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ASSIGNMENT 3: ESSAY

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Abstract

This submission looks at the notion of cultural and ethnic diversity in the massively multiplayer online role-playing game, World of Warcraft (WoW). The many peoples of Azeroth come from all walks of life, of many different customs and cultures that are respected and vividly shown and made apparent throughout the entirety of its world. WoW explores the constructs of real-world racial structures, both positively and negatively, in which make strong allusions in the game, particularly that of the dichotomy between commonality and foreignness being akin to good and evil, while also attempting to take strong strides towards depicting something greater than common racial stereotypes and racial influenced conflict.

Introduction

The fantasy genre, like most works of fiction, are able to create new and amazing experiences in the worlds that they create, while simultaneously being grounded in a sense of real-world troubles and issues faced by any human being. One of these issues, most pertinent, are the struggles concerning the representation of racial and ethnic identity in both their major and minor occurrences. The idea of good and evil as a means of portraying race plays heavily in many conflicts in the stories of fantasy games; such as the civil war between the Stormcloaks and the Empire in The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim (Bethesda, 2011). In this instance, we will explore more in depth a different perspective of the racial coin, in a game that depicts this idea very well. That is, the massively multiplayer online role-playing game, World of Warcraft (Blizzard, 2003), and its dichotomy of fear and quarreling as a distinction of cultural commonality and cultural foreignness.

The Racial Good & Evil

The idea of race and culture being a means to instill social subjugation and reform have been in contention for centuries of our world's history. This notion (Melissa J., 2012), labelled as "racial hegemony", argues the idea of society placing distinct and institutionalised discriminatory regulations to suppress and subjugate racial/cultural minorities, at the benefit of a majority. This is influenced by claiming that overall behaviour, beliefs and customs are linked to specific groups of physical, biological characteristics (skin colour, hair colour, physique, etc), and the globalisation of this view can be seen instigated in the mistreatment of cultural others through events such as the atlantic slave trade, or the White Australia Policy. Gone are the days of these horrible events, but these ideals still lay within the purview of modern society, underlying the laws that govern the many nations of the world and its inhabitants. And thanks to the rapid advancement of technology, and the rise of digital media, discrimination and racist ideology are able to be spread on a scale never seen before.

With many works of fantasy, creators of fictional worlds often depict races as one of biological differences, like physical appearance, and lifespan, and can draw a straight line

between 'good' and 'evil' races, such as the elves and dwarves of *The Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien, 1954), representing the good people of the realm, with fair-skin and rp british accents, and the orcs, savage marauders of hulking physique, and non-white skin. In the instance of *WoW*, we can see some of these instances of those of some physical description seem to encompass the same relative 'stereotype'. The burly, stout dwarves, with distinct scottish accents, and who somehow all love to blacksmith and get drunk. Or the lanky, hunched trolls with jamaican accents who all love voodoo. It is hence incredibly obvious that audiences are able to pick up on these stereotypes and traits, and embody that in their roleplay, to the point of emulating a pseudo form of xenophobia, as elements of the game encourage this behaviour. The age-old rivalry between the horde and the alliance determines your friends and enemies, and that the only thing that the other side deserves is a blade to the heart. Your race determines where you can go, what you can do in the world, what you can be (class, profession/job); it seems like an impassable barrier when someone who wants to roleplay, who may want to make friends in a small community of any and all races, but are discouraged from doing so. The atmosphere built around many of the locations, both in game and with game mechanics, can also make for a somewhat xenophobic nature, as stated by Melissa J. as being a means of portraying "race-based societies". The city of Silvermoon seems to have only blood elves inhabiting it; the underground city of Ironforge seems to be devoid of any other race besides dwarves and the occasional gnome, and even the "multicultural" centres of these two factions, Stormwind and Orgrimmar, seem to have little to no other outside races inhabiting them.

Not always like this

The conclusion that those in the majority make a lot of the time when attempting to defend their questionable behaviour, put simply by Melissa J, as but simple "common sense", built upon the foundation forged long ago by their forefathers. To this extent, we may think that these discriminatory and racist ideals have been around since the dawn of time, but in actual fact, we can trace the earliest civilisations as living in relative harmony with those of other physical descriptions. As Audrey and Brian (Smedly & Smedly, 2005) discovered, the earliest recounts of civilisations (ancient Rome, Greece and Egypt) encountered a variety of different peoples of all manner of different styles, looks, and beliefs. Physical uniqueness and outwardness was widely accepted, and overall encouraged. Religion was the largest defining feature of old world nations, and would define some of the rivalries and oppositions that dictated the times, particularly those of paganistic nature, with the Greeks, Romans, Egyptians, Celts and Norse being some of the most powerful religions of their time, and the most widely popular polytheistic religions remembered today. The importance of religion can then explain the eventual development that race would slowly come into effect with the rise of abrahamic religions, such as christianity, islam and judaism. Many of the justifications many people gave as to the ways to build inferiority against minorities, and those of different physical appearances, were of religious reasoning, as a means to redirect responsibility for the mistreatment of those of different appearances.

