

Continuing the colonial process through video games

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Abstract: This essay discusses the presence of colonialism and cannibalism in selected computer games because like literature these games have the ability to shape assumptions and representations of race that represent a cultural impact. The research has drawn material from a range of representations of cannibalism in the literature and addresses the role of agency.

Keywords: cannibalism; colonization; computer games; feminist; media studies; *Warcraft III*

The importance of the problematic inscribing of colonialism, cannibalism and racialized discourse into the computer game, *Warcraft III*, can be justified by Michel Foucault's theory that "there is a close relation between the production of power and the production of knowledge" (Mills, 2003, p. 704). In other words, when those making computer games narrow cultures and inscribe them with a colonialist influenced rhetoric, then the game makers and the game players are replicating the colonialist project.

Cannibalism has held a very important place in the justifying of colonizing missions. In the introduction to her book Kristen Guest makes this argument in explaining that "the opposition between civilization and savagery also performs significant ideological work within western culture both by containing marginal groups and by helping to articulate the anxieties of their dominant social counterparts" (Guest, 2001b, p. 2). In examining this computer game, it is hoped to argue that games such as *Warcraft III* function as a way for post-colonial western societies to experience pleasure by exploring and containing the colonized 'other'. However, this analysis of the game will also explore the possibility of there being agency in the way that race is constructed.

Warcraft III is a war-based strategy computer game consisting of an epic tale where races fight each other in order to gain power and control over land. It can be simply described as an online "capture the flag" game where the object is to spread control and power over a map by building settlements and destroying the opponents' settlements. There is both a narrative single player offline component to this game, as well as a multiplayer real time strategy game online. The online portion of this game has characters inscribed with the mythology of the offline component. For the purpose of this paper the discussion focuses on the online component of this game.

The online component of the game is most relevant to this analytical piece because it illustrates the social spread of racialized cannibalism more extensively than the solitaire offline component. When playing *Warcraft III*, the player must first select their race. Each of the races has their own "racial identity," described in detail on Blizzard Entertainment's *Warcraft III* website. Picking a race narrows one's choice of units, or military and heroes down to those associated with the race. The race options are Humans, Undead, Night Elves and Orcs. The teams can range between one player versus another player all the way to four players versus another four players. Because of this team construction, different races do get to work together. However, this collaboration does not diminish the racial and gender problems of the game. It is worth mentioning here that all the Humans are white males and out of four total races that combined have 16 heroes, there are only two female heroes to choose from. This narrow choice of representation clearly indicates that, for the most part,

this war game is intended for males. This presupposition is problematic because if men are the intended game players, then effective colonizing strategies are gendered.

Throughout this critical analysis, attention focuses on the Undead race because they are constructed as cannibals. The *Warcraft III* website describes the Undead as “walking corpses, disembodied spirits, damned mortal men and insidious extra-dimensional entities” (“*Warcraft III Races*”). The Undead were created for the purpose of “sowing terror across the world” and they also spread the “terrible plagues of undeath” which threatens the white human males (“*Warcraft III Races*”). Unlike the other races, the Undead have nomadic capabilities because they do not build their buildings in the same way as the other races do. Instead, they summon their settlements from the ground. This difference in construction ability might be seen as linking the Undead to indigenous peoples. The Undead are nomadic and have a lesser sovereignty over their land than the Humans. The Undead are cannibals as well. They are able to harvest bodies whether from their army or their opponents and use the bodies to either make their armies bigger or supplement their health ratings. The military unit called the Crypt Fiend has a special relationship to the land because they can bury themselves in the earth and get health from the soil.

Before moving on to theorizing about cannibalism, there are a few more Undead units that need further exposing. The first unit that needs special consideration is the Abomination. The abomination is a gigantic body made up of “multiple dead limbs and body parts from various corpses” they are described as “slow-witted” and loving to “carve flesh” (“*Warcraft III: Undead*”). The Abomination carries a meat cleaver that clearly ties his act of killing to food consumption. The sewed together limbs and garish swinging of its bloated body imply a savage consumption. Another important unit is called the Meat Wagon. The Meat Wagon is a harvester and storage unit for bodies. It is called the “dreaded” unit that “strikes fear and woe into the hearts of even the most resolute defenders” (“*Warcraft III: Undead*”). The fear that the Meat Wagon is supposed to affect substantiates my argument that the Undead are colonially inscribed with the fears about an indigenous other.

It is especially noteworthy that the Undead are the carriers of plague and terror. As this game is modern, linking an ‘other’ to terror carries a significant weight because, after the events of September 11th, those who signified racial difference in the United States were often threatened with being labeled a terrorist. The plague that the Undead units carry also cements this fear of difference because the rhetoric of plague bearers constructs the Undead as having questionable cleanliness habits. Furthermore, the plague that these units carry threatens the Human race within the narrative portion of the game by turning the humans into a zombie other. The language of saving a savage other often includes the desire to “purify” them; however the plague bearing Undead places them beyond saving.

Cannibalism is often mobilized as a practice that leaves the practitioner beyond salvation. Thus, the cannibal habits of the Undead and their plague-ridden armies inscribe them with the colonist’s justification for genocide. The last units to be addressed are the Ghouls. The Ghouls are “lumbering, rotting corpses” and are “ravenous cannibals who can regenerate their wounds by eating the flesh of fallen warriors” (“*Warcraft III: Undead*”). It is important to note that through these units, the producers of *Warcraft III* are re-inscribing colonialist depictions of cannibalism, and that it is not a new trend.

Warcraft III is essentially an epic tale of the 21st century. It has its own mythology and is as expansive as literature or art through the bard-like capabilities of the Internet and marketing. Through art and literature, Western colonizers have often tried to explain cannibalism in order to other a colonized subject. In Minaz Jooma’s piece on *Robinson Crusoe*, Jooma theorizes that “since any substance being taken in has a foreign quality, there is a need to assimilate the foreign to the familiar in an acceptable manner” (Jooma, 2001, p. 59). In other words, by attempting to understand and explain the reasons for cannibalism, literature and anthropology

attempt to relieve some of the discomfort and fear of difference. However, at the same time, they can also fetishize these differences for the entertaining pleasure of experiencing a fear contained in a familiar pleasure, such as theater, literature or art. The desire to explain and explore the reasons for consuming can also be found in works like *Robinson Crusoe*, and *Sweeney Todd*.

A discussion of ways in which Western anthropologists have considered cannibalism in other societies is found in Conklin's chapter entitled "Explanations of Eating" (Conklin, 2001, pp 87-107). She describes how none of the assumptions adequately describe the reasons why, for example, the Wari' (a tribe of people in Brazil) consume the flesh of their dead. To the Wari', humans were not consumed for nutritional reasons or sustenance in times of famine. In fact, cannibalism during times of famine was morally opposed by the Wari' people. The Wari' practice mortuary cannibalism essentially to fulfill a societal ceremonial duty (Conklin, 2001, p. 94). Unlike the inscribing of cannibalism into literature and *Warcraft III*, cannibalism for the Wari' serves a ceremonial and symbolic purpose whether it is eating friend or foe. In *Warcraft III*, the cannibal Undead eat to be feared and do not take any ceremony in the killing and dismembering of bodies.

As a modern epic, the function of cannibalism within the game should be compared with other literary cultural productions to expose aspects of the literary functions of cannibalism *Warcraft III* contains. While cannibalism is described primarily in relation to the fear that it causes Crusoe in *Robinson Crusoe* or other races in *Warcraft III*, this is not precisely the way it is described in other cannibal fictions. For example, while there is an extreme tension throughout *Robinson Crusoe* over "those who may eat and those who may be eaten", instances of cannibalism in this novel add excitement and poignancy to the story because of "Crusoe's alarm and his fear of being destroyed" (Jooma, 2001, p. 60). A *Warcraft III* player experiences a form of tension because their race is at risk of being consumed and therefore destroyed.

This is not to say that this tension may be a universally negative way to frame the Undead, in *Sweeney Todd* cannibalism re-visions class resistance as "... the limits to Europe's capacity to contain, assimilate, or indeed, destroy the resistant societies of the region" (Colás, 2001, p. 130). In her discussion "Are You Being Served? Cannibalism, Class and Victorian Melodrama", Kristen Guest traces the ways cannibalism was used in a fetishized form to critique and resist elites in England. Her writing on *Sweeney Todd* shows this most clearly. She begins with the following quote from *Sweeney Todd, the Demon Barber of Fleet Street*:

The history of the world, my sweet....
Is who gets eaten and who gets to eat,...
How comforting for just once to know,...
That those above will serve those down below (Guest, 2001a, p. 107)

