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Blood Scythes, Festivals, Quests, and Backstories

World Creation and Rhetorics of Myth in World of Warcraft

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One of the pleasures of playing in the "World" of Warcraft is becoming part of its pervasive mythology. This article argues that to understand the game's formal, aesthetic, and structural specificity, its pleasures and potential meanings, it is essential to investigate how the mythic functions. The author shows that the mythic plays a primary role in making a consistent fantasy world in terms of game play, morality, culture, time, and environment. It provides a rationale for players' actions, as well as the logic that underpins the stylistic profile of the game, its objects, tasks, and characters. In terms of the "cultural" environments of the game, the presence of a coherent and extensive myth scheme is core to the way differences and conflicts between races are organized. And, as a form of intertextual resonance, its mythology furnishes the game with a "thickness" of meaning that promotes, for players, a sense of mythological being as well as encouraging an in-depth textual engagement.

Keywords: *World of Warcraft; myth; MMoRPG; fantasy; world creation*

World creation has become a core feature of many recent digital games, and this fits hand-in-glove with the generic features of fantasy; the carefully crafted, extensive worlds found in multiplayer online games such as EverQuest, EverQuest II, and World of Warcraft offer players the opportunity to inhabit such worlds within which to play and interact with others in the guise of heroic adventurers. It can be said that most popular cultural artifacts are reliant for the generation of meaning and recognition on intertextual features. These are in part an outcome of genre production, but within certain genres, such as science fiction or fantasy, these are actively deployed to generate what Roz Kaveney (2005) called a "thick text,"[1] in other words a text richly populated with various allusions, correspondences, references, and connotations. As such, any fantasy-based game draws on a range of preexisting sources relevant to the invocation of the fantastic to lend breadth and depth to a game world and make use of players' knowledge. The inclusion of intertexual features are "a

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ludic gambit" as well as "a way of including the expert reader or viewer in a conspiracy of informed smugness" (Kaveney, 2005, p. 4).

For such reasons and more, aspects of myth and the mythic play significant roles in making the "World" of Warcraft. These are present in the register of narrative (perhaps the most visible dimension): They have a structural function; play a role in shaping the experience of the game world and its temporal condition; and are also apparent in the registers of style, resonance, and rhetoric. Each of these contributes to the high-fantasy ambience of the game and provide in different ways the means of locating players meaningfully in the game world. My aim in this article is to demonstrate how the game's mythic structures and elements drive the logic that underpins World of Warcraft's stylistic milieu and provides the context for and of gameplay. Some aspects of the game's mythic structures and forms key into what might be termed classical myth, others are filtered through more recent renditions of mythic forms and structures in the context of "fantasy" rhetoric, and some are more tangentially derived through other forms of popular and game cultures. Mythos therefore plays a significant role in the experience of playing World of Warcraft in terms of the game's major goals and is often also in play in the social dimensions of the game.

Since the publication of Bolter and Grusin's (2000) *Remediation*, it has been quite fashionable to focus on the ways that preexisting genres and forms have been used within digital games, and in many ways World of Warcraft can be said to remediate the mix of fantasy, myth, and heroic quests that characterize the genre of high fantasy into the specific context of the online massively multiplayer role-playing game. However, I have often felt that remediationist analysis does not often get to grips fully with the numerous ways that intertextuality informs genre-based games at different levels and in different registers; what is crucial to understanding the intertextual aspects of a game like World of Warcraft is that the presence of multiple intertexts encourages a certain type of depth engagement with the game, as well as the experience of being in the game world, that goes beyond but also informs the types of tasks offered to players. This depth engagement keys into what Kaveney (2005) called, in the more general context of genre products that often span different media, a "geek aesthetic." It is also worth noting here that such intertexts provide resources for those players who choose to role-play in World of Warcraft. To go some way toward opening up a more nuanced and expansive discussion of intertexts within World of Warcraft, the attention of this article is on the game's remediation of mythic forms and devices, taking account of the role of myth in the making of the game world, the relationships between mythic structures and gameplay, and the relationships between myth, fantasy, and the social affordances offered by the game.

