RENDERING THE OTHER:

IDEOLOGIES OF THE NEO-ORIENTAL IN *WORLD OF WARCRAFT*

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ABSTRACT

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Considering video games as sites of semiotic play, I argue that video games are a commodity that inscribes the consumer into various subject positions that often participate in the replication of ideology in simulated spaces. Applying Louis Althusser, Edward Said, and many other pertinent scholars, I consider *World of Warcraft*, the world’s largest online video game, and what our digital production and consumption of this gamic space says about our identities and place in a larger cultural ideological framework. It is with this understanding that I see ideology in video games as both an *illusion* that informs our understanding of the world, as well as an *allusion* to our very real subject positionings within the real world.

Focusing first on the *capitalist fairytale* that is recreated in the virtual economy and gaming ludology, I briefly discuss “gold farming” and how this real world aspect of *WoW* bridges the Oriental ideology in both real and virtual spaces, as both spaces benefit from this process. Focusing specifically on the recent *World of Warcraft* expansion, *Mists of Pandaria*, I argue that by making Pandaria and the Pandaren race so stereotypically Asian, so bluntly Othered, and so vividly exotic merely encapsulates the idea that diversity, difference and especially the East are all now more easily consumed by a world entrenched in such a clash of ideology and clash of cultures, where all facets of identity and play have been transformed into consumable products in the virtual world as potently as they also have in the real world.

Ultimately I argue that through digital reinscription, video games render the region, the geographies and the people of the Orient as meaningful *only* through the subjective Western gaze that comes to understand these geographical, material, and human spaces through a stereotyped
and Western-centric cultural lens. Further, I show how video games have the capacity to reinscribe dominant Western ideological trends that through the art of immersion and play become more than abstract paradigms reserved for academia, and instead are inscribed as common consumer understandings of foreign territories, peoples and histories through a new subject-positioning of the player.
“Just as none of us is outside or beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography. That struggle is complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings.”

— Edward Said, Culture and Imperialism
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PREFACE

In order to begin an interdisciplinary approach to the study of *World of Warcraft*, I played a minimum of 15-25 hours per week, for a consistent 9-month period, totaling an excess of 500 hours and counting. This does not include the extensive hours I spent researching and contributing to relevant academic literature, *WoW* forums, and researching leveling and character techniques. The research I am conducting was carried out in two locals: the virtual world of the game itself, on two U.S. servers, *Doomhammer* and *Alexstrasza*, in Northern Ohio, where I engaged in daily quests, raids, guild chats, guild achievements and other gamic experiences;¹ and at Bowling Green State University where I spent 2 years researching and gaining comprehension of the popular literature surrounding the game, American culture, and political ideology. Because of this, I have a particular bias in my gaming experience. To be clear, my aim is to offer my perspective on the game experience, logic, and textual placement, although I am aware that there are literally millions of perspectives on this gaming text. Rather than seeing this as detracting from the significance of my textual analysis, I believe this diversity contributes to the potency of looking at *World of Warcraft* as a site of textual analysis, as there is a great deal of ideology, culture and theoretical work to be constructed from the various cultures, geographies and perspectives that the global video gaming community may offer.

Further, it is possible that with the right funding and a different cultural upbringing, that a player’s community experience may differ if they were on a server from another part of the world, or had more time to engage in PvP (Player vs. Player) servers or RPG (Role Playing) servers, both of which I have little experience. The significant majority of *World of Warcraft* users play on PvP (Player vs. Environment) server, where PvP is only allowed in limited and voluntary spaces, and the main objective is to succeed against NPCs (Non-Player Character).
While there is always a bias in a researchers perspective, my goal was to gain a more comprehensive literacy of the video game text, and to offer a unique and relevant transcription of the gaming space.

Consistent with the postmodern definition of games, *World of Warcraft* is not limited to a particular narrative or style of gameplay. Hence, in order to ground my experience in the most comprehensive manner, I played main plot lines through the virtually insurmountable number of *Quests* available, with multiple characters, mainly Caliden on the Alliance side, and Orienta on the Horde, as well as leveled four *Professions* (*Blacksmithing*, *Mining*, *Leatherworking*, *Skinning*) to their maximum proficiency of level 600. I also leveled my characters (or, as many players refer to their characters, “Toon”) to the highest available level of 90. I also participated in all available dungeon instances, and have run several available raids. In order to run these dungeons and raids, I had to pick a specific role, as either a *Tank*, *Healer*, or *Damage Per Second* (*DPS*). I will explain these in greater detail in a later chapter. Suffice it to say that I chose the role of Tank, as it promotes me to a leadership position, and thereby a more immersive experience due to the inherited responsibility that comes with that role. I also engaged a significant amount of time participating in the *Auction House* economy, building a small virtual fortune through the sale and resale of in-game goods. I also pursued various *Mounts* with social significance, as well as consistently pursued the highest-level *Gear* for my character. To participate more fully in the communal side of the game, I joined a total of three *Guilds* throughout my time, building friendships, recording conversations, and engaging in player interviews. Screen shots were captured at variously determined times to showcase specific semiotics I noticed. Lastly, I made contact with several Blizzard representatives via message forums and phone calls, engaging in conversation about my study and ways they could assist.
Building on this experience is my recorded research in the *S.M.R.T. Gamer*, a personal academic blog focused entirely on video game research, reviews, and experiences. An extensive and detailed blog was kept and recorded after each playtime and compiled into bi-weekly blog posts. The blog can be accessed at the following URL: [http://jamesvgames.blogspot.com](http://jamesvgames.blogspot.com). The blog was open to the public and over the course of the three months I had a total of 3,014 views (and counting) from various players, academics, and subscribers from around the world.

In short, while I am coming to the game with a particular perspective, that requires a particular set of rules for “decoding” the text, as Stuart Hall would suggest, my aim is to offer various perspectives on how the game can be decoded, not merely as an acceptance of what narrative and ludology the game developers encoded, but also as a site of contest, struggle and negotiation between the gaming text and the player’s cultural perspective. That being said, I continually encourage and look forward to understanding and coming to learn other player’s perspectives that may have a unique interpretation or experience with the vivid racial and ideological semiotics of *World of Warcraft*. 
INTRODUCTION

Video games hold a key place in society, forming identities in virtual and real contexts, re-inscribing cultural values, and creating a semiotic of community that comes with simulated interaction. While games have been criticized for occupying only a space of leisure activity,\(^1\) often associated with child’s play and holiday consumerism, the technological progression of the late 20\(^{th}\) century and the early 21\(^{st}\) century has led to modern game engines that produces phantastical representations of real world geographies, and simulations of real player interactions. In fact, viewing them as antisocial apparatuses detracts from their potential to be understood and studied as vibrant cultures, which transform private spaces like bedrooms and the office chair into a virtual space of cultural convergence.

Rather, understanding them as a point of cultural convergence, allows for a globally connected site of play that is no longer limited to verbal communication, but now includes a transmogrified identity. In many virtual gaming spaces this includes an entirely new site for semiotic play, granting a new coding of social structures including values, morality, wealth, power, and community. Further, as sites of semiotic play, video games are a commodity that encourages the consumer to take up various subject positions that often participate in the replication of ideology in simulated spaces. Using this semiotic lens I consider World of Warcraft, the world’s largest online video game, and what our digital production and consumption of this gamic space says about our identities and place in a larger cultural ideological framework; instead of perpetuating the myth that technology is a utopic space that

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\(^1\) For a recent study on the analysis of video games and their effects as leisure activities, as well as study of the gendered relationship to video games, see Emil G. M. van Schie and Oene Wiegman’s, *Children and Videogames: Leisure Activities, Aggression, Social Integration, and School Performance* (The Netherlands: University of Twente, 1997), [http://doc.utwente.nl/58308/1/Schie97children.pdf](http://doc.utwente.nl/58308/1/Schie97children.pdf).
disembodies the cultural conceptions of self from the historical narration that places the self in relation to larger racial and power constructs.

Many scholars and readers have engaged video games in powerful ways, expressing their potential to either create a fantastical space for escape and relational transformation, or as an instigator of extreme violent tendencies in teens and a propagator of male dominance over the objectified woman. Further, scholars of Orientalism in American culture approach new manifestations of the ideology through post-colonial studies, but seldom acknowledge the role of computer and video games in this ideology. Game Studies, by contrast, tend to focus on the semiotics and technology of computer and video games, often ignoring the political dimensions of the complex narrative and virtual environment that make up the gaming experience. Thus, what I propose to add is a Cultural Studies perspective, that creates a bridge between the semiotics of the virtual space, which often have colonial and cultural symbolisms, and also their parallel real world political-ideological implications that are formed within both the narrative and ludology of the game experience.

It is important to explore video games’ connection to the political landscape that is reviving Cold War anxieties of the Oriental other, as America, and the West, looks to increase its imperial efforts and defend its “exceptionalism” in the 21st century by creating a phantastical space in which these anxieties can manifest. I see this effort happening globally from the perpetual “War on Terror” with its symbolic counterpart taking shape in the many First-Person Shooters, like the Call of Duty franchise that renders this “War on Terror” conflict in stereotyped

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3 For a powerful analysis of feminism in video games, see Radhika Gajjala’s and Yeon Ju Oh’s, *Cyberfeminism 2.0*, (Peter Lang Publishing, 2012).
and exaggerated representations of Middle-Eastern countries, as well as the popular rhetoric seen in the recent 2012 American Presidential campaign and automotive advertising that vilifies Asia as a backward, amoral, inhumane space full of “Chinese Cheaters.”

This rhetoric grounds itself in a political environment in which the economy verges on depression as the limits of Capitalism are being faced once again, and as an educated Asian consumer-worker population steadily grows, threatening American economic dominance, and as an allegedly hostile and intolerable Middle-East nationalism that supposedly threatens America’s “freedom.” While these are powerful and extremely complicated accusations, my aim is to look at video games as a medium not separated from this “reality” but rather an extension of the political and communal spaces that we understand culturally, an extension of the “imagined community” that must be read through a lens of Orientalism, in order to break down and transform these stereotypes of the “Other,” and to hopefully call for a rewriting of the Western-centric narrative, especially because of the potential that video games hold to influence this 21st century political and cultural landscape in profound ways.

Johan Höglund, specialist in Popular Culture and Edwardian Literature, provides a compelling example of this role of video games, in his intersection of the Military Entertainment Complex (MEC) and neo-Orientalism in the Call of Duty franchise, arguing that military computer games set in the Middle East not only symbolize but also construct this location within its game space. However, I argue that neo-Orientalism is not simply a product of the MEC, as Johan Höglund seems to think, as he states:

It is possible that the bid for a New Global American Century is accompanied by an American-style Orientalism, an Orientalism that legitimizes US foreign policy in the Middle East in the same way that

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6 Höglund, *Electronic Empire*. 
British Orientalism made British colonial policy both possible and agreeable to the British and European public.7

I contend that neo-Orientalism in the MEC is only a single piece of the ideological puzzle that makes up the post-Cold War American myth of legitimacy. While it is certainly manifested in the MEC, this is only one aspect of a much larger trend in American culture that others the entire Middle East, Asia, and nearly everything apart from the United States of America and Europe. Through digital reinscription, video games render the region, the geographies and its people as meaningful only through the subjective Western gaze that comes to understand these geographical, material, and human spaces through a stereotyped and Western-centric cultural lens. Further, video games have the capacity to reinscribe dominant Western ideological trends that through the art of immersion and play become more than abstract paradigms reserved for academia, and instead are inscribed as common consumer understandings of foreign territories, peoples and histories.

As with previous generations of expansion and conquest, the West seeks to create and define the image of the target area in order to prolong and justify Western exploitation of these spaces. As with the 19th century European idea of the Orient as being a homogenous geographical area prone to backwardness and violence, this American neo-orientalism seen in video games, I claim, depicts the Middle-East, Asia and Northern Africa and its occupants as dangerous, violent and technically savvy. The entire region is converted into an imagined zone hostile to America and the American way of life. Little attention is paid to the diversity of cultures, languages, and histories that comprise the real geographical space referred to as the "Orient," and Americans are taught to view the entire region as dangerous and in need of a "civilizing force." In video games, this civilizing force is, without compromise, portrayed as the

7 Ibid.
West, manifested in various ideologies that are rendered in virtual worlds and consumed by millions of players.

This intermingling of the real world in virtual spaces gives space for real world ideology to enter video games. This ideological inscription in virtual worlds is significant, as video games have now become a medium to express ideas from other political and public realms. For example, consider “Americas Army” a popular first person shooter used by the U.S. Army to recruit soldiers, DARPA, a research wing of the U.S. Army that funds research of multiplayer games for combat training, and Second Life, a game where the grip of capitalism manifests in digitally rendered shops, advertising, and virtual businesses. Video games are used in higher education, including here at Bowling Green State University, as well as in the world’s largest multinational corporations like Intel, Boeing and Sun Microsystems. Christian evangelists use video games as a gateway to further their proselytizing mission, and Sports are now simulated in video games in ways that replace the real world activity incorporating real-time skeletal movement capturing with increased computer graphic and motion-technologies, and fantasy sports leagues where the virtual world intersects with reality in a uniquely postmodern fashion. In this sense, virtual worlds feel more authentically like real cultures and space than other forms of media because of the elaboration of space and objects.  

It is with this understanding of space that I will refer to the reality in which you are reading this text, and in which we exist, eat, breath, and survive as the “real world.” This is not to diminish the “reality” of virtual spaces and video games, but merely to distinguish between the two spaces for the purpose of this study. I will refer to video game environments, such as World of Warcraft, as “virtual worlds.” Utilizing Leontiev and Vygotsky’s definition of virtual worlds,

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I define virtual worlds as spaces where participants (1) create an animated character, (2) move the character in three-dimensional space, (3) have meaningful communication with others, and (4) access a rich array of digital objects. Further, in these virtual worlds, the culture of the virtual world is enacted through human conversation and designed objects that mediate activity.\(^9\) It is these rendered objects that are the point of study in this paper.

It is with this global perspective that I understand video games to hold a key place in society, forming identities in virtual and real contexts, reinscribing cultural values from racial categorizations, to the semiotics of community that comes with simulated interaction. Further, the idea of “play,” in *World of Warcraft*, is an active aesthetic experience, and a constant semiotic negotiation. As Nardi suggests, this digital medium orients human activity in a stimulating visual and social environment that makes possible a “release of creativity, and a sense of empowerment in conditions of autonomy, sociality, and positive reward.”\(^10\) While this is true, I will also show through my analysis of the video game industry and *World of Warcraft* as a capitalist fairytale in Chapter 2, that the sense of autonomy and positive reward are products of a capitalist exchange that is simulated in *WoW*. These are rewards that reinforce cultural understandings of an American capitalist market, where hard work equates with economic success, with little to no racial or class barriers, which are limitations in the real world. At the same time, I will briefly expand on the notion of “gold-farming” and how this furthers an Oriental logic that connects virtual worlds and real worlds in a potent biopolitics of providing goods and services for the Western consumer at the expense of the often Eastern laborer. Connecting this to the larger framework of a culture formed around a material hierarchy, I will

show that this virtual world is ripe with semiotic markers of “otherness,” creating a space for a transference of Oriental ideology.

Understanding *World of Warcraft* as a cultural space, where real world and virtual world ideology intermingle, and have potential consequences for the construction of the individual, as well as the potential to reinscribe ideology onto millions of players, deems it necessary for scholars to engage video games from a more critical ideological lens. It is with this intent that I aim to uncover and explore in depth the ideological structures at play within *World of Warcraft*. By applying Louis Althusser’s theory of ideology, I will examine how virtual worlds are not separate ideological structures from real world ideology, but often operate on and are constructed from the very semiotic tropes translated from real world ideology, but use virtual means and institutions to enforce the ideology. Secondly, understanding this Ideological Apparatus as such, I will expand on Edward Said’s, theory of “Orientalism,” arguing that *World of Warcraft* enacts a powerful narrative and *ludological* “neo-Orientalism” that reinscribes a sense of the “Western gaze” on the digitally rendered “Other.” From the racial divide between the Alliance and Horde (the two main factions in *World of Warcraft*), to the geographical representations of people and spaces, as well as the newest expansion, *Mists of Pandaria*, there exists an exceptional highlighting of “Otherness” within the game space, as a main driving force of combat, narrative, and ideological reinscription. This examination of Orientalism in *WoW* is significant because of the ideology’s historical prevalence in political spheres over violence and global exchange. Especially because these political ideologies and conflicts that we see in video games reinforce a dominant Western gaze, and a history, even in the virtual world, that affirms the centrality of Western expansion, conflict and epistemology about identity, geography and material ideology. Finally, this analysis hopes to arrive at a hypothesis of how the ideological apparatus of the
virtual world both reinforces and reinscribes Oriental ideology, which then affects the player and their global perceptions in the real world.

Throughout this analysis, it is important to keep in mind that when I claim these games render ideology, community and culture to be “real,” this claim has more to do with the interpreted historical and ideological content than with the games' capacity to render a life-like version of the Orient. In other words, what matters is not so much that the geographies of the game are in fact real interpretations of actual real world spaces, or that the races are in fact identical to real world races, but rather the question that needs to be addressed is what kind of game space these games actually produce and what kind of narratives and game logic they construct through their virtual and symbolic renderings of these geographies, players and races.

In conclusion, it is my point to argue that World of Warcraft participates in this understanding of video games as sites of semiotic play, particularly recreating Orientalist tropes that categorize, limit, and reinforce cultural stereotypes for the dominant Western consumer. Further, these Orientalist tropes offer a simulation of the modern Capitalist society in its most phantastical and virtu-real representation, reinforcing the myth of success in an unparalleled fashion. Through the construction of a material hierarchy, video games, and particularly *World of Warcraft*, enable the cultural production of identifying the Other, associating them with particular material, geographic and aesthetic semiotics, thereby rendering Oriental ideology.

It is with these theoretical positionings, and understanding of video games that I begin to explore the uniqueness of the video game medium as a site of cultural production, and also a space ripe with ideology. In this sense, *World of Warcraft* is not just about play and fantasy, but also about struggles over geography; specifically imagined, virtual geographies that have rendered the Orient in a newly dominated position of the “Other,” an Other that both abates
Western terrorist anxieties, and also reaffirms American exceptionalism in a global, virtual medium.
LITERATURE REVIEW

What is a video game? While this question arouses an answer seemingly benign and simple, it is actually quite difficult to pin down an agreed upon definition of a video game. Considering the history of games, the various theories about their origin and roots, as well as the many and exponentially expanding theoretical and methodological frameworks in which video games are analyzed, defining video games is an enormous task. Semantically, the first term “video” alludes to the medium in which the “game” is experienced – through some visual form on a screen. The second half of the term, “game,” is far less easily defined. Johan Huizinga in his famous Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture (1950) offers the first definition, as does Roger Caillois’ in Man, Play, and Games (1961), Elliott M. Avedon and Brian Sutton-Smith’s The Study of Games (1971), and to recent works by Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman’s Re:Play: Game Design + Game Culture (2004), and Jesper Juul’s Half-Real (2005).

