

By [Clive Thompson](#) 

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When I log into the beta of the new *Lord of the Rings* game, the first thing I do is pick my race. I decide I'm going to be a dwarf: stolid, not so great with magic, but a superb brawler. The idea of being a slightly hotheaded man of the earth appeals to me. And pretty soon I'm engrossed in the task of trying out various big, honking noses.

That's when it suddenly hits me that this is a really weird, yet central part of online gaming: obsessing about your racial identity and appearance.

I don't mean "weird" in that it's unusual. Indeed, *every* online game begins with you carefully poring over a bouquet of races and picking your favorite. It's completely normal. No, what's weird is that this is crazily, dementedly out of step with how I act in my everyday world. In the real world, defining someone by his or her race is considered a classically illiberal act. But in games, racism -- making snap judgments about someone based solely on their skin and ethnic identity -- is absolutely central to gameplay.

I admit this might seem like a "whoa, dude" stoner epiphany. But the reason it came to mind is because I'm playing a [Lord of the Rings](#) game, and J.R.R. Tolkien basically invented the idea of fantasy race-based worlds. The people in Middle Earth were rigidly defined by their race. Hobbits were sensible, if unvisionary; elves were austere and aloof; orcs were unreservedly evil. It ain't where you're at -- it's where you're from. Mostly.

Indeed, Tolkien's obsessive devotion to race has provoked decades of blistering debates about whether his archetypes were thinly veiled allusions to real-life nationalities -- complete with rankings of which ones rocked and which ones sucked. The [hobbits](#) seemed like the stolid, sensible Victorian English folk that Tolkien adored; the goblins, with their evil technological genius, could be any scary European enemy army, like the second World War Germans. And the orcs, with their Indo-Asian features? Ahem. "I'm not going there," said Jeffrey Steefel, the executive producer of the *Lord of the Rings* online game, with a laugh when I called him to talk race.

Of course, you could argue that game designers adopted racial classifications for entirely different and more benign reasons. It wasn't, as with Tolkien, a way to meditate on human nature. It was just a great way to ensure diverse gameplay. Having different races in a game allows for a range of characters with different abilities: [Dwarves](#) have endurance, [elves](#) have magic, [orcs](#) have brute force. From a game-design perspective, dividing the world in races is much like dividing chess into six differently powered pieces. So on this level, you could ask, is the weirdly blatant nature of race in games a big deal?

Maybe not. Except that races inside games often seem to reflect, in a creepy way, some of our most regrettable biases about race in real life. For example, when *World of Warcraft* first came out, players were amused, stunned or both to discover that the evil trolls spoke in ... Jamaican accents. [Aaron Delwiche](#), a game academic at Trinity University, asked his student Beth Cox to analyze all the "emotes" in *World of Warcraft* -- the spoken greetings or hand gestures Blizzard pre-programmed into each race. She found that Trolls were "disproportionately more likely to make violent or sexual statements," Delwiche notes. (Some of their sentences were even scripted in Ebonics: "You going to axe me out?" says the female Troll when you hit the "flirt" command.) In the same way, the "good" alliance characters tended to employ Western, Christian-like symbols, while the evil horde had totems and shamanistic magic. "Clearly, there's something interesting happening there, and it's not just coincidence," Delwiche adds.

There's evidence, too, that players bring their own racial biases into the game. When [Nick Yee](#), a game academic at Stanford University, polled *World of Warcraft* players in 2005, he found that while there were nine possible races to choose from, a significant majority -- more than half of women and almost half of men -- chose to play as the two most "white-looking" and "pretty" races in the game: [Humans and elves](#).

These racial preferences are so powerful that they've actually warped and bent the gameplay in curious ways. Yee discovered that the people as humans and elves tended to be newbies, whereas the "evil" characters -- like Orcs -- were played by younger, more hard-core gamers. The two things were related: It turns out that the whole reason experienced gamers picked "evil" characters is because they were sick of dealing with noobs, and wanted to get away from them. They picked a race that seemed intimidating and scary precisely because they wanted to *be* intimidating and scary, pretty much the way the death-metal kids at my high school crafted fashion and music to drive the preppies far away.

It throws to an even deeper and stranger question: Does the race that you play as affect your behavior in the game? Yee suspects it can, in possibly subconscious ways. In a new experiment he recently conducted, people who played with "pretty"

avatars in an online game were more likely to confide in other players than those who chose intimidatingly mean-looking ones. (He controlled to ensure this wasn't just a matter of self-selection -- i.e., inherently reserved people voluntarily picking uglier avatars.)

The virtual skin you wear, it seems, can affect how you treat other people. "So you start to think, what does it mean to be in that avatar for 20 hours a week?" he asks. (If you want to read a truly spectacular debate on this subject, check out the sprawling thread "[The Horde Is Evil](#)" over at Terra Nova.)

Now, this obviously isn't a simple issue. The identities we pick online are not simple reflections of our real-life personas. On the contrary, most pundits have assumed that online worlds are more like identity sandboxes -- places we can screw around with different ways to be. I've run into "good" elves that were total jerks, undead villains who behaved in [wonderfully altruistic ways](#) and plenty of mincing hottie blood elves who turned out to be balding, middle-aged, married Ohio businessmen. Online games are our refuge from the linear politics of the real world, right?

I'd still like to think so. Though as I sit here tweaking my dwarf's nose, I admit I'm starting to wonder. Am I playing this character, or is it playing me?

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