Fictional worlds are common within genres such as fantasy, horror, and science fiction; examples include Lord Dunsany's world of "faery," J. R. R. Tolkien's "Middle Earth," H. P. Lovecraft's "Cthulhu" mythos, Robert E. Howard's Conan novels, Frank Herbert's Dune novels, and the "Buffy-verse." As is often also the case with classical myth, each of these imaginary worlds provides a blueprint formulation that is taken up and extended by others. As well as spanning across a range of media forms and texts, each of these fantasy worlds (or perhaps more properly universes or multiverses—where different universes interconnect—in some cases) uses structures and forms derived from preexisting mythological cosmologies and follow in the world-creating footsteps forged in myth systems such as Celtic, Greek, Native North American, and Nordic. As a form of narrative used to explain or allegorize a state of affairs, myth is, I would argue, intrinsic to the creation of a particular worldview in all these cases, whether that worldview is to be taken as "real" or as a form of make-believe. Playing a core role in the ontology of many myth systems is a particular cosmology that represents in literal terms some of the forces that impact on the sphere of the human; these may be alien or supernatural, and they play important roles in the particular way the world, the worldview, and the ensuing state of affairs are configured and made coherent. Alongside the presence of cosmological forces, many myths and myth-based texts are characterized by the creation of extended imaginary terrains, which either intersect with the "real" world or bear a mixture of familiar and unfamiliar geographical features. Many of these mythical worlds extend beyond a single story, providing the basis for a range of stories.

Despite the fact that many mythological and fictional worlds make use of symbolism that extends beyond narrative (the use of the totemic symbol of the horns of the minotaur in Minoan culture for example), the stories that underpin such cosmology and symbolism, and by extension worldview, are linear in nature. By contrast, the development of technologies that enable the construction of the illusion of three-dimensional digital space within which a player can move shifts into the domain of the nonlinear. Unlike stand-alone games, World of Warcraft offers a persistent world in temporal terms that exists whether or not an individual player is playing. In this, the game world has a material presence beyond the player that resembles in some respects the way that a so-called primitive mythologically based worldview functioned. The difference with World of Warcraft however is that it is signified modally through a variety of factors, including the presence of mythic elements, as a fantasy world that we choose to inhabit. Despite the modal context of fantasy, we nonetheless do "real" things in that world; myth, fantasy, and reality meet and manifest in what we do and how we act and interact with others in the game. Although it is still the case that many game worlds make use of mythic structures, such as the hero quest,[2] "frontier" myths, and myths around the "fall" of a culture, the mode of delivery and therefore the nature of our engagement is altered, and players are of course agents in the world. Nonlinearity and importantly, player agency within the context of a game world make therefore for a significant material difference to myth-based narratives found in other arenas.

World of Warcraft uses a range of mythic structures to lend coherency and stylistic character to the game's design. These can provide a type of pattern (or archetype) that Raph Koster (2005) claimed is core to the pleasure of playing games. The primary and highly recognizable mythic pattern that informs and structures the game is the epic hero quest format, wherein various forces work to help and hinder the hero-player on route to achieving particular goals. According to Otto Rank's Introduction to *In the Quest of the Hero*, this format originates within early civilizations—Greek, Teutonic, Babylonian, Hebraic, Hindu, Egyptian—in stories and poetry aimed to glorify their princes and warriors, each filtered through the terms of their own cosmological traditions (Rank, Raglan, & Dundes, 1990). The hero quest format has also become a staple of popular culture, partly through the widespread influence of Joseph Campbell's (1969) *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* on Hollywood scriptwriters. With ancient precedents and popular articulations, the hero quest is something that figures strongly in the collective consciousness and thereby provides a shorthand way of setting expectations and a proven mode for encouraging identification. I would argue that playing at or identifying with a hero, fictional or otherwise, affords a vicarious yet pleasurable sense of agency, the sphere of which is extended and exploited by many games.[3] Quests in World of Warcraft come in many different guises: They may involve delivering items, collecting objects—either from killing nonplayer characters or finding objects in the environment—or they might involve more unique actions such as jumping off a high cliff to prove one's bravery as with the Horde quest A Leap of Faith delivered by a Shamanic Tauren in Thousand Needles. Although such tasks certainly provide experience and loot, important for a sense of progress through the game, they are nonetheless keyed quite closely to the "state of affairs" of the game world and in certain cases into some of the major story arcs as well as helping to build character and skills. Undertaking quests lends the player a sense that he or she is playing a role in the history of the game world (even though it is patently obvious that players undertake the very same tasks as others and sometimes doing that same quest over and over—e.g., killing the dragon Onyxia, of which more later).

To investigate the relationships between gameplay, player agency, and myth, it is important to understand what contributes to the creation of "worldness."

