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Don't Hate the Player, Hate the Game: The Racialization of Labor in World of Warcraft

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This article examines the racialization of informational labor in machinima about Chinese player workers in the massively multiplayer online role playing game World of Warcraft. Such fan-produced video content extends the representational space of the game and produces overtly racist narrative space to attach to a narrative that, while carefully avoiding explicit references to racism or racial conflict in our world, is premised upon a racial war in an imaginary world—the World of Azeroth. This profiling activity is part of a larger biometric turn initiated by digital culture's informationalization of the body and illustrates the problematics of informationalized capitalism. If late capitalism is characterized by the requirement for subjects to be possessive individuals, to make claims to citizenship based on ownership of property, then player workers are unnatural subjects in that they are unable to obtain avatarial self-possession. The painful paradox of this dynamic lies in the ways that it mirrors the dispossession of information workers in the Fourth Worlds engendered by ongoing processes of globalization. As long as Asian "farmers" are figured as unwanted guest workers within the culture of MMOs, user-produced extensions of MMO-space like machinima will most likely continue to depict Asian culture as threatening to the beauty and desirability of shared virtual space in the World of Warcraft.

Keywords: World of Warcraft; Race; Labor; Transnationality; Asia

Cartman: "I am the mightiest dwarf in all of Azeroth!"
Kyle: "Wow, look at all these people playing right now."
Cartman: "yeah, it's bullcrap. I bet half of these people are Koreans."—*South Park*,
Season 10, Episode 8 "Make Love Not Warcraft"[1]

Where did all the doggies and kitty cats go
Since the gold farmers started to show
Don't want to know what's in the egg roll
And they keep comin' back
Cuz you're giving them dough
Take one down and I felt inspired
Corpse camp until
This China-man gets fired
That's one farmer they'll have to replace
Not supposed to be here in the first place.
I don't know any other way to convey
How much we wish you'd all just go away
Server economy in disarray
Guess I'll just fear your mobs around all day.—"Ni Hao (A Gold Farmer's Story),"
Warcraftmovies.com, accessed October 26, 2007

Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMOs) such as *World of Warcraft (WoW), Lineage II*, and *Everquest* are immensely profitable, skillfully designed, immersive and beautifully detailed virtual worlds that enable both exciting gameplay and the creation of real time digitally embodied communities. This year, *World of Warcraft* surpassed 10 million users, confirming games economist Edward Castronova's (2005) predictions for exponential growth, and these players are intensely interested in and protective of their investments in the virtual world of Azeroth. This stands to reason: as Alexander Galloway (2006) writes, "virtual worlds are always in some basic way the expression of utopian desire." One of their primary rallying points as a group has been to advocate strongly that Blizzard regulate cheating within the game more stringently, however, the definition of cheating is unclear, despite the game's End User License Agreement (EULA), since many players break these rules with impunity, a state of affairs which is actually the norm in MMO's.[2] As Mia Consalvo (2007) argues, it makes much less sense to see cheating within games as a weakness of game design or a problem with player behavior, than to see it as an integral part of game culture, a feature that keeps players from getting "stuck" and quitting. "Cheating" thus benefits players and the game industry alike. However, cheating is as varied in its forms as is gameplay itself, and some varieties are viewed by players as socially undesirable, while others are not.

Though Consalvo (2007) stresses the extremely subjective ways that MMO players define cheating, asserting that "a debate exists around the definition of cheating and whether it actually hurts other players [and] players themselves see little common ground in what constitutes cheating" (p. 150), real-money trading (RMT), or buying and selling in-game property for real money, is widely considered the worst, more morally reprehensible form of cheating. In particular, the practice of gold farming, or selling in-game currency to players for real money, usually through resellers such as

IGE or EBay, is especially disliked. Leisure players have been joined by worker players from poorer nations such as China and Korea who are often subject to oppression as both a racio-linguistic minority, and as undesirable underclassed social bodies in the context of game play and game culture.[3] These "farmers," as other players dismissively dub them, produce and sell virtual goods such as weapons, garments, animals, and even their own leveled-up avatars or "virtual bodies" to other players for "real world" money. As Consalvo (2007) writes, the "gill-buying practice is viscerally despised by some players" (p. 164).

