

To Be Human in World of Warcraft

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Introduction

If given the chance to become a fantastical creature of myth, would one change their culture and appearance to try on the identity of a new, nonhuman being? The MMO (Massively Multiplayer Online game) *World of Warcraft* allows for players to choose from a number of fantastical creatures to play as, ranging from Tolkien based creatures such as elves and dwarves familiar to the fantasy setting, to the less familiar trolls and cow-based tauren. Standing alongside these creatures of myth is one species far less fantastical, the humans. Humans are hardly strangers to the fantasy setting, appearing in practically every story since the dawn of the fantasy genre itself. This can be explained in fantasy's own roots in mythology, where myth and real life were often regarded as one and the same. But *World of Warcraft* is set in its own, separate world, far away from our own. But that's not to say the game doesn't draw references, or outright takes, different cultures from the real world. The tauren, for instance, are heavily inspired by the Native American people of America and Canada. They live in teepees and have names such as Bloodhoof and Thunderbluff Village. But why do taurens have these traits and not Humans? After all, Native Americans are humans as well. Why do Humans have the traits they do, and not the characteristics of other races, all of which can draw references from real world human culture?

Before I start to answer this question, I should make clear the term "race" used by *World of Warcraft* and its implications on how "race" is used in the real world. While there are disputes among scholars on whether race refers to one's biology and genealogy or their physical

differences, Blizzard has not revealed any information on genetic makeup of the different races of *World of Warcraft*. However, it isn't unreasonable to assume that there is a genetic difference between, say, tauren and gnomes, thereby making them separate species by the strictest sense of the word. As Richard Bartle says in his review of *Digital Culture, Play, and Identity: A World of Warcraft Reader* (2010), comparing the races is like comparing dogs to cats, as opposed to Labradors to Dalmatians. Despite this distinction, scholars such as Jessica Langer (2010) and Melissa J Monson (2012) have argued that the very use of the word "race" as opposed to "species" draws the unfortunate parallel to the common usage of the word in the real world to distinguish between ethnicity, thereby overshadowing any biological common sense. Regardless of the word used, this paper finds that the distinction of human versus non-human and the parallels of real human to be the most important issue, and will continue using the term "race" as that is the proper term in *World of Warcraft*.

It is also important to remember the audience that *World of Warcraft* is presenting itself to. While recent reports have estimated that almost half of the players are from China (Asif, 2010) it can be safe to say that during *World of Warcraft's* original launch, an American market was targeted. Blizzard Entertainment is an American based company, and its previous products were also mainly targeted at an American audience. This is in addition to later claims of cultural familiarity to an American audience, which become important later on.

How race in *World of Warcraft* effects gameplay is an important part to keep in mind. The first step in character creation is to choose what race to play as. All other factors are determined by the race of the character, including playable classes and special race-specific skills called "racial skills." All characters of the same race start their quest in the same area, closed off from other races. Later, certain quests can only be completed by characters of a specific race.

Choosing a character's race for their gameplay can be just as important to a player as other factors like aesthetic and in-world lore.

Each race in the game has an extensive background given by the official *World of Warcraft* website, as well as the fan run Wowpedia. The Human race is described as descending from the barbaric vrykul race, where they spent a period of time living nomadically until the Orc invasion forced them together (*WoW* official website). After successfully fighting off the orcs, the humans built massive cities and formed the Alliance. Though during times of peace, sections of humans would split off to form their own cities, they would always reunite in times of war. During the third war, the Alliance grew to include dwarves, gnomes, and night elves. Humans are said to have strong foreign relations with dwarves and gnomes, as humans respect their skill with technology, but remain suspicious of night elves and their mystic ways (Wowpedia). Humans value honor, justice, and courage, and their allies admire their adaptability, diplomacy, and passion. Their enemies find them bitter, power hungry, and greedy. Humans believe in the Holy Light, save for a few outcasts who have joined the Cult of the Damned.