In general terms, cultural theorists have approached video games with the question of “What meanings are made and/or reinforced through games?” Many scholars use the tools and methods such as interviews, ethnographies, and participant observation to investigate the role videogames play in people’s personal and public lives, as well as what meanings they assign to their experiences.\(^{11}\) Often, cultural theorists derive these assigned meanings from larger cultural theoretical frameworks. For example, Mia Consalvo, in her essay on Rule Sets, Cheating, and Magic Circles: Studying Games and Ethics (2005), argues that “players are constantly making meanings, decoding icons or actions or texts in the game,” and that “different players of varying ages, social classes, nationalities, ethnicities and genders bring their own experiences with them.

to each game.”¹² For Consalvo, these various individual identities bring unique lenses in which to assign meaning to the individual experiences of the players. Expanding on this notion, I suggest games should not be studied as separate spaces with separate rules and rewards, but rather as an exploration into how gaming narrative and experience are spilling over into our daily lives in pleasurable and troublesome ways, with real consequences. For Consalvo, this approach grants the player the ability to negotiate his or her belief in relation to the game, either walling off or happily integrating the gaming experience into the rest of his or her life.¹³

Other researchers have focused on understanding videogames as cultural artifacts with embedded meaning, exploring what the medium of the videogame is, and situating it in context to other forms of human expression.¹⁴ For example, Brenda Laurel’s book *Computers as Theatre (1993)* describes how digital technologies are the natural result of the “capacity to represent action in which the humans could participate.”¹⁵ In this way, computers (and, by relation, video games) are not merely tools for calculating, but a medium allowing the users to play both roles as the performer and the audience member. Henry Jenkins, on the other hand, considered by many to be a founder of video game theory, explores the role that videogames play in a broader context he refers to as *transmedia storytelling*. In Jenkins’ view, content moves between different media, and video games are a part of the general ecology of storytelling media that include movies, novels, and comic books.¹⁶ Jenkins also discusses the concept of *convergence*. Convergence for Jenkins is not merely the unity of hardware, but a greater degree

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¹³ Ibid.
of audience participation, such as fan culture adding to the storytelling experience. Again, fan culture and the general relationship of the player to the medium can be seen as imbued with cultural significance in need of greater theoretical exploration. Similarly, Janet Murray’s *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (1998) describes the computer as a new medium for the practice of storytelling, arguing that videogames, as one form of a computer or digital artifact, allow for new expressive possibilities. Espen Aarseth, on the other hand, disagrees with Murray’s idea and holds, “to claim there is no difference between games and narratives is to ignore essential qualities of both categories.”

This disagreement between whether games are an extension of storytelling, or a unique experience that extends beyond narrative highlights the popular *ludology vs. narratology* debates. *Narratology*, on the one hand, views games as stories and enables a structuralist perception of text based on the narrative structures. This perspective downplays the role of the player to that of a perceiver, and not an actor, which I find central to understanding the way race, identity, and ideology are constructed and enacted in video game spaces, as well as their transference to “real” life. *Ludology*, on the other hand, coming from the word *ludus*, Latin for “game,” proposes that the study of games should concern the analysis of the abstract and formal systems they describe, from within the game itself. In other words, the focus of game studies should be on the rules of a game, not on the representational elements which are considered only incidental. Espen Aarseth further clarifies this distinction by introducing the concept of ergodic literature, derived from the Greek words *ergon*, meaning "work", and *hodos*, meaning "path,"

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17 Ibid.  
20 Ibid.
which he distinguishes in the following way:

In ergodic literature, nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text. If ergodic literature is to make sense as a concept, there must also be nonergodic literature, where the effort to traverse the text is trivial, with no extranoematic responsibilities placed on the reader except (for example) eye movement and the periodic or arbitrary turning of pages.

As Aarseth’s concept of ergodic literature seems to suggest, video games are not merely narratives that require trivial eye movement and an “arbitrary turning of pages,” but rather require a more nomadic and action-oriented literacy. This requirement of movement through action is possible, perhaps uniquely, to the video game medium, where space, action, and progression are not limited to a bound text, but rather formed through immersion into a ludological text where games are studied and played as separate spaces with their own logic and rules. Johan Huizinga’s frequently referenced definition of “play” affirms this ludological approach, claiming that play is an activity that happens outside “ordinary” life. And in their powerful book *Rules of Play* (2003), Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman use Huizinga’s concept of the magic circle to emphasize that the rules, space and time of a game are separate from real-life rules, space and time. Yet, all theorists do not embrace the competition between these two approaches in video game studies. In fact, prominent video game scholar Jesper Juul explores in his book *Half-Real* (2011) how videogames blend formal rules with the imaginative experiences provided by the game. In other words, there is a narrative structure to video games, based on formal rules of engagement, but the play, the ludology, of the players interaction with the narrative, and with the game is unique. As he states:

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21 Johan Huizinga is a Dutch historian who wrote “Homo Ludens” (or “Man the Player”) in 1938. His definition of play has been a baseline for many video game scholars to expand and diverge from.
That the rules of a game are real and formally defined does not mean that the player's experience is also formally defined. However, the rules help create the player's informal experience. The player navigates these two levels, playing video games in the half-real zone between the fiction and the rules.23 This navigation between these two levels highlights a need to further study player ecology, a way of understanding how the player subject becomes coded actor in a balancing of the formal narrative structure, and the ludic expression of experience. Aarseth’s perspective of video games as “ergodic literature” hints at some of this interaction for the player, offering the idea that a player’s action has some physical aspect and is not strictly occurring on the mental plane. Perhaps this is indicative of Martin Heidegger’s call for a realigning of the human and technology, one that does not challenge the object as pure resource, to render it calculable based on a limited structure of narrative, but rather to be open to letting the symbiotic relationship between the machine and man to reveal itself to us in myriad ways.24 That is why Juul’s theoretical space is groundbreaking in the discipline, as it allows for a collusion of experiences and video game components to be questioned simultaneously. In order to look at race, as Nakamura has done, or materialization as Sundén has attempted, or other forms of identity construction in video games, it is necessary to operate on a theoretical grounding that is both interdisciplinary and theoretically diverse, otherwise we limit the potential of video game studies to articulate larger ideological constructs that require multiple lenses of understanding, especially considering the infancy of video game theory.

These methods of studying video games collectively offer insight into games as actions, sets of rules, and historically and culturally significant events. While all of these definitions offered are unique and noteworthy, I will focus on Jesper Juul’s definition, as outlined here:

According to Juul, video games have six features:

1. A rule based formal system
2. With variable and quantifiable outcomes
3. Where different outcomes are assigned different values
4. Where the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome
5. The player feels emotionally attached to the outcome
6. And the consequences of the activity are optional and negotiable

Juul’s definition allows for interplay between rules and player-creation. Rules certainly set a parameter for the nature of play and grant variable and quantifiable outcomes, but they also inherit values and structure from reality. For my research on the coding of racial and material ideology in simulated spaces, this is significant, because it grounds video games as mediums of semiotic exchange and interpretation. By “semiotics” I mean to say that video games are dynamic, rule-based, and strategic codes of language that require interpretation from the user. Further, video games are *multimodal*, requiring multiple senses to be interpreted, and video games are spaces of design that manipulate the player as much as the player manipulates the space. In this way, video games function as human sign and symbol systems as players within the virtual space share a finite set of semiotic patterns and processes that are ultimately interpreted as icons that are valued and given meaning only within the system of the game itself. Thus, video games are a medium in which semiotics are transposed and disseminated, in a similar fashion as language and literature. As David Myers suggests:

> Whatever might be strange or mysterious concerning a sign or symbol is systematically removed and replaced with the immediate sensation of the sign itself and the accompanying ability to value and understand that sign during play…this immersive experience of the semiotic self is no doubt part of the addictive-like appeal of [video] games.”

Secondly, Juul’s definition of games as having consequences that are optional and negotiable grants a post-structuralist approach to gaming that allows players to take multiple and significant subject positions in games, not merely as players coded along a trajectory that the

developer intended, but instead able to create a personal *ludology* through the presented narrative. It is from this second perspective that my cultural theory background finds significance in video games. Despite my preference for Juul’s definition of “game,” all definitions share a common history of how video games became a dominant fixture in popular culture, and a theoretical history that is as much contested, as it is diverse in its purpose.

On the one hand we have the history of the development of video games, their place within technological progression, and the emergence of a global industry. Beginning with a very basic battle simulation (Spacewar!), the video game industry faced adversity with the fall of American developer *Atari* in 1984, leaving a trail of bitterness that was carried over into the successful revival of the video game industry by the Japanese company, *Nintendo*. The history of video games is relatively short, but has been deeply imbued with racial rhetoric, a contributor to the increase in violence in media, and also a medium that produced a new spin on shock-factor advertising targeted at clearly defined demographics. Today, video games arguably hold a central place in the nostalgic memories of a late 20th century generation, who grew up with a controller in their hand before they could read or write.26 With the ability to simulate sports, foreign geographies, and phantastical experiences, it takes little explanation to understand the fascination players and consumers have with video games, especially considering our globalized world that has liberated modern minds from the previous limitations of cultural exchanges. It is from this fascination and cultural interaction that we have an emerging field of video game scholars working together from multiple academic perspectives including Anthropology, Sociology, Philosophy, Computer Science, Gender Studies, and Cultural Studies. Each of these perspectives brings unique and significant perspectives to video games as a commodity, cultural

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artifact, and site of semiotic analysis. Arguably the 21st century is uniquely positioned to engage video games at a theoretical level because it is bursting with scholars who grew up with video games as the medium of choice and who have the potential to build a theoretical base that is as diverse in methodology and focus as the video games themselves.

In 1982 Chris Crawford wrote *The Art of Computer Game Design*, the first book devoted to theorizing about video games. Crawford explored why people played games, and attempted to describe a methodology for the study of video games as an art form. Later the next year, Geoffrey R. Loftus and Elizabeth F. Loftus’s wrote *Mind at Play: The Psychology of Video Games* (1983), which looked at the psychological motivations of game players, how games relate to the cognitive system of the mind (attention, perception, short-term and long-term memory, and expectancy), motor performance, and problem-solving skills.27 And ten years later in 1993, French theorist Frédéric Le Diberder wrote *Qui a peur des jeux vidéo?*, which declared, after the six classical arts and the three newer ones (cinema, the comic strip, and television), video games were the tenth art.28 This comparison of the cinema and video games is not unique. In fact, as Le Diberder points out, Jean-Luc Godard, film director and critic, seemed to allude to the role of video games with his belief in the changing nature of the audience from passive to active and the spectator into an actor.29 In other words, video games seem to be the post-cinematic link in the essential progression of media that redefines our relation to the narrative world in images.

Although, it is important to note that video game theorist Jesper Juul would disagree with Le Diberder, as he sees video games as a “continuation of a history of games, rather than a new

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27 Wolf, *An Introduction*.
28 It is significant to note here that the Chinese operator of World of Warcraft was The9 – a semantic play on the implication that video games were the 9th art of China.
media, or a successor of cinema or print.”

Further, rather than seeing video games as a descendant of cinema or theatre, Gabriella Giannachi discusses in her book *Virtual Theatres* that the theatre itself has come to resemble virtuality, and that even the viewer can be simulated. Simulation of the player, the actor, the cinema in general seems to all take place most ideally in the video game, where multiplicity and a simulational culture are produced specifically to enable these new post-cinematic roles of the player and the consumer.

In the 21st century, this changing nature of the audience into actor is even more significant, as the increase in technology allows for new levels of immersion, and the global nature of gaming culture has allowed for entire communities, rich with social norms, dress codes, language, and other semiotic representations to flourish. The 21st century video game requires a new form of technical literacy; unique to the expansive dimensions these modern games create socially, geographically, and narratively. T.L. Taylor is among many to explore the social architecture of immersion in her book *Play Between Worlds (2009).* Looking from a snapshot of a particular massively multiplayer online gaming culture, Taylor examines the player’s immersion in and out of complex social networks that cross online and offline spaces. She argues that becoming a player is more than simply engaging in the activities of the game, rather it is the process of becoming socialized and enculturated into the life of the game, learning new vocabularies and understanding new social practices. This level of cyber-cultural immersion is often considered a “virtual embodiment,” as is the case for Jenny Sundén, cultural scholar and author of *Material Virtualities: Approaching Online Textual Embodiment (2003).* For Sundén,
the virtual does not automatically equate disembodiment,\textsuperscript{34} nor does it necessarily copy the real, rather she argues for a position between these two, whereby a virtual world might be an “extension of the corporeal, as well as the physical refiguration, or perhaps rather an incarnation of the textual.”\textsuperscript{35} In other words, virtual embodiment is a borderland that cultural theorists need to further explore, to fully understand the changing nature of the audience in relation to this new media.

One of the prominent scholars of these virtual borderlands is Lisa Nakamur\textsuperscript{a}, who explores visual culture on the Internet and the way race is codified into online space. In her book, \textit{Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet} (2007), Nakamura navigates the problem of language and how racism occurs due to web biases toward English, how Asians are considered the model minority because of their stereotyped fluency with technology, as well as how race is circumvented by depictions of characters that are not explicitly racialized, but rather made racial by their stereotypical signifiers (clothes, type of music, attire).\textsuperscript{36}

All of these modern theories of video game spaces touch on my overall research trajectory: \textit{Video Games and their situation as a medium for interactive visual-based communities need to be looked at and considered in terms of their ideological potential}. In other words, as Nakamura seems to illuminate, we need to think about what our digital production and consumption say about our identities in a larger cultural ideological framework, instead of perpetuating the myth that technology is a utopic space that disembodies the cultural conceptions of self from the historical narration that places the self in relation to larger racial and power constructs.

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 109.
\textsuperscript{36} Lisa Nakamura, \textit{Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).
Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig De Peuter have built an engrossing and comprehensive analysis of the video game industry in their book, *Digital Play: The Interaction of Technology, Culture and Marketing* (2003) that begins an exploration of this thesis, considering video games as spaces of cultural and ideological interaction. Traversing the history from the video game industry’s late 20th century origins to the overwhelming hegemony of Nintendo, Sega, Sony, and Microsoft, the author’s narrate the emergence of a modern media empire. While this history of video games, their development, and their eventual rise to dominance in the popular media is part of this book, the most significant focus details an industry shift from Fordism to post-Fordism. *Digital Play* examines how this shift from the production of goods to the production of experience is most aptly manifested in video games. As the author’s claim, “video and computer games are the most compelling manifestation of the simulator hyperreal postmodern ambience definitive of the post-Fordist economy.”

Again, this focus on post-Fordism is comparable to Aarseth’s understanding of games as ergodic texts, as they become spaces of experience, and therefore spaces where ideology is not a passive idea, but rather an active social and economic force.

Building off of this idea of video games as a post-Fordist production of hyperreal simulation, the authors incorporate international narratives of conflict, including “Japan Panic” that was bolstered post-WWII as a wave of technological innovation was imported from Japan into the American economy, thereby giving spatiality to Orientalism in the real world global conflicts that were coded in virtual mediums. Further, and most significantly, the authors explore narratives of colonization that virtual games, specifically their Japanese origins, recreated and made playable through interactive gaming texts. In what the authors call “Techno-

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Orientalism,” the so-called Japanese invasion is highlighted by Nintendo’s success, as well as their role in partnering with Hollywood.

Expanding on this perspective of Nintendo’s success leading to a revival of Japan Panic in a post-WWII Western society, I contend that the recent wave of modern video games utilizes Orientalism in a profound way, evoking sympathy and immersion into ideology in a similar way that the propaganda of the Cold War did. While the anxiety fostered in the Cold War excelled in furthering the Western perception of the Other as different and a space in need of domination, the recent 9/11 attacks seemed to legitimize this Othering of the Orient by the West. As Sam Greene, doctoral student at Bowling Green State University contends:

When the Cold War failed to end in the cataclysmic disaster that politicians portended for 45 years, The United States desperately needed a new legitimizing myth. The September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center allowed for such a myth to emerge, causing the War on Terror to replace the Containment of Communism as justification for U.S. imperialism.”

Thus, in the idea of Orientalism, the United States found a ready-made ideological template in which to situate the country and its struggle; further, by using orientalist tropes to depict the entire "Orient" as threatening and uncivilized, U.S. policy makers were able to reboot a new legitimizing myth and continue expanding territorially, economically, and ideologically with the consent of a large segment of the population. This same Orientalism has woven itself into the fabric of many popular cultural mediums, but video games are unique in that their situation as ergodic texts grants them a powerful potential of engaging the player in an immersion into the ideology, rather than a mere perception, as I will explore in Chapter 3.

In Edward Said's Orientalism, Said provides a foundational outline of the ways in which this post-9/11 ideology is rooted. Since the publication of Said’s Orientalism in 1978, much academic discourse has used the term "Orientalism" to refer to a general patronizing Western

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38 Sam Greene & James Vlisides, Political Ideologies of the Neo-Oriental in Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3 (Ohio: Bowling Green State University, 2013).
attitude towards Middle Eastern, Asian and North African societies.\textsuperscript{39} In Said's analysis, the West \textit{essentializes} these societies as static and undeveloped—thereby fabricating a view of Oriental culture that can be studied, depicted, and reproduced. Implicit in this fabrication, writes Said, is the idea that Western society is developed, rational, flexible, and superior.\textsuperscript{40}

Today, Orientalist tropes have been transferred as a manifestation in digital media, where it is not only the Western gaze that penetrates cultural understandings of the Orient, its people and spaces, as was the case in art, film, and architecture, but also now to the objectification of the Orient, its landscapes, its history, its culture and its people, as they are subject to a manipulation through \textit{playability} that is unique to the video game medium. This re-inscribing of Orientalism in virtual worlds in order to maintain and further Western conceptions of the world is what Höglund considers neo-Orientalism, as previously defined.

Höglund’s analysis is powerful and one of the few to critically engage Orientalism in relation to digital media, although his focus is centrally linked to the reproduction of American militarism and needs to be expanded. While his connection between militarism in video games and Orientalism is often true with games like \textit{America’s Army} or the wildly successful \textit{Call of Duty} franchise, I believe video games hold the potential to reproduce the East, and Orientalism not merely for the encouragement of American Exceptionalism militaristically, but also ideologically, continuing the notion that the Orient is othered not only physically, but also through a clash between reality and virtuality, as if the real world and the virtual world occupy difference cultural and ideological spaces. Further, it is important to understand Orientalism as a

\textsuperscript{39} For a well-constructed analysis of this general patronizing of the entire Orient, as well as a potential breakdown of the Orient into six specific postcolonial stylings, see Peter Hees, \textit{Shades of Orientalism: Paradoxes and Problems in Indian Historiography} (Wesleyan University, 2003). \url{http://artsandsciences.sc.edu/hist/faculty/edwardsk/hist783/reader/heehs.pdf}

\textsuperscript{40} Mahmood Mamdani, \textit{Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terrorism}, (New York: Pantheon, 2004), 32.
foundational ideological force that affirms that the clash is within the game-space equally as powerfully as it is within reality's global national conflicts. Therefore, the prefix “neo” seems less a suggestion of newness, and more a mere indication of the historical Orientalism reinscribed in new media that did not exist in the time of Said’s writing.

Ideology I understand to be the system of the ideas and representations that dominate the mind of a man or a social group. Borrowing this Marxist conception, I apply Althusser’s unique lens in his seminal work *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, in which he states that, “Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence.”

What these real conditions equate to in virtual worlds is precisely the object of study in this thesis. However, while admitting that this relationship between ideology and the individual is imaginary, it is important to note that ideology does make allusions to reality. Further, as Althusser suggests, they therefore need only be ‘interpreted’ to discover the reality of the world behind their imaginary representation of that world. Therefore, at the same time, ideology in video games is both an *illusion* that informs our understanding of the world, as well as an *allusion* to our very real subject positionings within the real world. It is in this sense that Orientalism in video games is ideology, in that it both informs the virtual world of the right positionings of subjects within the game space through its various geographic, racial and material codings, but also alludes to, and reinforces, a very real Orientalism that saturates both virtual and real spaces of cultural formation and interaction.