Constance Steinkuehler's (2006) analysis of *Lineage II*, a Korean MMO, discovered this to be true as well, and more importantly, uncovered some of the ways in which the condemnation of virtual currency buying is far exceeded by a "visceral" hatred of gold sellers or farmers. This hatred is strongly articulated to race and ethnicity: many (though by no means all) gold farmers are Chinese, and there is a decidedly anti-Asian flavor to many player protests against "Chinese gold farmers." As Steinkuehler notes, hatred of gold farmers has given rise to polls querying players on North American servers "Is it OK to Hate Chinese Players?" (32% of players responded "yes," and the majority, 39%, replied "I don't hate China, just what they stand for in L2," and 10% checked "I am CN and you should mind yourself, you racist pig"). Though she notes "calling someone 'Chinese' is a general insult that seems aimed more at one's style of play than one's real-world ethnicity" (p. 200), the construction of Chinese identity in MMO's as abject, undesirable, and socially contaminated *racializes* the culture of online games, a culture that scholars such as Castronova (2005) have claimed are unique (and valuable) because they are exempt from "real world" problems such as racism, classism, "looksism" and other types of social inequality.[4] Though as T.L. Taylor (2006) notes, MMOs are distinguished by their "enormous potential in a fairly divisive world," the "fact that people play with each other across regions and often countries" as often as not results in ethnic and racial chauvinism: "as a tag the conflation of Chinese with gold farmer has seemed to come all too easy and now transcends any particular game" (p. 321). Robert Brookey (2007) expands upon this claim; in his analysis of gaming blogs, he discovered "overt racist attitudes" towards Chinese farmers; most importantly, that "some players, who harbor negative feelings toward Chinese farmers, do not believe that these feelings denote racial discrimination." Thus, though it is the case that players cannot see each others' bodies while playing, specific forms of gamic labor, such as gold farming and selling, as well as specific styles of play have become racialized as Chinese, producing new forms of networked racism that are particularly easy for players to disavow.

Unlike the Internet itself, MMO's have *always* been a global medium, with many games originating in Asia.[5] Korea has been a major player in the industry from its beginning, but Asian players are numerous even in American-run MMO's such as Blizzard's *WoW*; in 2008, the number of simultaneous players on Chinese *WoW* servers exceeded 1 million, the most that have ever been recorded in Europe or the US ("Blizzard," 2008). Thus, though gold farmers are typecast as Chinese, most Asian players are "leisure players," not player workers. *WoW* sells Chinese, European, Japanese, and American versions of its game software, and also organizes its players

into groups once they are signed on. MMO's support thousands, sometimes millions of players from all over the world simultaneously in a live environment, therefore to make the game playable and pleasurable and take pressure off of resources and space, players sign up to play on a specific "shard" or "server" when they create their user accounts. These servers are divided by region and language, to facilitate efficient connections and handshaking, as well as to promote social discourse between players who speak different languages, but users can choose to play on any server they wish. Blizzard disables virtual currency transfers between servers, which means that each server contains its own economy. Thus, players who engage in RMT can be found on every server—MMO virtual property resellers such as IGE offers levels ups, gold, and other property on every server in *WoW*.

Like the biblical poor, in the world of MMO's gold farmers are and will probably always be with us. Perhaps because most digital game scholars are players themselves, the economics of gold farming are usually discussed in the scholarly literature in terms of their negative impact upon the "world" of leisure players, who buy gold because they lack the time to earn virtual capital through "grinding" or performing the repetitive and tedious tasks that are the basis of most MMOs. However, as Toby Miller (2006) has advocated, digital games scholars need to attend to its medium's political economy, and to "follow the money" to its less glamorous, less "virtual" places, like games console and PC manufacturing plants, gold farmer sweatshops, and precious metals reclamation sites—in short, to China. Yet while many players are fairly unaware that their computer hardware is born and dies, or is recycled, in China, they are *exceptionally* aware of the national, racial, and linguistic identity of gold farmers. Gold farmers are reviled player-workers whose positions in the gamic economy resembles that of other immigrant groups who cross national borders in order to work, but unlike other types of "migrant" workers, their labors are offshore, and thus invisible—they are "virtual migrants."[6] However, user generated content in and around MMO's actively visualizes this process. Machinima fan-produced video production racializes this reviled form of gameplay as "Oriental" in ways that hail earlier visual media such as music videos and minstrel shows. Gold farming, a burgeoning "grey market" labor practice in a disliked and semi-illegal industry that as Consalvo (2007) notes, may soon outstrip the primary games market as a source of revenue, has become racialized as Asian, specifically as Chinese. The impact this has had upon the medium and culture of gaming is tremendous, and echoes earlier examples of online community such as MUDs and MOOs, which also encouraged the development of racialized personae in a supposedly "race free" medium.[7]