One of the primary ways that worldness can be defined, and has been by academics, writers, and game designers alike, is that the world should have a unifying consistency; this applies not only to spatial coordinates, style, and physics but also to the past events that constitute the current state of affairs within the world and to which the player-character is subject. This means that the world has to have a history, and in the case of World of Warcraft, it is realized in mythological terms. In accordance with this, the world's putative history, along with differences in the worldview of different groups and factions, are organized around certain core principles that work in concert to lend the world its integrity, vivacity, and dramatic gameplay possibilities. Mythic structures, forms, and rhetorics frequently provide informative sources for the creation of the world and its concomitant history, and due perhaps to the multi-authorship of a game world that has evolved over a number of years, beginning with the first Warcraft game made more than 10 years ago (Warcraft: Orcs and Humans, 1994), many different aspects of these are in evidence. Such mythic structures, references, and resonances play a core role in the creation of the game as coherent world, but they also have functional features. A number of playful references to popular culture are also in evidence—which for some players may well disrupt the sense of the game world as internally consistent but that nonetheless work intertextually and may well function to demonstrate to players that the authors of the game share similar knowledge sets and tastes. Examples include a human lumberjack found in the Eastvale Logging Camp named Terry Palin, the Champion of the Horde is called Rexxar (the name of Thulsa Doom's henchman in the 1982 movie, *Conan the Barbarian*), and there are a variety of references to the earlier Warcraft games that are more internally consistent with the game's overarching mythos.

Like Tolkien's Middle Earth, the worldness of World of Warcraft comes from an assemblage of different—fictional—races and cultures; each has its own ficto-historical background (within which a variety of secondary myths and legends are found). As with the real world, particular myths inform the different worldviews of inhabitants, and they arise out of the putative historical experiences of each "race." These have a profound effect on gameplay, the interpellation of the player into the game world, and the way players are regarded by others. Although putative histories inform the tensions and alliances between races, which have a significant impact on gameplay, the myths assigned to each race also help to thicken the world by lending cultural diversity and—through deigetic and emergent conflicts arising from that diversity—drama. There are many indicators of each race's culture that relate to myth that also inform both gameplay tasks and the stylistic designs of the game world's spaces. Each race and the places that are designated as their territories are informed visually by various symbols. The Night Elves for example worship the goddess Elune, and sickle moons, the totem of Elune, are carved on the walls of many of their buildings. Night Elf characters have a range of voice emotes (activated by the player and heard in the game) that invoke the Goddess Elune, such as their cheer: "Elune be Praised!" (accompanied by some rather wild arm waving). It is only in those races aligned with a nature-based worldview, such as the Night Elves or Tauren, that the druid class exists. The Night Elves are aligned with real-world symbolism relating to the moon and the use of nature-based magic, assigning the race its cosmological worldview and activating a mythologically resonant frame of reference.[4]

The game's numerous quests tie into mythic form through the rhetorical style in which they are spoken or written, their structure, and content. Let's take one quest as an example: The Prophecy of Mosh'aru. It is delivered to players of around Level 40 by a factionally "neutral" nonplayer character troll who is located in Steamwheedle Port in the domain of Tanaris. It reads:

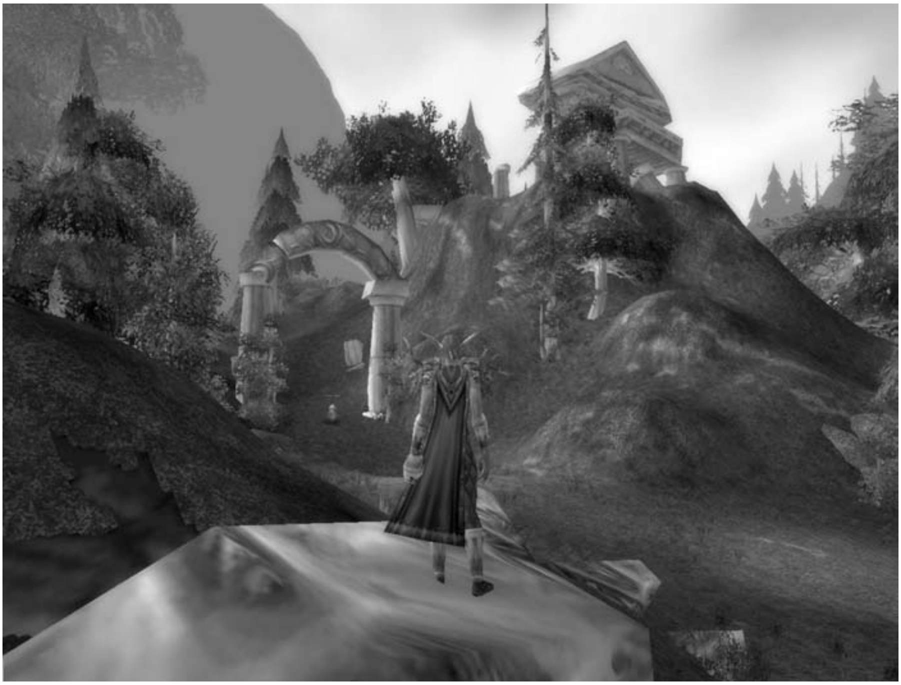
> The ancient prophecy of Mosh'aru speaks of a way to contain the god Hakkar's essence. It was written on two tablets and taken to the troll city of Zul'farrak, west of Gadgetzan. Bring me the Mosh'aru tablets. The first tablet is held by the long dead troll Theka the Martyr. It is said his persecutors were cursed into scarabs and now scuttle

