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Tara Spiecker  
Nova Southeastern University

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## About the Author

**Tara Morin** is currently pursuing a Master of Arts in Writing at the Farquhar College of Arts and Sciences. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in English from Wellesley College (MA), where she concentrated in creative writing. Although she considers early modern British literature and drama to be her primary area of expertise, her other scholarly interests include poets, authors, and artists of the Romantic Period, race and gender studies, virtual studies, and zoology. As a writer, Tara enjoys creating poetry, memoir, historical and speculative fiction, literary criticism, and drama. Her hobbies include studio art, fencing, archery, historical re-creation events, and enjoying the outdoors.

## Beat those Sleepy Slackers!: Color-Blind Racism in *World of Warcraft's* Valley of Trials

by **Tara Morin**

Several million people have visited a place called the Valley of Trials, a sub-region within the land of Durotar: a sprawling, arid desert landscape of cracked clay earth, grassy savannah, caves, and buildings constructed from "pre-industrial" materials—rough-hewn logs, giant tusk-like pillars, and animal hides—lashed together with ropes (see Figure 1 below). Neither Durotar nor its Valley of Trials is a real location. Both are virtual locations within a Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG) known as *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*).

The setting for *WoW* is one of high fantasy. The online game is fraught with regulars of this Tolkeinesque genre like dragons, dwarves, elves, goblins, and the undead. In the game, the Valley of Trials happens to be the homeland of orcs and trolls, two of the twelve available player races. When someone elects to play as an orc or a troll in the game, the Valley of Trials is the player's in-game starting location. This is where the player first steps into the body of his or her own orc or troll avatar.

For a virtual, high-fantasy-based homeland of orcs and trolls, the Valley of Trial's characteristics steer it alarmingly close to reality. The region's particular geologic and ecological properties—tall rock monoliths, cactus patches, baobab-like trees, and terrain that is sun-baked into fissured terra cotta—visually conflates Africa and the American Southwest (see Figures 1, 2, and 3 below). While the virtual adders, wild hogs, and hares reinforce this compelling illusion, a jarring feeling of proximity to the real world also stems from the way that the orc and troll races are designed to culturally suggest the "black races" of, respectively, African and Caribbean peoples.



*Figure 1:* The Valley of Trials, with cactuses and red rock formations visible to the left and upper center, trees that look like African baobabs and acacia visible to the right, and a lashed-together building covering the mouth of a cave in the center.



*Figure 2:* Cactus scenery creates an impression of a place like the American Southwest or Mexico.



**Figure 3:** Trees like these encourage a perception that the Valley of Trials is African. This particular tree looks like a cross between the African baobab tree and the African acacia (or winterthorn) tree.

### Representing Race and Racism Online

It is not difficult for players to notice the "black" racial associations suggested by *WoW* trolls and orcs. Some trolls have nose piercings made of bone, and all trolls speak in heavy Jamaican accents. It is common to hear trolls warn players to "stay away from the voodoo." Some troll settlements, such as one named Sen'Jin Village, have ambient music that is both instrumentally and stylistically similar to music of the Caribbean islands; these settlements also contain "open, thatched-roof wooden huts" and decorations of "masks that are extremely similar to those used in religious rituals in Voudoun" (Langer 97). As people suggesting continental African diaspora, orcs inhabit a large geographic region called The Barrens—a vast desert-and-grassland area complete with virtual lions, gazelles, giraffes, hyenas, and black-and-white-striped unicorns called zhevras. In many history textbooks, Africa has been termed "the cradle of civilization" or "the cradle of man" because of the fact that the earliest dated human remains have been found there. In *WoW*, orcs (especially male orcs) have a Cro-Magnon-esque skull shape complete with sloping foreheads, brow ridges, and protruding jaws. This portrayal reproduces the infamous "primitive and dumb" conceptual phrenological model of the negro that was created by white social Darwinists. The wild stegosaurus and velociraptors that are also native to The Barrens reinforce the concept that orcs are physically similar to early humanoids because, anachronistically, dinosaurs and cave people have often lived side-by-side in popular representations.