In addition to purely background information, humans have several traits which are more apparent from a gameplay perspective. Humans have four racial skills, skills that are only available to certain races, which are Every man for himself, Diplomacy, The human spirit, and Sword and mace specialization. Humans can also chose between eight of the ten available classes, only excluding shaman and druid.

What is least human?

To answer the question "What is most human," it became necessary to look at the converse, "What is least human." Colonialism in the real world has provided us with extensive knowledge in the phenomenon of dehumanizing the unfamiliar (Goff et al, 2007). Colonials met with new

unfamiliar people and, for the sole reason that they were different, found them to be more like animals than humans. At worst, these people were described as apes, and at best, they were found to be a fraction of humane. While this thinking is no longer supported in modern day Western society, its effects can still be seen. In a study by Goff et al, (2007) participants subliminally primed with images of Black male faces were twice as fast at recognizing blurred images of apes as participants primed with images of White male faces, showing a lingering mental association between Blacks and apes.

While none of the races in *World of Warcraft* are strictly black (though as Langer (2010) points out, there are some similarities that can be seen between African Americans and orcs,) the game does present the difference between the familiar and other. As Langer explains, the Alliance is the familiar. Humans, dwarves, and gnomes are all based around European and American culture, the culture that the developers and original target audience are most familiar with. On the other hand, the Caribbean based trolls, Native American based tauren, and Middle Eastern aesthetically driven blood elves are all unfamiliar to this established audience.

The link from *World of Warcraft* humans to British/American humans can easily be seen. Though there is a sliding scale, skin tones in the character creation only go as high as a fairly dark tan. Hair is generally smooth and straight for all models. Human npc's speak in a flat American accent. Their religion, belief in the Holy Light, shares a striking resemblance to Christianity, complete with churches and cathedrals scattered throughout their cities. The more avid followers "crush evil and chaotic beings in its name" (Wowpedia) similar to the old crusaders throughout the 12th century. Human architecture draws on old stone castles from medieval England. They can ride gryphon mounts, adorned with bald eagle-like heads, sharing a resemblance to the American national animal.

On the other hand, races that an American or Western Europe audience would find exotic are presented as non-human in the game. Trolls live on jungle strewn islands, living in straw huts. Pikes dot the landscape, along with wild predators. They speak in a heavy Jamaican accent, and constantly warn of the use of voodoo, a reference to the real world Haitian Vodou. Tauren, as has already been mentioned, derive heavily from the Native American culture. Though dwarves and gnomes aren't strictly British/American either, they can draw back to Scottish and Irish cultures for the dwarves, and old English myths for the gnomes. This close relation to medieval England keeps the same familiarity with the audience that humans have, which can easily be seen in their appearances. Though smaller, dwarves and gnomes are the closest looking races to humans in *World of Warcraft*, coupling well with the fact that they are also the least foreign to a Western audience.

But why all of this familiarity? There are many arguments against choosing these racial stereotypes. By putting *World of Warcraft* humans in the same category as colonialists, coupled with the other racial stereotypes of the Horde, the human's enemies, some very unpleasant parallels are made. Because the human language of "Common" is also the shared language of the Alliance, humans are seen as culturally superior to their allies (Monson, 2012, p. 61). Official *World of Warcraft* texts often reinforce the idea of hatred towards longtime foes for the sole reason of simply being another race. This can cause many problems as the lines between what's the real world and what's the virtual world are often blurred. Rowland and Barton, in their article "Race and Ethnicity in Fandom," found that many white players described both themselves and their character similarly, generally using words such as "intelligent," "clever," and "sophisticated." Players also tend to chose to pick characters that also reflect their own physical descriptions (Yee, 2008). Whether they're conscious of it or not, players do base their avatar off

themselves, and have at least some personal connection with it. Racial hatred, even in a fantasy setting, can have negative effects on the real world. After all, real world racism and bigotry are often reflected onto fantasy settings (Monson, 2012) and these settings can disguise their symptoms. Another study by Rowland and Barton showed that players had a hard time recognizing racism inside *World of Warcraft*. Each participant answered a survey which asked multiple questions about race in *World of Warcraft*, then multiple questions about race in the real world. The test was set up so participants weren't allowed to go back and change any answers. Many participants had little trouble answering questions about race as long as it was in game, but hesitated when asked similar questions about race in the real world. When the survey was over, participants were allowed to give their unguided opinions, several of which had given responses of reflection on real life and fantasy racism.