It is from these historical and cultural groundings that I begin to explore the question of race and representation in *World of Warcraft*. Released by American game developer *Blizzard*

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42 Ibid.
Entertainment, a former subsidiary of Vivendi and now partner with game-giant Activision, in 2004, World of Warcraft (henceforth, WoW) has risen to dominate the virtual world of massive multiplayer video games, holding the Guinness World Record for most popular game by subscribers multiple years in a row, and has grown to include four expansions ranging over a successful eight years. As Nick Dyer-Witheford explains, “WoW is not a highly original game, but it is a groundbreaking one -- the first MMO to operate on a truly global scale. It achieved this status by bringing together the previously largely separate worlds of Western and Asian online play.” While the game is the world’s largest massively multiplayer online (MMO) video game with over 11.5 million current subscribers, it is also a virtual community, geography, and “reality” constructed on ideological notions of gender, race, class and identity. WoW is saturated with material hierarchies and racial rhetoric that make the game understandable and consumable to a Western audience already literate in the language of materialization and racial coding. Hilde G. Corneliussen and Jill Walker Rettberg have compiled a World of Warcraft reader titled Digital Culture, Play, and Identity (2008), that introduces the works of prominent video game scholars such as Bonnie A. Nardi, T.L. Taylor, Jessica Langer, and Espen Aarseth to explore some of these concepts, including chapters focusing on Culture, World, Play, and Identity. Contributing to, and building on this research, Bonnie A. Nardi, anthropologist at University of California, Irvine, outlines her extensive ethnography in World of Warcraft in her extensive work My Life as a Night Elf Priest (2010), arguing for the application for what she calls activity theory and theories of aesthetic experience, a way of understanding how digital stimulus engages the individual, and how to interpret these stimuli. In these works World of Warcraft is shown to be a game with a time, place, and space of its own, with rules defined through the game design (kill

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44 Nick Dyer-Witheford, and Greig de Peuter, Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 132.
monsters and earn experience points to level up), as well as unwritten rules (play a specific role, don’t greedily take all possible loot from boss drops) and a number of varying goals for players to strive for.\textsuperscript{45} Additionally, as Corneliussen and Rettberg argue, \textit{“World of Warcraft is a social framework for communication.”}\textsuperscript{46}

It is to this collection of theory and analysis of video games that I hope to add a deeper discussion on Orientalism in video games, and a virtual-Capitalism and the intersections of these in a virtual reality ripe with semiotic significance. To be clear, by engaging in detailed research to understand the semiotics of \textit{World of Warcraft}, my aim is to show how \textit{WoW} serves as an ideal representation of a cultural text imbued with racialized characters, landscapes and narratives, and a materialization that is coded in the semantics, performance, and aesthetics of the game and its players. Specifically engaging materialism and race in the recent \textit{WoW} expansion, \textit{Mists of Pandaria}, I explore how this virtual biopolitics creates a digital space in which Oriental ideology manifests, transcribing cultural constructions of the “Other.”

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.
CHAPTER I: VIDEO GAMES AND POSTMODERN SIMULATIONS

In the fall of 2012, I joined a research group at Bowling Green State University called Social Media, Transmedia, Virtual Worlds, Gaming that was focused on how digital technologies, specifically video games, created, enhanced, or challenged social and cultural ideology, tropes and spaces. While I had spent most of my adult life pursuing higher education, it wasn’t until I began my research on video games that all of the political ideology, religious semantics, and cultural lenses began to align as I pursued a deeper understanding of video games in our current cultural landscape.

For this research, I decided to play World of Warcraft. For years I had been told of this fascinating and time-consuming game, of its world-record breaking number of players, and its virtual enormity. Having won multiple gaming awards and having a record breaking 11.5 million subscribers,47 I could not think of a more massive game to engage my theoretical background.

World of Warcraft, produced in California, is played in North America, Europe, Latin America, Asia, Russia, Australia, New Zealand, and parts of South America. It is available in many languages, including English, two versions of Chinese (as there are more Chinese players than any other national group), Korean, German, French, two versions of Spanish, and Russian. Although, unfortunately, no solid demographic information is publicly available for World of Warcraft, as there are many barriers to sampling 11.5 million players over a span of 8 years, who speak more than seven languages and play on a vast number of internationally sharded servers. While this data is not publicly available, from my research it is evident that real world social class is diminished, or perhaps transcended when a player enters the game space, and people

from all walks of life, many diverse cultures, and very unique perspectives engage *WoW* as a gameic text and are influenced by the ideology that is coded in the virtual world. As Nardi affirms, “One of the most striking things about *World of Warcraft* was the way it brought together social classes for authentic shared activity.”

The moment I began to play, I was instantly allured by *WoW*’s colorful, cartoonish graphics. I spent several hours researching fan websites and user-created forums to decide which character I should “play.” Surprisingly, this was not an easy selection. Did I want to be male or female? Did I want to be a *Tauren* or a *Human*, *Undead* or a *Worgen*? How would the community perceive me if I was a *Night Elf*, with their lean and tall frames, versus a *Draenei*, with their stocky and muscular bodies? And what name did I want to choose? I wanted to fit into the culture, and yet I wanted it to be personal and unique. Again, I looked at the forums to find an appropriate fit for both. I was afraid of looking “gay,” as the player forums suggested certain races were communally thought to be, but also didn’t want to be “ugly” and unattractive, as other races were considered. With these concerns in mind, I chose a *Race* and *Class* from a list of predetermined arrangements. I chose the *Draenei* Race, for its mystical, shamanistic qualities and unique, overtly masculine, body type including unique hair that appears to be more of an extension of their skin than a separate growth. I chose the *Paladin* Class because of its versatility, allowing me multiple ways to play the game. I named my character *Caliden* based on personal preference and its fit within the dialect of the *WoW* universe.\[50\] Entering a new world like this is a daunting task, and the fear of being cast out or not accepted weighed heavily as I

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\[49\] “Gay” here refers to the sentiment that is commonly reported by players on forums and in game. It is most likely a reference to this character’s lack of overt, or hyper-masculine traits.

\[50\] For a more detailed analysis of the meaning and symbolism of choosing a name in *World of Warcraft*, refer to Charlotte Hagstrom “Playing with Names: Gaming and Naming in *World of Warcraft*” in Digital Culture, Play, and Identity, ed. Hilde G. Corneliussen and Jill Walker Rettberg (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2011) 265.
created this character. As Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter suggest:

To select an avatar to live as in Azeroth is to engage in a graphically vivid anatomo-politics of the body. While Blizzard firmly dictates the range of choices that players have over their appearance, various body parts—hair, skin color, eyes, sex, and facial features—can be changed by menu choices, although only during the initial character creation. The permutation of race and class determines what attributes—agility, intellect, spirit, stamina, and strength—an avatar possesses, as well as where it starts its existence, what modes of transport it uses, what spells it commands, what weapons and armor it can use, and so on.  

In this way, choices about a character's race and class are representative of a biopower that the encoding of the game produces, where the act of choosing race and class shapes "the optimization of its capabilities, the extortion of its forces…its usefulness and its docility, its integration into systems of efficient and economic contours." This experience is perhaps the first right of passage in the game, as one must learn the language, customs, and communal knowledge about different characters, races, classes and professions.

The fact that these pressures exist when creating a character are reminiscent of Nardi’s belief that “World of Warcraft is an exemplar of a new means of forming and sustaining human relationships and collaborations through digital technology.” In this way, forming an identity in these new digital spaces can be read as a unique postmodern process, where culture has moved away from modern structures of real world power and domination, from strict categorizations of male/female, white/black, human/nonhuman, to a digital space with comparable communal structures and also potentially limitless identity possibilities and social categorizations.

Understanding video games as “real spaces” connotes a unique usage of the idea of space. The word space often refers to some void between two or more markers or boundaries. This sense of between-ness implies an inability to stand on its own, or distinct from other realities. This is not what I mean by the idea of space. Instead, these “spaces” in video games

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51 Dyer-Withford, Games of Empire.
52 This term is derived from Michel Foucault, who associated it with “an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugations of bodies and the control of populations,” and a term he closely relates to biopolitics, in The History of Sexuality Vol 1(1976), 140.
53 Ibid., 128-9.
54 Nardi, Night Elf.
take the form and function of real geographical environments, allowing for mobility, exploration, sensory stimulation, and a sense of belonging. So to say that these virtual geographies are “spaces”, in the sense that they are somehow voids between the real and the imaginary, is to detract from the very real functions they serve. From this perspective, video games and their virtual geographies have the potential to be very real spaces of identity and ideology formation and performance.

But at the same time, virtual spaces are not real world colonies, per se. They are not real world spaces riddled with soil soaked in the blood of wars and the permanence of history, but they are spaces that are created, fought over, and digitally inscribed with questions of power, global inequality, ideological tension, and subjective interpretations of existence. While these spaces are physically separated from the real world spaces, which are soaked in the permanence of history, they are spaces that both adopt the histories of the realities they are developed to emulate, and many of these spaces create a sense of history that has a timeless lore that is in fact saturated by blood and war. It is in this sense that scholars of virtual worlds have often drawn on postcolonial theoretical frameworks in the pursuit of understanding them.

These postcolonial foundations can be particularly useful when considering the underlying values embedded in the software of virtual worlds, which influence the cultures that emerge there, as well as unpacking the complex relations between physical and virtual world cultures. Therefore, it is through a postcolonial cultural lens that this research begins to explore video games as a cultural expression of these ideas of race, power, and identity through the lens of Orientalism. Specifically, I will suggest that World of Warcraft is a powerful cultural commodity, offering my contention that WoW is a prime example of a 21st century video game that exceptionalizes the players subject positioning as a Western consumer, who, as bell hooks
describes, digitally “eats the Other” in a simulated space of dominating exotic landscapes and player-identities. Further, I will examine the construction of identity in video game spaces, how the choice of race, class, and avatar appearance suggests a racial coding. With this, I hope to suggest that the player is not benign in the construction of ideology, but that through the construction of specific virtual identities, the player reconstructs racial and socially constructed conceptions of race, class and materialism. Thus, I will prove that video games offer a simulation of these real world ideologies, and disprove the myth that video games are a utopic space that disembodies the cultural conceptions of self from the historical narration that places the self in relation to larger racial and power constructs, instead claiming that video games hold a unique position in society to reinscribe Orientalist ideology as a metanarrative, which then normalizes its expression in other political spheres in reality.

At the same time, video games are themselves part of a modern hierarchical industry that codes particular ideological categories of identity and experience, which place the player into particular subject positions. This idea of coding is comparable to Stuart Hall’s differentiation between the encoding and decoding. Encoding refers to the frameworking of knowledge and technical infrastructure that supports the media. The encoding in WoW is the identity constructions, possibilities, and limits put forth by the game developers that can be read from the pictures, races, characters, and actions coded for particular virtual spaces and characters. The user decoding on the other hand, entails the interpretations and meanings that players assign.

particular identities and character possibilities, which often have social, material, communal and class implications/consequences. 57

Secondly, video games are part of an industry that puts the player into a subject position of the consumer. It is in this sense that I refer to Simon Gottschalk’s semantic play of the word “player,” as he refers to the WoW subscriber as a “p(l)ayer,” 58 to highlight the mix between play and pay the game requires. While the p(l)ayer is playing the game, an active performance that I will describe in a later chapter, this play coincides with paying for this experience that also takes place. In this very semantic play, there is a disconnect between the fantasy that play aims to indulge, and the real world financial obligation that is needed in order to engage in this fantasy. In this sense, WoW is a text that is recognized as a fantasy, but is paradoxically recognized as a game that must be paid for and entered through the real world. It isn’t that this WoW reality exists independently from the real world, but rather that there is a blurring between the boundaries between reality and virtual worlds. Even from this simple and fundamental aspect of entering the virtual world culture through the real world act of paying, World of Warcraft is highlighted as a text imbued with both fantasy and reality as they intermingle in a digital prose of ideological reinscription. As Fiske highlights in his discussion on the phenomenon of the 90’s video arcade:

Young people can now actively participate in electronic spectacles, control them, and master them, rather than passively watch them. Although the machine always wins, the essence of “video pleasure” consists in outsmarting it, if only for a while, and in extending he game to long sessions so that a single coin gives as much pleasure/time as possible. 59

57 There is a difficulty in video games in differentiating between the two, as the encoder and the decoder constantly inform each other. Perhaps this is an expression of hegemony, where those affected by the power inform those with the power and vice versa. To put it short, hegemony is not an autonomous action, nor is video game coding.
59 John Fiske, Reading the Popular. (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 93.
It is this sense of video pleasure that results in Fiske calling video games "the semiotic brothels of the machine age" and suggests that, although "the video arcade and the machines in it are bearers of the dominant ideology," they also allow space for a loss of self and resistance where the player becomes, temporarily, an empowered author. For Fiske, these "moments of evasion" from the dominant ideology are central dimensions of video pleasures. While MMO games like *World of Warcraft* differ from this coin operated, physically separated space of engagement that the video arcade mastered, the logic of getting the most re-play value out of your financial investment, whether it be $15 a month or $60 per text, still exists. Further, MMO game engines and ideology are far more advanced than those of the video arcade, as the goal of the game is not so that the literal machine always wins, as games like *WoW* implement a more sophisticated model of leveling, immersion, expansion, and defeating more difficult obstacles. It is no longer just a linear journey through predetermined, and perhaps fated, levels in which the machine always wins, but now a play and reward system in which you control a character who anthropomorphically takes on player characteristics in a vibrant and dynamic public space, and the goal is not to end the game, or to beat it, but to continue to acquire skills, abilities, armor and valor that is socially recognizable and semiotically tangential to the High-Score system of the arcade genre. Although, while the model of pay and pleasure may have transformed into something more elaborate, this only furthers Fiske's argument that video games are semiotic brothels, where pleasure is coded even more intensely in the imagery, the community, and the immersion required with games like *WoW*, which require a deep and calculated understanding of the players, the environments, the battles, and the "Toon" abilities. And it is in this sense, that while the game may be more elaborate in its effort to immerse and encapsulate reality and identity construction through social and ideological policing, the figurative “machine of the

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60 Ibid., 5.
game industry” and producers who have created the game as a text to be consumed, always win the players’ attention and dollars.

This sentiment that the “machine always wins” manifests powerfully because video game consoles are always "alive;" they "communicate," they challenge and generate excitement without the need of human interference. As Fiske suggests, in such a situation, players become “temporary insertions in a continuous electronic text.”61 This is even more true with games like *WoW*, where even when the console is turned off, the game continues to be alive, continues to circulate socially and economically, where skills and armor that have been acquired lose superiority as time continues and other players in the *WoW* community also improve. In a sense, the player is a temporary insertion in a continuous electronic text, temporarily suspended by their paid subscription but only "real" when they plug in to the server and "logon" to the virtual reality. It is this part of video games that cannot be coded, and needs to be understood from a cultural lens, where the culture develops in and around the players themselves, who consistently and constantly change the virtual geography merely by plugging in and becoming part of the community. And because players log in and log off on a regular basis, the community constantly changes. In this way, culture in virtual spaces is even more dynamic than in reality, as it has infinite potential for new members to be added at any time, and thus ideology to be inscribed on a potentially limitless consumer base.

While there are certainly many more applications of video games, the point is that video games have entered our culture in a profound and diverse set of ways, and have the potential to influence other political spaces in profound ways as the games and the ideologies within are “played” by millions of players daily.

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61 Ibid., 6.
But is it enough to say that video games have “entered” our culture? Have they merely become a medium for other cultural spaces to express themselves? Or do video games challenge, transform and prescribe culture? Or, instead, do video games have the power to create a new culture entirely? While I find all of these plausible, my research will show that video games like *World of Warcraft* are cultural artifacts that are simultaneously mediums of cultural creation, multi-cultural exchange, and real world ideological re-inscription.

While all video games establish a unique culture through communal rules, values, relationships and linguistic systems as we see in the previous sentiments, video games also inherit ideological structures and values from the “real world.” It is important to note that while I distinguish between the real world and the virtual world, I do not mean to imply they are actually different spaces. Rather this is a main point of contention, that virtual worlds are extensions of real worlds, as they are part of the very ideological, social and cultural structures that we use to identify and understand our selves in relation to reality. The matter of defining them separately is only to be used to distinguish between the two spaces in order to explore the way video game spaces are uniquely positioned as a medium in society, not to argue they are separate realities with their own inherent mediums. To understand this, I apply the lens of Louis Althusser’s “Ideological State Apparatuses” to *World of Warcraft*. For Althusser, a person’s desires, choices, judgments etc. are the products of social practices that are dictated and/or emerge out of the society itself.\(^\text{62}\) The human individual is regarded as a subject not innately, but rather by being relegated to particular subject positions by a social structure, which imparts these social practices on the individual. Thus, it is important to understand Althusser’s distinction between the *subject* and the *individual*. The *individual* is simply a body in the world, and was thus natural; a *subject* is a body that has been interpellated into ideology and hence becomes a

\(^{62}\) Althusser, *Ideology*. 
subject. In this sense, video games interpellate individuals as subjects through their very essence as an ideological state apparatus, which renders the player into various subject positions through coded social, material, and cultural structures. These imparted social, material and cultural practices both determine the characteristics of the subject individual and give him or her an idea of the range of properties that he or she can have, as well as the limits of each subject. In Althusser's view, our values, desires, and preferences are inculcated in us by ideological practice, the sphere that has the defining property of constituting individuals as subjects. Ideological practice consists of an assortment of institutions called "Ideological State Apparatuses" (ISAs), which include the family, the media, religious organizations, and equally of significance, as I argue, video games. There is, however, no single ISA that produces in us the belief that we are self-conscious agents. Instead, we derive this belief, as Althusser suggests, in the course of learning what it is to be a daughter, a schoolchild, black, a steelworker, a councilor, and so forth. This process is parallel to the virtual institutions within World of Warcraft. In World of Warcraft, family is produced through a guild; religion is established in the historical lore, quests and missions that often add a spiritual component to the game, not to mention the Temples, Shrines, and Cathedrals that scatter the cities. Not only do these specific structures interpellate the subject into a socialized identity, but the geographical structures, the racial characteristics, class abilities, and group roles all dictate a particular subject positioning, as I will argue further in Chapter 3. Just as social practices surrounding race, economics, geography and class in American culture create a particular range of agency for the individual or group, the chosen race, class, faction, profession, and dress institute a limit on the individual.

63 As Althusser states, "No human, i.e. social individual can be the agent of a practice if he does not have the form of a subject. The 'subject-form' is actually the form of the historical existence of every individual, of every agent of social practices." Louis Althusser, "Reply to John Lewis" in Essays in Self-Criticism (1976), pp. 33–100, 95.
64 Althusser, Ideology, 160.
As explained earlier, choosing these particular identity characteristics is a challenge because of the social and communal implications of the choice. For Althusser, being aware of other people is a form of ideology. Within that, Althusser sees subjectivity as a type of ideology. In order to make this “choice” the individual must already be in a subject position, which is required to make the choice. The transformation from a real world individual with its own social institutions to a virtual world individual takes place in this choice. By making the choice, aware of other players and the social conditions in which the game exists, is a freely chosen choice to accept the ideology of the game. In this way, individuality, even in virtual spaces, can not exist outside of ideology. As Althusser states, “we acquire our identities by seeing ourselves mirrored in ideologies.\textsuperscript{65} This idea is the same in virtual worlds, especially WoW, where our virtual identity is both a product of and an extension of our real world ideological understandings of the self and subject positions we both exist and desire to exist.