As one feature of gameplay, *WoW* uses many text-based player commands. For example, typing "/dance" followed by the "enter" key will cause the player's avatar to dance onscreen. In the way that *WoW* is designed, the specific dance that an avatar performs is dictated by both race and gender. Troll and orc dances are consistent with the way these game races suggest "black" cultures. The dance of female trolls "resembles Jamaican dancehall" (Langer 97). All orc females perform the same booty-dance. Both male trolls and male orcs break-dance, but male orcs alternate break-dancing with a sideways-step-slide that resembles something out of a "C-walk"—the dance-walk preformed by Cripps gang members.

Although players can customize the appearance of their on-screen avatars in limited ways, all orc and troll characters possess certain immutable traits that are "deviation[s] from Western beauty norms" (Langer 97). The "black" and "exotic" appearances of orcs and trolls are constructed in *WoW* from a combination of "Western-dictated ugliness" and "bestial otherness," traits that are either non-Western or non-human, and often animalistic or unnatural for humans to possess. These trait deviations from concepts of Western, "normative" beauty include dark, unnatural skin tones ranging from swamp green to deep forest green, aquamarine, cobalt blue, and violet and the fact that trolls have "a pronouncedly slouched stature [and] large, two-toed feet" (Langer 97). Both orcs and trolls have the animalistic traits of pointed ears and tusks. Hairstyle choices for male and female orcs and trolls fall almost exclusively outside the scope of Western beauty ideals in their mixture of punk and ethnic African styling. Both of these style categories communicate a sense of "wildness" to those subscribing to "normative" Western beauty. These hairstyle choices include dreadlocks, decorated braids, fully-shaved heads, and several styles involving partly-shaved heads (such as mohawks) or hair styled in a way that leave significant areas of scalp exposed. When female orc hair is worn shoulder-length and straightened, it still appears coarse in texture, defying an otherwise Western look. Even the name of the shared capital-city of the orcs and trolls—Orgrimmar—suggests the "non-Western ugliness" of these two races. Orgrimmar contains the words "grim" and "mar," which both suggest negative effects on physical appearance. "Grim" suggests "grimace" and the sense of "grimness," or hopelessness (in attaining beauty?), while "Mar" suggests "marring" or ruination of physical features.

In sociological scholarship, one frequent topic of discussion is the degree to which Western white culture—including colonial culture—tends to perceive and to portray racial minorities as both exotic and hypersexual beings. Within this cognitive framework, the concept of "exotic" identity blends inextricably with the concept of "erotic" identity. In "Sexuality and the Subject," Meenakshi Gigi Durham explains how the white ascription of racial minorities as "exotic" and "hypersexual" originated. He states that critical theorists of race, in expanding on the philosophies of Michel Foucault, acknowledged that "discourses of sexuality reify power hierarchies" (697). Durham explains that sexuality became a framework for reinforcing social power and privilege structures because, when "early sexologists privileged white male heterosexuality as the moral ideal" they simultaneously projected "the sexuality of . . . people of color as wanton and degraded" (697). Over time, this social power/sexuality dichotomy evolved in a way that merged the perceived sexual-moral differences "with physical signs of difference, especially race" (Durham 697). As Durham reports, this evolution in mindset is what created "[c]ultural tropes of racial Otherness" including "exoticization" and "hypersexualization," which are tropes employed by white powerholders as a way to "reinscribe power differentials in society" (697).

In accordance with white-invented stereotypes of racially-minoritized blacks, both orcs and trolls are exoticized as "social others" and hypersexualized through more than just their booty-dancing and their "explicitly sexual . . . Jamaican dancehall" (Langer 97). Orc and troll females are consistently portrayed, according to Western (but sometimes more generalized) beauty concepts as simultaneously "unattractive and hypersexualized, putting them in the subaltern position in terms of both gender *and* race that has historically been imposed on women of color" (Langer 98). The exoticization and hypersexualization of these characters, for example, also occur when the characters recite verbal flirts. When a player types `/flirt`, the player's avatar responds in both voice and movement. The avatar speaks a flirtatious comment while lowering its glance, coyly holding its hands behind its back, pivoting shyly and slowly from side-to-side, and dragging the toes of one foot across the ground. Some flirts eroticize the characters by being verbally suggestive. Several troll and orc flirts simultaneously advance their "exotic" appearances by contributing to both their "non-Western ugliness" and their "bestial otherness." Perhaps the most outstanding example of this phenomenon through which in-game conceptualized "blackness" is simultaneously hypersexualized and exoticized is a flirt spoken by female troll characters. This flirt says, "When enraged and in heat, a female troll can mate over eighty times in one night; be you prepared?" Among all the flirts that exist in the game, this particular flirt arguably demonstrates the greatest amount of sexual energy and excess. This particular flirt is also noteworthy for its word choices, which elicit animalistic images. The word "enraged" (as opposed to angry), "in heat" (as opposed to lustful or passionate) and "mate" (as opposed to "make love") invoke the instinct-motivated sexual drive of a beast rather than the choice-based and emotionally-responsive sexual desire of a human.

Jokes spoken by orcs and trolls when the player types `/joke` also contribute to their exotic appearance of non-Western ugliness and bestial otherness. One female troll joke is, "I feel pretty, oh so pretty," followed by the sound of spitting, and another is "Strong halitosis be but one of my feminine traits" (Langer 97). Male trolls have a "counterpart" joke stating, "I like my women dumpy and droopy with halitosis," which not only presents the troll female body as disgusting but adds an extra layer of revulsion for the male's preferences" (Langer 97). Female orcs go against ideals of Western beauty by speaking with a somewhat deep and gruff-sounding voice. One female orc joke mentions sensing that she is about to vomit a recent meal of boar meat. Another is a remark about how it is, once again, time to get her chest waxed. Like the other text-based avatar commands in the game, this orc racial joke about chest waxing is infinitely repeatable. This infinite repeatability gives the illusion that the orc female's imminent beauty and hygiene needs are trapped in a perpetual state of unfulfillment.

### **Questing for Privilege**

In *WoW*, negative racial stereotyping of orcs and trolls is not limited to factors that can be seen through the avatar creation interface or heard immediately after avatar creation through flirts and jokes. Negative racial stereotyping continues during gameplay. Because role-playing games (RPGs) are expansions of creative narrative, the role-playing genre is filled with quests to accomplish. According to narrative archetype scholars like Joseph Campbell, quests are the basic pattern of seeking and attaining goals, and these goals are important for the growth, development, and change of a character. Like many other RPGs, *WoW* situates the player, in the body of his or her avatar, within the role of "first person" or "main character." This character is responsible for experiencing the game's content and maturing as a hero over the course of the

virtual narrative journey. The assigning of quests and goals for the player to accomplish throughout the game allows the player's character to mature and grow as a hero in the game world. In many ways, quests serve as rites of passage. Successful completion of quests results in the gaining of experience in the form of experience points; when a player reaches a certain number of experience points, he or she advances to the next numerical level in the virtual world.

In *WoW*, as soon as orcs and trolls reach level three in the Valley of Trials, an orc named Foreman Thazz'ril (see Figure 4) assigns a quest titled "Lazy Peons." In assigning this quest, Thazz'ril asks orc and troll characters if they can help him by doling out a little corporal punishment to deserving non-player characters (NPCs—avatars controlled by the computer) who are labeled as "lazy peons" and who are literally male orc lumberjacks sleeping on the job.



*Figure 4:* Close-up of Foreman Thazz'ril.





**Figure 5:** A "lazy peon" sleeping. The words "Lazy Peon" above the sleeping orc label him.

Based on Foreman Thazz'ril's request, it is easy to recognize the negative racial stereotypes that are at work in the construction and in the enactment trajectory of the "Lazy Peons" quest. Because the lazy peons in question are orcs rather than members of a "non-black" race, the quest resonates with the historical discourse on black African slavery and the mistreatment that black slaves received at the hand of their white oppressors, slavers who cared about little more than high productivity and absolute obedience. Audio in *WoW* characterizes the lazy peons as stupid or undereducated. Clicking on any NPC labeled "Lazy Peon" causes the playback of pre-recorded audio (just like /flirts and /jokes do) to make the screen character talk. Lazy peon statements are voice-acted in a way that is obviously and intentionally goofy. Among the handful of phrases that lazy peons recite are statements like "Wut is it?" and "Me busy." Ironically, these phrases are spoken regardless of whether or not the NPC is currently "sleeping," so lazy peons frequently state that they are "busy" even when "sleeping."