Then why risk these parallels? The developers are completely aware of the implications of setting real world culture onto fantasy races. As Richard Bartle says in his review of *Digital Culture, Play, and Identity: A World of Warcraft Reader* (2010), "Nakamura's *Cybertypes*... is on their bookshelves too; I'm pretty sure... [I've seen it] on other MMO developers' offices." The answer may go back to the subject of familiarity. It would certainly feel strange for a hunched over, blue skinned, three toed creature to be called a human. On the other hand, if the humans were all dark skinned and referenced Caribbean culture, would that make them seem less human? Even though it's a culture not familiar with the audience, most people do recognize it as a culture belonging to humans. In fact, if the humans, a familiar race, had an unfamiliar culture, and the trolls, an unfamiliar race, had the familiar Western European culture, how would that affect the familiar versus other balance? Such a question may be interesting for further research or future game designers.

The parallel cultures and stereotypes may be used as a way to invoke a particular emotion or understanding without the need of a lot of background information. As Lisa Nakamura writes, “racial cybertypes provide familiar, solid and reassuring versions of race which other users can readily accept and understand since they are so used to seeing them in novels, films and video games” (2002, p. 40, in Langer, 2010, p. 101). The ability for players to quickly get a good idea of the world around them is a valuable resource for MMO designers. New players want to jump in and start bashing orcs, not read through a thick book of lore when they begin. Having a confusing and unrelatable world may cause new players to quit before ever diving in deep into the game.

Of course, there’s always the simple and boring answer that, in the original game by the Warcraft franchise, *Warcraft: Orcs and Humans*, humans were presented as European white, and though there’s nothing stopping the developers from changing their design, it would certainly raise a few questions, especially in the continuity between games. While this doesn’t answer the follow up question of why humans were presented in such a way in the original game, it does provide a short term explanation for *World of Warcraft*.

A Modern Medieval

Medieval Europe is a common setting for any novel or game in the fantasy genre since Tolkien’s genre defining *Lord of the Rings*. Cars, planes, and handheld firearms are nowhere to be found, and the strongest with a sword, horse, or bow rules the land. As shown before, humans draw heavily from this time period. They receive a racial bonus for using swords and maces, a trend that draws back to medieval knights. Honor, courage, and justice, values which are held in high regard by humans, are also the values held by knighthood chivalry (Isaac, 1999). Mentioned in Isaac’s review of *Chivalry and Violence in Medieval Europe* by Richard Kaeuper, knights were

also found to be incredibly power hungry, and used their values to brush aside their vices, much like the common Horde criticism of the human race.

But Azeroth contains many references outside of the medieval setting. Flintlock rifles are a common weapon, and the skies are dotted with just as many zeppelins as gryphons. The entire gnome culture is designed around engineering and machine work, and some of their inventions could easily fall into the realm of science fiction, or at least steampunk. Where else would you find a mechanical ostrich sitting besides its live counterpart?

Esther MacCallum-Stewart makes an interesting observation, comparing the setting of Azeroth, in terms of war and technology, to that of World War I. She claims that *World of Warcraft* is an interesting mix of “old” war (i.e. fought with knights, swords, and bows) and “new” war (i.e. with technology and an equally justified enemy.) The difference between old and new war, in terms of justification, is an interesting one. During medieval times, and seen in many stories with medieval settings, war is one united front full of heroes to defeat an evil enemy. But new war, wars fought since World War I, are devious and fought against an enemy whose motives are known and even empathetic (MacCallum-Stewart, 2008). Throughout the lore of *World of Warcraft*, the justification of both sides is made clearly known as to avoid a good-split, which makes sense, as both the races in the Alliance and Horde are open to players, regardless of their own morality.

