A Mythology of Raids: How raiding persists as a cultural phenomenon of torturous play

Keywords

Hate Raid, Intersectional, Live-streaming, Myth, Play, Semiology, Twitch

INTRODUCTION

This paper turns a critical semiological lens on the gaming and larger cultural phenomenon of *raiding.* On video game live streaming platforms such as Twitch.tv and YouTube Gaming, the prevalence of a violent practice known as hate raids has surged in the wake of Gamergate. Confoundingly, raiding is coded into the platform infrastructure of Twitch, as a function which allows live streamers to send their audience en masse to another streamer's channel. The practice of raiding was adapted from a community practice, wherein streamers had taken to linking one another's URL in their live chat before signing off, in an effort to share their audience power. Perhaps seeing an opportunity to increase viewer retention, Twitch co-opted the practice and named it raiding.

The introduction of the raid feature gave many in the community pause, as the term raiding has many connotations–some of which are unique to fantasy role playing games–many of which are negative. The practice of raiding has existed on the internet much longer than Twitch and carries a longer history of hateful attacks conducted by message board members. These attacks include infamous raids conducted by 4chan against gaming communities such as *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004) and *Habbo Hotel* (Sulake 2000). Hate raids, both on Twitch and in other online practices more widely, involve the coordinated disruption of a community by swarming their space with hostile users or bots, and spamming hateful, degrading, or harassing messages and symbols. This begs the question: why would Twitch use this term to describe a function intended for community building? And furthermore, what does the history of raiding in video games tell us about the meaning of raiding in contemporary gaming culture?

Game scholar Aaron Trammell has provoked others in this field to share in the task of repairing play; correcting a Western canonical understanding of play as civilized and pleasurable, by acknowledging that play is objectifying and–for many in racialized communities–painful (2023a). Additionally, he traces the networks of privilege that shape the history of hobby gaming communities and perpetuate what contemporary scholars and players alike refer to as 'toxic gamer culture' (Trammell 2023b). Engaging with French literary theorist Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* (1957), this semiological and historically informed critical analysis argues that raiding is a colonial, white supremist, and microfascist[1] cultural myth. It begins to answer the questions: why is raiding such a pervasive cultural phenomenon? What are the historical limits of raids? What are the conditions of their use? How are raids conveyed in gaming discourse and practices?

This study finds that raids are a historic and ongoing form of play. Mirroring Trammell's (2023a) use of Black phenomenology to describe the playful torture of policing, an intersectional lens of play is used to describe raiding. The history of raiding, in its varying connotations, reveals the structural, political, and representational objectification of those categorized or 'othered', as outside of the white-heteropatriarchy (Gray 2020). Furthermore, it illustrates raiding as a microfascist process of slow elimination rooted in racial patriarchy (Bratich 2022). In the context of gender, eliminationism operates on a longer temporality as a process rather than the result of taking the other to the limit by "reducing, de-animating, de-vivifying, annulling or taking the life away" (Bratich 2022, 10). The age old cultural practice of raiding objectifies marginalized bodies, pushing them away in defense of the networks of privilege which shape much of Western society–including video game culture.

As a cultural and semiological myth, raiding–in both sign and practice–has long acted as a dog whistle[2]. Barthes (1957) notes that myths are read innocently as inductive and factual, when they are in fact semiological and function to make concepts appear natural. It is important that game scholars, players, and developers, as well as platform owners, give critical thought to the meaning of the term and consider what social and power relations are naturalized through its use. In many communities raids are signifiers of violent military/police practices with a troubling history rooted in colonialism, white supremacy, and class violence. As feminist scholar and philosopher Judith Butler has argued, language is citational[3] (1997). The continued use of raiding, either as platform function or end-game content mechanic, carries a burdensome bibliography of the connotations that precede it. The function of raiding as a myth is to push, to the margins, all persons and players not reflected in the networks of privilege that bind the default and the normative.

ENDNOTES
[1] Microfascism is defined by Brattich (2022) as patriarchal forms of everyday sexism and misogyny which act as a slow elimination; policing women's actions through threats, chasing women from public places, and reducing their capacities through attrition (10-11).

[2] Raiding is similar to a dog whistle in that the term signifies a different meaning to those who understand the practice as a form of violent objectification, as opposed to a game mechanic or method for sharing audience power.

[3] Butler uses the term citational to refer to the manner in which hate speech cannot be tied to a certain context. In its utterance, hate speech breaks with the prior context but in no absolute manner. The newly acquired context is only legible in terms of the past from which it breaks. Therefore, hate speech can only be made sense of in relation to its past use-cases. The mythologist sees raiding in the same manner, by which the sign and its practice is only legible in terms of its linguistic system of signifiers and its many orders of connotations.

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