On the one hand, WoW engages the player in forms of exteroception, as seen in the spells, attacks, environments and enemy bodies, as well as a form of interoception, most evident in the red splattered screen indicating harm, stimulating sounds and colors, and the game interface with its various spell, health, enemy, party, and extra-worldly indicators. This interface is not the game itself, but rather a medium through which the player comes to understand the game. It is a way of identifying the player, and specifically the player in particular circumstances. The way the interface is organized supports this centrality of the self and the identification with the circumstances. Take for example the simple rendering of the player in the center of the screen. The camera can be manipulated in field of depth and scope of zoom, and even angle of rotation, but your embodied player is in the center. Further, your abilities are centralized on the bottom of the screen, and most significantly is the positioning of the minimap, chat log, and party members.

\textsuperscript{65} Althusser, \textit{Ideology}, 168.
onto the corners and sides of the interface. While WoW supports “addons,” third party interface modules that can allow a player to manipulate the way the interface looks and where various items are located, the game logic enforces this central space through a sense of efficiency that is only possible by having such a viewing area available. At the same time, by positioning these parts of the game in the periphery effectively renders them secondary to the actual experience of the game. In other words, it isn’t how the game is seen from a topography, as you see in the map, or not even necessarily how it is interpreted through reading the dialogue in the chat box, but rather the primary focus is on the center of the screen where the actual interaction with the environment, and thus with the players, the environments and the semiotics of the game takes place. Because the gamic interface is coded in this way, to make the experience central, again we have an understanding that World of Warcraft is an ergodic text, a hypersensory immersion that places primary focus on the experience, not the linear or rote process of reading the interface. In this same way, the semiotics of race, class and Orientalism are rendered significant in this centralizing of the experience as they are not merely read by the player, but they are literally positioned as central to the ludology of the game, and central to the players experience, making immersion into the ideology a necessary and central focus of the game.

All of this interface results in an anthropomorphic identification with the character, which creates a socio-cultural space for gazing upon the Other, as that which is not the self, and it is in this sense of proprioception that the enemy is highlighted in stereotypical fashion, defined by its very otherness from the player self, and as a target of that self. And the game itself, its virtual world, culture, geographies and people operate as phantasmic sites on which the player projects a series of anxieties regarding internal and external threats to the coherence of his or her gamic
body. On a larger scale, this anxiety about threats from the enemy Other will be seen to manifest in the game space in Chapter 3 as a virtual representation of the National body, the body of the West differentiating itself from the Orient.

Althusser also discusses “Repressive State Apparatuses,” which enforce social practice and ideology through coercion. This can be seen, for example, when a player abandons a group and is given an automatic “de-buff” which reduces the individual’s experience gain, power, or health for a time period as deemed by the game developers. This can be read as an act of violence that polices the individual to perform their role completely and effectively when in public spaces. Thus, when the Ideological State Apparatus that is coded in the ludology of the game fails to interpellate the player into the subject position the ideology requires, Repressive State Apparatuses, like de-buffs or armor damage, violently motivate the player to take the appropriate subject positions in the virtual game space. In this sense, ISAs and RSAs work together in World of Warcraft, as an elaborate network of ideological creation, replication and enforcement. One is not the opposite of the other, rather they work together to ensure the survival of the gamic status quo and the ludology of the text.

In cultural terms, World of Warcraft is a very interesting text for study. Because WoW has been around for over 8 years, and has such a massive following of nearly 11.5 million consistent players, and the retention rates of these players is outstanding (most in my guild have been around since the beginning of the game’s inception and have multiple max-level characters), plus the four expansions that have added new epic fights, loot, armor, experience, dungeons, raids, geographies, races, and classes, the game has a history entirely unique in the video game world. Because of this, there is a collective sense of nostalgia and memory attached

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to the community. Consider a recent post on *reddit*, a popular socio-cultural production site, titled “It’ll never be the same.” The post has a picture, split into two:

![2005 Image](image1.png)

![2012 Image](image2.png)

The top picture has 14 people huddled together for what looks like a family portrait, and reads “2005.” The bottom picture is taken in the same location, but has only 1 player, and reads “2012.” What this says about the game is that the sense of community has changed in the last 7 years of the game, as finding groups, running raids, and expansions have changed the events and goals that used to be exciting and collectively pursued. The post has nearly 3500 comments from *WoW* players, who share sentiments of nostalgia, ranging from quotes such as “Don’t cry
because it’s over, smile because it happened…or whatever,” to a special sentiment that long-time WoW players could appreciate:

This whole fucking comment thread makes me want to gather up a bunch of redditors and hop on some private vanilla WoW servers.
And there really is no experience quite like rushing Onyxia for the first time with 39 other people, or watching Ragnaros emerge from the molten pits in all his wrath. Or watching the tiger mount in ZA drop and the whole guild shits its collective pants. Or 200 Person battles at blackrock mountain where everyone took a left turn at World pvp on the way to their raids, and the server crashes.

Or being the person who unlocks the gates of AQ for the entire server, as an entire alliance guild is chasing you across the desert trying to stop you, and you open the gates, and all holy hell breaks loose...all of this right after you had to spawn a dragon in moonglade that required 3 raids to kill...after an entire faction gathered materials for weeks to help you to get to this point...
Man... 

Sentiments like this suggest that WoW occupies a cultural space parallel and reminiscent of American culture, perpetuating nostalgic myths of the culture’s past. Take for example the 1950s, considered to be the “Golden Age” for American culture, values and prosperity. American culture holds this time period to be one that identified the ideal America. While it is possible to deconstruct this myth of the ideal 1950’s, the myth serves as a bonding agent, providing a collective memory for many people. The sense of nostalgia about the 50s, regardless of its actual superiority, provides a space in which many people of many difference races and classes can collectively admire something they share. As Vertigo expresses in this sentiment, “vanilla” servers, meaning servers that are stripped of expansions and serve as a throwback to the “simpler times” of the game, are communal expressions of a desire to go back to a different cultural space, that the WoW community as a whole shares. It isn’t that these vanilla spaces are actually better, just that they are spaces that are held as collective history for WoW players. In other words, this is an example of just one of the thousands of nostalgic sentiments that the WoW

67 Rainfawkes, “It’ll never be the same,” reddit, http://www.reddit.com/r/gaming/comments/17f5ob/itll_never_be_the_same/.
68 Vertigo 1083, “It’ll never be the same,” reddit, http://www.reddit.com/r/gaming/comments/17f5ob/itll_never_be_the_same/.
community uses to bond and create a sense of history and culture. Further, this sentiment is interesting because it provides a way of seeing virtual worlds, like *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*), as cultures themselves, with a collective history and shared memories unique to that space and those players.

The sense of community and culture that *World of Warcraft* idealizes is summed up by a recent conversation with my guild leader, whom we will call “Chance” to keep his identity anonymous. Chance was in a severe car accident in 2006, leaving him physically disabled and emotionally frustrated. After problems with his wife, losing his job and ability to walk, he says he was on the verge of giving up and committing suicide. He joined *World of Warcraft* in late 2006, borrowing his cousin’s account, where he was mentored by a fellow guild mate whom he says he “spoke for hours a day with.” Chance says this experience changed his perspective on life, and gave him something to work toward. In a serious, yet joking manner, Chance sums up his feelings in this sentiment:

“I am an angry handicap. I try to be the best I can at *World of Warcraft* so that I am needed. I have 7 level 90 ‘pallys,’ and...I don’t know how else to say it...but it makes me feel needed.”

This sentiment struck a chord with me, as it encapsulated the very same experience I have with the game. It is more than an escape, it is more than a fantasy, it is a communal reality where family, social life, and a sense of purpose manifest in a truly empowering virtual space. As Nardi and many other game researchers have come to understand, the stereotype of the lonely gamer, who games in social isolation is fundamentally wrong; instead of a withdrawal into fantasy worlds, “we see the extrusion of the worlds into ordinary life as family and friends play together, as players gather in Internet cafes, and as they meet and socialize with others online.” Experience in this game may begin with the process of “leveling,” (the act of gaining a numerical level after a particular amount of experience that results in better skills and abilities),

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but it concludes with relationships that take precedence over gameplay. Looking at the culture behind *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*), we can see the community as “a social unit” that, “…is devoted to the game itself,”\(^7\) resulting in a virtual world that both creates and enhances relationships and identities through the creation of in-game agency and ability, as we see with Chance.

Embracing and sustaining this sense of community is not always easy, and it comes with its consequences. For example, discussions surrounding politics, religion and hot-topic issues are frequent and can easily get heated as beliefs, geographies, personalities and real world cultures clash. Yet, these differences are nearly always mended or circumvented by the game by the interjecting of goals or objectives. Further, while the distance between the game apparatus’ of particular players can serve as a buffer that allows for the ranting and venting of any particular perspective, ideology, opinion or belief, unlike other games, *WoW*’s communal aspect creates a social code in which those differences and that distance is not translated into dissonance. Rather, like a family, the bond of the individuals to the collective objective of the team, the guild, the dungeon, or the raid trumps this difference. And this is not entirely unlike the way race, the anonymity, the material hierarchy, and the communal necessity that *WoW* provides and enforces, as I will discuss further in Chapter 2, trump class, economics, real world geography, and language barriers.

This leads up to Chapter 2, where I build on Scott Rettberg’s theory of the *Capitalist Fairytale*,\(^2\) to show how through a material hierarchy centered around domination, looting, and performance of identity in public spaces, various players become performers and a simulation of “real” racial tropes, and that this virtual material hierarchy reinforces a Capitalist coding that

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\(^7\) Ibid.

trivializes the very real legal, racial, and social barriers to success in the real world, and also supports a real world material hierarchy that places the Western consumer above the Eastern producer. It is this material hierarchy that creates a cultural space for Otherness, inferiority, and Oriental ideology to manifest in the semiotics of the game.
CHAPTER II: CAPITALIST FAIRYTALES AND MATERIAL HIERARCHY

For many people the word Azeroth has no semiotic reference, but for the over 11.5 million current subscribers\textsuperscript{73} it is the name of the world in which the largest massive multiplayer online (MMO) video game, World of Warcraft (WoW), takes place. For these subscribers and players, it is a name associated with an entire geo-virtual society filled with economic and material hierarchies that carry explicit semiotic\textsuperscript{74} values reflective of modern day Capitalist society. In order to explore the construction of ideology in WoW, we must first explore this reinscription of Capitalism and semiotic materialism as a fundamental ideology in which an othering occurs of Oriental spaces, geographies, peoples, and narratives.

In this chapter, I argue that the principle reason why WoW has been so successful is in fact because it offers a convincing and detailed simulacrum of the process of becoming successful in Capitalist societies. This simulacrum\textsuperscript{75} is so popular due to what Daniel Chandler, author of Semiotics: The Basics, describes as “generic realism.” By this he means that through engaging a textual medium for a long time it can develop a kind of "psychological or emotional realism for viewers that exists at the connotative rather than the denotative level."\textsuperscript{76} In other words, the experiences of players in WoW are less a simulation and more a simulacrum, where the representations of environments are emotionally "true-to-life." Chandler discusses the example of long-running soap operas where the viewers familiar with the characters and


\textsuperscript{74} Throughout this analysis, I refer to various models of semiology, most significantly Saussure’s model of the Signified and the Signifier, but also briefly Pierce’s addition of the “interpretant.” See: Daniel Chandler, Semiotics: The Basics (New York: Routledge, 2002), 67.

\textsuperscript{75} Simulacrum here refers to post-modern theorist Jean Baudrillard’s conception of the simulacrum as being more than a copy of the real, but rather becomes a truth in its own right. Although I reject the post-modern view that the simulacrum bears no relation to any reality, and rather that it is a simulacrum offering a glimpse into the reality of the real, whereby the real can be either challenged or reinforced. See Daniel Chandler, Semiotics: The Basics (New York: Routledge, 2002), 80-81.

conventions of this particular soap opera may often judge the program largely in its own generic terms rather than with reference to some external reality.\textsuperscript{77} This same principle applied to \textit{Wow} gives insight into the willing suspension of the denotative disbelief in the games "reality," and how this suspension leads to a player’s emotional investment and immersion into the game. Yet differing from the soap opera, and perhaps enhancing this realism, is the fact that players’ characters are entirely self-created, self-decorated, and interactive in a way that allows for the embodiment of a sense of style, action, ethics, and sense of amazement and emotion in particular \textit{Wow} experiences.

The fact that \textit{Wow} has no in-game advertising leads to a further immersion in the game, separating the player from much of the usual bombardment of advertising in other media like film, television and radio. In a sense, this focused experience provides a refuge – an “escape” as players say – from modernity. As Nardi suggests, “It is one of the ways in which the game creates its own reality apart from contemporary life, moving the player away from the ordinary into the alternative reality of a fantasy space.”\textsuperscript{78} Fiske adds that playing video-games also produces important semiotic pleasures:

By allowing players to metaphorically transfer the power of control and meanings from machines, and the sphere of work, society, school and parents to the self, video games create a series of interesting inversions from normal everyday life. For example, by comparison to the player's location in the machine-dominated sphere of labor, the player does not work with the machine but against it. In contrast to the factory, improved speed and skill on the part of the player does not bring higher profits to the owner/producer but to the player him/herself who saves money by extending play-time.\textsuperscript{79}

Additionally, skillful video-game playing demands an "excess of concentration," as Barthes suggest, which results in a release, a "loss of self" of the socially constructed subject and its social relations."\textsuperscript{80} Losing oneself in a game is for Barthes the ultimate "eroticism of the text,"

\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., 67.
\textsuperscript{78} Nardi, \textit{Night Elf}, 13.
\textsuperscript{79} Fiske, \textit{Reading the Popular}.
which is experienced at the moment when culture collapses into nature or when the ideological subject reverts to the body, as he states:

The physical intensity with which the games are played produces moments of jouissance that are moments of evasion of ideological control.\(^{81}\)

Fiske’s idea of “losing oneself” in the text is reminiscent of Barthes differentiation between “readerly” and “writerly” texts. A readerly text does not challenge the reader's position as a subject, whereas a writerly text, on the other hand, provides bliss, which “explodes literary codes and allows the reader to break out of his or her subject position.”\(^{82}\) While ideology in \(WoW\) enforces particular subject positions, as I have previously argued, these subject positions are contested, freely chosen, and often alternate to the subject positions of the real world player. This distinction highlights the notion that immersion in \(WoW\), and virtual worlds of this caliber, result in a suspension of disbelief, as well as an acceptance of a re-positioning of the subject positioning of the individual. The re-positioning of the individual opens up a new avenue and capacity for ideology, perhaps new and otherwise unacceptable ideology, to manifest in the characters subject position. In this way, \(World\ of\ Warcraft\) is certainly a writerly text, where the player input constantly challenges their subject position and relation to ideology.

This potential as a writerly text, coupled with the sense of embodiment in a character within a populated, temporally regulated, and interactive environment – what I call a “geo-virtual” space – gives room for the video game to be the modern medium for the reflection, reinscription, and regeneration of ideology, specifically Capitalist ideology that creates a foundation for the reproduction of Orientalist perceptions of the characters and geographies in \(WoW\). As Althusser advances, ideology does not exist in the form of "ideas" or conscious

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\(^{81}\) Fiske, \(Reading\ the\ Popular\), 4-5.

\(^{82}\) Barthes, \(The\ Pleasure\ of\ the\ Text\).
"representations" in the "minds" of "individuals." Rather, ideology consists of the actions and performance of bodies governed by their disposition within material apparatuses:

I shall therefore say that, where only a single subject (such and such individual) is concerned, the existence of the ideas of his belief is material in that his ideas are his material actions inserted into his material practices governed by material rituals which are themselves defined by the material ideological apparatus from which we derive the ideas of that subject...Ideas have disappeared as such (insofar as they are endowed with an ideal or spiritual existence), to the precise extent that it has emerged that their existence is inscribed in the actions of practices governed by rituals defined in the last instance by an ideological apparatus. It therefore appears that the subject acts insofar as he is acted by the following system (set out in the order of its real determination): ideology existing in a material ideological apparatus, describing material practices governed by a material ritual, which practices exist in the material actions of a subject acting in all consciousness according to his belief.

In *WoW* the material ideological apparatus exists within the armor and the mounts, both of which have significant social implications of value, class and identity. This materialism is articulated through the player performances of domination, looting, and leveling. More specifically, assigning characters with professions and roles, i.e. Tank, Healer, DPS, imparts a specific expectation from the *WoW* community as a whole, not just from your immediate friends or players, but also through the random games, mobs, and *Dungeon Finder*, which places you in random 5-25 man groups where roles are selected and the expectation is that you perform that role to benefit the group as a whole, and so all participants can have the possibility of acquiring good loot only available through these group instances. Participating in this structure of acquiring, equipping and looting armor and mounts is a performance of ideology, a “material ritual” of owning and equipping these socially-meaningful artifacts of the dominant material ideology.

Building on Althusser, one can see these material rituals as parallel to Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus*. Habitus, in this sense, refers to lifestyle, the values, the dispositions and expectation of particular social groups that are acquired through the activities and experiences of the

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83 The use of “individual” here is significant, to further the distinction between the natural individual and the interpellated subject.
84 Althusser, *Ideology*. 
everyday in virtual worlds. As John Scott clarifies, “Perhaps in more basic terms, the habitus could be understood as a structure of the mind characterized by a set of acquired schemata, sensibilities, dispositions and taste.”

In *World of Warcraft*, these everyday activities range from leveling, to guild raids, to daily quests and beyond; all of which impart a collective sense of value and expectation. This communal value is given in-game currency as markers of this value, which also connects this value to other parts of the material hierarchy. For example, when completing daily quests, as well as running dungeons from the Dungeon Finder, a player acquires currencies called “Valor Points” and “Justice Points.” With these points, unique and high-level gear can be purchased. But this gear can only be purchased if you have completed enough daily quests to receive a particularly high reputation with that particular zone in which the item is sold. What this translates to is a lot of time and effort, and also a lot of dedication. The work becomes socially meaningful when the currency is translated into the actual armor or mount that is equipped after spending your Valor or Justice points. It is not merely an aesthetic change that creates the social meaning, rather the increase in abilities, the ability to share, link, and thereby brag about the item you gained, but it also imparts a collective sense of mission and motivation for other members of the *WoW* community to work hard and reap the rewards from those efforts.

It is from these examples that capitalism is transformed into an ideological apparatus, enforced through a *mythic violence* that tends to obscure its force by turning into a seemingly intangible juridical web of techno-political practices. As Walter Benjamin critically explains, “This form of law-preserving violence operates as a self-producing and self-eternalizing ‘microphysics of power’ producing and re-producing, disciplining and controlling, regulating

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and sanctioning bare life as actual, potential or superfluous labor force. Mythic violence has thus become the political economy of bare life – however productive the latter’s labor potential might be.\textsuperscript{86} In this sense, for Benjamin the source of this capitalist mythic violence is outsourced from the center to the periphery, through other apparatuses like religion and social codes. Extending this perspective, video games like \textit{World of Warcraft} also extend this mythic violence, preserving a microcosm in which the power of capitalism, and a political-economic life, is defined even in virtual worlds, extending fantasy from a realm of alternate reality, to that of a space that literally reproduces reality in the “periphery.” Even more symbolic is this notion that the virtual labor force is superfluous. As labor in video games is often seen as benign, a waste of time, or failing to produce actual goods, it is often discredited as a site of ideological replication. But as we see in this textual analysis, the semiotics of capitalism are potent and saturate the virtual world in \textit{WoW}, in fact it seems quite prevalent that while the gold, the ore, the leather, the loot, the armor or the mounts are not tangible in a real world space, they are still the material sites of ideological reproduction, as the process of labor, acquisition and wealth are parallel to Benjamin’s understanding of capitalism’s mythic violence.