This association to a time frame closer to the present can help understand other aspects of the humans of Azeroth that would otherwise seem paradoxical. Humans are valued in their abilities of diplomacy (it’s even one of their racial abilities), but are also described as “hav[ing] a view of diplomacy that does not favor negotiations” (Wowpedia). How this can be is best explained through real world examples, for instance, Woodrow Wilson during the building of the

League of Nations after World War I. Though the prospect of creating a peace council is one that would align with the idea of exceptional diplomacy, Wilson crumbled under the pressure of criticism (as diplomacy tends to bring much of) and eventually took on a non-negotiable all-or-nothing stance on the peace treaty and terms for the League of Nations (Ebeling, 2003). Though to say this relation with real world diplomacy is something unique to humans would be incorrect. The night elves, for instance, cut their ties with the Horde and officially joined the Alliance after Cenarius, their beloved lord of the forest and patron god of druids, was murdered by an orc champion. This could be likened to America's joining of World War II, after the attack on Pearl Harbor, in which it cut ties to the German campaign to join with the Allies. The human ability of diplomacy then most likely comes from their willing to be able to come together for a peaceful solution. Though their ability to solve issues peacefully has faults, most other races are contempt to stay separated from their allies. The Alliance itself was built by humans, as were several large groups working outside the main government, such as the Argent Crusade. Though one could use their leadership as an example of cultural superiority, it also shows the humans' ability to bring those of other races together towards a common goal.

Environmentalism in Azeroth

There are two classes of which humans are unable to become: druids and shaman. Both of these classes require a connection to nature missing in humans. In the description of the night elves, humans are unconcerned with their pursuit of technological advancement, and the effect it has on the environment. This can easily be traced back to many modern day concerns with environmentalism, and our own plights to preserve the planet.

Humans are also seen as adaptable, due to having to rebuild and relocate after major battles on their cities. However, MacCallum-Stewart offers a different perspective, arguing that it

is the Horde, not the humans of the Alliance, that are the most adaptable. She refers to the landscape of each race, showing that humans rely on their resources and defend them to the death. Most humans, if not fighters, are farmers, who need fertile land in order for their crops to grow. On the other hand, the races of the Horde do not have this luxury. Most of the Horde controlled Kalimdor is barren, with sparse vegetation growing around it. Trolls, more specifically the Darkspear jungle trolls, are only allowed a small patch of jungle on a small string of islands to call home. The tauren, known for their relation with the land that would rival the night elves, live in the plains of Mulgore, where the only notable vegetation is plains grass. But despite their lack of resources, these Horde races are able to combat the more privileged Alliance.

How this relates to the familiarity, or “humanness,” of these other races is unclear, however. Certainly there was a time when America, with its lesser amount of resources, was the underdog fighting a larger and more privileged threat. But as time went on, America became the far more resourceful and privileged side. While this helped secure victories in World War I and World War II, more recent conflicts have proven to be more difficult to secure, such as the wars in Vietnam and Afghanistan. So who is the “us” and who is the “other” in these scenarios? Certainly, modern day feeling would allow for the mightier force to be “us” and the Vietcong or Taliban to be the “other,” though if this definition were extended to the 1770’s, that would make America the “other.” One could argue that the more modern definition would overshadow the older, and more research could be used to back that claim. Of course, if one were to come from a British perspective, as the humans draw just as much from medieval England as it does modern America, the stronger power, save from fights with other European countries, was usually always the “us.”

