



Multimedia Narratives: Digital Bards

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Dissertation submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree *Master of Arts in English* at the North West University

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Ceremony: July 2019

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank my family, friends, and loved ones for their unwavering love, support, and patience. Additionally, I would like to thank my supervisor, Prof. N.C.T. Meihuizen, for inspiring me to pursue this undertaking in the first place; for without his continued guidance and involvement since my undergraduate years, I would not have had the desire to complete this undertaking. Finally, I would like to thank Blizzard Entertainment for teaching me English, for introducing me to fantasy, and for inspiring me on a continuous basis for well over a decade.

Ultimately, I did this for Galloop the Immovable; for Silky the Tireless; for Pacemaker the Boisterous; for Amreil the Light of Lights; and for Azeroth.

ABSTRACT

Key terms: multimedia; transmedia; WoW fantasy; prescribed fantasy; game worlds; game mythologies; game texts; digital paratexts; assemblage; WoW dungeons; ludic fantasy; ludic narrative; media-specific analysis.

Video games have come a long way since the days of *Pong* or the first *Mario Brothers* game by Nintendo in the 1980's; new technological advances, and the ongoing progression of game development are just some areas that are responsible, in varying degrees, for the somewhat saturated gaming atmosphere of today. It is difficult to imagine a game like *Pong* having characters with dialogues, or a *Mario Brothers* game where Mario and his brother Luigi actually talk to each other using emotional language. However, games like *World of Warcraft* have incorporated complex creative processes to provide an experience which is both similar and dissimilar to what we are used to with regards to more traditional media.

This dissertation aims to discuss and analyse various game development motifs that show evidence of some resemblance to other media like novels, short stories, drama, films, etc. Throughout various online sources (such as YouTube and Blizzard Entertainment's websites) we can find numerous examples where a game developer credits *Dungeons & Dragons* as a major inspiration for game development and story delivery; or of how Tolkien's fantasy archetypes resonated with the art teams behind games like *World of Warcraft* (from here on abbreviated as WoW).

World of Warcraft was chosen as the primary study terrain for several reasons, but two major ones follow: (1) its mostly-predetermined content delivery as a game development methodology, and (2) its mythological and (in many cases) literary inspirations that have been translated into a ludic setting. While the game is often dubbed as a "theme park" game, it is because of this "theme park" nature that WoW is an ideal subject for considering linear narrative threads; threads that often bear striking resemblances to some of our oldest, most traditional narrative media. Furthermore, the *Warcraft* franchise has a vast library of transmedial materials that accompany or supplement it, or even run parallel to the game itself; all of which offer valuable insights into what the varying media can mean for a single, unified idea or franchise. While *Warcraft* was initially intended for play in the 1990's, in 2017 it can be read via children's literature, comic books, young-adult novels, cook books, and (perhaps most interestingly) via a Chronicle series which clarifies and cements the mythological space of the game's world in a written form with accompanying artistic illustrations, which immediately gives the game's world a type of "second life" outside of the game itself. In addition to this, there is a *Warcraft* film to be watched, audio dramas to listen to on YouTube, short films to view on YouTube, as well as

animated comics that blur the medium-based boundaries between the traditional comic book, and the short film.

While there are several modern MMORPGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-playing Games) that test the boundaries of a given game and the player's agency within it (e.g., *Star Wars the Old Republic*, *Elder Scrolls Online*, *Eve Online*, *Guild Wars 2*, *Albion Online*, etc.), *WoW* was specifically chosen because of its longevity in a fast-evolving technological world and the aforementioned abundance of source materials that exist within the *Warcraft* franchise. In this dissertation, we will hopefully be able to gain insights into the often-complex nature of games, and possible means for analysing these games in a way that is both just to the media at hand, and meaningful to relevant disciplines.

SUMMARY

The first chapter aims to explore how video games fit into the realm of academia by illustrating key components of the game that show clear evidence of sophisticated practices and processes that all contribute towards a rewarding vision, and to its becoming an immersive experience. Here, discussions will revolve around often-nuanced motifs that might not come across as obvious to non-gamers. Additionally, we will experiment with literary convention and how (or if) it can be applied to a game, and how certain game formulae can be traced to literature. Essentially, the readability of games (in a traditional sense) will be explored in this chapter.

The second chapter offers a brief discussion surrounding possible paratextual applications in *World of Warcraft*, and considers different examples of transmedial products that surround the *Warcraft* franchise with especial attention paid to their interaction with the fictional setting of *World of Warcraft*. These products can exist as young-adult novels, children's novels, anthropological chronicling, animated short films, fantasy-inspired cookbooks, and novels that introduce and continue primary in-game narratives of the game in novel form.

The third chapter aims to illustrate how the game's Dungeons and Raids offer varied modes of story and gameplay; where the lines between narrative and the ludic are constantly rebalanced and blurred from instance to instance. The examples selected for this chapter are especially relevant when discussing this relationship; where the two selected dungeons narratively run parallel with one another, while the raid (as a large-scale gathering of multiple players) serves as a conclusion to the overall story of the three grouped game instances. Additionally, we see how classical mythology inspires the overall atmosphere of these environments, while simultaneously offering alternate interpretations and adaptations of these myths to suit the tone and intentions of the game's developers.

PREFACE

This dissertation views the video game, *World of Warcraft*, as a 'text' that can be appreciated in various traditional ways, but which can also extend a player's engagement with story-line and characters (as we find in conventional literature) through the materially immersive means at the video game's disposal. It thus argues for a continuity between written texts and the game, and does so by drawing on some basic literary principles, as well as characters and motifs from works ranging from *Heart of Darkness* to the Norse *Eddas*. Appreciation of this continuity helps establish the game genre as one worthy of academic study. At the same time the dissertation offers itself as a fledgling example of how this genre might be approached from an academic point of view. As mentioned in the previous summary section, the dissertation's chapters will deal with (1) possible readings of the game via basic literary principles; (2) the use and effect of transmedial materials that exist through older genres of expression; and (3) instances of WoW's gameplay that show the game's ludic and narrative elements in real-time. Therefore, this dissertation will shed light upon (1) parallels between various literary principles, (2) how external media (often in novel or codex form) which are familiar to literary studies augment and extend the game's fictions, and (3) what effect these two concepts have when applied to instances of real-time gameplay.

Additionally, this dissertation runs parallel with a YouTube channel known as the "Hungry Gamer Archive" (denoted by a simple gaming controller on a white background as the channel's thumbnail), which is a non-monetised YouTube channel managed by the presenter of this dissertation. At the time of writing, this channel can be accessed with the following link:

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCvdlLO4zJOAfTg-mgsw6Mug>

The videos that are mandatory for the following discussions can be found in the substituent playlist labelled "Must Watch". Each section that discusses video material will begin with a relevant notification.

On this channel, you will also find several videos that will be referred to in this dissertation at certain points, in addition to other useful gaming resources. The goal here is to contribute to a multimedia lens for analysis, by submitting a multimedia dissertation. While a video clip of a game will (at least at this stage in time) never be fully sufficient for grasping a given game's identity, it will give us an idea of how these games look and how they function at the user's end.

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CHAPTER 1: PAGING THROUGH AZEROTH

INTRODUCTION

As noted by Souvik Mukherjee (2015), traditional literary criticism is not able to deal with all of the aspects present in video games. Bearing this limitation in mind (to be further discussed below), it is nevertheless the goal of this chapter to offer possible applications of literary conventions and theory to specific aspects of video games, as well as to suggest continuities between the reading of literature and playing games. This discussion will begin by identifying and discussing parallels and differences between the processes of reading a novel and playing a game. When reading a novel or playing a game, it is most probable that the operator (i.e. reader or player) will encounter fictional characters that lend themselves to the relevant story being told, or to the game world that the player finds himself/herself in. This section of the chapter aims to show how fictional characters in both instances can illustrate similar fictional layers, while being moulded and manipulated by the medium that they find themselves in. Finally, all of the above play a role in how plots are delivered in both a novel and a video game. The final section of this chapter will illustrate how popular literary theories surrounding plots can be applied to the analysis of a video game plot. However, we will also see how these theories, while useful, need to be expanded in order to account for game-specific motifs and considerations that wouldn't typically be found in novels otherwise; highlighting the potential effectiveness of an inter-disciplinary and media-specific analysis on video games. While this chapter has demarcated the aforementioned sections for discussion, it is likely that some degree of overlapping discussions will exist due to the interwoven nature of various video game constituents. As will be seen in this chapter, video game plots and stories can be complex with an array of "moving parts" that contribute to its projection.

READING GAMES

Souvik Mukherjee's work (2015) regarding the readability of video games and, in turn, the 'playability' of books, provides numerous challenges to conventional notions of the machinic (in this context, relating to technicity and our use of various apparatus), textuality, and the ludic. Overall, he argues that the ludic facets apparent in video games are much older than it might first appear, in that it is to some degree related to what happens when one reads written literature (Mukherjee, 2015: 57). To illustrate this, he draws parallels with the established notion of a book as a textual medium in a cleverly-inverted discussion, by applying video game ideas to books, and textual ideas to video games. When viewing the video game as a possible

technological incarnation of the book, it is fitting to think along the lines of Jacques Derrida's sense of 'writing' as the 'inscription in general', even if 'alien to the order of the voice':

We say 'writing' for all that gives rise to an inscription in general, whether it is literal or not and even if what it distributes in space is alien to the order of the voice: cinematography, choreography, of course, but also pictorial, musical, cultural 'writing' [...] And finally, whether it has essential limits or not, the entire field covered by the cybernetic program will be the field of writing. (Derrida & Stiegler, 1976: 9)

However, Mukherjee claims that when a video game is perceived through a traditional literary lens exclusively, an effective understanding of its techniques and plots cannot be gained. By using the popular action/adventure game *The Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time*, he places emphasis on the time-twisting mechanics of the game as being a narrative device for delivering a playable plot. In short, the game's chronology can be manipulated by the player to overcome certain obstacles in the game. However, if this game system is used incorrectly or in a way that is too far outside the game's parameters, the game quickly blocks you through the character's saying, 'No, no, no, that's not how it happened – do you want to hear my story?' (Mukherjee, 2015:103). What we see here is a clear intention on the part of the game (as a type of 'author' embedded in a 'text') for the player to perceive an imaginary situation in a specific fashion with specific tools, and this narrative intention is kept in place by something which is inherent to the ludic approach: the application of rules. While you can overcome your enemies in a multitude of ways through different combat combinations, strategies, and degrees of character development, the game often wants you to respond on its own terms.

Furthermore, Mukherjee makes frequent mention of the machinic, and through it challenges established perceptions of technicity. Essentially, the broad notion of the 'machinic' refers to artefacts or phenomena that require an operator with access to certain types of input to enable the relevant 'machine' to function as intended. On another level, machinic artefacts often consist of numerous constituents that perform a sub-role which contributes to the overall whole of the given artefact; much like the cogs of a gear mechanism. A perhaps over-simplified example of this is the novel when viewed as a machinic whole. Within it are various technical constituents that contribute to the entire novel; things like language systems, spelling rules, genre conventions, characterisation techniques, and so on. Finally, once the novel is written or, in a sense, constructed, it is then 'operated' by the reader, in an act which essentially sparks this literary machine into being. A quote from Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* offers a useful parallel to this notion of the novel as machinic by way of the idea of the assemblage. Descriptions concerning assemblages are very similar to those pertaining to machinic media.

A book is an assemblage [...] It is a multiplicity [...] the book itself is a little machine; what is the relation (also measurable) of this literary machine to a war machine, love machine, revolutionary machine, etc.? (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 4)

It isn't difficult to accept video games as machines, and these machines often have micro machines within them, such as rule systems, game designs, and narrative delivery systems. Rules are very important in video games, providing sets of prescriptions regarding the overall experience of the game at hand. In the case of a storytelling game, rules are crucial for maintaining pace, sparking urgency, strategizing, giving emphasis, and for the overall provision of in-game content (Mukherjee, 2015: 58). However, these rules don't only pertain to narrative delivery, or to the game's mechanics exclusively. There are often several layers of rules that influence different aspects of the game:

The world and its design often is closely connected with the design of the game, since exploring the world (navigation) and learning how the world works (including everything from its machinery to its ontological rules and its physics, which can differ from the actual world) are both often a substantial part of what occurs during gameplay, and part of a game's objectives and goals (Wolf, M.J.P, 2014: 125).

It might be useful to apply the above notions to the game world of WoW as an example; especially when considering the (as of writing) recent changes to the game world's rules. WoW's world design is a significant feature (and is often referred to as a "character" of the world) which is, essentially, the play terrain where the gameplay takes place. There are practical reasons for this significance (i.e., the affordances and conventions of MMORPGs), as well as some philosophical and artistic motifs layering the game's systems and narratives. This terrain (as of writing) has a recently-added system which scales the player's character level according to the zone where he/she is currently playing. It can essentially scale your level down so that you can experience lower-tier zones with rewards that scale up to your unscaled power level. However, your character level does not scale upward. This means that, for example, the quest zones found in pre-expansion content can accommodate characters up to level 60 without becoming trivial or without reward. However, these zones will have different minimum level values, preserving possible incentives for progressing one's character a bit further before entering a more dangerous area. This type of system completely changes the way character levelling works in WoW, and it can be argued that this system's purpose is primarily gameplay-driven. The older system was often quite restricted, with its set-in-stone paths of level progression, whereas the modern system gives the player a greater range of options regarding how he or she might want to level up a new character. This means that finding a level 50 character questing in Westfall is now a possibility (Westfall used to have an approximate character level range of 10 – 20, where its player reward value was greatly diminished if the

player exceeded that power level). This is a significant world-based shift in the game's rules, as barriers to entry are now greatly reduced, and the player has the ability to make more choices regarding his or her levelling journey. Furthermore, this new system is perhaps more reliant on machinic rules than in the past, but these have a direct impact on the *world* in World of Warcraft. In short, overlaps between machinery and ontological rules are quite possible and can vary in scale, emphasis, or theme.

The ontological space of WoW is dense with history, motivations, infrastructure, social commentary, and myth. In the Legion expansion's final raid encounter, players had the opportunity to see the titans who practically shaped Azeroth as a planet; WoW players literally met their makers. Up to this point, the titans were never seen in-game in such detail; we now know what some of their voices sound like, and what they intend to do with their rogue titan prisoner once he's been subdued. Here, another overlap can be seen. Typically, the final raid of a WoW expansion (in terms of statistical player power) is the pinnacle of player power in that expansion. The only way to pursue even greater power than that already achieved in that given expansion is to partake in a new raid encounter from the next expansion set (in this case *The Battle for Azeroth*). This is, in terms of player progression through gameplay, the final rung of that expansion's ladder. So, machinery rules can include things like linked boss encounters, items and players for a particular raid. However, the notion of challenging world-building titans as a final raid of an expansion also has aesthetic and ontological aspects as well. That is, though it is logical (in the WoW tradition and space) to have the final raid tier as the most ludicrously lucrative one available at the time, its very presence also ties in well with the world-building and atmospherics of the game. Here, we see, again, how machinery rules and ontological and aesthetic concepts are often intertwined or run parallel to each other.