With capitalism, and the pursuit of success through profit, comes a longing that serves as the motivation to ensure effort and progress. This is similar to the way the economy and ludology of leveling in \textit{World of Warcraft} instill a motivational sense of desire, that causes the player to pursue the armor, mounts, wealth and abilities of what the \textit{WoW} culture deems indicative of wealthy and successful players. This is comparable to the way “players” in real world pursue becoming more like the wealthy, prosperous, and “successful” pioneers of Western Capitalism, as we see historically when immigrants from around the world, child laborers in

China, Vietnam, Thailand, Africa, and many other parts of the world, and all of humanity in esse, attempt to transcend their identity in hopes of becoming like these new wealthy “Saints” of Capitalism. The problem is, the individual is stuck in this transitional state of becoming, as they are interpellated as subjects in the ideological apparatus, and their subject positioning often renders them incapable of attaining the success they desire. What I mean to say, is that just as the globalized subject pursues the endless goal of becoming wealthy, the video game player in WoW also finds himself or herself in a constant process of becoming, but never fully able to manifest the goal. As we see in the case of armor and mounts, there is a seemingly endless amount of armor and wealth to acquire, not to mention multiple professions, classes and races to master, as well as challenges, quests and expansions to explore, dominate and accomplish. The opportunities are not only endless, but the materials, geographies, classes and abilities are constantly changing and being expanded upon by expansions and updates. Thus, just as the subject in the real world finds himself/herself steadily succumbing to the means available to him or her—internalizing the hope that one day s/he will accomplish this goal when s/he scratches off the right lottery ticket, invests in the right stock, or pulls the right lever at the casino—the World of Warcraft player also participates in this subject positioning of the exploited laborer, hoping that s/he will accomplish success when they complete this challenge, get lucky on this loot drop, roll this coin, acquire this mount, or equip that piece of tier armor. While the medium is different, the message is the same: identity and value are constructions of a materialism that places particular symbols and artifacts as indicators of wealth, power and class, and the acquisition of these is never complete.

Take a very specific example: in WoW there are items classified as “ Legendary.” These items are so difficult to obtain, it is estimated that only 2 or 3 people per server would have one.
These items require multiple rare items, which may have a fraction of a percentage drop rate, from a very difficult boss, and also require extensive amounts of time and energy. Consider that many of these bosses can only be killed once per week, that it usually takes 2-4 hours to get to the boss, and given that their percentage of dropping the item needed is often below 2%, it could literally take years to acquire just one piece of the Legendary gear. Because of the rarity of these items, the *WoW* community holds players with these items in extremely high regard. In fact, guilds, such as my own, will pay players who have these items to just be part of their guild to get an achievement. They don’t have to fill a specific role, or give the guild leader this item, they merely are paid for having such a high prestige and reputation in the community. In cultural terms, these players are “Celebrities” and gain success merely by having the appropriate status acquired through their “wealth.”

As Scott Rettberg, associate professor at the University of Bergen, claims:

> *World of Warcraft* is both a game and a simulation that reinforces the values of Western market-driven economies. The game offers its players a capitalist fairytale in which anyone who works hard and strives enough can rise through society’s ranks and acquire great wealth.87

This “capitalist fairytale” exists within the fantasy that is *World of Warcraft* through the insatiable game-ideology that causes players to lust over hard work in hopes of material and symbolic wealth accumulation as a reward. This fantasy is not only the driving force of gear, raids, dungeons, or daily quests, but also the Auction House economy, and the "professions" a player can acquire and perfect with consistent effort and leveling.

There is no explicit media in the game to manipulate a player’s perception of the wealthy, or to convince them of what I symbolically call the "Azerothian Dream," (an intentional pun on the myth of the American Dream) that if one works hard s/he too can have the success s/he sees in other players. It is an implied understanding coded into the very ludologic of the “kill, loot,

sell, repeat” system common to the MMO video game genre, and to all World of Warcraft players. In this way, despite the lack of billboards, television or advertising campaigns, the mere perception of the glowing dragons and the enormous mammoth mounts that consume most of a player’s screen, or the spiked shoulder armor or battleaxes that have round, spinning orbs that circulate their blade all remain explicit visible and performed symbols of the elite class, the wealth they have, and the hard work other inferior players (i.e., “Noobs,” the impoverished, the underclass) assume they must have put in to earn such items. In this way, armor and mounts are semiotic markers that differentiate players, creating a hierarchy of class, and creating a specific, material space for otherness to exist. And while rhetoric exists to diminish this Azerothian Dream of hard work leading to material success, such as the common conspiracy that players who have such wealth must have other characters or friends that help them, the critiques hold little weight because the glitter of their symbolic power shines on all players’ screens and compels them to continue to work, progress, level, and loot in the never-failing hope of attaining comparable material wealth at any temporal or financial cost. In short, while there is no Television, radio, print advertisement, nor billboards in the Azeroth skyline, there are certainly real, material symbols of wealth that imply the Capitalist recipe for success.

There are two explicit visual and performed sites of semiotic reference that indicate this material hierarchy: armor and mounts. The first, armor, is perhaps the most crucial to the actual gameplay in WoW. Simplified, armor gives both defense bonuses indicated by a progressive numerical system (from zero to several thousand defense rating), as well as other character statistic bonuses including Strength, Stamina, and Spirit among others. These statistical bonuses are crucial for surviving the ever-increasing difficulty of enemies throughout the games quests,
dungeons and raids.\textsuperscript{88} With the progression of acquired armor there is an aesthetic component, which becomes the site for semiotic reference through the performance of equipping particular armor in public spaces. As Mike Schramm, columnist for Joystiq and senior editor for \textit{WoW}.com, humorously describes shoulder armor:

> Shoulderpads seem to be the height of fashion in Azeroth. Not only do shoulder pieces call for the highest Arena rating in the game, , but they're often the flashiest way to add a little flair to your character. While you can get the plainest of the plain before level 20, after level 70, they quickly and often turn into the wackiest thing your character can wear. Whether it's pure energy, lighting wolves, or even eyes (freakin' eyes!), Blizzard's artists seem to go overboard as much as possible, especially on the high-end shoulder pieces.\textsuperscript{89}

In this statement, Schramm expresses the almost outlandish qualities given to shoulder armor in the game. But these “wacky” qualities are the very visual markers of superiority in the material hierarchy. Further, when the shoulders have eyes, as Schramm humorously suggests, it is as if even the material objects themselves are able to look down upon the inferior armor that surrounds them, or at the very least partake in the role of perception and visual performance that is so crucial to \textit{World of Warcraft}.

Further, within the game, there is a function called \textit{Inspect}. Any targeted player can be “inspected” which allows the inspecting player to see all of the items and abilities that the targeted player has equipped. In this sense, it isn’t just that armor and mounts and abilities are aesthetically valued, or visually enforced, but rather the ability for any player at any time to inspect you creates a further need to increase your armor and abilities. In a sense, this ability to inspect others is both an apparatus that enforces this Capitalist ideology, but can also be interpreted as a violation or penetration of one’s character. The fact that no character can hide themselves from potential enemy attacks, player inspections, or whispers from random players,

\textsuperscript{88} These are battles fought by groups of 5-40 players together in order to beat more difficult bosses and acquire better items. For a more detailed description visit: \url{http://www.WoWwiki.com/Raid}.

\textsuperscript{89} Mike Schramm, “Singing the praises of shoulderpads,” \textit{WoW Insider}, last modified May 22, 2008, \url{http://WoW.joystiq.com/tag/shoulder-armor/}.
indicates that the virtual world has many apparatuses in place that render the individual as a subject only in relation to other subjects who have the ability and potential to invade the privacy of the individual at any time. In this way, private spaces can be said to not exist in virtual worlds like World of Warcraft, as other members of the public can infiltrate nearly all private spaces. Culturally, this indicates three things: (1) community is a necessary part of virtual worlds like WoW, (2) the enforcement of material ideology for the advancement in a virtual social structure is empowered by these blurring of the boundaries between public and private spaces; (3) The notion of the “gaze,” as Said describes in his analysis of Orientalism, is enhanced, encouraged, and a central motivator for this material ideology.

To further support this idea that in game culture and ideology create and reinscribe a materialism that is not just aesthetic but on a deeper, ideological plane, consider the process of “transmogging.” In a recent patch 90 Blizzard developers allowed players to apply the look of a weapon and/or armor to other, less aesthetically pleasing, or higher leveled gear. What this means, is that any player can have the appearance of wealth, power, or class as indicated by the flashiness, rarity, or matching of a set of armor, without the potential item level statistics that may go along with it. Further, this ability to transmog gear, allows for a new multiplicity of armor, new combinations, and new aesthetic appearances. On the one hand there is still an in-game understanding of elite, rare and epic items that indicate hard work, determination, luck, and skill, but there is also a subset of this cultural narrative that place a nostalgic value on individuals who transmog their gear to older, less beneficial, armor. Individuals who transmog effectively can be seen as masters of the game space, as they are assumed to have a knowledge of the thousands of pieces of armor available and how to acquire them, as well as an implied temporal commitment to the game that transmogging often requires.

90 Specifically: World of Warcraft Patch 4.3.
While there is obvious connection to the aesthetic performance of armor in *WoW*, there is also the underlying knowledge all players acquire through playing. This implied knowledge suggests that in order to equip such superior armor, the players themselves are not only accomplished in level, but also in raiding, PvP (Player vs. Player), and/or economically—as these higher level armors require extreme luck, time, and skill that only the wealthy elites of the *WoW* community can afford. In this way, armor itself is semiotic representation of class differences.

Journalist freelancer_bob describes this difference, stating in his blog that:

> At level 20, I had some rough iron shoulderpads. At 40, I had shiny metal ones. At 60, they shimmered a blue color slightly. At 70, I expect there will be glowing crystals swirling around them. At 80 they might play Boyz II Men's greatest hits whenever I land a crit. I don't care how outlandish it gets - in pretty much any other MMORPG, the difference between the lowest-level items and the highest-level items is negligible.\(^9\)

In other words, according to freelancer_bob, *WoW*'s material hierarchy is exceptional in that it differs from other MMORPG games by emphasizing and forcing the player to perceive these material differences between players, which both motivates the inferior player to continue to work hard in hopes of similar success emulating the simulated Capitalist recipe of success, but also continually reinscribes a class distinction indicated by a visually explicit material hierarchy between low-level items and high-level items. Further, while Transmogging has in many ways diminished the aesthetic indicators of class, it has opened a new avenue of performance—a new way to perform one’s wealth, knowledge and superiority as it allows the wealthy to mask their wealth aesthetically. For example, while a wealthy and skilled individual has the unique ability to transmog their gear to lower-level items, this privilege is not necessarily available to lower level or less wealthy players who cannot transmog their low level gear to higher level gear to appear wealthy.

Many similar semiotic themes of increased statistic ability and aesthetic performance are

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replicated in the hierarchy of mounts in *World of Warcraft*. A mount is a vehicle that the player can ride allowing them faster transportation and a new status symbol. Mounts are usually in the form of mythical or creative animals or machines ranging from tigers, flying carpets and motorcycles, to dragons, mammoths and flying horses. A player first gains the ability to ride a mount at level 20. This mount is called a ground mount, as it cannot fly like later level mounts. It is also comparably simple, lacking the ornate decoration of later level mounts. And like skills, starting zones, and physical appearance, each race has its own unique starting mount. As the player progresses, s/he is able to buy a “Great Mount” which still is limited to the ground, but is usually larger, quicker, and more decorated. At level 60 a player is able to learn how to fly (although this skill is very expensive at around 125 times the price of the initial mount license).\(^9\) This chain continues to what is considered “Expert Flying” and cost 1,250 times more than the initial mounting license!\(^3\) In this way, the very cost of mounts indicates a very tangible economic hierarchy, but of further significance is both the ability to fly, as well as the aesthetic appearance of later level, rare mounts.

Very few of the valuable mounts can be bought in *WoW*. Rather, epic and rare mounts are acquired by working with multiple other players to destroy a particularly high level enemy, and then based on a percentage the mount may drop from the boss as an item to be picked up. Like Legendary armor, as previously discussed, these mounts are not only worth extraordinary amounts of money, but are also explicit visual symbols of power, domination, and high class in this virtual simulacrum. This sense of domination is not merely based on physical appearance, but more significantly on the speed and the ability to perceive the game from a top down perspective –reflective of what is commonly called a “God-game” perspective, or further, as

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\(^9\) The initial mount license is 4 gold (gold is the *WoW* currency). The first flight license is between 250-500 gold. 
\(^3\) Later flight licenses that allow for faster speeds and more ornate epic and rare mounts costs 4500-5000 gold!
Michel de Certeau, author of “Walking in the City” suggests, a panoptic administration of the text. In other words, the source of pleasure of seeing the whole, of looking down on, totalizing the most immoderate of human texts comes from these perceptions from up high that are only available to the elite players who have the Drakes (similar to dragons), and other hard-to-obtain mounts, making the complexity of the game space readable and immobilizes its opaque mobility in a transparent text.

In this discussion of mounts as granting privilege in perception, it is important to note how everyday life is explored in this game, and more specifically how flying grants a player the ability to transcend the larger power-structures such as predetermined paths or in-scalable hills that players who cannot fly are limited by. For example, players with the ability to fly may transcend of walls, trees, paths, and buildings, and in this way the ability to fly is where difference has space, where mobility happens, and where perception of the virtual can happen unobstructed. And all of this perception, all of the everyday life requires a sort of technical literacy of the $\textit{WoW}$ text, a mastery of the semiotics of play. Thus, it is important to note how these specific symbols articulate a second poetic and interactive geography of material hierarchy on top of the geography of the virtual.

The supremacy of this virtual capitalism, and the materialism as being central to the ludology of the game needs to be emphasized, for it is not something that affects only the venal or materialistic player. Even if a player enters with the expectation to engage in the social aspects of the game, s/he will not be able to fully participate successfully in social situations, as these social spaces are usually centered on activities having to do with material acquisition. If an

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95 Ibid.
96 Ibid., 158.
under-geared player attempts to permeate these social spaces and develop the sense of community and social complexity that is so central and perhaps the key to WoW’s global success, s/he will be unable to as the raids, guilds, professions and even acts of generosity require a particular item level and material transaction. As Dyer-Witheford suggests, “even those who play mainly for the social aspects of the game are drawn into a web of market transactions…‘an immense collection of commodities’”

But can I really say this is the same form of Capitalism and class Western citizens like me experience in reality? Are the same expenses involved, the same inequalities? Are there barriers to this formula like race, education, geography, de facto segregation, taxes, and income inequalities? This is where the video game economy is unique: While WoW has the same form, function and promises of a Capitalistic paradigm of wealth accumulation and free market economies (as we see in the myth of success, the Auction House economy, and the semiotics of armor and mounts), there is real, tangible and equal potential for all players to pursue and acquire these material rewards in similar, equally restricted fashions. Loot is randomized, and does not favor particular races. Dungeons, quests, and the Auction House are open and readily accessible to all players, from all countries, all races, and all classes. And while there are differences in the quests certain races can partake in, all quests balance each other through experience points and their strict regulation/standardization from the developers. Further, the economic theory of supply and demand is very much alive in the Auction House economy, but the myth materializes without the popular criticism from cultural scholars that the system is rigged in favor of those with the supply, and access to consume, because anyone can spend hours mining, collecting herbs, blacksmithing, or any other profession in WoW. Not only do all players have equal access to professions in the game, all players, races and classes have equal access to the means to sell

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97 Dyer-Witheford, *Games of Empire.*
these goods, without racial qualifiers, geographic restriction, or other barriers that plague or modern Capitalist reality. But simply because the in-game economy is accessible to all real-world nations, being played in nearly every continent, in multiple languages, played by all genders and a diverse array of cultures, does not negate the games potential to inscribe real world semiotic markers of race, class and difference that have ludological consequences.

*World of Warcraft*’s investment in this neo-Oriental discourse allows the American player and the global citizen to consume and, through this consumption, as Kontour expresses, purchase an identity while at the same time presenting a sanitized, bi-polar and fundamentally Orientalist image of violence conducted in these virtual worlds. But it is noteworthy that video games themselves are an expensive consumer commodity that the global poor can access only illicitly, demonstrating the massive inequalities of this regime. Thus, while the enemy is re-created within the rhetoric of a neo-Orientalism, it is the war-torn nations that both are the sites of conflict and this virtual American Empire, and also the same nations that are not economically privileged to “play” the part of the protagonist, nor are they able to take the vantage point of a virtual war as the real war takes place both in the minds and geographies of the impoverished Orient.

This notion of video games allowing the Western consumer to purchase an identity that is positioned, even in virtual worlds, to dominate the Other, is most aptly seen in the hotly contested controversy over “Chinese gold farming” that is quite prevalent in *World of Warcraft*. While the value is hard to verify, the global gold farming industry is probably worth between US$500 million and US$1 billion and involves some 60,000 gold farming firms employing

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between 400,000 and 500,000 people worldwide; though over 80% are in China. With a materialism as powerful and central to the logic of a game as massive as *World of Warcraft*, comes the market to obtain armor, mounts, and high-level characters with less effort and as quickly as possible. Gold farmers make this desire a reality by farming these items for the, typically Western, consumer who can afford such luxury. Tony Thompson, writer for *The Observer*, powerfully suggests that while “operating out of Mexico, Hong Kong, and eastern Europe, though sometimes owned in the United States or western Europe, these companies used "low pay in poor countries to provide services for wealthy Western players." There is a connection between the capitalism in *World of Warcraft* which materializes the very real Oriental ideology that relegates Asia and the Other to spaces of domination and consumption, as we see with gold farming. And as Constance Steinkuehler suggests, there exists a bipolar logic of global Empire translated into this video game, where the greatest purchasing power resides in America, while the lowest wages reside in China.” In this sense, the controversy over gold farming displays how video games are commodities that subsume entire social environments, cultures, politics, and relationships in an effort to recreate and capitalize on the fears and anxieties of the dominant Western consumer-player.