> from his shrine. The second is held by the hydromancer Velratha, near the sacred pool of Gahz'rilla. When you have the tablets bring them to me.

Although this quest text is clearly a call to action and a means of narrativizing in diegetically historical terms gameplay events, the language used is mythological in nature (filtered through the type of language often used in fantasy fiction): The use of the term *prophecy* evokes the supernatural world of mythology, and the names of the places are related to the race that populates that terrain—trolls in the case of Zul'farrak, gnome engineers in the case of Gadgetzan. In practical terms, the quest encourages players to visit the "instance" or dungeon of Zul'farrak. The meanings of the quest's text are thickened by what players already know of the world; the narrative fragment deepens players' understanding of the game world's state of affairs and in terms of the geek aesthetic, evokes the types of scenarios that players may be familiar with in their engagement with other fantasy-based texts. In addition, the mythological narrative "casing" of the quest (of which this is one of many) helps to disguise the game's technologically based mechanics, a point raised and explored by Eddo Stern (2002) in relation to the common presence of neomedievalism more generally in games. The presence of forms derived from myth and fantasy fiction provides a means of cloaking and making consonant with the high-fantasy milieu of the world the way players are channelled by the infrastructure of the game into certain activities and subject positions. This extends beyond the realm of individual quests. Quests are automatically deleted once completed as the player's quest log can only show 20 quests at any one time, for example. This "rule" demands that players make choices about their actions forced by the game's infrastructure; it is an arbitrary rule but operates, along with many other features, to foreground choice and management as an articulation of player agency. As well as imparting fragments of information about the game world's fictional history, cosmology, and current affairs, instructions on how to undertake a quest must be read carefully as they contain sometimes less than obvious clues, thereby encouraging players to engage with backstory and helping to dress up and contextualize in narrative terms the "grind" (a process that constitutes much of gameplay involving killing enemies and collecting loot needed to level-up characters). Doug Thomas (2005) raised some interesting issues about the grind in such games, which can for example curtail potential for role-play as well as making gameplay overly repetitious and narrowly goal oriented.[5]

Cues as to the state of affairs of World of Warcraft are also inscribed in the landscapes encountered in the game. In the case of the Night Elf homelands for example (Figure 1), the woods and shores are littered with the ruins of once splendid temples, and the various creatures that roam these lands have become "corrupt," made aggressive by a supernatural force released by the unwise and decadent use of dangerous magics (a common theme found in high fantasy and myth). The Night Elf homelands speak of the history of the race, as is also the case with those of other races. Night Elves are characterized along Tolkienean lines: They are an ancient race with an

Figure 1
The Ruins of a Once Splendid and Now Haunted Night Elf City



Source: World of Warcraft® provided courtesy of Blizzard Entertainment, Inc.

affinity with nature and regard themselves as superior to others, even though their civilization has been reduced by war and home-grown degeneration. As Walter Benjamin (1963/2003) said of the cultural use of ruins, they cast an aura of mystery and nostalgia. The ruins of once splendid temples and cities act within the game (as in real life) as in memoriam signifiers of passed glory, representing in romanticized terms a lost object of desire (in this case, the loss of a balanced and nature-friendly use of knowledge). All these “ruins” work with the “lost object” conditions that govern desire investments that are operative in both our engagement with myth and by extension with the high-fantasy genre. The presence of ruined temples to lost gods is one of the ways that World of Warcraft makes use of myth to connect to the real world, in this case drawing on “magical revivalism” through “new age” culture’s promotion of knowledges and beliefs that fall outside rationalism and Christianity/monotheism, within which myth is often valued as a “lost” way of seeing the world. Things of importance lost through war, greed, corruption, or degeneration play a defining role in the histories of other races too as well as underpinning the core thematic logic of gameplay. And for many, the ability to play as a mythological hero in a world filled with myths and magics, apparently lost to us in real life, is one of the major attractions of this game world.

Within the context of fantasy fiction, a world is constituted of a set of imaginary landscapes that are connected in spatial terms. Most fantasy genre worlds can therefore be "mapped," and indeed many fictions of this type include maps to demonstrate graphically the relationships between spaces (e.g., maps are provided as a kind of establishing shot as a preface to Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and Robert Jordan's *The Wheel of Time* novels—aspects of these, among many, also provide World of Warcraft with intertextual sources). The spatial aspect of such fictional worlds lends itself extremely well to the creation of multiplayer game environments. It keys into the journeying component of the hero quest that form the basis of games like World of Warcraft as well as to the media-specific context of three-dimensional space provided by such games through which the player is able to move quite freely. A variety of game scholars, including Henry Jenkins, Marie-Laure Ryan, and Janet Murray, have each argued that digital games should be regarded as spatial narratives. Although Markku Eskelinen (2004)[6] argued against regarding the spatial aspects of games as inherently bound to narrative, I contend that it is important not to lose sight of the fact that the spatial features of a game such as World of Warcraft connects in generic terms with the particular qualities of many mythological systems and following from that, the fantasy genre. As George R. R. Martin (2001) noted,

> J. R. R. Tolkien was the first to create a full realized secondary universe, an entire world with its own geography and histories and legends, wholly unconnected to our own, yet somehow just as real. "Frodo lives," the buttons might have said back in the sixties, but it was not a picture of Frodo that Tolkien's readers taped to the walls of their dorm rooms, it was a map. A map of a place that never was. (p. 3)

The nature of World of Warcraft's quest system forces players to be nomadic, traveling widely in the world to undertake the tasks required to progress. There is therefore a strong and highly recognizable sense of a journey structure in the game, working on the lines of the archetypal hero quest structure found in Homer's *The Odyssey* (c. 750 B.C.).

Unlike Eskelinen (2004), I would suggest that it is common for players to understand the quest format in both narrative and other, more functional and experiential terms (e.g., a means of gaining better equipment and experience points); one is not reducible to the other, but instead they create a gestalt that better reflects in conceptual terms the multifaceted experience of playing the game. Undertaking quests is for many players a core activity and can be regarded in mythological terms at both a semantic and structural level. The various maps available in the game aid travel and effective play; these might at times imply a narrative, but they also have other significant functions. They are part of the game's functional realism,[7] used in much the same way that one would use a map in the real world. The availability of in-game maps and online or paper-based atlases also promotes a sense for the player that they are free to travel the world, either to take in the sights and/or undertake localized tasks, as well as contributing to the sense of the game as world by locating the player spatially and temporally (space has to be traveled in real time and is revealed chronologically, with some minor exceptions). But as becomes clear quite quickly, not all places shown on maps are hospitable because they are populated by guards from the opposing faction; this presents to the player a localized issue but also points backward to the mythologized events that comprise the contextual histories of the world. Players come to know these through a variety of means, including mininarratives, some of which connect to more overarching ones, but because players are located in the state of affairs of the world in the present tense, playing the game is not experienced solely in terms of narrative—only in as much as narrative is a structure core to semantic engagement. The maps available are at first glance purely geographical and do not appear to show the effect of the state of affairs on territory, which determine where and where not a player can roam without incurring unlooked for trouble. For more experienced players, the given names of areas might be read through their knowledge of the world's narrativized, lived, and embodied history however. The world of the game, as with many other fantasy worlds, and their representation in map form are not therefore simply spaces. Without the presence of conflicts between competing factions, which entails both history and differences in worldview, there would only be dead and undramatic—if admittedly pretty—space. Such conflicts are core to gameplay as well as the more general experience of the game as world.

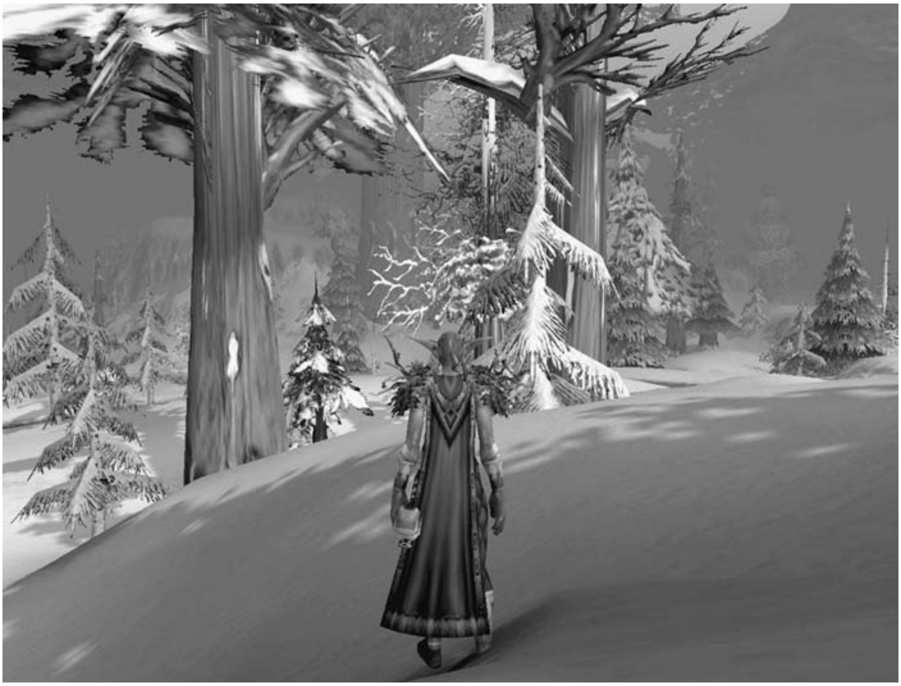
Complicating both linear chronology and the sense of being in the world in temporal terms, some aspects of the game have a rather complex recursive time structure; you may for example have killed the dragon Onyxia, but you will still find her alive in human form as Lady Katrana Prestor in Stormwind Keep at the side of the human boy-King and encounter her repeatedly with multiple visits. In this sense, the game does not have a consistent linear chronology; as with retellings of myths, battles are fought over and over again, and in this there is a cyclical/recursive organization of time—a kind of "eternal recurrence" to use a phrase from Nietszche. However, each time a battle is fought, it is likely to be done in slightly different ways depending on the class and skill ability of a given group. It is also the case that ways of tackling a dungeon raid successfully are posted on the Web—as a result, battles are fought in similar ways, with patterns of battle handed down from more experienced players (as described by Henry Lowood in this issue, there are player-made "master class" movies available that can be downloaded from the Internet, some of which show how to tackle successfully a given dungeon). Although we might regard such repetition as an echo of mythic "cyclical" time and might make for a "successful" raid (yielding high-level items), the common practice of replicating proven techniques and strategies demonstrates how the game's design can be experienced as limiting player agency and creativity. Like the ancient Greeks, players are subject to the rules of the "powers that be," and both modify their behaviors to keep those powers "on side."

A further way in which the game world connects to mythological forms is through the inclusion of festivals that are spread across the year. The game world itself is a protean form in certain respects, with various additions and changes to the game's world included by Blizzard through regular updates; such updates include temporary festival-related material (quests, items such as fireworks and costumes, and decorations). The inclusion of festivals helps to tie the rhythms of real-world time to those of game time—both cyclical and linear—as they key into a number of real-world festivals. Winter Veil occurs at Christmas time, as does New Year; the Lunar festival to Chinese New Year, Love Is in the Air to Valentine's Day; Noblegarden to Easter; Hallow's End to Halloween. Others are celebrations that have no direct real-world referent, such as Peon Day on September 30. These function to lend seasonal interest and fun things to do (i.e., quests that allow players to turn their mount into a red-nosed reindeer or receiving a pretty dress to wear at festival celebrations); but more significant, the annual festivals help to create a greater sense of a persistent and culturally driven real-time world and lend a greater sense of seasonal cycles within the world, which are not otherwise apparent in the visual appearance of the game's external environments. Up until recently there was no dynamic weather system in the world (an update given in March 2006 provided fairly limited changes to weather in most zones—although players can scale up and down the extent of the changes in the user interface), and neither is there evidence of seasonal change to vegetation—even though different terrains are assigned different climates in visual terms: Winterspring is eternally snowy, the trees and sky of Azshara have perpetual autumnal hues, and Elwynn Forest is ever summer-green. Whereas festivals are cyclical and tie into both "mythic" and pastoral/agrarian time, they also work to some extent as a counterbalance against the pockets of temporal stasis found in the game, experienced in the unchanging environments and in the persistence of nonplayer characters that are killed over and over (death is not therefore final as it is in the real world, meaning that sacrifice—of which there are examples in the world—is to some extent devoid of meaning).