Conclusion

So what can be learned from having humans live side by side with elves and orcs and trolls? Are the benefits worth the trade off of having those ugly parallels of real world and fantastical racism? As discussed earlier, throwing off the familiarity of the human race could lead to interesting results, but would this really change the racial problems presented in game? No race in *World of Warcraft* is perfect. As MacCallum-Stewart (2008) points out in her analysis of the battleground Warsong Gulch, the night elves, in their mission to preserve nature, tend to hoard their resources, even when other races need the supplies. Of course, their enemies the orcs use up their resources with no concern for preserving them, so fault can be found on both sides. It's this dichotomy of both bad and good that may never present a true solution for racism so long as a real world parallel exists. Even if the human race were all dark skinned, and had a culture closely resembling that of, say, an African tribe, how many scholars would look at the negative traits and cry foul at their existence?

One can argue that those negative traits speak louder than any positives. Take for instance the blood elves. Their real world cultural equivalent isn't as clear as the trolls or tauren,



Figure 1. Creating a blood elf.

but their homeland would suggest somewhere in the Middle East, as Monson puts it, “Elaborately curved pathways, long flowing silky curtains, a deep red and blue color scheme... gives these lands a notable Walt Disney’s ‘Aladdin’ feel” (2012, p. 62). This aesthetic can be seen in figure 1, showing the character creation

screen for a female blood elf. However, ask a member of the WoW community what culture the blood elves remind them of, and their answer is much different. One community member in

Monson's study said, "Blood elves are very European... the "Aryan" bloodelves are the only race on the horde side that is smart enough to be a Paladin" (2012, p. 63). As blood elves are constantly mocking their fellow races and showing off their feelings of superiority, many players associate them with German Nazis. However, one would be hard pressed to find any other relationship to blood elves and Nazis other than a superiority complex. Unless specific care is taken so that all races each draw from a variety of real world cultures, players will inevitably draw real world parallels and could easily take commentary on one fantasy race to mean the same thing on a real world race. And even so, cultures from one area can easily overshadow cultures from another, as shown with our Germanic friends the blood elves.

But achieving a no-racism game can be extremely difficult, especially when giving the players the option to play as different races, and having those different races be at war with one another. But walking a fine race line isn't always a bad one. As Langer mentions, *World of Warcraft* can, at times, be paradoxically promoting racism and frowning upon it at the same time. She points to the trolls, who are commonly referred to as vicious savages, as being a terrible racist stereotype. However, the blood elves, with their own racist jokes, give players a negative reaction to their own racism in game. It's as if the game is both aware and ignorant of its own racism. Of course, the blood elves became a playable race after the trolls, so initial criticism could have allowed for the designers to reflect on this during the blood elves creation. But the only way to know for sure would be to ask the designers themselves.

That said, what of the humans? As stated, they're courageous, honorable warriors of justice, save for when one's on the wrong side of their mace. Then they're cruel, greedy, power hungry, and ignorant of the Horde's plight. They cut down trolls and orcs simply because of long-time hatred of wars long ago. They are unable to differentiate the Forsaken from the

Scourge and vow to destroy all undead, despite the Forsaken themselves being an enemy of the Scourge. How racist of the developers to give a blanket culture over an entire race. How racist of the humans to not see past this blanket culture and its stereotypes.

Once again, *World of Warcraft* throws another paradox in its own race filled world. Though humans are often described with a handful of adjectives and are praised for their greatest deeds, it would be wrong to say that all humans fall under that category. Humans follow the Holy Light, but some have joined the Cult of the Damned. Humans honor virtue and justice, and yet banditry and sea piracy have been on the rise in Azeroth (Wowpedia). Humans hate their long-time enemies of the Horde, and yet the human led Argent Crusade, previously the Argent Dawn, allows members of all races to join. Is it fair to judge *World of Warcraft's* use of stereotypes when in the game, that's all they are? Just stereotypes. Clearly not all humans think alike, especially when one considers that all human characters are controlled by players, at least the ones that aren't non-playable story characters. Though they all may come from the same place, and have similar features, each character has some sort of story behind it. Sometimes it's just the player extending their own person onto their character. Sometimes the player develops a completely new identity for their character. Either way, very few characters completely fall into their stereotype if one were to take the time to learn about them. Perhaps the ability to stereotype the other races of Azeroth is the humans' greatest humanlike trait.

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