Gold farmers violate and accentuate this virtual capitalist fairytale, as they allow a consumer to purchase in-game currency, items, or characters with real world money. This ability violates the illusion that virtual economies are immune to real world power, which can purchase in game wealth, thereby reinforcing the notion of virtual economies as “fairytale,” as they are actually just that: spaces that are imagined to be immune from real world politics and power, but

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100 Dyer-Witheford, *Games of Empire*, 139.
are in fact sites ripe with these real world influences. In this way, gold farming is an ironic process where the wealthy consumer, most likely Western, purchases in-game “wealth,” most likely from a low-wage laborer in the Eastern Orient. As Dyer-Witheford powerfully states:

Here the intersection of Blizzard's digital biopower with the material biopower of Chinese capitalism snaps into sharp focus. When blizzard policies the digital realm of Azeroth (a kingdom created from the commercial enclosure of cyberspace) for virtual gold farmers, the offenders it seeks are likely to be actual peasant farmers who have left or been thrown off their fields by Chinese capitalism's enclosures, abandoning an impoverished and ecologically devastated countryside for its cyber-connected cities.103

Thus, virtual capitalism in World of Warcraft is not just a function of a virtual economy, but rather translated, produces, and through the game logic encourages real-world exploitation of the overwhelmingly Asian gold-farmer. This connection between real world and virtual world capitalism highlights the connection they share: *they both are cultural spaces that benefit from reproducing Orientalism.*

Looking at *World of Warcraft* through this semiotic lens does not allow one to conceive of the game as merely a leisure activity. Rather, *WoW* is filled with constant material symbols of wealth, power, and performance that serve as both the representamen, the interpretant and the referent104 of the Capitalist trope of success. To be clear, it is not merely that *WoW* operates on a Capitalist economic model that is of significance, rather that it emulates, and thereby educates the player on, the dominant Capitalist myth of success that permeates reality in a way that idealizes the system. In this way, *WoW* trivializes the very real barriers to success that exist in our reality, by perfecting the formula in a digital space in which its successful outcome is guaranteed by the coding of the game and the hard work of the player. Thus, while *WoW* may serve as a form of escape for many players, the irony is that the game is modeled after, and continues to serve as a simulation of, the western Capitalist world; an imaginary real. This inscription of Capitalist tropes in the game space provides a culture space where a hierarchy of

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103 Dyer-Witheford, *Games of Empire*, 145.
value can be placed on the individual, in a sense creating the cultural space for otherness to exist. This leads us to Chapter 3, where I will explore how this ideological construction supports and enables a digital Orientalism, a neo-Orientalism, where the historical British imperialism has been transformed into a digital Western imperialism, where the significance of the “gaze” is all the more potent, as video games are “semiotic brothels” where gazing upon the Other is a primary function.
CHAPTER III: NEO-ORIENTALISM AND THE GEO-VIRTUAL OTHER

The history of Orientalism is quite massive, its application ranging from defining geographical differences between the Eastern part of the world and the rest of the globe, as well as those countries conquered by Europe. Although the meaning of Orientalism has changed many times throughout history, being applied to art, peoples, geographies, landscapes, sexuality, and particular forms of architecture, writing and philosophy, it is its revival in digital technologies like video games that is of interest here. Bernard Lewis, Orientalist and historicist of the Ottoman Empire, popularly examined the concept Orientalism when he introduced the "clash of civilizations," an interpretation of Orientalism in which the progressive Judeo-Christian Occident was clashing against the primitive, barbaric and culturally inferior Islamic Orient.

Samuel Huntington, a political scientist at Harvard, broadened Lewis' thesis to cover the entire world, claiming that a “velvet curtain of culture has replaced the “iron curtain of ideology”" and that the velvet curtain has been drawn across the "bloody borders of Islam." Huntington’s conception of culture warns of a similar clash that Lewis proposed, and argues that if America fails to understand the threat of these cultures as the “locus of war” then the world order is at risk of division. Here, Orientalism is defined as a threat from cultures outside America, and thus the appropriate response is to strengthen unity in cultural structures, i.e. language, type of people and geopolitical positioning, and consequentially denying the influence of “Other” cultures, which threaten America’s cultural dominance.

Further, both Lewis and Huntington suggest that the Cold War contributed to the new

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global conflict being cast in cultural terms, where the West is a cultural ideal at odds with the besieging and pre-modern East. This East is not a benign Other, but rather a hostile Other. Hence, the racial connotations of “the axis of evil,” “the red scare,” “Japan Panic,” “Yellow Peril,” or “Green Peril” as iterated by politicians and media alike throughout the 20th and 21st century, are expressed as a manifestation of this cultural conflict. All of these threats are considered real peoples and places of the East, distant from the ideals and culture of the progressive and superior West. Of particular interest in regards to World of Warcraft, is the West’s conception of the East through the focused lens of Asian stereotypes and a “Yellow Peril.”

The Yellow Peril first became a major issue in the 1870s when Californian working-class laborers discriminated against the “filthy yellow hordes” from Asia, resulting in a series of legislation that restricted immigration and citizenship. As the famed orator of the time, Horace Greeley, suggests:

> The Chinese are uncivilized, unclean, and filthy beyond all conception without any of the higher domestic or social relations; lustful and sensual in their dispositions; every female is a prostitute of the basest order."107

While Greeley focuses on the lack of civilization of the Chinese, this Yellow Peril was transferred to many parts of Asia. Beginning with the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, and then being transferred to Japan after the Russian-Japanese War of 1904, which resulted in the Immigration Restriction Act if 1917 and the National Origins Act of 1924, the Yellow Peril reached its climax with the bombing of Pearl Harbor in December 7th, 1941. Thus, the origins of the Yellow Peril lie not with one particular part of Asia, but an entire set of cultures and races that were conglomerated in the gaze of the West. As John Dower powerfully states:

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The vision of the menace from the East was always more racial rather than national. It derived not from concern with any one country or people in particular, but from a vague and ominous sense of the vast, faceless, nameless yellow horde: the rising tide, indeed, of color.”

This Oriental racism was depicted in the popular media of the time, particularly through political cartoons, as Tim Yang suggests, depicted Asians as “treacherous in nature and though morally corrupt and mentally and physically lesser to the Americans, possessing in superhuman endurance, strength, sheer overwhelming numbers and mystical powers.” Continuing this mediated sentiment, Time magazine printed a helpful guide on how to distinguish between Chinese and Japanese:

Virtually all Japanese are short. Japanese are likely to be stockier and broader-hipped than short Chinese. Japanese are seldom fat; they often dry up and grow lean as they age. Although both have the typical epicanthic fold of the upper eyelid, Japanese eyes are usually set closer together. The Chinese expression is likely to be more placid, kindly, open; the Japanese more positive, dogmatic, arrogant. Japanese are hesitant, nervous in conversation, laugh out loud at the wrong time.

As these examples show, while particular media categorized particular nations or peoples into more or less favorable cultural understandings, all Asians were othered through a mere defining of difference from the West, a difference that justified conceptions of the superiority of the West, and its right to depict the East in the way it chooses.

On the other side of this history of Orientalism, Edward Said, prominent literary critic and Palestinian-American scholar, proposes that Lewis and other Orientalist thinkers are themselves part of a field of study that is “bent on self-affirmation rather than objective study, a form of racism, and a tool of imperialist domination.” Instead, Said suggests that the clash is more inside civilizations than between them, meaning the entire conception of the Other is defined not by those that are the Other, but those that feel they are in danger from the proposed threat. In 1978, Said published his influential and controversial book, Orientalism, which

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109 Yang, “Malleable.”
110 Ibid.
redefined Orientalism. Said redefined Orientalism to imply a pervasive Western tradition, a Western gaze that interprets the East through attitudes of cultural superiority and European imperialism.\footnote{Bill Ashcroft and Pal Ahluwalia, \textit{Edward Said} (New York: Routledge, 2008).} In his redefining of the concept to align with postimperialist rhetoric, Said defines four principal dogmas of Orientalism:

1. The same Orientalist histories that portray the West as rational, developed, humans and superior, caricature the Orient as aberrant, undeveloped and inferior.
2. The Orient lives according to set rules inscribed in sacred texts, not in response to the changing demands of life.
3. The Orient is eternal, uniform and incapable of defining itself; therefore it is assumed that a highly generalized and systematic vocabulary for describing the Orient from a Western standpoint is inevitable and scientifically objective.
4. The Orient is at the bottom something either to be feared (Yellow Peril, Mongol hordes, the brown dominions, Green Peril) or to be controlled (by pacification, research and development, outright occupation whenever possible).\footnote{Said, \textit{Orientalism}.}

As these principal dogmas suggest, Orientalism is a "distribution of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological texts."\footnote{Moustafa Bayoumi and Andrew Rubin, \textit{The Edward Said Reader}. (New York: Vintage Books, 2000).} Said’s understanding Orientalism provides the foundation for which media scholars examine various texts for their Oriental ideologies. While Orientalism went out of academic fashion in the 90’s, I believe Oriental ideology has evolved in video games, requiring a re-examination of Said’s conception of Orientalism as affirming a Western perception and dominance in the geo-political environment.

When Said conceived of Orientalism as something that essentially conjured an “imaginary space, a space that ultimately produces “the East” in the minds of a Western audience,”\footnote{Said, \textit{Orientalism}.} I am not sure he could imagine video games as extending this imagination to a very real space of community and cultural production. If we define culture from the perspective of Benedict Anderson in his postcolonial research on the nation, we can see culture as an imagined
community, a collective space, as Anderson eloquently articulates, the “imagined political community, [is] imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” and he convincingly illustrates the role of print press and colonial states in “making nations.” ¹¹⁶ Just as the printing press began the dissemination of ideology that created the potential for an imagined community, video games create virtual spaces that are spaces of communal interaction. In this way, video games are not separate realities, but rather an extension of reality as it is an extreme form of the imagination, and thereby the imagined community takes places in multiple real and virtual social spaces. In other words, because video games are a postmodern medium, they create “space” in a way that is not imaginary, but instead very real, as I have previously argued.

Understanding video games as an extension of this imagined cultural identity gives spatiality to Oriental ideology in a new social sphere. Meaning, this imaginary space that produces the East in the minds of a Western audience is extended beyond fantasy and beyond reality into a place where the space of the game is itself a playable reality, and also a space that has less to do with the realism of the space it represents, and more about the way the dominant Western consumer interacts with this space. As Höglund suggests:

> It is important to keep in mind that when these games claim to be real, this claim has more to do with the historical and ideological content than with the games' capacity to render a life-like version of the Middle East. The question that needs to be addressed is therefore what kind of game space these games actually produce and what kind of narratives they construct. ¹¹⁷

But to say that Orientalism in the 21ˢᵗ century is marked by a geographical limitation somewhere within the Middle-East, or within the imagined conception of the unified Arab, is to effectively ignore the media’s role in producing a common Oriental enemy that unifies the Middle-East with the hypothetical North-East (a.k.a. Russians), the South-East (a.k.a. Africans), or the East-East (a.k.a. Chinese) as we see represented in *WoW*. From this perspective, *WoW* can be read as a

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¹¹⁷ Höglund, “Electronic Empire.”
medium that not only reinforces cultural understandings of the common Other, but expands the
very subjects and geographies (in both a literal and virtual sense) that can be labeled as Oriental-
Others. In order to get at the heart of *Wow*, and video game’s role as an ideological state
apparatus, reinforcing racial end-coding and player de-coding, we must look at the subject
positioning of enemy bodies, the semiotic markers of Western-centrality and perspective, and the
interactive and immersive qualities that playing video game grants in a unique capacity.

Looking at these various aspects of the game will show that video games like *World of Warcraft*
reproduce an ideology of Orientalism, that associates the Orient to not only the generalized
Arab-terrorist, as many video game genres do, but equally in potency to the East as a generalized
concept of Otherness, influenced primarily by the West’s perception of Asia who have been
literally and gamically othered by their rendered subject-position as all subjects in positions that
support the economic and privileged position and perception of a Western consumer-player. In
fact, it seems that the very modeling of these Oriental spaces after real world Asian stereotypes
and cultural values in cartoonish graphics and playable form, render them culturally inferior to
the realism in which Western spaces and geographies are often represented by. Thus, while
Höglund focuses on the recreation of the Middle-East as a hub of neo-Oriental renderings in
video games, I am convinced that his argument can be extended to games like *World of
Warcraft*, which create an Oriental ideology through its rendering of Oriental spaces as they are
imagined even in fantasy, borrowing symbolisms of their real world, Asian influenced spaces. As
Leti Volpp states:

> Historically, Asia and the Middle East have functioned as phantasmic sites on which the US nation projects
> a series of anxieties regarding internal and external threats to the coherence of the national body.118 *The
> Citizen and the Terrorist*

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It is with this understanding of the role of Oriental ideology, that I interpret *World of Warcraft’s* rendering of Pandaria as a phantasmic representation of the Western perception of Asia, that both abates the West’s anxiety by depicting them as backwards and peaceful, but also transfers the subject-position of Otherness onto a group of people and geography, rendering them in a position to be dominated narratively in the gamic space.

With Said’s foundation of Orientalism, and Höglund’s understanding of video games’ capacity to render ideological content, I now turn to another textual analysis of *World of Warcraft*, where the revival of Orientalism is not only a foundation for the narrative of the game, but also a ludological norm that is foundational in the creation of the ideological apparatus, enforcement of material and racial ideology, and is further enhanced semiotically with the recent expansion, *Mists of Pandaria*. 
Mists of Pandaria\textsuperscript{119}, released in the fall of 2012, not only builds on racialized tropes already existent in the \textit{WoW} universe, but expounds on them in a new unparalleled fashion, explicitly creating an entire island, new race, and new class in which to literally and figuratively create an isolated space in which both the previous “Good and Evil,” the Alliance and Horde factions, can interact with this Oriental Other and continue their dominant historical narrative.

Until recently, Pandaria was shrouded in mystery, not know to have split from Kalimdor. Hence the title of the expansion, “\textit{Mists of Pandaria}.” As the website for this expansion explains:

Shrouded in fog since the world was sundered more than ten thousand years ago, the ancient realm of Pandaria has remained unspoiled by war. Its lush forests and cloud-ringed mountains are home to a complex ecosystem of indigenous races and exotic creatures. It is the homeland of the enigmatic Pandaren, a race that celebrates life to the fullest even while under siege by an ancient menace.

Couched in myth and legend, rarely seen and even more rarely understood, the enigmatic Pandaren have long been a mystery to the other races of Azeroth. The noble history of the Pandaren people stretches back thousands of years, well before the empires of man and before even the sundering of the world.

Denizens of a wondrous and fertile land, the Pandaren once labored under the oppressive thumb of a monstrous race of ancient warlords known as the Mogu. Through tenacity, diplomacy, and a unique form of unarmed combat, the Pandaren staged a successful revolution that deposed the Mogu and established a Pandaren empire that would prosper for thousands of years.

The new continent reveals itself to a broken world just as the Alliance and Horde are spiraling ever closer to a war that will consume all of Azeroth. Will the \textit{Mists of Pandaria} part to reveal the world's salvation? Or will the battle to control this rich and breathtaking new land push the two mighty factions over the brink of war and into total annihilation.\textsuperscript{120}

As this entry explains, Pandaria is the homeland of the Pandaren and birthplace of their ancient empire. Located in the southern part of Azeroth, Pandaria was shrouded by a magical mist by its last Emperor after the Great Sundering ten thousand years ago, and thus disappeared into myth and legend. And as a recent entry by Anne Stickney, writer for Joystiq, explains:

And while we don't know if the Pandaren are native to Azeroth, or Titan creation like the dwarves and gnomes, one thing is imminently clear -- the Pandaren are a far more advanced civilization than any other native Azerothian race.\textsuperscript{121}

\textsuperscript{119} Mists of Pandaria, \textit{World of Warcraft}, September 25, 2012
In the dark days of the Mogu dynasties, the Pandaren were nothing more than slaves. The Pandaren constructed the great wall known as the Serpent’s Spine in Pandaria, and because they were allowed no weapons, they were far less hardy than other races. A powerful sentiment of rebellion is explained in the lore of Kang. Kang was a slave during the dynasty of a ruthless Mogu who meted punishment by separating families. This ruthlessness manifested in Kang’s child being sent to the Serpent’s Spine to be devoured by an enemy. In Kang’s mourning, he realized that the entirety of the Mogu’s power lay in their slaves. If the slaves were to rebel, the Mogu would be defenseless. So the Pandaren became weapons themselves, and hence the first monks were created, and rose to power. While this story is mythical, it empowers Fanon’s anti-colonial sentiment, whereby Kang enacted the language of violence, which was the language of the Pandaren’s oppressor, the Mogu, in order to liberate them.

Pandaria history continues with a Pandaren named Shaohao, who was crowned Emperor of Pandaria after the revolution, the last Emperor Pandaria would ever see. After a troubling vision from a counselor of his, Shaohao traveled to the Jade Serpent, the spirit of wisdom, to ask for advice. The Jade Serpent told Shaohao that he needed to divest himself of his burdens and become one with the land in order to save it.

Thus began the journey of Shaohao, and the discovery of the Sha. The Sha are malevolent spirits that are, in essence, emotion in physical form.\textsuperscript{122} One by one, Emperor Shaohao sought out the Sha and defeated them, imprisoning them in the earth. As for Emperor Shaohao, defeating the Sha had lifted him to a space of enlightenment and then ascended to the Terrace of Eternal Spring to separate Pandaria from the rest of the world. But according to lore, as hard as he tried, he could not make the continent move, and doubt and fear began to creep in and manifest as the Sha. He called to the Jade Serpent for help, and the Serpent pointed out that

\textsuperscript{122} Ibid.
Pandaria was far more than just the Pandaren Empire. It was all creatures, both enemy and ally, united in an eternal whole. As Shaohao finally began to understand, his spirit became one with the land. And legend states that the Last Emperor of Pandaria simply faded out of existence as Pandaria drifted into the oceans, and the mists rolled in. According to the tales of old, he became one with the land, and he hid Pandaria away.

What follows from this story, is if Shaohao worked so hard to hide Pandaria, why did the mists go away? And why at this particular time in the history of Azeroth? Perhaps it is because the Occident happened upon the Orient, consumed its mystery and gave light to the fog that once shrouded them. It is in this sense, the revealing of this geography, this history, these people, was an act of digital imperialism. The arrival of the Alliance/Horde factions at this particular time, nearly as the world is being destroyed, is to further the narrative of the Western hero, with the unique ability to combat evil, to spread light into darkness, as their very faction definitions suggest is their mission. Hence the enemy of the Pandaren is the Sha, a dark, demonic, black and cloudlike enemy that is the embodiment of negativity. By aiding the Pandaren in fighting this evil, the Alliance/Horde player takes control of the history of the Pandaren, writing themselves into their history as hero, saving them from darkness, again a sense of manifest destiny lies in this exceptional quest. For it was only when the Alliance and the Horde arrived, continuing their own dominant history, and wrote their history upon the peoples, lands, and storyline that the fog began to clear. In other words, while it is this land and people that are plagued by the Sha, it is only the dominant Alliance/Horde character that becomes the hero, ridding this seemingly incapable and ill-defensed land and people from this greater evil. This imperialism of the Pandaria narrative relates to the larger framework of Pandaria existing within a postcolonial framework of neo-Orientalism.
Throughout the previous 8 years of this game’s existence, Pandaria did not exist. In fact, many of the areas now on the world map did not exist. Kalimdor, the original area, occupied the center of the global stage, and it was only with expansions that the peripheral islands came into view. In a sense, the Orient was created in relation to the first, and central land and peoples, for their discovery and exploration. Like the Mercator projection of 1569, the dominant West lies at the heart of the map in a real world global map, and the rest of the lands are distorted in size and shape to maintain this focus, so too does the world map of Azeroth keep Kalimdor, the West, as its main symbolic focus.

Pandaria is full of lore connected to the expansive history of World of Warcraft. The story goes that the earliest days of Azeroth, the world in which WoW exists, was a history plagued by wars and conflicts, specifically the War of the Ancients, a conflict between the Titans, who made the world of Azeroth, and the Old Gods who came along, liked Azeroth, and infested it. The story continues through enslavement, curses and escape, all surrounding the Well of Eternity, which redefined native Azerothian life into a new race of servants. A new race, the Kaldorei (literally “children of the stars”) found this Well of Eternity and became the first Night Elves, which introduced new arcane arts, and eventually split into multiple factions, some of which are playable now in the game. The history continues a deep and mystical story of deity conflict and racial toil, all amidst a tragic and phantastical fighting between empires. At the end of this War of the Ancients, a world event, commonly known as the Great Sundering caused the Well of Eternity to collapse and thus split the once united land of Kalimdor into many pieces, leaving behind the continents and scattered islands that are known today as Northrend, Kalimdor, Eastern Kingdoms, and now Pandaria; much like the belief that a split of Pangaea on Earth split the land into multiple continents, and caused significant racial, national and border divisions.
Fast-forward through several great wars, resulting in geographical relocation and truces that are eventually broken, and what remains is a deeply heated battle between the Alliance and the Horde, two extremely diverse factions with vehement players on both sides claiming superiority. Here we will begin our exploration of Mists of Pandaria, and the various semiotics of the game that codify this Orientalism.

