

Contrasting Masculinities in Azeroth

The Construction of Hegemonic Masculinity in World of Warcraft

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Abstract

Contrasting Masculinities in Azeroth: The Construction of Hegemonic Masculinity in World of Warcraft

By Malcolm F. Capstick

Using R.W. Connell's theoretical framework of hegemonic masculinity, a critical discourse analysis is completed on the avatar creation screen in World of Warcraft (WoW), a popular, online video game. As WoW is foremost a commodity, analysis is contrasted with design and marketing strategies that are provided by a lecture given at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) campus, on May 7th, 2014 by Rob Pardo, chief creative designer of WoW. Results show that hegemonic masculinity is most prevalent among the images of WoW, and given the commercial success of it as a commodity, this discourse is widely disseminated within context of globalized consumption. WoW as the articulation of a dominant, Western gendered ideology extended to global markets therefore successfully disseminates hegemonic masculinity through the commodification of pleasure.

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Table of Contents

Section 1: Introduction

Introduction	1-2
Terminology.....	3-7

Section 2: Theoretical Approach

Literature Review:	8-11
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Section 3: Literature Review

Theoretical Background.....	12-14
Directive Constructions of Gender	14-15
Participatory Constructions of Gender.....	15-17

Section 4: Methodology

Methodological Approach	18-19
-------------------------------	-------

Section 5: Analysis

Analysis of Primary Characteristics.....	20-24
Analysis of Secondary Characteristics.....	24-25
Codifying Masculinity within World of Warcraft	25-28
Marginalized Masculinities within World of Warcraft.....	28-30
Subordinate Masculinities within World of Warcraft.....	30-33

Section 6: Game Design, Accessibility and Gender Representation

Opening Markets.....	34-36
Gameplay First	36-37
Representation	37-38
Hegemonic Discourse and the Market	38-40

Section 7: Discussion

Discussion	41-42
------------------	-------

Conclusion.....	42-43
Limitations.....	43-44
Suggestions for Further Study	44

Section 8: Work Cited

Work Cited.....	45-48
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Introduction

Having grown up playing video games, I was afforded the opportunity to observe how technology has changed the shape of gaming over the span of 25 years. From getting my first Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) to my current preference for online computer gaming, I have seen how technology has changed the way that I interact with and through the video game infrastructure. This research project explores how Western hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005) is constructed in the virtual environment of the massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG), World of Warcraft (WoW). The MMORPG is a single player game, where each player assumes an onscreen identity, known as an avatar. Once in the game, a player is provided a virtual context, allowing players to interact together, in real time, within a persistent gaming environment. Whereas most games cease to evolve when the player is absent, the MMORPG continues to be shaped, even when the player has logged off.

The implementation of this form of gaming allows a player to access new avenues of social interaction, unbound by spatial restriction. As WoW itself is a globally accessible consumer commodity, it cannot be divorced of the ideological framings that maintain bearing on its production. Through global access to the consumer, WoW functions as a form of ideological dissemination that is willingly embraced within consumer markets.

As previous theoretical work has established that masculinity maintains a dominant status within Western culture (Connell, 2005), much of the status that is allotted to this ideology is constructed through an inability to view masculinity within a frame of exerting power (Macintosh, 1989; Connell, 2005). This is expressed within hegemonic masculinity as a cultural measure from which alternative constructions of masculinity and or femininity become measured. Through deconstructing masculinity within a context of its representation within a globally

accessible consumer commodity, research maintains the capacity to elucidate how masculinity is conceptualized, reiterated and disseminated through global access to the consumer good. To that end, this research explores how WoW represents masculinity, and if this representation reinforces or challenges constructions of Western hegemonic masculinity.

Terminology

Before beginning analysis, it is important to define **key terms** used throughout this body of work.

Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game (MMORPG)

The MMORPG is a single player game, where each player assumes an onscreen identity, known as an avatar. The defining characteristic of the MMORPG is that it allows thousands of players to interact together, in real-time, within a persistent online gaming environment, allowing real-time cooperative social interaction within a virtual space.

The Avatar

When a player logs on to WoW, the first decision that must be made is the design of a character's avatar. As the MMORPG format enables social interaction, the avatar is constructed to serve two important roles within the gaming experience:

1. The avatar is the tool by which the game is navigated.
2. The avatar is a visual representation of self within social interaction.

While serving as a means for game navigation, the avatar's primary function is as a vehicle for obtaining and completing various objectives. Whereas the MMORPG genre enables real-time social interactions, the secondary function of the avatar is to provide a visual representation of self, allowing the body to be read and interpreted within social relationships (Tronstad, 2008).

“Race”, “Gender” and “Class”

Options of visual representation are presented to the player using the in game terminology of “gender”, “race” and “class”. The use of these words within WoW has a different connotation compared with the analytical usage of these terms in this project. To avoid confusion, when

discussion uses the words “race”, “gender”, and “class” in the context of what is used within WoW, (i.e. the words in quotation marks) these terms are defined as follows:

1. “Gender”- A visual characteristic in WoW to delineate the anatomical sex of a selected avatar.
2. “Race” – A visual characteristic in WoW allowing the player to play one of thirteen unique avatar models.
3. “Class” – A visual characteristic in WoW that impacts the functionality of an avatar. While both “gender” and “race” impact the physical appearance of an avatar, “class” impacts the functionality of the avatar (it indicates what can and cannot be done). Whereas each “class” is given a pre-set of abilities, how the function of the game is played is directly impacted by a player’s choice of “class”.

Categorization of Visual Options

When first creating an avatar, a player is positioned to make several decisions that determine its aesthetic. For the purpose of this research, the characteristics have been broken down into two groupings:

1. Primary visual characteristics – The choice of “gender”, the choice of “race” and the choice of “class”.
2. Secondary visual characteristics – All other aesthetic options where availability is contingent on a player’s selection of primary characteristics.

Primary visual characteristics are differentiated from secondary visual characteristics by an inability to alter or reject the visual representations of the body. In other words, to play the game a player must choose a “gender”, “race” and “class” to proceed. The visual design that is offered to a player vis-a-vis primary visual characteristics are defined, pre-sets of bodily presentation. For

example, body type (skinny, muscular, tall, short, etc.), is an unchangeable visual characteristic that is defined through the avatars choice of “gender” and “race”.

Secondary visual characteristics allow a player a degree of agency in shaping visual representation. Depending on the selection of primary visual characteristics, a player is provided options to make the body seemingly unique through accepting and rejecting the available aesthetic options within this category.

“Race” Classifications

A player is provided 13 individual “races”, all with different body shapes, sizes, colours and cosmetic options that are made available through secondary visual characteristics. For the purpose of this study these races have been grouped within four categories.

1. Anthropocentric
2. Elvin
3. Anthropomorphic
4. Bestial

The anthropocentric races use symbolic structures of the body that identify the avatar as being human, or human-like in appearance. Symbols, such as whiteness of the skin, a proportional body type and the absence of bodily characteristics that would indicate foreign identification to the corporeal signification of human symbolism (such as protruding horns or elongated ears), characterize this classification as belonging to an aesthetic similar to that of the player. The anthropocentric “races” consist of Humans, Dwarves and Gnomes.

