

Critical Engagement with Racial Discourse in a Digital Fantasy World

Master's Thesis East Asian Studies

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Figure 1: The five playable races of Guild Wars 2

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Abstract:

Race in fantasy offers a 'safe space' to engage with racial discourse, but races are often narrowed down to one dimensional stereotypes. Guild Wars 2 is a Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game that features race in a similar way, but offers insight in various themes regarding racial discourse, postcolonialism and International Relations. Videogames more so than other popular media, have the power to be political because they allow for interactive engagement with the medium.¹ This thesis presents the argument that engagement with fantasy games featuring racial discourse can open up valuable and critical discussions of multiculturalism, the meaning of race, Orientalism and postcolonialism in our real life societies.

Keywords: race, fantasy, postcolonialism, Orientalism, game studies, International Relations

1. Introduction to the Thesis

Role Playing Games belong to some of the oldest games of the medium. Derived from fantasy writers such as HP Lovecraft and Tolkien, the genre gained popularity through the rise of Dungeons & Dragons, a tabletop RPG in which players decide who they want to be and adventure together playing as their own fantasy characters. In the past decennia, the World of Warcraft (WOW) has grown to become the biggest game in the MMORPG² genre. In these games players create their own character and explore a fantasy realm full of adventure, battles and lore. This realm is inhabited by a number of ethnic "races" including but not limited to Humans, Orcs, Night Elves, Tauren, Trolls and Dwarves. One of fantasy MMO's defining features is that it offers players the opportunity to forge their own identities and play as someone totally different from their real world self.³ The player could play as a character of another gender, or belonging to another ethnic group, thus shaping an identity that they would otherwise not be able to experience for themselves. On the one hand, this creates interesting opportunities for players to expand their view of identity and step into someone else's shoes. On the other hand, digital landscapes such as MMO's have the power to critically explore race and ethnicity, but also to enforce racial hegemony and differences between ethnic groups, and risking to present race as one dimensional stereotypes.⁴

Fantasy gaming and fantasy writing have historically features clear racist undertones. Influential fantasy writers such as HP Lovecraft and Tolkien have included racism in their works, by the likes of stereotyping or a lack of ethnically diverse cast.⁵ In the Lord of the Rings, the entire cast of main characters consists of White (male) characters, and the overarching theme is the battle between Good and Evil which translates to the novels as "evil forces in the East" against the West.⁶ Then, there is the stereotyping of ethnical races like the Elves and the Dwarves: Elves are pale, wise, elegant and refined, often look down upon other races, whereas Dwarves are stubborn, bearded, enjoy drinking and mostly stick to mines.

Stereotypical imagery such as those from Tolkien's novels have continued to exist in Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) where race came with consequences for gameplay. In addition to stereotyping, race

¹ Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (The MIT Press Ser., 2007).

² Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game.

³ Melissa J. Monson, "Race-Based Fantasy Realm: Essentialism in the World of Warcraft," *Games and Culture* 7, no. 1 (2012): p.53.

⁴ Monson, p.48.

⁵ Mattias Pettersson, "Racism and Fear in H.P. Lovecraft's The Shadow over Innsmouth," 2016: p.2.

⁶ Monson, "Race-Based Fantasy Realm," p.55.

here also influences certain abilities a character might have, and it influences the power statistics of the character (such as Strength or Charisma). This kind of categorization results in the emphasis of differences between these “races” rather than their similarities, which brings up the question of the purpose and meaning of race in this setting. The same can be said for many MMORPG’s, where the same choices of different stats are offered, sometimes even restricting certain classes to certain races. MMORPG’s like WoW offer the players a digital race based society, in which race signifies a biological, geographical and cultural difference.⁷ This seems problematic, as such a notion of race as biological is outdated and can be traced back to slavery and racial extremism. So does that mean there is nothing to take away from these digital worlds that can contribute to ongoing discussions of racial discourse in both videogames and society?

Racial discourse is historically connected to themes of colonialism and Orientalism, and is still itself a theme that is present in our current day society. The Black Lives Matter protests in the USA illustrate the ongoing presence and seriousness of racial discourse. Themes of race are often featured in popular media, be it literature, cinema, videogames or any other medium. However, videogames have an advantage over other media when it comes to political power, which is the audience’s interactive engagement with the text.⁸ I argue that engagement with racial discourse in fantasy games offers insight in the various themes connected to it, and that this engagement allows for the challenging of its (the game’s) systems. To illustrate these points, this thesis provides an analysis of the fantasy MMORPG called Guild Wars 2 (GW2) by NCSoft, to show the themes of race, (post)colonialism, Orientalism, International Relations, and multicultural society that surface when critically engaging with the game’s system, narrative and history. The purpose of the thesis is to show that it is not only the design of the game that determines whether a game is socially or culturally critical, but also the way in which the player experiences the themes of discourse through engagement.

The literature review explores the relevant literature for the topic, starting with the relevance of analysing popular culture in the field of popular culture studies and game studies. This section shows how themes like International Relations are politically embedded in popular media such as fantasy and sci-fi, whether it be a popular tv show like Star Trek or a videogame such as Mass Effect, and how they can reflect real life foreign policy. Additionally, the section on Race and Orientalism explores the definition of race, and the concept of Orientalism and its history of colonialist discourse. Here, concepts of multiculturalism and the hybridity of multicultural societies are introduced which form an important backdrop on the implications of the racial society of GW2. From there on, the literature review introduces race as featured in videogames, fantasy tabletop RPG’s and eventually MMORPG’s.

The methodology chapter introduces the model of research, and explains the methods and structure of the case study. A research model from a similar study by Monson is assessed here, to determine which parts of her analysis are applicable to the current thesis, and what the limitations of her model are for analysing GW2. Thereafter, the analysis chapter commences to point out how themes of racial discourse, colonialism, Orientalism and International Relations are embedded in the game.

Finally, the conclusion chapter will bring the thesis to a close, explaining ***to what extent and how there is opportunity to critically look at the meaning of race in the model of a race based society in an MMORPG***, and explains the limitations of the thesis alongside suggestions for future research.

⁷ Nathaniel Poor, "Digital Elves as a Racial Other in Video Games," *Games and Culture* 7, no. 5 (2012): p.376.

⁸ Bogost, *Persuasive Games*.

2. Literature Review

The Importance of Analysing Videogames and Popular Culture

Popular culture plays a major role in people's lives in the modern day and age, and includes music, books and comics, videogames and more. Judging by first impressions, a lot of popular media seems to lack depth and meaning: the reason people like it must be because the songs are catchy, or the comics are exciting and so on. However, this first impression could be deceiving. Popular culture is influenced and entwined with consumerism⁹, and its power comes mainly through the emotional reactions it triggers by being a largely visual culture, as people experience positive and negative representations of their identity.¹⁰ Thus, popular culture in general is helpful in examining and grasping elements of world politics¹¹, including political identity. Through this section I would like to argue that analysing videogames is important for grasping narratives of identity, race, world politics, and post-colonialism that are embedded in the media we consume. Doing so can give us valuable insights and perspectives on these topics, so that this might add to their existing discussions.

Ian Bogost argues that within popular culture, every new medium that emerges has had its own set of challenges that seem to repeat themselves for every newcomer on the scene. For instance, when comic books started gaining popularity its academic value was initially not acknowledged, which changed over time. A good example of this is Art Spiegelman's "Maus" (1986), which was a Holocaust memoir and was one of the works that "granted legitimacy" to the genre.¹² Now, the analysis of comic books has found its way into the academic landscape, and videogames have entered facing the same challenges the previous new medium had to endure.¹³ Scholars such as Ian Bogost and Alexander Galloway have come a long way to show that games can be critically analyzed on an academic level. Videogames as a medium give the players control over the course of the game, which enhance the engagement of the player with the medium in contrast to the turning of pages of a book or the passive viewing of a movie¹⁴, which is why it could be argued that regarding representations of people's identity, videogames are a much more powerful medium of political power.

In the field of International Relations and videogames, Craig Hayden wrote about the procedural rhetorics of the game Mass Effect. He argues for the capacity of videogames to articulate and represent the practice of international politics. He writes that "because videogames are a form of cultural expression defined by narrative and play, the game mechanic becomes available to critics and scholars as a distinct kind of persuasive communication to be interrogated and examined."¹⁵ Furthermore, he writes that representations of pop culture texts become especially significant for IR as he draws a line of similarities between pop culture and foreign policy rhetoric.¹⁶ In this way,

⁹Frederica Caso, and Caitlin Hamilton, *Popular Culture and World Politics : Theories, Methods, Pedagogies* (E-International Relations Publishing, 2015): p.37. (E-book)

¹⁰ Caso & Hamilton, *Popular Culture and World Politics*, p.42.

¹¹ Ibid, p.24-25.

¹² Rosemary V. Hathaway, "Reading Art Spiegelman's Maus as Postmodern Ethnography," *Journal of Folklore Research: An International Journal of Folklore and Ethnomusicology* 48, no. 3 (2011): p.249.

¹³ Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (The MIT Press Ser., 2007).

¹⁴ Caso & Hamilton, *Popular Culture and World Politics*, p.97.

¹⁵ Craig Hayden, "The Procedural Rhetorics of Mass Effect: Video Games as Argumentation in International Relations," *International Studies Perspectives* 18, no. 2 (2017): 175-93. p.189.

¹⁶ Ibid, p.190.