The environments in Pandaria are full of blossoming flowers of purples, oranges, pinks, and reds, paths carved out of stone, and shrines placed in a way that forces a player to assume a legacy of battle, worship and culture. Red fence posts, bamboo forests, sky-scraping mountain peaks, glowing dragon serpents and briskly moving clouds pouring rain or breaking to reveal a warm sunset all encapsulate nearly every facet of my senses.

As you enter the first main city in the Jade Forest, the starting questing zone for players, you instantly notice the warriors practicing a martial art. You notice red wells, fishermen, cranes, and snow-capped mountains in the distance. The sun shines beautifully, peaking through rolling clouds, and waterfalls and rivers are teaming with life from frogs, to storks, to porcupines and turtles. As you approach the city you walk along a cobblestone path, passing shrines and barrels of ale. The city is filled with Asian influenced architecture, including clay tiled roofs, and decorated wooden posts. Utilizing the historic China’s architectural emphasis on horizontal expansion, and exaggerated roofs, as well as yellow and gold roof tiles, wooden columns, red walls and ornate brackets, the architecture stands in clear distinction from the Romanesque and Gothic architectures of the Alliance cities, depicting what appears to be a very different stage in modernity.

Gongs and scrolls lie in corners, and immaculate bridges connect mountain shrines to the heart of the city. Fireworks are sold in the major cities, aligning with the real world roots of
fireworks being produced in China. Kites fly in the air, and Monks balance on wooden posts. Walls are often built around the city to further symbolically encapsulate the city, as if it were a nirvana hidden away from the corruption of the outside world. Gardens are full of ripening vegetables, trees blossom in bright pinks and greens, Jade statues scrape the virtual clouds, wild animals and enemies drop “Motes of Harmony,” and kitchens are controlled by obese Pandaren with aprons and Zen-like attitudes about the peace and tranquility of cooking. Not to mention that cooking and farming are two new professions introduced in this expansion.

With the introduction of the Pandaren as a new playable race, also came the addition of the Monk class, a class that, according to the WoW in-game guide, gains the benefits of “Masters of Martial Arts,” and ”Channel chi energy and keep light and dark forces in harmony.” This focus on the martial arts continues the West’s perception of the Asian Other, as the Monk utilizes moves such as “Legacy of the Emperor,” “Flying Serpent Kick,” “Fists of Fury,” “Tiger Palm,” “Spinning Crane Kick,” “Crackling Jade Lightning,” and “Zen Pilgrimage.” Again, the stereotypical representations of this Oriental space manifest in the very names of these moves, as multiple forms of martial arts, as well as a seemingly “Hollywood” version of Asian values and defenses depicted as the normal ability for this race and class.

As if all of these symbolisms weren’t potent enough, to entrench the player into a fantasy of exoticism, mysticism, and erotic contention with the modern world, the lands of Pandaria are teeming with water, rivers, lakes and ponds, all connecting in the superstition, as many critics have suggested, that the focus on water is key because it connects Pandaria to the historical lore of WoW regarding the Well of Eternity. As blogger Anne Stickney hints:

There's one really huge, momentous thing in Pandaria, and it's been locked behind a wall for who knows how long. In the Vale of Eternal Blossoms lies the Terrace of Endless Spring, the place where Emperor Shaohao supposedly ascended to his final rest. It's also surrounded by water -- the same water that bubbles forth in the Vale of Eternal Blossoms at the foot of Mogu'shan Palace.
And that water is key. That water is the water that leeches out over Pandaria. It's the water that flows into the Valley of the Four Winds, the water that keeps the plants growing larger than anything we've ever seen anywhere else in Azeroth. It's the water that the jinyu race supposedly originated from, ascending from a squat, aquatic race to the intelligent, humanoid creatures they are today.

It's also water that shimmers and pulses with the same quiet energy as the water at the foot of Nordrassil.

Think about that for a moment. Pandaria was once connected to the continent of Kalimdor. The water that the jinyu in the Last Emperor's tale spoke to when he saw his horrific vision of the Sundering. Pandaria was close enough in proximity to the kaldorei that pandaren travelers could get there and deliver a gift, a warning that the night elves refused to heed. It was close enough that Shaohao could see the green fire as it rained from the sky, close enough that it presented an immediate danger to Pandaria itself.

It is entirely possible that the Vale of Eternal Blossoms is hiding a secret -- and that secret is the remnants of the Well of Eternity. Not the diluted version created by Illidan on the peaks of Hyjal, the original. The Well that was used to attempt to bring Sargeras to this world. A Well far more powerful than what lies beneath Nordrassil, or even the one that was restored to the blood elves via the heart of a dying naaru.

The symbolism of a land that may hold the remnants of the collapsed Well of Eternity, lie in the names of the zones, like the Vale of Eternal Blossoms, and the Terrace of the Endless Spring. In this sense the land becomes a place of eternity, of endlessness, of a timelessness. This focus on the timelessness of Pandaria encapsulates the deep mystical history that is only recently being uncovered by the invading player, and furthers the Othering of the land, the people, and their deeply spiritual and vibrant history, by removing them from the strict focus on time, progress, and production that is evident in the rest of the game’s races, geographies, professions and economy. Further, as you play the game in Pandaria, you will hear repeated constantly, “don’t rush,” “stop running,” “slow down!” etc. as if to only further this lack of focus on time and production, which lies in stark contrast to the logic of the game which motivates constant progression through the acts of leveling, and an ideology that focuses on material acquisition that requires money and levels awarded most efficiently to those who reiterate the Azerothian work ethic evident in WoW’s capitalist economy.

This rendering of a digital space in which the Western perception can interact with the Orient is explicitly seen in the way the island of Pandaria seems to be bluntly modeled after

123 Stickney, “Know Your Lore.”
Western-stereotypes of real world geographies, peoples and culture surrounding pre-20th century Asia. Asia saw an economic boom in the 20th century as the revolutionary state capitalism of Deng Xiaoping took the place of Mao Tse-tung’s state socialism, which placed China in a position to be the “electronic workshop of the world.”124 But prior to that, pre-20th century Asia is depicted as a land of mysticism, exoticism, and pre-modern agriculture, patriarchal familial values, and gender roles, as we see depicted in Pandaria. Not to mention the architecture of early Asia incorporates this mysticism, carvings of dragons and jade as a symbolism of power, wealth and the elite all of which are indicative of a pre-modern rendering of Asia.

It is not merely visual, it is an entire interactive performance of hands coordinating movement, emotion dictating choices, and imagination transcribing a piece of my identity into a virtual character immersed in a vibrant, culturally distinct new world. I cannot afford to travel to Asia, but I can certainly pay $15 to have a emulated version on my screen.

Yet Pandaria is more than a replica of Asia, it is the Westernized replica filled with a mostly ahistorical culture that ignores the tumult of Asian history filled with genocide, warfare, drought, drugs, starvation, and global conflict. Further, this world is molded into a Western perspective of stereotypes of Zen peace, tranquil characters, playable monk classes, the Panda race, and monasteries where dedication, education, and an unfaltering work ethic are the main tropes of every tribe and culture. Not to say these things aren't evident in parts of Asian culture, but their representation here is to satisfy an appetite of the Western consumer, who in the postmodern era now consumes diversity and culture rather than integrating it. From the focus on cooking, to dragons, to a rudimentary agricultural society, Pandaria is a beautiful, yet ahistorical, representation of the very real diverse and ancient Asian culture.

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124 Dyer-Witheford, *Games of Empire*, 133.
RACE IN CONTRAST

To fully understand how Pandaria is a Westernized replica, the powerful symbolism of race in *World of Warcraft* needs to be addressed. Race in *World of Warcraft* is a significant site of semiotics, a site where a biopolitics of connecting the in-game narrative to the real world politics of empire take full symbolic manifestation. In order to understand this, we need to first explore the frequently discussed racialized distinctions between the Alliance and Horde, the two main factions of the game, and the races that align with that faction.

The Alliance is composed of *Humans, Night Elves, Dwarves, Gnomes, Draenei,* and most recently *Worgen.* As the description on one of *WoW*’s websites indicates:

> Proud and noble, courageous and wise, these races work together to preserve order in Azeroth. The Alliance is driven by honor and tradition. Its rulers are champions of justice, hope, knowledge, and faith. In a time when chaos and uncertainty reign, the Alliance remains steadfast in its determination to bring light to the darkest corners of the world.¹²⁵

The comparisons of the Alliance to the real world conception of the West are uncanny. Just as America and the West are teeming with motivational myths of democracy, morality and faith, so too are the Alliance beset on transferring these values to the lands of Azeroth. Further, there is an underlying sense of manifest destiny, where the Alliance is the light and it must spread that light to all corners of darkness –where everything outside of the Alliance equates with darkness.

On the other hand, the Horde is made up of *Orcs, Undead, Tauren, Trolls, Blood Elves,* and most recently, *Goblins.* As the *WoW* website states:

> Misunderstood and cast aside, these diverse and powerful races strive to overcome their differences and unite as one in order to win freedom for their people and prosper in a land that has come to hate them. In the Horde, action and strength are valued above diplomacy, and its leaders earn respect by the blade, wasting no time with politics. The brutality of the Horde's champions is focused, giving a voice to those who fight for survival.¹²⁶

The resemblance to brutality, backwardness and barbaric militarism of the Horde is in stark contrast to the nobility of the Alliance. The Horde races are seemingly composed of *outsiders*

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that have survived war through excessive brutality, patriarchy and embodying hatred.

The difference between these two factions is a blunt operation of a modern dichotomy between the “Good and the Bad,” the “Hero and the Villain,” the “Civilized and the Barbaric,” the “White and the Black,” the “Light and the Dark,” the “West and the East.” Azeroth's perceptual antagonism between Alliance and Horde corresponds to Foucault's suggestion that sovereign biopower depends on war: "It divides the entire social body, and it does so on a permanent basis; it puts all of us on one side of the other."127 By defining factions in this way, the races that align themselves with a particular faction inherit this coded identity, and their “evilness,” “darkness,” and “barbaric” tendencies are coded into the aesthetics of each particular race. For example, on the Alliance side, most of the races are lean and proportional to our understandings of the human body. Skin colors are pale blue or shades of white, and eyes are often brown or a whitish-blue. On the other hand, the Horde races often have green or grey toned skin, horns and an overall ugliness, and many of the races have yellow or red eyes. The Undead and Trolls have bones protruding from their armor, and many of the Horde races depict tribal social orders and religions such as voodoo. The language of these races is often a broken form of English, in a thick burly accent, or an obvious digital interpretation of Caribbean as seen with the Trolls. The Horde live in huts or caves, while the Alliance live in medieval houses or castles. All of these examples further enforce a racial separation that virtually codifies the West as represented by the Alliance, and the East codified by the Horde. Many video game theorists have remarked on this vilified depiction of the Horde,128 but what stands out as unique is a metaphor between the Horde of World of Warcraft and the Western fears of Asiatic hordes. As Dyer-Witheford powerfully shows, “If the virtual encounter between American and Chinese

127 Dyer-Witheford, *Games of Empire*, 129.
128 For examples, look into Bonnia A. Nardi, Nick Dyer-Witheford, Edward Castranova, or Kristofer Allerfeldt.
players in WoW is a harbinger of actual relations between West and Eastern poles of Empire, it is hardly an auspicious one.”

As many forums and critics suggest, each race plays out particular stereotypes from a Western perspective. As one popular forum respondent stated:

Humans are American.
Dwarves are Scottish.
Gnomes are the nerds from all the cultures.
Night Elves are Eastern Asian.
Draenei are Gypsies.
Worgen are English.
Orcs are African-American.
Trolls are Jamaican.
Tauren are Native American.
Undead are French.
Blood Elves are German.
Goblins are Italian-American.

Even these assumptions illustrate a euro-centric, Western view of the game space, as only one race, the Night Elves, is considered to be from Asia or outside of the “West.” Or, put more bluntly by an user named Shartoxi, Blood Elves are “Arabs (they even got the water bong that all arabs use to smoke and their words are really near arabic and its even means the same)” and

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Goblins are “Jews (really stereotypical big nose and like money, good in bussines)”\textsuperscript{131} To hear these interpretations of in-game characters is not uncommon. Although, it does suggest that these are only the way these characters are decoded, not necessarily how they are encoded. Yet, it seems the way they are interpreted is a result of the stereotypes that are encoded. For example, Trolls are considered Jamaican because of their thick Caribbean accents, their practice of Voodoo, and their armor, which is made of bones and shells. Also, the starting zone for Trolls is on a beach and they live in huts. Piles of skulls lie next to cauldrons, and masks decorate the trees and training posts. The language employs sentiments such as “Ya, mon. Let’s crack some tiki target skulls!” and names are drastically different from other Races, such as “Zar’jira” and “Jin’thala.”

Another powerful example of this encoding of real world racial stereotypes are the Tauren, who are considered to be a virtual rendition of Native Americans, as their homes are made of animal hide, they live in the forests, and their cities are decorated with totem poles and eagles. Further, the Tauren’s names are reminiscent of the real world Native American’s connection with nature i.e. “Sunwalker,” “Chief Hawkwind,” and “Seer Ravenfeather” just to name a few. Their language is deep and symbolic, the ground is covered in clay pots and bowls, and both kitchenware and homes are decorated in what appears to be a tribal blue and red ornateness.

With such bluntly exaggerated representations of peoples, lands and cultures, \textit{WoW} is rife with the semiotics of race, most of which seem to exaggerate the markers of difference, and to make them the most defining characteristics of each race and land. Further, the Alliance and Horde cannot communicate with each other, dominate different territories, and are in a state of

\textsuperscript{131} Shartoxi, “Are Worgen English,” Wowhead, modified on July 6, 2010, \texttt{http://www.WoWhead.com/forums\&topic=127793.6\are-worgen-english}. 
permanent hostilities, and therefore, as Dyer-Witheford suggests, “the choice fundamentally shapes the game experience.”

In this sense, *World of Warcraft* portrays diversity as a spectacle, and a further narrative of defining the “Good Guys” from the “Bad.” With such a discourse, the *World of Warcraft* message is clear: it (re)writes the thesis of the Western *manifest destiny* — the belief that the Occident is a “sacred space providentially selected” to embark on a “mission” to promote and defend its values and narrative dominance throughout the world, even if the world is virtual. In this fashion, the biopolitics of the enemy is infused with a neo-Orientalism toward an ever-present, continually recreated Other that is no longer limited to real world space or geography.

With the release of the *Mists of Pandaria* expansion came the introduction of a new playable race, the Pandaren, and with it a new biopolitics of defining the Orient. Furthering this digitally rendered narrative that presumably grounds itself on fears of the Asian-Other, with the introduction of the Pandaren race, this strict binary of West vs. East has been challenged, as a third category has entered the *World of Warcraft* universe. As the character selection screen in the game defines, “Now that [Pandaria] has been rediscovered, Pandaren heroes are stepping forward to declare their allegiance to either the Alliance or the Horde. The most adventurous of the Pandaren come from the Wandering Island, a mysterious land cut off from the rest of Azeroth.” Here, even in their base description, mysteriousness and detachment from the Azerothian narrative are highlighted, and their purpose for existing is said to offer their allegiance to the preexisting factions. As the screenshot on the left shows, the Pandaren occupy a third space, not identifying with either faction initially. It can be seen from this symbolic representation that the very fact that the Pandaren race is separated from each faction renders

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133 *World of Warcraft*, Patch 5.2.
them in a subject position of the Other, a position which is not participating in the historic battle between the Alliance and the Horde (the Western Civilized vs. the Barbaric Other). In this way, the introduction of the Pandaren created a space for a new common “Other,” a third party that is defined by its obvious difference from either faction.

Just as the entire Middle-East is hyper-generalized as a monolithic land, a land of Islamic despotism ripe with extremists and terrorists in popular video game texts like *Call of Duty* or *Battlefield*, *World of Warcraft* recreates this version of Orientalism through its recent expansion that added symbols, a race and geographies that can be read as monolithic spaces at odds with the Alliance and the Horde. Although, it is significant to note that Pandaria is not seen as the terrorist beset on destroying what it considers a Western hypocrisy, rather Pandaria is othered through a process of objectifying the space for the consumption by a Western audience. This is one of the fundamental differences between Orientalism, as Said suggests and the new War on Terror ideologically grounds itself on, and neo-Orientalism: neo-Orientalism focuses on defining the Other in virtual spaces, not only rendering them as different, but also as controllable, inferior, backward, timeless, and without concern for production. Video games are in a unique position to render the Oriental Other as controllable, as this sense of control and immersion into the dominant position is a categorical trait of the medium. Aligning with Said’s definition of Orientalism, the neo-Oriental is also where the Orient is
aberrant, lives according to sacred texts, is uniform and is systematically described through a Western standpoint which allows both their identities, histories and geographies to be controlled through pacification, and in the case of Pandaria through an outright occupation of the Pandaren’s gamic space. Further, this separation recreates the trope of the "Yellow Peril," the third party who is neither White, Black or minority but at times the Other, and other times the Ally –although ideologically always the Other, and only economically the Ally. Relating this to Said, *Wow* is recreating the Orientalism trope: By giving the Western player the way to engage the foreign, unfamiliar Oriental East, correlating Pandaria with Asian stereotypes, the Western player recreates this Oriental Other in a simulacrum where Asia is a place of exoticism, romance, and remarkable experiences in contrast to Western civilization. Even further, looking at the narrative, the Western Alliance culture is perceived/believed to be capable of change and modernization, as following the historical narrative of Western society from agricultural roots in Eastern Europe (similar to most starting zones for Alliance characters) to a medieval society with Kings, Lords, horses, guards and castles (as we see in the capital city of the Alliance: Stormwind), whereas the othering of Asia continues in Pandaria as their storyline and environments are considered ancient in contrast.

What is even more striking is that while these tropes dominate the representations of this seemingly foreign culture (as it is neither Alliance nor Horde as all of the previous expansion, gameplay and narrative focus on) there is an entire ignoring of the very real gold-farmers that exist in Asia, serving only to benefit the Western consumer-player. As Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter explain in their compelling book, *Games of Empire, World of Warcraft* operates under a “virtual biopower,” that administers life through an “anatomo-politics that participates in
a panoptic surveillance” and policing of the player.134 As they state, the division of Azeroth and the “perceptual antagonism between Alliance and Horde corresponds to Foucault's suggestion that sovereign biopower depends on war: ‘It divides the entire social body, and it does so on a permanent basis; it puts all of us on one side of the other’”135 But it isn’t merely a division between in virtual spaces, but this virtual rendering of division and conflict is a transposing of real world Western fears of the Asiatic hordes.

In this continuance of hegemonic dominance over the Asian-Other, *World of Warcraft* gives spatiality to an economy on what historically could be categorized as a predatory and selfish Western consumer that justifies their Asian indentured servants, even in virtuality, as benefiting from their excessive consumption as it creates jobs and income for them. But the pittance of their income is disregarded because the very Othering that justifies this exploitation is also the Othering that removes them geographically, ideologically and ethically from the Western domain of concern. In other words, why should the "Trinity of Modern Faith" as Pat Buchanan calls it,136 of Democracy, Diversity and Equality be applied to our opposite-ends-of-the-earth neighbors who are removed from the American way of life –especially if their backwards, comparably "inferior" way of life, manufacturing, and agriculture supports and perhaps ensures the survival of these modern myths.