In the context of the "Lazy Peons" quest, the orc Foreman Thazz'ril can be seen as a "whitewashed" enforcer because of his power-holding position as overseer. Thazz'ril's skin tone appropriately matches his whitewashed identity; he has the lightest possible skin tone choice for an orc. This light skin tone makes him at least as "white" (if not more) than all the orcs and trolls that he enlists to carry out the quest. His relative whiteness therefore allows him to achieve a "white" empowered status amidst the otherwise black community in the Valley of Trials. In an article entitled "Shades of Whiteness: The Mexican American Experience in Relation to Anglos and Blacks," authors Edward Murguia and Tyrone Forman discuss how whiteness can be relative and subject to a sliding scale associated with social elevation. They quote Michael Jones-Correa's explanation of how Latin American immigrants are "predisposed . . . even before coming to the

United States, to see race as a scale on which one shifts 'upward' to become whiter, if one can" (qtd. in Murguia 76). This association of whiter with socially upward perfectly distills the basis of the racist message—which is both visual and conceptual—that lurks within the design of this quest. In giving the quest (see figure 5), the literally whiter orc powerholder, Thazz'ril the "Foreman," asks equally or less "white" characters to wake up lazy, habitually-sleepy, low-ranking, "blacker" characters by hitting them.



**Figure 6:** Foreman Thazz'ril (background) assigning the quest "Lazy Peons" to an orc player (foreground). The text of the quest assignment appears in the square window on the left.

In giving the "Lazy Peons" quest, the "whiter" (and male) foreman (whose title also aptly suggests "foremost man") acts as a gatekeeper of "white" social power through three channels. These three channels are 1. the way the quest is given in its visual and textual cues, 2. the quest's job expectations, and 3. the quest's promise of reward. Consider these three factors while examining the quest assignment image (Figure 5) and the quest assignment text:

Cursed peons! They work hard gathering lumber from the trees of the valley, but they're always taking naps! I need someone to help keep the peons in line. You look like the right <race> for my task. Here, you take this blackjack and use it on any lazy peons you find sleeping on the job. A good smack will get them right back to work! Return the blackjack when you're done. Lousy slacking peons . . . . ("Quest")

The foreman demonstrates his power as a gatekeeper of "white" social privilege through several visual and textual clues. Besides his relative whiteness compared to the orcs and troll quest recipients, his hands are protected with gloves even though he (presumably) does little

woodcutting himself. Gloves, therefore, symbolize his privilege. They are extraneous because they are non-utilitarian, and they symbolize someone who does not want to get his hands dirty even with the simple task of disciplining his own workers. Textually, he describes his workers as "lousy," "slacking," and "cursed peons" who are "always taking naps." The greatly condescending term "peons" suggests that there is a large gap between his social rank and that of his workers. Although the once-potent deprecatory force of the word "lousy" has all but dissipated in the twenty-first century, it was still a strong term of insult during the early twentieth century (when Social Darwinist ideologies were prominent). The term "lousy" (meaning harboring the parasites known as lice) implies states of impoverishment and uncleanliness. The uncleanliness suggested is both physical (a result of general lack of hygiene) and moral (because there are pubic lice as well as head lice). The words "cursed," "slacking," and "always" imply that the peons' napping is so habitual that it is constant. Even his simple admittance, "I need someone to help keep the peons in line" hints that the napping is a perpetual and chronic problem with no permanent solution. The fact that he asks for help in disciplining what turns out to be a fairly small number of workers only hyperbolizes the scope of the problem. As Thazz'ril suggests, it is only possible to "*help* keep the peons in line"—not to actually "keep the peons in line" because they will presumably (and they really do) go back to sleep after only a short time (emphasis added).