Although some of these festivals correlate in a high-fantasy mode with those of the real world, each of the festivals nonetheless have significant relationships with the "mythos" of the game world: The lunar festival is held by the druids of Moonglade (both Horde and Alliance) in "celebration of their city's great triumph over an ancient evil," and Peon Day is based on "old" legend (which refers back to the earlier iterations of Warcraft games[8]) wherein

> The leaders of the two races: orc and human each called upon a lowly worker and assigned him a great task. . . . Thus, on the anniversary of that day, we celebrate in honour of them and of all the peons and peasants everywhere. (Retrieved March 2005, from www.wow-europe.com/en/info /basics/worldevents.html)

Figure 2
WinterSpring Is Eternally Snow-Bound

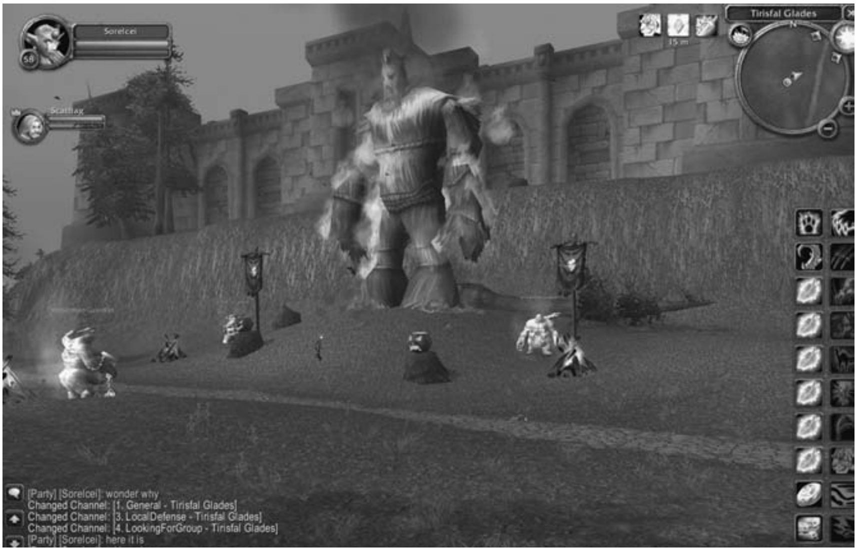


Source: World of Warcraft® provided courtesy of Blizzard Entertainment, Inc.

Many of these festivals have a paganish aspect as befits the “fantasy” nature of the game world, with some drawing on intertexts derived from a combination of history (both in-game and that developed across the Warcraft series) and popular culture.

One such example is the temporary inclusion during Hallow’s End of a large burning Wicker Man in Horde territory wherein the forsaken (the undead) make sacrifice. Julius Caesar[9] (1996) claimed that the Gauls made large wicker constructs shaped into human form within which sacrificial victims were placed and set on fire (this historical report may prove to be a fiction—a means of demonstrating to Roman citizens the barbarity of northern peoples—and is largely unverifiable). This image of a barbaric (imaginary?) past persists through European history: There are various woodcuts based on Caesar’s account from the late 17th century; it finds its way into J. G. Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*, published first in 1890, and, more recently appears in the film *The Wicker Man* (Robin Hardy, 1973). In the context of the game, Alliance players are offered a quest by a nonplayer character called Sergeant

Figure 3
A Wicker Man Located Outside UnderCity in Celebration of the Festival, Hallow's End



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[Party] [Sorelcei]: wonder why
Changed Channel: [1. General - Tirisfal Glades]
Changed Channel: [3. LocalDefense - Tirisfal Glades]
Changed Channel: [4. LookingForGroup - Tirisfal Glades]
[Party] [Sorelcei]: here it is
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Source: World of Warcraft® provided courtesy of Blizzard Entertainment, Inc.

Hartman—a tacit reference to the film's main protagonist, who is eventually sacrificed, named Sergeant Howie—to go and view the horror of this spectacle, for which they gain a small reward. Witnessing this ritual event supports the diegetic cultural and historical antipathy between Horde and Alliance and provides perhaps a further justification for player-versus-player action. There are numerous examples of such intertexts throughout this multiauthored game, and their presence works along the lines of geek aesthetic, which in part enables players to express their knowledge and identity to others as a form of cultural capital, as described by Kaveney (2005).

The presence of signifiers and narratives of a prehistorical and historical past, framed as they are within the rhetorics of popular culture, high and low fantasy, and myth, is one of the primary ways that World of Warcraft creates the illusion of a coherent world in cultural, stylistic, spatial, and temporal terms and in addition provides a rationale for the way that the player-character is assigned a particular, predetermined, morally and emotionally loaded history and identity. As with the real world, the player-character is born into this symbolic/mythological order and its concomitant "subject" positions, even as players bring their own histories with them. Although players might choose to ignore backstory, playing as Horde or Alliance or a particular class does nonetheless have an impact on the way the world is experienced and how players are regarded by others; and this is often cued through reference to mythologically derived archetypes as well as through game world history. Through a web of intertextual and intratextual signifiers, the game invites players to read the world and gameplay tasks as "myth," and like myth these have allegorical and material dimensions. Although the mythological and magical/supernatural might be regarded as masking the technological underpinnings of the game, I regard their primary importance as providing a symbolic language, a sense "worldness," and a combination of otherness and familiarity for players, like myself, to "think about and through" (Kaveney, 2005, p. 6). The "mythological" mode of creating a world and its concomitant meanings enables players to live virtually in "once upon a time" and has a significant impact on types of play and particularly role-play encouraged by the game. Having a material presence in this fictional world alongside other players with whom we interact raises all kinds of questions of a philosophical nature about the relationship between fantasy and reality, but that's a quest for another day. . . .

Notes

1. "The precondition of reading or recognizing a thick text is that we accept that all texts are not only a product of the creative process but also contain all the stages of that process within them like scars or vestigial organs." (Kaveney, 2005, p. 5)

2. See King and Krzywinska (2006) for more on the use of the quest format in video games.

3. "Mirror neurons" might go someway toward explaining in physiological terms why it is that we are able to identify or empathize with the actions of an onscreen avatar (as well as providing an explanation of human behavior, interpersonal interaction, and learning more generally). In watching another perform a certain action or watching them experiencing a certain emotion, mirror neurons fire in much the same way as if we had performed that action or experienced that emotion ourselves—albeit in a somewhat weaker way, meaning we can potentially choose not to empathize with that action. For a fuller explanation, see V. S. Ramachandran's "Mirror Neurons and Imitation Learning as the Driving Force Behind 'the Great Leap Forward' in Human Evolution" (available at http://www.edge.org/3rd_culture/ramachandran/ramachandran_p4.html).

4. I argue in "Being a Determined Agent in [the] World of Warcraft: Textual Practice, Play, and Identity" (Krzywinska, in press) that the mythologies, cosmological worldview, and concomitant iconographies that underpin the Night Elf race, as well as the Tauren race which is aligned in iconography and culture to Native North American culture, may well be designed to appeal to players attracted by so-called new age and pagan culture.

5. An abstract can be found at http://www.gamesconference.org/digra2005/viewabstract.php?id=139.

6. "From the highly variable viewpoints of formal narratology (Genette, Prince, Chatman), deconstruction and experimental fiction, Jenkins's 'spatial story' is a bit of a naive thematic construct; from the ludological perspective it is simply useless. Spatiality is an important factor in computer games, but that very fact makes architecture, choreography, sculpture or even orienteering far more important to game scholars and designers than any travelogue or myth." (Eskelinen, 2004)

7. For extended discussion of "functional realism" in video games, see King and Krzywinska (2006).

8. Peons are the workers that in the real-time strategy context of the earlier Warcraft games are used by the player as builders and gatherers.

9. Caesar (1996) wrote that the Gauls are much given to human sacrifice and employ druids to do it. He went on to say,

> Some of them use huge images of the gods, and fill their limbs, which are woven from wicker, with living people. . . . They believe that the gods are more pleased by such punishment when it is inflicted upon those who are caught engaged in theft or robbery or other crime. (p. 127-8/6.17)

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