A Short History of Racial Identity in Virtual Worlds: From Public to For-Profit

While early text-only online social environments such as MUDs and MOOs enabled users to adopt virtual personae or avatars across the lines of race, gender, and sexuality in order to experience pleasure, their contemporary counterparts, MMOs,' put users to work to create profit. Earlier online environments such as LambdaMOO were usually run by volunteers and academic institutions such as Xerox PARC at

Stanford and accessed free of charge by users. Though these virtual worlds are the direct ancestors of MMORPG's there is at least one major difference: MMORPG's are heavily capitalized entertainment media and are rapidly converging with other digital forms, such as cinema, online commerce, and advertising (Mortensen, 2006). Cross media franchises like the *Lord of the Rings*, *Star Trek*, and *Star Wars* have all produced successful digital games as well as action figures, spin off novels, and other officially licensed media products: MUDs and MOOs employed narratives and imagery from licensed media such as science fiction novels and films, but were not owned or developed for profit. However, as Jenkins (2006) notes, participatory media technologies like the Internet, digital video, and video game engines have permitted fans to broadcast their own, unofficial, unlicensed additions to these franchises, thus changing the political economy of media irrevocably and for the better. The Internet takes pride of place among these technologies: it is the distribution channel that has permitted fans to broadcast their work for minimal cost and with maximum impact. The mass adoption of the Internet in recent years has led to both an increase in user production and the increased licensing of digital media products, creating a delicate balancing act between media industries' desire to control their products and fans' desires to contribute to them. While many scholars have noted the democratic, empowering effects of participatory media upon media for users, it can also provide fans with a powerful vector for distributing racializing discourses that reflect the concerns of an online culture obsessed with determining identity online through virtual profiling.[8]

MUDs, virtual communities based upon gift economies which were distinguished by their key differences from the "real world" of capital, labor, and profit have given way to for-profit virtual worlds that increasingly dominate the media landscape. This has created an increasingly polarized social environment; one divided into "leisure players" and "worker players," virtual property buyers and laborer/sellers, and Asians and non-Asians. Asian "farmers" or virtual capital laborers have a significant cultural and social impact on MMOs. Though not all farmers, or for-profit workers, are Asian by any means, the image of the farmer has come to include race as part of the package. This racialization of the player worker in online social spaces is actively constructed by *WoW* fans, who have produced an extensive body of writing and digital cinema which cybertype Asian farmers as unwanted, illegal, and anti-social workers (Nakamura, 2002).

In an essay on the social lives of guilds in *WoW* Dmitri Williams (2006) asks, "How is race being managed within the anonymity of avatar space" (p. 358)? While Castronova (2005) and Julian Dibbell (2006) have produced excellent book-length treatments of digital economies in online gaming spaces there is little scholarship on the way that the rapidly expanding economies of MMORPG's are creating differentially racialized profiles, images, and behaviors.[9] While *WoW* and other MMO's do permit users to choose their own avatars within the range offered by the game's protocols, they are far from anonymous spaces for avatars. Race is indeed "managed," in MMOs, both by the affordances or "rules" of the game and by the game's players. While others have noted that the game narrative is structured around

