

University of Central Florida

**STARS**

---

Electronic Theses and Dissertations, 2020-

---

2023

## Digital Disconnect: The Relationship Between In-game and Real-world Issues in World of Warcraft

Taylor Devereaux

*University of Central Florida*



Part of the [Gender and Sexuality Commons](#)

Find similar works at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/etd2020>

University of Central Florida Libraries <http://library.ucf.edu>

This Doctoral Dissertation (Open Access) is brought to you for free and open access by STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations, 2020- by an authorized administrator of STARS. For more information, please contact [STARS@ucf.edu](mailto:STARS@ucf.edu).

---

### STARS Citation

Devereaux, Taylor, "Digital Disconnect: The Relationship Between In-game and Real-world Issues in World of Warcraft" (2023). *Electronic Theses and Dissertations, 2020-*. 1843.

<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/etd2020/1843>

DIGITAL DISCONNECT:  
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN IN-GAME AND REAL-WORLD ISSUES IN *WORLD OF  
WARCRAFT*

by

TAYLOR DEVEREAUX  
B.A. FLORIDA ATLANTIC UNIVERSITY, 2017  
M.A. FLORIDA ATLANTIC UNIVERSITY, 2019

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
in the Department of Sociology  
in the College of Sciences  
at the University of Central Florida  
Orlando, Florida

Summer Term  
2023

Major Professor: Scott Carter

## ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores how players of the Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG), *World of Warcraft*, responded to in-game instances of sexism and racism before and after the *Activision Blizzard* lawsuit was made public. It also covers the responses of players to the lawsuit itself to see if player responses changed once the lawsuit was made public. These results illustrate if and how player responses may change regarding in-game social issues based on the real-world environment that the game is being created within. To establish what players are seeing in the game, I first analyzed the narratives of four major *World of Warcraft* characters to identify if sexist and racist story lines were utilized within the narrative. I then analyzed forum posts from players speaking on in-game sexism and racism before the lawsuit, player responses to the real world allegations against *Activision Blizzard* during the lawsuit, and the player discussions of in-game sexism and racism after the lawsuit. I then categorized the forum post responses into Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's (2018) racial frames. I found that players can recognize sexism and racism within the real world, but disconnect the real world from the virtual world when speaking on sexism and racism within the game. Therefore, players tend to deny in-game sexism and racism exist. Although there was slightly more recognition of sexism and racism in-game after the lawsuit, many responses remained the same as before the lawsuit. This study brings to light the disconnect between the real-world and the game world that players utilize to continue playing the games they enjoy while absolving themselves of responsibility for supporting the game and the company.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would first like to thank Dr. Scott Carter, my dissertation chair, for continuously supporting me and helping me push forward in my endeavors to bring sociology to gaming research. I would also like to thank Dr. Andrew Baird, my mentor, for encouraging me to pursue a PhD and bring my research to a wider audience. Finally, I would also like to thank Dr. Michael Armato and Dr. Johnathan Cox, who supported me when I decided to pursue gaming research and were always open to working with me on some of the more specific areas of this dissertation that I needed clarification on.

I would also like to thank my mother, who has always supported my academic goals, and although she does not know much about gaming, read everything I ever sent her and was proud of me for making headway in this area. I then want to thank my best friend, Billy, for being such a wonderful emotional support system for me through these years. He has been by my side since I started this journey and always made time to check in with me and read my work. Lastly, I would like to thank my husband, Mike, for supporting me and giving me the motivation that I needed to finish this dissertation. He was always open to reading my dissertation to ensure that I not only made my work understandable for academics, but also for everyday gamers, for whom this research is meant to reach.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION .....	1
The Activision Blizzard Lawsuit .....	5
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW .....	9
Fantasy and Race .....	9
<i>World of Warcraft</i> Literature .....	12
Theoretical Framework.....	15
Social Narratives.....	21
Media and Social Narratives.....	25
Conclusion .....	27
CHAPTER 3: DATA AND METHODS .....	29
Analytical Strategy.....	29
Data Set #1 and Methods: Narrative Analysis.....	30
Data Set #2 and Methods: Forum Analysis .....	34
CHAPTER 4: DEPICTIONS IN <i>WORLD OF WARCRAFT</i> .....	37
Depictions of Gender .....	39
Sylvanas Windrunner: The Female Psychopath .....	41
Tyrande Whisperwind: The (In)dependent Strong Female Character .....	45
Gender Conclusion.....	47

Depictions of Race .....	49
Garrosh Hellscream: The Orc Scapegoat.....	52
Baine Bloodhoof: The Peace-Treaty Indian .....	56
Race Conclusion .....	60
Depictions in <i>World of Warcraft</i> Conclusion .....	61
CHAPTER 5: RESPONSES TO IN-GAME ISSUES BEFORE THE LAWSUIT .....	64
Minimalization .....	69
Dismissal.....	69
Mockery .....	71
Abstract Liberalism.....	72
Misrepresentation.....	72
Weaponized Escapism .....	74
Separation .....	75
Redirection .....	76
Conclusion .....	77
CHAPTER 6: RESPONSES TO THE LAWSUIT .....	80
Disgust .....	81
Minimalization.....	82
Unsurprised.....	84

Highlighting Performative Diversity .....	85
Condemning Company Defenders .....	86
Leaving the Game .....	87
Conclusion .....	89
CHAPTER 7: RESPONSES TO IN-GAME ISSUES AFTER THE LAWSUIT .....	92
Minimalization .....	95
Dismissal and Mockery .....	95
Weaponized Escapism .....	96
Redirection and Separation .....	97
Suspicion .....	98
Agreement .....	100
Conclusion .....	101
CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION .....	104
APPENDIX IRB APPROVAL .....	111
LIST OF REFERENCES .....	113

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

*Activision Blizzard* has been one of the leading companies in the gaming industry over the past decade. The company was heralded as one of the most diverse and inclusive companies to work for within the industry, which led many people to support the games that they make (*Blizzard Entertainment*, Retrieved Nov. 23, 2021). Through a “Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion” statement, the company stated that they believe that diversity fuels innovation and that they are committed to creating an environment where differences are embraced (*Blizzard Entertainment*, Retrieved Nov. 23, 2021). This statement included that they were named one of the “Best Places to Work for LGBTQ Equality” by the Human Rights Campaign Foundation’s Corporate Equality Index in both 2019 and 2020 and that they invest in programs to provide opportunities to underserved students, like Girls Who Code (*Blizzard Entertainment*, Retrieved Nov. 23, 2021). Despite this progressive reputation and a community that rallied behind the company based on this reputation, on July 20<sup>th</sup>, 2021, *Activision Blizzard* was hit with a lawsuit from the California Department of Fair Employment and Housing that stated the company “fosters a ‘frat boy’ culture in which female employees are subjected to constant sexual harassment, unequal pay, and retaliation” (Allsup, 2021).

This previous reputation is why when *Activision Blizzard* was hit with a major lawsuit that accused them of serious sexist and racist discrimination within the workplace, many fans of the company were hurt and blindsided (Konstantinovic, 2021). While this contradiction is now apparent, *Activision Blizzard* has relied on sexist and racist depictions since *World of Warcraft* was created over a decade ago, yet few people seemed to notice or hold the company accountable for it. Previous research has found that players of *World of Warcraft* are able to



ignore racism in the game for the most part because it is a fantasy war game, even though they use the stereotypical characteristics of playable races in the game to craft their own narratives (Ritter, 2010; Nash, 2016; Cruise, 2018; Pecker, 2013). Therefore, it is surprising that the lawsuit surprised the fans of the game since these depictions have been present in the game and are actively being used by players to craft their own character narratives.

This idea that players refuse to acknowledge sexist and racist depictions in the game, even though they are actively utilizing them, is what I am calling the digital disconnect. The digital disconnect is when players disconnect the game worlds that they insert themselves into from the real world altogether, therefore claiming that issues like sexism and racism cannot exist in the game world, or if they do exist that they do not matter, because it is only a game and not the real world. I argue that the digital disconnect occurs when players refuse to acknowledge sexist and racist stories in a game, despite fully understanding that these issues exist in the real world and are major issues.

Therefore, this study investigates how players understand issues of gender and race in the game world and whether players recognize issues of gender and race in the real world as being reflected in the game. More specifically, this study looks at how players understand these instances of sexism and racism in the game before the lawsuit and if the lawsuit opened players eyes to the sexist and racist story lines in the game. By utilizing theories of race and the rationalization of oppression, I intend to show that issues of race and gender are interconnected. I also intend to show that people use discursive practices of racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2018) to negotiate issues of gender and race within *World of Warcraft* and that these discursive practices are used to create the digital disconnect between the real world and the game world. This means

that players will use discursive practices to deny sexism and racism in the game, despite it being obvious in the narrative and players seeing the company engage in sexist and racist practices in the real world.

This study seeks to understand how *Activision Blizzard* used sexist and racist story lines within the narrative of *World of Warcraft*. Furthermore, this study seeks to understand how a real world lawsuit exposing these practices within the company impact gamer reflections on these story lines in the narrative of the game. First, I illustrate how *World of Warcraft* uses sexist and racist story lines within the narratives of characters who are depicted as gender and racial minorities. Previous studies of media have found that sexist and racist story lines are commonly used within fantasy narratives (Kim, 2004; Galloway, 2007; Cristea, 2015; Tolmie, 2006; Kuk, 2019). Scholars specifically studying *World of Warcraft* have also found that stereotypical depictions of real-world races are used to create the playable races within the game (Ritter, 2010; Monson, 2012; Spiecker, 2011; Johnson, 2014; Higgin, 2009; Cruise, 2018). This study will establish and extend the current literature by showing that story lines are infused with the narrative and sexist and racist frames.

Second, I analyze how players responded when issues of in-game sexism and racism were brought up in the forums before the lawsuit came to light. Scholars have found that players of *World of Warcraft* rarely recognize sexism or racism within the game because the game takes place during a fantasy war (Ritter, 2010; Nash, 2016; Cruise, 2018). Some scholars have found that players can only recognize when specific cultures are being appropriated and stereotyped within the game, but cannot recognize it for other cultures (Nash, 2016; Cruise, 2018). Therefore, this section will illustrate if players recognize the use of sexist and racist story lines

within the game, and if they do, how they respond to the idea that these story lines may be harmful.

Third, I establish how players reacted to the ongoing lawsuit against *Activision Blizzard*. In the real world, there have been many documented instances of people denying that sexism and racism are a major issue for minority groups (Bonilla-Silva, 2018; Lorber, 1994). Companies also regularly use their influence to assert that they are progressive and diverse, even though their organizational practices may differ from this (Ray, 2019; Gallagher, 2020; Williams, 2020). This section will show how players responded to the lawsuit itself and the real-world allegations of sexism and racism. This will be used to show if the ignorance of sexism and racism within the game also applies to the company in the real world after the allegations from the lawsuit.

Finally, I show the similarities and differences in how players of *World of Warcraft* responded to in-game gender and race issues after the lawsuit. Due to the allegations within the lawsuit, players may be forced to finally reflect on the content of the game itself. Combined with the previous literature and analyzed using Bonilla-Silva's (2018) discursive practices, this section will illustrate what the digital disconnect looks like. It will show how players can feel one way about the real-world instances of sexism and racism at *Activision Blizzard*, while feeling differently about instances of sexism and racism in *World of Warcraft*.

*Activision Blizzard*, but more specifically *Blizzard Entertainment*, have long held the reputation of being one of the most diverse and inclusive gaming companies in the industry (*Blizzard Entertainment*, Retrieved Nov. 23, 2021). However, due to recent events, that image is being challenged. Since the publication of the lawsuit, more attention has been brought to whether or not *Activision Blizzard* is actively reproducing gender and racial stereotypes both

within their company and within the games they make. This brings forth the final purpose of this study, which is to see how players reflect on character stories after problems arise in the real world. Therefore, it is important to look at the background of *Activision Blizzard* as a company and the lawsuit that they currently face.

### Background

For the lawsuit, the California Department of Fair Employment and Housing conducted a two-year investigation into allegations of misconduct at the company. The lawsuit alleges that the workforce at *Activision Blizzard* is only about 20% women, and its top leadership is exclusively male and white (California Department of Fair Employment and Housing, 2021). They found that women at all levels of the company regularly are paid less in salary, incentive pay, and total compensation in comparison to their male peers, as well as women being promoted slower and terminated quicker than men at the company (California Department of Fair Employment and Housing, 2021). Besides the unequal pay issues, women are also subjected to a dangerous work environment at the company. The lawsuit alleges that women are subjected to “cube crawls,” in which “male employees drink copious amounts of alcohol as they “crawl” their way through various cubicles in the offices and often engage in inappropriate behavior towards female employees” (California Department of Fair Employment and Housing, 2021). Male employees regularly delegate their responsibilities to female employees, engage in talk about their sexual encounters, talk about female bodies, and joke about rape in the workplace (California Department of Fair Employment and Housing, 2021).

The lawsuit also alleges that even though numerous internal complaints were filed against the offenders to Human Resources and leadership personnel, the company did not take effective

measures to remedy the situations, instead actively discouraging women from complaining and threatening retaliation against women who did (California Department of Fair Employment and Housing, 2021). Although the lawsuit goes into more detail with specific examples of each of these issues, the overall impact of the lawsuit coming to light was that fans of *Activision Blizzard* were shocked and upset by the fact that the supposedly “diverse and inclusive” company could have such heinous acts of discrimination tied to their name.

Since the original allegations came out, *Activision Blizzard* has only caused more distrust to fester among their fans. Multiple high-profile developers and leaders in the company have left the company, including former *Blizzard* President J. Allen Brack, who, although being named in the original allegations, claimed to know nothing about the harassment that was happening at the company (Greenbaum, 2022). Allegations were also made against *Activision Blizzard*'s CEO, Bobby Kotick, in which it is claimed that Kotick threatened to have an assistant killed and that he knew about the sexual harassment and did nothing about it (Grind, Fritz, and Needleman, 2021). These allegations led to another lawsuit filed by investors alleging that Kotick was “issuing materially false and misleading statements during a class action period” (Fahey, 2021). It has also since been alleged that during BlizzCon's, which is the large expo event that *Blizzard* holds for fans every year, employees would regularly refer to a specific employee's room as “the Cosby Suite,” due to the regular sexual harassment that female employees would experience when visiting the room for company get-togethers at the end of the expo (Greenbaum, 2022). As more information came out, it seemed undeniable that people were being mistreated at *Activision Blizzard*, which led to increased distrust in the company (Konstantinovic, 2021).

Unfortunately, the news did not stop there for *Activision Blizzard*, and in August of 2021, the California Department of Fair Employment and Housing filed a complaint that claimed *Activision Blizzard* was attempting to derail the investigations by forcing employees to speak with the company before contacting the California Department of Fair Employment and Housing and shredding documents related to the investigations and complaints (Farokhmanesh and Totilo, 2021). Shortly after, the Securities and Exchange Commission began an investigation into the company practices to determine if they lied to investors by attempting to hide and destroy evidence (Grind and Needleman, 2021). Since these developments, many high-profile leadership members and developers have left the company, including the newly appointed co-head of *Blizzard*, Jen O'neal, after she was denied equal pay with her co-head Mike Ybarra despite multiple requests from both herself and Ybarra during her three-month tenure in the position (Chalk, 2021).

The long list of allegations illustrated to fans that the practices of the company did not necessarily align with the progressive and diverse or inclusive workplace promoted on their website. Consequently, the lawsuit has resulted in many insiders and gamers to distrust the company's ability to change. Despite concerns about the sexist and racist internal conditions of the company (Konstantinovic, 2021), it is unclear if these views were integrated into *World of Warcraft* by the developers.

To investigate this, this paper uses Bishop's (2001) concept of the rationalization of oppression and Ray's (2019) organizational theory to establish that *Activision Blizzard* could be using sexist and racist organizational practices. This paper will also use Bonilla-Silva's (2018) theory of colorblind racism, as well as his concept of social narratives, to assess if sexist and

racist frames and stories can be found within the narrative and uncover how players reacted to the lawsuit itself and how players reacted to instances of sexism and racism in *World of Warcraft* before and after the lawsuit came to light. Analyzing the responses after the lawsuit is particularly important because it brings to light the real world issues of sexism and racism the company is accused of, therefore it could change how players see sexism and racism within the game. Lastly, this study will utilize research that speaks on media (Bonilla-Silva, 2018; Lorber, 1994; Williams, 2020), fantasy (Kim, 2004; Galloway, 2007; Cristea, 2015; Tolmie, 2006; Kuk, 2019), and *World of Warcraft* (Ritter, 2010; Monson, 2012; Spiecker, 2011; Johnson, 2014; Higgin, 2009; Cruise, 2018), to situate this study into the conversation of how sexist and racist story lines continue to be perpetuated by gaming companies and players themselves.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

For this study, there are numerous literatures that will be used to establish context and inform the analysis. First, I will cover the literature of gender and race within the fantasy genre since *World of Warcraft* is within a fantasy-based setting. Next, I will go into the current research on *World of Warcraft*, specifically in relation to gender and race, to illustrate the current conversation about race and gender issues within the game. Then, I will speak on the theoretical framework that I will be using within in this study to discuss and analyze the narrative of the game and the responses from players to in-game sexism and racism. After this, I will speak on social narratives and how they are used to uphold sexism and racism in a real-world setting. Finally, I will go over the literature on media and social narratives to show how these social narratives are applied within the media. This literature review will bring together the multiple sections of scholarly, and some non-scholarly, work to connect the real-world theories of gender and race to media, like *World of Warcraft*, so that within the analysis I can illustrate the connections between the two.

### Fantasy and Race

One common question posed by game studies scholars is about the application of these real-world social narratives into the world of fantasy, like in *World of Warcraft* or *Lord of the Rings*. Fantasy, as a genre, is broadly described as fiction that concentrates on imaginary elements, like magic, the supernatural, alternate worlds, etc. (Literary Terms). It has been found that epic fantasy realms often draw on mediaeval Europe for settings, language, and sociopolitical infrastructure (Mendleshon, 2009). Fantasy media uses the intertwining of recognizable cultural histories, epistemologies, and geographies to encourage consumers to



suspend their disbelief and accept the fantasy elements of the stories (Schwartz, 2006). Part of this is the creation of fantasy races. While fantasy races are unique in their physical appearance, it has been found that the races themselves are created in congruence with stereotypical racial narratives (Kim, 2004). Fantasy realms tend to give their fictional races recognizable traits that are associated with real-world groups (Monson, 2012). Therefore, fantasy realms and races, although not immediately recognizable as a particular race, are regularly created from stereotypical narratives of a certain race and/or ethnicity within the real world.

There has also been research that finds that fantasy worlds utilize the connection of goodness being light-skinned and evil being dark-skinned. For example, in *Lord of the Rings* it was found that goodness was related to whiteness with direct associations with Europe, specifically England and Scandinavian countries and that evil was usually related to black and savage characteristics and settings (Kim, 2004). In *Star Wars*, the character of Jar Jar Binks also illustrates this association and stereotyping. Although an “alien,” the character of Jar Jar Binks still relied on blackface characteristics to provide comical relief. From his exaggerated features to his heavy Jamaican accent, the character of Jar Jar Binks clearly utilized racial narratives and characterization to reflect a real-world stereotype of Jamaican culture (Galloway, 2007). Therefore, the role of racial narratives in fantasy stories has a possible history within popular media, making it all the more important that it is critically analyzed and understood.

For women, the fantasy genre becomes even more complicated. Unlike the interjection of races, the fantasy genre has a difficult time including women at all since it pulls from Mediaeval or Renaissance eras of the real world. Some of the most popular fantasy series, like *Lord of the Rings* has few or no female characters within its narrative (Robinson, 2016). Most people are

familiar with the idea of the damsel in distress from classic fairytales, but even contemporary fantasy literature the incorporates women fall victim to gender stereotyping. For example, the Strong Female Character story line states that is “shows us the underlying deficit of respect the character starts with, which she’s then required to overcome by whatever desperate, over-the-top, cartoonish means to hand – just to bring herself up to the man’s level” (Cristea, 2015). This type of character within fantasy fiction tends to be associated with masculine traits, like power and aggression, but still conforms to male gaze in that the character tends to be conventionally attractive as well (Cristea, 2015). For fantasy heroines, it has been found that those based in medievalism tend to have their stories and character development based on overcoming the patriarchy as her adventure (Tolmie, 2006). These articles illustrate how women are either ignored or stereotyped within fantasy literature and how, even though taking place in a fictional setting, conventional gender norms still apply to them.

It has also been found that within fantasy games, the games market themselves to their overwhelmingly male consumers. One study of the game *League of Legends* found that there are more male characters than female characters to choose from when playing the game (Gao, Min, Shih, 2017). Research has also found that, within *League of Legends*, women tended to be male-coded, which means that are put into roles such as leaders or protectors, but at the expense of being depicted in scantily-clad clothing and sexualized manners (Kuk, 2019). For example, in *League of Legends*, the character of Shyvanna, although a leader and a tank class, which is meant to serve as the frontline of defense and take a lot of damage, has very little in terms of armor. Although she is half-dragon and meant to take a lot of damage, her stomach, back, and legs are specifically exposed (Kuk, 2019). This illustrates that although women can be depicted as strong leaders within fantasy, they must still be sexualized in order to gain these characteristics.

Although I have defined the common stereotypes and story lines within fantasy based on race and gender, these conceptualizations are all framed within White male fantasy. Historically, there have been people who subvert these ideas of fantasy and create their own. For race, the concept of Afrofuturism has been around since 1993, which “combines elements of science fiction, historical fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, Afrocentricity and magic realism with non-Western beliefs (Womack, 2013). The goal of Afrofuturism is to put Black people at the front of these stories and create a future in which Black characters are present, not missing or just in the background (Wade, 2019). For gender, Feminist Fantasy has been a concept used to describe any science fiction or fantasy whose main character is a woman who is the active center of her own story (Tvtropes.com). Some stories point out gender inequality within fantasy spaces, others depict alternate societies, and some even retell old stories in a gender-flipped or non-sexist way (Tvtropes.com). Although these developments are important to the fantasy genre, many of these stories have been marginalized and largely ignored, therefore it is important to recognize the overwhelming presence of the White male fantasy standards, while also acknowledging that some in-roads to the genre can be made.