While religion in our own world is something, more often than not used to divide, we can see in *WoW* some instances where the religion of shared races are actually able to transcend racial differences and disagreements between cultures. While some religious sects throw strong allusions to real world zealous, xenophobic organisations, such as the fanatical Scarlet Crusade, whose history of torture and suffering has lead them to take up arms against anyone who looks undead, even if they are of the kindest of nature, there are some factions in *WoW*, who are able to find camaraderie in their religious similarities, despite their

physical differences. Look no further than the Cenarion Circle, a group of like minded druids who serve the demigod Cenarius to preserve the balance of nature. This group is composed of Taurens and Night Elves, who, racially, are determined to be on two opposing sides of a war, but thanks to religion, are able to put aside their indifferences, and come together for a like minded goal.

Familiarity vs Foreignness

So far, the doom and gloom of cultural and ethnic representation has provided little more than the same implications that other fantasy media have used for years, World of Warcraft being no different. But these are but surface level aspects of race and culture, we have yet to talk about some of the more positive implications that representation can have. While individuals such as Melissa J. have discussed in depth about the social integration of discrimination, creating a good versus evil mentality, we will explore the importance of the idea of 'commonality and foreignness'.

The idea of commonality and foreignness stems from the 'symptoms of a common Western cultural association of foreignness and insidiousness' (Langer, 2008), by which those of the majority commonly associate those of difference with those of wrongfulness, and with this notion, we are able to neutralise the hostility of difference.

In World of Warcraft, many players assume that the Alliance is good, and the Horde is evil, based solely on looks, but looking further in-depth reveals delicate and intricate nuances that suggest otherwise. We will explore this notion through a study of the elven race, as done similarly in a study by Nathaniel Poor (2012), who did a study on the elves of traditional Dungeons and Dragons (Wizards of the Coast, 1974) lore.

In World of Warcraft, Elves are broken up racially from a number of different factors; physical difference, history, location, ideals, and many more. Originally, they all lived together, but fell apart after the destruction of their home at the hands of the demonic Burning Legion.

There are currently 4 playable subraces of elves; Night Elves, Blood Elves, Nightborne and Void Elves, whose divulging histories will be discussed.

After the destruction of the nightwell, some of the elves of suramar fled their homeland and abandoned the ways of the arcane in favour of druidism. Under the guidance of the archdruid Malfurion Stormrage, and High Priestess Tyrande Whisperwind, the now labelled 'Night Elves', built their splendid city of Darnassus within the roots of the world tree Teldrassil, where they follow the guidance of the demigod Cenarius, and the Moon Goddess Elune.

- A brief history on the Night Elves

After the destruction of the nightwell, and the trek to the world tree Teldrassil, some of the elves rejected the call of druidism, and were exiled by their night elven brethren for their continued use of the arcane. Led by Dath'Remar Sunstrider, he led the remaining highborn elves east, and built the golden kingdom of Quel'thalas, and a new font of magical energy known as the sunwell. They spent years bathing in the warm light of their sunwell, until the third war, when the Lich King Arthas Menethil corrupted the elves' font of power once more, crippling the elves' connection to the arcane once again. These elves, now led by the descendant of Dath'Remar, Kael'thas

Sunstrider, changed their name to the blood elves, and have since survived decades with a crippling addiction to the magics they had once taken for granted.

- A brief history on the Blood Elves

Following the destruction of the nightwell, some elves decided to remain on Suramar, and salvage what they could behind a magical shield conjured to protect the innermost remains of their once glorious city. Centuries past, and the shield they had conjured to protect themselves starved them of light, changing them into the Nightborne.

- A brief history on the Nightborne

Following the destruction of the sunwell, some blood elves went to extreme lengths to satiate their lust for magic. Some blood elves tapped into the madness that is the void, and slowly lost their minds. Those who didn't immediately go insane were exiled from Quel'thalas, and forced to survive off of anything they could get their hands on. Years would pass until a leader would arise to lead these elves under a new banner. Alleria Windrunner, took the mantle of leader, and led this splinter group to Stormwind, to form a treaty with the Alliance under a new name; the Void Elves.

- A brief history on the Void Elves

Here we see the same race, splinter off and change, due to some change in history, location, or accessibility or exposure to some resource, but at the root of it all, they all stem from one race, location, and overarching history. This plays vastly different to other works of fiction, where one race acts, looks and feels all the same way.

This is not exclusive to the elves, as every race on Azeroth displays some innate sense of depth and history towards their actions, each coming from a place of suffering, as Nathaniel Poor (2012) so nicely puts it:

“The races of World of Warcraft represent many diverse cultures which might seem racist at the first and briefest of glosses. But there is a depth and complexity here that suggests the use and appropriation of different ethnic groups represent a serious attempt at a theme that goes beyond good versus evil. Blizzard not only acknowledges the existence of different cultures—something most fantasy games don't attempt—they treat them with respect and use them to seriously consider the embarrassing (and ongoing) exploitation, subjugation, and disrespect for indigenous people.”

Conclusion

World of Warcraft treats diversity with the utmost complexity and nuances expected of such a subject. The many peoples of Azeroth come from all walks of life, of many different customs and cultures that are respected and shown throughout the entirety of its world.

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