the notion of racial conflict between distinct races that players must choose, my focus here is upon the racializations that players bring to the game (Gotanda, 2004). Player resentment against Asian "player workers" results in a continual process of profiling other avatars to determine their status as "legitimate" leisure players or as unwanted "farmers." Player class (as Yee (2005) notes, "rogues" and "hunter" class avatars are often chosen by player-workers because they can accumulate saleable property without needing to "group" with other players), language use or unwillingness to speak to other players, equipment type, and repetitive behaviors are noted by other players as evidence that a player is a "Chinese gold farmer." Though these behaviors, player classes, uses of language, and equipment types are often employed by other leisure players, prejudice against "farmers" who are "ruining the game" results in the production of media texts that reproduce familiar tropes from earlier anti-Asian discourse. Though players cannot detect other players' races by looking at their physical bodies, they constantly produce a taxonomy of behaviors that create new racializations of avatar bodies in digital space. A player who speaks either Chinese, ungrammatical or "broken" English, or refuses to speak at all, or who repetitively harvests the game's prizes or "mobs" is often assumed to be a "Chinese gold farmer" and may be targeted for ill-treatment or even virtual death. This profiling activity is the subject of the fan-produced machinima that I will discuss in this essay, and is part of a larger biometric turn initiated by digital culture's informationalization of the body (Chun, 2007; Hammonds, 2006).

Racialization of Worker Players in MMOs

Gold farmers were a fairly mysterious, almost mythic group while Dibbell (2006) was conducting much of the research for *Play Money*, however, as Yee (2006) notes, since 2005 a surge of information about Chinese farmers has become available in the popular press as well as online. Gold farmers, or workers who are paid to "play online all day, every day, gathering artificial gold coins and other virtual loot that, 'as it turns out, can be transformed into real cash,'" were the topic of a *New York Times* story on December 9, 2005 (Barboza, 2005). They are also a major source of controversy and division among players. As Dibbell writes in 2006, the rise in *WoW's* popularity gave rise to a flourishing economy in virtual loot, such that "millions now spoke knowledgeably of the plague of 'Chinese gold farmers'" (p. 294).

In his *New York Times* magazine article "The Life of A Chinese Gold Farmer," Dibbell (2007) writes quite sympathetically of their plight, noting that while players complain vociferously about the way that gold selling has plagued or "ruined" the game economy, "as a matter of everyday practice, it is the farmers who catch it in the face . . . In homemade *World of Warcraft* video clips that circulate on YouTube or GameTrailers, with titles like "Chinese gold farmers must die" and "Chinese farmer extermination," players document their farmer-killing expeditions through that same Timbermaw-ridden patch of *WoW* in which Min does his farming—a place so popular with farmers that Western players sometimes call it China Town" (p. 40). Their position as virtual "service workers" mimics that of illegal immigrants and

other low-end workers in service economies in the global South. They are routinely racially profiled and harassed by other players in MMORPG's, producing a climate of anti-Asian sentiment.

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

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

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

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

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

Machinima is a crucial site of struggle over the meaning of race in shared digital space, and it is a central part of the culture of MMO's such as *World of Warcraft*. Machinima has recently become the object of much academic interest because it exemplifies the notion of participatory media, an influential and useful formulation that is the basis for Jenkins' (2006) book *Convergence Culture*. In it, Jenkins describes how machinima are prime examples of users' seizing the right to contribute to media universes in defiance of industry wishes, standards, and control; their value lies in the ability to produce counternarratives whose impact lies in their active subversion of the narrow messages available in many dominant media texts. Machinima literally extend the storyspace of the games upon which they are based, and the most interesting of these actively work to reconfigure their original meanings in progressive, socially productive ways. Jenkins explains that transmediated storyspaces which exists across media platforms permit increased opportunities for engaged users like fans to insert their own content into these "synthetic worlds," to use Castronova's

(2005) phrase—while game developers like Blizzard provide limited, licensed, and fairly tightly controlled virtual space for players to navigate, users extend this space by writing fan fiction, creating original artwork, and making their own movies or machinima using images, narratives, and tropes from the game.

While part of the pleasure of *World of Warcraft* consists in navigating its richly imaged, beautifully rendered spaces, users must rely upon the company to provide more of this valuable commodity in the form of expansion packs such as "The Burning Crusade" and "The Wrath of the Lich King," eagerly anticipated and extremely profitable products for which users are willing to stand in line for days at a time. Machinima permits users to expand this space for free; while navigable space is still tightly controlled by the company—unlike in *Second Life*, users are unable to build their own structures or objects to insert in the world—machinima allows users to extend its representational or narrative space, creating scenarios that are genuinely new because they depict activities or behaviors impossible in the space of the game. This is a fascinating area of study, and one that is a thriving and integral part of *WoW* in particular. The struggle for resources integral to the structure of MMO's can also be re-envisioned as the struggle to own or claim virtual space and to police national boundaries as well.[10] Player-produced machinima accessed from Warcraftmovies.com make arguments about race, labor, and the racialization of space in *World of Warcraft*.[11] These highly polemical texts employ the visual language of the game, one of the most recognizable and distinctive ever created for shared virtual play, to bring into sharp relief the contrast between the privileges of media production available to empowered players with the time and inclination to create machimina, and those who are shut out of this aspect of *WoW* by their status as worker players. Participatory media is a privilege of the leisure class; active fandom is too expensive a proposition for many digital workers, who as Dibbell explains poignantly, can't afford to *enjoy* the game that they have mastered, much less produce media to add to it.[12]

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

public. Lowood claims, "*WoW* movies, from game film to dance videos, have become an integral part of the culture shared by a player community" (p. 374).

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

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

> I see you farmin primals in Shadow moon Valley, 10 cents an hour's good money when you are Chinese, I buy your auctions you sell my gold right back to me, feels like you're bendin' me over, you smile and say "ni hao" and farm some gold, "ni hao" it's getting old, ni hao, oh (see Figure 1).

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

Later in the video, a Chinese gold farmer is killed by another player, who comments as he kneels next to the corpse that "this China-man gets fired, that's one farmer they'll have to replace, not supposed to be here in the first place" (see Figure 2). Clearly, Asian players, specifically those suspected of being "farmers" but as can be seen in this image, all "China-men" have a diminished status on *WoW*: many American players fail to see them as "people." As Cartman notes in the Emmy Award-winning "Make Love Not Warcraft" episode of *South Park*, Asians don't count as

Figure 1. "10 Cents an Hour's Good Money When You Are Chinese."

other players, or as "people." In this sense, they are non-player characters or NPC's, which are typically artificial intelligence modules or AI's that give players information or missions. NPC's can also refer to the game's monsters, or "mobs." This characterization of Asian "farmers" as either automated service workers or monsters fits neatly into their racialization within "Ni Hao," for the video depicts them as all owning exactly the same avatar, a male human wearing a red and gold outfit and wielding a pickaxe. This dehumanization of the Asian player—they "all look the

Figure 2. Screenshot from "Ni Hao."

same" because they all *are* the same—is evocative of earlier conceptions of Asian laborers as interchangeable and replaceable.

As Robert Lee (1999) notes, language, food, and hair were all privileged sites of boundary crises set up between Chinese and whites in minstrel shows in nineteenth century America. Player produced videos such as "Ni Hao" mock Chinese food ways, implying that Chinese eat dogs and cats. This is a nonsensical accusation, since there are no dogs or cats in *WoW*, nor any egg rolls. But of course, neither are there real-world races in *WoW*, until they are actively produced and shaped in visual form by fans' media production. In addition, the exoticism and supposed unintelligibility of the language is highlighted by the use of a spiky looking, irregular font that spells out the title "Ni Hao." The management of race within the virtual worlds of MMO's is reflective of earlier methods of managing race in American history, but also offers some new twists. Though gold farming is not a form of labor that is exclusively practiced by Chinese player workers, it has become racialized, partly through the dissemination of texts such as these. This has been well documented in other MMOs as well; as Steinkuehler (2006) notes, the player class of female dwarf was tainted by its association with Chinese gold farmers, and thus became an "unplayable" class because female dwarfs became racialized as Chinese.[13]

Avatarial Capital: The Disenfranchisement of Player-Workers and the Neoliberal Discourse of Colorblindness in MMOs