Just as rules are important in the playing of video games, they are, to reiterate, also important in the reading of books (Mukherjee, 2015: 69). The basic and foundational rule in reading a book, or any printed informative text, is to begin on page one, and so progress through the text as to understand its complete 'message'. The book as a medium, Mukherjee argues, is therefore a man-made machine that requires an operator first, and a consumer thereafter. Without the reader's input (both reading and physically turning the page), the book's content cannot be experienced. He provides the added example of language, where a given language is also a prescriptive human 'technology' which has rules that we need to adhere to (Mukherjee, 2015: 11). If the book is written in English and there is no translation in one's own language available for it, then one needs to read that book on the author's terms, conditioned by the rules of his or her language. Spelling systems are also obviously rule bound. While it's obvious that rules in games are not quite the same as the rules of a language, the almost mandatory (and, sometimes, even trivial) adherence to these rules for the sake of obtaining an effect or interpretation is what's truly interesting when regarding the two formats. The first novels in

history were written without adherence to any formalised rules of spelling, and even some modern writers such as Roald Dahl, in *The BFG*, to say nothing of James Joyce, with *Finnegan's Wake*, purposefully manipulate and flaunt rules of spelling and grammar in order to achieve a desired effect. This notion of taking a human technology (be it a printed book, or a digital game) and shaping it to create an experience is, Mukherjee believes, a process found in the oldest forms of human storytelling; and the bending or following of rules involved is ludic in nature. It isn't too difficult to think of examples where the developers of *World of Warcraft* also flaunted rules to evoke different feelings, or to provide new ways to play. The introduction of flying mounts in the *Burning Crusade* expansion practically "broke" one of the basic *world* rules in old WoW: gravity. Players could fly to areas unreachable by foot, albeit only in the newer zones (later, flying would become available throughout the game world). In fact, some of Outland's (the primary play terrain for this expansion) was gated behind the ability to fly. So, by "breaking" or "revising" this basic rule of the game, players had new ways to view the game world, and perhaps most importantly, their way of "playing" changed as a result (for better or worse). For a large part of Mukherjee's book, he constantly attempts to bridge the gap between books and video games; both are human artefacts which have faced challenges in their histories, and both continue to face challenges today; but they are both still functioning as storytelling media with their relevant cultures and sub-cultures, seen as 'assemblages':

Too many games insist on telling stories in a manner in which some facility with plot and character is fundamental to – and often even determinative of – successful storytelling. The counterargument to all this is that games such as *Fallout 3* are more about the world in which the game takes place than the story concocted to govern one's progress through it. It is a fair point, especially given how beautifully devastated and hypnotically lonely the world of *Fallout 3* is. But if the world is paramount, why bother with a story at all? Why not simply cut the ribbon on the invented world and let gamers explore it? The answer is that such a game would probably not be very involving. Traps, after all, need bait. In a narrative game, story and world combine to create an experience (Bissel, 2011, cited by Mukherjee, S., 2015: 8).

This is also applicable to games like *World of Warcraft* which relies heavily on its fantasy world. To add to this notion of the machinic as a common thread between written literature and video games, Jacques Derrida offers an interesting view regarding the conjoining of elements that are radically unlike:

In any case, I like gestures (they are so rare, probably even impossible, and in any case, nonprogrammable) which unite the hyperactual with the anarchonistic. And the preference for this union or admixture of styles is never simply a matter of taste. It is the law of response or of responsibility, the law of the other. (Derrida & Stiegler, 2007:10)

When considering the rise of Digital Humanities and the growing interest in multimedia, 'gestures' like the one above may not be so scarce in the years to come. While Derrida's comment may appear to be somewhat ephemeral (the 'gestures' involving 'hyperactuality' – however we define this problematic term – are 'probably even impossible'), the simple prospect of challenging conventional traditions and beliefs with new and emerging knowledge for the sake of a 'responsibility' to the 'otherness' of what is to come in the future, offers an encouraging angle for this discussion regarding the readability of games. The subtleties of Derridean otherness aside, however, the broad notion of uniting present understanding, at least, with what is "anachronistic" is not something specific to discussions surrounding new or emerging media-delivery technology. These conjunctions have been taking place since the dawn of academic discourse. An example of such would be in Plato's *The Republic*, where an admiration of Homer's tragedies can enhance present existence or, indeed, do it harm (in the case of the general, uneducated populace): in both cases anachronistic values combine with the present to produce an effect (following Derrida's 'law of response', perhaps), whether positive or negative. Thus, for example, tales of heroes slaying dragons are probably as old as humanity itself; so, seeing these motifs and conventions feature in the cultural mainstream powered by complex technological processes, would prove to be a fitting example of this type of response or effect.

I now consider some familiar and pertinent theories and look at parallels between the forms of media, and what traditional literary approaches can and cannot achieve when analysing a video game. In video games, there are things that are often difficult to describe, but can be perceived, which is why media-specific lenses are required for bettering our understanding of video game media (Mukherjee, 2015). This does not mean that traditional analyses are irrelevant or useless when considering multimedia, but a traditional approach lacks certain dimensions of consideration that are vital for studying and "grasping" a video game. Mukherjee calls one of these dimensions "being in the game" (Mukherjee, 2015), a phrase which takes on a whole new meaning when applied to video games. However, drawing a brief parallel between traditional literature and the pen-and-paper role playing game *Dungeons and Dragons* can prove useful for better understanding the interactive, collaborative, multi-pathed, and personalised elements of ludic experience that have been present since the dawn of 'gaming'. Here, a quote from the *Dungeons and Dragons Player's Handbook* is quite useful:

"They [the creators of D&D] were tired of merely reading tales about worlds of magic, monsters, and adventure. They wanted to play in those worlds, rather than observe them...Almost every modern game, whether played on a digital device or a tabletop, owes some debt to D&D... It is the first roleplaying game, and it remains one of the best in its breed." (Mike Mearls as cited in Wyat & Schwalb, 2014:4)

World designers for *World of Warcraft*, like Chris Metzen, have often indicated their admiration for D&D (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004(a)). Interesting in the above quotation is the sense of being “tired of merely reading tales” and wanting to “play in those worlds, rather than observe them”. What is expressed here is a desire to enter the realm of virtual interactivity. Throughout the *Player’s Handbook* of D&D, the authors clearly see storytelling as the primary goal of this game (as anyone familiar with D&D’s dungeon masters would agree) (Wyat & Schwalb, 2014). However, D&D serves as a good starting point regarding the combination of interactive games and actual texts (as indicated by the alternate alias of “pen-and-paper RPG”). These games involve a player known as a storytelling (and encounter-planning) dungeon master, along with a number of additional players who are the “adventurers” of this story; the dungeon master is, in essence, the omniscient adventure guide for a given game of D&D. Typically, the dungeon master (here on known as DM) will have an entire story planned, with battle scenes, monsters, plots, and in-game rewards for the adventurers, all in accordance with the rules and guidelines found in these player handbooks. The adventurers will create their imaginary avatars on a sheet of paper, indicating varying criteria and attribute allocations, also in accordance with numerous rules, restrictions, and other criteria. Oftentimes, these adventurers are so invested in a given avatar persona, that they make a custom figurine to help give the character a level of tangibility. From there on, the creativity of the DM is mostly the source of the given adventure, but the DM’s story needs characters to drive his or her story (Wyat & Schwalb, 2014). Essentially, this interplay of omniscient adventure guide and participatory characters encourages a type of symbiotic storytelling which is one of the founding pillars behind the interactivity and design behind modern technological iterations of D&D like *WoW*. Ultimately, the DM is like a book, but to get to its contents, you need to enter its domain, and actually partake in its quests. Here, the D&D game cannot exist without adventurers, but the adventurers need an adventure from the DM. This relationship between a DM and his or her adventurers, is very much akin to the relationship between *WoW*’s developers and the players in the game world (which is to be expected when considering *WoW*’s inspirations and heritage). The developers serve as a collective DM, while the players are required to have adventures within the game to bring it to life; which is especially relevant when considering *WoW* as a game that strongly encourages (and sometimes forces) player interaction.

So, what does this mean in relation to reading literature? D&D gave rise to many inspirations, some of the earliest manifesting themselves in the form of adventure games. These games usually have a core emphasis on narrative and storytelling in a way that greatly resembles hypertexts, or digital texts that are immediately presented to the reader, and which have vast and far-reaching cross-referencing and informative capabilities (Salter, 2014). An overview of this type of game follows:

This genre was labelled “adventure games”: an adventure game involves a player seeing a story through from beginning to end, following the experience of a viewpoint character – the player’s avatar – on a quest shaped by the world and story crafted by the designer. Progress is inhibited not by enemies to be fought but by puzzles to be solved, whether those puzzles involve sneaking past guards, finding a key, or finishing tasks for a character in order to learn a vital clue, just as Nell gradually explores the stories of the Primer [from *The Diamond Age*] through manipulating objects and text with her own words. (Salter, 2014:5)

On the surface, this definitely sounds like a game experience which also promises a story with a degree of player/reader choice, preference, engagement (both readerly and ludic), and ludic satisfaction. The device upon which these games can be played (an iPad) is more available than ever, and its use has been effectively portrayed in Neal Stephenson’s *The Diamond Age: Or, A Young Lady’s Illustrated Primer* (Salter, 2014). Salter unpacks the significance of this technology by way of the story’s main character, Nell:

But the magic of the iPad is drawing upon a history of convergence in digital storytelling that has evolved alongside computing itself, as new tools and models for interactive narrative and the increased accessibility of those tools have allowed for a broad range of storytellers to build on these emerging models for literary interaction... Nell’s *Primer* is an apt example, particularly in its reliance upon an outside human to provide the emotional depth for the interactions – literally, a speaker for the dialogue. For Nell and the child with the iPad, the devices in their hands appear magical. But their magic is human-generated. (Salter, 2014: 3-4)

As noted by Salter, this is an effective example of how the tools of storytellers (a) become more and more widespread with ever-improving technologies, and (b) how their digital narratives require a human operator to effectively communicate. Along these lines, I would argue that this relationship between the human and the device (be it an iPad, gaming console, or PC) is a core part of the gaming experience as a whole, with varying levels of implementation across the various games and genres.

However, D&D’s basic “device” or “interface” is an interesting concept to discuss when considering the human-device relationship. The dungeon master can perhaps have a custom map drawn specifically for a given adventure, or the players (as mentioned earlier) can provide figurines to represent their in-game characters. What would we then call the DM’s default interface? Pen and paper? Dice? The player’s handbook? If we decide (for example) that the default “interface” and “technology” of D&D is comprised of (1) a language, (2) writing utensils, (3) surfaces to write on, and (4) game pieces like dice, we find that these constituent “technologies” (in a Mukherjeean sense) are surely our first example of interactive tools (when

compared to the Salter quote above). Just like the aforementioned interaction between iPad and 'child', wouldn't working with paper also involve interaction between a tool and a player? If there isn't a human available to operate the iPad, it's of no cognitive value. Without a human who (at least) knows how to draw or write something with a writing utensil, paper wouldn't really have a communicative function. Obviously, the personal computer also falls into this camp of interactive functionality and, given the possibility for ever-improving computing power, it isn't too surprising to see how newer games keep testing design boundaries in terms of technical ability (i.e., graphical power, connection speeds, etc.), as well as aesthetic realization (i.e., new motifs, topologies and atmospheres that develop as a result of new or developing technical affordances).

Additionally, Salter regards games such as *Everquest* and *World of Warcraft* as direct heirs to D&D (Salter,2014:26), which is not entirely surprising when given the apparent effectiveness of translating D&D designs to MMORPG designs. When discussing the player's role in an interactive fiction setting, Salter describes the experience as follows:

...the player of an interactive fiction story is a visitor to a world that previously existed only within the designer's head, and through his or her interactions the visitor soaks up the atmosphere of the world while following the rules of the experience, thus functioning as a tourist abiding by the adage, 'When in Rome...' Visitors know that they cannot steer the log vehicles off their tracks, but they can gather information about the environment and therefore gain a better sense of the story, even as they proceed through its narrative arc (and inevitable drop). (Salter, 2014:27)

In this part of her book, we also discover the aforementioned concept of a theme-park game which involves a demarcated play terrain with several attractions to visit in the order of your choosing (Salter, 2014:27). Many (if not most) games that require a significant play terrain are indeed theme-park games by nature, while other strictly PvP games might better resemble complex gladiatorial arenas (or even both in some cases).

What's perhaps the most interesting facet of Salter's work here is her view on character-driven narrative, and its absence in 'Blizzard's later releases'. Such narrative is important, as immersion in character is common to both reading and game-playing. To consider Salter's observation in context, it is known that Blizzard was working on a title called *Warcraft Adventures* which never saw the light of day as it was cancelled, supposedly near completion (Salter, 2014); this was also intended to be a classic adventure game.

According to Salter, *Warcraft Adventures* was a game that would have involved character-driven narrative, and its cancellation was especially tragic for fans of the genre of adventure games (Salter,2014:81). She went on to argue the following about *Warcraft Adventures*:

However, even though in cancelling the project Roper [the designer] believed that the “adventure game is still the single best way to tell a story”, none of Blizzard’s later releases featured the character-driven narrative suggested by *Warcraft Adventures’* screenshots and early media. (Salter, 2014: 81)

The main problem with this statement is that Salter is omitting a very important Blizzard game that was indeed in circulation around the time of her writing: *Starcraft II* (it was launched in July 2010; her work was published in 2014). While this game operated much as a pioneer for esports and RTS competitive play, it also boasted a powerful trilogy of character-driven stories alongside its promises of competitive potential (the video labelled “*Starcraft II: Developers’ Journey*” in the *Starcraft II* playlist is a valuable resource regarding Blizzard’s desire to tell stories). Again, as with the *Warcraft* games, Chris Metzen was involved with the world synthesis of the trilogy and had the following to say after publishing the final instalment of the trilogy:

“I will always look back on *Starcraft* as the game where we really found our feet as storytellers, where words and art and sound and design all just kinda smash together to create a very distinct expression of immersion” – Chris Metzen, former SVP, Story and Franchise Development, Blizzard Entertainment. (Blizzard Entertainment, 2015)

Starcraft II would then contradict what Salter said about character-driven story, as the story involves many characters who develop, clash, and interact with one another (Blizzard Entertainment, 2015). *Starcraft II* has three parts, all character-driven, as mentioned above: *Wings of Liberty*, *Heart of the Swarm*, and *Legacy of the Void* respectively. Each part boasts a lengthy story with main and optional missions for the player to complete. *Wings of Liberty*, based on the human race (known as Terrans), involves a campaign which entails the dethroning of a political tyrant. *Heart of the Swarm’s* campaign is based on a Terran woman named Kerrigan, who will become the queen of a faction of aliens known as the Zerg, all the while hoping to reunite with her lover from the Terran faction; and *The Legacy of the Void* is focussed on another (but more advanced) alien race wanting to take back their homeworld. At the end of the final chapter, the three factions join forces to face a greater cosmological threat that wants to end all life in the universe. This unified close, therefore, involves familiar characters one had played with, alongside, or even against, in previous chapters (Blizzard Entertainment, 2015).