### *World of Warcraft Literature*

Although gaming has had many studies that include racial and gender issues, very few compare to the extensive nature of *World of Warcraft*. Many games that are studied focus on games that come out in volumes, which means they come out one game at a time and have a limited number of entries. *World of Warcraft* is different in that the game is always available and continuously updating. If a player desired, they could log into the game today and go back to many of the original areas that came out in 2004 to play and explore (the ones they cannot access

only being locked because the narrative dictated that they were destroyed later on). Therefore, due to the unique functional elements of *World of Warcraft*, it is important to emphasize the literature that specifically addresses this game.

*World of Warcraft* has been playable since 2004, and since then there has been some research on the game at this point. Specifically in terms of race and racism within the game, there have been a few scholars that acknowledge how the game utilizes racial stereotypes and narratives. Previous studies have mainly focused on character creation and how the choice of playable race follows stereotypical depictions of real-world races throughout history, which then defines the social and political organization of the game (Ritter, 2010; Monson, 2012; Spiecker, 2011; Johnson, 2014; Higgin, 2009; Cruise, 2018). These studies analyze the playable races within *World of Warcraft* and the environments and stories they are presented to attest that the game relies on racial stereotyping to create a narrative and gameplay framework for the game. One important note is that a couple of these articles specifically focus on the Tauren, or the Native American stand-in for the game, and illustrate how *World of Warcraft* appropriates Indigeneity for its gameplay (Nash, 2016; Cruise, 2018). One article found that race plays a primary role in the development of alliances, languages, intellect, temperament, occupations, strengths, and technology use within the game based on stereotypical race imagery as well (Monson, 2012). These articles show that the race-based characteristics of the fantasy races in *World of Warcraft* have not gone unnoticed, but by limiting the studies to character creation and the base conceptualizations of these races, there is opportunity for more research revolving around that full narrative of the game and how it is being interpreted by players.

Previous articles on *World of Warcraft* involving racism also speak to player response to the idea that the game uses racial stereotyping to create the playable races. One article found that since the game is a fantasy war, it allows players to ignore racism within the game (Ritter, 2010). Another article found that some players actually do recognize that *World of Warcraft* appropriates cultures, but only in relation to appropriating indigenous cultures (Nash, 2016; Cruise, 2018). Lastly, an article relating to the narrative of the game speaks to how players take the base characteristics of the playable races and craft their own narratives that shape how they act in-game and interact with other players (Pecker, 2013). These findings indicate that while some players recognize and accept the role race plays within *World of Warcraft* to some extent, others actively ignore or deny the use of race or its impact on their gameplay. Therefore, it is important to study *World of Warcraft* beyond the opinions of the players and look at how the game itself is structured and how the narrative is intended to be interpreted.

In terms of gender and sexism, many of the studies that have been done cover a wider variety of topics than with racial issues. Some scholars have identified the importance of language and the construction of gender identity within gaming, which found that players tend to use gendered stereotypes and male or female-oriented language practices to assert this identity (Pearce, 2017; Eklund, 2011). Others look specifically at the content and narrative of the game to identify points of contention and uncomfortable instances of sexism when playing as a female character (Myers, 2012; Boeshart, 2014). Lastly, scholars also tend to look at how women experience sexism within the game from both the story and the community, therefore finding that many women play *World of Warcraft* have been targeted, sexualized, harassed, and stereotyped based solely on their gender (Boeshart, 2014; Brehm, 2013). Overall, these issues have less of an impact of the game itself and world-building within it, unlike the racial aspects of the game, but

stereotypes are still pervasive for women within the game. Both within the narrative of the game and the social narratives of the community, women are marginalized and stereotyped based on common story lines that plague women within fictional realms.

### Theoretical Framework

In order to understand the current state of *Activision Blizzard* and the players perception of the company, it first needs to be framed within the rationalization of oppression. The rationalization of oppression rejects the idea that there is a hierarchy of oppression and that oppressions work as an interconnecting web and reinforce one another (Bishop, 2001). Bishop (2001) poses that societies have been organized around competition, domination, and private wealth, in which racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression were a critical part. This concept is comparable to Crenshaw's (1989) concept of intersectionality, which explains how race, class, and gender intersect and overlap to understand where power comes from and collides. As such, racism, sexism, and other -isms work as "integrated oppressions," in that they do not work as separate entities or problems. Instead, problematic practices and behaviors that arise from sexist or racist ideologies have a direct impact on the problematic practices that affect other minority groups or are blanket practices and behaviors that will directly contribute to the mistreatment of multiple groups.

For this study, I will argue that this concept of integrated oppressions is vital to understanding the state of *World of Warcraft* and *Activision Blizzard*. This study will draw from multiple theories of oppression, including Bonilla-Silva's discursive practices of colorblind racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2018) and Ray's (2019) organizational theory, but that does not mean that these concepts only apply to racial matters. To Bishop and other scholars (Crenshaw, 1989),

systems of oppression work together to oppress many groups, then it can also be understood that theories, like colorblind racism, can apply to other forms of oppression, like sexism. Therefore, the rationalization of oppression leads to more integrated theoretical frames that apply to multiple forms of oppression, even if the theory itself was formulated with one in mind.

The first thing that is critical to the understanding of the situation at *Activision Blizzard* is that of the organizational structure. Ray (2019) challenges traditional organization theories and the idea that organizations are race-neutral. He instead argues that there are four tenets of racial organization. First, Ray (2019) argues that “racialized organizations enhance or diminish the agency of racial groups.” This means that organizations control time use from the employees. Within organizations, this means that the organization itself can segregate people into different parts of the organizational hierarchy and control how they use their time in order to diminish an individual’s ability to change the organizational procedures and institutional environment. Second, Ray (2019) argues that “racialized organizations legitimate the unequal distribution of resources.” He does this by highlighting the White normalized practices within organizations and how many normalized practices can result in the discrimination and segregation of racial minorities to lower paying and less valued positions, which then impacts their ability to create change. Third, Ray (2019) argues that “Whiteness is a credential.” By this, Ray (2019) means that formalized credentialing has been used as a way for an organization to appear race-neutral, but also still allow them to utilize racialized hiring practices. Lastly, Ray (2019) argues that “the decoupling of formal rules from organizational practice is often racialized.” This means that organizations regularly decouple their formal rules, specifically in terms of equity, access, and inclusion from the practices they use. By doing so, organizations can appear to support equality

and inclusion while actively preventing minority groups from creating change within the organization.

Using Bishop's (2001) concept of the rationalization of oppression, Ray's (2019) four tenets can also be applied to gender differences within the workplace. Organizations can control the time of women and segregate them into certain areas within the organizational hierarchy. Normalized practices that prioritize patriarchy can result in the discrimination and segregation of women into lower paying and less valued positions. Maleness can be seen as a credential and using formal credentialization can be used to make the organization seem gender-neutral, while upholding sexist hiring practices. Lastly, organizations can decouple their rules about equity, inclusion, and for women specifically, sexual harassment, from the practices they use to appear equitable while actively preventing women from reporting incidents and creating change.

Previously, Joan Acker (1990; 1992), discussed the concept of gendered organizations that is similar to this application of Ray's (2019) racial organizations to gender. Acker's (1990; 1992) research speaks about how men's bodies are the default and therefore, when making policies, organizations default to the idea that men are their employees. This means that their policies are made with men in mind and do not tend to acknowledge how these policies will impact women differently. Acker's (1990; 1992) supports Ray's (2019) theory of racial organizations because it illustrates a foundation of gendered organizations that can then be applied to Ray's (2019) theory to illustrate how closely tied these two theories are. This means that the theoretical expansions that Ray (2019) has made can be equally applied to race and gender.



Ray's (2019) conceptualization of the tenets of racialized organizations is critical to this analysis, specifically in relation to the final tenet that argues that "the decoupling of formal rules from organizational practice is often racialized" (Ray, 2019). *Activision Blizzard* has continuously stated that they are inclusive and diverse, but the recent lawsuit alleges that they have been using discriminatory practices for a decade. The *Activision Blizzard* lawsuit illustrates that the public facing rules of the company did not extend to the informal organizational practices within the company and actively prevented minority groups from making changes within the institutional culture. These tenets help to explain how *Activision Blizzard* was able to uphold their image as one of the most diverse and inclusive companies in the gaming industry, while also actively discriminating against minority groups. There is an active movement against the company, and the company itself has attempted many strategies to try and cover up or deflect the issues that have come to light, mainly to protect their image and appease shareholders. This aligns with Ray's (2019) conclusion, in which he states that "Social movements and conflict between states, along with more mundane processes such as attempts to gain market share, can alter the connections between racial schemas and organizational resources as actors deal with organizational problems in creative ways." This conclusion helps to explain the state that *Activision Blizzard* is in currently since the lawsuit went public. Following this conclusion, it can be seen that *Activision Blizzard* as an organization, may be pressured to change its practices due to social backlash, but that there is also the possibility that they only change the appearance of these practices and continue to oppress their workers by upholding the normalized practices they already have in place.

Although Ray's (2019) organizational theory will not be used to directly analyze the findings of this study, it is important context to what is seen within *World of Warcraft* and from

players. Ray's (2019) theory explains the difference between the public facing reputation of the company and the actual practices being used within the workplace, while the *Activision Blizzard* lawsuit challenges this public reputation. This study will show that players rely on this public reputation when arguing against in-game sexism and racism before the lawsuit, but when discussing the lawsuit itself, the players are forced to question this public reputation. By acknowledging that the reputation of the company can make a difference in player responses to in-game sexism and racism, it will allow for further analysis into the different responses to in-game issues and the lawsuit itself from players.

The second part of Bishop's (2001) theory that is critical to this study is the assumption that no one chooses to be an oppressor, but most people do so unconsciously. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2018) also states that both racists and non-racists can reproduce colorblind ideologies and racial frames. This specifically applies to the players of *World of Warcraft* and how they understand the narrative and presentation of the game. According to Dietrich (2013), in over sixty MMORPG's that have been online since 2010, the vast majority of the games do not allow for the creation of avatars, or player characters, with a non-white racial appearance. Since the rise of MMORPG's players have rarely been given the choice of playing non-white characters within their games, therefore creating the norm that player characters must be white in their skin tone. Due to this norm, players may not challenge, or even notice, the fact that a MMORPG had no options for non-white racial appearances within the character creator. Therefore, this would lead to players to unconsciously oppress other groups through their acceptance of this norm since this is the way it has always been. It may also lead to players arguing in favor of the company online because the lack of non-white representation is seen as a non-issue due to the fact that it is an established way of doing things within the MMORPG gaming scene.

In order to understand the unconscious oppression that players perpetuate, I will be using Bonilla-Silva's (2018) concept of colorblind racism. Colorblind racism is defined as the denial of race discrepancy based on race itself or the system, therefore meaning it must be the fault of the minority race (Bonilla-Silva, 2018). Essentially, colorblind racism is how Whites justify being race-neutral in what they see to be a "post-racial" era. Bonilla-Silva broke down the white racial frame into four distinct frames: abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism, and minimization of racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2018). Each of these frames describe the different ways in which White people deny the existence of racism and racial prejudice in society. Abstract liberalism extends the theory of symbolic racism by using the idea of meritocracy to reject that racism exists. Naturalization pulls from early biological theories by stating that racial differences are a natural occurrence. Cultural racism also refers to symbolic racism by using culturally based arguments to explain the standing of minorities in society. Finally, minimization again pulls from symbolic racism to explain how Whites view discrimination as no longer being a major factor in minorities' life chances. Now, these frames do not deny the existence of racism, but instead highlight how Whites specifically uphold the racial structure of society by refusing to acknowledge the role that racism plays within society and the lives of minorities in the United States. Among players of *World of Warcraft*, this will lead me to assess if and how *World of Warcraft* forum participants use racial frames to defend *Activision Blizzard* and thus reproduce inequality.

Although these frames specifically address racism within society, they can also be extended to sexism. Following Bonilla-Silva's (2018) four major frames and using Bishop's (2001) concept of the rationalization of oppression, it can be understood that these frames are interconnected with other forms of oppression. Lorber (1994) covers all of these frames within

her book without using the same terms. Stoll, Lilley, and Pinter (2017) have called this idea of using Bonilla-Silva's (2018) racial frames to apply to gender as gender-blind sexism. Abstract liberalism would use the idea of meritocracy to reject that sexism exists, instead insisting that men and women have equal opportunities. Naturalization would state that biological differences between men and women is a natural occurrence. Cultural racism, or in this case cultural sexism, would use culturally based arguments to explain women's overall standing within society. Finally, minimalization would explain how men no longer view sexism as a major factor in women's life chances. Again, these frames would not deny the existence of sexism, but instead illustrate how men specifically uphold the patriarchy within society by refusing to acknowledge the role that sexism plays within society and in women's lives.

These four frames will help answer all three of my research questions within this study. They will first illustrate how the frames are applied to characters within *World of Warcraft* by the developers to craft their narrative. Second, they will show how people respond to the *Activision Blizzard* lawsuit and whether these frames are upheld when faced with new evidence of the contrary. Lastly, it will highlight the similarities and differences in how players use these frames when discussing racism and sexism within *World of Warcraft* before and after the lawsuit went public. By using these frames, I seek to understand both how they are used during the creation of the game and the perception of *Activision Blizzard* and *World of Warcraft* by the players.

### Social Narratives

Social narratives are used widely within contemporary society to create and solidify conceptualizations of certain subjects in the public's mind. Therefore, the key to upholding these

social narratives are the stories and story lines that surround certain ideas and groups. According to Bonilla-Silva (2018), story lines are “the socially shared tales that are fable-like and incorporate a common scheme and wording.” In terms of racial issues, these story lines include people claiming that the “past is the past,” “I did not own any slaves,” “other groups have made it, how come they have not?,” and “I did not get ... because of a minority” (Bonilla-Silva, 2018). For gender, these stories include things like “women’s work,” “biological differences between men and women,” and “there are equal opportunities between men and women” (Lorber, 1994). These stories are used by people within everyday society to justify racial and gendered issues, place the blame on individuals, and absolve themselves of guilt. People will also use personal stories to justify their feelings towards certain groups, like positive and negative interactions (Bonilla-Silva, 2018). These stories and personal testimonies serve to absolve the individual of guilt that they might be racist or sexist, but the same can also be said for companies. *Activision Blizzard*, through their game narrative, rely on racial and gendered stereotypes and story lines to make their narrative sensible within the game world. Therefore, their vocal commitment to diversity and inclusivity can be seen as a way to absolve the company of guilt for using these stereotypes within the game narrative. This dissertation seeks to discover how *Activision Blizzard* utilizes these stereotypes within *World of Warcraft* and the practices they use to convey the meaning of the narrative to players.

Within society, group position theory can be easily seen through societal narratives. For example, in a study of amicus briefs about immigration, it was found that, “The briefs set up that idea that these valued resources are at risk...these briefs actively assist in (1) producing feelings of group position and (2) fostering the sense that the value resources held by the dominant group are being threatened by a subordinate group” (Carter and Lippard, 2015). In this study, there

were explicit messages from elites and interest groups about immigration that instilled a sense of group position in the general public. Whether or not these resources are actually being threatened is not the main point, instead it is vital to focus on how these narratives are crafted and the meaning behind their existence. In this study, group positioning will not be assessed directly, but it will show in the analysis that players are attempting to create a group positioning among themselves to justify their opinions on in-game sexism and racism. Therefore, even though it is not being analyzed itself, it is important to acknowledge that group positioning is being used within the responses from players.

Although this study focused on race, the concepts of group position theory and threat can also be applied to gender. For example, in a study of the Dickwolves incident, in which a rape comic was popularized in the gaming community and merchandise for it was sold at a gaming conference, it was found that when women protested the sale and production of anything related to the comic, men in the gaming community responded with degrading comments and threats to subdue the women (Salter and Blodgett, 2012). Men in the study stated that they felt that if women could not handle dealing with something like a rape comic, then they should not be trying to insert themselves into the male dominated gaming community. These two examples illustrate how powerful social narratives are within society and how the specific use of social narratives by people in power help to create and uphold these narratives and stereotypes, especially when the group in power feels threatened by another.

Colorblind racism also specifically mentions the role of societal narratives within the theory. Colorblind narratives, defined as stories that people tell to try and make sense of racial matters (Bonilla-Silva, 2018), are used by Whites in a variety of social institutions. These

narratives vary from general storylines about race in America to personal testimonies about interactions with minority groups or people who are racist to assert that the individual saying them is not racist. For example, in a recent study, it was found that amicus briefs about affirmative action used color-blind narratives in distinctive ways by both supporters and opponents of affirmative action (Carter, Lippard, and Baird, 2019). In doing so, these briefs did not directly address race, but instead used racially charged narratives that framed the issue in terms of injustice instead of race.

Gendered narratives are also used by people to try and make sense of gendered matters within certain situations. These narratives vary from ideas about gender norms to personal testimonies about interacting with women. For example, it has been found that, in gaming, that stories about women gamers tend to focus on “casual” games and gameplay (Taylor, 2012). There has also been a historical argument about women in gaming that states women play game differently from men. Rooted in the social narrative of biological difference, this argument states that women engage with games for identity and sociality, and are not interested in direct competition (Taylor, 2012). Although this narrative does not specifically address gender, it does utilize gender narratives to frame the issue of women’s marginalization within the gaming sphere.

Institutions also use these colorblind and gendered narratives in a variety of ways. It was found that many institutions in the United States use colorblind narratives in their organizational missions to attract people to their product (Gallagher, 2020). Institutions will use terms, such as inclusion, diversity, and tolerance, to distract people from the systemic racism that takes place within them (Williams, 2020). In actuality, these terms are used to create additional barriers to

challenging systemic racism by denying that racism is in the institution in the first place. Terms, like diversity, are used by Whites to evade confronting the problems that arise from whiteness by inserting themselves into the racial diversity pool (Williams, 2020). These statements work identically for gender issues as well. By using these terms, it can both distract people from systemic sexism in the workplace and create additional barriers for women to challenge systemic sexism by denying the sexism exists within the institution in the first place. By using these terms, men also insert themselves into the diversity pool and can state that all opportunities are equal, regardless of gender, even though that may not actually be the case. Therefore, these narratives allow White men a way to avoid the topic of systemic racism sexism and assert that they are not racist or sexist, while simultaneously using racist and sexist practices and relying on racial and gendered narratives.

### Media and Social Narratives

Media is a major tool used to reproduce racial and gendered narratives, both overt and subvert (Bonilla-Silva, 2018; Lorber, 1994). Social narratives are essentially social products and media outlets, like the news, play a critical role in reinforcing them. For race, media outlets tend to leave out systemic issues when regarding racial issues, like the whiteness of workplace institutions when speaking about affirmative action (Bonilla-Silva, 2018; Dijk, 1991). Movies, like *The Blind Side*, highlight how individual bigots overcome their personal feelings towards non-white groups and emphasize the white savior narrative in abolishing racism without paying any attention to systemic problems (Williams, 2020). For gender, women are subjected to the male gaze within Western culture, in which they are seen as sexual objects and not as women (Lorber, 1994). Women in media tend to be portrayed as weak through being vehicles to express



their emotions, such as despair and sadness that men are not allowed to express (Lorber, 1994). The media depictions of race pull attention away from systemic racism and serve to satisfy White's racial angst about racism in the United States by making it seem as though the issue is solely with overt racists, while media depictions of women allow for men to maintain their manliness by using women to express their feelings for them.

In gaming, racial and gender stereotypes have been prevalent in variety of ways for the past two decades. When the Internet was first becoming more widespread, John Barlow wrote a manifesto about Internet development and human freedom. In this manifest, Barlow states that that there should be no government interference with Internet operations and that the Internet will create a world without privilege or prejudice (Barlow, 1996). This development of an equal Internet space did not come to pass. It has been found that racial stereotypes in videogames regularly define non-white races, mainly in that non-white characters are limited to violent and aggressive roles unless they are based on a celebrity (Burgess, 2011; Dickerman, 2008). After playing videogames that utilize racial stereotypes, it was found that players were more likely to associate non-white characters with violent and aggressive behavior (Dickerman, 2008). It has also been found that racialized games celebrate both the pro-white aspect and the anti-others aspect of the white racial frame (Feagin, 2020).

It has also been found that the stereotype of women gamers being more casual and less skilled is directly tied to the fact that almost all professional players are men (Paaßen, Thekla, and Stratemeyer, 2017). This stereotype is also connected to the image of the "true gamer," which is seen as male, that marginalizes women who are competent at a game because they do not fit this stereotypical image (Paaßen, Thekla, and Stratemeyer, 2017). Another study found

that women accrue skill at the same rate as men in gaming, but tend to perform worse due to the stereotype that women cannot be as good at videogames as men (Ratan, 2015). Overall, these articles provide evidence that the Internet developed with the White male in mind. Furthermore, the gaming industry is not exempt from the racialized and gendered influences of society that all institutions are organized by. In fact, the Internet is a crucial area of study in how it is reproducing racialized and gendered narratives and stereotypes for new generations.

### Conclusion

According to scholars, the fantasy genre has had a long history of utilizing racist and sexist stereotypes to create their worlds (Mendleshon, 2009; Schwartz, 2006; Monson, 2012; Kim, 2004; Robinson, 2016). These stereotypes have been used since the early days of the fantasy genre, which means that these stereotypes are integral to characterization of certain fantasy races. In *World of Warcraft*, both the playable races and the entire socio-political organization of the game are partially determined by these stereotypes as well (Ritter, 2010; Monson, 2012; Spiecker, 2011; Johnson, 2014; Higgin, 2009; Cruise, 2018). This has allowed for scholars to study how these stereotypes have impacted players while playing the game (Pecker, 2013; Ritter, 2010; Cruise, 2018; Nash, 2016). Player behavior is influenced by the socio-political organization of the game; therefore, they are also influenced by the sexist and racist stereotypes that the organization of the game was created with. Therefore, this study will contribute to this literature by analyzing if player responses to in-game sexism and racism changes when real-world instances of sexism and racism are brought into the conversation.