Hayden builds onto Bogost's notion that videogames are a kind of literacy that helps us make or critique the systems we live in.¹⁷

The relevance of analysing pop culture and videogames for the field of International Relations is further amplified by Jutta Weldes' book "To Seek Out New Worlds"¹⁸. Weldes argues that there are plentiful meanings that circulate between world politics and the genre of science fiction, with producers of sci-fi drawing inspiration from real political events and politicians drawing inspiration from sci-fi, an example being Ronald Reagan's "Star Wars" missile defense.¹⁹ Additionally, the similarities between Star Trek's United Federation of Planets and the United States are listed which make it seem like a direct representation in terms of its foreign policy, as the Enterprise strives to bring democracy and law to the rest of the galaxy.²⁰ Similarly to Weldes, Stephen Benedict Dyson writes that "IR is by necessity, as speculative and imaginative as a lot of sci-fi,"²¹ in his book about the international relations of Star Trek and other fantasy/sci-fi works.²²

Nick Robinson further builds on the connection between US foreign policy and pop culture, and shows its representation and influence in military videogames. In particular, he uses military videogames to show the underlying themes of American exceptionalism in US foreign policy. Robinson notes that "popular culture can be used to support the exceptionalism narrative by propagating the idea that the non-Western world is threatening and needs America's civilizing/democratizing influence."²³ He explains that situating the USA as an innocent victim makes it seem that using force in response is justified. Additionally, the videogames he analyzed seemed to always show the enemy as ruthless and beyond reason, and that there is no option to negotiate with them. This article supports the argument that popular culture matters for world politics, and demonstrates that politics are performed and revealed through studies of the practices of protagonists within popular cultural spheres.²⁴

Although some of these examples are made in connection to sci-fi, a similar method of analysis can be applied to fantasy. Martin Hall argues that there is an essential connection between fantasy and Realism as a theory in the field of International Relations. He aims to illustrate this by showing that both fantasy and Realism theory are derived from the Christian myth of Satan, which according to him is central to Western civilization.²⁵ He states that Satan as a personification of Evil in one force, is designed as a threat and ultimately lies in the concept of sovereignty, which he considers the most important concept of Realism.²⁶ This can be seen in many works of fantasy as well, in which the Evil or wrongness can be named and personified, like Sauron in the Lord of the Rings or Voldemort in Harry Potter. He concludes that "myth constitutes paradigmatic truth in Western civilization, and

¹⁷ Hayden, "The Procedural Rhetorics of Mass Effect," p.191.

¹⁸ Jutta Weldes, *To Seek out New Worlds : Science Fiction and World Politics*, 1st Palgrave Macmillan ed. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

¹⁹ Karl Leib, "Confronting Strange Worlds," *International Studies Review* 6, no. 1 (2004): p.123.

²⁰ Ibid, p.123-124.

²¹ Stephen Benedict Dyson, *Otherworldly Politics : The International Relations of Star Trek, Game of Thrones, and Battlestar Galactica*, 2015: p.3.

²² Chris Parkes, "Otherworldly Politics: The International Relations of Star Trek, Game of Thrones, and Battlestar Galactica," 2016, H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences Online, 2016-03-01.

²³ Nick Robinson, "Have You Won the War on Terror? Military Videogames and the State of American Exceptionalism," *Millennium - Journal of International Studies* 43, no. 2 (2015): p.452.

²⁴ Ibid, p.469.

²⁵ Martin Hall, "Chapter: The Fantasy of Realism, or Mythology as Methodology," in *Harry Potter and International Relations*, edited by Daniel H. Nexon and Iver B. Neumann, 2006: p.177.

²⁶ Ibid, p.186.

that fantasy – as opposed to science fiction – makes the same tragic interpretation of the Christian myth of Satan as Realism does.”²⁷

The personification of evil and the enemy as portrayed beyond reason are themes that are also featured in Robinson’s article about American exceptionalism in videogames, which will be discussed in the next section about Orientalism.

Race, Ethnicity and Orientalism

Popular culture reaches audiences all around the globe and helps shape the identity of many people. Different kinds of music influence the way people dress and behave, and books and comics have the power to bring people together and celebrate their love for their favorite fictional stories and heroes. The same can be said of videogames. Because videogames are such an engaging medium, the messages sent with the stories, characters and environments in those games have the possibility to influence the minds of many players, whether such a message was intentional or unintentional.²⁸ However, when popular culture and videogames aim to give a portrayal of a non-Western cultures, there can be risk of offering an Orientalist view.

Orientalism is an academic term popularized by Edward Said, who used the term to describe the exotification and fetishization of the Arabic and Asian cultures from a Western perspective.²⁹ The term is based off the dichotomy of East³⁰ and West, Orient and Occident, and has its roots in the Colonial period where the colonized were subjected to the gaze of Western imperialism. As a result, stories would emerge about the ‘mysteries’ of the Orient, and it became the center of fantasies such as the stereotypical imagery of the Middle East in *A Thousand and One Nights*. More specifically, Said specifies three different ways of Orientalism: Orientalism as an academic discipline, Orientalism as a way of viewing the world, and Orientalism as a hegemonic way of the West to dominate the Orient.³¹

In Orientalism, the dichotomy of Orient and Occident portrays the Orient as effeminate, weak and barbaric whereas the Occident is portrayed as masculine, strong and refined. This ideology fits into the mindset of the colonizer forming a motivation to colonize the colonized. It feeds off the idea of an ‘us’ and the ‘Other’, where the differences between the two are emphasized. For the colonizer, it was easier to define the ‘Other’ by the use of stereotypes and showing that they are different.

The term Orientalism and the ideology attributed to its name are not without criticism. For example, David Kopf³² claimed that Said’s approach lacked historical precision.³³ Said was accused of doing exactly what he proclaims the West has been doing: essentializing the ‘Other.’ Said responded to this with denial, claiming that the West and the Orient are both made up entities that do not exist by themselves. Even though Said’s approach is not without criticism, he comes up with alternative and

²⁷ Hall, “The Fantasy of Realism,” p.191.

²⁸ Hayden, “The Procedural Rhetorics of Mass Effect.”

²⁹ Megan C. Thomas, “Orientalism and Comparative Political Theory,” *The Review of Politics* 72, no. 4 (2010): p.654.

³⁰ The Orientalist approach is not limited to a gaze of the East, but to anything that can be considered non-Western or non-European from a historical perspective, which would include Africa and pre-colonized America.

³¹ F. Güven, “Criticism to Edward W. Said’s Orientalism,” *RumeliDE Dil ve Edebiyat Araştırmaları Dergisi*, (15), (2019): p.418-430. DOI: 10.29000/rumelide.580700

³² David Kopf, “Hermeneutics versus History,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 39, no. 3 (1980): p.495-506.

³³ *Ibid*, p.420.

better ways in which the West and Orient can engage with each other to avoid racial thinking and uncritical acceptance of authoritative ideas.³⁴

In the ideal scenario everyone would get along without having a bias or stereotyping people of different origins. Then, why are race and ethnicity so often the center of attention among the problems of modern day societies? Homi Bhabha has been an important influence for debates in cultural politics, and wrote on colonialism, race, identity and difference. In an interview³⁵ in which he talks about cultural difference and community, he makes some interesting points about the nature of multiculturalism and the hybridity of culture. He states that the problems with the endorsement of cultural diversity are that on the one hand there is encouragement of diversity there is also containment of it, and on the other hand that in societies where multiculturalism is encouraged racism is still rampant.³⁶ Bhabha argues that “multiculturalism represented an attempt both to respond to and to control the dynamic process of the articulation of cultural difference, administering a consensus based on a norm that propagates cultural diversity.”³⁷ He rather talks about cultural difference than diversity, stating the inadequacy of such a liberal relativist perspective as the reason. Bhabha is of the opinion that all forms of culture are related to each other in some way or form because it is a signifying or symbolic activity. In that sense, he argues that there is no ‘in itself’ within cultures because they are always subject to ‘cultural translation.’³⁸ Instead, he refers to a ‘third space’, as a hybridity which enables other positions to emerge. As an example, he notes that Western metropolitan histories of progress could not have developed without bringing up colonial predecessors of the ideas of civility and the mythology of ‘civilisation’.³⁹ Simply put, the third space is a hybrid of two original moments. Today’s multicultural society is the perfect example, but Bhabha criticises the limitations of such a ‘liberal’ sense of community through the postcolonial perspective of the third space. He questions the foundational rights that are central to liberal society by calling out the discriminatory legal status that is assigned to migrants and refugees⁴⁰, as the third space would not have existed were it not for a history of colonialism and migration.

One academic field that is deeply intersected in colonial history is ethnography. Daniel P.S. Goh regards the central concepts of colonial studies as inscribing modernity into colonized societies, and inserting Western modalities of cultural life onto these “conquered worlds.”⁴¹ Ethnography in essence is a way of studying a cultural group from an outside perspective, and in this regard evokes the same problems of Area Studies, which is that it offers a view on the ‘Other’. Additionally, this kind of research is rooted in imperial discourse and was even a way to get to ‘know the enemy’ by researching them. Goh concludes that in Malaya and the Philippines, “de-racialized sociology has taken the place of anthropology as preeminent discipline, but hidden behind it are indications of a fundamentally ethnographic state.”⁴²

Bhabha notes that the assumption that all cultural diversity may be understood on the basis of a universal concept such as human being, class or race, can be very limiting and dangerous in trying to

³⁴ F. Güven, “Criticism to Edward W. Said’s Orientalism,” p.428.

³⁵ Jonathan Rutherford, “The Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha,” in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, edited by Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishhart, 1990): p.207-221.

³⁶ Ibid, p.208.

³⁷ Ibid, p.208.

³⁸ Ibid, p.210.

³⁹ Ibid, p.218.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p.218.

⁴¹ Daniel P. Goh, "States of Ethnography: Colonialism, Resistance, and Cultural Transcription in Malaya and the Philippines, 1890s–1930s," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 49, no. 1 (2007): p.110.

⁴² Ibid, p.137.

understand certain cultural practices and how they construct their own systems of meaning.⁴³ Culture can typically be traced back to a certain ethnicity or race. Then, this argument could imply that dismissing the notion of race can be limiting and dangerous, which makes sense considering the history of racial discourse. In the ideal scenario everyone would get along without having a bias or stereotyping people of different origins. Then, why are race and ethnicity so often the center of attention among the problems of modern day societies?

To answer such a question it is crucial to define race and ethnicity. According to Zack et al. the epistemic problems posed by race and ethnicity are related to the lack of clear and consistent criteria for distinguishing them.⁴⁴ They point out that it is unclear what defines race and what defines ethnicity. There are arguments that race is a social construction and scientific evidence indicates that it is not a biological reality. Ethnicity differs from race in that it is not constrained by descent, and the criteria of ethnic groups are often contextual. However, there are no criteria that can be effectively used everywhere to identify such an ethnic group.