What is specific to the ‘reading’ of games is noticeable in another interesting area in *Starcraft II’s* story campaigns – how the inter-mission interface functions between moments of RTS (Real Time Strategy) missions. Here, we see a direct borrowing from the hypertextual nature of classic adventure games. The player’s options for interaction greatly resemble those in the hypertexts of past classic adventure games. For example, the player enters a type of “cantina” area (relative to the campaign he/she is involved in) where he/she has no direct control over the

faction leader's movements or actions. However, all over the screen little notifications will appear with the option to click on them for additional story and world context as in hypertexts, albeit with additional modern motifs such as mini-cutscreens, which stem from new technological affordances (Blizzard Entertainment, 2015). (This interface can be seen in the *Starcraft II* gameplay samples in the *Starcraft II* playlist on the Hungry Gamer Archive channel.) While offering completely optional bits of context, these notifications aim to provide areas of dialogue between different characters to surprising effect. In addition to their usefulness, they can also be viewed/heard/initiated in any given order (Blizzard Entertainment, 2015). This might imply that, while the *Warcraft Adventures* project was cancelled, the developers learned lessons and techniques from the cancelled project which they transferred to the newer incarnation of their newer game. The important point here is that though classic adventure games were some of the earliest digitally-interactive storytellers in history, their traditions have not died out entirely, as many would believe. In terms of a game's scholarly "readability", then, it is clear (at least) that its multimedia format has been under scrutiny for a significant amount of time. However, though it may sound straightforward, being "well-read" in the games industry is often a problematic concept to unpack, as it involves reading the large variety of 'dimensions' common to multimedia.

The "reading" of games has involved a long-running discussion within game studies and other disciplines, and is thus still relevant to discussions surrounding WoW. Much like WoW, *Starcraft II* also needed a lore, a history, and a sense of scale. However, its worlds never needed to be fully actualised due to the game's still being rooted in the RTS genre (*Warcraft's* former genre). It is true that the current concept of an "adventure game" is significantly different to those of the 1980s and 1990s, but that does not mean that some of the classic motifs aren't transferable to newer game formats. Games like *The Last of Us*, and the *Uncharted* series involve hints of puzzle solving, interacting with environments, and character development, and offer new affordances like advanced animations and technologies (examples of *The Last of Us'* storytelling can also be found in the "Last of Us" playlist on the channel). Some games like the *Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* go out of their way to defy genre and franchise traditions and conventions (supplementary footage for this game can also be found under the corresponding playlist on the Hungry Gamer Archive channel). Returning to what was said by Mukherjee and Hayles regarding media specific analysis, it is because of these genre-bending games that we need to develop analytical tools that take this multiform nature of digital play into account. Where classic adventure games were relatively easier to work with from a literary-critical perspective, due to their pop-up texts and readerly-familiar playstyles, newer games are quickly becoming more complex with regards to their offerings and affordances, making it difficult to determine all-encompassing analytical tools.

Approaches to reading, and hence the choice of analytical tools, are often dictated by narrow-mindedness or conceptual blinkers, conditioned by prejudice or critical partiality. E.M. Forster, whose sharply delineated practical insights are still useful today in literary studies, was long since aware of what he called the dangers of critical 'provincialism':

Now, provincialism does not signify in a writer, and may indeed be the chief source of his strength: only a prig or a fool would complain that Defoe is cockneyfied and Thomas Hardy countrified. But provincialism in a critic is a serious fault. A critic has no right to the narrowness which is the frequent prerogative of the creative arts. He has to have a wide outlook or he has not anything at all. (Forster, 1985:8)

While this remark is obviously aimed at readers of traditional literature, it isn't difficult to apply this notion of provincialism in criticism to the criticism of a game. An example would include a video game journalist basing his or her review on an isolated game feature or segment, rather than considering all of the game's offerings. If the given game offers a mix of PvE and PvP content, the reviewer cannot base a review on one of these two features on its own.

There are many arguments surrounding approaches to the analysis of video games, but the following extract makes an interesting point regarding the bridging potential involved in interdisciplinary discourse, an idea which might be applied to games:

Within the narrower question of strictly interdisciplinary work — a question involving methodological issues above all — relationships between disciplines vary. Some scholars consider narrative an inherently interdisciplinary field, because in its traditional appearances in novels and other forms of storytelling it consists of language, deploys rhetorical figures, is processed psychically — mentally as well as affectively — and thus involves cognition. Thus, narrative analysis bridges narratology and, respectively, linguistics, psychology, and cognitive science. In other cases, the study of a single-discipline object such as literary narrative often invokes other disciplinary methods as 'helpers' in order to 'thicken' the analysis, or specialise in a particular kind of interpretation (Gibbs, 2005: 250).

This extract can be used as a thematic starting point for this dissertation, as it reinforces the notion that the study of games is a far-reaching and broad field which often incorporates perspectives and considerations from other disciplines and fields. Thus, when we consider the parallels between some game designs and literary conventions and motifs, we should aim at "thickening" the analysis of video games, rather than proposing an all-encompassing model from a single perspective.

Returning to Forster, he can readily give credit to a solitary creator for a given work; this would be a far harder thing to do with a present-day video game where (in the case of Blizzard

Entertainment) hundreds of developers work on a single game. However (not to be too prescriptive – or ‘provincial’ – in this regard), a solitary individual *can* have a great influence in game development. For example, Christ Metzen was senior vice president for Blizzard Entertainment, as well as the lead world designer for multiple Blizzard intellectual properties. Though we will never know the full extent of his contribution as an individual, in most sources (like reports from BlizzCon conventions and behind the scenes DVDs) Chris Metzen is shown to be an ever-present entity regarding world design and lore.

If we were to apply Forster’s statement regarding provincialism to video games, this would very much be in line with Mukherjee and Hayles’ views on “media specific analyses”. Conducting an analysis on something like a multimedia work, a video game, then, will inherently need a “particularly wide” approach (as suggested earlier). It is comments like Forster’s and Hayles’ that point to problems for those who fiercely associate themselves only with ludologists or narratologists in the realm of game studies.

Thus, while I believe that some traditional literary frameworks are very useful and relevant to analysing games like WoW, it is (hopefully) clear by now that we are in need of a wider approach to analyse multimedia works. Critical provincialism, while undesirable in most realms of critique, are especially harmful to video games and we should, therefore, contribute to the analysis of games from an inter-disciplinary perspective in the hopes of creating media-specific standards for analysis. These works are going to continue to develop, and, like their associated technologies, so too must our understanding grow and develop.

GAME CHARACTERS

Video :1

Please watch the video labelled “World of Warcraft Character Creation” before proceeding.

The novelist, unlike many of his colleagues, makes up a number of word-masses roughly describing himself (roughly: niceties shall come later), gives them names and sex, assigns them plausible gestures, and causes them to speak by the use of inverted commas, and perhaps to behave consistently. These word-masses are his characters. They do not come this coldly to his mind, they may be created in delirious excitement; still, their nature is conditioned by what he guesses about other people, and about himself, and is further modified by the other aspects of his work. (Forster, 1985:44)

This is an especially interesting opening to this section on characters due to the parallels that can be found between “word-masses” and lines of code. This extract concerns the far from simple skill of arranging words to create a projection, and how these sequences of words can come to the author via emotion, past experience, and guess work ‘about other people’. On a superficial level, the novel contains sequences of words (conditioned by a language system, and a desire to project something) written on pages. While it’s most likely that the author arranged these sequences of words with a particular intention, any possible meaning that exists in these sequences awaits a reader’s input to actualise it. Once performed, the seemingly straightforward act of reading sequences of words in a given language gives way to a more abstract process; that of “absorbing” the possible projections created by the author. This is not too unlike game design coding, where coders also create sequences of digital instructions concerning how and what to project to the player. However, almost exactly as in a novel, if there isn’t a ‘reader’ to actualise this code and to bring the resultant game to life, all possible events, motifs, designs, etc., put in place by the developers will effectively remain dormant. While codes and word sequences can be prescriptive for characters in games and novels, game characters can engage in non-scripted behaviour, and characters in novels can be interpreted in different ways by different readers.

This parallel between the author’s words and the game designer’s code points to a common baseline for the creation of meaning. However, multimedia works obviously offer additional means for characterisation. One such is the sensory-inclined nature of a game’s offerings. Despite the fact that WoW characters such as Thrall, Varian Wrynn, and the Lich King, are all unmistakable entities with little or no room for varying interpretations (as seen in the video game), they benefit from the additional sensory input of games. Thrall, for example, is actually seen to be a green-skinned orc shaman. His appearance remains constant and does not fluctuate according to the imagination of the ‘reader’, as it might in a novel. Further, Thrall, despite being an orc, has a unique posture when compared with his fellow orcs. As seen in the accompanying video, orcs have slightly hunched backs and have an overall square-looking physique (the Battle for Azeroth expansion allows players to change this posture). Thrall on the other hand is often shown as standing upright in a way more akin to humans than orcs. This is a significant consideration in the light of Thrall’s past as a childhood slave to humans, effectively raised and taught by them. Although we are not explicitly told by an ‘author’ to what extent his past conditioned his present bearing, the virtual realism of the game allows the character’s movement and posture to bear meaning, which we can interpret as we might the appearance of another person in lived experience. It can thus be suggested (in simple terms) that novel characters ‘appear’ to us through the intervention of our own imaginations (aided, obviously, by the author), while the characters of a game (in the spirit of digital “gameness”) have a tangible

aspect to them. This distinction might best be illustrated by contrasting the way Thrall might be presented in a book, with how he is presented in the game.

From the point of view of a book, Thrall as originally conceived (2004) would be verbally presented in terms of his posture, his eye colour, his hair colour, his physique, his armour, his weapon, and his throne room; the actions he engages in would also be recounted. Although the reader's imagination might play with these and other details, the events, actions, and chronology of these events are static and will remain the same on every reading.

From the point of view of the game, however, the player will virtually travel to Thrall's throne room to see him; depending on the player's chosen faction, the difficulty of this endeavour will differ greatly. A Horde character will be able to walk right up to Thrall and view him from every angle, for as long as he or she likes. In terms of design, Thrall is scripted to stand in his throne room, and attack enemies if they invade his domain. If you are not an enemy, he will sometimes behave as a quest giver or receiver. Coming on Thrall in this 'literal', sensory way, the player's sense of Thrall will be fixed; he will be a figure which cannot be altered by the player in any way, with very little or no room for imagination or interpretation. Even the way Thrall greets the player (another sensory feature of a game character) is fixed, prescribed.

However, Thrall can be perceived in-game in different ways, though these too are fixed for particular players. To Alliance players, Thrall is exceptionally dangerous and aggressive. He can be seen casting bolts of lightning at his enemies, while attacking them with his hammer. The Horde character, though, might be able to get up close to Thrall and inspect him in great detail, but will have to wait for an Alliance raid in order to see Thrall actually fight. As an Alliance player, one might have to view online sources or play a Horde character to fully inspect Thrall in detail. It is important to note that, while Thrall was (at this early stage in the development of the game) actually scripted to perform very simple and predictable actions, these actions are only prompted by player provocation (specifically, Alliance player provocation, as Horde players are not able to provoke Thrall into combat). So, on a game character level, we can see how the actions of a player enable (albeit limited) virtual interaction obviously not possible in a novel.

It can be argued that some characters' voices and combat abilities are (in some cases) even more recognisable than their appearance. To hear Thrall's voice, for example, would (for some) be even more unmistakable than seeing his visage. Thrall's appearance (previously robed and mystical in *Mists of Pandaria*, and slightly more warrior-like in *Warlords of Draenor*) was changed by the developers to better suit the new environment they were now moving towards. His voice, though, still has the same deep and husky tone. So familiar is it, that even in the case of displayed dialogue (seen via speech bubbles or in the player's chat window), if the player has heard Thrall speak (either by clicking on him, submitting or receiving a quest, or in a cinematic cutscene), the character's voice tone is imaginatively 'heard'.

So, if a trade-off took place between internalised characterisation and prescribed characterisation (when comparing the characters of novels and games), it is clear that they yield different types of projections that shape the experience of the 'operator' when 'reading' a book or game.

The characters [in novels] arrive when evoked, but full of the spirit of mutiny. For they have these numerous parallels with people like ourselves, they try to live their own lives and are consequently often engaged in treason against the main scheme of the book. They "run away", they "get out of hand": they are creations inside a creation, and often inharmonious towards it; if they are given complete freedom they kick the book to pieces, and if they are kept too sternly in check, they revenge themselves by dying, and destroy it by intestinal decay. (Forster, 1985:66 -67)

While characters in novels might be 'full of the spirit of mutiny', It would be fair to argue that the layer of sensory realism (involving sight, hearing, and interaction) offers unique advantages to game character-based storytelling. Where we might read about Tolkien's Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli and their travels across Middle Earth, actually seeing Thrall move and engage enemies makes it easier to be within the moment; as Mukherjee put it, to "be in the game" (Mukherjee: 2015). Though this is so, games can still show homage to older forms of storytelling media in a significant way. Thomas G. Pavel provides some interesting parallels with regards to fictional worlds and games of make-believe by referring to Kendall Walton's theory of fictional entities, and how he applied this theory to Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*.

In Walton's view, "the central metaphysical issue of the ontological status of fictional entities is embodied in the experience of being *caught up in a story*" (1984, p. 179). When immersed in the adventures of Anna Karenina, even if we do not actually believe what Tolstoy's text tells us, we let ourselves "be convinced, momentarily and partially, at least, of the existence of Anna Karenina and of the truth of what is said about her in the novel." This happens, Walton argues, because works of fiction are not mere sequences of sentences but props in a *game of make-believe*, like children playing with dolls or pretending to be cowboys... And rather than assuming that the readers of *Anna Karenina* contemplate a fictional world from some privileged vantage point outside it, Walton insists that the readers are located *within* the fictional world that, for the duration of the game, is taken as real (Pavel, 1986: 55).