To analyze this possible change, I will use Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's (2018) concept of story lines and discursive practices. This will be used to categorize the player responses into

racial frames. After categorizing the responses, I will use other literature, like Ray's (2019) organizational theory, to put these responses into context with current literature. The concept of social narratives will create a framework for the responses to show how they are aligned with current literature that speaks to issues of sexism and racism in the real-world (Carter and Lippard, 2015; Gallagher, 2020; Williams, 2020). Also, although not analyzed directly, I will use the literature on group position theory to identify when player responses are attempting to create a feeling of group position between different groups, which will contribute to the overall discussion of how players respond to in-game and real world sexism and racism. Doing this will allow me to illustrate how players respond to both in-game and real world instances of sexism and racism committed by *Activision Blizzard*, which will then show how the digital disconnect between the real world and the game world influences how players responded to sexism and racism in different contexts.

## CHAPTER 3: DATA AND METHODS

The purpose of this project is to uncover whether players disconnect in-game instances of sexism and racism in *World of Warcraft* from the real-world instances of sexism and racism *Activision Blizzard* are accused of in the lawsuit against them. To do this, I must first establish that instances of sexism and racism exist within the narrative created by the developers of *World of Warcraft* through doing a narrative analysis. From this foundation, I can analyze player responses to in-game instances of sexism and racism in the game by categorizing them into racial frames. I can then look at responses to the *Activision Blizzard* lawsuit to see if player responses are different if the sexism and racism are present within the real world, instead of only in the game world. Finally, I can compare the player responses to in-game sexism and racism from before the lawsuit to after the lawsuit to uncover if player responses have changed to the in-game issues given the new information about the real-world sexism and racism at the company. Doing all of this will allow this study to show if there is a disconnect for players between the digital world and the real world when it comes to in-game sexism and racism within *World of Warcraft* depending on the context of the real world lawsuit and allegations against the company.

### Analytical Strategy

For my analytical strategy, I will be using critical discursive analysis (CDA) as developed by Thomas Huckin for all of my analyses. CDA views language as a social practice and looks at how inequalities can be reproduced through text. Although a game, *World of Warcraft's* story is, at its core, text based. Even cutscenes and voice lines are scripted by writers and therefore are able to be analyzed using this methodology. CDA specifically focuses on three levels of the text being analyzed: the text itself, the discursive practices (or the processes of writing/speaking and

reading/hearing) that create and interpret the text, and the larger social context (Huckin, 2002). CDA attests that all three of these levels are interrelated, and therefore need to be analyzed together. The first level of analysis, the text itself, will be achieved by looking holistically at the narrative of four main characters within *World of Warcraft* from a neutral standpoint. In this case, a neutral standpoint refers to only addressing the statements and images that are presented in the game validated by citations. Although this still leaves some room for bias, the practice of requiring citations from the game will allow for as close to a neutral standpoint as possible. Then, the second level of analysis will allow me to identify patterns within the text that the writers have given and the discursive practices that they use to convey the narrative.

The second level of analysis will then cross over into my second data set, the forum posts, in terms of how they are interpreted by the players. This will allow me to analyze how the text within the game and the patterns that have been found are interpreted by players and the meaning to the players themselves. Finally, the third level of analysis will be addressed by tracking the responses to these patterns before and after the Activision Blizzard lawsuit became public. This will allow me to analyze how players interpret these patterns within the larger social context of the lawsuit and how players view the company. Overall, this will allow me to analyze how the narratives are presented by the company, and furthermore, player reaction to in-game narratives both before and after the lawsuit.

#### Data Set #1 and Methods: Narrative Analysis

For this analysis, I will be using two main data sets. First, I will be using articles that summarize the narratives of specific characters within *World of Warcraft* from the website *Wowpedia*. *Wowpedia* is the free *World of Warcraft* wiki encyclopedia that catalogs the *Warcraft*

universe with a focus on *World of Warcraft* with a neutral point of view. Although it has a similar setup to *Wikipedia*, through its use of community contributions, *Wowpedia* is run differently and has specific policies to address validity within its articles. *Wowpedia* has an official policy to maintain a neutral point of view when authoring or editing an article. Contributors must represent the information fairly and without bias. Although nothing is completely without bias, this provides a basis that is informative and backed up by specific citations within the game itself. Specifically in terms of lore, *Wowpedia* requires that any of the additions made to its articles are sourced and can be experienced by another player, either currently or in the past. Sources are only considered valid if they come from the game itself and can be validated by another player, was not retrieved by utilizing exploits, if the content is currently on an official *Blizzard* website and is publicly accessible, or directly from the other media published by *Blizzard* (ex. Books, games, art, etc.). All sources of lore must also be clearly cited and labelled within the article with where it was retrieved from. Any kind of speculation or fan interpretation, even from *Blizzard* developers, must be labeled under the speculation tab until it is able to be verified within a reputable source or is not allowed on the website at all (*Wowpedia*). These lore policies ensure that the information on the website is correct and able to be accessed at some point by any player. It also allows for me to filter the information on these characters specifically to what is stated within *World of Warcraft*. Since there are many other forms of media that *Blizzard* uses to convey the story that many players do not engage with (ex. Books, other games, art, etc.), it is important for my analysis to specifically address the character narratives that are presented within *World of Warcraft*, which *Wowpedia* allows me to achieve.

In this analysis, I will be using the character articles that summarize the story development of four main characters within the game: Tryande Whisperwind, Sylvanas

Windrunner, Baine Bloodhoof, and Garrosh Hellscream. These four characters were chosen because they met the criteria for this analysis and they are major characters within the narrative of *World of Warcraft*. I chose these characters by utilizing the “Present Main Warcraft Universe Characters” list on the *Wowpedia* website. By using this list as my starting point, I ensure that the main characters that I have chosen to analyze are main characters of the game and to the story, as agreed on by players within the community. The original list has fifty main characters total. I then filtered out any neutral characters that were listed, since they do not have an allegiance to either faction within the game and cannot be categorized as either “good” or “bad.” This left me with twenty-three characters to look at for this analysis.

To choose my two female characters, I then filtered the list to include only female characters, which left me with four female characters for the Alliance (good side) and two female characters for the Horde side (bad side). I then filtered out any characters who had over half of their narrative portrayed in novels or comics, which left me with three characters for the Alliance and one character for the Horde, Sylvanas Windrunner. To choose between the remaining three Alliance characters, I based the decision on who had the most interaction with Sylvanas Windrunner in order to analyze similarities and differences in how the two women are portrayed in the same situations, which gave me Tryande Whisperwind as my female Alliance character for analysis.

To choose my two People of Color-coded characters, I took the list of twenty-three characters and removed anyone on the Alliance side. I did this because previous literature has found that the Horde faction is the one that represents stereotypical depictions of minority races within the game (Cruise, 2018; Johnson, 2014; Monson, 2012; Nash, 2016; Pecker, 2013, Ritter,

2010, Spiecker, 2011). This left me with twelve characters, which I then removed the two female characters, since I am using one in the previous analysis and the other was filtered out due to over half of their narrative being portrayed in novels or comics. Out of the ten left, I then filtered out any characters who had over half of their narrative portrayed in novels or comics, which left me with eight characters. From here, I filtered out any characters that were not included in the most recent expansion, *Shadowlands*, in order to ensure that the characters are current, which left me with three characters to choose from. Out of these three, I chose Baine Bloodhoof due to the fact that previous literature has identified that his race, the Tauren, are depicted as a stereotypical image of Indigenous cultures (Nash, 2016; Cruise, 2018). Out of the other two, I then chose Garrosh Hellscream based on the fact that he is in conflict with Baine at many moments throughout the game, whereas the other character, Vol'jin, regularly aligns himself with Baine, which would limit my analysis. Therefore, by choosing Baine Bloodhoof and Garrosh Hellscream, I can analyze the similarities and differences between the two characters and how they are portrayed in the same situations.

For all of these characters, I will only be using the sections of the articles that come from *World of Warcraft* the game and its expansions, therefore leaving out any information that is given through previous games or novels and comics. This is to ensure that any information about these characters used is specifically within the context of *World of Warcraft*, since many players have not played the previous games or read the novels and comics. This means that their understanding of these characters extends only to what is in *World of Warcraft* itself, therefore, to account for how the majority of players will understand these characters, I will be leaving out sections on outside information about the characters and their narratives. Using CDA, I will first look at how these narratives are presented from a neutral stance, then analyze the discursive



practices that are used by the writers to convey the narrative and specific meanings within it, therefore making it a critical part of my analysis and answering the question of how Activision Blizzard portrays itself within the game narrative.

### Data Set #2 and Methods: Forum Analysis

My second data set will be *World of Warcraft* official forum posts. The official *World of Warcraft* forum site is an easily accessible way for players to speak on aspects of the game with other players. The navigation menu first asks the reader to locate their interest into one of several categories, including general discussion, lore speculation, or technical questions. The reader can also type their question or keyword directly into the search bar using either a simple or advanced option. Once on a forum post, the reader will see the initial post at the top and then responses to the post underneath it. Players can either post within the forum or directly respond to other contributors by using the reply option if they would like to address a particular statement. They can also quote previous posts or parts of previous posts in order to highlight exactly what they are responding to.

To find the forum posts for this analysis, I first used the advanced search option to look for forum posts speaking on in-game issues before July 1, 2021. This date was chosen because the lawsuit against Activision/Blizzard was officially filed and public on July 20, 2021, therefore, to ensure that these responses were brought up before the news of the lawsuit, I used the beginning of the month as the set date. In the search bar of the website, I searched for the keyword's "racism" and "sexism" and looked through the first page (as these posts were the most popular and had the most responses) for forum posts the addressed racism or sexism within the game itself. This gave me four major forum posts, which all took place in 2020 and

questioned either gender or racial aspects of the game. One post has 170 comments (Thavius, 2020), one has 96 comments (Paradigmrum, 2020), one has 578 comments (Meatfist, 2020), and one has 638 comments (Elleyella, 2020). The comments on these posts will be analyzed by first filtering out any comments that do not address the topic, then the comments will be grouped by either agreeing that there is an issue within the game or disagreeing that there is an issue. Using CDA, I will look for patterns within the responses to see if players use specific discursive practices to understand the narrative and content of the game.

Then, I will compare the previous forum posts and responses to forum posts that are from after the lawsuit went public. Using the same methodology, I used the advanced search option to look for forum posts speaking on in-game issues after July 31, 2021, to ensure the forum posts were created after the lawsuit had gone public. In the search bar of the website, I searched for the keyword's "racism" and "sexism" and once again looked through the first page for forum posts that addressed racism or sexism within the game itself. This also gave me four major forum posts, which all took place in 2021 and questioned either gender or racial aspects of the game. One post has 110 comments (Valhaan, 2021), one post has 392 comments (Felgercarb, 2021), one has 128 comments (Destros, 2021), and one has 89 comments (Avih, 2021). The comments on these posts will be analyzed by first filtering out any comments that do not address the topic, then the comments will be grouped by either agreeing that there is an issue within the game or disagreeing that there is an issue. Using CDA, I will then look for patterns within the responses to see if players use specific discursive practices to understand the narrative and content of the game and compare them to the forum posts that were created before the lawsuit went public to see if the patterns and discursive practices have changed with the knowledge of the lawsuit.

The final forum post that will be analyzed will address the player response to the Activision/Blizzard lawsuit. One forum post, called a megathread, was posted July 21, 2021 and has 1,507 comments with player reactions to the lawsuit directly after it went public (Meraii, 2021). This forum will be analyzed similarly to the previous ones, but after comments that do not address the topic are filtered out, I will then group the comments based on support for Activision/Blizzard and condemning Activision/Blizzard. Using CDA, this will illustrate the larger context of the game in terms of the company and how it is view by the players. It will also add significant insight into how players view the company and how this translates to how they view certain aspects of the game. By comparing the responses to the lawsuit to the responses to in-game issues, both before and after the lawsuit went public, I will be able to analyze if players continue to use the same discursive practices for in-game issues when presented with real-life issue among the company or if they use different discursive practices to interpret the game with this new knowledge.

## CHAPTER 4: DEPICTIONS IN *WORLD OF WARCRAFT*

As previously established, *Activision-Blizzard* is a major company when it comes to the development of games. Specifically, *World of Warcraft* has been one of the most popular MMORPGs for a decade (MMO Populations). Therefore, both *Activision-Blizzard* and *World of Warcraft* have been in the position of power that allowed them to shape the gaming space for many years. The company was also considered one of the most diverse and inclusive companies to work for within the industry, which led many people to support the games that they make (*Blizzard Entertainment*, Retrieved Nov. 23, 2021). If players are engaging in *World of Warcraft* and the narrative for many years, there may be many instances of sexism and racism that have passively influenced their beliefs. So, by establishing the instances of sexism and racism in the game, I can then compare it to the player responses to illustrate how the digital disconnect functions when these stereotypes are interwoven into a fantasy narrative.

By utilizing Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's concept of story lines as the theoretical frame for this analysis, I will be able to illustrate how *Activision Blizzard* has an impact both within and outside of *World of Warcraft*. According to Bonilla-Silva (2018), story lines are "the socially shared tales that are fable-like and incorporate a common scheme and wording." These story lines are often ideological, and they are based on generic arguments to create narratives. Story lines are social products that use a similar framework and language, but are told by many different story tellers, which allows the story tellers and the audience to share a representational world that makes these stories seem true (Bonilla-Silva, 2018). More than anything, these story lines allow the dominant group to see the world in a particular way and justify the current racial and gender hierarchy within society. For example, Bonilla-Silva (2018) speaks to how the

storyline “If Jews, Italians, and Irish Have Made It, How Come Blacks Have Not?” This story line is used in the real world by Whites to state that other races that were considered minorities in the past have made it in America and have achieved economic prosperity, therefore if Blacks have not done the same, then it is their own fault. This not only absolves Whites of their responsibility for upholding the racial hierarchy, but also justifies that hierarchy by placing the blame on Blacks instead of the structural barriers that they face. In this case, *World of Warcraft* serves as a fictional world that utilizes gender and racial story lines to create their character narratives, which then reinforces these story lines within the real world.

This study seeks to understand how players disconnect their digital worlds from the real world in terms of acknowledging and understanding racism and sexism within *World of Warcraft*, but to do this, I must first establish that there are common cases of racism and sexism within *World of Warcraft*'s narrative. To achieve this, I will be analyzing the narratives of four main characters to understand their use of sexist and racist story lines in *World of Warcraft*: Sylvanas Windrunner, Tyrande Whisperwind, Garrosh Hellscream, and Baine Bloodhoof. The first two characters, Sylvanas Windrunner and Tyrande Whisperwind, will highlight sexist stereotypes given to female characters in *World of Warcraft*, while the other two, Garrosh Hellscream and Baine Bloodhoof, will highlight the racist stereotypes given to POC-coded characters.

Although men and the White-coded races within the game can also be subject to sexist and racist stereotypes at times, these stereotypes rarely define their character within the game. On the other hand, for the women and POC-coded characters, these stereotypes tend to be the defining feature of their characters and drive their narrative development throughout the

expansions. Therefore, I chose to analyze two women characters and two POC-coded characters to highlight the overemphasis on the use of these stereotypes for these characters. I also chose to analyze one female character in the Alliance and one in the Horde, while for the POC-coded characters I chose to analyze characters from two different fantasy races. This is used to illustrate that regardless if they are on the “good side” or the “bad side” and regardless of what fantasy race they are, these characters are still defined by sexist and racist stereotypes because of the fact that the developers created these races and characters based on the stereotypes that persist in media outside of gaming.

This analysis will provide the context needed to understand how sexism and racism is reproduced within the fictional gaming world of *World of Warcraft*. By establishing this, this analysis will provide insights into how developers are able to use sexist and racist story lines within their narratives to control the overall narratives of their game. This will then provide a glimpse into how developers use real-world conceptualizations of groups and cultures to create their characters and how this can reproduce sexist and racist stereotypes and storylines. By examining both women and POC-coded characters, this chapter will provide a comprehensive foundation for how the character narratives of *World of Warcraft* reproduce stereotypes and story lines within the gaming world.

### Depictions of Gender

This section is going to discuss the characters of Sylvanas Windrunner and Tyrande Whisperwind. Although Sylvanas Windrunner is aligned with the Horde, the “bad” faction in *World of Warcraft*, and Tyrande Whisperwind is aligned with the Alliance, the “good” faction in *World of Warcraft*, these two characters are similar in that their character development is based

on sexist story lines. I found that both characters can be defined at times by the Strong Female Character and (In)dependent storylines. The Strong Female Character story line is defined by a female character that is not respected engaging in over-the-top methods to gain respect from the people around her, specifically men (Cristea, 2015). The issue with the utilization of this story line is that it relies on the idea that a female character is not automatically given respect, like it is to many male characters. Instead, female characters must do outlandish things to establish that respect. The (In)dependent story line is defined by a female character being depicted as a leader and independent, but the character is dependent on a relationship with a male character to help them make leadership decisions (Tompkins, Lynch, Driel, and Fritz, 2020). The problem of using this story line is that the female character's independence is only on the surface level. Although the female character is in a position of power and can make decisions on their own, they instead rely on a male counterpart to help them make decisions or make decisions for them. Therefore, the independent nature of the female character is solely in the leadership title, because in practice, the female character rarely, if ever, makes decisions without the direction of a man.

In addition to the previous two story lines, these two characters share one more story line, but to very different degrees, which is why I have listed them as different story lines. Sylvanas Windrunner is characterized by the story line of the Crazy Lady, which is when a female character shows a gender difference in psychopathy by using manipulation, social aggression, and emotional instability (Cerny, Friedman, Smith, 2013). The issue with this story line is that it illustrates the female character as a psychopath by relying on gender differences. For example, instead of the psychopathy being illustrated through aggression, it specifically is shown as social aggression where the female character furthers their goals through underhanded tactics and manipulation. Tyrande Whisperwind also illustrates a form of the Crazy Lady trope, but she

specifically illustrates the emotional instability, which is why I have termed this story line as Female Psychopathy (Cerny, Friedman, and Smith, 2014). The problem with this story line is that it characterizes a female character by their unstable emotions alone. The female character does not use logic or reason, instead allowing her actions to be completely driven by her emotions. Therefore, this shows that women cannot be trusted in a leadership position because they can become emotionally unstable at any moment.

Although these two characters are from different factions, and even though one is a major antagonist of the game while the other is one of the protagonists, they are both defined by the same story lines throughout the narrative of the game. This analysis will further illustrate what these story lines look like within the narrative and how each story line is applied differently and to different degrees for the characters to fit with the overall narrative that the game was trying to tell.

#### Sylvanas Windrunner: The Female Psychopath

In *World of Warcraft*, Sylvanas Windrunner is one of the major antagonistic characters that players will face along their journey. Originally a Blood Elf ranger general, before the events of *World of Warcraft*, she was tortured, killed, and then brought back to life as an undead warrior in service of a man called the Lich King. When the player first encounters her in *World of Warcraft*, Sylvanas has gained her freedom from the Lich King and due to this newfound freedom needed to be established as her own character with her own motivations. In doing this, I think *Activision Blizzard* used stereotypes commonly described by gender scholars (Cristea, 2015; Cerny, Friedman, Smith, 2014; Tompkins, Lynch, Driel, and Fritz, 2020) for Sylvanas's



character development. Sylvanas embodies multiple story lines over the course of her story, specifically Strong Female Character, Crazy Lady, and (In)dependent Character story lines.

The first story line that Sylvanas exemplifies in the early expansions of *World of Warcraft* is that of the Strong Female Character. According to Cristea (2015), the Strong Female Character story line shows viewers that the female character does not have much respect, therefore she must overcome that lack of respect through desperate and over-the-top actions solely to bring herself up to a man's level. For example, after Sylvanas wrestles her mind and soul free from the control of the Lich King, she joins the Horde, but she is given little respect for this act of strength from the male leaders of the Horde. Therefore, Sylvanas relies on earning their respect by winning many battles on their behalf, but even after winning these battles, she is questioned by the male leaders of the Horde due to the methods that she used to achieve those victories. For example, when her troops were losing in combat when trying to occupy a territory, Sylvanas captured the daughter of the leader of the territory and forced him to surrender to the Horde in exchange for his daughter's life. Basically, Sylvanas, lacking the respect she felt she deserved, set out to prove that she was a strong woman through whatever means necessary, but this only ended up causing more suspicion and lack of trust from the male leaders of the Horde.

The methods that Sylvanas used that caused the male leaders of the Horde to be wary of her also fell into the Crazy Lady story line, which states that women with psychopathic traits “demonstrate gender differences in psychopathy including using sexuality for manipulation, social aggression and emotional instability” (Cerny, Friedman, Smith, 2013). Throughout her story, Sylvanas regularly uses (1) manipulation to win battles, (2) social aggression to give herself the upper hand, and (3) emotional decision-making that could be viewed as unstable. For

example, Sylvanas (1) threatened to cause a plague that would wipe out both Alliance and Horde soldiers, (2) exchanged family members that she had kidnapped and held hostage to gain control over a part of the continent, and (3) burned a sacred tree and the home city of the Night Elves and killing everyone who was in the city. Sylvanas rarely wins her battles through direct combat, and when she does try to use direct combat, she usually fails. Due to this, the male leaders of the Horde continuously reiterate that Sylvanas is unstable. They state that she lacks empathy and loyalty to the Horde, therefore she needs to be under constant surveillance to ensure she does not do anything “insane.”

Once Sylvanas becomes the leader of the Horde, the male leaders who serve as her counsel regularly question her motives and tactics to defeat the Alliance. For example, during the war, when Sylvanas deploys a plague onto the battlefield, the male Horde leaders claim that she only wins battles in a dishonorable way because she not only killed the Alliance troops, but also her own. They claim that she lacks empathy for all people, including her own, and only sees them all as pawns to achieve her own goals. Leaders from both the Alliance and the Horde constantly claim that she is crazy, which only causes her to use manipulation to achieve her goals more often. Since she is considered crazy, she cannot use logic or reasoning to come to an agreement with others, meaning that she has to manipulate them in order to win. Sylvanas’s use of manipulation is in direct opposition to the male leaders of the Horde and further solidify her as weak and crazy through the use of indirect combat. According to Cerny, Friedman, Smith (2013), the Crazy Lady story line illustrates a gender difference in psychopathy. For Sylvanas, this difference comes from using manipulative and ruthless tactics to win her battles instead of using brute strength and honorable combat, which is the agreed upon battle strategy of the male

Horde leaders. This difference in battle tactics leads Sylvanas to be seen as crazy and dishonorable in the eyes of the male Horde leaders.