The Guest and Colás works allow the game player to see some sort of agency in *Warcraft III* through the power taken by consuming. For a better understanding of how this is possible, it is necessary to continue analyzing Guest's explanation of how the "discourse of cannibalism is constituted by the fears and desires excited by encounters with the other" (Guest, 2001a, p. 108). In drawing upon Gananath Obeyesekere's efforts to "challenge formulations of a racialized other" Guest argues that there is a connection between the cannibal other and the self because as Obeyesekere states, there is a "theme of common humanity that binds" the cannibal with the British (cited in Guest, 2001a, p.108). Obeyesekere "further suggests that cannibalism does not polarize self and other so much as it allows both colonizer and colonized to engage in fantasies about a savage other who is really a projection of the self" (Guest, 2001a, p. 108). Unlike Colás, who focuses on cannibalism in South America, Guest looks at the way marginalized groups within the "Old World" have taken power through their theatrical representations as cannibals. *Sweeney Todd* is one such example of cannibalism

theatre. Colonialism is inscribed into this story because Sweeney Todd tries to murder a colonialist who has been able to capitalize enough from colonizing another land that he can now afford to marry. Cannibalism comes into this play as both the metaphorical and literal translation. *Sweeney Todd* critiques the capitalist consumption of colonialism through Mark Ingestere's character, the colonialist, and Sweeney's victims have "been converted into meat for Mrs. Lovett's pie shop" (Guest, 2001a, p. 117). Kristen Guest argues that by making the baker of the meat pies an unknowing cannibal, there is a "reversal of the mainstream view of the lower classes as threatening other," because "the designation of the poor as cannibalistic 'savages,' is contested and the play's representation of unwitting 'cannibals' as victims of capitalistic greed" (Guest, 2001a, p. 118).

To understand yet another way agency can be inscribed into *Warcraft III* to combat the colonialist notion of a cannibal savage other, it is necessary to turn to Jeff Berglund's piece, *Cannibal Fictions*. In the chapter entitled "Turning Back the Cannibal: Indigenous Revisionism in the Late Twentieth Century," Berglund begins his argument about the use of cannibal themes to combat colonialism by discussing Steven Yazzie's piece "Fear of a Red Planet," which depicts a "bloody eagle eating its own tail" (Berglund, 2001, p. 130). To the discussion of this painting, Berglund includes Jack Forbes, a Native intellectual's opinion that "imperialism and exploitation" are "forms of cannibalism," but that "the logic of colonization can be used for anti-colonialist ends" (Berglund, 2001, p. 132). Berglund substantiates this argument by explaining how Native writers "depict that true cannibalism is practiced by those with access to power, which in most cases means those who are linked to the primarily white State apparatus" (Berglund, 2001, p. 133). This begs the question, who becomes the cannibal in *Warcraft III*? Is it the re-inscribing of the colonized 'other' into the Undead that matters most or the act of colonial consumption that game users engage in through playing the game that is most important?

There is no easy answer to these questions. It seems most likely that both the re-inscribing of cannibalism into a savage other and the consumption of computer war games played by predominately male audiences are equally problematic. Drawing upon Guest's piece where cannibals are described as a reflection of the self, one can make connections between these different theoretical approaches to cannibalism. If cannibals are a reflection of oneself and game players are "consuming" game play or playing as or with cannibals, perhaps there is some agency within *Warcraft III*. In other words, when one is choosing the Undead and conquering the Human race, although there is a re-inscribing of the cannibal other into this process, the Undead is still able to resist the colonizing force of the patriarchal Human race. Furthermore, one could see the fear espoused by the Human race of being eaten or assimilated into the Undead army as giving the Undead an enormous amount of resistant power over the colonizing Human.

On the other hand, when so little ritual is attributed to the Undead army's cannibal tactics, this lessens their ability to seem rational. The lack of ceremony in the slaughter of foes, alongside characters such as the Abomination who is described as slow-witted, takes some of this agency away from the Undead army being seen as a complete powerful force to be dealt with. Furthermore, when cannibalism has been used by the indigenous other as a way to create a resistant revolutionary culture, it seems to be mobilized for the purpose of demonizing the colonizer who must be dealt with through consumption out of last resort. The Undead are clearly demonized pictorially. Components of the army are spiders and banshees, who have a similar effect as a siren, and their entire race is portrayed as subhuman because they are zombies. The Humans, Orcs, and Night Elves are all portrayed as living complete entities. This contrast between living and not quite dead, can be seen as continuing the colonial justification for genocide. If the Undead are not alive, then surely their actual deaths are not inscribed with the same level of loss of life as the other races.

In this critique of *Warcraft III* alongside post-colonial theories about cannibalism, I hope to have illuminated how computer games are relevant to post-colonial theory because they are imbued with an enormous amount of cultural power. Whether or not the Undead's portrayal as cannibals is beneficial to their construction as a force to be dealt with, does not matter as much as being aware of the ways colonialist representations and exclusions trespass into many seemingly neutral areas of society.

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