Though one is obviously "within" a fictional world in a video game, is this, like *Anna Karenina*, 'a game of make-believe'? If so, what of the player's actualisations within the game? If a player is running with her avatar through Ashenvale forest to reach the Stonetalon mountains, but gets attacked by an enemy player along the way, is this an event of make-believe? This particular event, especially because it involves another human player, is something that actually takes

place, though in the virtual 'make-believe' environment of the game; player A sees player B and they engage each other with the hopes of achieving an outcome. If an outcome is achieved (that is, the defeat of one player), then the loser is faced with the inconvenience of returning to the living world, while the victor (depending on the game version) is rewarded with currency or simply the thrill of player interaction; showing a relationship between player characters and the fictional world and its rules. Thus, another question can be asked: do these game rules that have specific criteria and outcomes contribute to a game's realism? Here, it can be argued that the players' actualisation of decisions within the game make it difficult to accept fictional gaming worlds as wholly worlds of make-believe. As mentioned in earlier sections, the player's avatar can only exist if the human chooses to operate it. If a player has created an avatar, but never returns to play the character, that character is, in a sense, dead. While the player is "existing" within the world, decisions are made and, therefore, actions follow. However, this does not exclude some examples of make-believe experience.

For example, when looking at role players within WoW, we see how these players can construct elaborate contexts and back stories for their characters; they even form guilds around these notions with specific rules and parameters within which prospective players must adhere to in order to play with other players. These players would essentially become secondary writers within the game itself; giving their characters and character organisations their own identities shaped by their preferences and desires. In this example, it isn't difficult to accept that 'games of make-believe' are very much possible within WoW. However, this notion becomes problematic when discussing aspects of WoW's gameplay in isolation; players of make-believe (for example, role players) still actualise some forms of gameplay within the game's world and rules via combat with, say, monsters, but players who are arguably the most interested in actualisation and gameplay (for example, Gladiator-ranked PvP players) are not entirely removed from make-believe events, as their avatars are rewarded with exclusive titles that modify their characters' status within the game.

Further discussions surrounding the fiction of WoW and how the world presents itself can be found in the second chapter, on surround multimedia and transmedia.

In addition to discussing the various ways that game characters are 'evoked' (as in literary works) or animated (or both), it is worth investigating how game designers build their traversable spaces with player involvement in mind. Here, we will see how the player's character is related to the game world that he/she shares with others.

Every facet of the video game development process is organically interrelated with the requirements of others. In a game, an artist explains in Steven Poole (2000), "the early levels are all meadows and open spaces to get the player comfortable with the character" (p. 212). The terrain is designed expressly to optimize gameplay. Therefore,

another crucial step in level design is the design of gameplay. So that the players can immerse themselves in the game world, the entire space must be consistent. There must be a harmony between the objects' dimensions, the achieving path, and the game style (Picard, 2014:103).

This extract has largely to do with introducing players to an environment or level, but it also mentions how other design facets are interrelated. As remarked earlier, unlike the typical author-centric production of a novel, games are mostly produced via a committee-based approach. Level design is but one constituent of a given game's design, which, within itself, also contains various sub-constituents; let us apply this idea of preliminary level design to that of WoW's Northshire Abbey (a zone specifically designed for starting players). The zone is relatively small in comparison to other playable zones, and it is also open and easily traversable, with most of its quests bunched together. This zone might not be a meadow per se, but it definitely communicates an environment of benevolence and relative safety, which can also allow players to focus attention on their characters and their abilities. In the original version of WoW, players mostly dealt with Kobolds (small, diminutive creatures), young and encroaching wolves, and a band of thieves ransacking the nearby vineyard. This, in the grand scheme of the original WoW game world, is clearly not intended to be an overly provocative or challenging zone. Therefore, the fledgling player was matched with a fledgling-level of danger or challenge. However, since the *Cataclysm* expansion, many zones saw significant world-changing alterations to many of the game's original game zones, Northshire included. Instead of facing the diminutive Kobolds and low-ranking Defias Brotherhood thieves, new players now mostly face encroaching orcs and goblins; both of which are races that are allied with the Horde. The aforementioned vineyards are now free of Defias thieves, but are set ablaze by invading orcs. At the conclusion of this zone's quest content, the player is tasked with defeating the orc commander in charge of the invasion; a non-playable character who is much more powerful than any of the surrounding enemies in Northshire. The *Cataclysm* expansion was launched at the end of 2010, which meant that the game world and its constituent zones (especially the original pre-expansion zones) were already some 6 years old; meaning that many of the game's active players have played through these zones on multiple occasions throughout the game's life. It is possible that, in order to refresh these starting experiences for existing players, the developers made zones like Northshire Abbey a bit more exciting. This shows how a design theme or design motivation can shift to adapt to changing markets or, in the case of a long-running game like WoW, changing players. Such shifts are obviously not possible in a work of literature. As we are about to find out below, even a specific facet of game design, like level design, has its own sub-constituents that make up its whole. We already know that both playable and non-playable characters have many ties to the game world, but it

might be fruitful to take a brief look at how many considerations need to take place in the realm of level design.

While level designers are tasked with structuring the layouts of game spaces, like quest zones, dungeons, or raids, other teams are responsible for adding certain aesthetic qualities to these layouts “so that players can immerse themselves in the game world” (Wolf & Perron, 2014). Again, we use Northshire Abbey as another example. This zone is compact and simple, but is also mindful of its creature placement. The weaker enemies are closer to the player’s starting location, while the more dangerous enemies (the Defias Brotherhood thieves) are across a river to the east of the player’s starting position. However, what these enemies (or even the natural fauna and flora) look like is not always due to the level designers. There are members of the WoW team who specifically work on creature models and environmental effects. While, for example, world designers like Chris Metzen may be tasked with the theoretical conceptualisation of monsters, events, and characters, it still falls to artists and other designers to bring these elements from the theoretical realm to the virtual realm. While the theoretical world builders might provide textual descriptions or basic sketches of the dwarves of Ironforge, it falls to other constituent teams to bring their voices, actualised appearances, and audible ambience to the virtual realm. The original version of WoW’s soundtrack had orchestrally-backed songs dedicated to each capitol city which, in some ways, contribute to the characterisation of those races. The soundtrack of the dwarf city is heavy, with deep trumpets sounding within their mountainous stronghold, while the night elves’ soundtrack creates a more natural and harmonious atmosphere, with string instruments. While constituents like zone music or sound effects can also, technically, form part of level design, it is clear that the design of modern games (despite demarcated responsibilities) are very collaborative and rely heavily on other designers and their works.

Returning to the idea that the game still pays homage to traditional literature, we can see (thanks to Blizzard Entertainment’s *World of Warcraft Chronicle* series) that the game’s mythos and histories are quite extensive and complex. The chronicle series has shed light upon many things that were, up to the time of publishing, unclear or even unknown to the general player population. Though there were many Warcraft-themed novels in circulation before the arrival of the chronicle books, none of them could offer the anthropological and ontological depth present in the chronicle books.

This 3-volume series clarifies most of the playable races’ origins, conflicts, and inspirations. The first volume is especially useful when considering, for example, the origins of the troll race as one of the first native species of Azeroth. Additionally, the Darkspear troll was a playable race for Horde players since 2004, while the Zandalari trolls will become playable in the *Battle for Azeroth* expansion.

The fount of Azeroth's arcane lifeblood accelerated the cycles of growth and rebirth. Before long, sentient beings evolved from the land's primitive life-forms. Among the first and most prolific were the trolls, a race of savage hunter-gatherers who flourished in Azeroth's jungles and forests. (Metzen, Burns & Brooks, 2016:70)

Prior to the release of the chronicle series, players never saw the full extent of the troll's history and past triumphs. Zuldazar (home to the Zandalari trolls) is depicted as a substantial temple-like city at a high altitude, with some Mayan- and Inca-inspired architectural pieces; a far more complex society is hinted at here, than that of the originally-playable Darkspear trolls in the earlier versions of the game. Essentially, at the time players could play as the primitive and refugee-like trolls back in 2004, the trolls had historically seen the sundering of the planet's supercontinent; they had fought numerous wars against enemies like the Mogu and the Pandaren; and some of their brethren had even evolved into the night elves originally playable by Alliance players (Metzen, Burns & Brooks, 2016). The night elves, often depicted as some of the most ancient and regal races of Azeroth, are a direct descendant of the fierce troll race; the characteristically pointed ears and slightly pronounced incisors found in night elves are actually key hereditary features from their troll ancestors (Metzen, Burns & Brooks, 2016). It is because of newer lore additions such as these that older discussions surrounding possible colonial relations in WoW can become problematic, for example, those by Jessica Langer, which correlate real world races with those of the game (Langer, 2011:89 -90); such discussions, though perhaps valid from the point of view of unconscious implications on the part of game designers, need to take the new lore into account, and give some degree of credence to the conscious intentions of these designers. Further study of the chronicle series, reveals similar shifts in the racial makeup of WoW. Here are a few brief examples of these shifts that can even be revelatory for some players regarding their characters' placement in the game's lore:

Humans are the descendants of malformed children of a Viking-like race known as the vrykul;

Orcs succumbed to demonic corruption through a multitude of manipulations;

Dwarves actually share a similar ancestry with the humans, as they were descended from mighty earthen constructs built by the titans to bring cosmological order to the planet.

Essentially, the human and dwarf ancestors were created by the same entities, albeit in slightly different ways.

In closing this section about characters, note that a lot can go into character creation, identity, and the composition of a player's ludic toolkit. While its gameplay and game-like offerings comprise one layer of its makeup, the mythological or theoretical layer of the game world is, in many cases, intertwined with the former layer. That is, a literary text-based component is still important in the creation and appreciation of characters in the game itself. Dwarves, for

instance, have the racial ability of Stoneform, which is both a gameplay tool, but also an homage to their past; and tauren gain an advantage when pursuing herbalism as a profession due to their affinity for natural pursuits. With regards to correlations to real-life histories and socio-politics, there is indeed a lot of room for valuable discussion surrounding cultural illustrations and motifs in WoW. However, it is important to consider as many lore and historical materials as possible when discussing a game which relies on external media to provide additional context for its fiction and fantasy.

PLOTS

E.M. Forster provides a useful outline of the hierarchy of the novel's structures and how the plot, as a device, is of a greater importance and value than a basic story due to the nuanced and far-reaching implications that can be discovered behind events connected with what Forster calls 'the sense of causality' and 'mystery', which 'suspend the time-sequence' which governs a mere 'story':

Let us define a plot. We have defined a story as a narrative of events arranged in their time-sequence. A plot is also a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality. "The king died, and then the queen died" is a story. "The king died, and then the queen died of grief" is a plot. The time-sequence is preserved, but the sense of causality overshadows it. Or again: "The queen died, no one knew why, until it was discovered that it was through grief at the death of the king". This is a plot with a mystery in it, a form capable of high development. It suspends the time-sequence, it moves as far away from the story as its limitations will allow... If it is in a story we say "and then?" If it is in a plot we ask "why?" That is the fundamental difference between these two aspects of the novel. A plot cannot be told to a gaping audience of cave-men or to a tyrannical sultan or to their modern descendant the movie-public. They can only be kept awake by "and then – and then –". They can only supply curiosity. But a plot demands intelligence and memory also. (Forster, 1985:86).

While Forster wrote with novels in mind almost a century ago, this commentary is regarded as a classic case for rationalising and understanding the writing tradition overall. However, while this work was obviously specifically directed at novel writing, it would be interesting to measure its applicability in relation to video game plots. Before we attempt to apply this to WoW, a game called *The Last of Us* by the developer Naughty Dog can be a fruitful example of a story-driven game which delivers both a story and plot. This game has been critically acclaimed with over 200 'game of the year' awards from notable entities like Gamespot, IGN, Polygon, British

Academy Game Awards, Kotaku, The Daily Telegraph, Game Informer, and many others (Pitcher, 2014). The game's story takes place in a post-apocalyptic-looking, zombie-haunted setting where humanity has been reduced to a life of rugged survival under martial law. The player mostly controls a character named Joel, who has been introduced in the opening chapter via his daughter Sarah (video samples of the game can be found on the channel). This introductory chapter shows the tragic death of Joel's daughter as they tried to escape the initial outbreak of the spore-based infection (Naughty Dog). The following events of the game's story occurs 20 years after the incident, and Joel, after a fateful encounter, is charged with delivering a young girl called Ellie to a (then) mysterious entity. This journey would be lengthy and dangerous; allowing the player to observe how these characters react to certain events, and, therefore, how they develop as characters throughout the journey. To apply the aforementioned notion of novel plots to a game (in practical terms, do we find ourselves asking "why?" when things occur?), a subtle example can be used. There is a particular scene in the game where Joel and Ellie walk through an abandoned cafeteria on their journey, and a short and deceptively significant exchange takes place. Joel makes a simple remark about how he misses having a good cup of coffee. Ellie is perplexed by this statement; by asking 'why is she perplexed?' the player realises that, while Joel has also lived a pre-outbreak life, Ellie was born during the events of the infection (Naughty Dog). That this is the case suggests that plot elements are present in video games. In a recently-announced sequel to the game which builds on the previous story, Ellie has grown older and is shown in a trailer to be playing a guitar while singing a song. On the surface, this might seem to be a simple piece of promotional material. However, during the events of the first game (originally released on Playstation 3 in 2013), in a single moment of dialogue, Joel had said to Ellie that, if they survive the ordeal, he will personally teach her how to play the guitar. So, to the attentive player, seeing Ellie in a new trailer is obviously exciting from a gameplay perspective, but doubly so when considering how conscious the developers seem to be regarding the details of the interaction between characters and the relationships they now have. The above examples, along with numerous others, show the narrative potential of placing two characters with different pasts and upbringings together. This subtle and gradual uncovering of meaning (a type of delayed decoding) behind the actual events of a story is apparent, then, in both novel plots and video games. However, the delivery of elements involved obviously differs greatly when comparing the two mediums. The novel's plot-clues gestate on the page, to be 'hatched' (with greater or lesser degrees of sophistication, depending on the author) by a reader; while *The Last of Us* offers a fairly linear game path to progress through, plot elements also need to be decoded and utilized according to a player's mechanical input and ability to choose the precise ways through which to progress through the game and, effectively, the story. With this said about the plots of mostly-linear, narrative-focussed games like *The Last of Us*, what of plots in a game where the

game world is shared by thousands of players concurrently? Can plots exist in WoW (as an MMORPG) without sacrificing temporality or depth in order to make sense for thousands of unique individual characters simultaneously on a given server?