Lastly, underlying the entire narrative of Sylvanas is the idea that she is (In)dependent, which “refers to the relationships established between the heroine and her partner(s) in the game-world” (Tompkins, Lynch, Driel, and Fritz, 2020). In this story line, female characters are presented as independent by being put in leadership positions, but also are dependent on their male counterparts to help them make leadership decisions, instead of making them on their own. Therefore, the characters are portrayed as independent on the surface, but are also constantly undermined by their dependence on a male counterpart. In the early expansions, Sylvanas is reliant on her lover, Nathanos, and gives him much of the responsibility of leading her faction of the Horde. She leaves Nathanos to train warriors to fight with little to no oversight, even though, as a previous ranger general, she is more than capable of doing it herself. Then, although it seemed that Sylvanas was acting on her own judgement for many of these acts of manipulation, it is later revealed that she is relying on a man called The Jailor who is trapped in the Underworld who has been telling her what to do to achieve their shared goal. For example, Sylvanas committed a mass genocide against the Night Elves and is hated by both the Alliance and Horde for it, but it is later revealed that The Jailor told her that she needed to kill many people so that he had enough souls to break himself free of his prison, which is what led her to commit the genocide in the first place. After The Jailor is free of his prison and betrays Sylvanas, she gains a part of her soul back and becomes a completely different person. She now has empathy and becomes a passive character who is even more reliant on others than she was previously. She allows the leaders of the Alliance and the Horde to tell her what to do and make decisions for her because she is ashamed of her previous acts of violence. Therefore, it is shown

that, although it seemed like she was making decisions for herself, Sylvanas was always relying on others to make decisions for her and guide her actions. It also showed that, without empathy, Sylvanas could commit terrible acts of war, but with empathy, she is incapable of making any decisions on her own.

### Tyrande Whisperwind: The (In)dependent Strong Female Character

In *World of Warcraft*, Tyrande Whisperwind is one of the main female protagonists the player meets during their journeys. She is the chosen high priestess of Elune, goddess of the Night Elves, and the leader of the Night Elves. When players first encounter Tyrande in *World of Warcraft*, she and her husband, Malfurion, are helping the Night Elves rebuild their villages after the war that took place in *Warcraft III*. They are also trying to help the Night Elves adjust to being mortal, since their immortality was taken from them in the previous war. Throughout her narrative, Tyrande falls into three major story lines: (In)dependent, Strong Female Character, and Female Psychopathy.

Tyrande mainly falls into the (In)dependent story line, which “refers to the relationships established between the heroine and her partner(s) in the game-world” (Tompkins, Lynch, Driel, and Fritz, 2020). Although the relationship itself is not negative, the (in)dependent story line emphasizes the dependence that a supposedly independent female character has on her male counterparts to make leadership decisions. Tyrande is rarely seen without Malfurion and she is constantly relying on him for guidance in leading the Night Elves. In one expansion, Malfurion goes missing and this clearly causes Tyrande a lot of distress, and when he returns, Tyrande immediately makes him her co-leader to her make decisions on how to lead the Night Elves, even though she has been doing it on her own the entire time he has been missing. This example

illustrates that Tyrande is capable of being independent and making leadership decisions for her people, but also undermines the fact that she is capable of doing so by relying on Malfurion to help her make decisions immediately after his return. Tyrande immediately relies on her male counterpart to help her make decisions, which shows her lack of agency as an independent character. Another example is when Tyrande takes part in the war against the Horde as an Alliance leader. Although she is a leader within the Alliance, when she suggests certain tactics be taken, the male Alliance leader ignores her and chooses to take his own approach instead. Tyrande then praises the male leader for his plan, even though her plan was equally logical and viable, which illustrates that she needs to rely on a man to make decisions for her, even if it is not her partner. Although Tyrande is equally capable of making decisions and leading her people, she relies on the counsel of male leaders to make decisions for her, which illustrates her lack of independence, even though she is in a position of leadership.

Later on, Tyrande begins to exemplify the idea of the Strong Female Character, which is when a female character is not given respect and she has to use over-the-top methods to gain that respect and bring herself up to a man's level (Cristea, 2015). Tyrande's first instance of being a Strong Female Character is when she chooses to save the Night Elf people over her own husband after he is kidnapped. Tyrande essentially has to rid herself of her devotion to her husband in order to become a strong leader and save her people. By casting off the feminine quality of being devoted to her husband, Tyrande is allowed to become a Strong Female Character by bringing herself up to a man's level. She also rids herself of other feminine qualities to be seen as a strong leader. For example, after the genocide of the Night Elves, Tyrande gives herself to vengeance in exchange for power from Elune. She is no longer faithful or devoted to anyone and claims that if Elune does not give her the strength to avenge her people, that she will stop worshipping her.

Tyrande's narrative from this point forward focuses on her vengeance and how it causes her to ignore the men around her, which is seen as a problem that needs to be solved instead of a complicated issue since her people were the victims of a mass genocide. All of her actions are decided by emotionally-induced vengeance, which aligns with another female story line where female psychopaths in television regularly illustrate unstable emotions as a reason for their psychopathy (Cerny, Friedman, and Smith, 2014). Due to her emotional rage, Tyrande is shown to be a Strong Female Character, but also insane and violent. For example, when the male Alliance leader try and tell Tyrande to stay behind instead of travelling to the Underworld to help stop Sylvanas, she completely ignores them and jumps through the portal to hunt her down herself. The male leaders try to placate Tyrande's emotions and keep her from enacting her vengeance, and by the end of this narrative, Tyrande is forced to give up her vengeance to save the world. By doing so, she restores all of her feminine qualities, like her devotion to her husband, but she needed others to step in and tell her to do so. At this point, she is no longer a Strong Female Character and once again (In)dependent on others to tell her what to do and how to feel. This completely undermines Tyrande's feelings about the genocide of her people and the independence that she had to make decisions about how her people should be avenged. Once again, Tyrande must rely on others to make decisions for her and is forced to suppress her own emotions and thoughts to follow the lead of the men around her.

### Gender Conclusion

Sylvanas Windrunner and Tyrande Whisperwind could not be on more opposite sides within the faction war of *World of Warcraft*. In fact, they are in direct opposition to one another at times, which makes it even more intriguing and worrying that the two characters are defined

by the same story lines throughout their narratives. The Strong Female Character, (In)dependent, Crazy Lady, and Female Psychopathy story lines are all harmful in their own ways, but foundationally they all rely on gender differences to define the female character. The bigger issue is that these social narratives do not exist solely within media. Lorber (1994) found that people used stories like talking about biological differences between men and women and that there are equal opportunities for men and women in the real world to justify their beliefs about and treatment of women. The story of biological differences aligns perfectly with the Crazy Lady and Female Psychopathy story lines that rely on both physical and mental biological differences between men and women. The story of there being equal opportunities for men and women also aligns with the Strong Female Character and (In)dependent story lines that rely on the female character being in a position of power where they feel the need to be accepted and respected by men.

These story lines cause harm through the reproduction of these stories and reinforce the gender hierarchy both within *World of Warcraft* and in the real world. These story lines, and the narratives of Sylvanas Windrunner and Tyrande Whisperwind by extension, fall into the common theme in fantasy that the stories of heroines tend to be based on overcoming the patriarchy as part of the adventure (Tolmie, 2006). The intriguing notion that this analysis brings to the literature in that respect, is that this is not limited to heroines, but can also apply to female villains. Like Sylvanas, a female villain's story can be based on overcoming or dismantling the patriarchy as a crucial part of the narrative and character development. Therefore, the reinforcement of these stereotypes causes harm for the fantasy genre by normalizing these story lines as an effective way of creating a female character.

In *World of Warcraft*, these story lines also cause harm to the players at times. It promotes players using gendered stereotypes or gender-oriented language to assert their identity (Pearce, 2017; Eklund, 2011), because the characters of the game themselves are defined by those same things. The story lines can also create uncomfortable instances of sexism when playing as a female character (Myers, 2012; Boeshart, 2014), because the player still has to go through the story where the female characters are continuously less respected, looked down upon, and called unstable or crazy, while playing as a female character. Finally, these story lines promote the use of sexism within the game because sexism is already within the story, therefore the community learns through that narrative that using sexist language and ideas is appropriate when speaking to actual women playing the game, leading to women players being targeted, sexualized, harassed, and stereotyped (Boeshart, 2014; Brehm, 2013). Therefore, these story lines not only impact *World of Warcraft* or are just a story/game, but the story lines have also impacts on games, the fantasy genre, and the players themselves.

### Depictions of Race

This section is going to discuss the characters of Garrosh Hellscream and Baine Bloodhoof. Both of these characters are aligned with the Horde, mainly because previous studies have found that the races that are POC-coded within *World of Warcraft* are all within the Horde faction (Ritter, 2010; Monson, 2012; Spiecker, 2011; Johnson, 2014; Higgin, 2009; Cruise, 2018). Although they are within the same faction, these two characters are different races, and those races are based on two different real-world cultures. Garrosh Hellscream is an Orc, which has been found to be based on African and African American stereotypes (Spiecker, 2011). On the other hand, Baine Bloodhoof is Tauren, which has been found to be based on American



Indian or Indigenous stereotypes (Nash, 2016; Cruise, 2018). Therefore, these two characters rely on different story lines to shape their narratives and character developments based on the story lines that are told in the real world about Africans and American Indians, but some of these story lines overlap in concept, even though they have different names.

Garrosh Hellscream's characterization relies on story lines that are perpetuated in Western news media about African people. I found that Garrosh embodies the myth of lack of progress, myth of the primitive, myth of tradition, myth of African continuity, poverty myths, and hopelessness myth (Harth, 2012). First, the myth of lack of progress is the concept that Africans are a "backward" people (Harth, 2012), which is problematic because it relies on the idea that African people are not making progress like the rest of the world, therefore they should not be considered as equals. Second, the myth of the primitive is the way the Western media weaponizes words that relate to primitive or exotic to create a value judgement of people who align with these traits (Harth, 2012), which is an issue because it creates a comparison between a "modern" society and "primitive" society and encourages the people of a "modern" society to look down upon the "primitive" society. Third, the myth of tradition encourages the idea that African traditions are unchanging (Harth, 2012), which is problematic because it pushes the belief that Africans are overly attached to their traditions to the point of refusing progress as a society at any point in time. Fourth, the myth of African continuity is the belief that Africa is one country or one similar place (Harth, 2012), which is an issue because it completely neglects the cultural diversity of different countries in Africa, including languages, foods, clothing, customs, traditions, etc. Fifth, the poverty myth is the idea that all Africans are poor (Harth, 2012), which is problematic because it perpetuates the idea that Africans are less than capable of providing for themselves and need help from others or have to turn to extreme measures to survive. Lastly,

hopelessness myths are the beliefs that the people of Africa are beyond hope because there are too many problems in Africa to solve (Harth, 2012), which reinforces the idea that other countries should look down upon and abandon Africa and African people because there are too many issues in the continent that cannot be solved.

Baine Bloodhoof's narrative relies on historical stereotypes of American Indian people at different points in time. Baine symbolizes the story lines of the uncivilized Indian, the hostile and savage Indian, the conquered Indian, the treaty-asserting Indian, and the innocent Indian. Overall, these story lines were used to paint the Native Americans in a particular image that would be beneficial to European colonists during different time periods in colonization, but these story lines persist in the modern day. First, the story line of the uncivilized Indian is identical to the myth of lack of progress, in that it depicts Indians as "backwards" people (Bobo and Taun, 2006). This story line is a problem because it allows for people to feel justified in conquering and hurting the American Indians since they are not as civilized as the European people, which promotes a racial hierarchy. Second, the story line of the hostile and savage Indian is when American Indians are shown to be warlike savages (Bobo and Taun, 2006), which is an issue because it creates the belief that American Indians are dangerous, therefore they should be met with caution and equal aggression, even if it means killing them. Third, the story line of the conquered Indian is the idea that American Indians are powerless and dependent on their conquerors (Bobo and Taun, 2006), which is similar in concept to the poverty myth. The issue with this story line is that it promotes the idea that American Indians cannot provide for themselves in the modern world that the European colonists created, therefore they are merely a relic of the past. Fourth, the treaty-asserting Indian is when American Indians are depicted as an economic and political threat through their use of old treaties that they made with the European

colonists and the U.S. government (Bobo and Taun, 2006), which is problematic because it promotes the idea that American Indians are people to fear because they will take away things from everyone else, like land. Lastly, the innocent Indian is the idea that American Indians are friendly and will not stand in the way of European investors and explorers (Bobo and Taun, 2006), which is an issue because it reinforces the idea that American Indians are weak and will allow European investors and explorers to come and claim their land and resources without putting up a fight.

Even though the names of the story lines are specific for each race, and therefore each character, there is a clear overlap between the two characters in terms of the story lines that are used to define their characters. Basically, both characters are characterized by story lines that encourage the player to look down upon them in one way or another. Their narratives promote harmful stereotypes of African and Indigenous people. This analysis will explore specific instances of when these story lines impact the character narratives and the narrative of the game and illustrate how these story lines are relied upon to push both the character and the overall narrative forward.

#### Garrosh Hellscream: The Orc Scapegoat

In *World of Warcraft*, Garrosh Hellscream is the chief of the Mag'har. The Mag'har are orcs that escaped corruption from the Fel demons of the Burning Legion that pride themselves on their shamanistic traditions and tribal society centered on survival through ritual combat and personal honor. Previous studies have already established that the orc race in *World of Warcraft* is designed to suggest that the orcs are of an African culture (Spiecker, 2011), therefore Garrosh is a major antagonist who leads the orc "African" people, which causes his narrative to fall into

stereotypical story lines of African people. Specifically, I found that Garrosh falls into story lines of African people that are seen in Western news media: myth of lack of progress, myth of the primitive, myth of tradition, myth of African continuity, poverty myths, and hopelessness myth (Harth, 2012).

First, Garrosh's narrative illustrates the myth of lack of progress. The myth of lack of progress promotes the idea that Africans are not modern and are instead a "backwards" people (Harth, 2012). This myth is problematic because it relies on the stereotype that African people are not making progress like the rest of the world, which then cause people to believe they are "backwards" compared to other countries and continents. During his story, Garrosh refuses to use any kind of advanced magic or technology in combat. He instead emphasizes the importance of honorable combat, which is a traditional tactic in a modern world. He condemns other leaders of the Horde for using advanced technology and magic to win battles. In one expansion, he also only had interest in an artifact that increased battle prowess through gaining power from an old god, illustrating that Garrosh focuses on the past and refuses to adapt to the technology of the future.

Second, Garrosh falls into the myth of the primitive, which is the use of words that relate to primitive or exotic means to create a value judgement (Harth, 2012). This myth relies on the use of descriptive language as a reference point to say that one culture is better than another since one is using something primitive, while others are using more modern or smarter means to achieve the same end goal. Garrosh is insistent on using honorable combat in order to solve the problems that face the Horde, but other leaders of the Horde believe otherwise. For example, two other Horde leaders, Thrall and Baine, try and convince Garrosh that honorable combat is not the

only way to solve problems and pass judgement on him for not seeking alternative methods, such as treaties or compromise. Other leaders, such as Sylvanas, question why Garrosh refuses to use advanced technology or magic to the Horde's advantage and pass judgement on his unwillingness to see the use of these things as honorable as well. Basically, Garrosh's insistence on using traditional means to solve problems leads to value judgements from others throughout the narrative.

Both of these previous points overlap with the myth of tradition, which Garrosh also exemplifies. The myth of tradition promotes the idea that African traditions exist in an unchanging way (Harth, 2012). Although this could be seen as positive, this myth is used to assert the idea that African history is static instead of dynamic. It promotes the idea that Africans are so tied to their traditions that they refuse to progress in any way and that Africans will always act the same way, regardless of the point of time in history. This is an issue because it encourages the belief that African people are to be looked down upon because they are not progressing along with the rest of the world. Instead, they are choosing to remain in the past, therefore they are not as advanced as the Western world. Garrosh is consistently depicted as upholding the traditions of the Horde, those traditions being tribal in that they engage in ritualistic combat and shamanism. His refusal of new technology and magic is based on the fact that he believes that the Horde needs to stay true to the traditions that created it. Then, when others challenge Garrosh and his traditional ways, he doubles down on his commitment to these orc traditions, even as more and more of the other races in Horde rise against him. Ultimately, it is not the traditions themselves that portray Garrosh as part of the myth of tradition, but instead it is his refusal to change that promotes the myth that these traditions are unchanging, therefore the Orcs refuse to change and will always exist as a people that believe that only honorable combat

is a proper way to solve their problems. This then promotes the idea that African cultures and people also exist in an unchanging way, which combined with the myth of lack of progress, results in players believing that African people are a backwards people that refuse to progress as a people.

The last three myths, the myth of African continuity, poverty myths, and hopelessness myths, are not seen as much in Garrosh's story, but are still present. The myth of African continuity, which is when Africa is viewed as one country or one similar place (Harth, 2012), is illustrated when the Horde turn to another orc clan for help in Garrosh's absence. This myth promotes the idea that all of Africa speaks the same language and has the same culture, instead of being a continent filled with many languages and diverse cultures, which limits people's understanding of African society. When the Horde turned to this other clan of Orcs, although both clans of orcs originated from the same continent, the orc clan that the Horde turned to for help had almost been wiped out and the remaining survivors were forced to flee the continent many years prior. The fact that the two orc clans have different histories and one of them had to flee the continent, but are depicted as similar and still speaking the same language reinforces the myth of African continuity.

Poverty myths, which is the belief that all Africans are poor (Harth, 2012), is shown through Garrosh stating that he must wage battle with the Alliance to secure resources for his people to survive, which implies that the orcs are poor and cannot sustain themselves. The poverty myth reinforces the idea that all Africans are poor, therefore they will turn to extreme measures to acquire what they need to survive, which illustrates them as a desperate group of people.

Finally, hopelessness myths, which is the belief that there are so many problems with Africa that they cannot be resolved and the people are beyond hope (Harth, 2012), is seen in how others interact with Garrosh and his people. This myth is used to promote the idea that other countries should not try to help Africans in any way because they have too many issues that cannot be resolved, therefore there is no point in trying to help them. For example, due to Garrosh's refusal to compromise and unwillingness to change, this leads the Alliance to believe that any people in the Horde who have not defected are beyond help. The Alliance also ignores the traditions of the Horde when Garrosh loses in a duel and should be killed as punishment for his crimes, instead putting him on trial because that is what the Alliance believes in. The last instance of hopelessness myths comes from Garrosh himself. After he has died and is found by the player in the Underworld, Garrosh proclaims that he is proud of his decisions and would do them all again, showing that he feels the violence he caused was valid to save the Horde from becoming a part of the Alliance. This leaves the player wondering if the Horde can actually be saved or if the Horde has to align themselves with the Alliance to move forward and progress into the future.

#### Baine Bloodhoof: The Peace-Treaty Indian

In *World of Warcraft*, Baine Bloodhoof is the High Chieftain of the tauren tribes of Mulgore, which is the home of the noble tauren. Previous studies have established that the tauren tribes are the Native American stand-in for the game, and their depiction appropriates Indigeneity (Nash, 2016; Cruise, 2018). This leads Baine to be characterized by common stereotypes from Native American history, as outlined by Bobo and Taun (2006). Baine illustrates the stereotypes of the uncivilized Indian, the hostile and savage Indian, the conquered

Indian, the treaty-asserting Indian, and the innocent Indian. These stereotypes were used throughout Native American history in order to paint Native Americans in a specific light that was beneficial to European colonists during that time period and for different means, but ultimately led to negative stereotypes of Indians becoming the norm within society, which still persist today.

Initially, Baine is illustrated to be an uncivilized Indian, which depicts Indians as backward and primitive (Bobo and Taun, 2006). This stereotype was used to justify colonist policies that hurt the Native Americans and absolve them of their guilt for taking their land because the Native Americans were not civilized like they were and merely occupied the land, instead of owned it. Baine and his fellow tauren are shown to be uncivilized due to their belief in Earth spirits and insistence on being kind to them, which most of the races on the continent do not believe. Baine tries to speak with other races that are mining and hurting the Earth spirits to get them to stop, but the other races do not believe him because they think that the tauren beliefs are primitive. Also, when Baine turns to violence later in the narrative, he is stopped by tauren spirits and told that violence is not the tauren way, which convinces Baine to return to the traditions of the Horde and continuing the idea that the tauren race is uncivilized.

At many points, Baine is also shown to be a hostile and savage Indian, which is when Indians were believed to be savages and warlike aggressors (Bobo and Taun, 2006). This stereotype was used when Native Americans responded with hostility over the taking of their land, therefore colonists started to depict Native Americans as an aggressive people so that the colonists were justified in killing them when they tried to protect their land. When Baine is ignored by the other races about hurting the Earth spirits, he breaks their tools in an attempt to



stop them from hurting the spirits any further. Baine also goes along with the violence that the Horde is committing in the war against the Alliance, although it is resentfully because he does not fully agree with it. He tries to execute a malevolent spirit at one point as well before being stopped by tauren spirits telling him that violence is not the tauren way. Therefore, Baine's instances of being a hostile and savage Indian are short, but he still shows him as the aggressor who has lost sight of his traditions when they occur.

At times, Baine also is illustrated as the conquered Indian, which states that the Indians were conquered, and they are now powerless and dependent on their conquerors (Bobo and Taun, 2006). This stereotype was used to illustrate Native Americans as neither an assimilated people or as a "traditional" Indian, instead these are a people that are relics of a previous era living in a society that no longer has a place for them. In this case, those conquerors are the Alliance and Baine seems to be in their control at certain points. For example, Baine expelled any tauren that wished for revenge against the Alliance because he did not believe that violence was the way to solve their issues. Baine regularly advocates for peace from both sides, in which he rejects the war between the Horde and Alliance and feels as though they should all find a way to live together on Azeroth. Also, when Alliance leaders decide Sylvanas's punishment for her crimes, Baine chooses to agree with the punishment, even though her punishment aligns with Alliance values more than his own.