“Race means a biological taxonomy or set of physical categories that can be used consistently and informatively to describe, explain, and make predictions about groups of human beings and individual members of these groups.”

- Naomi Zack (2002,1)⁴⁵

In response to the unclarity of the meaning of race, eliminativism argues that race should be eliminated from discourse because it has no biological basis, and a kind of neo-realism that argues that race can still be regarded as having some kind of reality.⁴⁶

“In continuing to use the term “race” as if we were referring to a biological reality, we commit the fallacy of ontological obligation according to which the existence and use of a term commits us to an ontological reality to which the term refers.”

- Naomi Zack & Jorge J.E. Gracia⁴⁷

The first approach has the disadvantage of failing to preserve enough of the concept of race to understand how it has functioned and continues to function in society, and the second approach is too close to old biological notions of comfort. Zack and Gracia’s paper suggests that a common-bundle view of race and a historical familial view of ethnicity preserve the notions of race and ethnicity without the objectionable commitment to their biological reality or a lack of contextual and flexible aspects of these notions. It is constructionist in that the choice of the particular features is the result of social construction and thus may vary from society to society and place to place.⁴⁸

Concluding from the Zack & Garcia, there is no concrete answer to whether or not we should eliminate notions of race and ethnicity when talking about groups of people. However, there are more theories about the use of the terms. Constructions of race have to do with power, and the

⁴³ Rutherford, “Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha,” p.209.

⁴⁴ Naomi Zack and Jorge J.E. Gracia. "Race and Ethnicity," in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Race, The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Race, Chapter 11* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

⁴⁵ Naomi Zack, *Philosophy of Science and Race*. (New York: Routledge, 2002): p.1.

⁴⁶ Naomi Zack and Jorge J.E. Gracia. "Race and Ethnicity."

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

association of race with experience of advantage and disadvantage.⁴⁹ Discrimination plays a role in disadvantage, such as racial discrimination in job searching. In severe cases, a person might be invited for a job interview only to be rejected (directly or indirectly) because they belong to a certain ethnic group. Therefore, it may be fruitful to eliminate notions of race in theory, but in reality this does not prevent such cases of discrimination. Additionally, racial discrimination has played a role in the history of the world, and denying the social construct of race would downplay some of the most serious phenomena in history such as slavery. Therefore, we should not treat the issue of race and ethnicity lightly, nor should we invalidate the social constructs and history surrounding it. In this sense, deracializing society and media does not seem like a concrete answer to the problem. There is, however, the issue of representation of race and ethnicity in popular media, also in videogames.

Race, Ethnicity and Orientalism in Games

Just as other media like literature and cinema engage with notions of race and ethnicity, videogames can do the same and more. Many games strive to create compelling stories with a diverse cast similarly to current-day cinema. However, videogames have an inherent advantage over literature and cinema in terms of the narrative, which can be non-linear, and the fact that they are interactive. This transforms the experience from an onlooker's perspective to actually experiencing what is happening in the game. Some games succeed in forming a valuable critique about race and ethnicity whereas others simply include more diverse characters, only to have them conform to preexisting notions and stereotypes. The following book analysis indicates the difficulty of designing a meaningful critique on race.

In her chapter of the book *Gaming Representation*, Russworm and Malkowski explore the limits of racial empathy in videogames that take place *in a dystopian setting*⁵⁰. What they found is that some of the most racially diverse videogames are those that take place in a dystopia, and that simulating a diverse disaster does not suggest the game offers a radical critique when it comes to race. They illustrate this with the example of *The Last Of Us*, a dystopian game in which a White man named Joel and a young White girl named Ellie survive in a decaying world. The Black characters in this game all have in common that they serve the narrative purpose to 'help' the White main characters, which implies that "throughout the game Blackness labors to shore up White character agency."⁵¹ Examples include a young Black girl who serves the purpose of teaching Ellie to be more confident and exploratory, only to then have her die when they both get lethally infected whereas the main character Ellie survives and finds out she is immune and holds the cure to the virus. Another example is Marlene, who is the leader of a resistance group looking for a cure against the virus and who fight against a militarized police. At the same time she is also the game's central antagonist who wants to use Ellie's brain to find a cure for the disease, but main character Joel refuses to let Ellie die even though she was willing to and kills Marlene. *The Last of Us* shows that even with racially diverse representations that are not overtly stereotypical, the game can still fail to critically engage with its portrayals of ethnicity.

According to Russworm and Malkowski, Telltale's *The Walking Dead* gives a better example of a Black character in a dystopian videogame that critically engages with notions of Black masculinity, and also creates empathy in the form of the father-daughter relationship between the main character Lee and the child Clementine. Set in a dystopian world during a zombie apocalypse, the game makes the

⁴⁹ Coretta Philips and Lucinda Platt, "'Race' and Ethnicity," in *Social Advantage and Disadvantage, Social Advantage and Disadvantage, Chapter 12* (Oxford University Press, 2016).

⁵⁰ Jennifer Malkowski and Trea Andrea M. Russworm, *Gaming Representation : Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games*, (Digital Game Studies, 2017): p.109-128.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, p.112-113.

player interact with certain characters he meets who have a bias against Lee because of his ethnicity, in some ways direct (by calling them out for it) or indirect (by means of cut-scene dialogue). The narrative style of the game makes it so that the player chooses how Lee behaves, whether he becomes a caring leader for the group of survivors he comes into contact with or whether he neglects civil interaction with his fellow survivors. However, when it comes to the interaction with the girl Clementine he will always treat her with compassion, which indicates a powerful critique on the negative image of Black fathers as irresponsible or incompetent.⁵²

In the two mentioned games, race is embedded in an attempt to diversify the cast of characters and to form a critique on the meaning it carries, and one game has done it better than the other according to Russworm and Malkowski. Although it would seem as if the results of their analysis imply that the forming of critique on race in videogames is flawed, this is not exactly the point they are working towards. Russworm notes that “there are tremendous opportunities for rich dialogue exchange between game design imperatives and interdisciplinary scholarship.”⁵³ Similarly, she states that game studies can also better integrate scholarship from African American studies and literary/film & media studies, so that we can offer new ways to make critical discussions on topics like these.⁵⁴ Thus, the implication of their research is that there are productive steps that can be taken in order to take discussions of race and ethnicity in videogames to the next level, both in terms of game design and scholarship, to make these topics accessible and relevant to producers and fans of games.⁵⁵

Therefore, it is worthwhile to analyse more and different kinds of videogames, not only to find critiques on race by the game designers but also to form our own critique of race. Russworm’s chapter specifically focused on games in a dystopian setting (post-apocalyptic) where race is not a main focus but rather a noticeable underlying element of the narrative. Hence, analysing a MMORPG that is built on racial difference should provide many interesting options for discussion.

Besides the notions of race and ethnicity, Orientalism and postcolonialism are also themes that can be seen in videogames. However, the othering that takes place in some of these games may go under the radar for some of its players. Robinson’s analysis on American exceptionalism in military videogames gives the examples of the Other as a ruthless enemy that cannot be negotiated with, and is personified as purely evil (i.e. American depictions of the Middle East), and the Other as one that needs America to lead its security efforts and its willingness to be led by America (Philippine special forces who need to be led by Americans to complete a mission in Medal of Honor).⁵⁶ Rachael Hutchinson illustrates virtual colonialism by comparing representations of Other in the fighting game SoulCalibur to racial attitudes from during the height of the Japanese colonial expansion in the Meiji period.⁵⁷ Although these depictions of the Other are problematic, Souvik Mukherjee argues that the player’s gameplay can be legitimized to experience and question colonialism.⁵⁸ He gives the example of empire building games, in which the player builds a (colonial) empire by building up their nation and colonizing land and other nations. Although the player is complicit in colonialism, they can also reframe the colonial map and thereby create an alternative history by playing according to the rules

⁵² Russworm & Malkowski, *Gaming Representation*, p.120-121.

⁵³ Ibid, p.126.

⁵⁴ Ibid, p.126.

⁵⁵ Ibid, p.126.

⁵⁶ Robinson, “Have You Won The War On Terror,” p.461-462.

⁵⁷ Rachael Hutchinson, “Virtual Colonialism: Japan’s Others in Soulcalibur,” in *Transnational Contexts of Culture, Gender, Class, and Colonialism in Play (Video Games in East Asia)*, edited by Alexis Pulos and S. Austin Lee, (2016): p.155.

⁵⁸ Souvik, Mukherjee, "Playing Subaltern," *Games and Culture* 13, no. 5 (2018): p.517.

of the colonial game.⁵⁹ All in all, popular media and videogames have the quality to embed themselves in the discourses of race and postcolonialism. Engaging with them does not mean conforming to the representations and depictions of that medium, but rather offers the questioning and challenging of said representations through engagement.

In the previously mentioned games, the race or ethnicity of the characters does not specifically influence the gameplay mechanics, meaning the way the game is played, with the exception of certain moments in the narrative. This changes when entering the atmosphere of Role Playing Games (RPG).

Role Playing Games: Tabletop RPG

RPGs exist in various shapes, but this section will be limited to discussing the tabletop RPG and the MMORPG (Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game). The reason for the inclusion of only these two is that there exists a correlation between the two. In the role playing aspect, the MMORPG can be seen as a spiritual successor of sorts for the tabletop RPG, bringing in large part the fantasy of creating your own character and adventuring in an imaginary world to digital platforms. This is not to say that the classic tabletop RPG is no longer popular, as the latest edition of the popular tabletop RPG called Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) has a large following. This tabletop RPG can offer valuable insight on fantasy-based races as represented in a classic nondigital role playing game.

“Roleplaying games matter because they force players to explore the ideas of “self” and “other,” to chart the space between, and to decide how much space there really is.”

- Clements et al. (2015, 3)

Dungeons & Dragons revolves around a group of players and a separate player who is named Dungeon Master. The players each create their own fantasy character and join hands to adventure together in an imaginary world controlled by the Dungeon Master. The game begins with creating a character in which a myriad of options are available. The player first chooses the “race” and the class of their characters. In this context, class refers to the job or the role of the character, such as a Fighter or a Mage for example. The “races” the player can choose from range from Humans, Elves and Dwarves to less the human looking but nonetheless humanoid Dragonborn and Tieflings. Immediately, the notion of race that the game portrays with its options for characters implies a problematic vision of race as something biological. The biggest differences between the previously mentioned “races” that are noticed right away are their physical features. The choice of any race influences the player characters gameplay statistics, meaning that the races in D&D are in this sense limited in their capabilities because of their race in some shape or form.

Additionally, the game’s guidebooks and rules indicate predetermined racial characteristics in the roleplay of certain races. This can go as far as to include bigotry and hatred towards certain races, which is true in the case of Dwarves, as they supposedly have a “hatred for Goblins and Orcs.”⁶⁰ As Clements et al. state, D&D uses the term “race” where “species” would be more appropriate.⁶¹ They go on to express that D&D’s instructional texts are full of racism, and that the game assumes that “race” is a vital descriptor that marks fundamental inborn difference between individuals.⁶² In similar

⁵⁹ Mukherjee, “Playing Subaltern,” p.517.

⁶⁰ “The Dwarf Race for Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) Fifth Edition (5e),” D&D Beyond, accessed May 29, 2020, <https://www.dndbeyond.com/races/dwarf>

⁶¹ Philip Clements, Jeremy Wallach, Esther Clinton, and Marilyn Motz, “Roll to save vs. Prejudice: Race in Dungeons & Dragons” (ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, 2015), p.5.

⁶² Ibid, p.29.

fashion, Garcia notes that racism is built into the D&D system, and that textual descriptions of race hint at bigotry and oppression within the game's history for different races.⁶³ Because roleplaying games explore the ideas of self and other, depictions of race as biological in these games are problematic and contribute to racial thinking if they are not engaged with critically. However, race is also connected to culture. In the section about race and Orientalism, Bhabha noted that cultural difference is something that permeates multicultural society. Because race in fantasy also signifies geographical and cultural difference besides the outdated biological view, the fantasy genre also involves multiculturalism, and it could be said that it tends to depict cultural difference rather than diversity, as the emphasis is clearly put on difference. In practice, this leads to the stereotypical one dimensional racial characteristics of certain races. Hutchinson discusses an interesting quote from Bhabha indicating that judging a stereotype as 'positive or 'negative' misses the point⁶⁴:

"My reading of colonial discourse suggests that the point of intervention should shift from the ready recognition of images as positive or negative, to an understanding of the processes of subjectification made possible (and plausible) through stereotypical discourse." (Bhabha, 1994, 67)⁶⁵

Hutchinson proceeds to argue through Bhabha that stereotypical depictions tell us about the author's assertion but also their anxiety towards the Other, and that "judging a stereotype as positive or negative subverts the more important issue of the 'regime of truth' that the stereotype reveals."⁶⁶ In the case of D&D and other fantasy games like World of Warcraft, this 'regime of truth' is the racial hegemony that is formed by the biological nature of race that is presented. Therefore, it is crucial to look past the stereotypes themselves to realise the underlying themes that invoke them, by critically engaging with the fantasy game.

Role Playing Games: the MMORPG

The necessity to critically engage with race in tabletop roleplaying games carries over to digital roleplaying games. In the MMORPG genre of videogames, the World of Warcraft (WoW) is arguably the most popular and well known around the world.⁶⁷ However, World of Warcraft displays some problematic notions of race similar to D&D. In practice, WoW "does not succeed in breaking free of racial stereotyping,"⁶⁸ as it continues to perpetuate racial stereotypes as based on real life stereotypes. In her analysis of the game, Melissa J. Monson concludes that the World of Warcraft fails at challenging players to question notions of racial essentialism, and instead reproduces a racial hegemony within the game. As it turns out, many of the races of the fictional world of Azeroth are based on racial stereotypes, and like many other works of fantasy such as Tolkien's The Lord of The Rings and Star Trek, it simplifies the races to singular qualities of character. Examples of this are 'stubborn' Dwarves, the 'violent nature' of trolls within WoW. However, Monson also draws comparison to Tolkien's stereotyping of Elves being serious and calm, the forces of "good" being composed of White men that live in the West, and the "evil threat" that lies within the East and South complete with the 'Haradrim' who are direct caricatures of Arabic cultures. In WoW, the Elves and notably the Draenei, Tauren and Trolls are inspired by either East Asian styled architecture and

⁶³ Antero Garcia, "Privilege, Power, and Dungeons & Dragons: How Systems Shape Racial and Gender Identities in Tabletop Role-Playing Games," *Mind, Culture, and Activity* 24, no. 3 (2017): p.240.

⁶⁴ Hutchinson, "Virtual Colonialism," p.156-157.

⁶⁵ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994): p.67.

⁶⁶ Hutchinson, p.173.

⁶⁷ "Top 6 Most Popular MMORPGs Sorted by Population (2020)," Altar of Gaming, accessed July 15, 2020,

<https://altarofgaming.com/all-mmos-sorted-by-population-2018/>

⁶⁸ Melissa J. Monson, "Race-Based Fantasy Realm," p.49.

furniture (Elves), East Asian mystical lore and described as hailing from a different planet (Draenei), Native American culture (Tauren), and colonial African stereotypes complete with Jamaican accent (Trolls).⁶⁹ Every race in these franchises is usually attributed a single characteristic that defines the entirety of that ethnic group, which is the reason why the World of Warcraft enforces racial hegemony according to Monson.

The severity of the problem of race in roleplaying games is accentuated by the success of games like World of Warcraft, and games like it such as Everquest II.⁷⁰ There is something about being able to play out a fantasy of engaging as someone of a different race that would otherwise be seen as taboo in real life, according to Lisa Nakamura.⁷¹ Then, is the model of most MMORPG's that include the choice of race inherently flawed, or is there a possibility of using race and political identity to challenge gamers to question long established notions of racial hegemony?

Monson's study on WoW is what partially inspired this thesis. However, the notion that it 'fails' at challenging players to question notions of racial essentialism is one that can be discussed. Initially, this conclusion seems fair as the game is designed as a racial hegemony, but this point is primarily to be made from a design perspective. As an interactive medium, and as a form of literacy in the words of Bogost, videogames can help us critique the systems we live in. The advantage that this medium has over other media like cinema and literature is the interaction of the player with the game that shapes the experience. In this sense, players are free to challenge the system that the game presents to them.

If one were to watch a movie which takes place in a race based society, with depictions of racism and other forms of injustice, what would make one come to the conclusion that it 'fails' in challenging the notions of racial essentialism? Perhaps an answer would be that the narrative somehow does not engage enough with these aspects and dances around it. Now, a similar argument could be applied to videogames, but what hinders this argument here is that it is the players themselves who engage directly with these aspects of race. As discussed before by Mukherjee, the engagement of the players through gameplay allows them to experience and question the systems they play in. In fact, one could say that they are 'living' it in such a game. The fact that they experience these notions of racism in a race based society in itself brings about notions and ideas that are up to the player to challenge, not only by the game's design but by their own engagement with it.

That being said, stereotypical and one dimensional representations of race can hinder the way in which the game's narrative and design itself engages with these themes. However, similarly to D&D, it is imperative to look towards the source of these stereotypes in the game and reveal the earlier mentioned 'regime of truth' cause by biological notions of race. In an 'ideal' scenario, a race based society in an MMORPG would give an impression of a multicultural society that is similar to ours, by which the engagement of the players would make them question that system in which they play.

Lisa Nakamura offers an interesting insight about the cultural importance of games that include racist discourse. She notes that games "do not need to be entirely free of racist discourse in order to be

⁶⁹ Melissa J. Monson, "Race-Based Fantasy Realm," p.62.

⁷⁰ Poor, "Digital Elves as a Racial Other in Videogames."

⁷¹ Lisa Nakamura, "Head Hunting in Cyberspace (race on the Internet)," *The Women's Review of Books* 18, no. 5 (2001): p.10.

culturally important or socially productive, but if we are to take games seriously as synthetic worlds, we must be willing to take their racial discourse and conflicts seriously as well.”⁷²

Joseph Packer writes about something called “spirit of the game” as it is described by Blizzard, and he writes that it can be approached in three ways: from the designers point of view, the textual approach of scholars, and the players’ experience and narrative. Packer argues that “neither the game designers nor any individual player decides the primary skin colour demographic of a game like WoW. Only the collective decisions of players influenced by the properties of the game results in a “blackless fantasy” where players can choose black skinned avatars but very few do so.”⁷³

I would like to argue that this is not necessarily the case if the game presents the player with few options to create (human) Black characters, leading to essentially creating a white character and only being able to change the skin colour. Additionally, it is imperative to look at the NPC characters of that faction and determine whether script-wise the faction includes players of said ethnicity. These are factors that cannot be overlooked when making a statement saying that only the collective decisions of players influence these results.

Packer concludes that “Cosmos” plays a large part in analysing MMORPGs because the narrative consists of much more than just the textual script of the game, and while players may recognize the racial stereotypes, they experience WoW’s racial groups more directly through Cosmos.⁷⁴ By just looking at the textual approach, Packer argues that it will be no different than analysing a single player game such as Skyrim⁷⁵.

While there is a point to be made about the Cosmos broadening the narrative of racial groups in MMORPGs, it does not invalidate the fact that the real life racial stereotypes the races are based on can influence the players’ experience in a negative way. Whereas players may not associate Troll characters with colonial depictions of African and Caribbean ethnicities, they might still associate them as their own caricatures within the games racial context, like violent natures or a hatred of a certain other race. Alternatively, when taking a look at the forums of the game players can be seen name calling other players according to their race. For example: an Orc calling a Blood Elf a “little belfling”, and vice versa the Blood Elf calling the Orc a “white bearded green Jesus.”⁷⁶ What this example indicates is that even though Cosmos might influence how players experience the textual race based society differently, they still think of each other as radically and racially different. This is a direct result of how the game was made and intended to be, which can be directly attributed to the textual approach Packer described. However, even though fantasy emphasizes racial difference, that need not to be the focus of its themes. Rather, I would argue with Bhabha’s concept of multiculturalism, that race based societies in MMORPG’s offer a reflection on multicultural society that shows that the reason for emphasis on cultural difference is the way culture is constructed, and only exists in relation to – and ‘translated’ from – other cultures and otherness.⁷⁷

⁷² Lisa Nakamura, "Don't Hate the Player, Hate the Game: The Racialization of Labor in World of Warcraft," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 26, no. 2 (2009): p.141.

