinima website [Dines and Humez 567]), as well as 7,308,781 views-to-date, 22,994 likes, and 7,209 comments on *Youtube*. In the video, *World of Warcraft* animation depicts identical Chinese gold farmer avatars being killed and, ironically, harassing other players while an off-screen voice sings new lyrics over the instrumental track of Akon’s popular song “Smack That.” In one segment, a player kneels next to the avatar of a Chinese gold farmer whom he has just killed and sings, “This China-man gets fired, that’s one farmer they’ll have to replace, not supposed to be here in the first place.” The identical appearance of every Chinese gold farmer avatar within the video, coupled with the song’s use of the term “China-man” instead of “gold farmer,” suggests that the video’s creative team and thousands of supporters think of all gold farmers as homogeneously Chinese men who are visibly and occupationally indispensable (“... that’s one they’ll have to replace . . .”), as if Chinese gold farmers, like the pandaren race, have been hardcoded to embody a set of racially-dependent, nonhuman traits. Because the lyric “not supposed to be here in the first place” is sung directly after an avatar refers to a Chinese gold former as simply a “China-man,” this segment voices American players’ contempt for both Chinese gold farmers and, more generally, Chinese players, every one of whom North American players seem to assume is a gold farmer.

A tempting solution is to simply replace each race’s stereotypical fighting style, speech pattern, philosophy, and wardrobe with the more

12 Urban Dictionary defines a “machinimator” as “a person who makes machinima movies” (Kerfoofle), and “machinima” as “the art of using a pre-rendered gaming engine and making it into a film” (Grifmasta).

realistic conventions of the human race which it references. However, this strategy ignores the fact that incorporating even the most accurate, respectful representation of a race that is possible within a digital gamespace still furthers essentialist ideology; by transcoding¹³ race, (which is an analogue classification—individual members of one race inevitably vary in biology and social habit) into binary, digital code, MMORPGs reduce the infinite fluidity and variability of entire races and the cultures with which they associate into singular cybertypes bound by finite numbers. The unavoidable, algorithmic uniformity and immutability of a digitized race, even if its members' appearances and behaviors resist harmful stereotypes, works to create an essentialist framework which views race as an amalgamated whole rather than a collection of distinct individuals with individually valuable lives. In other words, transcoding particular races into digital formats encourages players to view members of these races as dispensable constituents.

A more effective solution would be for digital gamespaces to exclude racial representation altogether. The homogenizational essentialism that accompanies digitizing an analogue race is inevitable; as Lev Manovich writes in *The Language of New Media*, new media's¹⁴ inherently essentialist digitality has a "significant influence on the cultural logic of the media" (6). The problem with eliminating all racial representation in digital gamespaces is, of course, that race is a critical component of identity, which is a central focus of MMORPGs with customizable avatars. If online role-playing games' popularity throughout global culture continues, the racially essentialist ideology cultivated by their digital frameworks may be unavoidable. It is likely that this will be the case. According to *Statista*—an online market research, statistics, and business intelligence portal partnered with *Business Insider*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Independent*, and *Forbes*—the MMORPG market had almost a twenty-seven-billion-dollar revenue in 2016; by 2018, this number is projected to increase to thirty-four billion. Although this projected increase would be an obstacle

13 In his book *The Language of New Media*, Lev Manovich states, "[I]n new media lingo, to 'transcode' something is to translate it into another format" (64).

14 Lev uses "new media" as an umbrella term encompassing "[w]eb sites, virtual worlds, virtual reality, multimedia, computer games, interactive installations, computer animation, digital video cinema, and human-computer interfaces" (8).

in the fight for a future in which demographics like Chinese *World of Warcraft* players are not targeted and harassed, it does not mean that digital games' effects on social progress will be solely adverse. Since the nonprofit organization Games for Change was founded in 2004, there has been a remarkable increase in online games¹⁵ purposefully designed to educate players about issues related to ableism, sexism, racism, Islamophobia, classism, misogyny, and queerphobia. The tools are there—it is just a matter of using them.

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15 Notable examples include The Quinnspracy’s Depression Quest (2013), Impact Games’ PeaceMaker (2007), and United Nation’s World Food Programme’s Food Force (2005).

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