Baine is mostly characterized as a treaty-asserting Indian, which is when Indians are seen as an economic and political threat through their use of treaties (Bobo and Taun, 2006), but not in the same way that Native Americans were historically stereotyped. Historically, this stereotype created the image of the Native American as a threat to economic and political society

by asserting antiquated treaties that have no place in modern society. In *World of Warcraft*, Baine pushes for peaceful solutions and treaties between the Horde and Alliance, but he tends to vilify Garrosh, leader of the Horde, and the Horde for their violent methods in doing so. Baine and his allies even work with the Alliance in order to bring Garrosh down, in the hopes that this will allow for the two sides to find peace. Instead of being a threat to the Alliance, Baine is a threat to the Horde and their traditional ways of life. Baine regularly suggests that the Horde enter a treaty with the Alliance in order to stop the war, but he is ignored because the other races of the Horde do not want to compromise their own traditions to appease the Alliance. His peaceful and treaty-asserting nature is used as a way to align Baine with the Alliance and makes him a significant threat to the Horde because he is willing to compromise some of their traditions in order to achieve peace between the two factions.

Lastly, due to his depictions as a treaty-asserting Indian that is a threat to the Horde, Baine is also shown to be an innocent Indian, which depicted Native Americans as friendly people who would not stand in the way of European investors and explorers (Bobo and Taun, 2006). This was used to convince European explorers to travel to North America by relieving the fears of angry natives intent on getting rid of intruders. Due to the fact that Baine does not agree with the Horde's violent methods, the Alliance see him and the tauren as innocent. They are willing to work with the Alliance and engage in acts of kindness to the Alliance. For example, Baine betrays the Horde and returns a prisoner to the Alliance because he disagrees with Sylvanas's attempt to control his mind and soul. Also, throughout their time in the Underworld, Baine never stands in the way of any of the decisions that are made by Alliance leaders, even when he is skeptical of their choices or does not agree. Therefore, Baine is innocent and kind towards the Alliance, meaning that he is not a threat to them.

## Race Conclusion

Although Garrosh Hellscream and Baine Bloodhoof are of different fantasy races and based on different real-world cultures, the similarities in the story lines used for their characterization is concerning. More problematic though is the fact that these story lines do not stay within the confines of the game. Many of these story lines fall under the conceptual story line that Bonilla-Silva (2018) established, “other groups have made it, how come they have not?” Story lines like the myth of lack of progress, the myth of tradition, the conquered Indian, and the uncivilized Indian all provide answers to this question but focus on the individual choice by these groups to remain in the past instead of assimilating into the modern day and pushing their society forward. These story lines rely on individualistic explanations of inequality rather than the broader social, economic, and political barriers, which reinforces the racial hierarchy within *World of Warcraft* and the real world.

These story lines also reinforce racial stereotypes within the fantasy genre as a whole. This analysis illustrates that, although the Orcs and Tauren are fantasy races, their narratives abide by racial story lines (Kim, 2004). These characters gave both Garrosh and Baine recognizable traits associated with the real-world group they are meant to represent, which is common in fantasy literature (Monson, 2012). The addition that this analysis makes is that these recognizable traits do not stop at the physical appearance of a character. These traits can also exist within the narrative and characterization of a POC-coded character through the use of story lines. This means that the fantasy genre can use racist story lines to define their characters without giving them physical traits that would denote the culture that they are based on, which allows for the reproduction of these story lines, and the racial hierarchy, to become more covert within fantasy literature.

The use of these story lines can also have a negative impact on *World of Warcraft* players. Studies have shown that these races follow stereotypical depictions of real-world races throughout history (Ritter, 2010; Monson, 2012; Spiecker, 2011; Johnson, 2014; Higgin, 2009; Cruise, 2018). This analysis supports these findings, but also shows that since these story lines come from real world stories that are still used in the modern day, that it is possible that the story lines in the *World of Warcraft* narrative can reproduce the racial hierarchy and promote the idea that these story lines are true, even in the modern day. Since the game takes place in a fantasy world, players tend to ignore the racism within the game (Ritter, 2010), but this does not stop the story lines from having an impact on the players. Players will take the base characteristics of a race in the game and craft their own narratives for their character, which shapes how they act in-game and interact with others (Pecker, 2013). Since these races are based on the racist story lines of Africans and Indigenous people, this means that players are crafting their own characters and narratives with these story lines as part of it as well, which further perpetuates the story lines, the racial hierarchy, and the stereotypes attached to these story lines. Therefore, these story lines impact the real world, the fantasy genre, and players just by including them in the game narrative.

#### Depictions in *World of Warcraft* Conclusion

These story lines, whether they are based on gender or race, are used to promote stereotypical ideas of women and POC and further reinforce the gender and racial hierarchy. Some may argue that these depictions do not matter because they are based within a fantasy world, but these story lines still contribute to the social narratives that society has in the real world for these groups. These story lines can illustrate the biological differences between men

and women, which is a strongly held belief in the real world (Lorber, 1994) or they can provide a reason for why some races have made it in the U.S. while others have not (Bonilla-Silva, 2018). Ultimately, the use of these story lines in media helps to solidify the conceptualizations of certain groups, like women and POC in the public's mind. They can be used by people to justify gender and racial issues, place the blame on individuals, and absolve themselves of guilt (Bonilla-Silva, 2018), and these story lines only help reinforce those ideas.

The use of these story lines also illustrates the role that *Activision-Blizzard*, as a progressive company, has in the reproduction of these narratives. Although the company was supported and known as a diverse and inclusive company, this was mostly a surface level image that was used to distract from the content of the games they made (Williams, 2020). This analysis has shown that the narrative of *World of Warcraft* has since the beginning and continues to use sexist and racist story lines to create their characters and push forward the overall narrative. But the reputation the company had as being a progressive company creates additional barriers for players who try and point out these sexist and racist story lines in the game. By believing in the company being progressive and the fact that *World of Warcraft* is based in a fantasy setting, it can be difficult for people to argue that these instances are a problem within the game, which protects the company from any backlash for the content of their game.

This dissertation is meant to establish the digital disconnect between in game and real-world issues in *World of Warcraft*. This chapter has established that gendered and racial story lines are used within *World of Warcraft* to both define characters and push the overall narrative, as well as established that these story lines can have an impact on players (Pecker, 2013; Boeshart, 2014; Brehm, 2013; Pearce, 2017; Eklund, 2011; Myers, 2012; Ritter, 2010). This

impact on players can shape the beliefs of the player base and combined with the progressive reputation of *Activision-Blizzard*, these story lines can make it harder for players who are concerned with the gender and racial story lines in the game to speak about it and bring it to the attention of the developers. Also, players may, unconsciously or consciously, recognize the similarity in the fantasy and real-world depictions and become more inclined to make value judgments of these groups based on the stereotypes they have interacted with in the game, which blurs the line between what is fantasy and what is real.

## CHAPTER 5: RESPONSES TO IN-GAME ISSUES BEFORE THE LAWSUIT

Although *World of Warcraft* has numerous instances of sexist and racist story lines within its narrative, as shown in the previous chapter, the reputation of *Activision-Blizzard* as a company is that they are very diverse and progressive. Many groups that fight for gender and race equality in the gaming industry and players themselves supported *Activision-Blizzard* because of this reputation (*Blizzard Entertainment*, Retrieved Nov. 23, 2021). Therefore, before the lawsuit came to light, players that wished to talk about the instances of sexism and racism in the game had a difficult time conveying their points. *Activision-Blizzard*, as an organization, used terms like inclusion and diversity to hide the systemic sexism and racism within the company from the players (Williams, 2020). By doing this, *Activision-Blizzard* created a barrier to challenging the sexist and racist instances in *World of Warcraft* by convincing the players that the game and company were progressive and diverse, which caused the players to argue against people who brought up these issues on the company's behalf (Williams, 2020). This is unsurprising since research has shown that this is a common practice used by companies to obscure sexism and racism within the company (Williams, 2020; Gallagher, 2020).

This study intends to show how players are also able to obscure the sexism and racism present within *World of Warcraft* while being supported by the fact that, before the lawsuit, there was no evidence of sexism and racism in the company. To do this, I will utilize Bonilla-Silva's (2018) concept of racial frames. Bonilla-Silva (2018) identified four racial frames: abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism, and minimization. Abstract liberalism is when people use the idea of meritocracy to reject that racism exists. Naturalization states that racial differences are a biological occurrence. Cultural racism explains the standing of minorities in

society by identifying cultural traits that the group has. Finally, minimalization is when White people state that discrimination is no longer a major factor in the life chances of minorities.

Of these four frames (Bonilla-Silva, 2018), two of these frames are evident within the responses to in-game sexism and racism. First, the most common frame that was used by players was the minimalization frame, which explains how White people view discrimination as no longer being a major factor in the life chances of minority groups (Bonilla-Silva, 2018), therefore asserting that racism is no longer important or an issue at all. This is problematic because it ignores the systemic ways in which minority groups are marginalized in both the real world and the game world. In the real world, organizations will implement policies that diminish the agency of certain racial groups (Ray, 2019; Williams, 2020; Gallagher, 2020).

For the public, *Activision Blizzard* presents as a diverse and inclusive company to attract people to their games (Williams, 2020; Gallagher, 2020), but the formal rules of the company for diversity and inclusion are decoupled from the organizational practices, which allows for the suppression of minority employees in the company (Ray, 2019). In the game world, the minimization of gender and race issues also ignores the common practices of the industry identified by researchers. For race, it has been found that non-white characters are regularly limited to violent and aggressive roles (Burgess, 2011; Dickerman, 2008) and that players are more likely to associate non-white characters with violent behavior (Dickerman, 2008). While for gender, it has been found that the stereotype that women are less skilled at games is tied to the fact that almost all professional players are men (Paaßen, Thekla, and Stratemeyer, 2017) and that the image of a “true gamer” is seen as male, which marginalizes women who are competent at a game because they do not fit this image (Paaßen, Thekla, and Stratemeyer, 2017). Therefore,



minimizing the fact that sexism and racism exist within the real world and within games contributes to reproduction of the gender and racial hierarchy.

Second, the frame that was seen in the responses was the abstract liberalism frame, which is when people use the idea of meritocracy to deny that racism exists (Bonilla-Silva, 2018), therefore stating that because everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed, that racism is no longer a factor. This is an issue because it assumes all people have equal chances in life and confront similar barriers, but this is not the case.

In real life, Ray (2019) argues that people of minority groups are subjected to racialized hiring practices and organizational practices that suppress their ability to confront these barriers. Lorber (1994) and Bonilla-Silva (2018) argue that minority groups, women and people of color, are subjected to gender and racial stereotypes and that people regularly deny the existence of these stereotypes through the use of story lines that people use to justify their support of these stereotypes. Women are also faced with degrading comments and threats when they try to combat these barriers, especially in a male-dominated space (Salter and Blodgett, 2012).

In the game world, the lack of equal chances is focused on within research on women in gaming. One study found that women increase their skill at the same rate as men, but perform worse due to the stereotype that women are less skilled at games (Ratan, 2015). Historically, women have been classified as “casual gamers” because male gamers claim that women play games to be social and not competitive like men (Taylor, 2012). Due to these stereotypes, scholars have found that women tend to experience sexism within *World of Warcraft* from the community by being targeted, sexualized, harassed, and stereotyped based solely on their gender (Boeshart, 2014; Brehm, 2013). These studies illustrate that there are many barriers for women

and people of color that are not faced by other groups, like men and White people, therefore the idea of meritocracy denies that all of these barriers exist.

The final frame that I observed in the forum post responses is a unique colorblind frame that I call “weaponized escapism.” Weaponized escapism is when people use escapism, defined as the “habitual diversion of the mind to purely imaginative activity or entertainment as an escape from reality or routine” (Merriam-Webster) to claim that social issues, like racism and sexism, do exist, but not within the specific space they are referring to. Therefore, I termed this frame weaponized escapism because people are using the concept of escapism in a combative way as a discursive practice to deny speaking about sexism or racism within a certain space. People who use this frame are stating that real-world social issues cannot exist in their escapist space because there is a disconnect between the real-world and the game-world. This frame differs from the minimalization frame because, unlike the minimalization frame, people who utilize this frame acknowledge that sexism and racism are real problems that exist. People who employ the weaponized escapism frame will state that sexism and racism are major issue within the real world, but are not an issue or do not exist within their specific escapist space, which makes it unique from the minimization frame.

To illustrate these practices, I will be analyzing how players responded to in-game issues before the lawsuit and how players used these racial frames to justify the current gender and racial hierarchy in the *World of Warcraft*. To do this, I found four discussions on the *World of Warcraft* forums that addressed gender or race issues within *World of Warcraft* before the lawsuit came to light, specifically in the year 2020. The *World of Warcraft* forums are an official space on the *World of Warcraft* website where players can post and discuss different things about

the game, like gameplay, lore, and issues within the game. I selected these posts by filtering the forum posts to only show those that mentioned the words “sexism” or “racism” before the year 2021, which is before the lawsuit.

Two of these discussions arose during the Black Lives Matter movement during the summer of 2020, while the other two were discussions that were posted later in the year. The first post I analyzed was created by a player named Thavius (2020), which listed multiple instances of racism in *World of Warcraft*, like the portrayal of the Orcs that was outlined in the narrative analysis. 170 comments were posted in response to this forum post responding to the original points. The second post I analyzed was created by a player known as Meatfist (2020), who created a post stating that representation within media should not/does not matter. He stated that people should recognize other people’s abilities and talents instead of focusing on representation. 578 comments were posted in response to this forum post. Third, a player named Paradigmrum (2020) created a forum post pointing out that the game forces players to engage in a race war by dividing the races between the Alliance and the Horde and having them fight. 96 comments were posted in response to this assertion. Finally, a forum post created by a player named Elleyella pointed out a specific quest where an enemy exclaims “You hit like a girl!” and how this can be uncomfortable for female players. 635 comments were posted in response to this post. These four posts clearly addressed sexism or racism within *World of Warcraft* and expressed an opinion regarding the issues. Although only four posts were chosen, this study analyzes all the comments in response to these posts, totaling 1,479 responses, to illustrate how players respond to issues of sexism and racism being brought to the forefront for discussion within the game.

To establish the context of what these discussions on the forums looked like before the lawsuit, I first analyzed the sub-themes that arose in the discussions on sexism and racism in *World of Warcraft* before the lawsuit came out. These discussions revealed five major sub-themes within the responses to the original post: Dismissal, Separation, Mockery, Misrepresentation, and Redirection. I then categorized these themes to Bonilla-Silva's (2018) racial frames, as well as the weaponized escapism frame. Three of these sub-themes fit within either the minimalization or abstract liberalism frames that were established by Bonilla-Silva (2018), while the other two fit into the weaponized escapism frame due to the fact that these discussions revolve around a fantasy video game and not real life.

### Minimalization

The most prominent responses were those that aligned with Bonilla-Silva's (2018) minimization frame, in which people state that discrimination is no longer a major factor in the life chances of minority groups. Within the minimalization frame, two sub-themes emerged from the player responses. Most players responded to the accusation that *World of Warcraft* might have racist or sexist elements with the sub-themes of Dismissal or Mockery. Although Dismissal and Mockery responses differ in their delivery, the intention of the comments are to minimize the idea that discrimination is present or that it impacts the game in any way.

### Dismissal

Dismissal was the most common response within the forum posts. Dismissal occurred when the player either 1) dismissed the person who was bringing up their concerns or 2) dismissed the topic the forum post was talking about. Dismissal is a common concept within

gaming literature, especially concerning the instances of racism within games. For example, it has been found that due to *World of Warcraft* being set during a fantasy war, that allows players to ignore the racism within the game and attribute those instances to the war between the factions (Ritter, 2010). In other games, it has been found that players dismiss racial issues because they do not believe that a gaming forum is the place to discuss social issues (McKernan, 2015). Many of the dismissal responses in the *World of Warcraft* forums looked similar to the following: “Wow, for a weekend troll thread you sure put a lot of effort in it. Flagged.” (Henoriel, 2020) or “Or you know you can actualy [*sic*] just stop talking about it. This is completly [*sic*] made up issue nothing els [*sic*].” (Elias, 2020). The first quote illustrates a dismissal tactic used commonly online, which is to call the person bringing up the issue a “troll.” A “troll” in this context is a person who is specifically trying “to antagonize others online by deliberately posting inflammatory, irrelevant, or offensive comments or other disruptive content” (Merriam-Webster). By calling the player bringing up the issue a “troll” the player is implying that the person bringing up the issue is only doing it to antagonize others and is not actually acting in good faith. This is meant to minimize the importance of the issues brought up by discrediting the person who brought it up in the first place. The second quote also contributes to this act of minimization by discrediting the issue itself. The second quote claims that the issue is made up and not actually present within the game, therefore it should not be spoken about because it does not actually impact anything in the game. By stating that the issue itself is not real, it makes the issue seem insignificant, which in turn will discourage others from speaking about the issue itself.

## Mockery

Mockery was less prominent as a response, but still present within the forum responses. Mockery is when a player makes fun of the idea of changes to the game or makes fun of the person who brought up the issue. For example, when mocking the idea of changes, a commenter would say, “I concur with the OP. Let’s change this to World of Teacraft, where all races and creeds sit around to a cup of tea... discussing of ways to make better blends.” (Beerwolf, 2020). This quote mocks the idea of making changes to the game itself by overexaggerating the point that the person who brought up the issue was trying to make. The joke implies that if the issues were removed from the game, then automatically all semblance of war and fighting has to go with it, therefore leaving the game as “World of Teacraft.” This minimalizes the issues brought up mainly because it suggests that different races and conflict between them is required to make the game, but this ignores the complexities and nuances of the issue as a whole. Then, for mocking the person, a commenter would state, “[:roll\_eyes:] [emoji] Get over yourself princess.” (Trunchbull, 2020). This quote mocks the person who brought up the issue directly, and in this case the person who brought up the issue was talking about a line that states “You hit like a girl.” The response not only tells the person who brought up the issue to get over it, but also insults them using the same type of language that the person was trying to bring attention to by using the term “princess”. Therefore, this quote is meant to minimize the issue by claiming it is not a big deal, but then reinforces this stance by mimicking the language that the person had an issue with in the first place. This example of mockery implies that women are weak, which is supported by the literature on gender stereotypes (Lorber, 1994; Taylor, 2012).

### Abstract Liberalism

One major sub-theme also aligned with Bonilla-Silva's (2018) abstract liberalism frame. The abstract liberalism frame is when people use meritocracy to deny that racism exists (Bonilla-Silva, 2018). In this context, the abstract liberalism frame states that since there is an equal opportunity for all races, that racism is not a factor. The only sub-theme that falls under abstract liberalism is Misrepresentation, these comments rely on the idea that all races are equally represented within the game.

### Misrepresentation

The theme of Misrepresentation falls under the abstract liberalism frame because misrepresentation asserts that all races are equally represented within *World of Warcraft*. Although this is true, the reason this is a misrepresentation is because the responses either leave out or completely ignore the surrounding context of the races in the game and the socio-political structure of the game. For example, a response posted by Kaifana (2020) describes the various races that are represented within *World of Warcraft*:

“The game is very diverse when it comes to cultural inspirations. Not sure what you mean.

Humans: Medieval

Worgen: Victorian England

Dwarf: Celtic, Scottish

Goblins: New Jersey/New York/ Islander

Trolls: Caribbean

Zandalari: Aztec, Incan, West african accent

Blood elf: Middle Eastern, French, elvish

Night elves: Native American, Ancient Greek, Turkish

Nightborne: Roman, Ancient Greek.

Tauren: Native American

Vulpera: Gypsy, North African

Draenei: Greek mythology, Eastern Europe, Indian.” (Kaifana, 2020)

Although this breakdown does not get all the cultural inspirations within the game correct, it also leaves out important details in order to support their point. For example, Goblins being portrayed as New York/New Jersey leaves out the fact that the race is based on historical caricatures of Jewish bankers popularized by Nazi propaganda posters through the use of portraying the Goblins as greedy, dishonest, and malevolent (Adorno, 1950/2019; Wilson, 1996; Placido, 2022). The response also mixes the races in accordance to what faction they fall into, which reveals more about the inequalities that are present within the game. For context: Humans, Worgen, Dwarves, Night Elves (Nightbourne included, since they are a subset of Night Elves), and Draenei are part of the Alliance, while Goblins, Trolls (Zandalari included, since these are both troll races), Blood Elves, Tauren, and Vulpera are part of the Horde. When looking at the response with this context, it can be seen that the inspirations for Alliance races tend to be based in cultures reflective of White people, while the inspirations for the Horde tend to be based in



cultures reflective of people of color or at the very least groups that have been historically marginalized and targeted, like gypsies.

Whether these responses leave out information intentionally or not is unclear, but I am more inclined to liken these responses to Bonilla-Silva's idea of both racists and non-racists unconsciously perpetuating racist systems (2018), meaning that racist beliefs such as these can be reproduced by people who see themselves as racist or not racist. This is because, at the surface level, someone who looks at *World of Warcraft's* cultural inspirations would believe that the game is incredibly diverse, as the player who responded did, but when breaking down the cultural inspirations within the context of the game systems, it becomes clearer that the factions are established along racial lines. Although the response itself falls into the frame of abstract liberalism due to its focus on every race being equally represented, it becomes misinformation because it leaves out the necessary context to understand the issue in full.

#### Weaponized Escapism

The final two sub-themes do not fit within any of Bonilla-Silva's racial frames, mainly because they are specifically used within the context of speaking about racism and sexism within media. These two sub-themes are Separation and Redirection, and although they do not fit within the original concept of racial frames, they are still discursive practices used by people to downplay or ignore the social issues that are brought up. The sub-themes of Separation and Redirection are unique from the original racial frames because they do not deny the existence of sexism or racism within real life, only within the game. In fact, they tend to use the fact that sexism and racism exist in real life to minimize the importance of talking about these issues within the game space, therefore denying sexism and racism within *World of Warcraft*.

These two sub-themes fall under a new colorblind racial frame that I will be calling “weaponized escapism.” Weaponized escapism is when people use escapism, defined as the “habitual diversion of the mind to purely imaginative activity or entertainment as an escape from reality or routine” (Merriam-Webster) to claim that social issues, like racism and sexism, do exist, but not within the specific space they are referring to. Basically, when people use something as a form of escapism, they disconnect it from the real world and social issues, and although escapism itself does not necessarily require this, people use escapism to aggressively reject the idea that social issues can exist within a particular space. Therefore, these issues cannot exist in whatever space the individual uses as a form of escapism.