⁷³ Joseph Packer, "What Makes an Orc? Racial Cosmos and Emergent Narrative in World of Warcraft," *Games and Culture* 9, no. 2 (2014): p.91.

⁷⁴ Ibid, p.95.

⁷⁵ The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim is a single player fantasy roleplaying game from the company Bethesda.

⁷⁶ "What Class Should Be My Main/What class is the most fun to play," World of Warcraft Forums, accessed May 29, 2020, <https://us.forums.blizzard.com/en/wow/t/what-class-should-be-my-main-what-class-is-the-most-fun-to-play/75920/14>

⁷⁷ Rutherford, "Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha," p.210.

It is valid to say inclusion of Cosmos in the analysis of scholars will add to our understanding of race based societies in MMORPGs. Incorporating the experience of the players as individuals and including their own constructed narrative is useful to point out the complex nature of these online societies. Be that as it may, such a vast combination of elements will increase the scale of a given research on the topic immensely, particularly when taking into account individual experiences.

Nathaniel Poor writes about digital Elves as racial Other in videogames, explaining that Elves are a long standing Western cultural trope representing the Other in fantasy settings. As for race in fantasy, he conforms to the earlier mentioned notion that the term 'species' would be more applicable than 'race', as race in the fantasy context is often used to describe differences in appearance, culture and geographical origin compared to race as a social construction in real life.⁷⁸ Poor notes that Elves are Human-like but not exactly, resonating with the Orient and Other as being "like us but not completely." As for the purpose of race in fantasy, he writes that race is central to the narrative of fantasy game spaces and agrees with Leonard (2006) that "one cannot understand fantasy, violence, narrative and virtual realities and the like without examining race, racism and racial stratification."⁷⁹

Considering the literature discussed in the previous chapters, the thesis will now move on to the methodology section to examine to what extent, and how there is opportunity to critically look at the meaning of race in the model of a race based society in MMORPG's.

⁷⁸ Poor, "Digital Elves as a Racial Other in Video Games," p.376-377.

⁷⁹ Ibid, p.379.

3. Methodology

In this thesis, I will be researching how there is opportunity to critically engage with racial discourse in Guild Wars 2 and to some extent its predecessor Guild Wars. The goal of this study is to explore the race based societies introduced in modern MMO's, and to what extent they can offer an opportunity to critically look at the meaning of race and concepts of (post)colonialism, Orientalism and IR that are connected to it.

The reason for the inclusion of the original Guild Wars is because it is important for the lore of the second game. Guild Wars originally didn't feature explicit races in its character creation. Rather, the versions/expansions of the game called Prophecies, Factions and Nightfall respectively featured a general direction of the aesthetic of the created characters, having a close resemblance to ethnicities that were associated in the real-life counterparts of the regions in the game. For example: the first instalment called Prophecies featured a geographical map that featured a European region (Ascalon) and a Pacific themed region (Kryta). The aesthetic culture of the inhabitants of Ascalon suggests strongly that it is based on European medieval culture, with castle walls, plate armours and clothing resembling medieval times. Kryta features palm tree beaches, jungles and swamps, shares a medieval theme, and is the home of druids among other things. Prophecies served as an introduction to the overworld that is to be called Tyria.

When creating a character in Prophecies (and in the other instalments of Guild Wars) the player first gets to choose their profession (aka warrior, ranger, monk, etc.), after which they design their character aesthetically. This is done by selecting one of the predetermined faces, choosing a hairstyle, changing skin colour, and determining the height of their character. There are no skill point bonuses for choosing different professions like in WoW, but each profession has its own set of faces to choose from. The other instalments of the original Guild Wars follow the same model, but the aesthetic world the story takes place in changes, as does the ethnicity of its characters. Factions, the second instalment, features a world and story based on East Asian fantasy tropes with an Asian cast of characters, including the player character. The third instalment called Nightfall features a world and story based on African geography and culture with a cast of African characters including the player character. The final instalment called Eye of the North is more of an expansion rather than a standalone instalment, and players need one of the first three instalments to have access to this campaign. It features a snowy world loosely based on Northern European mythology.

Guild Wars 2 changes its formula compared to its predecessor and introduces five playable races: Asura, Charr, Human, Norn and Sylvari. After selecting a race, the player may choose any of the 9 professions to go with it, and customization of the player character is what follows. Then, the game introduces one of its unique narrative mechanics, namely the player character's personal story. The game asks the player a series of questions, like how the character would react in a certain situation, and which of the select story characters would be their friend/mentor, and so on. The answers chosen by the player influence the way the story of their character unfolds.

Research Method

Guild Wars 2 will be critically analysed on its perception and importance of race in gameplay and lore aspects of the game. Researcher participation will include sessions of play for each of the five races up to lvl30, which is where the individual stories of the races end and the main storyline shared by all

racism is to begin. Additionally, the story past level 30 will be partially explored to form a hypothetical analysis of the narrative shift that takes place.

The analysis will be divided into two large sections, in which the findings will be directly discussed. The first section called "The Player Races in GW2" will cover primarily the five playable races of Guild Wars 2 in the form of a personalized version of Melissa Monson's model of her analysis of the World of Warcraft,⁸⁰ of which certain aspects were deemed useful to apply in the current thesis analysis. Monson's model is good because it places the game world in a framework of a real race based society to explore hegemonic mechanics that reproduce notions of racial essentialism.⁸¹ By doing so, it opens up important discussions of the relevance of race in these games, and what they mean in a fantasy setting. The model of research applies well to Guild Wars 2 because it is very similar to WoW in nature, sharing its most common MMO-features like choosing a race and class for your character. The limitation of her model is the lack of focus on the narrative structure of the game, as it focuses mainly on the characteristics of the races and ethnic resemblance to real life. Therefore, this research also includes the story narratives of the races.

From Monson's model, the geology, biology, gameplay and ethnic resemblance of the game's playable races were well applicable and are thus featured in the first section of the analysis. Additionally, the variation within the Human race section from Monson's analysis is very relevant for GW2, so this research features a focus on the Human ethnicities as presented in the original Guild Wars, which due to lore consistency is also relevant for Guild Wars 2. The first section ends with a part about bigotry, after which the discussion shifts to the non-playable races.

The second section called "Non-playable Races and Indigenous Population of Tyria" deals with representations of Other regarding the depictions of non-playable races. The discussion includes the "enemy image" or hostile image of some of Tyria's original inhabitants against the Human population and some other playable races that took over lands from the indigenous people. Additionally, the discussion explores the view of the so called "lesser" races of Tyria and their function in the story to support the agency of the player races. The section ends with an elaborate investigation of a relation of bigotry between the player races and one of the lesser races, political implications of the story merge later in the game, and an application of Bhabha's concept of multiculturalism on the game world's capital city Lion's Arch.

⁸⁰ Melissa J. Monson, "Race-Based Fantasy Realm," p.48-71.

⁸¹ Ibid, p.48.

4. Analysis Chapter

This chapter is divided into two sections. The first section covers strictly the player races of Guild Wars 2 and the interactions between them. The second section covers an arrangement of non-playable races in the game world. At the end, there is a short section discussing the implications of the narrative after level 30.

Section 1: The Player Races in GW2

There are five playable races in GW2: Human, Charr, Asura, Sylvari and Norn. As mentioned in the literature review, the term “species” is more appropriate when looking at their biological and characteristic differences.

Geographically, every race has their own starting area that consists of almost exclusively inhabitants of the chosen race. Lore wise, each race has their own capital city of sorts. However, there is racial integration present in towns and capital cities alike in the sense of merchants and travellers, and occasionally allied military forces. The Lion Guard for instance, is a military organisation designed to maintain order in the lands where the player races made their home, and consists of members of all five player races.



Figure 2: from left to right, Human, Charr, Norn, Asura and Sylvari.

Biologically, the five player races all share a humanoid appearance with two legs and two arms, and a general anatomy that is similar to a human. The Human and Norn races are the most similar as their main discerning features are their height differences: the Norn are significantly taller overall and thus look more robust to the eye. The Asura are the smallest, seem to be covered in thin fur and have characteristically large eyes, a small nose and large ears. The Charr are a feline race who walk on two legs or on all fours depending on their liking. Their facial structure resembles that of lions, tigers and cheetahs, but with antler-like horns on their heads. The males tend to have longer horns and more robust teeth whereas the females tend to have a more narrow snout, smaller horns and teeth. Lastly, the Sylvari are a humanoid race that originate from plants. Their visual features are much like a Human’s, albeit with larger eyes, pointy ears resembling leaves, and plant like markings over their bodies. Instead of hair, they grow leaves on their heads that resemble hair.

In terms of gameplay, there are no major differences between the five races. There are “racial skills” that are exclusive to each of the races, but they are of minor effect and not likely to be used past the earlier stages of the game. The largest effect of which race the player chooses is that of the narrative: each race has its own starting storyline and starts in their own zone or area. The characters

introduced in the story are mainly of the same race as the player character, and typically deals with a problem or a characteristic of that race. In summary, they can be found in the table below:

Asura	The Asura are inventors and scientists. The player character is a science student who makes an invention that goes wrong, and has to go out to solve the problem.
Norn	The Norn are hunters and brawlers with a touch of the shamanistic. The player character has to claim big hunting trophies, brawl, and help please the guardian spirits.
Sylvari	The Sylvari are dreamers and philosophers. When the player experiences a vision like dream, they must set out and find its meaning as a way to save the world.
Charr	The Charr are masters of war, and the player character must reunite their warband .
Humans	The Humans are political, and the player character must help uncover corruption in their government.