The Elven classification, while still resembling a human-like appearance, is marked by foreign features to corporeal identification of the human aesthetic, such as elongated ears and eyebrows, and illuminated eye colour. The Elven classification consists of Night Elves and the Blood Elves.

The Anthropomorphic classification categorizes races through their resemblance to animals. While the body itself does not resemble human-like features, the symbols of the animals depicted (Wolf, Bovine and Panda) still maintain a corporeal familiarity through using representations of identifiable animal archetypes. The anthropomorphic classification consists of the Worgen, Tauren and the Pandaran.

Lastly, the Bestial classification of the body maintains features that are foreign to corporeal human identification. Through the use of elongated, sharpened teeth, the presence of horns or tentacles, and the decomposition of the body, aesthetic features within this classification are the furthest removed from human corporeal identification. The Bestial classification consists of Orcs, Undead, Goblin, Draenei and the Trolls. See table #1 for racial categorization.

“Racial” Categorization

	Anthropocentric	Elvin	Anthropomorphic	Bestial
“Race”	Humans	Night Elves	Worgen	Orc
	Dwarves	Blood Elves	Tauren	Undead
	Gnomes		Padaran	Goblin
				Draenei
				Troll

Table #1

Masculinity in World of Warcraft

To begin looking at masculinity in WoW, it is first necessary to establish what masculinity is within this context. As Connell (2005) defines hegemonic masculinity as “the configuration of gender practice ... which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of woman” (p. 77), masculinity is positioned as a fluid set of symbolic structures that men maintain, and woman lack. It is then fruitful to first contrast the

human male body to that of its female counterpart. As the human likeness is a familiar visual in the corporeal experience of the player, it is the site from which cultural ideologies of idealized masculinity can be made palpable. By observing how the game itself constructs masculinity through the use of symbolic structures that differentiate the Human male body from that of the Human female, a baseline of masculinity can be codified for comparative analysis.

Theoretical Approach

To begin looking at masculinity within WoW, it is necessary to understand what masculinity is, and how it is defined moving forward within this work. I employ R.W Connell's definition of hegemonic masculinity as the theoretical framing of my content analysis. Connell (2005) states:

“It has become common to recognize multiple masculinities: black as well as white, working class as well as middle class. This is welcome, but it risks...oversimplification, [as this framework assumes] that there is *a* black masculinity, or that there is *a* working class masculinity (p. 76).

To reduce masculinity to single archetypes is problematic, as it collapses multiple masculinities “into character typology” (Connell, 2005, p.76). In doing so, it implies a static unchanged performance, contingent on defined characteristics, such as spatial relationships, physical aesthetic of the body and sexuality. Connell argues that it is more theoretically fruitful to instead reflect on relationships between forms of masculinity that are historic and culturally contingent. In doing so, research is able to theorize masculinity in more fluid terms, in how one moves in and out of a malleable, yet defined set of categorizations of masculinity. Connell provide four categories that the performance of masculinity can be classified under:

Hegemonic Masculinity

Hegemony, derived from Antonio Gramsci's (1932) analysis of class relations, is used in this context to illustrate how one form of masculinity in Western culture becomes exalted over another (Connell, 2005, p.77). It is reflective of cultural characteristics that embody social dominance over femininity. Hegemonic masculinity provides a normative definition as to what masculinity is and how it is to be performed. It is from this definition that all other forms of

masculinity can be measured. It is through doing so that alternative forms of masculinity can be policed and patterns of hegemonic masculinity sustained.

Although this particular construction of masculinity sets the bar in defining normative masculinity, it is important to note that hegemonic masculinity “embodies a current accepted strategy” of normative gender performance and physical and spatial characteristics (Connell, 2005 p.77). As hegemonic masculinity is challenged, it begins taking new shapes of normativity, having a trickledown effect on how all other classifications of masculinity are to be understood. The one important characteristic that remains static within hegemonic masculinity is dominance through exclusion.

Subordinate Masculinities

As hegemonic masculinity maintains a hierarchical position over femininity, it is necessary to elucidate a category of masculinity that examples best its opposite. Subordinate masculinity is a “repository of whatever is symbolically expelled from hegemonic masculinity” (Connell, 2005, p.78). Symbolic characteristics of identity are categorized and become understood as existing within a hierarchy of masculinity. Characteristics such as physical weakness or homosexuality, when viewed within the frame of hegemonic masculinity, become assimilated into femininity. It is through the rejection of the symbolic characteristics embodied within subordinate masculinity that hegemonic masculinity is able to sustain dominance.

Complicit Masculinities

As few individuals are able to embody hegemonic masculinity fully, complicit masculinity takes shape through maintaining characteristics that do not fit neatly within the hegemonic mould, yet still maintain a complicit connection to the hegemonic project (Connell, 2005, p.79). An example is the typification that is commonly associated with a male sports fan within common TV sitcoms. Although his bodily physique cannot be classified within a

masculine ideal, it simultaneously does not challenge that ideal by projecting symbolism that is commonly associated with the arena of femininity. Although symbolically, the characteristics do not obtain categorization within hegemonic normativity, such symbolism remains complicit in the hegemonic project.

Marginalized Masculinities

Whereas complicit and subordinate masculinities negotiate a hierarchy within the frame of gender, marginalized masculinity is a form that engages the intersection among gender, race and class. Marginalized masculinities are restrained from achieving hegemonic masculinity through bio-political and economic features. In terms of the white male embodying normative masculinity within hegemonic definitions, bio-political characteristics, such as race and disability are measured against this norm. In terms of the black body, it can be conceived as being a vehicle of hyper-masculinity. However, it should be mentioned that marginalized masculinity, as stated previous, is not a fixed position to which one type of masculinity resides. Largely, it is contingent on authorization given within the hegemonic group. An example offered by Connell (2005), is that of the Black male athlete, who can, in fact, embody hegemonic masculinity through maintaining physical and aesthetic strength or economic and social capital. However, this is considered an outlier that “does not yield social authority to black men generally” (p81), and is contingent on dominant social preferences for authorization, which in Connell’s example, is the value of the athlete in Western society.

Taken together, the important concept to take away from this discussion is that the categorizations of masculinities do not reflect, and should not be understood as a fixed set of characteristics, but rather as expressions of the norms that remain salient within specific historic, spatial and cultural contexts. Whereas one’s individual actions and aesthetic can drift in and out of each categorization, the analysis of WoW provides a limited number of static images, allowing

critical analysis within a fixed context that is reflective of the current ideology of Western gender construction.

Literature Review

Theoretical Background

Current theoretical works within masculinity studies have positioned masculinity as a malleable construction that is produced within time and space (Kimmel, 1987; Connell, 2005). The production of specific and multiple forms of masculinity allows cultural tastes to esteem one construction over the other within a defined, but fluid, hierarchy (Connell, 2005). Cultural tastes for a preferred construction of gender become influenced through contexts where institutions (Messner, 1995), patterns of consumption (Simpson, 1993; Johansson, 1998; Thusu, 1999; Glen, 2008), globalization (Connell, 1998; Connell, 2005) and history all intersect to shift regional effects of gender.

Connell (2005) argues that the proliferation of the Western institution through the opening of markets brings patriarchal constructions that shift regional ideology, imagery and practices of gender (p.199). The sartorial adoption of the business suit as an effective expression of business masculinity, for example, was in direct response to the expansion of globalized economics, where Western institutions maintain influence in the reproduction of the performance of business masculinities (Connell 2005; Kondo, 1999). Similarly, shifts in US labour structures from a production-based economy to more service based employments, has allowed working and lower class American masculinities to renegotiate within their own cultural and historic contexts (Green and Owen, 1998; Alcock, Beatty, Fothergill, Macmillan, & Yeandle, 2003; Nixon, 2009). Through a repositioning of environment (within context of economics and labour), the ideological constructions of masculinity shift, allowing room for renegotiations that both construct and deconstruct cultural esteem within the performance and embodiment of multiple masculinities (Connell, 2005).

Connell (2005) argues, “on a global scale, the most profound change [in the construction of masculinities] is the export of [the] European/ American gender order to the colonized world” (p.199). Although the history of Western imperialism has contributed greatly to constructing identity within the global Other (Said, 1978), the impact of globalization has served to bring new meanings to gender globally, within the areas of production (Eviota, 1992), consumption (Simpson, 1993; Thussu, 1999) and migration (Tyner, 1999). Although literature has considered the negotiations of gender through the introduction of markets (Eviota, 1992), an equal and related facet of globalization can be conceptualized through the gendered symbolism that is made possible through the expansion of electronic communications and commodities (Connell, 2005). It is through the analysis of global media where “American/European gender ideology can be seen” (Connell, 2005, p. 199).

Critical discourse theorists look at media not divorced from culture, but as culture itself, where hegemony is not only produced but can also be challenged (Van Dijk, 1993). Symbolic representations of a gender order articulates an ideology where new constructions of gender performances can be negotiated. Simpson’s (1993) analysis of Xuxa, a sexualized female Brazilian performer in a widely popular children’s television program, highlights the media’s role in shaping racial and gendered perceptions of ideality, and with it, negotiations of femininity that align with the Western beauty ideal. Similar literature shows shifts in the male physique in toy action figures that reflect increased muscle mass, aligning idealized masculinity within muscular physicality (Pope, Olivardia, Gruber & Borowiecki, 1999). The inculcation of Western gendered narratives through media allows the renegotiation of regional ideologies of gender, where numerous shifts in culture have been produced in pursuit of the Western ideal (Thussu, 1999; Eddy, Hennessey & Thompson- Brenner, 2007).

Although the expansion of communication represents a wide field of study, video gaming has seen an expansive growth that now represents a multibillion-dollar global industry

(ESRB.org, 2014), placing it securely within the canon of globalized communications. Although video games do share qualities with other forms of media, research has argued that video games are pivotally different, as the player (consumer) is able to become an active participant within the narrative (Gee, 2006). The massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) shifts this singular dialog between the game and the player to open up a virtual space in which players can interact through infrastructure of the gaming space, allowing for corporeally remote and complex social interaction (Chan & Vorderer, 2006).

With 7.2 million monthly subscribers (Activision Blizzard Quarterly Report 2014) across 244 countries and territories (Azeroth by the numbers, 2014), WoW is the mostly widely embraced video game within the MMORPG genre. As this is the case, WoW has garnered much attention from feminist scholars (Eklund, 2011; Braithwaite, 2013). As gaming has generally been associated with a male audience (Schott & Horrell, 2000), narratives, imagery and in-game bodily performances are all argued to have the male consumer in mind and thus reflect a familiar narrative for this audience (Schott & Horrell, 2000). In turn, the in-game construction of gender is argued to reflect heteronormative constructions of ideals, where gender is performed for the player through the images and narrative of the text (Eklund, 2011).

Directive Constructions of Gender

Gender research within the arena of the MMORPG looks at both directive and participatory constructions of gender. Directive constructions look to employ analysis on the embedded aesthetic and narrative constructions of gender within the gaming infrastructure itself. Although directive constructions of masculinity can be examined in many ways, the avatar has been heavily analyzed to represent a Western construction of heteronormative ideal, where to participate, one must engage in an esteemed Western cultural aesthetic (Dietrich, 2013) closely tied to a male/ female binary (Kolko, 1999; Beasley, & Collins-Standley, 2002; Eklund, 2011). As the virtual social environment of a game is a commodity, it is argued that the player is not able

to achieve autonomy in their choices of representation, as interaction with the gaming structure itself is predetermined within its design (Kolko, 1999). Whereas the MMORPG enables a social element to the gaming experience, the avatar takes on a second function serving both as a tool of game navigation and a symbolic representation within player-to-player interactions (Tronstad, 2008). By virtue of maintaining the choice of sex/gender this aspect of aesthetic is considered salient for social interaction.

In addition to the avatar, the player is assigned certain symbolic features that mark gender that are largely contingent on the avatar's chosen sex. Eklund's (2011) argument that WoW performs gender for the player, is largely an examination of how the sex of the avatar interacts through the system of emotes (in-game designed interactions such as dancing, flirting, flexing etc.) and bodily symbolism (p.332). In WoW, the body comes predesigned to represent normative notions of gender that are structured largely on a masculine/feminine, male/female binary. Although a player can choose to gender swap (use an avatar that is the alternative to the player's corporeally identified sex) through the in-game use of the avatar, the performance of gender can only be structured in a normative way, as the symbolic structure of emotes and body language are married to the player's choice of the male or female body (MacCallum-Stewart, 2008; Eklund, 2011; Todd, 2012)

Participatory Constructions of Gender

Participatory constructions of gender are represented through assorted ways in which players are able to exercise agency in constructing their own gendered identity. This can occur within the infrastructure of the gaming environment (Guitton, 2010; Martey et al. 2014), or through external contexts, such as the use of online message boards (Braithwaite, 2013). Guitton (2010) demonstrates that there exists a gendered dynamic to the naming convention of female and male avatars, suggesting that players tend to mark the anatomical sex of the selected avatar through the use of an onscreen name. Similar participatory constructions of gender within the

infrastructure of the game can be seen through the use of the virtual body. Martey et al. (2014) argues that male video game players signal their gender even when playing a female avatar. In-game cues, such as frequent jumping, and other attention grabbing uses of the virtual body, often mark male video gamers. These findings suggest that although WoW provides directive constructions of gender for the player, agency can be utilized through the use of the virtual body and in-game symbols to mark a construction of a gendered identity.

In addition to using player agency to express gender within the gaming context, Braithwaite (2012) is able to demonstrate how video games provide a shared context within which communities develop. It is then through such communities that negotiations of gender are constructed outside of the game itself, within community based communications. It is within such communications, Braithwaite (2012) argues, where members of the WoW community are able to reaffirm their own masculinity through, for example, actively rejecting feminism within the context of an online message board. In such cases, the player is able to monopolize external contexts of a shared experience (on the topic of WoW), where gender can be articulated and negotiated within public communications.

The reviewed literature illustrates that video games have become a salient topic in gender and media studies (Kolko, 1999; MacCallum-Stewart, 2008; Guitton; 2010 Braithwaite, 2012; Eklund, 2011; Martey et al 2014). Through analysis of the directive constructions of gender that are embedded within the infrastructure of the cultural text, gender is **expressed** largely in how the text relies on heteronormative constructions of aesthetic ideal that reflect Western preferences of bodily representation.