### Separation

The theme of Separation is the most blatant form of weaponized escapism. Separation is when the response states that there is no connection between *World of Warcraft* and real-world issues, so bringing up social issues within *World of Warcraft* is meaningless. Responses that stated this looked like so: “World of Warcraft  $\neq$  Real World, if you don’t see the difference then you need professional help, this way  $\gg\text{---}\gg$ .” (Xitro, 2020) or “This is why we can’t have nice things. Keep real life out of fantasy racism has no place in WoW we come here to get away from this garbage of “everything is racists” (Makigan, 2020). These quotes coincide with research that has found that players use the fantasy elements of video games to help them meet needs not met in real life and reduce stress (Ferguson and Olson, 2012). It also reinforces the idea that the virtual world, since it is computer generated, is not real (Calleja, 2010), and therefore real-world issues cannot be applied within the virtual world. The first quote was the most common response of this type, where people outright stated that the game is not the same as

the real-world and should not be seen that way. It dismisses the in-game social issues that are being brought up solely on the basis that the game itself is not real, therefore we cannot apply real-world conceptualizations and issues to it. The second quote also states that people need to “keep real life out of fantasy” and that people use the game to escape real-world issues. This implies that, because people use *World of Warcraft* as a way to escape the real world, that people should not apply real life issues to the game.

### Redirection

The second theme, Redirection, also uses weaponized escapism, but in a less direct manner. Players that engaged in Redirection took the idea of social issues within the game and redirected that concept to possible cases of real-world issues of the same type. A good example of this is when a player named Canabal (2020) responded to a comment on a *World of Warcraft* forum post:

*““There are no non-white employees as far as I am aware, I certainly cannot think of a single one off the top of my head that works at Activision.”*

That [[:point\_up\_2:]] [emoji] would make for an interesting thread to discuss if it was true. Not seeing black pixels isn’t racism, so it’s not worth discussing.” (Canabal, 2020).

This response both denies that in-game social issues exist, while also redirecting the conversation to the real-world that may also have similar issues. It implies that the representation within the game does not matter, but if the issue were to be present within the company in real life, then that would be an issue worthy of discussion and attention. Therefore, these issues can

only be important within the context of the real world, meaning that they do not matter within the virtual world.

### Conclusion

*Activision-Blizzard's* reputation as a progressive company is one that seems to have had an impact on the players of their game. Even with specific examples of sexist or racist instances within *World of Warcraft*, the majority of players were able to deny that these instances were actually examples of sexism or racism. Then, even when the players did not deny that the instances of sexism and racism were present, players denied that they mattered because they take place within a virtual space and in a fictional world. Something being virtual does not necessarily mean that it is not real or not reflective of real-world spaces (Calleja, 2010), but through the use of escapism, players are able to disconnect the virtual from the real world.

This allows players to use discursive practices, like minimalization and abstract liberalism (Bonilla-Silva, 2018), to reject the idea that sexism and racism can exist within the virtual space. In many cases, this is done without the player themselves engaging in sexist or racist behavior. Instead, players insist that the issue does not exist in a virtual space or that this is a real-world problem, therefore a gaming forum website is not the appropriate place to discuss these topics (McKernan, 2015). This does not deny that sexism and racism are problems within the real world. In fact, in some cases, players did acknowledge that these issues exist in the real-world, but by bringing these issues into the virtual space, this conflicts with the escapist nature of *World of Warcraft* as a game. Therefore, players must separate racism and sexism by stating that they only exist in the real world. This conceptualization of the game world and real world relies

on the idea that developers making the game are not pulling any of their inspiration from the real world, but instead are coming up with completely new and unique stories.

Through the combination of *Activision-Blizzard's* reputation as a diverse and inclusive company and the player's reliance on *World of Warcraft* as a form of escapism from the real-world, this creates a barrier for players who wish to challenge these sexist and racist portrayals in the game (Williams, 2020). Players become protective of this space and by acknowledging that they are actively supporting a game that reinforces sexist and racist story lines, they would also have to acknowledge that they are doing nothing to fix the issue. This means that the players would not be able to absolve themselves of the guilt of supporting a company that reproduces these story lines (Bonilla-Silva, 2018), which is why they engage in discursive practices to avoid the topic. Therefore, these examples are important because they illustrate how players can utilize the disconnect between the digital world and virtual world to maintain a space that reproduces the gender and racial hierarchy without feeling as though they are contributing to it themselves.

By ignoring the sexism and racism within *World of Warcraft*, players are contributing to the reproduction of the gender and racial hierarchy. Scholars have theorized that people do not always choose to be oppressive to others, but that most people do this unconsciously (Bishop, 2001; Bonilla-Silva, 2018). By denying the existence or importance of sexism and racism in *World of Warcraft*, players are creating a barrier for minority groups to challenge the systemic discrimination that they face within the game. Particularly by relying on *Activision Blizzard's* progressive reputation, players evade confronting the sexism and racism within the game and place the blame on the minority group for "making an issue out of nothing" (Bonilla-Silva, 2018; Williams, 2020). Therefore, players are helping to reproduce the gender and racial hierarchy in

both the game and the real world because they are creating additional barriers to confronting these issues while protecting the company and the game they play.

## CHAPTER 6: RESPONSES TO THE LAWSUIT

The *Activision Blizzard* lawsuit was one that was highly publicized when it came to light in July of 2021. Many mainstream news outlets wrote articles covering the lawsuit and the issue reached much of the gaming world. The lawsuit alleged that women at all levels were regularly paid less, promoted slower, and terminated quicker than men (California Department of Fair Employment and Housing, 2021). It also alleged that women were subjected to a toxic work environment where they were subjected to men speaking openly about sexual encounters, female bodies, and jokes about rape (California Department of Fair Employment and Housing, 2021). Women in the company were also actively discouraged from complaining about these issues within the workplace (California Department of Fair Employment and Housing, 2021).

Players of *World of Warcraft*, one of *Activision Blizzard's* most popular games, took the issue very seriously, which led to a mega-thread on the *World of Warcraft* forums. A mega-thread is a single post, usually created by a forum moderator, that is created about a particular topic in order to keep all conversation about that topic in one place, instead of spreading across many different forum posts. The original post, created by a player known as Meraii (2021), specifically outlined what was stated in the lawsuit based on a *Bloomberg* article that came out about the subject. The original poster did not state any of their personal opinions on the topic within their post. Based on this information, a conversation was started that ended with 1551 comments before the thread was locked, meaning that no one else could comment on the post.

In this thread, there were six major responses from players that were consistently seen within the thread: Disgust, Minimalization, Unsurprised, Highlighting Performative Diversity from the Company, Condemning Company Defenders, and Leaving the Game. Most of these

responses are different than the responses to in-game issues before the lawsuit, with the only similarity being Minimalization. When it came to the real-world issues of sexism within *Activision Blizzard*, players tended to condemn the company, which is in stark contrast to how they responded to in-game instances of sexism and racism. Although some players still utilized the racial frame of Minimalization to protect the company, it was far less prevalent than when discussing in-game issues. Therefore, this chapter allows for this study to compare the responses to sexism and racism from players in the real world to those of the last chapter where they were discussing in-game issues.

The first two responses, Disgust and Minimalization, were the most prevalent within the forum posts. These two responses were the main dichotomy within the post. On the one hand, Disgust opposed the actions of *Activision Blizzard* and condemned them for the accusations within the lawsuit. On the other hand, Minimalization gave *Activision Blizzard* the benefit of the doubt and supported the company, which therefore upholds the sexism that they were accused of. Therefore, these two responses shaped the discussion about the lawsuit into two sides: those that oppose the company's actions and those who do not think the company's actions are important.

### Disgust

First, the theme of Disgust is when players stated that, if the allegations were true, that they were terrible to hear and they were appalled that *Activision-Blizzard* allowed these things to happen. Many of the Disgust comments went like so:

“Very harrowing, since it’s been an investigation over the past couple years that means this stuff has been going on for ages and still possibly ongoing. Frustrating the articles



only hard name one person for doing it but it seems like there were a lot guilty of it.

Wondering if this is the true reason old devs and higher ups have been leaving over the years and not what entirely what was speculated before.” (Pickpawkit, 2021)

“Disgusting if true, the more you read into this the worse it gets. Honestly just sickening to read. What the hell is happening to Blizzard, just nuke the whole company at this point and start fresh.” (Oromis, 2021)

These comments highlight that *Blizzard* has been losing many high-end executives consistently over the past few years and speculate that the investigation and lawsuit might have had something to do with it. They also speak to the longevity of the investigation, which was a two-year investigation, and of the accusations, which date back to 2004, to conclude that this may have been an issue since the early days of the company that were swept under the rug until recently. The word choice of comments like these, such as “harrowing,” “disgusting,” and “frustrating,” showcase how many *World of Warcraft* players felt betrayed and upset about the company that they have been supporting. This reaction was the most popular reaction to the lawsuit and many people seemed to not know what to do with the information other than be disgusted by the fact that they might be true.

### Minimalization

Minimalization was the second most popular response to the lawsuit but was much less prevalent than the disgusted reactions. Minimalization responses were characterized by players minimizing the validity or importance of the allegations within the lawsuit because they are only allegations and not proven in a court of law. These comments overlap with the responses to in-

game issues, but in a more serious manner. Instead of complete dismissal or mockery, players tend to only minimalize the accusations because they have not yet been proven, but they do not state that the issues do not exist. One poster stated, “Innocent until proven guilty, how many times do we need to repeat the same mistake?” (Serenå 2021). Another player made a similar comment:

“As far as I know the premise “innocent until proven guilty” still stands, even in near-dystopian hellholes like California. So a trial even there is a fair chance at both the accuser and the defender to present their evidence that proves guilt and innocence. So the evidence has to be at least filtered through the trial itself anything short of that goes against the premise ‘innocent until proven guilty’.” (Metaljaw, 2021).

These comments concisely sum up almost all of the minimalization responses. The main difference between these responses and others were that many of the other minimalization responses wrote multiple paragraphs about why others should not believe the accusations before they go to court and stated that if the accusations were proven to be true, that there should be repercussions for them.

For these players, they felt that the lawsuit did not prove that anything had actually happened and that they needed more evidence before condemning the company. These comments had the common theme of not trusting that the California Department of Fair Employment and Housing was making the accusations with enough evidence behind them and that there are many false allegations of sexual misconduct within the workplace. Although this was a popular response the first day the thread was posted, which was the day the lawsuit came out, this response was almost entirely absent by the next day. This is most likely because many

current and former *Blizzard* employees came out on *Twitter* and made statements to news stations that stated, “they must do better,” and insinuated that the allegations were true. With this confirmation of the allegations, almost all comments stating that the lawsuit should not be trusted disappeared from the thread.

### Unsurprised

The third main response to the post was of players being Unsurprised. These players felt, that although upset, they did not feel surprised by the allegations since many gaming companies have had similar allegations over the past few years, many were just to a lesser degree.

“I fail to understand why anyone is surprised. This happens wherever there are men. It is endemic throughout society. Until there is a sea-change in the way boys are taught, it will continue to be a problem that girls and women are supposed to just put up with.” (Zashii, 2021)

“Honestly, I’m disappointed, but not actually shocked. I’m barely surprised. I think I kind of just assume that all large companies are rotten at the core in some way or another...” (Alewín, 2021)

These players tend to highlight the overall societal issue of women being harassed in the workplace and state that it is something that will require greater social change than a lawsuit against a singular company. Many of these players expressed their disappointment, specifically because *Blizzard* has been given awards and celebrated for their inclusivity in the past but are not surprised since this seems to be something that happens in every large company, regardless of how diverse they claim to be. This response seems to fall into a middle position between the

Disgust and Minimalization responses. Players who comment like this state that they are upset, similar to the Disgust responses, but also that they are not surprised because it happens in every large company and requires greater social change, which minimizes the issue with the company as well.

### Highlighting Performative Diversity

The final three major responses were all seen to a lesser degree than the previous three but were important within the forum's overall conversation. First, the responses Highlighting Performative Diversity from the Company put much of what was upsetting about this lawsuit into context by citing examples where *Activision-Blizzard* has used performative diversity to seem like a progressive and inclusive company, while they were also engaging in these sexist and racist practices.

“Big yikes. Blizzard remove mean word from 2008 that bad mouthed sylvanas but acts like this IRL. This goes to show that corporations virtue signal only for profit and do not actually hold any meaningful social justice positions.” (Rustylegs, 2021)

“They remove Swifty and Quinton Flynn as voice actor for Kael'thas for accusations proven to be false, yet their own employees treat female employess [sic] like this?” (Belenor, 2021)

The history behind these comments are what put the lawsuit into context with the overall picture of the company. Previously, *Blizzard* had removed part of a cutscene where a male character calls a female character, Sylvanas, a “bitch.” *Blizzard* also banned a streamer, Swifty, and recast a main voice actor, Quinton Flynn, when they were accused of sexual harassment,

even though they were later proven innocent in court. *Blizzard* was always quick to act when incidents like these arose, which is part of what led people to believe they were an inclusive and diverse company. Therefore, when the lawsuit came to light, people were also quick to point out the hypocrisy in their previous decisions. Since the allegations date back to 2004, these decisions were made while the company had a toxic environment, and they were treating women poorly within their workplace. It highlighted that *Blizzard* made many of their decisions on these issues purely for the sake of performative diversity and could not be trusted. This provides evidence for Williams (2020) theory that companies use words like “diversity” and “inclusion” to distract from the racist, or in this case sexist, policies and procedures within the company. Although being “committed to diversity and inclusion” and acting in a way that seemed to prove that statement in these cases, the company itself distracted the public from their own policies and procedures that put women at risk within the workplace.

### Condemning Company Defenders

Next were the players who were Condemning Company Defenders. These players went after the comments that minimized the issue and called into the question the legitimacy of the lawsuit. They did this both by mocking them and stating outright that they were in the wrong.

“‘women who get harassed and abused should come out with their stories’

Women who got harassed and abused come out with their stories

‘iNoCcEnT uNtIL pRoVeN gUiLtY’

‘pRoOf tHo?? hehe eksdee’” (Bukachu, 2021)

“To anyone quietly dismissing it, shrugging their shoulders and saying it happens everywhere or saying they can’t wait until it blows over, YOU ARE A PART OF THE PROBLEM. Several people have confirmed that the environment at Blizzard is toxic as all hell and in particular, the WoW team stands out. Please seek actual help, the women in your life deserve so much better.” (Waning, 2021)

These were comments that actively fought against the narrative that this is not a legitimate lawsuit, that it happens everywhere, and that they just need to wait for it to be forgotten about, like it has for many other companies in the gaming industry. The first comment specifically highlights that some of the minimalization commenters were blaming the women for not coming forward sooner and questioning why they did not do so. They mocked the people who made these statements by showcasing the commenter’s own reaction as why women would not feel comfortable coming forward with their accusations of harassment in the workplace. The second comment is more direct and calls out the players that were trying to dismiss the accusations as something that is normal within large companies. The comment emphasizes that these people are part of the problem because they are giving the company and people involved a pass solely because “it happens everywhere.” This shows that players were holding one another accountable for their responses within the forum and illustrates that the issue was not solely with *Blizzard*, but also with the *World of Warcraft* player base.

### Leaving the Game

Lastly, there were some comments of players Leaving the Game. These players felt that they could no longer support the company after the accusations came out. Although the

accusations had not been proven in court, these players thought that there was enough evidence for them to leave the game and deny *Blizzard* their money by staying subscribed.

“I just cancelled my sub, not supporting this company anymore. Maybe ill [*sic*] give FFIV a try.” (Ellá, 2021)

“Game time expires in 5 minutes - and for now I don’t think I’ll be renewing. Not sure when I’ll be back, honestly with this stuff being out there I’m not even sure I want to wait for the court case and all that to make a decision; even if the people currently working on WoW are fine.” (Pickpawkit, 2021)

These comments illustrate the impact that the lawsuit had on many players of *World of Warcraft*. Many felt that they could not support a company that had accusations as severe as the ones that *Activision Blizzard* were facing. They stated that they may try another MMORPG and conversations around which games may be a good alternative continued within the comments. The second comment in particular highlights an issue that many *World of Warcraft* players had to face at the time the lawsuits came out, which was that they had to decide if they would hold the company accountable, even if it was at the expense of the possibly good people who currently worked on the game. It also showed that the accusations themselves were enough to illicit this response and that the court decision did not really matter. As stated in the Unsurprised comments, allegations of sexual harassment happen in many companies and many companies get out of them with a little more than a slap on the wrist, but the allegations against *Activision Blizzard* were to a bigger extreme than previous allegations and turned people away from the company as a whole.

Although comments of Leaving the Game were not very prevalent in the forum post, it seemed to be the response from most of the silent community of *Blizzard* players. According to a video investigating player numbers published in August of 2021, in February 2021 there were over 6 million active players at max level, but as of August of 2021 there were less than 3 million active players at max level. These numbers include players who have multiple characters, which each character counts as one player for these statistics (Bellular Warcraft, 2021). Though there may have been other reasons that people left the game during this time period, the lawsuit undoubtedly had an impact on some players who chose to leave the game.

### Conclusion

The responses to the lawsuit from the players of *World of Warcraft* were varied, but the majority of the players who commented on this forum post believed the allegations and condemned *Activision-Blizzard* as a company. When it came to these “in real life” issues, players were less inclined to give *Activision Blizzard* a pass or even wait for the allegations to be worked out through the court system. Players condemned the company not only for their current accusations, but also drew attention to times where they had portrayed themselves as a progressive company in the past while these company practices were going on (Williams, 2020). Players were also suspicious of who knew about the sexual harassment and to what extent these sexist and racist practices were normalized within the company as everyday practices (Ray, 2019). Many players even felt that the best course of action was to stop playing the game altogether.

Contrary to the responses to in-game instances of sexism and racism, when it comes to the “real life” issues and accusations, people tend to rally behind the victims and look down on



the company that allowed for those issues to fester, even to the point of giving up on a game that they may have played for a significant part of their lives. Since these accusations are against the company and their real company policies and practices, players could not disconnect in the same way that they do with the virtual instances of sexism and racism. Therefore, players had to confront the issues that are now part of reality. This means that players must confront the issues, and many felt that they needed to take action in some way, whether that be through voicing their disappointment in the company or by leaving the game to deny the company financial support.

These responses contribute to the literature on sexism and racism in a novel way because, unlike the previous literature, most players did condemn the sexism and racism that the company was accused of in the real world. Most players did not deny the accusations or justify the company's actions or use discursive practices to ignore the subject like the previous literature identifies (Bonilla-Silva, 2018; Lorber, 1994). Some players specifically pointed out that the company's previous actions and their organizational practices were hypocritical because they presented as a progressive company while allowing for these issues to persist, which are things that scholars commonly find go unnoticed (Ray, 2019; Williams, 2020; Gallagher, 2020). Some players even started to instill a sense of group position between players who condemn the company and those who were defending the company (Carter and Lippard, 2015). Therefore, these responses illustrate that, unlike previous literature, these players acknowledged, condemned, and fought against sexism and racism in the real world. It is only when the accusations of sexism and racism are solely within the game that players use story lines to ignore or deny the issue.

If the issue arises in the real world, players are willing to take action to condemn the company, but the nature of the digital disconnect, where the virtual and fictional world are separate from the real world, allows players to live in a world where they can keep themselves from acknowledging that the in-game instances of sexism and racism are an issue. Therefore, both the digital nature of the game and the fictional setting that the game takes place in play a major role in why players use discursive practices to deny sexism and racism within *World of Warcraft*.

## CHAPTER 7: RESPONSES TO IN-GAME ISSUES AFTER THE LAWSUIT

The purpose of this section is to compare the responses from before the lawsuit to after the lawsuit. As seen in the previous two chapters, players tend to deny in-game social issues, but were very aware of the problems when it came to the *Activision Blizzard* lawsuit. Therefore, this chapter is meant to identify any changes to player interpretation regarding the social issues within *World of Warcraft* after the lawsuit went public.

Previous literature, both about the real world and the game world, has found that people tend to deny or ignore sexism and racism. In the real world, people will use story lines to deny gender and race discrepancies based on gender/race or systemic problems, instead blaming the minority group (Bonilla-Silva, 2018; Lorber 1994). In the game world, specifically *World of Warcraft*, players tend to ignore the racism in the game because it is a fantasy war game (Ritter, 2010) or they only acknowledge cultural appropriation of indigenous cultures within the game (Nash, 2016; Cruise, 2018). Companies also tend to use colorblind narratives to distract people from the systemic issues of the company and attract people to their product (Williams, 2020; Gallagher, 2020). This makes it an interesting discovery that players tended to deny in-game instances of sexism and racism using story lines, which is supported by the literature, but did not deny the sexism and racism that *Activision Blizzard* are accused of, which contrasts with the previous literature. Therefore, this chapter will investigate if player responses to in-game instances of sexism and racism were influenced by the publication of the lawsuit or if players continue to deny these issues in alignment with the previous literature on in-game sexism and racism.

To identify these changes in responses, I analyze four discussions on the *World of Warcraft* forums that addressed gender or race issues within *World of Warcraft* after the lawsuit came out, specifically in late 2021. All four posts were created to talk about changes that *Activision Blizzard* made to *World of Warcraft* shortly after their lawsuit became public. The first post I analyzed was created by a player named Valhaan (2021), which addressed whether the removal of a single racist term from the game is a “slippery slope” to removing all racism and violence from the game, which would make the story less compelling. 110 comments were posted in response to this post. The second post I analyzed was created by a player known as Felgercarb (2021), which spoke about a statement made by the *World of Warcraft* developers that said they were removing or changing some dialogue in the game to make sure they are not “punching down.” Felgercarb’s post states that, although he understands the sentiment, he worries that this means the only demographic the game will make fun of is straight, Christian, White males. 392 comments were posted in response to Felgercarb’s original post. The third post I analyzed was from a player named Destros (2021), who stated that a game should not reflect company values and that *Activision Blizzard* making changes to the game to reflect their real-world values is insane and will have a negative impact on the game. 128 comments were posted in response to this post. Finally, a post created by a player named Avih (2021) stated that they find a lot of things offensive, but that people should look past it and *Activision Blizzard* should stop catering to the minority at the expense of the majority. 89 comments were posted in response to the original post.