These observations lead us back to the discussion about the meaning of race and ethnicity in the literature review chapter. As Naomi Zack noted, the term race refers to a biological set of physical categories to informatively describe, explain and make predictions about groups of (human) beings and individual members of these groups.⁸² Zack and Garcia pointed out that there are arguments that race is a social construction, and not a biological reality when applied to human beings. Then, how relevant is the term race for the five playable races of GW2? Judging from the biological analysis, all five are humanoid but with fairly distinct features. Each race has a history clearly distinguishable from the others, and the main things they share with each other are their language which is the same, and the continent on which they live. Likely the reason they are referred to as races is because they have cultures, that are comparable to real life human cultures. This is primarily due to the fact that the culture of real life human beings as a species does not have any known counterpart that it could be compared with. In essence, the fantasy genre creates a ‘fantasy’ of nonhuman cultures that compare to it, which in the classic cases of Elves and Orcs can mimic problematic stereotypical imagery of already existing human ethnicities and cultures. However, if by some kind of miracle the underwater civilization of Atlantis came to light, and its inhabitants turned out to be a kind of intelligent fishlike creatures that look somewhat humanoid, would we call them a “race”? Are they similar enough to humans, and do they share a kind of historical familial view of ethnicity with humans? These kinds of contextual aspects have shaped the terms race and ethnicity as we now use them. The way race is constructed in GW2 and other fantasy MMORPG’s like WoW seems to be based on the past notions of race as a set of physical categories that can be used to describe individuals of certain groups. As Clements et al. pointed out for D&D, in GW2 the term “species” would be more appropriate.⁸³

The stereotypical images of the five races add to the aforementioned notions of physical categories of race. As hinted at in the summaries of the personal story, GW2 is not devoid of stereotypical

⁸² Zack and Gracia, "Race and Ethnicity."

⁸³ Clements et al., “Roll to save vs. Prejudice: Race in Dungeons & Dragons,” (ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, 2015), p.5.

imagery of races. Each playable race has some sort of stereotype going for them, that defines not only their culture but sometimes also the way (NPC) characters of that race behave.



Figure 3: The Norn's brawler image.

Norn are stereotypically macho and brawler type of characters, and their culture is defined by their belief in animal spirits that guide them and protect them in battle. In correlation with the natural habitat of the Norn, these animal spirits are all arctic creatures, namely raven, snow leopard, bear, wolf and owl.



Figure 4: The Asura as smart and arrogant.

Asura are stereotypically smart and arrogant, and their culture is built around their scientific success in making travelling portals, mechanical robots for combat, and other inventions. They also often seem to be involved in the most bigotry regarding other races, which they deem as minor races or simply as "weird", i.e. calling Sylvari names such as houseplant.



Figure 5: The Charr who excel in war.

Charr are stereotypically warmongering, and their capital is less of a city and more like a citadel full of war machines.



Figure 6: The sage-like image of Sylvari.

The Sylvari are a more peaceful race of philosophers due to the way they were created by a centaur and a human who planted the immensely large tree that later became the Sylvari capital. They have an affinity with nature that derives both from their plant-like features and their personalities.



Figure 7: Various humans.

The Humans appear to be the least stereotypical playable race in the game. As of writing this section there has not been any major stereotypical element to them.

Returning to Hutchinson and Bhabha's mention of stereotypes and the 'regime of truth,' a similar source for the racial stereotypes can be seen like in WoW. Whereas in WoW and D&D the racial stereotypes partially result from the notion of biological difference (through character stats), GW2's seem to be almost solely based on cultural difference. Examples are the Norn culture drawing inspiration from Northern European Viking cultures, and the Asura technological culture striving for technological superiority resulting in an arrogant view of others.

The game world also shows that there are stereotypes held about one another between the five races. While some of these stereotypes are about the inherent characteristics of people of a certain race, some are about physical appearance, and some go as far as resulting in bigotry. The following quotes are either from NPC characters that were engaged in casual conversation between one another, or embedded in the story dialogue.

"You're taunting them like you're a Norn, with typical lack of foresight" – a Charr guard on their fellow guard explaining their plan to counterattack an ogre base.⁸⁴

⁸⁴ "Drive off the ogres attacking Watchcrag Tower," Guild Wars 2 Wiki, accessed July 15, 2020, https://wiki.guildwars2.com/wiki/Drive_off_the_ogres_attacking_Watchcrag_Tower

“She’s loud mouthed, ruthless and vulgar. Your standard Asuran scientist.” – Tegwen, a Sylvari character from the Sylvari personal story.⁸⁵

As of writing, the Sylvari seem to be victims of the most bigotry from the other playable races. They often get called plantheads or house plants, and are looked down upon due to their frail appearance. This does not seem to be a major theme (or any theme at all) of the storyline, and it does not occur often, but it stood out at the times that it did occur during story missions. It is noteworthy that in particular, an Asuran character in the Sylvari storyline uses these slurs during story dialogue. There was also an interesting dialogue⁸⁶ between a Human father and his child who spectated a gladiatorial match between the Sylvari player character and an opponent.

Child spectator: *“Hey, dad? What are those walking ferns?”*

Rowdy spectator: *“Sssh, son, don’t call them plants. Watch the fighting and let daddy drink his beer.”*

Interestingly, later in the contest the dialogue turns out like this:

Rowdy Spectator: *“All right! Get ‘em, Waine! Shove that plant back into the ground!”*

Child Spectator: *“Dad, I thought you said not to call them plants!”*

Rowdy Spectator: *“Do as I say, not as I do.”*

The implications of this dialogue are unclear, but it could hint at an underlying general disdain for people of Sylvari descent. There are two or more possible reasons that lead to this kind of bigotry. The first is that the Sylvari are the newest race in the world of Tyria, indicating a kind of xenophobia towards them. The second is the reason why the Sylvari came into being. Historically, Humans are at war with Centaurs, one of the indigenous people of Tyria. At one point after a much bloodshed, a Centaur and Human went together in exile because they could not stand the atrocities their races did to each other, and they were unable to convince their friends from either side to stop fighting. Together they planted a tree called the Pale Tree, and being philosophers of peace, they instilled all their wisdom and values into it. Later, after the death of the man and Centaur who planted the Pale Tree, the Sylvari were born from it and lived by the values instilled by their creators. The bigotry from the Humans towards Sylvari could be explained by the fact that in this way, the Sylvari are descended from values of a Centaur with whom Humans are still at war. This leads us to the intriguing reason of Human existence in the world of Tyria, and the Humans’ regard towards the indigenous population, which will be covered in the section 2 of the analysis.

Variation Within the Human Race

The reason why the Humans are the least stereotypical could lie in the fact that they are the most fleshed out race in the history of the game world, especially regarding GW2’s predecessor which is

⁸⁵ “Beneath the Waves,” Guild Wars 2 Wiki, accessed July 15, 2020, https://wiki-en.guildwars2.com/wiki/Beneath_the_Waves

⁸⁶ “The Bad Apple,” Guild Wars 2 Wiki, accessed July 15, 2020, https://wiki.guildwars2.com/wiki/The_Bad_Apple

the original Guild Wars. In the original, the world consisted of at least three continents with vastly different cultures. Ascalon resembled a medieval European kind of aesthetic with knights in armor and with castles, whereas Kryta had the aesthetic of Pacific Islander cultures. Cantha was a region that resembled an East Asian aesthetic culture, and Elona resembled a region based on African geography and cultures. Because GW2 builds on the already established lore and history of the previous game, it would seem that Humans are the most fleshed out seeing as they were the only playable “race” in the original.



Figure 8: NPC characters from left to right, Krytan, Ascalonian, Canthan and Elonian.

The way the original handled ethnicity was quite unique, in the sense that the options to customize the appearance of your character depended on in which story campaign (and thus which region) your character was made. For example, a character made in the Factions campaign (featuring East Asian cultures) would be limited to having facial features resembling people of East Asian descent. The same was true of the African and European regions respectively. If the player owned all the campaigns, one character could travel to all the other regions and play all the content, but a special quest would introduce them (and integrate them) into the other region. Although the player character’s appearance is limited to options available in the chosen campaign, human NPC characters of ethnicities originating from the other regions could still occasionally be found.



Figure 9: character creation of an 'Elonian' character in the Nightfall campaign of GW1.



Figure 10: character creation of a 'Canthan' character in the Factions campaign of GW1. Note the variation in skin colour options allows the player to customize their character's ethnicity to a certain degree outside of the boundaries of face options.

In the 'vanilla' GW2 campaign, all Human player characters start in the same area in the formerly mentioned region with European aesthetic. Character creation tools allow players to make a character of any real life ethnicity that they would prefer, but culturally there is no way to distinguish

your character from other human player characters⁸⁷. This is almost certainly due to the fact that when GW2 released it only featured the European region for Humans.



Figure 11: GW2 character creation allows much more freedom to customize the face, skin and even body proportions, making it possible to portray any ethnicity with a human, or in this case Norn character.

Ethnic Resemblance to Real Life

In terms of ethnic resemblance of real life, there is a case to be made about Human ethnicities in the world of Tyria. However, the other four races do not seem to have any direct resemblance to real life races. As Monson pointed out in her analysis of WoW, certain player races in that game are portrayed with certain vocal accents that resemble real life accents. (i.e. stereotypical Irish and Jamaican accents) This issue is mainly avoided in GW2, because the overwhelming majority of the cast speaks with a British or American English accent. There also do not seem to be any language barriers between the five playable races. The most ethnic resemblance that can be seen besides that of the human race, is the resemblance of the other four races to fantasy races in other videogames and in fantasy literature. For instance, you could compare the Sylvari to Elves, Asura to Gnomes (perhaps even Dwarves), and Charr to Orcs due to all of their stereotypical features, being wisdom (and affinity with nature), ingenuity and ferocity respectively. Fantasy races such as Elves, Dwarves and Orcs often have some kind of real life reference points embedded within their culture or stereotypical behaviour, but the races in GW2 avoid that for the most part by constructing their stereotypes so that they do not seem to have a direct link with real life racial stereotypes. Besides the Humans, the most prominent real life reference is that of the Norn who are likely influenced by

⁸⁷ There is an optional dialogue for human characters that chose the 'dead sister' story background, in which a Captain inquires the player over the descent of the sister and player character. Depending on the option picked which are Krytan, Canthan, Elonian and Ascalonian, the sister character when found will have the appearance of the chosen ethnicity. This does not affect the story in any other way.

Northern European folklore and mythology due to their aesthetic, their spirituality and perhaps even physical features of their appearance (beards, tall build, etc.)