Although some research views the influence of Western media in global spaces (Thussu, 1999), video games remain largely underrepresented within scholarly literature. Whereas movies, books and other forms of media are structured around presenting a narrative to the observer, video games are fundamentally different in allowing the player to become an active participant

within the narrative (Gee, 2006). If WoW should articulate a specific form of masculinity, the context of the commodity provides a medium that is (for the most part) static in its design (Eklund, 2011), globally accessible (Azeroth by the Numbers, 2014) and interactive (Gee, 2006). This context provides players with specific narratives of gender ideology that are actively embraced during consumption, thus allowing the player to become an active participant in the performance of gendered ideologies that reflect a Western form of power articulation (Foucault, 1977).

Methodology

Methodological Approach

The research approach employed in this study uses a critical paradigm to articulate if/how Western hegemonic masculinity is expressed within the text of WoW. To do so, a critical discourse analysis (CDA) is employed to examine the in-game avatar creation screen. The CDA will use Norman Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional approach to analyze the text of WoW at the macro, meso and micro levels.

The micro stage of analysis will identify an overall picture of the text. Descriptive in its approach, this stage engages in an analysis of how the body of an avatar is constructed to reflect symbolic features of masculinity. Themes of masculinity are identified and coded to view relationships that may exist between the selected body types of the avatars that are made accessible to a player.

The meso stage of analysis employs the cultural conditions that maintain bearing on WoW's production and consumption. To do so, the meso stage of analysis is supplemented with a lecture given by Rob Pardo, WoW's chief creative designer. The lecture itself engages in a discussion that connects the intersection of design, commerce and gender representation within WoW. Ultimately, the goal of this stage of analysis is to contextualize the micro stage of analysis within the cultural conditions of capitalism and market driven production.

Lastly, the macro stage of analysis employs a critical analysis of these themes and how they interact within the theoretical approach of hegemonic masculinity. This choice of analysis is used to allow multiple points of analytic entry, observing both the text and the historic and cultural contexts that function to produce it.

The chosen research methodology of a CDA is used to provide a framing for analysis that best understands how the commodity of WoW functions as a standalone text. By examining

WoW as a text of power articulation through a CDA, this research positions the symbolic structures of discourse in the game within broader social, political and cultural processes that impact WoW's production (Van Dijk, 1993).

WoW is used as a data source as it is produced and owned by a Western institution (Activision Blizzard, 2014), has demonstrated impressive longevity (Celebrate 10 Years of Warcraft, 2014), popularity (Investor Activision, 2014) and global appeal (Azeroth by Numbers, 2014). In addition, my own familiarity with WoW offers a unique perspective into the context of the game, its community and its place within popular culture.

Analysis

As the use of an avatar within the context of an MMORPG maintains a function of social representation (Tronstad, 2008), it is important to establish what options are provided to a player that allows an expression of visual identity. As the game itself is, above all else, a commodity, the options that are provided to a player are the direct result of decisions made during production. By allowing certain forms of representation, and disallowing others, the options that are provided to a player articulate the cultural characteristics that are valued in how the body is to be conceptualized (Kolko, 1999; Beasley, & Collins-Standley, 2002; Dietrich, 2013). Therefore, breaking down what is offered to a player in how they are able to be visually represented captures the culturally contingent ideological values in how certain forms of the body are esteemed, while others are simply not made present.

Analysis of Primary Characteristics

When observing the avatar creation screen, the first decision that is made by a player is that of “gender”, a primary characteristic. While the selection of “gender” is a conceptual term that is used within WoW as a means to delineate the anatomical sex of an avatar, it does not make a distinction between the biological characteristics of sex, and the performances that are associated with gender (Butler, 2002). In doing so, the performances of masculinity and femininity are constructed to be mutually exclusive and tied to the selection of anatomical sex (Kolko, 1999; Beasley, & Collins-Standley, 2002; Eklund, 2011). While the game itself uses the term “gender” as a method of differentiating the anatomy within a male/female binary, the performances of gender (such as the use of makeup on the female body or the visible musculature on the male body) become contingent on this selection. The use of the word “gender”, does therefore reflect an ideology of viewing the body and its associated gendered performances within a mutually exclusive and binary relationship. “Gender”, although a conceptual decision

made within the construction of how a player can be visually represented, symbolizes a cultural frame of constructing a gendered identity in relation to anatomy.

As “gender” is a primary visual characteristic, a player is unable to negotiate ambiguity within this form of representation. The male/female body is presented to a player within a binary that grants or excludes access to secondary visual characteristics. As this is the case, representing the male body within a frame of symbolic feminine features or the female body with symbolic masculine features is not possible.

For example, if a player is to select a female avatar, the option to be visually represented with facial hair is made unavailable within the options provided in the secondary visual category. By creating a structure that ties both the performances of gender and the anatomy of the avatar within a binary system, the player is required to represent the body within a structure that values this ideology as a legitimate means to communicate identity within social interaction. By disabling a player’s ability to represent within an ambiguous set of sex characteristics (such as having both a beard and breasts), this form of representation is made illegitimate through its absence within the virtual space of WoW. This, in turn, communicates an ideology that values one representation of the body by virtue of its presence within the game. By excluding alternative forms of representation that exist outside of binary structures, normative views of the body become unchallenged. In turn, hegemonic discourses become reinforced through the exclusion of aesthetic and performative options that would otherwise challenge a binary understanding of the body. Through excluding an option of representation of an ambiguous sex, binary structures establish hegemonic status through their absence within the institution of the game itself. As a cultural ideal informs the decision to exclude this form of representation within the virtual space that WoW provides, the game itself reinforces the legitimacy of binary pairing through simply erasing the existence of an ambiguous sex within representation and social interaction.

Juxtaposition of Primary Visual Characteristics

As the primary visual characteristics function to provide a player with two visually significant options (“gender” and “race”), it is important to note that the ability to refine these options is made unavailable to a player. As this section contrasts the Human models within the game, only the selection of “gender” is discussed.

When juxtaposing the Human male to that of the Human female, the male body is shown to be much larger, both in physical height and through the use of visible musculature. Where the female model is given a petite, hourglass figure, the male body is constructed in such a way that accentuates the musculature of the arms, chest, back and shoulder. While the physique of the male model is slimming at the hips (similar to the female model), this design does not draw attention to this area, but rather highlights the broadness of the shoulders resting above. Where the female model does not display any bodily symbols of strength (visible musculature), the male model constructs a frame of masculinity by highlighting the use of body size as a meaningful characteristic to distance the male body from being interpreted as being female. The implication therefore, is that bodily dimorphism is a significant indicator to communicate a masculine identity within context of WoW.

A second feature that differentiates the Human male model from the Human female within the primary visual category is the presence of secondary sexual characteristics within the Human female model (presence of breasts). While the Human male model is able to access secondary sexual characteristics (through visual representation of a beard), this is made optional within the secondary visual category of aesthetic selection. While the male body is able to embrace or reject this form of representation, the secondary sexual characteristics on the female body are predetermined within the primary visual category. Where the Human female body is defined by the presence of secondary sexual characteristics, the Human male body is granted the ability to express agency and either reject or embrace the visual of male secondary sex

characteristics. This suggests that the Human male model maintains the ability to communicate a gendered identity through a collective whole, rather than being defined by the presence of secondary sexual characteristics.

The final significant difference within the primary visual category is the posture of the Human male and Human female bodies. Each maintains a significant difference that is characterized by an arch of the lower back within the Human female model. The lower back of the male model maintains a relaxed straightened position, while the shoulders are positioned slightly off center of the torso. In contrast to this, the Human female model maintains an arch of the lower back, protruding both the breasts and buttocks outward. While the human male model does maintain a protruding chest, this is done through the use of musculature. As posture is a precondition of the Human male and female bodies, the relational difference that disallows the male from using posture to accentuate the chest and buttock is itself constructed as a masculine trait.

Similarities within the Primary Visual Characteristics

While masculinity in the primary visual category delineates characteristics that define the Human male model as distinct from the Human female model, there are some exceptions in how the masculine ideal is constructed that both male and female models embody. As the primary visual category does not allow for visual customization past the provided presets of the body, the rigid construction that both the Human male/female models represent, collectively aid in defining hegemonic masculinity.

The trim figures that characterize the Human models are the only form of body size provided to a player. As neither the male or female models provide an option for a body that is obese, elderly or reflects a disability, the implication is that these depictions of the body are contextualized as undesirable options within visual representation. By simply restricting the

ability for a player to visually represent outside of a physically fit, abled and youthful body, the obese, elderly and disabled forms of representation are obscured within in game social interaction. In doing so, the player, when playing a Human model, is required to be visually interpreted within a cultural ideal that relegates alternative (but common) body types invisible.

Analysis of Secondary Characteristics

The secondary visual category is made distinct from primary through the ability to either accept or reject certain forms of visual representation. Whereas primary categorization provides the player with a “gender” and “race” specific body structure, secondary categorizations allow the player to customize the body, enabling certain forms of visual representation while maintaining the ability to reject others.

The face.

When selecting a male avatar, the player is granted access to secondary visual characteristics. Here, the player is provided an opportunity to express visual identity through customization of the face, hairstyle, hair colour and beard. The human male is given 9 options of facial expression, 8 of which use a furrowed brow, closed mouth and slightly closed eyes to give the face an expression of stoicism. When contrasting this to the facial expressions that are offered to the human female model, 13 of 15 available options use wide eyes, raised eyebrows and a smile, allowing the female facial structures to maintain an emotive, if not happy, appearance. While the body itself does not carry with it any intrinsic feelings or emotions, the face uses a variety of expressions to align the onscreen male identity in such a way that disallows visible indications of emotive gesture. Through the repression of facial characteristics that imply happiness, joy, or general emotion outside of stoicism, the implication is that emotive gesture is constructed as a feminizing trait.

Accessories.

When looking at the visual options that are offered to a player within the secondary visual categories, the unique difference that the female body is offered is the option to accessorize through the use of both makeup and piercings. As the Human male is unable to accessorize, and instead offered an option of customizing a beard, this implies that the Human male body is seen as complete, where external products are not used, nor needed to improve or define its aesthetic identity.

Hair.

The unique feature that is granted to the Human male model is that of baldness, both residual and completely shaven. As the Human female model does not have an ability to employ a bald aesthetic within hair design, baldness therefore is reflected as uniquely male, and therefore a masculine trait.

Codifying Masculinity within World of Warcraft

Connell (2005) argues that “hegemonic masculinity can be defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women. (p. 77). Given this definition, the construction of hegemonic masculinity within context of WoW, can be defined by the unique characteristics that make the Human male model distinct from the human female model.

Primary/Secondary Masculine Symbols by “Race”, “Race category” and “Gender”

	Race/Sex	Primary Visual Characteristics				Secondary Visual Characteristics		
		Visible Musculature	Control of 2nd Sex Characteristics	Body Dimorphism	Absence of an Arched Lower Back	Stoic Facial Expression	Absence of Accessories	Bald Hairstyle Option
Anthropocentric	Human (M)							
	Human (F)							
	Dwarf (M)							
	Dwarf (F)							
	Gnome (M)							
	Gnome (F)							
Elven	Night Elf (M)							
	Night Elf (F)							
	Blood Elf (M)							
	Blood Elf (F)							
Anthropomorphic	Worgen (M)							
	Worgen (F)							
	Tauren (M)							
	Tauren (F)							
	Padaran (M)							
	Padaran (F)							
Bestial	Orc (M)							
	Orc (F)							
	Undead (M)							
	Undead (F)							
	Goblin (M)							
	Goblin (F)							
	Draenei (M)							
	Draenei (F)							
	Troll (M)							
	Troll (F)							

Table #2

Table #2 contrasts both primary and secondary visual characteristics of masculinity across “race”, “gender” and racial categorization. Within the anthropocentric “races”, masculinity is constructed along normative lines through relegating the visual symbols of masculinity to the male body exclusively. As the anthropocentric racial categorization reflects a “race” category that most resembles the human form, it is only when the body deviates from this image that alternative constructions of masculinity begin to reflect differently.

In the Elven racial category, categorization of masculinity begins to see a shift. Specifically, the Blood Elf male lacks four key characteristics that define masculinity within context of WoW. Although body dimorphism is still a factor when contrasting both the Blood Elf male to the Blood Elf female models, by lacking over half of the visual characteristics that define masculinity within WoW, the Blood Elf male model can be interpreted as a structure of subordinate masculinity. It is important to state, however, that although the presence of a subordinate masculinity is present, the overall structure and position of masculine symbols still function only within the male models. Therefore, despite reflecting the presence of a subordinate masculinity, the masculine symbols that are present still function within a normative construction, and are absent from the female depiction of the body.

In the Anthropocentric races, symbols of masculinity begin to appear on the female body, suggesting a degree of female masculinity. This is only viewed within the Tauren “race” within secondary visual characteristics. While for the most part, symbols of masculinity belong to the male avatar body, suggesting a primarily normative construction of masculinity, WoW does allow a player to construct a visual representation of the female body that reflects a degree of masculinity.

The Bestial racial category sees the most expansive access to masculine symbolism within secondary visual characteristics of the female body. Similar to the Tauren female model, the suggestion is that a player can access a form of masculinity that challenges dominant

ideology. However, in effort to do so, the player must access a racial category that distances itself from a humanlike image. While most female avatar models access symbols of masculinity within secondary visual characteristics, an outlier is found within the female Orc model. As the female Orc model is the only female model that is able to access a symbol of masculinity within the primary visual category, this suggests that this model is defined by its masculinity (as this symbol is a precondition of the body). Where secondary visual characteristics allow a player to make a choice of being visually represented within a masculine construction, the female Orc is required to, and therefore defined by her masculinity.

Marginalized Masculinities in World of Warcraft.

As the Human male is used to represent hegemonic masculinity within WoW, marginalized masculinities require alternative bio-political characteristics to be measured from this typification of masculinity (Connell, 2005, p.80). The bio-political characteristics that mark the body in WoW primarily function within two separate categories. The first closely aligns with symbols indicating race, while the second are characteristics more commonly associated with bodily disability.

“Race”.

The “Race” of an avatar does not provide a unique feature that subordinates femininity, rather race function as a filter by which masculine symbols become interpreted. By maintaining heightened degrees of musculature and/or facial features that read as stoic, although masculine within the context of WoW, these features become marginalized through the bio-political depiction of the body as being a race other than human.

When looking at “race” in WoW, the Bestial classification of character typology all maintains physical indicators that divorce the appearance from close association to that of the Human models. This is done through several strategies, such as colour of skin (green, blue and

purple), hyper developed musculature, and the use of bodily characteristics that are foreign to the human aesthetic, such as protruding horns, tentacles etc. By using bodily characteristics that maintain a significant aesthetic difference to a human likeness, the body classification becomes categorized within an alternative masculinity that does not quite match the ideal embodied within the Human male model. Bestial masculinities, although displaying some preferred masculine traits, such as hyper muscularity in both the Orc and Draenei male models, can only be read against the racialized categorization of the body. As Connell defines marginalized masculinity as being a “[relationship] between the masculinities in dominant and subordinated classes or ethnic groups” (Connell, 2005, p. 80), the ability to view the Bestial classification as racialized, relegates the masculine attributes of the body out of hegemonic status. This is significant as the only other model that maintains all seven masculine symbols is found within the Bestial racial category. The Draenei male model, while achieving dominant masculine status relative to most avatar models, does not maintain a hegemonic status, because of its aesthetic deviation from a human like appearance. The result is the subordination of masculinity within a marginalized masculine status.

Disability.

Although disability is not a significant theme, it does present itself through the presence of dwarfism within various bodily representations. Although one body in the Bestial classification of race does reflect this characteristic (Goblin), this form of subordination is primarily what differentiates the Anthropocentric races. While the Human male represents the ideal, the alternative anthropocentric races, Dwarves and Gnomes, both maintain visible signification of dwarfism. At roughly half the height of the Human male, both the Dwarf and Gnome models become aesthetically identifiable by their small stature.

Similar to how the masculinities of race can only be defined through their relationship to human male body, the same relationship that allows a player to conceptualize these forms of body

type as being small can only be constructed when using the human male body as a point of reference. Therefore, the human male model is constructed as the ideal (dominant masculinity) from which other bodily characteristics (representing subordinate masculinity) become measured. As hegemony maintains power through an inability to view it as marked (Macintosh, 1989), it is the assumed precondition to which the human male body has come to represent, that all other forms of masculinity become measured, and subsequently subordinated. Disability, in context of a small height within the Anthropocentric classifications, becomes a means to esteem the masculine status of the Human male model over other races that maintain a human likeness in appearance.

Subordinate Masculinities within World of Warcraft

Male femininity.

Hegemonic masculinity is defined through its relational distance to the female typification (Connell, 2005, p 77). Although the male body within WoW is made distinct from the female body through several characteristics (see Graphic 1a), the classification of subordinate masculinity is reified through the identification of a male avatar body type that reflects female characteristics. While this is present in several classifications of “race”, for example, both the Undead and Troll “races” maintain a body type with no visible musculature, in these particular circumstances, masculinity becomes reinforced through a means alternative to this single bodily characteristic. Strategies to include additional symbols of masculinity maintain the ability to offer these “races” a masculine status.

The male Blood Elf model, which falls under the Elvin racial categorization, presents the player with a body type that, like the human female model, communicates a degree of feminine signification. Standing at similar height to the male human model, the Blood Elf male body is characterized by the absence of musculature, and the absence of a bald hairstyle. Unlike the

human male model, the Blood Elf posture is more reflected of the human female body, with an arched back that accentuated the chest outward, not through muscularity, but through a positional posture of the lower back. While the Blood Elf maintains options for facial hair, which is a defining characteristic of masculinity within WoW, the options limit representation to a small (almost unseen) patch of hair cuspated slightly below the lower lip and or chin. Through the absence of these characteristics, the Blood Elf body is denied masculine signifiers that mark hegemonic masculinity within the context of WoW. While other races supplement feminine attribute through hyperbolizing masculine characteristics (use of angry facial features, or hyper developed musculature), the male Blood Elf model itself is devoid of such supplementing masculine features. As hegemonic masculinity is characterized as the currently accepted vehicle to legitimize patriarchy (Connell, 2005, p. 77.), by reflecting characterization that closely aligns to the female body, the Blood Elf model becomes relegated in to a subordinate masculinity classification.

Male Blood Elf



Image 1a.

Female masculinity.

As most female models within WoW reflect similar gendered characteristics to that of the human female, much of the classification of the female body can be positioned within a subordinate masculine classification. However, within the available female models, the female Orc is the only female avatar with access to a masculine symbol within the primary visual category. While the female Orc model still maintains many of the characteristics that define the female body, such as the use of accessories, required presence of secondary sexual characteristics, and the arching of the lower back, the model simultaneously reflects symbols of masculinity that are employed by the human male body. With the presence of developed musculature, the use of a bald hairstyle, the female Orc model is granted access to symbolic masculinity. However, as the player is required to identify the avatar as a female “gender”, regardless of access to symbolic masculinity, the avatar body is relegated to a subordinate masculine status.

Body Dimorphism

The one masculine attribute that remains consistent across all “race” categories is the presence of body dimorphism between the male/female models within a “race”. While a player is able to select a male body that reads as feminine, or a female model that reads as masculine, it is important to mention that masculinity within this context is relative. While the female Orc model does communicate symbols of masculinity, this masculinity, when juxtaposed to the male Orc model becomes diminished, as the male Orc model maintains access to greater degrees of masculine symbolism. This is true for all models within the game. The female body is always smaller in size compared to the male equivalent within a given “race”. However, when contrasting across the “race” categories, body dimorphism becomes less rigid. The female Orc model, when juxtaposed to the male Bloodelf does reflect more characteristics of masculinity through the use of visible muscularity and physical stature and bald hairstyle. Therefore, body

dimorphism is something that will always be presented within a “race”, but the female body can amass a dominant masculine status across a “race” category.

Given this analysis, what is important to take away is that masculinity is constructed within a pre-set number of options that define the human male model as distinct from the human female. As the “race” aesthetic begins to deviate from an anthropocentric “race” category, alternative forms of masculinity are made present within the body. While the player can utilize female masculinity and male femininity, certain forms of normative gender construction cannot be opted out of. For example, body dimorphism will always be present within a “race” category, and the female avatar will always be defined by the presence of secondary sexual characteristics, while the male avatar, in almost all cases, need not.

Game Design, Accessibility and Gender Representation

WoW, although many things, is above all else a commodity, and as a commodity, its viability as a consumer product is directly related to its capacity to facilitate a positive experience for the consumer. As WoW had recently celebrated its ten-year anniversary and is played by millions of players globally (Azeroth by the Numbers, 2014), WoW represents an outlier of unprecedented success within video game development. It is within this context that Rob Pardo, chief creative officer at Blizzard Entertainment (henceforth identified as Blizzard), held a lecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) campus on May 7th, 2014. Pardo's lecture centers on the intersection between game design and the business acumen that has enabled Blizzard to achieve such a presence within the gaming industry. While the lecture itself discusses both marketing and design strategies that are taken by Blizzard to produce such a large degree of success, during the question and answer portion of the lecture discussion opened up on representation within Blizzard games.

Todd Harper, a researcher of queer/gender representation in gaming at the MIT gaming labs, asks Pardo why their products do not reflect the realities of player contexts outside of male heteronormativity. The impact, argues Harper, is that the resulting products do not reflect the realities of many people who enjoy the games that Blizzard produces (Pardo, 2014, 1:10:22). What follows highlights the marketing practices that are adopted by Blizzard to design their products, and cross analyzes this information with the responses offered by Pardo in regard to gender representation in Blizzard commodities.

Opening Markets

As the lecture itself is intended to elucidate how market strategies are implemented within the design level of game development, what Pardo attributes to the success of the Blizzard

brand is its ability to create games that reduce various forms of alienation within potential markets. Pardo (2014) states:

“[Blizzard identifies] a hardcore [gaming market] that already loves [an existing game within a genre]. While we definitely want to service that group... where we see [an] opportunity is [through] opening up [this] market to a much larger group that has previously been made much less accessible due to [a] games complexity, [having] too much jargon [or being] too hard to get into. We really want to find those games that have a lot of hardcore loyalty and figure out the ways we can make these games accessible to a larger market” (7:10).

At its core, Blizzard looks to identify fringe gaming genres that maintain small but ardently devoted communities (Pardo, 2014, 7:10). From this point, design teams tweak existing mechanics in such a way that diminish the barrier of entry, therefore reducing limitations and alienating mechanisms within a product in effort to grant access to new markets of consumers.

Ultimately what Pardo identifies is that Blizzard does not reinvent the wheel within their products; rather they simply refine it in such a way that broadens both its appeal and accessibility to new and expanding markets. An example of this strategy, argues Pardo, is seen within the graphical interface of their games (Pardo, 2014, 8:15). As technology has developed in home computing, the capability of graphical design allows technical and artistic developers to create games that appear as hyper-realistic. While this is a trend that is seen throughout the gaming industry, this choice in graphical representation is a decision that serves to alienate markets that maintain low-end home computers. If the consumer is simply unable to run a game due to the technological demands of its design, that consumer, by extension, is unable to purchase the resulting commodity. As Blizzard designs their games with a cartoon-like appearance, this in turn diminishes the demands on the technology needed to consume the product. By making this decision at the point of game design, the resulting commodity can be accessed by a greater number of people within a market of lower end personal computing (Pardo, 2014, 8:15).

Ultimately, the point that Pardo stresses is that game design maintains a close connection to who

is able to gain access and consume a given product. If design alienates an audience, they, in turn, alienate the company from potential markets and economic success.

Gameplay First

As the production of a consumer product within Blizzard is an undertaking of over 200 developers (Pardo, 2014, 9:21), each developer within the process is required to make decisions concerning what is to be included and what is to be excluded within the resulting product. While some decisions are large, such as the design of player avatars, many are small, such as rendering a texture of a tree within the gaming environment. As the oversight of each decision cannot be observed by Pardo himself, individual developers are provided a degree of agency that is governed by eight guiding “core values” within Blizzard’s corporate culture. While most core values are not discussed within context of the lecture, the first and arguably most important core value of “gameplay first” was central to Pardo’s discussion. Although game design can be approached in an effort to communicate complex story telling or engage in slick, hyper-realistic graphical design, these attributes are secondary to the construction of the player’s experience when emerged within the game itself (Pardo, 2014, 10:52). As the player’s experience can be understood in many ways, Pardo (2014) states that:

“What [putting game play first] really means to us is that when [large design teams are] making a game, [they should] understand how [each individual’s] part... whether or not they are an artist [or] sound designer, [contributes to] the game [being] more fun to play.... We will sacrifice things very often to bring game play forward” (10:10).

It is important to note that the experience of a player when playing WoW is rarely the result of happenstance; everything that is seen, heard and interacted with, is the result of conscious decisions making by developers in the pursuit of producing a positive player experience when using Blizzard products (Pardo, 2014, 19:15). Pardo goes on to state that “[when working in] game design, you will come to a point where you will have to make a decision of what is more

important to you” (Pardo, 2014, 18:15). The implication of this design approach is that if an element of a game’s design is perceived to potentially hinder a player’s experience within consumption, a decision is made to simply disregard elements that risk impacting a player negatively. The phenomenological experience of consumption, therefore, is the currency that defines the Blizzard brand and echoes within the core value of putting gameplay first.

Representation

When responding to Harper’s critique that Blizzard products maintain a heteronormative discourse, Pardo acknowledges that representation within their products is a known and problematic issue. Pardo (2014) states:

“[diversity of alternative contexts to male heteronormativity] is not a value for [Blizzard]...[we are] not trying to bring in serious stuff, socially relevant stuff or actively trying to preach diversity...[although] it is not always the right thing to do, it’s just how we develop [Blizzard games]” (1:12:02).

Although Pardo recognizes that not including alternative cultural contexts in video game design is problematic, he maintains a narrative that speaks to the degree to which culture (both internal and external to Blizzard) does not view male heteronormativity as political. In Peggy McIntosh’s (1989) essay titled *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Backpack*, McIntosh states that “after [realizing] the extent to which men work from a base of unacknowledged privilege.... I realized that much of their oppressiveness was unconscious” (p.10). Although McIntosh utilizes this thought in a context of race within her own work, the essay captures the processes that provide hegemonic ideologies their power, namely through an inability to view an ideology as exerting power. By relegating the cultural experiences of those who do not maintain membership within a dominant group as “serious stuff”, Pardo categorizes cultural contexts that are external to male heteronormativity as being political. Simultaneously, male heteronormativity is not viewed

within the context of maintaining a political position, both reinforcing and reproducing hegemonic status.

When discussing how male heteronormative imagery is made present within the game, Pardo (2014) states:

“An example where we struggle is our portrayal of woman in [WoW]. Because most of our game developers are guys that grew up reading comic books...[often they draw] comic book looking women, which is offensive to some women...it’s a struggle as the diversity [at Blizzard] is unbalanced” (12:45).

The implication of this comment positions the imagery found within the text of WoW to be the result of the embodied ideologies of its design staff. While this is true for the representation of women within the game, this also speaks to the reflection of Western hegemonic masculinity. As the game design, development and maintenance are completed within the West, the same ideologies that dictate the depiction of femininity, simultaneously influence both the depiction and gendered performance of masculinity. The images that are presented to a player reflect the ideology of a design team who maintain a cultural, spatial and historic relationship that frame the ideological constructions that become embedded within the products that are produced. Similar to the male developers being influenced by comic books, the embedded ideologies that guide the decisions made (or options that are simply not considered) within game design are influenced by Western relationships to ideological exposure.

Hegemonic Discourse and the Market

Through the presentation of hegemonic representation, a player is provided a normative image that does not challenge common ideologies of gender, sex and sexuality. Although as Harper points out, this construction of representation does not encompass the lived experiences of the player base that utilize Blizzard products, it does however, through being a hegemonic discourse, communicate a familiar cultural narrative. Donald Lazere (1987) states “hegemony [in

media] encompasses the terms through which the alliances of domination are cemented... engineering [the] mass consent to the established order” (p. 241). By providing content that reflects the experiences and cultural contexts of the Western male, Blizzard games both utilize and reinforce an overarching value that is given to these attributes generally within the broader society, reinforcing an accepted and common, ideology.

As WoW is a globally accessible franchise, the resulting commodities that are produced become a vehicle by which ideological constructions of gender are disseminated. As literature confirms the expansion of Western ideologies through globalization (Messner, 1995; Connell, 1998; Thussu, 1999; Connell, 2005), the impact of this form of ideology can serve to restructure global ideological framings of an idealized masculinity (Connell, 2005). By reflecting Western hegemonic ideology, through the developer’s exposure to cultural products such as comic books (Pardo, 2014, 1:12:45), this form of ideological framing becomes reproduced within the commodity of WoW, and by virtue of being a globalized commodity, is made globally accessible.

It is important to state that Pardo’s job does not require the production of equality within representation of Blizzard products. Pardo’s job, rather, is producing a commodity in such a way that generates capital. As a commodity, the function of ideological exposure becomes intimately connected to a consumer’s desire for consumption. By structuring a commodity that embodies hegemonic Western ideology (albeit unintended), exposure and global dissemination is made possible through the global access, and appeal that WoW maintains within the consumer market. The articulation of power does not function as a nefarious decision that is made within the process of design. Power, rather, is expressed within this context, as a commodity that reflects Western gendered ideology that is willingly and actively embraced under the pretense of being a fun activity.

What is important to take away from this discussion is that WoW reflects male heteronormative narratives that result from the embodied ideologies of its design team. The

depiction and mobilization of such narratives are therefore not the outcome of conscious decision-making, but rather, the consequence of the spatial, cultural and historic contexts within which the commodity is produced. As WoW reflects hegemonic discourse embedded within a commodity, its consumption, and by extension exposure to hegemonic discourse, is actively sought out, embraced and consumed within the global market. Its articulation of power, therefore, is the consequence of the connections among the commodity, its embodied ideology, and global access.

Discussion

Previous research concludes that WoW reflects normative constructions of ideology in terms of race (Dietrich, 2013), gender (MacCallum-Stewart, 2008; Braithwaite, 2013) and sexuality (Eklund, 2011). Within the context of this project, the depiction of masculinity also echoes these previous findings. The use of symbolic masculinity within WoW functions to position the anthropocentric “races” within a normative position of masculinity. By anchoring the symbolic features of masculinity within the male body exclusively, and excluding the female form from masculine expression, hegemonic masculinity become reified through belonging only to the male form within the anthropocentric body.

While WoW does permit a player to be visually represented within alternative constructions of masculinity, it is required that the player does so within a body type that distances its image from an anthropocentric “race” category. Female masculinity, though present, is only offered to a player within both anthropomorphic and Bestial “race” categories. As a player can visually be represented with symbolic structures of female masculinity, their ability to do so can only be engaged within context of a racialized body outside of a humanlike aesthetic.

Through the use of avatar models that are distanced from the human aesthetic, the construction of masculinity becomes much less rigid. While a female Orc, for example, can be granted masculine status through a primary visual characteristic of visible musculature, the function of masculinity is still made relative to the male counterpart within the “race” category. In all “race” categories, body dimorphism will always favour the male models within a frame of dominant masculinity. As this is the case, female body types that capture the symbolic structures of masculinity, and conversely, male body types that capture the symbolic structures of femininity, will always grant the male body dominant masculine status within the “racial” category itself through access and expression of more masculine symbolism (see table #2). What is interesting, however, is that when juxtaposing the body across “race” categories, it is possible

for a female body to maintain dominant masculine status. As this is the case, a player can be offered strategies to challenge normative construction of gender within in-game social interaction. While the game itself allows a player to challenge normative forms of masculinity, through access to both male femininity and female masculinity, by absolving these strategies from the anthropocentric races, the player is unable to do so within an image similar to the their own corporeal likeness.

As the depiction of the body is admitted by Pardo to be the result of embodied ideology within its production (Pardo, 2014, 1:12:45), it can be inferred that the ideologies that frame how the body is structured in WoW is the result of Western exposure to gender ideology (as the game is produced, and maintained within Irvine, California). Through the expansion of WoW's global access, these same ideologies are willingly embraced by consumer markets, thus facilitating direct exposure to Western dominant ideological discourse. As the commodity of WoW embodies hegemonic ideology (Kolko, 1999; Beasley, & Collins-Standley, 2002; MacCallum-Stewart, 2008; Eklund, 2011; Pardo, 2014, 1:12:45), the proliferation of Western ideology is accelerated by access to, and appeal for what WoW has garnered within the global market.

Conclusion

It is important to note that WoW is itself a product of much decision-making. As the game is a consumer commodity, the resulting experience for the player is produced by hundreds of developers, each of which make conscious decisions regarding what to include, and what to exclude from the game. As WoW is produced within the West (Irvine California), the ideologies that shape its production become embedded within the cultural text. It is therefore exposure to Western ideology that informs the decision-making processes at the point of development. As hegemony is positioned within a degree of power through an inability to view it as exerting power (Macintosh, 1989), dominant ideologies become unquestioned by consumers, as they reflect

hegemonic ideological values within a context of a fun product to consume (i.e. the video game is something that consumers themselves wish to use).

Foucault (1977) argues that “discipline 'makes' individuals; it is the specific technique of a power that regards individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise. It is not a triumphant power...it is a modest, suspicious power, which functions as a calculated, but permanent economy” (pg. 170). In context of WoW, the representation and global dissemination of Western hegemonic masculinity functions as a means of power articulation. As hegemonic narratives within WoW function to reiterate Western preferences of gender articulation, these attributes are willingly embraced through market consumerism. Power, in terms of framing hegemonic masculinity, is therefore not exerted onto the player, but rather, is embraced willingly by the consumer. Applying a Foucauldian lens, the relationship between production, commodities and the consumer provides a context that shapes self-regulation in terms of molding the ideological constructions (and constraints) of idealized gender ideology.

Limitations

As WoW is a single text in a vast number of video games, the sample selected can only represent a single cultural text that is not fully representative of how masculinity is constructed generally within the medium. Any findings that are produced in this study will only capture characteristics that are found in WoW and should not be generalized to the gaming industry as a whole. Secondly, as the ideology of gender is tremendously complex and varied, the chosen method of analysis does not consider how a player would negotiate the experience of the text. As this is the case, the phenomenological experience of how a player negotiates symbols of masculinity in relation to their own lived experiences is not reflected in the data set.

In doing a discourse analysis on a virtual representation of the body in the context of a video game, it is important to state that representation carries with it no intrinsic meaning. When

broken down to its simplest structure, the body of an avatar is no more than small pixels of colour, arranged in such a way to resemble structures of cultural familiarity. While this paper argues the presence of certain forms of masculinity, to complete this analysis, I too, as researcher, observer and gamer, am required to draw on my own ideological leanings to make sense, codify and interpret the images of the text. Although a strong argument can be made to demonstrate the presence of hegemonic masculinity, this is predicated on my own individual interpretations of symbolic masculinity, informed through a cultural, historic, gendered and classed experience.

Lastly, as WoW is much more than the static images used within this research, how masculinity is constructed within the audio, textual, and narrative of the game is beyond the scope of this project. This is significant as these aspects play a salient role in how a player experiences the video game. As the study only considers the depiction of the body, the construction of masculinity within this research is only partial.

Suggestion for Further Study

As this project looks at the construction of Western hegemonic masculinity that is embedded within the text of WoW, it does not consider how a player experiences this ideological discourse. Future research could contrast cultural understandings of masculinity that conflict with the prevailing Western paradigm embedded within the game. As the research suggests that global access to commodities such as WoW maintains the ability to disseminate ideology (Connell, 2005), the impact of exposure to a conflicting or alternative understanding of masculinity could impact how a player negotiates his/her own constructions of masculinity.

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