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"Don't Hate the Player, Hate the Game"

The Racialization of Labor in *World of Warcraft*

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. . . Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMOs) such as *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*), *Lineage II,* and *Everquest* are immensely profitable, skillfully designed, immersive and beautifully detailed virtual worlds that enable both exciting gameplay and the creation of real time digitally embodied communities. This year, *World of Warcraft* surpassed 10 million users, confirming games economist Edward Castronova's (2005) predictions for exponential growth, and these players are intensely interested in and protective of their investments in the virtual world of Azeroth. This stands to reason: as Alexander Galloway (2006) writes, "virtual worlds are always in some basic way the expression of Utopian desire." One of their primary rallying points as a group has been to advocate strongly that Blizzard regulate cheating within the game more stringently; however, the definition of cheating is unclear, despite the game's End User License Agreement (EULA), since many players break these rules with impunity, a state of affairs which is actually the norm in MMO's.[1] As Mia Consalvo (2007) argues, it makes much less sense to see cheating within games as a weakness of game design or a problem with player behavior than to see it as an integral part of game culture, a feature that keeps players from getting "stuck" and quitting. "Cheating" thus benefits players and the game industry alike. However, cheating is as varied in its forms as is gameplay itself, and some varieties are viewed by players as socially undesirable, while others are not.

Though Consalvo (2007) stresses the extremely subjective ways that MMO players define cheating, asserting that "a debate exists around the definition of cheating and

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whether it actually hurts other players [and] players themselves see little common ground in what constitutes cheating" (p. 150), real-money trading (RMT), or buying and selling in-game property for real money, is widely considered the worst, more morally reprehensible form of cheating. In particular, the practice of gold farming, or selling in-game currency to players for real money, usually through resellers such as IGE or EBay, is especially disliked. Leisure players have been joined by worker players from poorer nations such as China and Korea who are often subject to oppression as both a racio-linguistic minority, and as undesirable underclassed social bodies in the context of game play and game culture.[2] These "farmers," as other players dismissively dub them, produce and sell virtual goods such as weapons, garments, animals, and even their own leveled-up avatars or "virtual bodies" to other players for "real world" money. As Consalvo (2007) writes, the "gill-buying practice is viscerally despised by some players" (p. 164). . . .

Though as T. L. Taylor (2006) notes, MMOs are distinguished by their "enormous potential in a fairly divisive world," the "fact that people play with each other across regions and often countries" as often as not results in ethnic and racial chauvinism: "as a tag the conflation of Chinese with gold farmer has seemed to come all too easy and now transcends any particular game" (p. 321). Robert Brookey (2007) expands upon this claim; in his analysis of gaming blogs, he discovered "overt racist attitudes" towards Chinese farmers; most importantly, that "some players, who harbor negative feelings toward Chinese farmers, do not believe that these feelings denote racial discrimination." Thus, though it is the case that players cannot see each others' bodies while playing, specific forms of gamic labor, such as gold farming and selling, as well as specific styles of play have become racialized as Chinese, producing new forms of networked racism that are particularly easy for players to disavow.

Unlike the Internet itself, MMOs have *always* been a global medium, with many games originating in Asia.[3] Korea has been a major player in the industry from its beginning, but Asian players are numerous even in American-run MMOs such as Blizzard's *WoW;* in 2008, the number of simultaneous players on Chinese *WoW* servers exceeded 1 million, the most that have ever been recorded in Europe or the U.S. ("Blizzard," 2008). Thus, though gold farmers are typecast as Chinese, most Asian players are "leisure players," not player workers. . . .

Perhaps because most digital game scholars are players themselves, the economics of gold farming are usually discussed in the scholarly literature in terms of their negative impact upon the "world" of leisure players, who buy gold because they lack the time to earn virtual capital through "grinding" or performing the repetitive and tedious tasks that are the basis of most MMOs. However, as Toby Miller (2006) has advocated, digital games scholars need to attend to its medium's political economy, and to "follow the money" to its less glamorous, less "virtual" places, like games console and PC manufacturing plants, gold farmer sweatshops, and precious metals reclamation sites—in short, to China. Yet while many players are fairly unaware that their computer hardware is born and dies, or is *recycled,* in China, they are *exceptionally* aware of the national, racial, and linguistic identity of gold farmers. Gold farmers are reviled player-workers whose position in the gamic economy resembles that of other immigrant groups who cross national borders in order to work, but unlike other types of "migrant" workers, their labors are offshore, and thus invisible—they are "virtual migrants."[4] However, user generated content in and around MMOs actively visualizes this process. Machinima fan-produced video production racializes this reviled form of gameplay as "Oriental" in ways that hail earlier visual media such as music videos and minstrel shows. Gold

farming, a burgeoning "grey market" labor practice in a disliked and semi-illegal industry that as Consalvo (2007) notes, may soon outstrip the primary games market as a source of revenue, has become racialized as Asian, specifically as Chinese. . . .