As for bigotry among the five playable races, a similar trend could be seen in both D&D and WoW, where an emphasis is put on the differences of the races. The built in racism towards certain other races in D&D, and textual descriptions that hint at bigotry and oppression within the game's history are present in GW2 as well as can be seen by the Sylvari examples. The bigotry and hatred towards other races deepens further in the following sections regarding the other (non-playable) races of Tyria.

If one were to ask the question why the players would like to engage into such a racial system, there are several explanations to be found in the literature. Nakamura mentioned that there is something appealing about being able to play out a fantasy of engaging as someone of a different race.⁸⁸

Section 2: Non-playable Races and Indigenous Population of Tyria

According to the wiki database of both the original Guild Wars and GW2, Humans were not native to the world of Tyria. It is said that they were introduced to the world by their Gods from "elsewhere". Other races originally inhabited Tyria, such as the Centaurs and the Dredge. The Centaurs live in tribes, and are a spiritual people that combine nature worship with ancestor worship. When the Humans settled in Kryta, they overtook Centaur lands and drove them away. The Centaur tribes formed an alliance and vowed to retake their stolen lands.

The premise of native population being driven away by a coloniser rings bells in the mind, and the culture of the Centaurs is reminiscent of that of Native American populations (i.e. spirituality, living in tents, and their motive for war). The following quotes can be heard from Centaurs of the Modniir tribe:

"Get off our land!" – a Modniir Centaur upon engaging the player in combat.⁸⁹

"My blood honors the earth." – a Modniir Centaur upon dying.⁹⁰

The centaurs are among the most common enemies the player faces during their early travels in the game world. Although the motives of the Centaurs to go to war seem valid from a perspective from outside the game, there is no directly available explanation in-game as to why the Humans (and the other playable races) are at war with the Centaurs. Even the Sylvari, who originated from the desire of peace between Humans and Centaurs, seem to antagonise the Centaurs. This is demonstrated in the Sylvari personal story mission called "A Tangle of Weeds", where the Sylvari player character and an NPC Sylvari trick Harathi centaurs to fight an undead horde in the Humans' stead. They do this by evacuating the Human village that was being targeted, and tricking the Harathi centaurs into thinking that they are tree spirits who paved the way to retake their land. In the end, the evacuated humans take back the village as the Centaurs are weakened by the fight with the undead. As of the time of writing, it is unclear whether a resolution to the conflict with the Centaurs will be formed past the level 30 mark of player progression.

⁸⁸ Lisa Nakamura, "Head Hunting in Cyberspace," p.10.

⁸⁹ "Chat Text Links Part 1," Jump to Victory – Guild Wars 2, accessed July 15, 2020,

<https://sites.google.com/site/jumptovictory/chat-text-links>

⁹⁰ "Modniir," Guild Wars 2 Wiki, accessed July 15, 2020, <https://wiki.guildwars2.com/wiki/Modniir>

Another native population that is hostile to the player are the Dredge. These are mole-like humanoid creatures that mostly live underground. Culturally, they are industrial, and they highly value the freedom of their race. Historically, they were enslaved by the Dwarves. Once free from their masters, they took over the Dwarven mines and became xenophobic, thinking that any race they come into contact with will enslave them. Their expansionist attitude has led them to collide with the Norn as the Dredge tunnels cause avalanches and landslides at the Norn's capital settlement.

The Dredge are ruled by a dictatorship called the "Moletariate", and tend to have Slavic/Russian inspired names like Vladok, Shukov and Vyacheslav. It is said that the Moletariate led the people over the ages into xenophobic lifestyles, slowly becoming corrupt themselves and sending the Dredge commoners into constant heavy labour. The image of the Dredge shares an uncanny resemblance with the Soviet Union due to the names they use, and the wordplay on proletariat.

Although these two hostile factions seem to have a valid reason to go to war with the Humans and other playable races that threaten their societies, they are simply regarded as enemies that the player has to crush in order to progress through the game. This is a common trope in the fantasy RPG genre, as for the player character to progress there need to be some "goons" that need slaying to earn some experience and increase the player's level. However, considering the history of the Centaurs in particular as described by the wiki database, the framing of Centaurs as simply "the enemy" hints at a position of superiority of the player races, and an inferiority of the indigenous Centaur peoples. This can be linked to discussions about colonialism and Orientalism. In this case, the Centaurs fill the role of the marginalized Other, and they are portrayed as barbaric and inferior in the way they have been treated ever since Humans showed up in their lands. Although, the motivation to colonize the colonized seems to resonate more with genocide rather than a way to simply dominate them. Instead of the Human-Centaur war being framed as the Centaurs fighting back against their invaders, it is framed as a war in which Humans defend their existence from the hostile Centaur horde. This is similar to the concept as introduced by Robinson, of the enemy that is framed as beyond reason in American exceptionalism.

The Lesser Races of Tyria

"Some of the lesser races have asked for assistance. I'll show you the dossiers, and you can choose where you'd like to investigate."

– Riel Darkwater of the Order of Whispers

There are more examples of Other that can be found in the game. Most notably within the notion of the "lesser" races of Tyria, as a story NPC explains to the player. These are all non-playable races, and the interactions between them and the playable races display some interesting representations of racial hegemony, colonialism and Orientalism alike. They are also referred to as "tribal cultures of Tyria", which are the Grawl, Ogre, Skritt, Quaggan and Hylek. Some of these are often hostile to the player, whereas others are primarily non-hostile. Outposts of these cultures can be found across the continent.

The Grawl are hunter gatherers with a simian physiology, who live in tribes and are highly religious. They appear to be hostile to the player most of the time.

Ogres are one of the oldest races, and their tribal lifestyle is built around their occupation of being beast masters. Contrary to most of the lesser races, they are not religious and only care about here and now.

The Skritt are intelligent rat-like creatures who originate from deep beneath the surface of Tyria, similarly to the playable Asura. Their group intelligence and incredibly fast reproductive rate makes them a target of the Asura, who view them as a threat to all intelligent races.⁹¹ They are opportunistic hedonists, and they take what they can when they can, with little tactics and planning.

Quaggans are a peaceful race of small whale-like creatures who are known for actively avoiding conflict. They are unfailingly polite, and are intelligent and wise, although their manner of speech leads to assume they are childlike.

The Hylek are a tribal species of froglike humanoids that worship the sun as their deity. Their names and toponymy are likely Nahuatl based (Aztec, Mexico), as indicated by names such as Quecuan, Tlatoa, Pochtecatl and so on.⁹²

After the personal story of the chosen player race is completed until past level 30, the player is asked to support one of these lesser races by the Order they have chosen to join. In this context, “support” means to earn their trust by helping them fix their problems, in order to later recruit them for the player’s cause. In almost all of the cases it boils down to defending them from the threat of the Elder Dragons. As apparently each playable race has different relations with the “minor races” of Tyria, the options you get for supporting them in the story are limited according to your chosen race. For example, you can choose to support the Skritt if your character is Charr, Human, or Sylvari, but not if you play as Asura or Norn. However, these restrictions can be overcome when playing with a friend who does have access to the minor race of interest. Once a choice is made, the character’s race does not affect the story’s details.⁹³ When this story section is completed, the aided NPC will show up to help the player later when needed. It is worth observing here that “supporting” the race of choice also comes from a partially ethnographic view, where the objective is also to ‘learn’ about that race and its practices.

In aiding the chosen lesser race, all five scenarios are similar in that they revolve around convincing the tribe that they are in danger by the threat of the Elder Dragons. The tribe in question either believes they can handle the threat alone, are unaware of the threat, or their existing problems turn out to be due to the threat. In the case of the Hylek, the local tribe decided to send a chosen “champion of the Sun” to deal with the threat, which backfired as they later all appeared to have perished and instead enlisted in the undead horde of the Dragons. The theme of this scenario is the blind faith of the leading shamans, and the player’s position to enlighten them as they cannot help themselves. It suggests these races are in fact inferior as the term lesser races implies, and puts the player and the player race in a position of dominance over them. This shows an example of (American) exceptionalism similar to Robinsons’ analysis of Medal of Honor. With the Hylek’s tournament to become “champion of the Sun”, the player’s Hylek competitor is portrayed as brave and proud, yet in the end incompetent, signifying the need of the player as their saviour.

Techutli: *I worked hard for a chance to compete in the tournament. You do not worship the Sun God, you are no hylek. You should not be here.*

⁹¹ “Skritt,” Guild Wars 2 Wiki, accessed May 29, 2020, <https://wiki.guildwars2.com/wiki/Skritt>

⁹² “Hylek,” Guild Wars 2 Wiki, accessed May 29, 2020, <https://wiki.guildwars2.com/wiki/Hylek>

⁹³ “Racial Sympathy,” Guild Wars 2 Wiki, accessed May 29, 2020, https://wiki.guildwars2.com/wiki/Racial_sympathy

Also Techutli after the second wave of enemies in the challenge:

Techutli: *Stop it, stop! I give up.*⁹⁴

There is a fundamentally ethnographic mentality with engaging with the tribes of the lesser races, as the goal is to earn their trust by being initiated in their ways of living. Like with the Hylek, this initiation of your 'foreign' character results in a tribe tradition being exposed as flawed. For example, the Champion of the Sun tradition of the Hylek is a competitive ceremonial event to decide who is the Chosen of the Sun to set out into the wilderness and combat the evil threat of undead. As a result of what happens next, the tribe abolishes the tradition of sending a Champion into battle alone and instead prepares defences. This is an example of the hybridization of the Hylek society, by the insertion of Western/player race modernity onto the 'colonized' tribe.⁹⁵

Similarly to the case of the Centaurs, this scenario fits into the framework of 'us' and the 'Other', in which the inferiority of the Other forms a motivation for the colonizer to "colonize" them. The similar ending of all five possible scenarios of this story segment gives meaning to the use of the term "colonize" in this context: at the end of the segment the tribe in question has lost their home in the battle, is now convinced of the threat and agrees to join the player's fight against the Elder Dragons. While their homes are not colonized in the literal sense, the narrative frames the tribes as incompetent and suggests that they would have ceased to exist if it were not for the player to have aided them. This solidifies the superiority of the player and the player race over the lesser race.