These four posts were chosen by filtering the forum posts to those that mentioned “sexism” or “racism” after July 2021, which is after the lawsuit was publicized. Although only four posts were chosen, this study analyzes all the comments in response to these posts, totaling

719 responses, to illustrate how players respond to issues of sexism and racism in the game after the lawsuit came to light. This is a lower number of responses than the previous chapters, but this is due to lack of posts that address in-game sexism and racism. This may be because players were less inclined to discuss these issues after the lawsuit or because the forum moderators were barring posts discussing sexism and racism from being posted, but there is no way to confirm the reason for the lack of posts. Also, unlike the set of forum posts before the lawsuit, the original posts were complaining about the changes being made, instead of bringing attention to in-game issues themselves, but the responses still speak on whether or not in-game issues are valid to discuss.

These discussions revealed six major themes, four of which were also present before the lawsuit came out: Dismissal, Separation, Mockery, Redirection, Suspicion, and Agreement. I then categorized these themes within Bonilla-Silva's (2018) racial frames, as well as the previously established weaponized escapism frame. Two of these sub-themes fit within the minimalization frame that was established by Bonilla-Silva (2018), which are Dismissal and Mockery. These two sub-themes are the same as they were before the lawsuit in that they dismissed or mocked people who argued that sexist and racist things should be removed from the game, therefore minimalizing the issues.

Three of the themes fit into the weaponized escapism frame, which are Redirection, Separation, and Suspicion. Redirection and Separation are the same as they were before the lawsuit in that players tried to redirect the conversation to real world instances of sexism and racism or separate the real world from the game world, therefore not denying sexism or racism exist in the real world, but denying that the issues exist within the game. The Suspicion sub-

theme fits into the weaponized escapism frame because players blame the lawsuit and company practices for why sexist and racist things are being removed from the game, therefore implying that these things are not an issue, but since the lawsuit came out and *Activision Blizzard* was publicly condemned for the accusations, they are removing things from the game solely to improve their public image. Finally, the Agreement theme did not fit into any frame because it does not deny in-game social issues, instead these responses completely supported the removal of sexist and racist things from the game. Four of these themes, Dismissal, Separation, Mockery, and Redirection overlap with the responses to in-game issues before the lawsuit. Therefore, although many comments remained the same, there were some changes that happened after the lawsuit was made public.

### Minimalization

Once again, responses align with Bonilla-Silva's minimization frame, specifically Dismissal and Mockery. The minimalization frame is when people state that discrimination is no longer a major factor for minority groups (Bonilla-Silva, 2018). Dismissal and Mockery were almost identical to the comments before the lawsuit, in that players were minimalizing the idea that discrimination is present but were different in that players focused on the individual and how they felt that people were overreacting.

### Dismissal and Mockery

These responses were directed at people who agreed with the changes being made to the game and looked almost identical to the minimization responses from before the lawsuit came out.

“People need to stop being fake offended. If your [*sic*] truly offended you will know it stop the fake outrage. Stop trolling. If your truly offended you will be inserting not so nice words. Stop the fake outrage.” (Yoshuyilu, 2021) – Dismissal Response.

“My TEEN should NOT be exposed to your sick and twisted BDSM. Please ban this “Jailer” and remove ALL of this Chains of “Domination” content... its [*sic*] disgusting. Also, have you seen the Orc females DANCE!!! What kind of sick people design this game for children??? [/s] [*sarcasm*]” (Rez, 2021) – Mockery Response

The typical Dismissal response focused on the individual themselves. Players would comment that others were not being genuine because they were agreeing with changes that realistically had no impact on the game itself. These responses imply that if people really cared about the in-game issues, that they would also have a problem with the war and genocide aspects present within the game and not just the racist or sexist comments. This is used as a way of dismissing the issues of racism and sexism in the game by pointing out different issues that people “should” have a problem with according to the responder. The second quote was a typical Mockery response as well. People would exaggerate the issues to illustrate their opinion that making changes to the game is stupid, and by doing so, also accuse the developers of making the game too child friendly. By exaggerating the issues being brought up, they minimized the validity of the statements that changes needed to be made within the game.

### Weaponized Escapism

Three of the other themes aligned with the racial frame of Weaponized Escapism. Weaponized Escapism is when players use escapism in an aggressive way to deny the existence

of sexism and racism within their escapist space. Players who used this discursive practice denied that social issues, like sexism and racism, can exist within a fictional, virtual space, even if they exist within the real world.

### Redirection and Separation

Redirection and Separation, once again, looked similar to the responses that were posted before the lawsuit came out. Redirection focused on not addressing the social issues within the game and instead redirecting the conversation to real-world cases of the same issues. Separation is when players state that there is no connection between real-world social issues and the game, therefore bringing up social issues within the game is meaningless.

“Sad state of affairs we live in these days. It all begins with child rearing. Instead of teaching kids to have resilience and a thick skin, those parents are teaching them that their irrational emotions are more important than everyone else’s freedoms. This carries over to blizz’s woke censorship. Can’t be hurting people’s emotions so they censor everything. The road both blizz and society is going down will not end well.”

(Ingvaeonic, 2021) – Redirection Response

“My stance on it is. They don’t have to censor anything. The game was always for teenagers/young adults, it went 15+ years with flirts and other emotes and it was just fine. Just because you get lawsuit where YOUR employees mistreated women doesn’t mean you should erase all fun things from the game.” (Demoniclily, 2021) – Separation

Response



Redirection responses, although similar to before the lawsuit, seemed to largely change where the players placed the blame. Instead of redirecting to other areas of real-world instances of racism and sexism, players redirected the conversation to the education system and parenting. Most comments of this type stated that kids are to blame for the changes because they are too sensitive and want everything to cater to them having “a safe space.” Therefore, they deny the fact that the game has any racism or sexism, but instead think that kids who do not know how to manage their emotions are the ones that are causing changes within the game. The Separation responses were also similar to before the lawsuit, but now players spoke on how the company should separate its internal issues from the game and stop making changes that pander to people who were upset about the lawsuit. Players would emphasize that the things that were being removed had been in the game for years and, just because there were issues at *Blizzard* with the mistreatment of women, does not mean that anything sexual or that could be construed as sexist should be removed from the game. Therefore, these players wanted to maintain the separation between the game world and the real world, even though the developers making the game were the ones that had to deal with the real-world issues.

### Suspicion

A new theme that came out of these responses after the lawsuit was Suspicion. Essentially, after the lawsuit came to light and the changes were made, many players were suspicious of the intent of the developers. Aligned with the idea that companies use terms like diversity and inclusion to distract from their company practices (Williams, 2020), these players were suspicious that the changes were genuine and instead accused the developers of trying to distract from the lawsuit by removing things from the game. Responses stated things like:

“Not sure that I’m convinced anyone asked for them-- feels like a bad PR stunt in light of the court proceedings. But that doesn’t mean it didn’t offend someone either.” (Zeraveth, 2021)

“Exactly this, IDK why people keep calling people out as snowflakes and should move on when these things were never asked for in the first place at all. This is 100% blizzard trying to look good in the press (but it backfired) and in the courts (which I hope will also backfire).” (Lightir, 2021)

These responses tended to highlight that these changes to the game were most likely performative on the part of the developers as a public relations stunt after the lawsuit came out to save their reputation. This uniquely falls under weaponized escapism because players were using the lawsuit as an excuse for the changes being made. These players do not think that the changes were needed and that the things that were removed due to sexism or racism were not offensive because it is a game, so they instead blamed the lawsuit to justify their opinion. Although the changes may have been made because of valid reasons, these comments blame the lawsuit because they cannot imagine that other players may have taken issue with the things removed from the game. By doing this, they weaponize the idea that *World of Warcraft* is fictional and create a separation for themselves between the game world and the real world. By making these changes, the developers shattered the separation between the game world and the real world for players. Therefore, these players needed a new justification as to why the changes were being made and by calling it nothing more than a PR stunt, they can relieve themselves of the responsibility of supporting a game with sexist and racist things made by a company also accused of sexist and racist practices.

### Agreement

The final theme that was seen in the forum posts after the lawsuit came to light was more people who responded with Agreement. These players accepted that sexist and racist things existed in the game and should be removed, regardless of if it was a PR stunt or not.

“Or maybe a whole culture moving more towards kindness and watching your mouth results in...a less toxic society and kinder world? Saying the world is a cruel place is an easy cop out. It’s cruel because the cruel have never been held accountable and that is slowly changing. Will it work? Maybe, maybe not. But it is a good goal to strive for. Much better than “I’m a jerk, you all just need to deal with it.”” (Ralanthel, 2021)

“do you people even play video games? I don’t think I ever played a video game where there wasn’t any social - political commentary going on, it’s insane to me when people say " stop putting politics in my vimeo [*sic*] game " have you guys ever played COD 4? or any MGS game? Xd also yes it should reflect their values because sexism and racism are bad, even IN UR VIBEO [*sic*] GAME” (Auranisse, 2021).

Obviously, this theme does not fall under any of the racial frames because players are finally acknowledging that these in-game issues exist and should be changed. The first quote highlights many of the responses in that it states that removing sexist and racist things in the game, even small ones, are a step towards a kinder community. It also speaks to the fact that previously, these microaggressions were not taken seriously and no one was held accountable for the issues, in the real world or in the game. By holding the developers accountable and making changes, the game is working towards a better narrative and community that does not rely on racism or sexism to push the story forward. Although the change may not be immediate or may

not work at all, it is something to strive for and should be encouraged. The second quote brings other games into the discussion as well. The quote emphasizes that “stop putting politics in games” is not a good excuse because most, if not all, games pull inspiration from social and political issues in the real world. It also states that the game should reflect the company’s values, so if *Blizzard* are trying to align themselves more with the values they state to the public, then these things need to be removed. Basically, if *Blizzard* is going to say that they are against racism and sexism, then their games need to reflect that by removing the sexist and racist things that are in *World of Warcraft*.

### Conclusion

After the *Activision-Blizzard* lawsuit went public, many of the responses to in-game instances of sexism and racism stayed the same. There was still a significant use of discursive practices to deny that sexism and racism exist (Bonilla-Silva, 2018; Lorber, 1994) in *World of Warcraft* or that people should apply real-world social issues to the gaming space. Yet, there were also many people who began to agree that changes needed to be made in the game if players and developers are to move forward from the lawsuit.

Previous literature has shown that players of *World of Warcraft*, tend to ignore the racism in the game (Ritter, 2010) or only acknowledge it when the game appropriates indigenous cultures (Nash, 2016; Cruise, 2018). Contrary to the literature, after the lawsuit, a change was finally seen in the player base where people took the in-game issues seriously and wanted more for the game than for it to rely on racist and sexist narratives. Although there are still a significant number of players who would deny that racism and sexism in the game exists, there is

also a significant increase in the number of players willing to speak up and hold the developers accountable for their past mistakes in the hopes of securing a better future for *World of Warcraft*.

These comments illustrate that the digital disconnect between the real world and the virtual world is still present within the *World of Warcraft* player base. Four of the six themes were the same as before the lawsuit came to light. Therefore, players are still trying to keep the fictional world of *World of Warcraft* separate from the real world that they are using the game to escape from. The main change within the four overlapping themes is that players started to blame individuals for “being too sensitive” or “creating fake outrage,” which is similar to how people create feelings of group position. By blaming the individuals, players create an “us versus them” narrative that is well-established in race literature (Carter and Lippard, 2015, Bobo and Taun 2006). Players conveyed that they felt as though the compelling parts of *World of Warcraft* were being taken away from them because *Activision Blizzard* was catering to the minority by removing some of the sexist and racist instances in the game. Therefore, these players fostered a sense of community through valuing the game as it was created and wanted to make it known that these are things they valued, and they should not be removed from the game.

The addition of the Suspicion theme is one that brings together anti-racist literature and uses it to deny racism, which is an intriguing concept. By stating that *Activision Blizzard* is only making changes as a way to cover up the severity of the accusations (Williams, 2020), they reject those changes needed to be made to the game itself. It relies on the idea that developers are creating the fictional world in a vacuum and that the working environment of the developers had no impact on the game or what was put into it. This again illustrates the digital disconnect because it creates a separation between the real world and the game world. The unique part of

this frame is that it actively condemns the real-world issues that the company was accused of, while also condemning the developers for making changes to the game to remove sexist and racist instances.

The biggest change is that, for some players, the digital disconnect was completely shattered after the lawsuit was made public. They viewed these changes as steps in the right direction and acknowledged that, even though all these instances have been in the game for a long time, they needed to change because they are no longer appropriate. These players could no longer separate the real world from the game world because the lawsuit showed them that these instances of sexism and racism are prevalent in both places. They acknowledged that since the accusations illustrated rampant sexism and racism in the workplace, that those things impacted the developers and the game itself. Although it was not many players, it was a pivotal moment where players recognized that the game world is influenced by the real world that the developers live in. Therefore, these changes are a step in the right direction for both the game and the players. Since players can acknowledge that there are instances of sexism and racism in *World of Warcraft*, they can also hold the developers accountable for what is put into the game and how that impacts the real world.

## CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This study set out to uncover how a company and fans negotiate gender and race in game and in the real world. Utilizing the company of *Activision Blizzard* and their popular MMORPG *World of Warcraft*, this study investigated how the company integrates gender and race in *World of Warcraft* and how fans of the game negotiated the presence of in game issues before and after the *Activision Blizzard* lawsuit went public. By using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), I first analyzed the text of the game by looking at the narrative of four major characters in *World of Warcraft*. I then brought in the larger social context by examining how *World of Warcraft* fans responded to the *Activision Blizzard* lawsuit. Finally, I illustrated how this larger social context influenced how fans used discursive practices to interpret the text by comparing the responses to issues of in game racism and sexism before and after the lawsuit was publicized.

In the text of *World of Warcraft* describing the characters and story lines, I found many instances of the use of harmful stereotypes and story lines that created the personality and story of four of their major characters. Although there is room for bias in the text, the fact that the summaries must be backed up by text from the game itself ensures a minimal amount of bias. For the women in the game, I found that the female antagonist relied heavily on the “Crazy Lady” story line (Cerny, Friedman, Smith, 2013), namely that Sylvanas was continuously referred to as emotionally unstable and used manipulation to win battles for her. For one of the female protagonists, Tyrande, I found that she was characterized by (in)dependence (Tompkins, Lynch, Driel, and Fritz, 2020), in which she was supposed to be a leader and independent but was constantly relying on male partners or male leaders to make decisions for her, and when she did not, she was also called emotionally unstable. For the characters of color, I found that the male

antagonist of color, Garrosh, was influenced by many myths of Africa that are seen in Western news media (Harth, 2012). Garrosh was considered primitive and his main reason for being an antagonist was that he was holding onto tradition and did not want to change. The male protagonist character of color, Baine, also fell into harmful stereotypes because many of his actions aligned with stereotypes of Native Americans, like the savage Indian and the treaty-asserting Indian (Bobo and Taun, 2006). Overall, it became increasingly clear that the narrative of these characters in *World of Warcraft* relied on stereotypes to create the characters themselves, leading to some race and gender issues within the narrative of the game.

The responses to the lawsuit brought in context for the comparison of how players negotiated in game issues. Before the lawsuit, players largely minimized in game issues of racism and sexism. They also used abstract liberalism (Bonilla-Silva, 2018) to misrepresent diversity within the game. Lastly, many players used the new discursive practice that I called weaponized escapism, which meant that they used their escapism to claim that social issues do exist, but not within the specific space that they use as an escape.

When analyzing the response to the *Activision Blizzard* lawsuit, although there were some people who did not want to place blame until court proceedings happened, the majority of people were disgusted with the company and wished for them to be brought to justice. When it came to the real-world issues of gender and race discrimination in the workplace, most players stood with the developers who were impacted and vilified *Activision Blizzard* for allowing these practices to take place. Many players were not surprised, others pointed out that the company was engaging in performative diversity up until this point, and some also attacked other players who were trying to defend the company or minimize the lawsuit (Williams, 2020; Ray, 2019).



In the end, the majority of the players left the game, and many did this silently, to show that they do not support *Activision Blizzard* and their actions.

After the lawsuit, most of the responses were the same, but some people were suspicious of the reason for the company making changes to the game to promote diversity (Williams, 2020). For some players, they seemed to be trying to create an “us versus them” narrative where the players who thought that sexism and racism should not be removed from the game were in opposition to players who thought that they should be removed (Carter and Lippard, 2015, Bobo and Taun 2006). There was also a significant increase in people who agreed that these issues were prevalent in *World of Warcraft* and thought that if the game is going to move forward, the company needs to make these changes.

Although the comments by the players were made anonymously, it is critical to acknowledge that the discursive strategies that were employed by players, both before and after the lawsuit, promote a white masculine subjectivity. Bonilla-Silva (2018) speaks about how White people are the ones most likely to employ racial frames and discursive practices to avoid discussing racism and race issues. Stoll, Lilley, and Pinter (2017) also applied this to gender and illustrated that men are most likely to use these discursive practices to avoid speaking about sexism and gender issues. Therefore, by acknowledging this literature, this research also shows how players can reproduce the white masculine subjectivity to limit the discussion around gender and race issues within these spaces.

Video games occupy an interesting grey area of media in that the people are able to interact with and help create the narrative and community that is established. When creating an entire universe, like Azeroth in *World of Warcraft*, developers draw inspiration from the world

around them (Ritter, 2010; Monson, 2012; Spiecker, 2011; Johnson, 2014; Higgin, 2009; Cruise, 2018). Unfortunately, this means that common racial and gender stereotypes that exist in the real world may also make their way into the game world unless the developers specifically make a point to recognize and subvert these stereotypes. From the foundation established within the narrative, players then negotiate how they understand the fantasy world that they have inserted themselves into, but since the fantasy world is also a form of escape, it can cause players to ignore issues of race and gender within the game world.

This is what I call the digital disconnect, which is when players separate social issues that happen within the virtual world from those in the real world. *Activision Blizzard* did a great job curating a public reputation for being a progressive and inclusive company, but this contrasted with their organizational practices. They used terms like diversity and inclusion to create this reputation (Williams, 2020), but internally, the company was organized through sexist and racist practices (Ray, 2019). This allowed for players to ignore the in-game instances of sexism and racism until the lawsuit was made public, but even after the publication of the lawsuit, players tended to separate the game world from the real world. This contributes to the literature because it shows that the reputation of the company is not the only factor in whether players acknowledge and accept sexism and racism in the game. As illustrated by the player responses, some players disconnect the game world from the real world and feel as though things like sexism and racism are necessary to create a compelling narrative.

This understanding led to what is most likely the most important contribution to the literature that this study has to offer, which is the discursive practice of weaponized escapism. The idea that people can use escapism to separate real world issues from the world they escape to

is one that should be applied to more areas outside of gaming media. By using weaponized escapism, people are able to claim that they take issues of race and gender seriously, but simultaneously deny that they exist within their entertainment space. Future studies should investigate other areas where weaponized escapism may be used as a discursive tool, such as sports, movies, television, and literature.

Then, by understanding that the use of these discursive practices promotes the white masculine subjectivity, this means that weaponized escapism is most likely being used by White men. When addressing issues like sexism and racism, the ability to disconnect and escape into something relies on the privilege of the individual to be able to ignore these issues. Men have the ability to ignore sexism within *World of Warcraft* because it is not something that impacts them. Even if they are playing a female character, the sexist moments in the game that they experience do not reflect their real-world experience, which allows them to attribute the sexism to being just a part of the narrative. This also applies to race because white players, even if they are playing a race that uses racial story lines, are able to play through these story lines without it reflecting their real-world experience. Therefore, white players can attribute these racial story lines to the creative liberties of the developers since they do not recognize that these racial story lines are based on stereotypes of communities of color in the real world. By understanding this subjectivity, researchers can identify how the digital disconnect and use of weaponized escapism works and why people use it. Furthermore, if future research can examine the player demographics of a game in comparison to responses to in-game sexism and racism, there may be crucial insights into which players employ these strategies and why.

Therefore, this study has shown that real world theories of gender and race can apply to digital spaces. Although Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2018) created his theories of story lines and discursive practices based on the real world, they can be applied to how people respond to similar issues in the digital world. It has also illustrated that story lines and discursive practices, although similar in nature to the real world, can look different within a digital space. This connection between the real world and the digital world influences the game, the players, the developers, etc., but also creates a space where the gender and racial hierarchy of the real world can be perpetuated without consequences. Players are most likely perpetuating the gender and racial hierarchy unconsciously (Bonilla-Silva, 2018), since most players were actively against *Activision Blizzard* when it came to real world instances of racism and sexism. The digital disconnect allows players to ignore these things within *World of Warcraft* because it is a work of fiction, while simultaneously being against them in the real world. Therefore, it is a possibility that as sexism and racism become more covert in the real world, that these hierarchies will be perpetuated in media because people will not recognize it as an issue due to the digital disconnect.

Overall, this study showed that the connection between real world issues and in-game issues is a complicated one. Although there are issues of race and gender within a game, people will minimize or deny the presence of these issues as a way to escape these issues in the game because they already have to deal with these issues in the real world. Although this study specifically looked at the digital divide between the real world and the game world, I believe that this separation between the real world and escapist media can be seen in other areas as well. This study also illustrated that when the real-world issues are exposed within the company or organization that creates the escapist media, that people will start to acknowledge that the issues

of the real world have infiltrated the escapist media as well. It should not take something as serious as the *Activision Blizzard* lawsuit to bring attention to these issues within escapist media, but this study shows that when it does happen, it shatters, or at least begins to crack, the disconnect that people have created between the real world and media they enjoy.

**APPENDIX  
IRB APPROVAL**



UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL FLORIDA

**Institutional Review Board**  
FWA00000351  
IRB00001138, IRB00012110  
Office of Research  
12201 Research Parkway  
Orlando, FL 32826-3246

NOT HUMAN RESEARCH DETERMINATION

March 25, 2022

Dear [Taylor Devereaux](#):

On 3/25/2022, the IRB reviewed the following protocol:

Type of Review:	Initial Study
Title of Study:	Digital Disconnect: The Relationship Between In-Game and Real-World Issues in World of Warcraft
Investigator:	<a href="#">Taylor Devereaux</a>
IRB ID:	STUDY00004129
Funding:	None
Grant ID:	None
Documents Reviewed:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Carter Faculty Form, Category: Faculty Research Approval;</li> <li>• Devereaux Exemption Request Form, Category: IRB Protocol;</li> <li>• IRB Variables, Category: Other;</li> </ul>

The IRB determined that the proposed activity is not research involving human subjects as defined by DHHS and FDA regulations.