WoW and other virtual worlds have been touted for their democratic potential—as Castronova (2005) puts it:

> People entering a synthetic world can have, in principle, any body they desire. At a stroke, this feature of synthetic worlds removes from the social calculus all the unfortunate effects that derive from the body . . . all without bearing some of the burdens that adhere to the Earth bodies we were born with. (pp. 25–26)

The social calculus of race, nation, and class are burdens borne by Chinese gold farmers, Chinese leisure players, and ultimately, the gaming community as a whole. Hatred of Chinese gold farmers drives *WoW* users to produce visual and textual media that hews closely to earlier anti-Asian discourses, media that they broadcast to other users through forums, general chat in-game, and "homemade" videos.

World of Warcraft is a virtual world where significant numbers of people are conducting their psychic, financial, and social lives. This massively multiplayer online game continues to roll out content for its users in the form of expansion packs, frequent software updates, action figures and a feature film in development, and an extensive content-rich and frequently updated website for its community of users. Users are invited by Blizzard to get involved in some aspects of this world's production by contributing interesting screenshots, machinima, personal narratives, and advice on gameplay to their site, and even in cases when they are not, players actively produce in defiance of its wishes. Topics that the game industry may wish to avoid because they may seem divisive, or may reflect badly on the virtual world, are confronted frequently in participatory media created by its users.

Machinima as User-Generated Racial Narrative: The Media Campaign Against Chinese Player-Workers in *WoW*

Machinima is a crucial site of struggle over the meaning of race in shared digital space, and it is a central part of the culture of MMOs such as *World of Warcraft*. Machinima has recently become the object of much academic interest because it exemplifies the notion of participatory media, an influential and useful formulation that is the basis for Jenkins' (2006) book *Convergence Culture*. In it, Jenkins describes how machinima are prime examples of users' seizing the right to contribute to media universes in defiance of industry wishes, standards, and control; their value lies in the ability to produce counternarratives whose impact lies in their active subversion of the narrow messages available in many dominant media texts. Machinima literally extend the storyspace of the games upon which they are based, and the most interesting of these actively work to reconfigure their original meanings in progressive, socially productive ways. Jenkins explains that transmediated storyspaces which exist across media platforms permit increased opportunities for engaged users like fans to insert their own content into these "synthetic worlds," to use Castronova's (2005) phrase—while game developers like Blizzard provide limited, licensed, and fairly tightly controlled virtual space for players to navigate, users extend this space by writing fan fiction, creating original artwork, and making their own movies or machinima using images, narratives, and tropes from the game.

While part of the pleasure of *World of Warcraft* consists in navigating its richly

imaged, beautifully rendered spaces, users must rely upon the company to provide more of this valuable commodity in the form of expansion packs such as "The Burning Crusade" and "The Wrath of the Lich King," eagerly anticipated and extremely profitable products for which users are willing to stand in line for days at a time. Machinima permits users to expand this space for free; while navigable space is still tightly controlled by the company—unlike in *Second Life,* users are unable to build their own structures or objects to insert in the world—machinima allows users to extend its representational or narrative space, creating scenarios that are genuinely new because they depict activities or behaviors impossible in the space of the game. This is a fascinating area of study, and one that is a thriving and integral part of *WoW* in particular. The struggle for resources integral to the structure of MMOs can also be re-envisioned as the struggle to own or claim virtual space and to police national boundaries as well.[5] Player-produced machinima accessed from Warcraftmovies.com make arguments about race, labor, and the racialization of space in *World of Warcraft.*[6] These highly polemical texts employ the visual language of the game, one of the most recognizable and distinctive ever created for shared virtual play, to bring into sharp relief the contrast between the privileges of media production available to empowered players with the time and inclination to create machinima, and those who are shut out of this aspect of *WoW* by their status as worker players. Participatory media is a privilege of the leisure class; active fandom is too expensive a proposition for many digital workers, who as Dibbell explains poignantly, can't afford to *enjoy* the game that they have mastered, much less produce media to add to it.[7]

Unsurprisingly, there are two tiers of this type of user production—Blizzard frequently solicits screenshots, holds art contests, and showcases user-produced machinima that become part of the "official" canon of the game. However, there is extensive traffic in content that is not endorsed by the developer, but which is nonetheless part of the continuing rollout of the world. Racial discourse is a key part of this rollout. If the official *World of Warcraft* game is a gated community, one that users pay to enter, its covenants consist in its EULA [End-User License Agreement]. However, part of Jenkins' (2006) argument is that media technologies such as the Internet have made it impossible to "gate" media in the same way. The "underground" machinima I will discuss in this chapter build and expand the world of *WoW* in regards to representations of race in just as constitutive a way as its official content. As Lowood (2006) notes, *WoW* players have been creating visual moving image records as long as, or perhaps even longer than, they have been playing the game. Thus, machinima is anything but a derivative or ancillary form in relation to *WoW,* for its history runs exactly parallel, and in some sense, slightly in advance of the game itself—as Lowood notes, users were employing the beta version of *WoW* to make machinima before the game was available to the public. Lowood claims, "*WoW movies,* from game film to dance videos, have become an integral part of the culture shared by a player community" (p. 374).

If indeed machinima extend the world of gameplay, how are players co-creating this world? Anti-farmer machinima produces overtly racist narrative space to attach to a narrative that, while carefully avoiding overt references to racism or racial conflict in our world, is premised upon a racial war in an imaginary world—the World of Azeroth. While Jenkins (2006) celebrates the way that fans, particularly female fans, have extended the worlds of *Star Trek* in truly liberatory ways, inserting homosexual narratives between Captain Kirk and Spock that the franchise would never permit or endorse, a closer look at user produced content from Warcraftmovies.com reveals a contraction and retrenchment of concepts of gender, race, and nation rather than their enlargement.

Warcraftmovies.com, the most popular *World of Warcraft* machinima website, organizes its user generated content under several different categories. "Underground" machinima deals with topics such as "bug/exploit," "exploration," and "gold farming." "Ni Hao (A Gold Farmer's Story)" by "Nyhm" of "Madcow Studios" has earned a "4 x Platinum" rating, the highest available, from Warcraftmovies.com, and it is also available on YouTube, where it has been viewed 533,567 times, has been favorited 1,998 times, and has produced 981 comments from users ("Ni Hao"). This extremely popular, visually sophisticated machinima music video features new lyrics sung over the instrumental track of Akon's hit hip hop song "Smack That." This polemical anti-Asian machinima's chorus is:

> I see you farmin' primals in Shadow moon Valley, 10 cents an hour's good money when you are Chinese, I buy your auctions you sell my gold right back to me, feels like you're bendin' me over, you smile and say "ni hao" and farm some gold, "ni hao" it's getting old, ni hao, oh.

The claim that "10 cents an hour's good money when you are Chinese" displays awareness that the farmers' incentive for exploiting or "bending over" better-resourced players comes from economic need. Another part of the video shows a "farmer" shoveling gold into a vault, with the subtitled lyric "IGE's making bank now." The International Gaming Exchange is one of the largest re-sellers of gold, avatar level-ups, and other virtual property, and it is an American business, not an Asian one. Nonetheless, this commentary on the gold farming economic system resorts to the full gamut of racial stereotypes, including a Chinese flag as the background for a video scene of a sexy singing female Troll in a scanty outfit flanked by the human "farmers" wielding pickaxes and shovels.

Later in the video, a Chinese gold farmer is killed by another player, who comments as he kneels next to the corpse that "this China-man gets fired, that's one farmer they'll have to replace, not supposed to be here in the first place." . . . Clearly, Asian players, specifically those suspected of being "farmers" but as this image [suggests], all "China-men" have a diminished status on *WoW:* many American players fail to see them as "people." . . . The video depicts them as all owning exactly the same avatar, a male human wearing a red and gold outfit and wielding a pickaxe. This dehumanization of the Asian player—they "all look the same" because they all *are* the same—is evocative of earlier conceptions of Asian laborers as interchangeable and replaceable. . . .

Conclusion

The anti-Asian racial discourse in "Ni Hao," as well as that noted in Brookey's (2007), Steinkuehler's (2006), and Taylor's (2006) research are not necessarily representative of the *WoW* population as a whole (though it must be said that while YouTube and Warcraftmovies are full of machinima or trophy videos of farmer-killing replete with racist imagery, there are no pro-farmer user-produced machinima to be seen).[8] Machinima is a breakthrough medium because it differs from previous mass forms of media or performance; it is the product of individual users. However, like the minstrel shows that preceded it, it shapes the culture by disseminating arguments about the nature of race, labor, and assimilation. . . .

Similarly, it is certainly not the case that games must be entirely free of racist discourse in order to be culturally important or socially productive, in short, to be "good." No multiplayer social game could meet that criterion at all times. On the other hand, if we are to take games seriously as

"synthetic worlds," we must be willing to take their racial discourses, media texts, and interpersonal conflicts seriously as well. As Dibbell (2006) claims, it is constraint and scarcity—the challenge of capital accumulation—that makes MMOs pleasurable, even addictive. Game economies based on cultures of scarcity engender Real Money Transfer, and as long as this form of player-work is socially debased and racialized, it will result in radically unequal social relations, labor types, and forms of representation along the axes of nation, language, and identity. Asian worker players are economically unable to accumulate avatarial capital and thus become "persons"; they are the dispossessed subjects of synthetic worlds. As long as Asian "farmers" are figured as unwanted guest workers within the culture of MMOs, user-produced extensions of MMO-space like machinima will most likely continue to depict Asian culture as threatening to the beauty and desirability of shared virtual space in the *World of Warcraft*.

Notes

1. Players of *WoW* regularly use an arsenal of "mods" and "add-ons" that are circulated on player boards online; though these are technically in violation of the End User License Agreement (EULA), many players consider the game unplayable without them, especially at the terminal or "end game" levels. Blizzard turns a blind eye to this, and in fact tacitly condones it by posting technical updates referring to the impact of add-ons on game performance.

2. See T. L. Taylor (2006), on in-game language chauvinism and the informal enforcement of "English only" chat in *WoW* even by players of non-Anglophone nationalities.

3. See Chan (2006), as well as the January 2008 special issue of *Games and Culture* on Asia, volume 3, number 1, in particular Hjorth's (2008) introductory essay "Games@Neo-Regionalism: Locating Gaming in the Asia-Pacific."

4. See (Aneesh, 2006).

5. As Brookey (2007) argues, national boundaries have been reproduced in cyberspace, and the location of the servers that generate these virtual environments are used to demarcate the borders. These respondents claim that if Chinese players experience discrimination on U.S. servers, it is because they have crossed the border into territory where they do not belong and are not welcome.

6. The phrase "player-produced machinima" is in some sense a redundant one, since machinima is from its inception an amateur form; however it is becoming an increasingly necessary distinction as professional media producers appropriate it. *South Park*'s "Make Love Not Warfare" was co-produced with Blizzard Entertainment, and Toyota has aired a 2007 commercial made in the same way. See http://www.machinima.com/film/view&id=23588. In an example of media synergy, *South Park* capitalized on the success and popularity of the episode by bundling a *World of Warcraft* trial game card along with the DVD box set of its most recent season.

7. See Dibbell (2007) for an eloquent account of "Min," a highly skilled worker player who took great pride in being his raiding party's "tank," a "heavily armed warrior character who . . . is the linchpin of any raid" (p. 41). His raiding team would take "any customer" into a dangerous dungeon where a lower level player could never survive alone and let them pick up the valuable items dropped there, thus acting like virtual African shikaris or Nepalese porters. Min greatly enjoyed these raids but was eventually forced to quit them and take up farming again when they proved insufficiently profitable.

8. UC San Diego doctoral candidate Ge Jin's distributive filmmaking project on the lives of Chinese worker players in MMOs can be viewed at http://www.chinesegoldfarmers.com. His films, which can also be viewed on YouTube, contain documentary footage of Chinese worker players laboring in "gaming workshops" in Shanghai. His interviews with them make it clear that these worker players are well aware of how despised they are by American and

European players, and that they feel a sense of "inferiority" that is articulated to their racial and ethnic identity.

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