Returning to a previous segment on bigotry and racism within the racial system of GW2, a notable case has popped up in the earlier description of the Skritt. They are seen as a threat by the intelligent Asura, one of the reasons being that the Skritt are very intelligent as a group. Unfortunately, it is canonically not possible to choose to aid the Skritt while playing as an Asura character, which would likely have yielded an interested scenario. Instead, the wiki of GW2 offers some interesting background information on the apparently longstanding conflict between these two groups. The page about the Asura race emphasizes that Asura value intelligence and intellectual superiority over all other attributes, but there is no mention of their view of Skritt.⁹⁶ Conversely, the page about Skritt describes several things the Asura seemingly despise them for. Firstly, the fact that due to their group intelligence, a full-fledged colony can rival even the Asura for cunning. And secondly, that them being a naturally curious species, a large enough group can eventually discover the nature and operation of any item they obtain- "much to the chagrin of inventor races such as the Asura."⁹⁷ Although there is no clear indication of the reason for the Asura's hate of Skritt, it would seem that their stereotypical arrogance over intelligent matters might have a hand in this. Additionally, it is worth noting that historically both groups lived underground in the Depths of Tyria where they were locked in a genocidal war with each other. In this section of the wiki page, it is also stated that the Asura see it more as an extermination than a war,⁹⁸ and that since the Skritt re-emerged, the Asura have attempted to enlist the help of other (playable) races to exterminate their foe once and for all.

"These alchemagical inventors may be short in stature, but they're intellectual giants. Among the Asura, it's not the strong who survive, but the clever. Other races believe they should rule by the

⁹⁴ "Chosen of the Sun," Guild Wars 2 Wiki, accessed July 15, 2020, https://wiki.guildwars2.com/wiki/Chosen_of_the_Sun

⁹⁵ Goh, "States of Ethnography," p.110.

⁹⁶ "Asura," Guild Wars 2 Wiki, accessed May 29, 2020, <https://wiki.guildwars2.com/wiki/Asura>

⁹⁷ Guild Wars 2 Wiki, "Skritt."

⁹⁸ Ibid.

virtue of their power and strength, but they're deluding themselves. In due time, all will serve the Asura." – In-game description

While characters of Asuran descent clearly serve a comic relief purpose in the personal stories of GW2 due to their witty dialogue, a closer examination indicates that their race is written with a desire of superiority over races they deem less intelligent. Their bigotry towards Skritt is reminiscent of the textual bigotry and historical oppression in the lore of D&D as described by Garcia.

Although the earlier discussed explanation of why the player would want to engage with such a racial system is speculation, Russworm's analysis of *The Last of Us* offers an interesting take. Russworm discussed how in that game, Blackness labours to shore up White character agency. In GW2, the lesser races are one way in which the agency of the player races is solidified, which in turn paints them as superior and enforcing a racial hegemony, not among themselves but over the lesser races.

Implications of the Merged Storyline Past Level 30

After the level 30 personal story, the narrative becomes more streamlined towards one direction among the five stories. The player enters the grand narrative of fighting the dragons and has to decide which of the three Orders to join. The Order of the Vigil likes to tackle problems head on, the Order of Whispers works from the shadows, and the Order of the Priory likes the scientific approach. Whichever the player chooses mildly influences how the story missions play out and which characters the player gets to interact with, but the story remains largely the same regardless of the Order chosen.

The level 40 mission start with a gathering of five "representatives" of each playable race to discuss the threat of the dragons. At first, they do not seem to enjoy each other's company and recall the last time they worked together did not go well. There also seems to be a grudge going on between the Human representative and the Charr representative, regarding their history of war with each other. Overall, they do not seem to like to work with each other again and the meeting is deemed as a failure.

As of playing the level 40 missions, it seems the narrative implies the five races will work cooperatively to defeat the dragons, overcoming their differences. To an extent, it is possible to compare the gathering of the five representatives to the Fellowship of the Ring in Tolkien's saga: they have different values and do not agree about everything, but the situation has forced them to cooperate against a common enemy. This implies something political, as race based societies in fantasy media usually focus on the differences between races and factions. Examples of this are Orcs against Humans in the *Lord of the Rings*, and the Horde races versus the Alliance races in *WoW*. As Clements wrote, *Role Playing Games* force players to explore the ideas of self and other, to chart the space between them, and to decide how much space there really is. Branching the story arcs of the five playable races together over the course of the narrative signals the message that perhaps they are not so different after all. One major indication of this message is in the existence of the city of Lion's Arch, which is the metropolitan capital city of the game world in which all five playable races live together in harmony.

If we revisit Bhabha's concepts of multiculturalism⁹⁹, Lion's Arch could be interpreted as the myth of liberal society where different cultures coexist through the rights of civility, but ultimately could not have been conceived without the imperialist practices of antagonizing and marginalizing native

⁹⁹ Rutherford, "Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha," p.208-219.

populations and practicing colonialism. It is a 'third space' of hybridity that replaces the history that founded it and sets up new structures of authority and politics.¹⁰⁰

However, with the five playable races also show cultural difference rather than diversity. Lion's Arch may suggest that they can easily coexist, but the progress towards getting the collaborative force together to defeat the threat shows the difficulty they have with agreeing with each other's values.

¹⁰⁰ Rutherford, "Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha," p.211.

5. Conclusions

To what extent and how is there opportunity to critically look at the meaning of race in the model of a race based society in MMORPG's?

In conclusion, GW2's narrative offers a lot of different aspects regarding race, culture, postcolonialism and International Relations. As an RPG that fits into the classical fantasy genre, the term race plays a key role in its narrative as a means to engage with racial discourse in a society that resembles our own. Although gameplay-wise the differences of race are practically meaningless, the histories and cultures that they are embedded in shape a narrative of racial discourse and colonialism for the player to engage with. These narratives present us plenty of problematic issues, such as the racial hegemony of the playable races over lesser races, bigotry, Western exceptionalism, Orientalism, and so forth.

So, to what extent can we critically look at the meaning of race in GW2's race based society? Race here is framed as biologically, geographically and culturally different, whereas in real life it is a social construct.¹⁰¹ Such a biological definition of race is outdated, but cultural difference is a phenomenon that is very much present in current day melting pot societies. If we were to ignore cultural difference, we would fail to understand how cultural systems function and are created.¹⁰² Although the game does not do a great job in presenting the five playable races without their mostly one dimensional stereotypes, it does offer a meaningful portrayal of a multicultural society with the five of them coexisting in the metropolitan capital city of Lion's Arch. Underlying themes of (post)colonial discourse can also be found, both in the Orientalist representation of the 'lesser' races and the lore and history of the game. It shows how multiculturalism and a colonial history have come to create a 'third space', that is reminiscent of our own society in some ways. Popular media, and particularly fantasy, can offer an ambiguous reflection of the real world society, in which concepts like race can be explored safely.¹⁰³ Additionally, themes of International Relations and World Politics are also present. The player races as military saviour of the 'lesser' races signifies exceptionalism that is not unlike the American exceptionalism in military videogames found by Robinson.¹⁰⁴ So, to answer the question, through engagement with racial discourse and the meaning of cultural difference the game gives to race, the game allows as to uncover underlying themes of postcolonialism, Orientalism an IR that relate to it.

But does featuring racial hegemony and colonialist themes make Guild Wars 2 a 'bad game' in its portrayal of race? The answer is, no, not really. In the words of Nakamura, a game does not need to be free of racist discourse to be culturally significant or socially important.¹⁰⁵ Videogames as a medium offer an inherent advantage over other media in their ability for the player to experience the game interactively rather than passively. There is merit in analysing them, as they are a powerful medium of political power regarding the representation of identity¹⁰⁶, race and ethnicity¹⁰⁷, and International Relations and World Politics.¹⁰⁸ In Guild Wars 2 all of these can be found and engaged

¹⁰¹ Poor, "Digital Elves as a Racial Other in Video Games," p.376.

¹⁰² Rhutherford, "Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha," p.209.

¹⁰³ Poor, p.391.

¹⁰⁴ Robinson, "Have You Won the War on Terror?"

¹⁰⁵ Nakamura, "Don't Hate the Player, Hate the Game," p.141.

¹⁰⁶ Bogost, *Persuasive Games*.

¹⁰⁷ Russworm & Malkowski, *Gaming Representation*.

¹⁰⁸ Robinson.

with. I would like to argue that the engagement with these themes in the game allows for the challenging of its system and the concepts it introduces. Thereby, I mean to say that we should not only look at a game's design to find critiques on themes such as race, but also to form our own critiques of what the game presents to us. Particularly in fantasy games, race plays a significant role in the narrative, and they enable us to engage with racial discourse in ways that can open up new discussions. Therefore, stating that a game 'fails' at challenging players to question notions of racial essentialism is like looking at the text from only one perspective, in this case the design of the game.

The limitation of this thesis is that GW2 unfortunately offers the players a rather passive position in directly engaging with the critical discourse that it contains, meaning that they for instance cannot "reframe the colonial map" as in empire building games.¹⁰⁹ For future research, the circle could be completed by including the universe of the actual players of the game and record their perspectives and opinions, and the way in which they engage with the source material. This way, one can not only measure any amount of critical thinking while playing these games, but also analyse the 'culture' that comes into being within these digital societies. Such a digital culture will likely prove to come with its own unique discourse extended from what was already present, and show how digital race is perceived by those who are participating in it.

As a researcher, it was quite a daunting task to attempt to play through the various stories of each playable race up to lvl30, and although there has been a lot of playing involved, the wiki pages could fortunately fill in what I had not been able to directly experience by playing as it proved to be very time consuming to level up all characters. In the end, all characters besides my Charr and Asura characters had been levelled to 30 or beyond. Nevertheless, performing this analysis of GW2 has introduced many themes in the game that I might not have noticed on a regular playthrough, and I hope that others may find them as engaging as I did.

¹⁰⁹ Mukherjee, "Playing Subaltern," p.517.

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Figure 9: Guild Wars, personal screenshot.

Figure 10: Guild Wars, personal screenshot.

Figure 11: Behance. "Guild Wars 2 UI: Character Creation." Accessed July 15, 2020.
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