Here, I would like to propose the idea that each WoW expansion set serves a function similar to the elements of a type of macro plot or chapter. Expansion sets serve an array of functions, but some of the more obvious ones include the addition of story line or story continuation, new ludic opportunities, new environments, and further player character development (mostly in a ludic sense). As of writing, the base game has seen 7 expansion sets (Blizzard Entertainment, 2018), as listed below:

- World of Warcraft (in the U.S) – November 2004
- The Burning Crusade – January 2007
- Wrath of the Lich King – November 2008
- Cataclysm – December 2010
- Mists of Pandaria – September 2012
- Warlords of Draenor – November 2014
- Legion – August 2016
- Battle for Azeroth – August 2018

This section will make use of WoW's second expansion as a point of reference. The *Wrath of the Lich King* was the second expansion for WoW and it contained characters and events that were last dealt with back in the days of *Warcraft III*, the time before the franchise migrated to the MMORPG scene. This expansion peaked with around 11 million monthly subscribers, which was the first time the game passed the 10 million player mark (Blizzard Entertainment, 2017). Thus, as Dufrenne would have agreed, the sheer number of people spending time and money on this game is a clear sign that the game (if considered an aesthetic object) can fairly be described as both valuable and successful:

What the work expects of the spectator is its consecration and, simultaneously, its completion. Drawing on Scheler's distinction between objectivity and universality, we may say that the objectivity of the value which the work bears can be felt only on contact with the object, and its universality can be established only empirically through unanimity of opinion and the test of time. (Dufrenne, 1979:47)

Again, this extract and its theories surrounding the phenomenology of aesthetic experience was certainly not intended to offer commentary on video games; many of Dufrenne's examples came from theatre and from music (Dufrenne, 1979). However, just as we may have found value in

applying some of Forster's theory to video games, we can identify two possibly valuable points in this extract:

1. The objectivity of the value of the object is felt on contact with the aesthetic object
2. Universality is measured empirically through unanimous opinion and the test of time

The first point can be applied to what has been said by Souvik Mukherjee regarding the immediacy factor when playing a game (that is, being 'in the game' and making 'contact' with it by entering its space); also with the important addition that 'objective value' is apparent in the simultaneous presence of other gamers.

The Wrath of the Lich King expansion was the first where (as noted above) the game had over 10 million monthly subscribers. Up to that point, the previous expansion had already broken sales records, but this expansion broke the previous expansion's record as well (Blizzard Entertainment, 2018). Thus, even before making "contact" with the game in a Mukherjeean sense, we can already pose objective grounds regarding "unanimous opinions" about the value of WoW (at the very least, at certain points of the game's existence).

When one plays a game like WoW, what happens when we ask ourselves 'and then' and 'why?' roughly at the same time? Furthermore, if we ask 'why?', can our responses be non-textual? Consider the fact that on the northern-most edge of Azeroth lies the icy landscape of Northrend (the main site of this expansion's features). One of its zones, the Borean Tundra, contains stretches of permafrost, where mammoths and other wildlife exist in an endangered state. This zone can serve as a clue to how a game plot can conjure "but why?" moments in its delivery, even without the presence of a single sentence or sequence of words. The Lich King has the power of ice and frost at his command, and thus (for some players) their first experience in the expansion is already a foreshadowing of the ultimate enemy in this part of the world. It is clear then that the non-textual environments of Northrend also make us ask "why" certain things are the way they are.

Game plots are very complex as they do not always rely on writing motifs and progressions alone; there are numerous factors behind the game's features that augment, magnify, add detail, and unify the narrative elements behind a given expansion in WoW. "But why?" moments can arise purely from ludic moments as well. This is somewhat different to what we're used to in the traditional literary arena, due to the games' multi-analytical demands. How would the pursuit for meaning in a novel differ from seeking meaning in a game? We've already discussed how WoW can offer "but why" moments. However, what of "and then" moments? I return to Forster:

Curiosity by itself takes us a very little way, nor does it take us far into the novel – only as far as the story. If we would grasp the plot we must add intelligence and memory.

Intelligence first. The intelligent novel-reader, unlike the inquisitive one who just runs his eye over a new fact, mentally picks it up. He sees it from two points of view: isolated, and related to the other facts that he has read on previous pages. Probably he does not understand it, but he does not expect to do so yet awhile... This element of surprise or mystery – the detective element as it is sometimes rather emptily called – is of great importance in a plot... Mystery is essential to a plot, and cannot be appreciated without intelligence. To the curious it is just another “and then”. To appreciate a mystery, part of the mind must be left behind, brooding, while the other part goes marching on. (Forster, 1985:87)

With the arrival of the *Chronicle* series, it is fair to argue that both of Forster’s notions of “why?” and “and then” moments come to the fore; perhaps more so in the first volume which covers the origins of the Warcraft universe. ‘Curiosity’ is particularly prevalent in historical materials like the *Chronicles* because we are often given a perspective which casts light on both past events and possible futures.

For example, Ner’zhul, a slave to a far greater cosmological power, wants to break free from his bonds and seeks a vessel to help him do so. Thus, after identifying his prey, his telepathic work begins to strip the young prince Arthas of his sanity (Metzen, Burns & Brooks, 2018). Does this mental change in Arthas count solely as destiny (that is, in terms of cosmological or spiritual forces) if it is forced upon the unwitting Arthas? Does our knowing of his victimhood help to generate some measure of sympathy for the fallen hero? Behind the sequence of events in the game, therefore, lies a sense of causality that adds depth to characterization; ‘and then’ is bolstered by ‘but why’, to return to Forster’s terms. Furthermore, when considering the story of Arthas as an iconic Warcraft character, it is interesting to see how, in the progression from *Warcraft III* up until the latest WoW expansion, new pieces of information have been revealed about past events.

The greater context offered when considering all of these materials can evoke many “but why” questions in relation to this one Warcraft entity on its own. While it can be appropriately sensational for a video game to generate “curiosity” in its player base, there is plenty of room to, simultaneously, ask questions of “but why”. Arthas has been defeated; the new Lich King was active during the Legion expansion, so what will happen next in the case of this iconic Warcraft entity? Is he the same as Arthas? Is he malevolent? Even though Arthas is gone, are aspects of him still present? If so, will ‘he’ commit the same atrocities? The chronicle has noted that the Lich King entity (Ner’zhul) is cunning, patient, and highly proficient with telepathic powers. Also, as a former servant to the Burning Legion, it made sense for him to offer aid in this expansion. However, the entity’s long and eventful history in the Warcraft lore, in addition to the dangers posed by his abilities, suggests that this character can be called upon at any moment by the

developers to use as a possible base for future content in the game. In short, in Forster's sense, there is enough narrative content available for a player to contemplate past story and plot threads in *Warcraft*, in the hopes of better understanding (or even guessing at) the future of this entity or events and characters related to him.

The above discussion has considered the parallels, continuities, and differences between traditional literary texts and video games in order to argue the case that a type of valid 'reading' and subsequent immersion in story and plot takes place in game play. While the concepts of 'reading' a game, analysing its characters, and illustrating some of its non-textual plot constituents have all been allocated their own sections for discussion, it should be clear that these three sections (along with many other video game features in general) are very much intertwined with one another; thus making it difficult or unwise to discuss them without identifying their possible links with one another. The discussion in this chapter has been aided by insights from such writers as Souvik Mukharjee and E.M. Forster concerning game immersion, the machinic aspects of reading and gameplay, critical provincialism, and the distinction between plot and story. Firstly, the chapter has considered the technical process equivalent to 'reading' a novel, to playing a game as an operator of a type of apparatus which, in a sense, allows this human operator to generate meaning or substance. This similarity in the artefacts' technicalities is a valuable starting point for any discussions surrounding the absorption of content in both media formats. Furthermore, we've seen how fluctuations in game systems not only modify the ludic atmosphere of a game, but it also affects the lens through which players view the game; especially if these fluctuations pertain to an overall world environment that effectively alters the pathways of a player's progression. Brief mention was made regarding other games that rely heavily on a prescribed and linear game story (such as *The Last of Us* and *Starcraft II*) which shows us how intricate (in Forster's sense) plots can conjure moments of both retrospective and prospective "why?" moments, despite existing as two very different game experiences in terms of modes of play. With all of these overlaps between the points of discussion in this chapter, it is clear that any analysis that aims at covering the entirety of a game's scope or field needs to be broad, far-reaching, media specific, and, perhaps most interestingly, inter-disciplinary. Things like the game's overall projection of its gameplay; the player's character and the non-playable characters and their place in the fictional game world setting; and both the prescribed and free-flowing game moments that can fall in or outside of a plot, are all compelling reasons for provoking discussions that require multiple perspectives to form an encapsulating synopsis. In terms of the overall goal of this dissertation, this chapter serves to provide examples of the possible applications of literary concepts in a fantasy game world setting, while illustrating and making provision for aspects of a given game that are not accounted for in traditional literary practice. This chapter discussed the various intertwined intricacies that can be found while 'reading' a game, in addition to briefly mentioning external

media which aims to augment the core game experience. The following chapter will investigate how various differing types of external media expand on the fiction of *Warcraft* while paying homage to the some of the ludic spheres in the game.

CHAPTER 2: PARATEXTS AND TRANSMEDIA

INTRODUCTION

This chapter will now discuss the possible applicability of paratexts and transmedia in the video game context. In the examples chosen for this discussion, we can see how paratexts extend and surround gameplay within the game, while transmedia extends the theoretical world concepts of the game. Firstly, we will discuss the multiple surrounding layers of the game experience. This discussion essentially “zooms in” on the various layers of aesthetics and ludic mechanics that interact with one another in ways that often resemble paratexts.

Secondly, the transmedia section, unlike the paratext section, aims at “zooming out” from the paratextual in-game discussion, to look at the theoretical space of *Warcraft* and how it’s often bolstered by accompanying media from other non-gaming formats. Furthermore, the transmedia section will briefly discuss parallels with popular culture franchises like *Star wars*, which will lead into the main discussion regarding the several differing types of media that surround the *Warcraft* franchise. These examples will include (1) the chronicle series as a historical account of the franchise’s fictional history; (2) the *World of Warcraft Traveler* as a novel intended for readers ages 10 – 12; (3) a promotional short-film from the *Harbinger* YouTube series; (4) the official *WoW* cookbook and how the game’s world crosses over into our world; and (5) the latest novel from Christie Golden which serves as a prequel for the upcoming *WoW* expansion. This novel is especially significant because, unlike most *WoW* novels (as of writing), this novel moves the general narrative of the game forward instead of recollecting past events like the *Illidan* and *Arthas* novels.

This chapter hopes to show how meaning in *WoW* can be derived from deep within the game’s various systems and motifs, as well as from external materials that can project *Warcraft* experiences to players outside of the game as well.

PARATEXTS

Regarding the 'paratext', Mukherjee notes:

Consalvo and Lumenfield both derive their concept of "paratext" from Gerard Genette. Genette describes the "number of verbal and other productions" such as the author's name, the preface and illustrations that "surround or extend" a book as the "paratext": "accordingly, the paratext is what enables a text to become a book and to be offered as such to its readers and, more generally, to the public. More than a boundary or a sealed border the paratext is a threshold" (Mukherjee, 2015:104)

Before we start discussing possible paratextual applications to a video game, it is worth discussing how paratexts might augment a "central text" of a video game. As Mukherjee notes, it is difficult to identify the central "text" of a game (Mukherjee, 2015):

The video game-text, too, is not obtainable in its essence but only in its played instances and ... these played instances can be accessed and analysed through the paratextual records such as Let's Play and After Action Reports. (Mukherjee, 2015:116)

While this may be true about the game text, Let's Play videos can be very useful in witnessing a gaming experience without having to play the game itself. It is arguably the best way to reference a game for moderators or panels who do not have the means or desire to play. However, it is only the "second-best" option, as these videos (as mentioned in an earlier section) cannot yet capture the dimension of "play". Here, we aim to apply the above-mentioned ideas regarding paratextuality and textuality to WoW.

An example of this application can be found when looking at the paladin class. A paladin (in the Legion expansion) who specialises in Retribution (a damage dealer in grouped content) has an ability called "divine steed". Once activated, the player basically breaks the rules of the game and instantly mounts up on his/her charger (i.e., warhorse) for a short time. This is a significant rule breaker as (1) players, in general, cannot mount up while in combat, (2) when players mount up normally outside of combat, there is a short delay before they mount successfully, and (3) players cannot actively "fight" while mounted, as they will be dismounted as soon as they initiate any form of combat. So, not only will an ability like "divine steed" make you feel powerful, it will also provide you with an objectively effective utility ability to react to ludic situations. However, this ability has a greater significance. The paladin's identity (in terms of lore and fantasy fiction) is based on holy medieval knights, very much akin to King Arthur and his Knights, Knights Templar, Charlemagne's Peers, and jousting. Since the beginning of WoW, the warhorse and the charger have both been unique mounts only usable by paladins; a fact which doesn't only serve a satisfying aesthetic and ludic function, but also references material outside

the game world (be it classical myth, or older gaming archetypes from sources such as Dungeons & Dragons). As Krzywinska notes:

Some aspects of the game's mythic structures 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 game cultures. While players might engage with the game mythos in variable ways, it is nonetheless a core unifying feature of the design of World of Warcraft. (Krzywinska, 2011:124)

Therefore, when applying Genette's theory of the paratext, it will be worth identifying two levels of distinction here: "gameness" and aesthetics. Divine Steed's "gameness" can be found in its increasing the player's movement speed for a short time. To isolate this facet of the ability (for the sake of the argument), picture the game world as a blank and flat plain with a simple and infinite white floor and horizon devoid of in-game assets like trees, structures, or enemies, with the player's avatar being represented by an equally plain cube. By pushing certain buttons, this cube can move around. However, when pressing a specific key on the keyboard, the cube suddenly moves 100% faster than usual for a short time. Now, picture several red coloured cubes that are assumed to be hostile towards the player's blank cube, and they are moving towards the player. In addition to moving normally with a combination of key presses, the player of the blank cube will have the ability to temporarily evade these red blocks in a dash of speed; depending on the goal of this specific game environment, the player might even be encouraged to use that ability to engage the enemy more quickly. This example, although abstract, shows an instance where ludic elements overshadow aesthetics.

Now, returning to WoW's paladin character, picture the player's human-like character standing in a dense jungle where vision is often obscured by surrounding flora and in-game assets like structures and enemies. The first thing to be noticed here is the character's appearance which, as in most games that incorporate role playing (RPG) elements, can communicate a message to other players. Sets of armour like the Holy Warrior Plate, which is currently unobtainable since the Mists of Pandaria expansion, are class specific and, as a result, can provide another level of characterisation or identification. Furthermore, the heavily plated, but angel-like aesthetic of this armour set makes it hard to mistake this character's class for another character who might be, for example, a death knight (there are other examples of crossover aesthetics, but in the case of this example, this specific appearance is class-oriented). So, picture the death knight in the dense jungle while the paladin stands next to him or her with this class-specific armour. An accompanying player (without any prior knowledge of the paladin player) will be able to identify this player's (1) class, (2) possible time spent in the game, and (3) depending on which expansion is current, and which area both players find themselves in, the paladin's player

power. In this way, aesthetic elements can communicate important information to other players. We've already established that the surrounding jungle is dense, which can mean that there will be some traversal challenges for the player. Furthermore, these environmental challenges are often aesthetically enhanced to create pleasing or appropriate settings for players.

As this hypothetical paladin character ends up strolling too close to an enemy faction's base camp, and before he or she can react, powerful enemy guards start moving towards the player with the goal of defeating the player. So, this paladin player might attempt to evade these guards who are likely to be (1) very powerful, and (2) in numbers that make chances of victory slim. Upon seeing that these guards are closing in, the player will likely hit the speed-boost button to improve his or her chance to escape. However, in WoW's scenario, the button doesn't simply make the character run faster for a short time. Here, we will notice other features: the button that corresponds with this ability can be bound to a multitude of keys or gestures according to the player's preference; a paladin horse is specifically used; while other classes often have similar movement-enhancing abilities, the paladin is the only character who mounts up in combat, even though it would be simpler if the player just moved faster on a game level. In considering these features, we might find the notion of paratexts useful. As mentioned earlier, there are many cases in both the game, as well as external media relating to WoW, that show evidence of mythological inspiration from other works and sources. The paladin's armoured warhorse and charger mounts are only useable by paladin players, so, it can be argued that, while the gameness of a given game can be seen as (in literary terms at least) the "primary text" of the game, it is clear that there are many additional aesthetic layers that augment this primary text. While it isn't entirely unreasonable to build a game with simple cuboidal entities with movement speed abilities and a basic goal of catching each other, the paladin's Divine Steed ability is clearly a game function which is intentionally coated with aesthetic meaning; which would then imply a union or relationship between both the mechanical and theoretical spectrums of the game's construction.

The same can be said about the paladin's counterpart, the death knight. They also have a steed which is exclusively available to them, which takes the form of an undead and cursed horse. This is an inversion of what we've discussed about the paladin's divine steed, which again bears meaning when we look back at the Warcraft III campaigns and the Wrath of the Lich King expansion. Chances are, the explorative player would have appreciated the binary relationship between the paladin and the death knight. So, what do these extra bits of meaning "mean" for the game? For them to be paratextual, the "essence text" of the game should accompany them. But, can this "essence text" vary depending on the player's preference? Before I unpack this question, let us consider a case where you are "progressing" story quests, and you use Divine Steed and other thematic abilities to further the story. If an ability like Divine Steed is considered as an example of a paratext, what happens to that paratext status when the paladin uses that

ability in unorthodox or ludicrously illogical ways? For example, running in circles around a pond or lake for the sake of passing time while you wait for one's party members to arrive on the scene? Or what if the paladin uses the ability to reach a favourite fishing spot? Again, it is crucial to understand the "playability" of a game when applying literary concepts to the game, as it is essentially the simplest means to determine an equivalent of the "reading and writing" that we are used to in traditional literary studies. With this flexibility (and even ambiguity) regarding paratexts in video games, it is sufficient to argue that, given the multimodal relationships within the game, games like WoW make use of such a wide range of paratexts, that the player's point of preference can shift the "main textual objective" of the game to suit his or her needs; resulting in other facets of the game becoming primary texts to some, while other facets are simply supplementary to others.

I now return to my previous question regarding multiple "essences" in WoW as a primary text. If a player is a serious PvE raider, it's likely that the player sees PvP activity as a type of supplemental or side activity, an additional mode of play for the player's preferred activity or list of possible gameplay opportunities. It might not be something the player is overly interested in, but it does form part of the same game being played, regardless. This results in (for example) a PvE raider, and a competitive PvP player, despite having very different goals and preferences, sharing the same space within the same game. Examples can exist where for player A, WoW is a PvE game with some PvP on the side. For player B, WoW is a PvP game with some PvE on the side. For player C, WoW is an RP game with some PvP or PvE. And for player D, WoW is a game with compelling activities to do across the board. With all this said about the game's possible "primary texts" and the paratexts that often coat the game's systems, it should be clear that notions of paratexts and "primary texts" (primary text in the sense of a player's focal point and preferred mode of play in a game) are not entirely alien concepts to discuss within video games as they can reveal examples of both in ways unique to video games as a medium. These games rely on an array of multimedia elements to provide multimodal play activities, but the variety of media involved (which often behaves similarly to paratexts as well) forms a complex whole which, when disseminated, can prove interesting regarding inter-disciplinary discourse surrounding games, but the multiform nature of video games makes it very difficult (or, more probably, impossible) to create a single disciplinary lens that does justice to all of a given game's constituents. While this dissertation approaches WoW from a literary perspective in the hopes of contributing to the overall study of games, it is an equally significant goal of this dissertation to show how isolated analyses of games from a single disciplinary perspective can prove problematic when no account is made for the media-specific affordances, limitations, and motifs of these games.

TRANSMEDIA

Some of the most successful examples of popular transmedia can be found in older franchises like the *Star Wars* films; we can gain a great deal by considering the transmediality of these earlier forms of media. In principle, a fictional product's ability to extend itself is not too dissimilar to the Tolkien case of *The Silmarillion*, with its anthropological expansions of the author's fantasy world to augment his novels. Much like *Star Wars*, the *Warcraft* franchise employs many types of accompanying media such as films, novels, sculpting, and comics.

Newman and Simons point out:

Even though *Star Wars* did not become a video game until 1983, we contend that it was a richly playable experience from its very first exposure to the public. The popular assumption of the *Star Wars* canon as one primarily seeded by a series of six films is one ripe for challenge. *Star Wars*, in its broadest sense is, and always has been, richly transmedial. Collectible cards, licensed novels, themed LEGO sets, and the "Expanded Universe" of characters and stories reach out, extend, and sometimes run parallel to the purely cinematic experience of *Star Wars*. These are not trivial additions to cinematic "primary texts." Rather, these extrafilmic texts are vital parts of the storytelling system adding weight, richness, depth, and dimension to the resources of the canon. While action figures, merchandising, and the "Expanded Universe" are comparatively well documented in writings on *Star Wars* (e.g., Kapell and Lawrence 2006; Brooker 2002), video games have been largely neglected within scholarly discussions of transmedia storytelling. (Newman & Simons, 2011:239)

Economic possibilities aside, it isn't difficult to acknowledge some degree of storytelling potential behind transmedial storytelling; especially when considering the upcoming examples of *Warcraft* transmedia, like pre-expansion comics, short films, and expansion-themed novels. As we will hopefully see from the following discussions, transmedia has the potential to function independently from its relative media, all the while offering new layers of meaning when considered or absorbed together. If we think about this matter, we have been extending boundaries of texts for a long time in literary studies already; we call it intertextuality. For example, it would be difficult to consider Milton's *Paradise Lost* without, at least, mentioning other works like Dante's *Inferno*, or even John Donne's *Holy Sonnets*. Each of which, despite their varying modes and tones, are very well suited for a conjoined discussion about their dramatization of the spiritual or supernatural. So, what of *Warcraft* and fantasy? Mukherjee states that in 2007 Henry Jenkins pointed out that:

"the encyclopaedic ambitions of transmedia texts often result in what might be seen as gaps or excesses in the unfolding of the story: that is, they introduce potential plots

which cannot be fully told or extra details which hint at more than can be revealed” (Jenkins, 2007). Jenkins’ comment moves the discussion around the game-text and storytelling in the direction of paratextuality in the sense that the understanding of the game is linked to other media connected to the game. (Mukherjee, 2015:106)

When it comes to “encyclopaedic” transmedia, the WoW chronicle series matches this description perfectly. However, upon reading the WoW chronicle books, they truly do read like tomes aimed at chronicling events that took place in history, with broad and sweeping series of events, rather than the often plot-focussed and intimate novels. However, despite the intended construction of these history books, it can be argued that Warcraft transmedia (especially in the case of the chronicle series) more often than not aims to supplement or augment current events and stories in the latest or upcoming content in the game. The above extract speaks of unfulfilled plots and a dependence on external media which can cause more problems than solutions regarding a given story. However, in the case of WoW, and almost ironically, much of the transmedia surrounding WoW aims to address things that cannot be addressed by the game itself, serving to provide both solutions for some of the game’s ludic or feasibility limitations, along with motivations for the creation of future content. In WoW, there are numerous stories or plot threads that are introduced and touched on, but it is with the advent of transmedia that many of these threads are completed or fleshed out. Prior to the launch of the Legion expansion, William King’s novel, *Illidan*, was released in the hopes of (very similarly to Golden’s Arthas novel) providing context around one of the game’s main characters (who is also the character depicted on the transmedial box art for this expansion). In WoW, this character’s story is not complete. He has existed since the RTS versions of Warcraft, which involve stories and events that fall outside of WoW and in an older game which, for the most part, fell out of the mainstream over a decade ago. So, in many ways, the accounts of Illidan in the chronicle series, as well as King’s novel, handle this video game character more effectively (or, at least, completely) than WoW does on its own. In many cases surrounding WoW, it can be argued that the game itself has limitations that are mitigated by the additional materials; creating a situation where, instead of having the transmedia depend mostly on the “primary text” to make sense, WoW relies on many transmedia materials to do things that cannot be done (or are not financially feasible) in the game itself. To investigate the impact of Warcraft’s transmedia on the game, we will now discuss some popular examples.

WORLD OF WARCRAFT CHRONICLE SERIES

Video 2

Please watch the video labelled “World of Warcraft: Chronicle” before proceeding.

As stated in the video, the World of Warcraft Chronicle serves a type of encyclopaedic role. Although this is a video aimed at promoting the sale of a new product, it is still worth considering because one of the key writers for the Warcraft's franchise, Chris Metzen, is offering commentary on the new line of books. Commerce and public relations aside, he was still one of the highest-ranking members of the company and has been credited for his contributions involving theoretical world design and story development (as is noted by the behind the scenes DVD for the original version of the game where he talks about his official job title). Additionally, he is one of the three writers who participated in the actual writing of the chronicle books. As of the time of writing, three volumes are available, with the possibility of more volumes in the future, seeing as volume 3's contents end roughly around the Cataclysm expansion, which obviously excludes content from the Mists of Pandaria, Warlords of Draenor, Legion, and Battle for Azeroth expansions. As noted by Metzen in his behind the scenes interview, creating a sense of world and fleshing out a world's histories and denizens is very much a process comparable, for example, to what's been done by Tolkien and Lewis in the past. It's also interesting to notice how, when considering the ongoing debate between many ludologists and narratologists in game studies, the study of games is relatively new to academia and is certainly an area of study which is still hotly debated (Mukherjee, 2015). Metzen's affirmation that WoW forms part of the "Tolkien tradition" makes the previous comparisons with Tolkien's *Silmarillion* and the chronicle series a valuable parallel and introduction to transmedia.

How does this series of books supplement or add to the game world of Azeroth? One of the first answers to this question lies in the video we've just watched; it can show us both things that have passed, and things that can potentially take place in the future. This dual-view of Azeroth's past and possible future is a key component to the game's sense of world, and is often ludic and playful as a result. There are numerous YouTube channels and WoW community websites where players scrape together bits of in-game knowledge, in addition to external source materials, to try to solve some of the game's mysteries and possible futures. This type of speculative puzzle solving is very much akin to notions of ludic activity, as the weighing of different facts and histories is often done in attempts to identify future patterns or events. For example, Metzen states:

At the core of it all lies a real sense of...history. The overarching story of Warcraft is a vast, intertwining patchwork of myths, legends, and world-shaking events that ultimately contextualize the player's heroic efforts in the ever-expanding world they share. Twenty years of storytelling. Tens of thousands of moments, characters, races, and monsters, all forming dense strata of concepts and ideas over time. This book – this chronicle – is meant to bring it all together and reinforce the overarching narrative that lies at Warcraft's heart. Writing this was an opportunity to unite the frayed story ends and smooth out the rough edges of this fictional history. Ultimately, this grand (and super

nerdy) editorial undertaking gives us an amazing perspective on Warcraft's recurring themes and conflicts:

How societies often clash before seeing a common humanity in each other...

How earnest, well-intentioned heroes can often succumb to temptations of power...

How failing to take responsibility for mistakes of the past can lead to calamity in the present...

These are just a few of the motifs that form the common thread of Azeroth's great history, expressed across disparate cultures, factions, and individuals over mythic spans of time. Cycles within cycles... It's from this top-down view that we can more clearly see the dangerous yet glorious horizons ahead. And even in the face of all this... history... I'm fairly certain that the adventure is only just beginning! – Chris Metzen (Metzen, Burns & Brooks, 2016:6)

This extract from the first volume of the chronicle series confirms the intentions of the series as a whole; to form a coherent account of the fictional happenings of this fantasy world, while bringing the players closer and closer to an otherwise-unreachable world. Reading this book in addition to playing the corresponding game adds new layers to the game experience, simultaneously answering and catalysing questions regarding the events within the game. While the game might not be able to house all of Azeroth's history on its own, having a transmedial "library" of intertextual sources can help fill these gaps and enrich the experience of all the relevant media involved (as mentioned in earlier sections). That said, the chronicle's subject matter, from a story and fantasy perspective, offers useful supplements to explorative gamers' experiences, but it seems to be implied that the chronicles function better when paired with the game; then, as noted by Metzen, future horizons can be speculated on. This book, conforming to a degree to Genette's aforementioned paratexts, is very much in its ramifications a multimedia work; a view of it based on its artistic illustrations, the various writers that contributed to the book's text, and the substantial game that facilitated the need for the clarified lore. This fact might therefore provoke another discussion: have books always been multimedia works containing varying types of paratext? If so, what does this tell us about the artistic versatility of multimedia as a whole? In closing this section regarding the transmedial function of the chronicle, the following extract provides insight on the group-based productions behind the world of Azeroth:

The world of Azeroth has been shaped by hundreds of craftsmen, designers, artists, and writers since its earliest inception. It is the product of many talented hands and many passionate voices, all bent toward creating a world so rich in detail, theme, and

characterization that... well... you'd want to pull on your +6 Boots of Butt-Kicking and give your all to defend it. – Chris Metzen (Metzen, Burns & Brooks, 2016:6)

Despite the comical and informal tone of this extract, there is a reoccurring theme that underlies it; that game design (especially at this scale) is a collaborative process which relies on the varying skills and contributions of other team members to bring a construct to life. As mentioned earlier regarding the benefits and dangers when disseminating the multiple forms of media that comprise the whole of a given game, the theoretical creations that closely resemble traditional fantasy media like the works of Tolkien cannot be considered without also considering the ludic elements behind the game. The virtually literal “pulling on of any equipment” is something that is inherent in gaming and carries its own levels of meaning, effectively making it almost impossible to talk seriously about a game’s story or narratives without mentioning the game’s “gameness”.

WORLD OF WARCRAFT TRAVELER

Video 3

Please watch the video labelled “World of Warcraft: Traveler Announced” before proceeding.

Some fitting correlative evidence is found in Metzen’s closing thoughts in the video regarding the Traveler series:

I love that Warcraft can be all of these things, from a feature film to a giant video game, to a series of young adult novels. But each expression has its own purpose; has its own gravity. Traveler teaches me things about Warcraft I did not see before. It opens me up to Warcraft in a way that a single video game doesn’t just by itself. So, I am very thankful for Traveler; very thankful for getting to do this; for Scholastic to agreeing to build this series of stories with us. (Metzen in World of Warcraft, 2016(a))

What we can gather here is that one of the key story builders and writers for Blizzard Entertainment greatly approves of the use of intertextual and transmedial media regarding Warcraft and the world of Azeroth. This is especially important in the case of the aforementioned multimodal capabilities of fantasy game stories and worlds. As mentioned in the first chapter, WoW was (and, objectively, still is) a massive gamer-culture phenomenon which continues to grow its game, as well as its various forms of media, with new novels, comic series, short films, and so on. As the game is well over ten-years-old, it is clear that many of the current players have grown up alongside the game. Some players might have started families during their time in the game, a fact which enables a valuable and profitable opportunity to introduce new generations to the world of Azeroth. Before we proceed to older examples of pop-culture phenomena being passed on to new generations, the following extract from Newman and Simons helps solidify our understanding of transmedia and what it offers us today.

Without a doubt, and in keeping with multimedia texts and products, the transmedia narrative is inherently multimodal in that it is one that is deliberately and self-consciously distributed throughout a system of channels that each offer parts of a whole. Perhaps more importantly, however, the decentralized mode of storytelling that Jenkins documents as characteristic of the contemporary media environment is one in which each channel of communication may contribute something to the telling of the story or the ability of the audience to engage with it as the particular affordances of the medium are harnessed... Each video game, television program, LEGO brick, or action figure is located within the context of the totality of texts in the storytelling system and gains something from this situation and proximity; each has a self-contained set of meanings and does not rely on other materials in the system to bestow meaning upon it. (Newman & Simons, 2011:242 -243)

When considering transmedia and “a system of channels that each offer parts of a whole” (ibid.), it might be worth discussing what this “whole” could be. A possible answer is the fantasy world of Warcraft: Azeroth. As noted earlier by Metzger, the fact that Warcraft can “be all these different things” is very much in line with talks about transmedia and intertextuality. Furthermore, these words of his are especially significant: “Traveler teaches me things about Warcraft I did not see before. It opens me up to Warcraft in a way that a single video game doesn’t just by itself”. With the affordances of a new medium (that is, young adult novels), one of the key creators of Azeroth credits this new (at the time) form of Blizzard media as something that provides fresh lenses through which to behold this already well-known world. As Azeroth first existed as a game world (with all of its traditional and contemporary inspirations considered), it can now exist as “something else” depending on the chosen piece of media (along with its structures, affordances, and constraints) and the person who “absorbs” it. Azeroth can now be a playful and compelling world for children aged between 8 and 12 years, while also being a challenging game world with various challenging opportunities for older players.

With regards to new generations being introduced to Azeroth, we find a similar example among older Star Wars fans and how they introduce their beloved universe to their children. Fittingly, there are numerous Star Wars-themed games in circulation and it is also a widely popular phenomenon. Newman and Simons tell of how other media developers aided Star Wars fans to introduce new generations to these worlds that they had held in high esteem over decades of enjoyment:

Throughout the course of our research, we observed and interviewed a number of parents and their children playing the various LSW [LEGO Star Wars] games. Here, we will focus on the responses of one specific familial pair of players: a father (age thirty-three) and his son (three). The father held the original (Episodes IV, V, and VI) films as

significant markers of a particular moment in his childhood. In order to ensure the integrity of these valuable cultural artifacts, he was anxious that his son have the best possible introduction to the canon: “The first watching together of Star Wars should be something boys remember. Like their first kiss.” Almost immediately following an enthusiastic viewing of the original trilogy, the universe exploded into being a place to play. Even thirty years after the original film, toy lightsabers are still regular stock in toy shops, and one was duly purchased. A gift of some LSW spaceships with associated minifigures provided a new form within which the story could be replayed. The LSW video game was introduced shortly after that, providing the child’s first video game experience. (Newman & Simons, 2011:244)

If the LSW games are also intended for children as young as 3-years-old, the traveler book plays a very similar role, the type of role which should (on the surface) be more familiar to conventional narrative studies. However, this example of LSW is particularly relevant to this discussion due to its existence as a game which (already as a transmedial piece of multimedia) has substituents that are also transmedial in nature. Thus, *LSW: The Complete Saga* has three modes of play; namely, Story Mode, Freeplay Mode, and Challenge Mode.

As the title of the mode suggests, Story Mode has a particular emphasis on telling a story, and is mostly “concerned with a broad replication of the narrative of the films” (Newman & Simons, 2011:246). Much of the game’s story is told via non-playable sections (that is, cutscenes). However, “each chapter is introduced by the familiar, anticipation-building ‘crawl text’ featured in the movies, which roots them firmly in the storybook tradition” (Newman & Simons, 2011:246). But this story cannot be told without a player’s participation, much as a book cannot communicate its contents without a reader.

The Freeplay mode is unlocked after a certain amount of progress is made in the Story mode. Here, “players are at liberty to swap and change between multiple characters – not necessarily those that are scenically or canonically ‘correct’.” (Newman & Simons, 2011:247). As fittingly stated in their essay, this added level of playfulness or playability is very much akin to the flexible playability of LEGO itself, making this type of mode doubly effective regarding the themes of the game. To supplement this thematic playfulness, Jonathan Smith (Game Director for the game) had the following to say regarding the idea “pitch”:

When we went to Lucas at the start, their initial response was, well we’re already doing Star Wars games. We had to emphasise the LEGO experience, just how special this is going to be. This isn’t a game of the movie. This is the game where you play with the movie. (Newman & Simons, 2011:251)

Coming from the game director himself, this is a confirmation that the game's flexibility and diverse playability are key foci for the game, in correlation with LEGO's desire to enhance the playability of the Star Wars universe. In essence, the three modes offered by the game stand as possible evidence that a game can (1) tell a story, (2) facilitate flexible and even random moments of fun, and (3) provide "overly gamey" experiences of challenge.

The final game mode is called the Challenge mode, and is best described by Newman and Simons in the following extract:

In "Challenge Mode," players are required to perform specific tasks within a time limit, such as collecting 1000 LEGO studs. In this mode, the individual abilities of characters and the specific locations in the Star Wars universe are deemphasized as they give way to types of play and objectives drawn from the canon of video gaming. These three modes represent a spectrum of emphasis, beginning with Story Mode's commitment to the narrative origin, through the Challenge Mode's total emphasis on more recognizable gamelike systems. (Newman & Simons, 2011:248)

This "spectrum of emphasis" is a fitting concept to apply to these substituent transmedial experiences when considering WoW's systems and modes of play. It can be found in many different games; we've discussed possible examples of this emphasis on activities (PvP, PvE, and RP) and features in earlier sections. However, what more can we gather when identifying a possible "spectrum of emphasis" in WoW and the Warcraft Traveler? The common denominator between, for example, the Warcraft Traveler and WoW as a game, is the fantasy world, Azeroth. Therefore, much like the LSW game, the fantasy behind Warcraft can be seen as a similar "macro-whole" to both the Star Wars universe, as well as the "universe" of LSW, which offers a range of possibilities and experiences. So, does the world (possibly as a multimedia construct on its own) facilitate its own "spectrum of emphasis"?

An example for exploring this possibility can be found in the raiding scene of WoW. Even though WoW raiders may have "beaten" the game's raid or dungeon content, they are most likely going to continue completing the content multiple times in search of more powerful items and equipment to give them an even greater benefit within the game world. In addition to this, much like LSW, modern WoW's dungeons and raids (as of writing) have a number of different difficulty levels; raids, for example, currently have 4 difficulty levels. If a player is mostly interested in story-related content in a given raid tier, the lowest difficulty setting for a raid is the easiest entry to the content as a group is formed automatically by Blizzard's matchmaking systems which will also instantly teleport the player to the raid once the team is assembled. However, the higher difficulties for a raid offer more challenges than the first level but have greater rewards. Thus, even if a raid serves as a climactic narrative event for a given expansion set, players can choose to shift their "emphasis" to a purely ludic one thereafter; essentially,

accumulating player power. While the tone and motifs of LSW and WoW can differ significantly, they both incorporate systems that offer players opportunities to place “emphasis” on the features or modes of play that they prefer at a given moment. Both show examples of how story can be emphasised (with some degree of adherence to source material outside of the game) while offering ludic systems that facilitate compelling and satisfying entertainment.

Returning to what’s been said earlier regarding the physical differences in meterage between Middle-earth and Azeroth, it can be argued (with due respect to Tolkien’s work) that games can take 2-dimensional maps and make them traversable and interactive via multimedia processes. As pointed out by Aarseth, the physical meterage of Azeroth is in fact much smaller than Middle-earth, but Tolkien’s world (with its medium-based affordances and constraints) can afford to be based on maps where cities are hundreds of miles apart. However, from a gaming perspective, fantasy worlds do not solely rely on our imaginations; they can be prescribed with a substantial amount of detail, even if some of those details oftentimes exist as illusions or mitigations for the game’s limitations. However, with these examples of prescriptive fantasy, comes the price of technical limitations. This goes hand-in-hand with what’s been said about medium-based limitations. For example, a novel is a familiar storytelling medium which (in general) is a fairly accessible means for absorbing information; on a basic level, it requires a level of linguistic capability, and some degree of contextual background knowledge. So, on a user level, it can be argued that the book has far fewer barriers to entry than (for example) a video game at this stage in time, because, while the ability to read is common, not everyone who reads partakes in gaming (yet). Novels can have hundreds (sometimes thousands) of pages of content where in-depth dialogues and characterisations can take place, all the while challenging readers to visualise and imagine the events within their own minds. With their supplementary materials akin to Tolkien’s fictional languages, maps, and historical chronicling via the *Silmarillion*, it isn’t difficult to see parallels with Warcraft transmedia. Although there is an apparent air of commercial manufacturing behind materials like the various Warcraft books and merchandise, the events that take place in these stories (specifically the formal lore materials rather than, for example, Chris Metzen’s *Snow Fight*, or Monroe-Cassel’s *Warcraft Cookbook*) are still valuable additions to the game world’s fiction and fantasy. An apt example of this can be found in Golden’s novel, *Before the Storm*, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

These are just some brief examples of what a novel can offer us. However, a key feature to consider is the portrayal of the novel’s contents (assuming that it is a fantasy novel). Regarding the potential degree of realism that can reinforce a fantasy story, the following extract from Purtle offers some insight:

Tolkien and Lewis use, in different ways, realism of presentation. This is obvious enough in Lewis’ case. His vivid descriptions of extraterrestrial scenes and nonhuman entities,

the acute observation of character, the realism of the dialogue, all make it easy to suspend disbelief. (Purtil, 2006:28)

While this extract praises these novelists' use of their medium's affordances to evoke feelings of realism, the novel as a medium in general lacks some significant dimensions of our physical reality; the dimensions of sight, hearing, and action (virtually literal interactivity) via contemporary multimedia. So, while the use of dialogues, fleshed-out maps, and fictional languages all serve to make a world feel more believable (possibly as conscious mitigations for a given medium's limitations), what does our actual seeing and hearing of the world and its denizens offer us? Apart from some isolated and modern multimodal examples, the novel is not able to accommodate actual sensory experience. So, from a gaming perspective, how does one go about achieving "realism of presentation"? Does the use of visual, aural, and interactive fiction enhance or detract from effective fantasy storytelling? Video game fantasy and its similarities to traditional fantasy will be discussed in a later chapter, but is still important enough to mention in this section. Works like the *Traveler*, despite being a children's novel, are in many ways also multimedia works (*Traveler* has several drawings and illustrations that accompany the immediate offerings of Azeroth as a world) and it needed specialists to make Azeroth available in this medium. Metzen acknowledged the fact that a single game cannot do all the things being done by Christie Golden (young-adult novelist), Duncan Jones (film director for the *Warcraft* film), and Greg Weisman (author of *Warcraft Traveler*).

In conclusion to this section, we can see how the various forms of media feed into one another, which is representative of the multimodal nature of these forms of media. When considering these examples of transmedia specific to Blizzard's Azeroth, it is clear that much consideration is given to the medium-specific affordances of these types of media. While a giant game like *WoW* can offer a lot of content, it will still have its limitations; which is something that all forms of media have to deal with. For example, because Middle-earth is technically far bigger than Azeroth in terms of meterage, it is not yet possible for a player (unless someone does this in the future) to pass through a portal into Middle-earth in an interactive and virtually-to-scale form. While this can prove to be an interesting prospect for studying game worlds and player behaviour, filling that world with compelling content to keep players playing (and paying) seems to be a greater challenge than crafting a game world of that magnitude.

HARBINGER SERIES – KHADGAR

Video 4

Please watch the video labelled “Harbingers - Khadgar” before proceeding.

This section regarding the Harbinger short-film series will deal with notions of chaos versus order in the cosmology of Warcraft. The following chart serves to show the various cosmic forces and how they oppose one another:

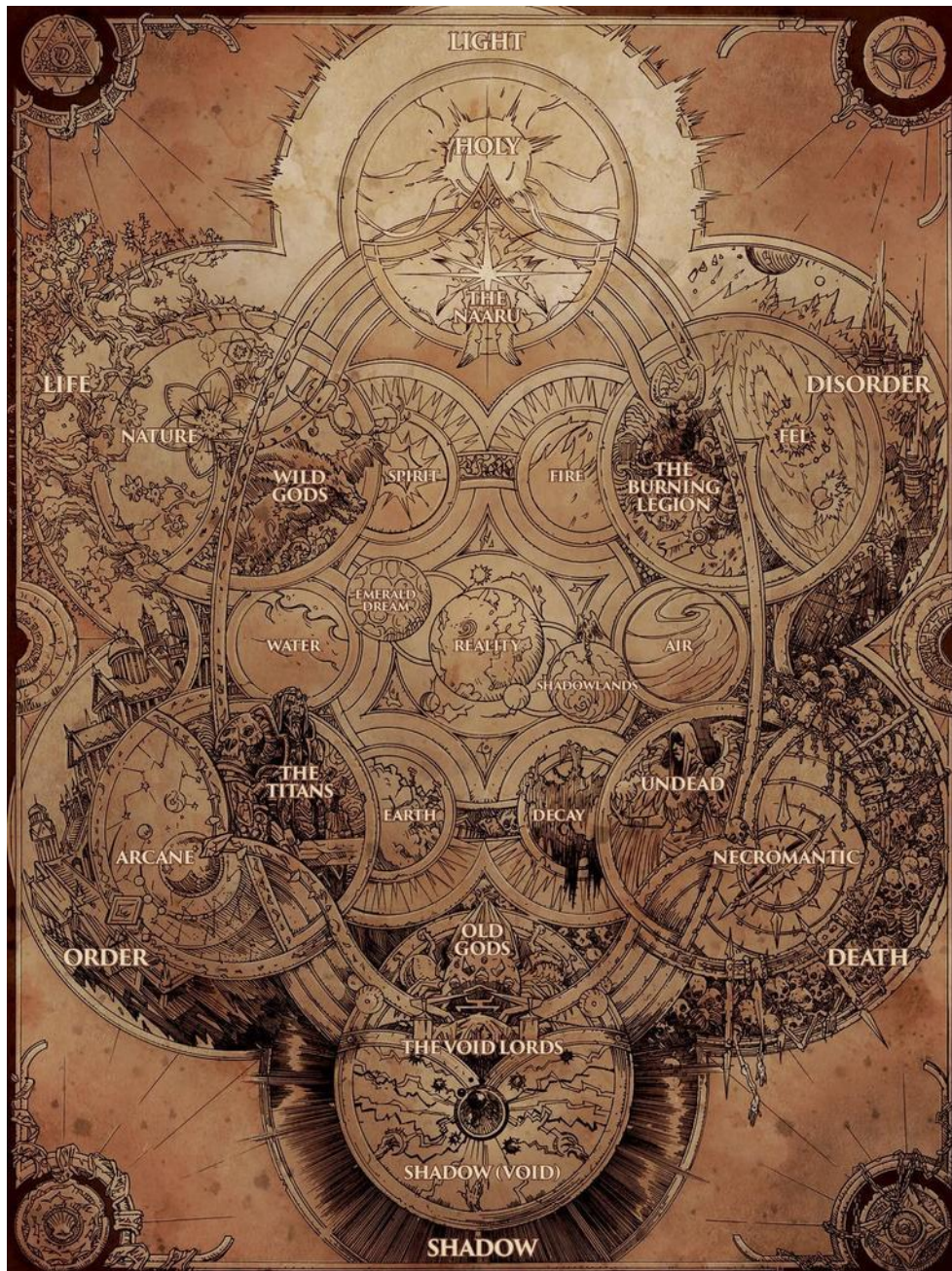


Image 1: Cosmology of the Warcraft universe.

(Metzen, Burns & Brooks, 2016:8)

Mages in WoW are often depicted as scholars who are hungry for knowledge. A WoW character's effectiveness in combat is measured by a set of numerical criteria which denotes proficiencies in certain combat situations; this is commonly referred to as attribute points or "stats" (short for statistics). These numbers are modified by a number of factors like weapons, armour, and in-game consumables. Thus, one expects to see (in the post-Legion versions of the game) that warriors amass high *strength* and *stamina* values, which modify both physical damage as well as maximum health thresholds. The mage, however, typically amasses the

intellect attribute, which modifies damage and healing spells for spell-caster characters. However, in older versions of the game, the *intellect* attribute had an additional function; it also impacted on how many spells spell-casters can cast without having to replenish their energy (this threshold is known in the game as “mana”). In this case, the literal accumulation of “*intellect*” would result in a greater volume or threshold for casting spells, which would mimic the popular fantasy archetype of a wise wizard or mage burning through tomes and scrolls in order to expand their magical repertoire. In the Warcraft sense, this is mostly facilitated by the player’s equipment, but accumulating and searching for the best-suited equipment for a specific character or class is, in a way, a similar process to a wizard studying a magical source of knowledge to expand his or her own knowledge further.

The Burning Legion is a faction of demons led by a fallen celestial titan who seeks the destruction of all life in order to utterly rule out the possibility of life’s corruption by even darker forces (Metzen, Burns & Brooks, 2016). This Legion of demons is diverse with many different agents to carry out the dark titan’s will. One type of demon is found in this video, commonly known in-game as the “Dreadlord” type. Early in the video, we are given a possible clue about Medivh’s deception in the mirror scene. While it is debatable whether a Hamlet-like ghost will have a reflection in a mirror, another mythological creature which is famous for not having a reflection is a vampire. In Warcraft III, Dreadlords had an ability called “Vampiric Aura”, which would replenish the Dreadlord and his allies’ health whenever they inflict damage on their enemies (as seen in Warcraft 3). So, it is reasonable to suppose that Medivh’s lack of reflection is a possible marker of significance, proving either a lack of living substance (as in the case of a ghost) or the presence of a deceitful vampire luring the mage with promises of power in a typical Dracula-like fashion. If this is true, this could remind us of many classical literary types such as the Gothic, Elizabethan tragedies, and mythology in general. One of the most popular examples of a scholar bartering with a demon is Marlowe’s Doctor Faustus:

Doctor Faustus is a play about desire: for the best in life, for knowledge, power, material comfort, and influence. Faustus sells his soul to the devil hoping to learn the secrets of the universe, but is fobbed off with explanations which he knows to be inadequate. He is obsessed with fame, but his achievement as a devil-assisted celebrity magician is less substantial than it was previously as a scholar. (Marlowe, edited by Gill, 2008)

While Khadgar was never a Guardian of Azeroth, he was the apprentice of Medivh during his time as Guardian. However, while Khadgar never became a Guardian, and thus never lived a lavish life of luxury like his master had, we learn from the chronicle that Medivh’s life (despite his challenges and unfortunate fate) was indeed that of someone who lived a luxurious life during his time as Guardian. This provides even more evidence of a Faustus-like scenario where a bargain or commitment is made with supernatural powers, at the cost of one’s better nature:

In the years that followed, Karazhan [Medivh's tower] would host many more galas. Nobles from around Stormwind would come to regard Medivh's parties as exclusive high-society events. The Council of Tirisfal snuck a few agents into these festivities, but the magi were thoroughly confused by what their spies reported. By all accounts, Medivh was using his power and prominence to live a shallow life of luxury. It was not what they'd expected from the son of Aegwynn. (Metzen, Burn & Brooks, 2017:112)

Here, we see a resemblance to Doctor Faustus' post-bargain life. As stated in the rest of the chronicle, Medivh had a "lingering darkness inside him" which we will later discover to be a demonic presence (Metzen, Burn & Brooks, 2016 - 2017). Thus, this "lingering darkness" which essentially waited for the right time to actualise itself through Medivh, is very much relatable to the contract between Mephistopheles and Faustus; both of which deal with a "wait-until-the-time-is-right" situation. Both stories deal with forbidden powers; both deal with powerful mortal desires; and both have an ultimate price that needs to be paid. Not only is this a testament to the value of the transmedial chronicle series, but it shows a very similar social commentary to that found in Marlowe. We are shown how the pursuit of knowledge (not too dissimilar to the mythical tale of Icarus) can be perilous if it's undertaken at the expense of others or your own moral well-being. While this isolated WoW story harkens to similar motifs and character struggles found in Marlowe and world mythology, it fits into a different overarching framework. As a play, the story of Faustus falling to temptation, and facing the consequences of this at the end, is at the forefront of the reader/viewer's perception. However, this Harbinger video discusses an event which clearly (1) exists as a constituent part of the overarching theme and story of the Legion expansion's experience, (2) which takes place outside of the game's playable world, and (3) is transmedial in that it's offered outside of the "primary text", which, in this case, is the Legion game expansion. The Harbinger video concludes that Azeroth's surviving this demon invasion cannot rely on a single powerful entity, but on the cooperation and teamwork of the inhabitants of Azeroth. Thus, this short film offers some traditional motifs in its handling of key WoW characters, but it forms part of a whole which offers its own themes of sacrifice, cooperation, and unity; themes that aren't foregrounded in *Doctor Faustus* (World of Warcraft, 2016 (b)).

With the chronicles' additional context, we will have a better understanding of Medivh's past and what the cost of his immense power was to himself, as well as his own people at large (Metzen, Burn & Brooks, 2016 - 2017). However, his former apprentice Khadgar (now an elderly mage) is offered the same gift and the same opportunities as his predecessor. This situation, again, is very much like the one we have just discussed about the bartering with demons, except Khadgar shows us an example of what could have happened if such power was resisted. In the beginning, Medivh's intentions were good, as he just wanted to protect everyone he cared about, but this well-intentioned nature was twisted and turned against him by dark forces; much

as Faustus is in thrall of “explanations which he knows to be inadequate” (Marlowe, 2008 and Metzen, Burn & Brooks, 2016 - 2017). However, Khadgar also has good intentions as he seeks to safeguard the whole of Azeroth (opposing factions included) from the invading legions. As a thematic action, Khadgar instead chooses to rely on allies and companions to fight against the Burning Legion, rather than accept powers that would also facilitate fulfilment of desire and experience of unlimited pleasure.

In the end, we see three Doctor Faustus-like modalities in the above: (1) The man who sells his soul to the devil to gain influence, knowledge, and power; (2) the man who was destined to fail as he was born with an innate darkness, and never desired to become the Guardian of Azeroth, but eventually indulged himself; and (3) the man who, despite being faced with a tempting proposition which might be exploited for well-intentioned reasons, resists offers that are “too good to be true” while having faith in his allies and companions rather than material power. When given the themes of the *Legion* expansion, this was a fitting short film for providing context regarding Khadgar in particular, as well as how unity will be the salvation of Azeroth, rather than sheer force and power, which is easily corruptible. This series of short films was launched on YouTube prior to the expansion’s launch, which (in addition to being a marketing tool) provides a foretaste of the narrative atmosphere which awaits players in the upcoming expansion. These expressions are examples of how technology, cinema, art, music, and design all contribute to a given expression; a fitting instance of the potential of multimedia and how much “creation” takes place in a separate space, which is still significantly relevant to other spaces, like the game itself.

[WORLD OF WARCRAFT: THE OFFICIAL COOKBOOK](#)

This is probably the most unorthodox example of Warcraft transmedia. Chelsea Monroe-Cassel also compiled the “Game of Thrones-themed” cookbook, which hints at an entirely new fantasy dimension; the dimension of eating fictitious food. As noted in earlier sections regarding our senses in a ludic environment, this cookbook offers an unexpected sense to be explored in Warcraft: taste. As fantasy worlds still involve living, organic creatures and beings, it would be fair to assume that they need food and water to survive. However, regarding the need to maintain the fantastic atmosphere of a given fantasy world, it wouldn’t be very convincing or “wonderful” if the denizens of Azeroth ate the exact same food as we do in our world. So, Blizzard’s developers actually created a multitude of dishes that can be prepared by players if they so choose. Furthermore, a beef burger might be made more “fantastic” in Azeroth if it, for example, was made out of Clefthoof meat, which adds to the sense of world that the developers were clearly intent on conveying. That being said, the full introduction to the book provides us with some interesting insights as to how something like a fantasy cookbook can find its place in our own world:

The difficulty with creating real recipes for fictional dishes lies in the world-building. Sometimes a world is not rich enough – not fully imagined enough – to provide adequate details about the foods. In those cases, a stew is just a stew, and bread is just plain old boring bread, no matter how sustaining.

But then there are fictional realms that are so inventive, so creative and unique, that they are instantly immersive. The world of Warcraft is such a place, where fish both common and rare can be caught in countless bodies of water, where the farmers of Pandaria battle “virmen” that threaten their crops of enormous vegetables, and where an unusually high number of nonplayer characters need help collecting ingredients for recipes both delicious and dodgy.

And while a lack of details can prove problematic, so too can having such a wealth of them. Cooking mythological creatures is all well and good when sitting in front of a computer, but when it comes to bringing that recipe to life in the kitchen? Well... let's just say it can get complicated.

In creating this cookbook, I've tried to keep things relatively simple while staying as true as possible to the dishes and recipes within the game. I hope you'll find some of your old favorites – and perhaps discover a few new ones, too.

Here's hoping you all stay Well Fed on your journey through this book! (Monroe-Cassel, 2016:6)

It is interesting that the author gives full credit to Warcraft's world for making such a book possible. When reading this introduction, it becomes rather obvious that a fully fleshed-out world will contain a diverse food culture; it just isn't something we are quite used to or expect when embarking on a fantasy adventure. This, much like what Metzen said regarding the Traveler, is an example of the various “things” Azeroth can lead to. Here, we see the potential for external media (like this cookbook) contributing to the other types of Warcraft media. For example, the young-adult novel *Warcraft: Day of the Dragon* by Richard A. Knaak often references the food in WoW, such as Darnassian Bleu, for example, a type of cheese hailing from the Night Elven community of Darnassus. While dialogues in novels can be said to underline the realism of their worlds, the same can be said about celebratory and cultural dishes, as well as physical sustenance in general. However, in addition to the fantasy contributions that food culture can make in a fantasy world, food in WoW is also a game device. Food and drinks in WoW restore character resources; food generally restores health points, drinks restore mana points, and some foods restore both resources. In addition to this, the consumption of high-quality dishes in the game provide ludic benefits to the player. After consuming such a meal, the player's character receives a status-altering effect (colloquially known as a “buff”) which gives the player

a temporary “power-up” that can effect combat ability, movement speed, and durability. This buff is labelled on the screen as “Well Fed”. If we refer back to Monroe-Cassel’s introduction, we notice that she referenced that buff in her concluding remarks. This shows that the author acknowledges the gameness and fantasy of cooking in Azeroth, which, as mentioned numerous times before, is a fitting testament to the inter-connected nature of the substituents that contribute to the whole of Azeroth. To add to this, each recipe in the cookbook has a short description (resembling a role-player’s register) which gives us more context regarding the dish and its existence in Azeroth. An example of this fusion of gameness and fantasy exists below:

The secret’s in the malt! Ragnar Thunderbrew has been drawing patrons to his tavern for decades with the savory smell of his famous ribs. Now the old Thunderbrew family recipe for the best ribs in the Eastern kingdoms is available to all. (Monroe-Cassel, 2016:117)

Additionally, this recipe for *Beer-basted Boar Ribs* is accompanied by the in-game thumbnail icon found in the game itself. What makes this particular example so interesting is the fact that the recipe is only obtainable in the game after you’ve assisted Ragnar Thunderbrew with the preparation for the meal. The player is tasked with obtaining the boar meat by hunting crag boars in the snowy region of Dun Morogh (specifically around Kharanos). Then the player needs to visit the nearby tavern to purchase the required ale for the dish, and after submitting the required ingredients, the player is rewarded with some coin, experience points (responsible for advancing the player’s power), and the fabled cooking recipe (as seen in many WoW quests). The player can now reproduce the same recipe at will, and it gives one of the first levels of the “Well Fed” buff. Thus, for players who’ve been playing the game for several years, being able to cook this type of dish after completing this quest dozens of times with different characters, may very well produce similar feelings of nostalgia and reverence as are evoked in the aforementioned father-and-son viewing of the *Star Wars* films. This is yet another example of how transmedia often enters a give-and-take relationship with other related media; an old player will gather much meaning from actually enjoying this dish outside of the game, while those who are not familiar with the game will still be able (hopefully) to enjoy a unique recipe which can potentially serve (like the *LSW* games) as an introduction to the world of Azeroth.

In closing this section regarding the Warcraft cookbook, the following extract shows another acknowledgement of the gamey nature of cooking in Azeroth:

1) Make 5 from each

- The Way of the Nibble
- The Way of the Loaf
- The Way of the Broth
- The Way of the Entrée

- The Way of the Sweet
- The Way of the Tankard

2) You are now a Master Cook. