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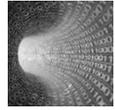
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# ‘Seriously, get out’: Feminists on the forums and the War(craft) on women

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## Abstract

Everyday gendered experiences provide an affective framework for understanding participation in massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs) and their community forums. Debates on the *World of Warcraft* online forums about changes to an upcoming in-game character named Ji Firepaw, who initially greeted characters with gendered and sexist dialogue, demonstrates how games and game communities are embedded in larger cultural contexts. Themes like the feminist as killjoy, anxious masculinity and player agency recur across official and unofficial *WoW* forums regarding Ji Firepaw. These concerns rely upon and aim to reinforce gendered power dynamics, illustrating how the digital and the virtual are not independent spaces. Rather, MMOGs and their associated online environments are experienced as part of the everyday, such that feminists and feminism are treated as threats to these virtual spaces and, by extension, to the enjoyment and sociability of an implicitly broader set of shared values about gender and sex roles.

## Keywords

Affect, feminist killjoy, forums, masculinity, misogyny, MMOG, online communities, virtuality, *World of Warcraft*

People congregate in ever-increasing numbers in virtual places. Some of these are richly rendered and imaginative spaces in which we can channel magic, wield swords and band together to overpower villains threatening the very fabric of the world. Others are clearly ordered and largely textual spaces into which we can channel anger, wield snark and

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band together to overpower opinions threatening the social fabric of a community. When it comes to the massively multiplayer online game (MMOG) *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*) and its network of online forums and fan sites, these two spaces overlap.

Forums provide a place to negotiate how Azeroth – *WoW*'s fictional universe – could, should and does have meaning for players. The discussions found on *WoW*'s official forums, as well as on numerous fan sites like MMO-Champion and *WoW Insider*, help to foster – and police – a sense of community and commonality beyond the game itself. Here, I explore how gender politics are sites of struggle in this virtual community, using a specific set of forum threads about a contested character in *WoW*'s recent beta testing as a case study. Specifically, I investigate how feminism is most commonly understood in these debates: as a powerful, hysterical threat in and beyond Azeroth. The discussions that take place in these forums make use of several affective discourses: the feminist as killjoy, anxieties about masculinity, and an emphasis on player choices. These discourses are not about Azeroth as a discrete space, but as inseparable from everyday understandings of gender politics. Such understandings, made visible in disagreements about being gendered in virtual space, form a basis for maintaining a community in the face of a perceived feminist threat.

## **World of Warcraft and the Ji Firepaw debate**

Blizzard Entertainment's *World of Warcraft* is one of the most successful MMOGs. Since its release in November 2004, the game's popularity has skyrocketed, peaking at over 12 million subscribers in 2010 (Blizzard Entertainment, 2010). At the end of *Cataclysm*, the game's third content expansion, Blizzard launched an Annual Pass promotion that ran from 13 March 2012 to 1 May 2012. In exchange for agreeing to subscribe to *WoW* for an entire year, players would receive exclusive in-game rewards, a free copy of Blizzard's highly anticipated *Diablo III* and guaranteed access to the beta testing phase of the fourth expansion, *Mists of Pandaria* (*Mists*). By the closing date, over one million people had signed up for this Annual Pass promotion (Activision Blizzard, 2012).

The popularity of the Annual Pass meant that a staggeringly large number of players were able to participate in the *Mists* beta. Typically, access to beta testing has been limited to key industry members and a small number of regular subscribers chosen through a lottery system. Player feedback regarding story and character inconsistencies, graphical glitches and gameplay bugs was conveyed via an in-game reporting system. With such a massive influx of players to the *Mists* beta, Blizzard adjusted its feedback structure, adding a *Mists* beta feedback category to its official online forums. While only players who signed up for the Annual Pass were able to post in this section, the threads were visible to anyone, enabling discussions about future content to move beyond the official forums to fan sites and gaming blogs, and extending the dialogue to members of the *WoW* community without beta access.

One personality in particular caught the community's attention. Named Ji Firepaw, this game figure is central to the initial *Mists* storyline. A core feature of *Mists* is the introduction of a new type of playable character, the Pandaren; unlike other character types, which are divided into two opposing factions (the Horde and the Alliance), Pandaren begin as neutral, and players must select an allegiance for their character at the

end of an introductory quest chain. Ji Firepaw provides the player with a series of quests that will help their character progress and improve. When the time comes to choose a faction, players learn that Ji Firepaw is being promoted. He becomes the Pandaren ambassador to the Horde, a leadership position that is presumably an extension – and reflection – of his earlier work as an instructor.

In his original iteration, Ji Firepaw greeted male and female characters with the following dialogue:

(To a male character): Hello, friend! You've got a strong look to you! I bet you're all the rage with the ladies! Join me! You and I are going to be good friends!

(To a female character): Hello, friend! You're some kind of gorgeous, aren't you? I bet you can't keep the men off you! Join me! You and I are going to be good friends!

These gendered differences prompted one beta tester, Aislinana, to start a thread on *WoW*'s official beta feedback forums. In it, she remarked:

It's a subtle difference but it pulled me out of playing for a moment. I am aware that Ji is written to perhaps be slightly too friendly. I know you all have a friend like that. However, how it reads to a woman, especially as a woman in real life – it came off as creepy. The focus is on how *beautiful* she is, rather than strong. Given how Pandaren society seems to value strength and poise as gender-neutral traits, why make this guy espouse an exception? (Ji of the Huojin, 2012: 1)

This concern was picked up by the prominent fan site *WoW Insider*, which used Aislinana's question as a starting point for an editorial about in-game gender inequalities (Myers, 2012). Encouraged by this article, other beta testers chimed in on Aislinana's thread, which quickly grew to over 300 responses. In the subsequent beta update, alongside numerous other tweaks and fixes to bugged content, Ji Firepaw's dialogue was rewritten; he now tells female Pandaren 'You seem poised and confident'. This revision provoked a massive outcry that spilled beyond the borders of Blizzard's beta feedback forums to a host of other gaming websites, blogs and fan forums.

## Research methodology and research sites

Heeding Adrienne Shaw's advice that 'we should look at video games in culture rather than games as culture' (2010: 417), I use Ji Firepaw as a focal point to explore how online forums are sites of struggle over the boundaries of community and communal identities. I draw upon the complementary perspectives of feminism and critical discourse analysis to identify how already circulating discourses, such as those about the war on women, can be amplified in these spaces, as tensions around gender and privilege play out. Critical discourse analysis investigates 'the role of discourse in the (re)production and challenge of dominance' (Van Dijk, 1993: 249). My analysis pays close attention to how these relations of power are made visible around gendered subjects, contributing to larger feminist projects that 'analyse power relations and the way that women as individuals and as members of groups negotiate relations of power'

(Mills, 2004: 70). Additionally, my own familiarity with *WoW* – as a player and reader of various *WoW* and MMO fan sites and forums – afforded me a participant–observer understanding of both the game and the community context in which debates about Ji Firepaw took place.

I tracked conversations about this character across *WoW*'s official forums, as well as two prominent fan sites: *WoW Insider* and *MMO-Champion*. I focused on threads dedicated to discussing Ji Firepaw: there were nine in total, with nearly 4000 posts. Typical forum threads rarely contain more than a few dozen posts; the sheer number of replies these threads elicited suggested posters and players were particularly invested in this topic. In order to understand the nature of this investment, I looked for patterns of talk and of perspective or orientation that would help me uncover the ideological norms and values animating this controversy. Largely outraged in tone, these threads share a sense of policing who 'counts' as part of the *WoW* community. As the following discussion and excerpts illustrate, anger at feminists, anxiety around masculinity and concerns about forms of player agency recur in these posts, in an attempt to cast feminism out of the game. All posts have been reproduced verbatim, to capture and convey the posters' perspectives as accurately as possible.

## Games as gendered spaces

Many game studies scholars investigate how gaming and gender intersect. For some, games' representational worlds offer opportunities to assess the presence and roles of female characters (see, e.g., Jansz and Martis, 2007; Kennedy, 2002; Martins et al., 2009). Female characters are no guarantee of female players, however, and while some critics have tried to pinpoint what makes video games appealing, others have focused on what makes video games (un)appealing to women (see, e.g., Cassell and Jenkins, 1998; Kafai et al., 2008; Royse et al., 2007). The presumption, as Nick Yee explains, is that 'men and women prefer different kinds of game play ... [and] that there are dramatic differences between men and women in terms of what games they might enjoy playing'; in other words, that games are gendered spaces (2008: 89). Yee's own research on MMOGs, the Daedalus Project, challenges this easy assumption, suggesting that the motivations to play vary both across and within gender, and 'attempt[s] to identify play motivations that appeal to the 'female brain' might be solving a problem that doesn't exist' (2008: 91).

As one of the most well-known MMOGs, *WoW* has intrigued a variety of scholars. Corneliussen and Rettberg's *WoW*-centered anthology *Digital Culture, Play, and Identity* (2008), for example, includes narrative, economic, representational and ludic approaches, among others. Less prominent, however, is close attention to how MMOGs such as *WoW* are part of everyday environments and experiences, including gender. For instance, the centrality of avatars to the gaming experience has generated provocative questions about 'doing gender' online (see e.g. Eklund, 2011; MacCallum-Stewart, 2008; Turkle, 1995). These explorations grapple with the politics of embodiment, an issue central to feminist critics like Donna Haraway and Lisa Nakamura, whose work on cyborgs (Haraway, 1991; see also Wolmark, 1999) and on identity tourism (Nakamura, 1995, 2011), emphasises how gender and race are points of privilege, online *and* off.

Offline points of privilege have real implications for people's willingness and ability to participate in online games. Not only do MMOGs require a certain level of economic capital (to purchase and maintain a computer, accessories, subscriptions, and high-speed internet access), they also presume a raced and gendered social capital. Digital environments are far from equitable utopias, and the cultures that constitute themselves around and through online games are often felt as largely white and male (see e.g. Brock, 2011; Dutton et al., 2011; Higgin, 2009). Even though women comprise nearly half of many PC game playerbases (Nielsen, 2009), their interest is still often seen as trespassing.

Websites like [www.fatuglyorslutty.com](http://www.fatuglyorslutty.com) are repositories of misogynistic comments aimed at female players, and discussions of sexual harassment in gaming communities, like those Amy O'Leary chronicled in the *New York Times* (2012), provoke similar responses. The deluge of hateful comments received by Anita Sarkeesian, a pop-culture critic and feminist vlogger, when she began fundraising to produce a series on female character stereotypes in video games makes this sense of male entitlement clear (Sarkeesian, 2012). In the wake of a negative Fox News story about the single-player game *Mass Effect*, Dutton et al. pointed to how players conceptualised 'the enemy' in clearly gendered terms that 'reached disturbing levels of misogyny' (2011: 295). They urged scholars to actively consider 'how an open media landscape can not only allow sexist discourse to emerge, but create a space for it to be accepted, if not actively condoned and reinforced' (2011: 303).

Such experiences shows how games are far from separate spaces, but rather are firmly embedded within everyday ideologies of gender, power and privilege. The 2012 US presidential campaign foregrounded the ways in which these ideologies can be mobilised for partisan support and political purchase, coalescing in what is popularly called the war on women. Emanating from state and federal Republican party platforms, and buttressed by conservative religious groups, this war on women is manifesting in recidivist political decisions: 'the Republican-controlled House of Representatives has voted 55 times to undermine women's health, roll back women's rights, and defund programs and institutions that provide healthcare and support for women' since the start of 2011 (U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Energy and Commerce Minority Staff, 2012). Issues such as preventative care, reproductive rights and domestic violence support services are talking points for US political parties and pundits, topics that spill over into broader discourses of gendered privilege in everyday life, including online and digital communities.

Shaw (2010) suggests that one of the most significant adjustments critics should make is to dismantle games' typical status as outside a more 'real' mainstream culture. 'Placing video games within larger cultural discourses is important', she argues, 'as video games themselves are the product of larger cultural contexts' (Shaw, 2010: 410; see also Taylor, 2006). The strategies like name-calling and shaming that Dutton et al. identified, for instance, are forms of rebuttal and dismissal not used solely by gamers, but tendencies that cut across multiple forms of public and political debate. Following these rhetorics as they move through the media landscape increases our 'insight into the crucial role of discourse in the reproduction of dominance and inequality', and emphasises the roles that cultural discourses play in online and digital environments (Van Dijk, 1993: 253).

## Findings and analysis

### *The feminist killjoy loose on the forums*

Blizzard's changes to Ji Firepaw's dialogue are attributed to posters like Aislinana – 'shameful', 'disgusting', 'toxic' players, whose 'hate ruins perfectly acceptable things (like silly flirtatious cartoon characters) for everyone else' (thundercles, They Changed Ji Firepaw, 2012: 147). These kinds of assertions situate players who are uncomfortable with Ji Firepaw's comments as 'troublemakers'. Sara Ahmed refers to this as the trope of the feminist killjoy – a figure that 'brings other[s] down, not only by talking about unhappy topics such as sexism but by exposing how happiness is sustained by erasing the signs of not getting along' (2010b: 582). The pervasive characterisation of feminists and feminism as 'ruiners' that Ahmed tracks throughout contemporary popular and political discourse recurs in these threads, intimately tied to understandings of community and of 'getting along'. Feminists are intentionally disruptive, and are exhorted to feel bad about themselves for the destruction they cause:

its people like you that ruin the world for the rest of us. You literally cried until a good character was gutted because YOU didnt like the character. You imposed YOUR sensibilities on others and subjected the rest of us to your overly sensitive nature. So for all of us we now have a LESS enjoyable experience, a less enriched experience full of diverse characters, all because YOU got your panties in a bunch because an NPC [non-player character] called you pretty. You ruin GOOD things for the rest of us, and you should be ashamed of yourself. (Macey, [Feedback] Ji Firepaw, 2012: 481)

Players who speak out against Ji Firepaw's original quest text are diagnosed as the cause of negative feelings – their 'failure to be happy is read as sabotaging the happiness of others' (Ahmed, 2010b: 582). Pinpointing feminists as the problem makes one solution readily apparent: remove them from the discussion – and the community – altogether. Many angry posters claim to 'have reported your post to be taken down for offensive material' (Fogrum, Ji of the Huojin, 2012: 279).

This strategy is underscored by the numerous ways in which Ji Firepaw supporters argue that this critical feedback is 'doing feminism wrong.' Such ire, they contend, is misplaced – *real* feminists have other priorities:

There is a REAL war on women and their rights happening RIGHT NOW in the United States that you can focus your energies on if you are truly concerned about gender equality. (Caz in Myers, 2012)

If 'real' feminists are off battling 'real' sexism, the implication is that the dialogue – both by the game's characters and on these forums – is not actually a problem, and that those who think it is are not actually feminists. One poster even coins the term 'hobby feminist' to dismiss the arguments appearing in these threads: 'You know, the ones that have nothing better to do than sit around and complain about vaguely flirtatious comments made in a video game, instead of battling REAL sexism' (Fogrum, [Feedback] Ji Firepaw Part 2, 2012: 446). Clearly meant as belittling, the term 'hobby feminist'

attempts to de-legitimise player concerns; ‘incorrectly’ identifying sexism is no more than a frivolous pastime. The charge of ‘hobby feminism’ directs attention away from the content of their complaints and toward the players themselves: ‘feminists are read as being unhappy, such that situations of conflict, violence, and power are read as about the unhappiness of feminists rather than about what feminists are unhappy about’ (Ahmed, 2010b: 583). This redirection enables posters to attack other players and sidestep their critiques of the game: ‘This is not feminism. This is a few girls who don’t know what feminism is getting upset about something stupid’ (Scarlett, [Feedback] Ji Firepaw, 2012: 457).

Scarlett’s use of the term ‘girl’ is another strategy for dismissing feminist concerns, by infantilising posters who advance unpopular standpoints. Such ‘juvenalizing discourses of feminism’ (Deem, 2003: 616) invalidate a point of view by suggesting the speaker has not yet grown up: ‘I’m not saying you can’t be upset. I’m saying your reason for being upset is childish and trivial’ (Lumineus, Ji of the Huojin, 2012: 23). Others use patronising terms evocative of decades-past gender relations to put posters in their place:

Oh, *please*. This entire thread is *garbage*. Your opinions on sexism in this game are invalidated, doll. Flirting has been in this game since launch and it has been several magnitudes worse than a silly ill-perceived compliment about looks, baby. Grow up. This is a game played by a large range of ages, classes, races, and sexes, sweetheart. Comments about looks, sex, foreplay, prostitution, promiscuous sex, groping, stripping, and flirting are already in game, sugar. (Sanecore, Ji of the Huojin, 2012: 255; original emphasis)

Statements like ‘put on your big girl panties and get over it’ seek to render critiques amusing and harmless (Macey, [Feedback] Ji Firepaw, 2012: 664). The presumably female poster is as a result ‘made safe by being represented as fundamentally still a girl’ (Tasker and Negra, 2005: 109; see also Deem, 2003; Gill, 2007). Alongside accusations of the wilful, misguided destruction of others’ enjoyment, such rhetoric reveals the normative gender ideologies at stake in these debates, and the shifting cultural terrain of gender politics means that these changes are often felt as a threat to the composition of the virtual community that coheres around *WoW*.

### *Ji Firepaw and attacks on masculinity*

The ‘feminist killjoys’ voicing negative impressions of Ji Firepaw are seen as sabotaging the camaraderie of virtual space, and the pleasure found in it, by asking both players and Blizzard to recognise and redress gender privilege:

Change it back. It’s more than a little irritating the way businesses, like yourself, keep bending to thin-skinned politically correct BS. You’re just giving them more power. You’re feeding what are essentially trolls. (Covun, [Feedback] Ji Firepaw, 2012: 118)

This is the issue, isn’t it. This is giving power to women who don’t like the overarching patriarchal structure of society. This is taking power from men to define what is and isn’t acceptable treatment of women. This is equalizing the power structure. You’re giving them more power, when *obviously* we all know *those* types should not have any power whatsoever,

save what we deem to grace them with. You're overplaying your hand, mate. (Kohzere, [Feedback] Ji Firepaw, 2012: 130)

Changes to Ji Firepaw's comments are not read in terms of crafting more suitable storylines or compelling characters, but as a form of emasculation: 'Do people have nothing better to do than castrate Ji Firepaw?' (Darkhallows, *They Changed Ji Firepaw*, 2012: 332). This character very quickly becomes emblematic of how 'real' masculinity is under attack; upset posters repeatedly and forcefully refer to the revisions as a form of neutering: 'He has had his balls removed' (Stomination, [Feedback] Ji Firepaw, 2012: 113).

Such visceral imagery perpetuates a zero-sum approach to gender and power, reinforcing broader claims throughout the threads that men are 'losing', that feminism is 'winning', and that these in-game changes are part of a broader crisis in masculinity. This language of crisis entered mainstream public and political discourse in the 1990s (see e.g. Bly, 1990; Bordo, 1999; Faludi, 1999) and continues to dominate popular understandings of gender roles, now intensified by a climate of economic uncertainty – as neologisms like the 'He-cession' (Salam, 2009; Zincenko, 2009) and hand-wringing about the 'end of men' suggest (Rosin, 2012). Within *WoW*'s discussion boards, most players find it easy to single out women, and specifically feminism, as the cause of this crisis:

Why complain about the only standing ground a man has in this world. The only thing men have that's equal is gaming nowadays. We lose our house, kids, money and even our places to hang out to women all the time. We are expected to 'act like a man' when a single woman has not a single expectation in society but being 'princess'. (Rain, in Myers, 2012)

Ji Firepaw becomes a nodal point through which players articulate how masculinity and men are 'under siege' by feminist demands: 'They dont actually want equality, which is why demonizing men at any given chance helps THEIR agenda. They don't want equality, they want subjugation of men to women. Ballless men afraid to speak up cowering to women' (Alyviveena, [Feedback] Ji Firepaw, 2012: 504). Player responses reiterate how the affective dimensions of gender anxiety resonate beyond their in-game enjoyment. Many claim an affinity with Ji Firepaw, establishing parallels between the 'neutering' he has received and their own experiences:

This is why I feel so strongly, ive been oppressed by feminists my whole life. Ive been told not to say things Ji said before, told I was creepy, I was kicked and pushed back into a cave by so many women. Made to feel meagre and small, made to feel shy and had the confidence kicked out of me... till I could only look at women and think they wont like me if I say something they will think I'm creepy if I say I think they are beautiful. I got to the point where I just accepted I was creepy, and lonely and would always be alone. (Concequence, [Feedback] Ji Firepaw, 2012: 587)

This perceived congruity – that character revisions are tantamount to personal rejection – mobilises many posters' contentions that men and masculinity are increasingly devalued across all aspects of everyday life. Many posters buttress this argument within claims that the gender relations Ji Firepaw embodies are 'just the way things are', Martha

McCaughey refers to this as ‘the caveman mystique’, a ‘partial, political discourse that authorises certain prevalent masculine behaviours and a problematic acceptance of these behaviours’ (2008: 17; see also Faludi, 1999: 37). Like Concequence’s feeling of being ‘pushed back into a cave’ above, this pattern of talk draws on a language of evolution, and popular appeals to an innate manly essence motivate many of the arguments offered in favour of retaining Ji Firepaw’s original text: ‘Guys **do** think like that, even if we know enough to keep our mouths shut. It’s just nature’ (Drailen, Ji of the Huojin, 2012: 112; original emphasis).

Defending Ji Firepaw’s dialogue as part of the natural order of things pre-empts a need for posters to consider not only their own beliefs and behaviours, but those of the people who disagree with them as well. When sexist behaviour is biological, it is also unchangeable, past the point of individual choice or control: ‘Men’s behaviour is reified in a concept of masculinity that then, in a circular argument, becomes the explanation (and the excuse) for the behaviour’ (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005: 840; see also McCaughey, 2008). If males are at the mercy of their evolution, the problem then clearly lies with those who mistakenly want to change it; feminism and feminist-inflected arguments thus appear even more unreasonable, contributing to the popularity of the idea of the feminist killjoy as a scapegoat (Ahmed, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c). Some posters work against this facile assignment of responsibility, however:

You think like that. It isn’t a universal male trait. Which is likely part of why you defend this – because it makes you feel more comfortably about how you personally are, and that someone finds how you perceive people inappropriate is threatening to you. (Tempestmooon, Ji of the Huojin, 2012: 138)

Tempestmooon pinpoints one of the most powerful affective dimensions of the anxieties that run through such arguments: concerns about the character’s quest text – from both sides of the debate – are deeply rooted in everyday experiences that push beyond the boundaries of the game to encompass unquestioned assumptions and behaviours. In bringing these concerns to the front page of the forums, players upset with the original dialogue are unsettling the normative standards of the virtual community as well: ‘Maintaining public comfort requires that certain bodies “go along with it.” To refuse to go along with it, to refuse the place in which you are placed, is to be seen as causing trouble, as making others uncomfortable’ (Ahmed, 2010a: 4).

### *Player agency and gendered choices*

This troublemaking, many players argue, is done deliberately: ‘You are CHOOSING to be offended here’ (Lobster, [Feedback] Ji Firepaw, 2012: 1001). Feminists are not angry because of the dialogue, but because they are feminists. Because they are feminists, they are actively choosing conflict, and therefore they create problems:

You have to Choose to be offended. You have todo the mental acrobatics in order to take such a simple, if slightly of color, complement as some sort of underhanded statement. If you choose to see it as offensive it is, if you dont you dont. (Graglor, [Feedback] Ji Firepaw, 2012: 422)

This emphasis on ‘choice’ echoes the perception of contemporary feminism as ‘victim feminism’: ‘when a woman seeks power through an identity of powerlessness’ (Wolf, 1993: 147). Popularised by writers like Katie Roiphe (1994), the image of feminism as wedded to an ideology of exaggerated victimisation provides posters like Macey and Graglor a discursively acceptable scapegoat. While activists, academics and forum posters like Aislinana grapple with the complexity of agency alongside structural and institutionalised forms of sexism, Ji Firepaw’s supporters repeatedly offer what they see as a simple solution: ‘I’d rather they quit. Seriously, get out’ (Ashirana, [Feedback] Ji Firepaw, 2012: 557). Such sentiments quickly establish a sense of ‘us versus them’, in which disagreement is met with exclusion. These calls for ‘others’ to ‘just get out’ place the responsibility squarely on the shoulders of posters seen as disrupting shared space:

It’s not your story. I’d almost rather the few thousand players who are so deeply wounded in a sea of millions playing and enjoying simply not buy the game. (Meralie, Ji of the Huojin, 2012: 110)

... you don’t like the violence, don’t play, you don’t like the commentary, don’t play, you don’t like the quest lines, don’t play, you don’t like your chain-mail, don’t play ... but geeze leave the game alone so those of us who like the world Blizz had created for us can enjoy it! (sigrunibirka, in Gray, 2012)

Players whose opinions on gender ideologies deviate from the community’s unspoken norm are summarily considered not part of that community and advised to leave. Should they choose to stay, they should limit their gameplay in the interest of other people’s happiness: ‘Nobody forces you to roll [play as] a Pandaren, nobody forces you to read the dialogue and quest text. Why does your comfort take precedence over our enjoyment?’ (Brolex, [Feedback] Ji Firepaw Part 2, 2012: 419).

The undertones of these ‘choices’ are not lost on some posters, who note the similarity between such options and the broader climate of gendered blame in which women are admonished to avoid sexual harassment by monitoring and modifying their behaviour:

Don’t play, yes, quite. While you’re at it, don’t go out in public without head-to-toe covering and/or a weapon to defend yourself from assault. In fact, don’t leave the house at all. See? Everything unpleasant, offensive and/or dangerous in life can be avoided if you just/keep to your place/. (StClair, in Myers, 2012)

This language of choice slides easily into rhetorics of blame that resonate beyond Azeroth’s borders, echoing, for instance, the growing international presence of SlutWalk, an anti-rape movement that contests the idea that women are ‘asking for it’ based on their appearance (see e.g. Tarrant, 2011; Valenti, 2011). Some forum posts even advocate that unhappy players sidestep the issue altogether by just not ‘being’ female: ‘Or hey, since you don’t want to be treated IN game like you are IRL, reroll a friggin MALE how’s that for solutions?’ (Ilyanna, Ji of the Huojin, 2012: 257). This array of ‘choices’ tells players to simply put up with inequality – to keep silent, or leave the community entirely.

Others envision a different kind of choice when dealing with Ji Firepaw: a way to talk back. For many, the inability to meaningfully react to ‘You’re some kind of gorgeous!’ is more problematic than the comment itself:

And that's really, I think, the key thing for me, at least. I'm running along, doing my quests, my character gets hit on and her physical attributes commented on, and I have 0 recourse of response. I effectively just have to stand there and take it. (Eilwyn, Ji of the Huojin, 2012: 43)

'Taking it' from Ji Firepaw is the only way to advance your character, since the game requires a linear play-through of the initial storyline before the player can move on to other areas. Instead of removing the dialogue, though, these posters advocate additions that let players frame the tone of their interactions:

... they could simply let our character react to Ji. Give us a couple of options: females could slap, glare, giggle, or smile shyly. Males could flex, laugh, punch Ji playfully, or glare. This would help give the player some power back over their character rather than just being a passive recipient of a comment they may not approve of. It also acknowledges by Blizz that not everyone is okay with being chatted up out of the blue on a battlefield. (Snuzzle,[Feedback] Ji Firepaw Part ...huh?, 2012: 69)

This dynamic already exists in the game. For instance, in one quest, players are given the choice of executing or releasing a foe after an interrogation. The result has no bearing on the story arc; it exists solely to provide the player with an admittedly superficial sense of input into a moral quandary. By proposing a similar approach here, players are seeking that same feeling of contribution, a way to enact their own gendered consciousness within the game world. That such suggestions include a spectrum of responses, from the appreciative to the dismissive, acknowledges – and even encourages consideration of – the *WoW* community's diverse opinions on gendered roles and relations. This is in stark contrast to the 'Seriously, get out' stance found elsewhere, underscoring how firmly the game and its community are affected by broader cultural discourses about gender and privilege.

### *Real affect and virtual reality*

Players upset with the changes to Ji Firepaw's dialogue are quick to point out that *WoW* is a fantasy game, a virtual rather than 'real' environment. Game scholars call this the 'magic circle' effect, in which players' enjoyment is contingent upon feeling that the game world is bounded off from the 'real world' (see Huizinga, 2000; Salen and Zimmerman, 2004). Yet steadfastly asserting that *WoW* should be experienced as a fantasy environment is not the same as arguing that the game exists independently of the 'real world'. The ways in which posters marshal virtuality to bring back Ji Firepaw's original text demonstrate a powerful investment in the game as a fantasy space *because* of the larger cultural contexts in which *WoW* is embedded:

This whole gender-equality argument is getting tiresome. This is a game, this is Azeroth. This is not America during the suffrage movement. This is not a civil rights MMORPG. This is not supposed to be a politically correct virtual world in which to pass your time. (Caz in Myers, 2012)

Please, I beg you, to stop dragging in new-age P.C. suffrage into a fantasy world where people go to escape reality ... This topic on women's suffrage is currently a huge trend, and that's fine, but not in our video games. (Cynthx in Myers, 2012)

The game's virtual status is offered defensively; frequent, frustrated references to political correctness suggest that these players feel besieged by 'real-life' gender politics and are anxious to experience *WoW* as a world in which these tensions do not exist. That 'the virtual is merely another part or aspect of the everyday' is precisely the issue for many posters, prompting passionate calls to consider *WoW* as a separate space, even if only affectively (Malpas, 2009: 135). Players want to experience Azeroth as a form of freedom – in this case, as free from 'political correctness', used here as an implicit (and sometimes explicit) shorthand for feminist critiques of power and privilege.

Posters concerned about Ji Firepaw's original dialogue, and who support its revision, also present their position as being 'free from', expressing a desire for a space that is experientially different from the everyday:

... how I feel is that he'd be better suited being the same character but written in a way that doesn't mimic the same weird tendencies as weird dudes trying to pull you at a bus stop. My experiences and my opinion is that it is weird and it pulled me out of playing that character ... It's pretty telling though that 'girls take that flirting with a grain of salt' because honestly that speaks volumes about what we as women deal with in society. Every woman reacts differently to this stuff, but why men do it or if they should or not is not even questioned. (Aislinana, Ji of the Huojin, 2012: 34)

The majority of women play *WoW* for the same reason the majority of men play *WoW* to have fun in a fantasy environment where they can feel heroic. If they wanted to hear creepy comments that made them uncomfortable they could save the \$15 a month subscription fee and just go anywhere there are guys... (Steve in Myers, 2012)

Ji Firepaw's initial remark that the female PC was 'some kind of gorgeous' was felt by many players as yet another instance of public sexualised harassment. The language of fantasy and virtuality here revolves around a different axis of gender politics. These players desire a space in which they are free from reminders of what it is like to be female in North America. Our current public and political climate increasingly disregards strategies for safeguarding women's bodily integrity and autonomy – from weakening the US Violence Against Women Act to restricting women's reproductive health care and choices (U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Energy and Commerce Minority Staff, 2012). *WoW*'s gameplay, in contrast, has the potential to fulfil a fantasy of equality: 'And that's what I love about the game. I'm not singled out for my gender. Having this sort of interaction as one of the first in the starting zone sends a very different message' (Eilwyn, Ji of the Huojin, 2012: 33).

Posters draw detailed analogies between Ji Firepaw's dialogue and hypothetical non-virtual interactions, to try to illustrate this message:

I do think it's a bit awkward and inappropriate for someone in a position of power to flirt with a subordinate. If I showed up on the first day of the job, reported to a new boss, and the first thing he did was hit on me I'd definitely be bothered by it in a way that having some ordinary guy off the street compliment me wouldn't trigger. If that boss then became a top government official I'd be even more bothered that someone like that was in charge of so many people. Ji's flirtation wasn't bothersome simply because it was a flirt, it was from his position of power and the context in which it happened (as soon as you report for duty). (Antira, [Feedback] Ji Firepaw, 2012: 57)

These ‘imagine if’ scenarios are intended to demonstrate the overlap between virtual and real experiences. Their structural and contextual congruities mean that interactions with Ji Firepaw *feel* the same as other instances of public harassment (see e.g. Gardner, 1995; Stanko, 1990), and this familiarity drives players to advocate for change in a space where they feel their voices may actually be heard.

Such reactions to Ji Firepaw recognise that ‘the virtual does not constitute an autonomous, independent, or ‘closed’ system, but is instead always dependent, in a variety of ways, on the everyday world within which it is embedded’ (Malpas, 2009: 135). The everyday provides an affective framework for virtual participation and interpretation, and contextualises divergent opinions on what Azeroth, as a fantasy environment, should be free *from*. The struggle over meaning and community is one of shared orientation: belonging is contingent upon agreeing on the ‘free from’. The overwhelming impression across official and unofficial forums is that the community should be free from feminism and feminists, figures pinpointed as the cause of the problem: ‘In the thick sociality of everyday spaces, feminists are thus attributed as the origin of bad feeling, as the ones who ruin the atmosphere, which is how the atmosphere might be imagined (retrospectively) as shared’ (Ahmed, 2010b: 581–582).

## Conclusion: making everyday trouble

Rather than going along with the material available on the beta, and rather than limiting their feedback to graphical glitches, ‘troublesome’ posters instead raise questions that make visible the *WoW* community’s assumptions about masculinity, femininity and the politics of game and community participation. As Ahmed reminds us, ‘trouble does not simply reside within individuals but involves ways of reading situations of conflict and struggle’ (2010c: 60). Reading forum threads about Ji Firepaw as sites of struggle, then, demonstrates the mobility of gender ideologies that continue to caricature feminism as a threat to community stability and sociality. We can better understand the roles that digital communities and activities play in the politics of the everyday when we acknowledge that these communities and activities *are* the everyday.

The range of casual-to-vitriolic anti-feminism and misogyny in these discussions is not attributable to video game culture as a different kind of culture, or to digital space as a different kind of space; these are extensions – additional avenues for anti-feminist, anti-feminine and anti-woman sentiment to circumscribe participation and self-presentation. Anxious masculinity intersects with aggressive anti-feminism not because videogames are, as one poster said, ‘the only standing ground a man has in this world’, nor because online communities are autonomous spaces for escaping ‘real’ politics – Azeroth’s conflicts co-exist with the war on women, and its virtual inhabitants carry this context with them. That such rhetorics reproduced across everyday digital and physical environments means, rather, that gender politics are far from containable. Online venues extend the landscape for their articulation and, notably, for their contestation. That the loss of ‘You’re some kind of gorgeous’ as an opening salvo sparked such furore amongst players may even suggest, as one poster sardonically notes, that ‘the actual thing people are really mad about is that a woman voiced her opinion and *someone actually listened* for once’ (Peregrina, [Feedback] Ji Firepaw, 2012: 925; original emphasis).

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