Nick Yee (2006) has written eloquently about the resonances between anti-Chinese rhetoric during the gold rush and some of *WoW's* anti-Chinese farmer discourses, resulting in a lively discussion on his blog that contains in miniature some key neoliberal positions on race. His excellent article "Yi Shan Guan," yielded over a hundred comments from readers as of October 30, 2007, many of who dismissed anti-Chinese gold farmer racism as not really racism, but rather a result of legitimate anger over worker players' ruining other players' immersion in the game as well as creating in-game inflation. These positions are mirrored in the lively discussion forums for "Ni Hao" on warcraftmovies.com. After one poster left a comment saying simply "racist," another replied:

> g2 lv love people who consider things racism when in actuallity they are rascist for making the diffrence in their head, if every one just veiwed every one else as 'people' theyd be no problem belvie i rated alrdy also. [sic]

Another remarked:

> what's rasict, no we are only one race the human race, now if there where another species and he was making fun of them, then it would be rasict. no he is only being anticultural, not rascist. anyway good job with the song Nyhm but the movie wasn't as good. [sic]

This last comment is an excellent example of the liberal position, an ideology that eschews outright racism based on bodily characteristics, favoring instead a "liberal democratic state where people of color could enjoy equal rights and upward

mobility" (Lee, 1999, p. 145) if they could succeed in assimilating to American culture. As Lee (1999) writes, the triumph of liberalism and the racial logic of the Cold War produced an "emergent discourse of race in which cultural difference replaced biological difference as the new determinant of social outcomes" (p. 145). Asian Americans became the "model minority" after the Cold War because they could be pointed to as a successfully assimilated to American capitalism, but also, as Lee points out, because they were not black.

Neoliberalism is premised on the notion of colorblindness. The first comment cited above advocates exactly this position: racism is not the result of an individual's bad behavior, but rather the result of the person who identifies it, for they are they ones who "see" race, or "make the difference in their head." As is also evident in the readers' comments to Yee's essay, posters are eager to prove that their hatred of Chinese gold farmers isn't racist, is not a prejudice against "biological difference," but is rather a dislike of unsuccessful assimilation to American social norms, what the poster calls the "anticultural" position. The problem with gold farmers isn't that they *are* Chinese; it is that they "*act* Chinese." The characterization of American *WoW* player behavior as self-sufficient, law-abiding, non-commercial, and properly social is belied by their role as gold buyers within *WoW's* server economy: the purchasing of virtual property lies within the bounds of "American" gaming behavior while selling it does not. But this is only the case if one is Chinese—IGE is not targeted in racialized terms, if at all. The notion that it is permissible to condemn someone for how they behave, rather than what they are, is a technique for avoiding charges of racism, for "culture" is seen as something that can be changed, hopefully through assimilation to American norms, but race is not. However, as Yoshino (2006) notes, this neoliberal position results in a compulsion to cover one's identity, to behave in ways that are normatively color-less or sex-less, in order to take one's unchangeable race, gender, or sexuality out of play.

"Ni Hao" is one of many examples of machinima that demonstrate that anti-Asian racism is both common within the game, and that the problems with the "server economy" are attributed to Chinese gold farmers. Judging from its popularity on YouTube, this is a widespread belief. It also employs an unusual technique to stress the equivalence between Chinese culture and gold farming: one episode depicts a *WoW* avatar entering a Chinese restaurant whose image is *not* taken from in-game, but rather a photographic image featuring several Chinese people eating. The next scene depicts a Chinese fortune cookie opening up to reveal the words "Buy gold" as the title proclaims "it's another gold farm ad from Beijing." This insertion of photographs of actual people within the world of *WoW* machinima violates a generic convention—generally machinima makers stick to in-game images. This exceptional moment invokes images of real Chinese people to make clear the connection between their racialized bodies and gold farmers in-game. *WoW* allows players to hide their race during game-play, an enormous amount of player energy goes into "outing" gold farmers. Though as noted earlier *WoW* and other MMOs are populated by as many legitimate or "leisure players" who are Asian as those who are European or American, it is clear that being profiled as "Korean" or a "China-man" in-game can

be dangerous. "Ni Hao's" introduction asks "I see you there, could you be the farmer?" It is crucial to note that online anonymity makes it impossible to verify "with one's own eyes" whether or not a player is Chinese, and whether or not they are by extension a gold farmer. Many *WoW* forums and video clips such as "Chronicles of a Gold Farmer" address this problem by sharing strategies for profiling Chinese worker players.

"Ni Hao" depicts the killing of gold farmers in-game amidst a mise en scene of gongs, dog-filled egg rolls, fortune cookies, Chinese flags, and photographs of Chinese people dining in a restaurant. Even in a theoretically body-free space such as an MMO, the calculus of race, nation, and class result in user produced algorithms based on player behaviors, equipment type, language use, and player class that result in racist discourse, both in real-time interaction and in the construction of *WoW's* transmedited synthetic world.[14]

As Dibbell (2007) notes, *WoW* isn't a *game* for everyone in a literal sense: for worker players it is a virtual sweatshop. Worker players in MMO's produce informationalized property that they can neither consume themselves nor sell directly to those who can—in this sense, their high-tech labor in low-tech conditions more closely resembles maquiladora factory laborers' conditions than it does other recreational or professional software-based activities. Farmers work in shifts, playing *WoW* in 12 hour sessions and sleeping on pallets—their work exemplifies "flexible accumulation's strategy of mixing nonmodern and modern forms of production" which as Hong (2006) explains "depends on and reproduces racialized and gendered exploitation" (p. 115). Gold farming is an example *in extremis* of informationalized capitalism, for the avatar is a form of property that is composed of digital code yet produced by the sweat of a worker's brow.

Castronova (2005) makes the excellent point that much of the attraction of MMO's lies in the pleasure of accumulating "avatarial capital." Like the notion of "cultural capital" or "human capital" to which it refers, avatarial capital is a "soft" form of accumulation; as he puts it, "things like education and on-the-job experience that enhance earning power ... are intangible and inalienable" (p. 110). Unlike the "physical capital" which is linked to both in-game currencies and real world economies, "avatarial capital" is a different but equally compelling scale of value based on the virtual accumulation of "experience points and skills and attributes" that "allow people to make investments, investments whose returns are in the form of increases in their ability to do and see things in the world" (p. 110). This is precisely the style of capital accumulation that worker players are denied; the repetition of value-producing labor in *WoW* greatly curtails their movements within the game as well as the range of activities available to them. The Timbermaw area in *WoW* nicknamed China Town that Dibbell (2007) describes is favored by farmers not because of its beauty, exciting activities, or opportunities for exploration and creative social play, but rather because it is a good source of saleable virtual property.

While scholars such as Greg Lastowka (2007) have done an excellent job describing the rules and constraints that govern the creation and movement of "physical capital" within the server economy, less research has been done on avatarial capital within

WoW.[15] Though as Castronova (2005) notes and most gamers already know, "coming to own the avatar, psychologically, is so natural among those who spend time in synthetic worlds that it is barely noticed" (p. 45). This "emotional investment" in avatars is relatively little studied in MMO's, and certainly not from the perspective of worker players. Filiciak's (2003) psychoanalytically informed scholarship on avatar creation and ownership posits an intimate relation between a player's real life bodily identity and their avatarial body. He writes, citing Reid, "avatars 'are much more than a few bytes of computer data—they are cyborgs, a manifestation of the self beyond the realms of the physical, existing in a space where identity is self-defined rather than pre-ordained" (p. 91). However, while Chinese gold farmers create and deploy avatars, they are unable to accumulate avatarial capital since their jobs consist in selling "level ups" as well as gold and equipment. Thus, the notion that avatars are "manifestations of the self" when applied to gold farmers neatly sums up the problematics of informationalized capitalism. The privilege of avatarial self-possession is, like capital itself, unevenly distributed across geopolitical borders. Though "emotional investment" is an unavoidable side effect of avatar usage, the luxury of either hard or soft capital accumulation is denied player workers in virtual worlds. If late capitalism is characterized by the requirement for subjects to be possessive individuals, to make claims to citizenship based on ownership of property, then player workers are unnatural subjects in that they are unable to "come to own an avatar." The painful paradox of this dynamic lies in the ways that it mirrors the dispossession of information workers in the Fourth Worlds engendered by ongoing processes of globalization.[16]

Conclusion

The anti-Asian racial discourse in "Ni Hao," as well as that noted in Brookey's (2007), Steinkuehler's (2006), and Taylor's (2006) research are not necessarily representative of the *WoW* population as a whole (though it must be said that while YouTube and Warcraftmovies are full of machinima or trophy videos of farmer-killing replete with racist imagery, there are no pro-farmer user-produced machinima to be seen).[17] Machimina is a breakthrough medium because it differs from previous mass forms of media or performance; it is the product of individual users. However, like the minstrel shows that preceded it, it shapes the culture by disseminating arguments about the nature of race, labor, and assimilation. As a "Ni Hao" commenter on YouTube on October 31, 2007 notes: "GO MADCOW!! lol kick goldfarmer's asses;) the place in nagrand where u cant get witout fly mount is nice for china-man killing." Similarly, it is certainly not the case that games must be entirely free of racist discourse in order to be culturally important or socially productive, in short, to be "good." No multiplayer social game could meet that criterion at all times. On the other hand, if we are to take games seriously as "synthetic worlds," we must be willing to take their racial discourses, media texts, and interpersonal conflicts seriously as well. As Dibbell (2006) claims, it is constraint and scarcity—the challenge of capital accumulation—that makes MMO's pleasurable, even addictive. Game economies

based on cultures of scarcity engender RMT, and as long as this form of player-work is socially debased and racialized, it will result in radically unequal social relations, labor types, and forms of representation along the axes of nation, language, and identity. Asian worker players are economically unable to accumulate avatarial capital and thus become "persons;" they are the dispossessed subjects of synthetic worlds. As long as Asian "farmers" are figured as unwanted guest workers within the culture of MMOs, user-produced extensions of MMO-space like machinima will most likely continue to depict Asian culture as threatening to the beauty and desirability of shared virtual space in the *World of Warcraft.*

Notes

[1]   Air date October 4, 2006, Comedy Central Network.

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

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

[4]   Castronova (2005) writes that avatar use in MMO's creates new bodies for users, and that they "erase, at a stroke, every contribution to human inequality that stems from body differences" (p. 258).

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

[6]   See (Aneesh, 2006).

[7]   See Nakamura (2002), in particular Chapter 2, "Head Hunting on the Internet: Identity Tourism, Avatars, and Racial Passing in Textual and Graphic Chatspaces."

[8]   Machinima has been credited with enormous potential as a means by which users can create their own cinematic texts, and is often seen as an ideal means for fans to make new, socially progressive meanings out of "old" texts. See Jenkins (2006) and Lowood (2006).

[9]   See Chan (2006) and Yee (2006).

[10] As Brookey (2007) argues:

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

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

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

[13]   As she writes, because adena farmers often play female dwarves, they

> have become the most despised class of character throughout the game . . . Girl dwarfs are now reviled by many players, systematically harassed, and unable to find anyone that will allow them to hunt in their groups . . . it seems as if a whole new form of virtual racism has emerged, with an in-game character class unreflectively substituted for unacknowledged (and largely unexamined) real-world difference between China and America. (p. 208)

[14]   Interestingly, gender is not part of this profiling practice. This may have to do with the depiction of Chinese farmers as male in both the popular press and in photo essays depicting MMO game players and their avatars. See Cooper (2007).

[15]   See also Balkin & Noveck (2006).

[16]   As Castells (2000) writes of the Fourth World, "the rise of informationalism at the turn of the millennium is intertwined with rising inequality and social exclusion throughout the world" (p. 68).

[17]   UC San Diego doctoral candidate Ge Jin's distributive filmmaking project on the lives of Chinese worker players in MMOs can be viewed at http://www.chinesegoldfarmers.com. His films, which can also be viewed on YouTube, contain documentary footage of Chinese worker players laboring in "gaming workshops" in Shanghai. His interviews with them make it clear that these worker players are well aware of how despised they are by American and European players, and that they feel a sense of "inferiority" that is articulated to their racial and ethnic identity.

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