By asking the player to "help keep the peons in line" by "get[ting] them right back to work," Thazz'ril adheres to a previously-discovered trends in RPGs concerning "blackness." In "Racing Towards Representation: An Understanding of Racial Representation in Video Games," Samantha Blackmon writes: "racial stereotypes are evoked in video games in order to show nonwhiteness" (204). She also states that "games that do have African American characters usually have a white protagonist whose purpose is to beat things back into a state of 'normalcy'" (204). Both of these statements by Blackmon are accurate descriptions of the quest "Lazy Peons." The laziness racial stereotype is evoked in order to demonstrate "blackness" in the sleeping orc peons. By accepting Thazz'ril's quest, the player gets to "try on" whiteness by literally beating the peons awake and back to their "normal" working state (see figure 7).



**Figure 7:** Player-character whacking a "lazy peon" awake and back to work with the foreman's blackjack.

Foreman Thazz'ril also acts as a gatekeeper of "white" social privilege through the job expectations that he outlines for the player. By handing the player his "blackjack" to strike sleeping orcs with, he transmits some of his own authority to the hand of the player. As a scepter of punishment, the blackjack cudgel symbolizes permission to exert authority over others, just as nineteenth-century British police truncheons carried the royal crest, serving as the officer's badge of authority. Ironically, the word "blackjack" contains the word "black"—as if specifically and intentionally designated for use by and on virtual individuals with "black" racial identities. In detailing the job, Thazz'ril expects that a "good smack will get them right back to work." This direction implies that he thinks there is no need to use words or gentler gestures to accomplish the same result, perhaps because the foreman believes that verbal communication with "stupid" peons would be a needless waste of time. This insistence on mute brutality to motivate workers tactically resembles the choice to whip draft animals that are perceived as too dumb, stubborn, and brutish to be motivated by gentle persuasion.

Thirdly, Thazz'ril, the foreman and gatekeeper, embodies "white" power and privilege by socially rewarding the player for completing the quest he assigns. When the player completes "Lazy Peons," Thazz'ril gives praise with the words, "Good, good. Maybe they'll think twice before slacking next time! Thanks for the help!" Additionally, he awards the player 450 experience points toward the next level. After the player completes "Lazy Peons," the player discovers yet another reward for having obeyed Thazz'ril. Foreman Thazz'ril issues another, different quest promising 450 more experience points. This second quest is fully dependent on completing the initial quest "Lazy Peons"; a player who never completes "Lazy Peons" will

never see the follow-up quest and its additional advancement opportunity. At the time that he gives the quest "Lazy Peons," Thazz'ril includes the statement, "Return the blackjack when you're done." By giving this command, Thazz'ril suggests that the character will not need a blackjack of his or her own because the character, having shown a capacity to work within the dominant power structure, will continue to advance to higher-levelled job positions.

The component of the quest that requires players to single-out and punish the peons who lazily continue sleeping when they should be working buys into white racist assumptions about individuals of continental African, Caribbean, and Mexican/Latin American racial identities. These groups are plagued by how whites perceive them as lazy (and, relatedly, physically slow, sleepy, unmotivated, and unintelligent). Granted, the racist linkage to Mexican cultural identity in the "culturally black" Valley of Trials is significantly more subtle than the racist hintings at black African and Caribbean laziness. However, the fact that "lazy peons" are napping in the relative vicinity of cacti is more than enough to evoke the sleeping, "lazy Mexican laborer" image. The use of the term "peon" also effectively communicates the conceptual identity of a laborer relegated only to the most menial tasks, and Mexicans notoriously suffer from association with low-wage unskilled labor such as migrant farm work, janitorial service, and housekeeping. The game's assignment of the "lazy peons" to the role of desert lumberjacks, itself reminiscent of migrant farm work, limits them to performing back-breaking and near-thankless work under a blazing sun.

### **Embodying Color-Blind Racism**

The most complex and subtle function of the "Lazy Peons" quest is the way in which it illustrates the phenomenon known as color-blind racism. In "'The American Way': Resisting the Empire of Force and Color-Blind Racism," Aja Y. Martinez defines color-blind racism as a subtle form of modern racism that seeks to "whiten" colored minorities by encouraging them to abandon racially-stereotyped traits that have been impressed upon them by white racist powerholders. Under the purview of color-blind racism, colored minorities are coerced by white racist stereotyping to turn away from any "colored cultural identity markers" that white power-holders portray as undesirable, unprivileged, or socially inadequate. This system of coercion based on racist stereotypes is dangerously subtle because it creates a negative, inescapable feedback loop. This feedback loop occurs because, regardless of whether or not someone who is labeled as a "colored minority" chooses to "become whiter" by subscribing to the color-blind racist system (in avoiding "opportunities" to be negatively culturally-identified as "an example of his or her race"), he or she implicitly reinforces the color-blind racist system.

Martinez begins her article on color-blind racism with the anecdote that, at her high school, "students of color" made up ninety-five percent of the student body and were "split more or less between Chicano/a and African-American Students" (584). She continues by stating that, out of 250 students in her graduating class, only eleven students advanced to a "four-year university"; her school counselors had only told these eleven students that "college . . . was an option" because they were enrolled in Honors and AP courses (584). Martinez mentions that, as a Chicana student, she was the "exceptional minority" in these Honors and AP courses; most of the other students in her Honors and AP courses were white even though white students "comprised only 3 percent of the student population" (584). It is from this framework as "exceptional

minority" amidst white peers that Martinez delivers her description of how color-blind racism operates.

According to Martinez, "color-blind racist ideology" revolves around the "assimilation" of colored individuals into white elite culture (585). In her discussion of this ideology, she references Richard Rodriguez's autobiographical narrative *Hunger for Memory*. In this book, Rodriguez feels ashamed that his parents are uneducated, and he feels proud when he loses "all trace of his Spanish accent" (Martinez 585). As is highlighted through the examples from Rodriguez' life, color-blind racism is especially prevalent within education. Martinez states that "color-blind racism explains the lack of [minority] representation in academia as owing to marginalized people's own failure to value education" (587). Instead of blaming racial minorities for "biological shortcomings" (like the overt racism of the American past), the new color-blind racism blames "cultural shortcomings" (Martinez 587). Martinez names color-blind racism as "the current and dominant racial ideology in the United States" (586).

Because *WoW* was created in the United States, it is unsurprising that color-blind racism is manifested within *WoW*'s in-game world. In the quest assignment text for "Lazy Peons," Foreman Thazz'ril's emphasis is on being "the right <race> for [his] task" (as opposed to being the right <class> or <gender>). This means that, when a troll or orc player reads Thazz'ril's quest proposal, <race> in the quest text is replaced by either "troll" or "orc," depending on the character's identity. This invocation of <race> intimates the racial and color-blind racist undercurrents that exist within the quest's construction. Within the context of the quest "Lazy Peons," social privilege (gained by accepting the quest) and social advancement (gained by completing the quest) both correspond to receiving education in the real world. In the real world of color-blind racism, social privilege and social advancement are two of the promised "whitening" benefits of higher education.

The notion that colored minorities are underrepresented in academia because they "d[o] not value education" is replaced within the context of "Lazy Peons" with the notion that colored minorities stay stuck in positions of menial labor (as peons) because they do not value continuous hard work (Martinez 585). Foreman Thazz'ril says that, although the "lazy peons" "work hard gathering lumber[,] their hard work is not continuous because "they are always taking naps" ("Quest"). In "Lazy Peons," the color-blind racist "cultural shortcoming" that is focused on is the laziness stereotype associated with African, Caribbean, and Mexican cultures. Foreman Thazz'ril acts as the enforcer of "white" privilege at the same time as he tempts new orcs and trolls to embrace "white" privilege by turning against and punishing fellow "blacks" for having "non-white laziness" and for, therefore, being a sort of lamentable embarrassment to the "whiteness-seeking" members of "black" culture (the orcs and troll players that find themselves socially-empowered enough to graduate into the higher-level areas beyond the Valley of Trials). The "black, but socially-unprivileged" lazy peon's resistance to work is juxtaposed to the "black, but socially-privileged" player's willingness to distinguish him or herself from these slackers, reproducing the cultural dichotomy within color-blind racism between "blacker black" and "whiter black."

It is also useful to examine this quest through the lens of postcolonial theory. In her article entitled "Playing (Post)Colonialism in *World of Warcraft*," Jessica Langer describes how avatar-

based "embodied" gameplay intersects with "the state of the body" as a "key identity marker" in postcolonial theory (100). She argues that, by embodying players in onscreen avatars, games like *WoW* can easily feed into traditional colonial discourses of racially-based empowerment and oppression (100). Within postcolonial theory, "terms of colonial oppression [are] based on the physical differences between colonizer and colonized" (Langer 100). Because *WoW* recreates and perpetuates real-world racial stereotypes, it can be asserted that, by inhabiting an avatar (especially if that avatar is portrayed as "black"), the player buys into "the colonial, racist paradigm" by acting as "the colonizer who has power relating to the embodiment" (Langer 100). Langer states that, in *WoW* and similar RPGs, this player power over the "embodiment" is "given over somewhat to players" because they have some control over their character's physical appearance through the avatar customization process; essentially, the existence of this variable allows players to "choose how to be embodied" (Langer 100).

It is critically important to recognize, however, that in RPGs like *WoW*, this choice of "how to be embodied" does not end after hitting the "accept" button on the initial avatar-customization screen. Instead, the choice is an ongoing and constant process, and choice over "how to be embodied" also includes physical features not strictly limited to visual traits. It includes control over the larger umbrella-category of character traits expressed through social interactions with other players, traits that both emerge from and reflect on the racialized avatars. Most quests in *WoW* are optional, giving players the choice regarding whether or not to accept and complete them. Many other RPGs also involve choices, such as multiple-choice menu options for how to respond to another character's words or actions. In MMORPGs, such as *WoW*, in which online, socially-projected, real-time play and features like in-game text and voice communication options conflate screen character and real player, choices on "how to be embodied" remain powerful conveyors of social ideologies.

When the choice of how to be embodied is applied to the player's experience of the quest "Lazy Peons," the player's choice involves racially-resonant ideological consequences. If the orc or troll player-character decides to accept and carry out the quest, he or she is implicitly reinforcing "white ideals" by punishing "black" embodiments of negative, white-dictated "black" stereotypes. If the orc or troll character/player decides not to accept and carry out the quest, he or she is at a disadvantage in making progress toward the next character level as compared to those who elect to carry out the "Lazy Peons" quest. The reward for completing "Lazy Peons" (sending five lazy peons back to work by smacking them with the foreman's blackjack [see Figure 7]) is 450 experience points, which is a significant amount of progress for level-three *WoW* player-characters, who require 2100 experience points to advance to level four. Experience gained from "Lazy Peons," therefore, is nearly a quarter of the experience required to reach level four. Moreover, because completing "Lazy Peons" awards 450 points and a follow-up quest promising the same amount, players who forfeit the first opportunity also forfeit the second—leaving a experience "debt" totaling 900 points. Considering the fact that the first quest sending the player-character beyond the Valley of Trials does not become available until level five, the player-character electing not to complete "Lazy Peons" is left to find another (slower and most likely harder) way to gain comparable experience. Because there are few quests in the Valley of Trials, players who choose not to complete "Lazy Peons" will almost certainly be forced to make up the experience by "grinding" (repeatedly killing NPCs for comparatively small amounts of experience) before he or she will "graduate" from the Valley of Trials.

Even the word "Trials" as part of the region name seems to play into a structure of "whiter" identity being enforced upon "blacker" identity. The word "trial" can evoke the mental image of a colonial Western courtroom in which a line of white, bewigged judges and jurymen and peer down at "defendant-infractors" who are, either physically or morally "less white." When this mental image is evoked, so is the sense of the steep and intimidating power differential of the colonial courtroom in which those passing judgment are both unquestionable and unassailable in authority, and those receiving judgment are both fully-questionable and fully-assailable by punishment. It is therefore arguable that, by virtue of region name alone, any quest given in the Valley of Trials—including "Lazy Peons"—includes undercurrents of race/power tropes that subtly coerce the player into *wanting* to be obedient to the job requirements he or she is given.

In "Lazy Peons," the job requirements given to beginning orc or troll player-characters explicitly include being a disciplinarian and implicitly include acting as a symbolic ambassador of white hegemonic power when punishing the sleeping peons. Following an intra-racial power/privilege structure (a sliding scale of "whiteness") imposed by the system of colorblind racism, every blow the player character delivers to a sleeping peon seems to say "this is the reason that you're not being socially advanced like I am—even at this very moment."

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