25. Blizzard Entertainment

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Blizzard Entertainment is the company that designed the virtual worlds of Warcraft, Starcraft, and Diablo. Online gaming through Blizzard’s Battle.net began in the 1990s with such offerings as WarCraft: Orcs and Humans (1994) and Starcraft (1998). Both became the foundation of franchised online real time strategy games (RTS), which grew in popularity and originated professional arenas of competition. World of Warcraft is now one of the most popular video games in the world, spanning six continents and engaging more than 10 million people. Both the design of the games, and the subcultures that inhabit them, are part of a generational experience in a globalized world. As a white adolescent male in a middle- and working-class suburb of Southern California, Blizzard games became a medium of friendship for my friends and me. The Blizzard logo, as a symbol of its game franchises, remains an artifact of that childhood. Games continue to mediate experiences of childhood in the United States, yet little ethnographic work exists detailing the experiences of youth across virtual worlds.

Unlike other online games like The Sims and Second Life, and Blizzard’s games are permeated by one-on-one combat, battle tactics, and epic war narratives. Race, especially, is made into a salient system of differences through gameplay. In Warcraft: Orcs versus...
Humans, the Orcs take on the visage of barbaric conquerors, later countered in the Warcraft 3 storyline that portrays Orcs closer to “noble savages” of Enlightenment racial thinking. Orcs and their allied races, the undead, trolls, and ogres, play across racialized tropes in Euro-American racial thinking, though also evoking humanity as white medieval Christians. In StarCraft, three races, the human Terran, insect-like Zerg, and psychic Protoss battle for control of a single sector of space. Each carries a legacy of genetic engineering that has augmented their “race” and its nature, as well as its capacities for warfare. World of Warcraft innovatively combined the personalization of Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs) that centers the player’s custom-built character, including abilities, skills, and attributes that level up. Race- and gender-bending become possible through the bodies that people create in-game. As extensions of one’s agency in a virtual environment, these characters engender new forms of desire, exchange, community, and subjectivity.

Access to gaming continues to be contoured by questions of access and subcultural hegemonies, falling along lines of class, race, and gender. In the United States, Blizzard’s gaming communities are dominated by white, Asian American Pacific Islander, middle-class men. Dominated by this racial, gendered, and classed subculture, a serious question for MMORPGs and RTS games is how inclusive they can be. In 2005, Blizzard banned an explicitly LBGT-friendly group in World of Warcraft because it might incite harassment. Such concerns were made more visible in 2013 when a transgender Canadian woman became a serious contender in international StarCraft tournaments. Professionalization, too, can change the gaming community. In Korea, high-level StarCraft teams often provide salaries, training houses, and experienced coaches. Only recently have American teams begun to explore this level of professional competition and the infrastructure necessary to maintain it. While issues of class, race, and gender continue to plague Blizzard games, we should ask ourselves what potentials for new forms of youth sociality exist in virtual gaming spaces; what forms or spaces of youth expression are being foreclosed elsewhere, especially for queer and of color youth; and what structures of inequality persist between virtual and “real” worlds.