What Buchanan points out is that the West is capable of modernity, and we see this in the geographical manipulation of environments, cities and homes. On the other hand, the East, the Oriental, is incapable of modernity –in fact it is resistant to modernity, as this modernity seems to disrupt the ancient harmony the Pandaren share with the land. This distinction is reminiscent

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134 Dyer-Witheford, *Games of Empire*.
135 Dyer-Witheford, *Games of Empire*, 129.
of Mahmood Mamdani’s division between the “modern” and the “premodern.” For Mamdani, the world is divided between the modern, who make culture and are its masters, and the premodern, who are conduits of culture. The premodern are those who are not yet modern, who are lagging behind or have yet to embark on the road to modernity. The stereotypes and semiotic representations of the Pandaren in WoW is indicative of a premodern inscription, relegating the Pandaren and their geography to a space of an Oriental other, lacking even the potential to progress to the modernity that both the Alliance and the Horde embody.

As Christopher Miller, Yale historian, highlights in his discussion of the history of Orientalism, “The division of the world in "the West" and "the East," "Europe and Asia" left out a third part – a "blank darkness" -that was said to lack history or civilization because it lacked either great texts or great monuments. The cultures of Pandaria challenge this conception of civilization, as the land and its people are filled with ancient texts and massive, and powerful monuments. But despite this, the symbolism of this third part, covered in a blank darkness, a shroud of mist, propels this idea that the history of the Orient has been erased, missed, and only created in the fantasy and imagination of the West. Further, the very fact that these texts and monuments exist does not detract from their perception as ancient, as anti-progressive, and in that regards in contrast to the modernity of the Western civilizations of Azeroth. The obvious differences in architecture, aesthetics of race, skin and armor were all visible markers of difference. But Pandaria and the Pandaren are a single enemy, who were neither diverse nor visible. In this way, the Pandaren were othered in a unique way, where they were not only the enemy, but they were an invisible threat, a threat that could not be seen, understood, interacted with, or made a spectacle of until their recent interaction with the Alliance/Horde. In this sense,

137 Mamdani. Good Muslim, Bad Muslim.
the depiction of the Pandaren as an Eastern, Asiatic Other as a petrified ancient version of mysticism and tradition seem premodern, in stark contrast with the militaristic "Horde" and "civilized" Alliance. Through this (mis)perception of this third party, the history of the Oriental East, the Pandaren race and Pandaria landscape seems to have petrified into a lifeless custom of an antique people who inhabit antique lands, that only gained a history through being perceived by the dominant Alliance and Horde.

It is with these geographical and racial representations of a foreign, exoticized Other, that takes on the characteristics of the Asian Orient from the perception of the Western consumer, that World of Warcraft, specifically the recent Mists of Pandaria expansion, tie into the larger “machine” of ideology. In other words, these renderings represent a neo-Orientalism that digitally renders a geo-virtual clash of civilizations.

This geo-virtual clash creates a space for the continuation of a dominant “Western” narrative of a struggle for domination. This can be seen in the lands of Pandaria, and the Pandaren themselves, forced to choose to align with one or the other faction once the player reaches level 10. After following a quest chain from “Bidden to Greatness,” “Evil from the Seas,” to “A New Fate” the Pandaren player must choose to align with either the Alliance or the Horde, as they are seen as the paths to liberating the island of Pandaria from the evil that has manifested.
As Figure 1, which appears when the Panda must choose, suggests, each faction is coded with a particular symbolism of civilized vs. uncivilized, nobility vs. pride, wisdom vs. aggression, even to the cultural markers of a blue banner vs. a red banner, where blue is often associated with the good, with the heaven in the skies, and red is often associated with blood, with evil, or with the hell beneath the earth.

In this way, the island of Pandaria, its own history, its race of the Pandaren, the temples, the cities, the ports, the missions, the entire space seems to exist because of and for the continuation of the battle between the Alliance and Horde, as the world is changed in order to serve as a utility to one faction or the other. The place no longer holds distinction, but is instead plagued, changed, manipulated, and rendered visible through the very gaze of the Alliance and the Horde, a gaze that manifests in the forced play of the Pandaren race in choosing a faction which again rewrites the history of these people from the perspective of the Alliance or the Horde, the factions that dominate this virtual world. It is this gaze that both “others” the geography and the people, and also these very spaces and peoples, which are used to define the
dominant Alliance and Horde in an unparalleled fashion.

This is semiotically rendered through the historically relevant way that both Alliance and Horde players arrive at Pandaria. Once a player reaches level 85, they gain a quest that leads them to either the Alliance’s upgraded Skyfire Gunship, or the Horde’s Hellscream’s Fist Zeppelin, depending on a player’s faction. In either case, you board a flying ship, which takes you through the mist to arrive at the shores of Paw’don Village in Pandaria. The symbolism of coming to the Orient on a wooden ship is disturbing, if not reminiscent of colonial times. It is further symbolic that a player’s first encounter once they arrive to Pandaria is with their rival faction, ensuing an epic war between the Alliance and the Horde. Meaning, from the very moment the mists part, the land of Pandaria begins, primarily, as a battleground to continue the historic battle between the Alliance and the Horde. As a player, it feels oddly evocative of the first settlers arriving in North America, believing it was Asia. As the battle winds down, the exoticism and beauty of this foreign land blossoms in full fashion, giving a player a sense of accomplishment having defeated their enemies and conquered this new land first. This example shows just one blunt rendering of a video game taking a powerful historical narrative and
translating it into the narrative of a symbolic conflict, made playable, abstracting the real world significance of rendering the Orient in this dominated position.

This relationship to the ideological machine is further evident in the relationship to the apparatus logic itself, which renders the player into a subjective position. Nick Dyer-Witheford, professor and author of *Games of Empire*, argues, “Game consoles are not just hardware but techno-social assemblages that configure mechanic subjectivities.” In other words, games, like other cultural machines, interpellate us in particular virtual “subject positions” that are not clearly distinct from actual subject positions. As Dyer-Witheford states, “they simulate the normalized subjectivities of a global capitalist order – consumer, commander, commanded, cyborg, criminal.” While it is not entirely clear that the player emulates these subjective positions in reality as they are forced to in virtuality, it is clear that the player becomes an operator to various techno-cultural machines. Foucault calls this “biopower,” to indicate how the particular politics of this system render the player a function of a technological Empire.

Dyer-Witheford builds on Foucault’s conception stating:

> They operate as corporate machines, eliciting ongoing expenditures on software; as time machines, commanding hours of attention; as biomachines, initiating intimate relations between players, artificial intelligence, and networked collectivities --but they also sometimes operate as nomadic war machines, appropriated by hackers and pirates challenging proprietary controls and raiding corporate revenue streams, within the larger biopolitical machine of Empire.

In this sense, the logic of the game apparatus forces the player to occupy a particular time and space through subjection, that reinforces conceptions of Western exceptionalism and virtual Empire.

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139 Dyer-Witheford, *Games of Empire*, xxxi.
140 Ibid.
141 Ibid., 192.
143 Dyer-Witheford, *Games of Empire*, xxxi.
While players occupy particular subjected positions, the virtual bodies are also spaces of analyses in which the positioning of bodies, as well as the performance of the player interacting with the body, has specific socio-political relevance. In video game spaces, one could say that the virtual character becomes “choreographic” in that the body and the processes of nominalization that produce it, are viewed from a safe distance and thereby objectified. But not choreography in a sense that it is rehearsed (all though this form of repetition is significant and crucial in virtual spaces), rather that it is emergent, and the virtual body becomes a “transactional collectivity: fluid, transitory, ungrounded,” an interaction between the virtual environment and the player. It is in this transaction that a link between the player and the virtual body are made possible by an anthropomorphism of the player into the various subjected positions. Yet, at the same time, it is in this choreography of the virtual body, that there opens a space for bodies to “mis-perform.” In this sense, expanding on Judith Butler’s conception of performativity, the virtual body appears to be a passive medium that is signified by a source external to the body, i.e. that of the player. But what is unique about virtual spaces is that there is no primal body, no body that exists prior to inscription. The body is entirely that which is projected, performed and choreographed through virtual movements in a virtual and intangible (perhaps even invisible) spatiality.

It follows from this apparatus logic, that if the player is rendered into a subjective position, so too are the virtual characters positioned in politically subjective positions of the “Other and the Hero”, or the “Enemy and the Good Guys.” In other words, when discussing the

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144 Susan Melrose, “‘The body’ in question: expert performance-making in the university and the problem of spectatorship,” (Middlesex University, 2006), 8.
146 Kontour, “War.”
games from this perspective, it is necessary to stress Edward Said’s conception of Orientalism, particularly the fact that Orientalism essentially conjures an *imaginary space*, a space that finally produces the East in the minds of a Western audience.148 In the same way, *WoW* constructs the East, the South, and everyone apart from their own faction’s territory, as a perpetual battle frontier where the conflict between their own fight for freedom and power is carried out indelibly against this besieging enemy.149 From this perspective we can see the choreography of the gamer involved in continually performing this strategic containment of the Other. Their vagueness allows them to be stand-ins for any “terrorist” enemy.”150 As Johan Höglund indicates:

> From the perspective of the gaming experience…this effectively conveys to the gamer that continuous warfare lends safety and cohesion to society rather than destabilizing the world.151

In this way, the choreography of the gamers anthropomorphism, as well as the biopolitics that exists in the logic of the game apparatus, we see a traversing of the borders of nation-states; where particular virtual spaces correlate with the dominant West, and other spaces correlate with the besieging East, a traversing that poses as entertainment but at the same time manufactures world-wide consent through the dispersion of a particular type of Orientalism.

Perhaps this is most symbolically represented in the fact that in *WoW*, civilians and local inhabitants of the zones of Pandaria have no blood. No blood pours from their battered bodies lining the streets, the battle zones, or the dungeons, and no bullets penetrate their invisible152 bodies. This lack of blood seems to highlight the enemy’s lack of significance, the inability to

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148 Höglund, *Electronic Empire*.
149 Ibid.
151 Höglund, *Electronic Empire*.
152 The gaming logics of *WoW* render civilian, shopkeeper, and informative NPC bodies as not occupying gamic space—rather they serve as perceptual icons that can be walked through, over, and never penetrated by attacks.
perceive their actual spatial manifestation, and their “lifelessness” in times of conflict. And while the bosses of the dungeons, and enemies that are actually fought against (from mobs to quest bosses to other players in PvP battles) have no blood, and no explicit signs of livelihood in this material sense, they are penetrated by the attacks that the player may commit against them. These hits, and this damage—this penetration if you will—furthers the sensation that the goal of the player is to destroy them, to feel the hit, to target them with efficiency in the hopes of eradicating them. Killing monsters is an important activity in *WoW*, but it is in some sense an abstraction, a way to keep score. As Nardi suggests, “*WoW* monsters are cartoonish, often silly, and in no way terrifying or realistic. They waddle, many are copulent and ungainly, they emit gurgling noises when they die—and of course they will soon be back for the next encounter. *WoW* has none of the graphic visceral realism found in other video games such as blood spatters or frightening weaponry.”

Although Nardi is right to clarify that there is a lack of realism regarding death, it also seems true that the clear and continuous defining of a group of people as Other, as hostile, and as enemy, leads to a virtual form of malicide. In other words, *WoW* creates a spectacle of excessive malicide, an indoctrination through faction propaganda and personal interest to destroy the Other in order to master one’s own character, abilities, and to continually enforce the negotiated boundary between the virtual self, and the enemy Other. Further, the objects that are killed have semiotic values that are inherited from real world political and ideological affects, as we have seen in previous examples.

These examples show how *World of Warcraft*, with its newest expansion *Mists of Pandaria*, recreates an Orientalizing narrative which has been a driving force of European and Western expansion for hundreds of years, to make it playable, enjoyable, and rationalized under the guise of a postmodern reality, a fantasy with only subtle comparison to the real Oriental

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people and geographies. It is these very symbolisms that indicate that *WoW* is more than fantasy, it is a digital rendering of ideology, created for the consumption of this space by the very Western player-consumers that dominate the *WoW* universe.

But, interestingly, *a Western audience does not dominate WoW*, but rather an estimated 48% of players are in fact Asian. How do we as cultural theorists understand this? Why would a group of people find enjoyment, playability, or escape into a virtual world that bluntly stereotypes and trivializes their own real world culture and historical lore? I believe this is a unique example of the power of hegemony in the video game medium. As Gramsci developed in his analysis of social strata, cultural hegemony is an imposed set of societal norms that are not perceived as natural and inevitable, but instead recognized as artificial social constructs. But what makes the video game interesting is that these artificial social constructs are not only obvious and explicitly stated, they are chosen by players of all different races and socio-economic positions because of a global historical narrative that places the geographies, peoples and races that are symbolic of the West as superior and, presumably from this study, even superior in virtual worlds. It is in this sense that *World of Warcraft* operates on a powerful ideological level, where it is not merely the encoding of the machine that renders ideology, but rather the “Oriental” players themselves, dominated by an Asian consumer, that reinforce and support this Orientalizing narrative within the game space.

In conclusion, *WoW* is unique in its position to offer both a localized, seemingly individual perspective through the first and third person genre structure, but also operates under a panoptic administration, that through the various material and community structures and geographically traversing environments allows the player to engage in all forms of perception.

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that continually and virtually recreate an Other through Orientalist ideology.
CHAPTER IV: CONCLUSION

Veteran players often suggest that *WoW* developers have made the game easier over the last 8 years to make it more appealing to new, perhaps less experienced, players. We see examples of this with the map now being fully explorable regardless of actual contact with that part of the virtual world, with Quest markers indicated on the minimap, and arrows guiding the direction to the next objective anywhere in the world. Further, the communal aspect of the game is made easier by the Guild Finder, the Auction House, and the Dungeon Finder, which has radically changed the way players communicate and form social bonds in public spaces. Mounts are now account bound and not character bound, and item transferring is also easier, making rare mounts a little less rare. While this list could continue for quite some time, what makes this significant is that the ideology expressed in the most recent expansion is also perhaps the most bluntly stereotypical and ideologically potent of all the lands, races and expansions. I would argue that this may be merely a continuation of the trend to make the game more accessible to the consumer, as recreating and modeling the land, the races and the narrative of the game after Oriental ideology is a familiar trope to the gamer of the 21st century, who grew up in either the Cold War, post-Cold War or “War on Terror” ages, all of which reproduce and highlight the exceptional position of the West in relation to the Oriental Other who is depicted as both barbaric in religion, beliefs and government, but also technologically savvy, morally void and at indelible odds with the progressive West. In other words, making Pandaria and the Pandaren race so stereotypically Asian, so bluntly Othered, and so vividly exotic merely encapsulates the idea that diversity, difference and especially the East are all now more easily consumed by a world entrenched in such a clash of ideology and clash of cultures, where all facets of identity and play
have been transformed into consumable products in the virtual world as potently as they also have in the real world. As Dyer-Witheford powerfully captures:

Indeed, while WoW’s universe appears to point back to a premodern world, its universe of altered humanoids and species hybrids, with its menu-driven character design, leveling up, and specialized bio-classes, seems also a parable for an emergent order of commodified post human self-modification and the struggles between game companies and gold farmers, over the circulation of beast lord avatars, shamanistic spells, and demonic weaponry a virtual rehearsal for a world where the choices for medical implants, longevity treatments, cosmetic improvements, sexual optimality, enhanced intellect, and means of mass destruction are contested only between legal or criminal markets.\(^{155}\)

As this intersection of ideology in *World of Warcraft* shows us, Oriental discourses have been translated into a virtual discourse thereby reinforcing, recreating, and rendering visible these narratives and ludologic in an entirely new, virtual fashion. This neo-Orientalism ultimately anthropomorphizes the enemy in such a way that real geographical and ideological conflicts are transfigured onto the virtual subject position of ‘enemy,’ and thereby furthers the American narrative of exceptionalism encoded in virtual spaces. As my epigraph to Said noted, *WoW* is not just about soldiers and canons, but also about struggles over geography; specifically imagined, virtual geographies that have rendered the Orient in a newly dominated position of the “Other,” an Other that both abates Western anxieties, and also reaffirms American exceptionalism in a global, virtual medium centered around both real and virtual consumption.

The abstraction of Othering in video game spaces, is not separate from other mediums of ideology expression and dissemination. Orientalism is not exclusively a virtual world ideology, but rather it embraces, re-inscribes, and normalizes this rhetoric that is commonly expressed in political debates about the “Chinese Cheater,” the “Bad Guys,” and the “Terrorist.”\(^{156}\) In this

\(^{155}\) Dyer-Witheford, *Games of Empire*. 151.

\(^{156}\) In the recent 2012 political debates between Mitt Romney and Barack Obama, both candidates utilized Orientalist rhetoric to further American exceptionalism as a key agenda in the geopolitical arena. The transcript of the debate can be found at this address: [http://www.debates.org/index.php?page=october-22-2012-the-third-obama-romney-presidential-debate](http://www.debates.org/index.php?page=october-22-2012-the-third-obama-romney-presidential-debate).
sense video games, themselves mechanical apparatuses, operate to disseminate particularly Western ideologies in the larger techno-cultural political machine.

The problem with this dominance of Western ideology in video games is that it aligns with Anne McClintock’s conception of a paranoid media that produces, ultimately, an “unstable fantasy of omnipotence.”157 If Asia has moved into a manufacturing economy, taking over the dominance of the Silicon Valley in the last 20 years, games like World of Warcraft have shown the potential for Asia to be a dominant video game consumer market as well. Yet, with depictions of the Asian Orient rendering these peoples, their histories, geographies and narratives as inferior, pre-modern and backward, being consumed in such massive quantities by the Asian consumer, video games have once again become a medium that supports the dominance of the Western narrative, the Western economy, and the Western gaze on a virtually globalized world.

Perhaps Marshall McLuhan was on to something when he said, “the medium is the message.”158 The video game as a medium has become a unique cultural and social space, where ideology is ripe within the semiotics of the virtual world and interactions within. Perhaps we cannot easily, or timely, change the message, as ideology is not a static function but a dynamic process of interaction that is reinforced by many medias and ideological apparatuses. But this particular medium, the video game, is a relatively new technology, and because of its vast consumption on a truly global scale, and potential as an immersive and interactive technology, holds the potential to change the way a global society interacts with it. Perhaps here, in this ability to change the way the player and the consumer interacts within the game, is the space in which ideology can be shaped, changed and molded. The problem will lie, as it does with any

capitalist media, within an industry that thrives on consumption. The people will consume what they understand, and in an age of invasive and exaggerated spectacles through advertising and marketing, people want to consume what they understand and what they see in other media. In other words, it appears to be a safe bet to utilize ideologies like Orientalism in video games, because it is a widely understood way of perceiving the world, and particularly the consumers place within this world. To change the ideology is to change the consumer base, and until the West loses dominance in its ability to consume, the likelihood of changing this ideology through the medium seems unlikely. But as a gamer and a scholar, I cannot help but be an idealist, and think that if video games have the potential to be phantasmic sites that can withhold a nation's or cultures deepest anxieties, it can also render our most idealistic versions of culture, communication, and community. And it is with this hope that I critically engage video games.

I have argued strongly that through the various semiotics of the game virtual worlds, like Azeroth, are not different from reality but rather extensions of it. Because of this, and because of their popularity, electronic games are, again in the words of Leonard, "sophisticated vehicles inhabiting and disseminating ideologies of hegemonies." It is unfortunate then that the potential these virtual worlds held to extend the possibilities of culture, diversity and human-focused development have instead extended the ideological dominance of the Western consumer, relegating the player to the position of an operator in the re-inscription of these now global and virtual subject positionings; subject positionings that mask themselves as play, but hold powerful tropes of Orientalism that will continue to influence the way the West interacts, intersects, and interprets the East.

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