IRB review and approval by this organization is not required. This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these activities are research involving human in which the organization is engaged, please submit a new request to the IRB for a determination. You can create a modification by clicking **Create Modification / CR** within the study.

If you have any questions, please contact the UCF IRB at 407-823-2901 or [irb@ucf.edu](mailto:irb@ucf.edu). Please include your project title and IRB number in all correspondence with this office.

Sincerely,

Kamille Birkbeck  
Designated Reviewer

## LIST OF REFERENCES

- Acker, Joan. 1990. "Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies: A Theory of Gendered Organizations." *Gender and Society*, 4(2): 139-158.
- Acker, Joan. 1992. "From Sex Roles to Gendered Institutions." *Contemporary Sociology*, 21(5): 565-569.
- Adorno, Theodore. [1950] 2019. *The Authoritarian Personality*. London: Verso.
- Alewín. 2021. "Activision Blizzard sued by California Department of Fair Employment." Retrieved Dec. 22, 2021. (<https://eu.forums.blizzard.com/en/wow/en/wow/t/activision-blizzard-sued-by-california-department-of-fair-employment/300332/179>)
- Allsup, Maeve. 2021. "Activision Blizzard Sued Over 'Frat Boy' Culture, Harassment (1)." *Bloomberg Law*, July 21.
- Auranisse. 2021. "Game should never reflect company values." Retrieved Jan. 20, 2022. (<https://us.forums.blizzard.com/en/wow/en/wow/t/game-should-never-reflect-company-values/1117252/72>)
- Avih. 2021. "I find a lot of things offensive." Retrieved Jan. 23, 2022. (<https://us.forums.blizzard.com/en/wow/t/i-find-a-lot-of-things-offensive/1101076>)
- Barlow, John. 1996. "A Declaration of Independence of Cyberspace." Electronic Frontier Foundation. <https://www.eff.org/cyberspace-independence>
- Beerwolf. 2020. "It's about time we addressed the racism and other issues in World of Warcraft." Retrieved Dec. 18, 2021. (<https://eu.forums.blizzard.com/en/wow/en/wow/t/it%E2%80%99s-about-time-we-addressed-the-racism-and-other-issues-in-world-of-warcraft/161103/41>)



- Belenor. 2021. "Activision Blizzard sued by California Department of Fair Employment." Retrieved Dec. 22, 2021. (<https://eu.forums.blizzard.com/en/wow/en/wow/t/activision-blizzard-sued-by-california-department-of-fair-employment/300332/111>)
- Bellular Warcraft. 2021. "WoW's Health: The Numbers Don't Lie... Here's What We Discovered." Retrieved April 2, 2022. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ToaLY0DF2gY>)
- Bishop, Anne. 2001. *On Becoming An Ally: Breaking the Cycle of Oppression in People*. Second Edition. London, England: Zed Books.
- Blizzard Entertainment. 2021. "Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion." Retrieved Nov. 23, 2021. (<https://careers.blizzard.com/global/en/diversity-inclusion>)
- Bobo, Lawrence D. and Mia Tuan. 2006. *Prejudice in Politics: Group Position, Public Opinion, and the Wisconsin Treaty Rights Dispute*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
- Boeshart, Megan. 2014. "FEMALE GAMERS, SYLVANAS WINDRUNNER, AND SEXISM: GENDER POLITICS IN WORLD OF WARCRAFT." Masters Thesis, Department of Rhetoric and Composition, Texas State University.
- Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. 2018. *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States*. 5<sup>th</sup> Edition. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
- Brehm, Audrey. 2013. "Navigating the feminine in massively multiplayer online games: gender in World of Warcraft." *Frontiers in Psychology*, 4. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00903>
- Bukachu. 2021. "Activision Blizzard sued by California Department of Fair Employment." Retrieved Dec. 22, 2021. (<https://eu.forums.blizzard.com/en/wow/en/wow/t/activision-blizzard-sued-by-california-department-of-fair-employment/300332/43>)
- Burgess, Melinda C. R., et al. 2011. "Playing With Prejudice: The Prevalence and Consequences of Racial Stereotypes in Video Games." *Media Psychology*, 14(3):289–311.

California Department of Fair Employment and Housing. 2021. *California Department of Fair Employment and Housing vs. Activision Blizzard, Inc., Blizzard Entertainment, Inc., and Activision Publishing, Inc.* July 20, 2021.

Calleja, Gordon. 2010. "Digital Games and Escapism." *Games and Culture* 5(4):335-353.

Canabal. 2020. "'It's about time we addressed the racism and other issues in World of Warcraft.'" Retrieved Dec. 18, 2021.  
(<https://eu.forums.blizzard.com/en/wow/en/wow/t/it%E2%80%99s-about-time-we-addressed-the-racism-and-other-issues-in-world-of-warcraft/161103/61>)

Carter, J. Scott and Cameron Lippard. 2015. "Group Positioning, Threat and Immigration: The Role of Elite Actors and Interest Groups in Setting the "Lines of Discussion." *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*. 1: 394-408.

Carter, J. Scott, Cameron Lippard, and Andrew F. Baird. 2019. "Veiled Threat: Colorblind Racism, Group Threat and Affirmative Action." *Social Problems*. 66: 503-518.

Cerny, Cathleen, Susan Friedman, and Delaney Smith. 2014. "Television's "Crazy Lady" Trope: Female Psychopathic Traits, Teaching, and Influence of Popular Culture." *Academic Psychiatry*, 38:233-241. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40596-014-0035-9>

Chalk, Andy. 2021. "Blizzard boss Jen Oneal was paid less than her male counterpart prior to resigning." *PC Gamer*, November 17.

Crenshaw, Kimberle. 1989. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." *University of Chicago Legal Forum*. Vol. 1989(8).

Cristea. 2015. "GENDER AND STEREOTYPING IN FANTASY – PART ONE: STRONG WOMEN." Retrieved Nov. 17, 2021. (<http://fantasy-faction.com/2015/gender-and-stereotyping-in-fantasy-part-one-strong-women>)

- Cruise, Owen. 2018. "Fantastic Racism: The Problem with World of Warcraft." *Autosave*. (<https://www.autosave.tv/2018/08/14/fantastic-racism-the-problem-with-world-of-warcraft/>)
- Demoniclily. 2021. "Slippery Slope?" Retrieved Jan. 12, 2022. (<https://us.forums.blizzard.com/en/wow/en/wow/t/slippery-slope/1113078/66>)
- Desteros. 2021. "Game should never reflect company values." Retrieved Jan. 20, 2022. (<https://us.forums.blizzard.com/en/wow/t/game-should-never-reflect-company-values/1117252>)
- Dickerman, Charles, et al. 2008. "Big Breasts and Bad Guys: Depictions of Gender and Race in Video Games." *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health* 3(1):20–29.
- Dietrich, David. 2013. "Avatars of Whiteness: Racial Expression in Video Game Characters." *Sociological Inquiry*, 83:82-105. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soin.12001>
- Dijk, Teun van. 1991. *Racism and the Press*. 1<sup>st</sup> edition. New York, New York: Routledge.
- Eklund, Lina. 2011. "Doing gender in cyberspace: The performance of gender by female World of Warcraft players." *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 17(3): 323-342. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856511406472>
- Elias. 2020. "It's about time we addressed the racism and other issues in World of Warcraft." Retrieved Dec. 18, 2021. (<https://eu.forums.blizzard.com/en/wow/en/wow/t/it%E2%80%99s-about-time-we-addressed-the-racism-and-other-issues-in-world-of-warcraft/161103/51>)
- Ellá. 2021. "Activision Blizzard sued by California Department of Fair Employment." Retrieved Dec. 22, 2021. (<https://eu.forums.blizzard.com/en/wow/en/wow/t/activision-blizzard-sued-by-california-department-of-fair-employment/300332/331>)
- Elleyella. 2020. "'You hit like a girl!'" Retrieved Jan. 10, 2022. (<https://us.forums.blizzard.com/en/wow/t/you-hit-like-a-girl/631707>)

- Fahey, Mike. 2021. "Activision Blizzard Faces Second Lawsuit Over First Lawsuit." *Kotaku*, August 3.
- Farokhmanesh, Megan and Stephan Totilo. 2021. "California expands lawsuit against Activision Blizzard." *Axios*, August 24.
- Feagin, Joe. 2006. *Systemic Racism: A Theory of Oppression*. London: Routledge.
- Felgercarb. 2021. "Punching Down?" Retrieved Jan 15, 2022.  
(<https://us.forums.blizzard.com/en/wow/t/punching-down/1106850>)
- Ferguson, Christopher, and Cheryl Olson. 2012. "Friends, fun, frustration and fantasy: Child motivations for video game play." *Motivation and Emotion*, 37:154-164.
- Gallagher, Charles. 2020. "Institutional Racism Revisited." In *Protecting Whiteness*: Chapter 5.
- Galloway, A. 2007. "StarCraft, or Balance." *Grey Room*. 28: 86–107.
- Gao, G., A. Min, P. Shih. 2017. "Gendered Design Bias: Gender Differences of In-Game Character Choice and Playing Style in League of Legends." In *Proceedings of the 29<sup>th</sup> Australian Conference on Human-Computer Interaction*, Brisbane, QLD, Australia.
- Greenbaum, Aaron. 2022. "Everything You Need To Know About The Activision Blizzard Scandal." *Den of Geek*, January 20.
- Grind, Kirsten and Sarah Needleman. 2021. "SEC Is Investigating Activision Blizzard Over Workplace Practices, Disclosures." *The Wall Street Journal*, September 20.
- Grind, Kirsten, Ben Fritz, and Sarah Needleman. 2021. "Activision CEO Bobby Kotick Knew for Years About Sexual-Misconduct Allegations at Videogame Giant." *The Wall Street Journal*, November 16.

- Harth. 2012. "Representations of Africa in the Western News Media: Reinforcing Myths and Stereotypes."
- Henoriel. 2020. "It's about time we addressed the racism and other issues in World of Warcraft." Retrieved Dec. 18, 2021.  
(<https://eu.forums.blizzard.com/en/wow/en/wow/t/it%E2%80%99s-about-time-we-addressed-the-racism-and-other-issues-in-world-of-warcraft/161103/4>)
- Higgin, Tanner. 2008. "Blackless Fantasy: The Disappearance of Race in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games." *Games and Culture*. 4(1): 3-26.
- Huckin, Thomas. 2002. "Critical Discourse Analysis and the Discourse of Condescension." *Discourse Studies in Composition*.
- Ingvaeonic. 2021. "Game should never reflect company values." Retrieved Jan. 20, 2022.  
(<https://us.forums.blizzard.com/en/wow/en/wow/t/game-should-never-reflect-company-values/1117252/105>)
- Johnson, Kimi. 2014. "Here Be Dragons: Performing Virtual Embodiment, Social Conduct, and Racial Imaginaries in World of Warcraft." *University of Minnesota Digital Conservancy*.
- Kaifana. 2020. "It's about time we addressed the racism and other issues in World of Warcraft." Retrieved Dec. 18, 2021.  
(<https://eu.forums.blizzard.com/en/wow/en/wow/t/it%E2%80%99s-about-time-we-addressed-the-racism-and-other-issues-in-world-of-warcraft/161103/21>)
- Kim, S. 2004. "Beyond black and white: Race and postmodernism in the lord of the rings films." *Modern Fiction Studies*. 50: 875–907.
- Konstantinovic, Daniel. 2021. "Activision Blizzard faces fan and industry backlash after report alleging CEO misconduct." Retrieved April 21, 2023.  
(<https://www.insiderintelligence.com/content/activision-blizzard-faces-fan-industry-backlash-after-wall-street-journal-report-alleges-ceo-misconduct>)

Kuk, Bryan. 2019. "PLAYING GENDER: AN ANALYSIS OF FEMININITY IN THE POPULAR CULTURE PHENOMENON LEAGUE OF LEGENDS." Honour's Thesis, University of Calgary.

Lightir. 2021. "I find a lot of things offensive." Retrieved Jan. 23, 2022. (<https://us.forums.blizzard.com/en/wow/en/wow/t/i-find-a-lot-of-things-offensive/1101076/83>)

Literary Terms. "Fantasy." (<https://literaryterms.net/fantasy/>)

Lorber, Judith. 1994. *Paradoxes of Gender*. Yale University.

Makigan. 2020. "How is Horde v Alliance not encouraged racism?" Retrieved Jan. 5, 2022. (<https://us.forums.blizzard.com/en/wow/en/wow/t/how-is-horde-v-alliance-not-encouragedracism/561201/49>)

McKernan, Brian. 2015. "The meaning of a game: Stereotypes, video game commentary and color-blind racism." *American Journal of Cultural Sociology*, 3(2):224-253.

Meatfist. 2020. "Representation shouldn't/doesn't matter" Retrieved Dec. 20, 2021. (<https://us.forums.blizzard.com/en/wow/t/representation-shouldntdoesnt-matter/682282>)

Mendlesohn, F. 2009. *A short history of fantasy*. London, UK: Middlesex University Press.

Meraii. 2021. "Activision Blizzard sued by California Department of Fair Employment." Retrieved Dec. 22, 2021. (<https://eu.forums.blizzard.com/en/wow/t/activision-blizzard-sued-by-california-department-of-fair-employment/300332>)

Merriam-Webster. "troll." (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/troll>)

Metaljaw. 2021. "Activision Blizzard sued by California Department of Fair Employment." Retrieved May 3, 2023. (<https://eu.forums.blizzard.com/en/wow/t/activision-blizzard-sued-by-california-department-of-fair-employment/300332/580>)

- MMO Populations. "World of Warcraft Player Count." Retrieved June 3, 2023. (<https://mmo-population.com/r/wow>)
- Monson, Melissa. 2012. "Race-Based Fantasy Realm: Essentialism in the World of Warcraft." *Games and Culture*. 7(1): 48–71.
- Nash, Curtis. 2016. "Cultural Appropriation, Postcolonial Fetishism, and Indigenous-Settler Relations in Blizzard Entertainment's World of Warcraft." *University of Guelph*.
- Oromis. 2021. "Activision Blizzard sued by California Department of Fair Employment." Retrieved Dec. 22, 2021. (<https://eu.forums.blizzard.com/en/wow/en/wow/t/activision-blizzard-sued-by-california-department-of-fair-employment/300332/67>)
- Paaßen, Benjamin, Thekla Morgenroth, and Michelle Stratemeyer. 2017. "What is a True Gamer? The Male Gamer Stereotype and the Marginalization of Women in Video Game Culture." *Sex Roles*, 76(7-8):421-435.
- Paradigmrum. 2020. "How is Horde v Alliance not encouraged racism?" Retrieved Jan. 5, 2022. (<https://us.forums.blizzard.com/en/wow/t/how-is-horde-v-alliance-not-encouraged-racism/561201>)
- Pearce, Alyssa. 2017. "Exploring Performance of Gendered Identities through Language in *World of Warcraft*." *International Journal of Human-Computer Interaction*, 33(3):180-189. DOI: 10.1080/10447318.2016.1230965
- Pecker, Joseph. 2013. "What Makes an Orc? Racial Cosmos and Emergent Narrative in World of Warcraft." *Games and Culture*. 9(2): 83-101.
- Pickpawkit. 2021. "Activision Blizzard sued by California Department of Fair Employment." Retrieved Dec. 22, 2021. (<https://eu.forums.blizzard.com/en/wow/en/wow/t/activision-blizzard-sued-by-california-department-of-fair-employment/300332/350>)
- Pickpawkit. 2021. "Activision Blizzard sued by California Department of Fair Employment." Retrieved Dec. 22, 2021. (<https://eu.forums.blizzard.com/en/wow/en/wow/t/activision-blizzard-sued-by-california-department-of-fair-employment/300332/58>)

- Placido. 2022. "The 'Harry Potter' Anti-Semitism Controversy, Explained." *Forbes*. January 5. (<https://www.forbes.com/sites/danidiplacido/2022/01/05/the-harry-potter-anti-semitism-controversy-explained/?sh=70934f067766>)
- Ralanthel. 2021. "I find a lot of things offensive." Retrieved Jan. 23, 2022. (<https://us.forums.blizzard.com/en/wow/en/wow/t/i-find-a-lot-of-things-offensive/1101076/70>)
- Ratan, Rabindra, et al. 2015. "Stand by Your Man: An Examination of Gender Disparity in League of Legends." *Games and Culture*, 10(5): 438–462.
- Ray, Victor. 2019. "A Theory of Racialized Organizations." *American Sociological Review*, 84(1):26-53. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122418822335>
- Rez. 2021. "Slippery Slope?" Retrieved Jan. 12, 2022. (<https://us.forums.blizzard.com/en/wow/en/wow/t/slippery-slope/1113078/89>)
- Ritter, Christopher. 2010. "Why the Humans are White: Fantasy, Modernity, and the Rhetorics of Racism in *World of Warcraft*." *Washington State University*.
- Robinson, Garrett. 2016. "The Fantasy Genre Hates Women." *Medium*. February 4.
- Rustylegs. 2021. "Activision Blizzard sued by California Department of Fair Employment." Retrieved Dec. 22, 2021. (<https://eu.forums.blizzard.com/en/wow/en/wow/t/activision-blizzard-sued-by-california-department-of-fair-employment/300332/11>)
- Salter, Anastasia and Bridget Blodgett. 2012. "Hypermasculinity & Dickwolves: The Contentious Role of Women in the New Gaming Public." *Journal of Broadcasting and Media*, 56(3):401-416. DOI: 10.1080/08838151.2012.705199
- Schwartz, L. 2006. "Fantasy, realism, and the other in recent video games." *Space and Culture*. 9: 313–325.



- Serenå. 2021. "Activision Blizzard sued by California Department of Fair Employment." Retrieved Dec. 22, 2021. (<https://eu.forums.blizzard.com/en/wow/en/wow/t/activision-blizzard-sued-by-california-department-of-fair-employment/300332/37>)
- Spiecker, Tara. 2011. "Beat Those Sleepy Slackers!: Color-Blind Racism in World of Warcraft's Valley of Trials." *Quadrivium: A Journal of Multidisciplinary Scholarship*. 3(1): Article 4.
- Stoll, Laurie, Terry Lilley, and Kelly Pinter. 2017. "Gender-Blind Sexism and Rape Myth Acceptance." *Violence Against Women*, 23(1): 28-45.
- Taylor, T.L. 2012. *Raising the Stakes: E-Sports and the Professionalization of Computer Gaming*. The MIT Press.
- Thavius. 2020. "It's about time we addressed the racism and other issues in World of Warcraft." Retrieved Dec. 18, 2021 (<https://eu.forums.blizzard.com/en/wow/t/it%E2%80%99s-about-time-we-addressed-the-racism-and-other-issues-in-world-of-warcraft/161103>)
- Tolmie, Jane. 2006. "Medievalism and the Fantasy Heroine." *Journal of Gender Studies* 15(2):145-158. DOI: 10.1080/09589230600720042
- Tompkins, Jessica, Teresa Lynch, Irene I. Van Driel, and Niki Fritz. 2020. "Kawaii Killers and Femme Fatales: A Textual Analysis of Female Characters Signifying Benevolent and Hostile Sexism in Video Games." *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 64(2):236-254. DOI: 10.1080/08838151.2020.1718960
- Truchbull. 2020. "'You hit like a girl!'" Retrieved Jan. 10, 2022. (<https://us.forums.blizzard.com/en/wow/en/wow/t/you-hit-like-a-girl/631707/641>)
- Tvtropes.com. "Feminist Fantasy." Retrieved June 14, 2021. (<https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/FeministFantasy>)
- Valhaan. 2021. "Slippery Slope?" Retrieved Jan. 12, 2022. (<https://us.forums.blizzard.com/en/wow/t/slippery-slope/1113078>)

- Wade, Natalie. 2019. "Afrofuturism: Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture for Black Artists." *14 East*. March 1.
- Waning. 2021. "Activision Blizzard sued by California Department of Fair Employment." Retrieved Dec. 22, 2021. (<https://eu.forums.blizzard.com/en/wow/en/wow/t/activision-blizzard-sued-by-california-department-of-fair-employment/300332/92>)
- Williams, Johnny. 2020. "The Unblackening." In *Protecting Whiteness*: Chapter 2.
- Wilson, Thomas. 1996. "Compliments Will Get You Nowhere: Benign Stereotypes, Prejudice and Anti-Semitism." *The Sociological Quarterly*, 37(3):465-479.
- Womack, Ytasha. 2013. *Afrofuturism : the World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*. Chicago, IL: Chicago Review Press.
- Wowpedia. "Wowpedia: Lore policy." Retrieved Oct. 12, 2021. ([https://wowpedia.fandom.com/wiki/Wowpedia:Lore\\_policy](https://wowpedia.fandom.com/wiki/Wowpedia:Lore_policy))
- Xitro. 2020. "It's about time we addressed the racism and other issues in World of Warcraft." Retrieved Dec. 18, 2021(<https://eu.forums.blizzard.com/en/wow/en/wow/t/it%E2%80%99s-about-time-we-addressedthe-racism-and-other-issues-in-world-of-warcraft/161103/68>)
- Yoshuyilu. 2021. "I find a lot of things offensive." Retrieved Jan. 23, 2022. (<https://us.forums.blizzard.com/en/wow/en/wow/t/i-find-a-lot-of-things-offensive/1101076/13>)
- Zashii. 2021. "Activision Blizzard sued by California Department of Fair Employment." Retrieved Dec. 22, 2021. (<https://eu.forums.blizzard.com/en/wow/en/wow/t/activision-blizzard-sued-by-california-department-of-fair-employment/300332/94>)
- Zeraveth. 2021. "I find a lot of things offensive." Retrieved Jan. 23, 2022. (<https://us.forums.blizzard.com/en/wow/en/wow/t/i-find-a-lot-of-things-offensive/1101076/16>)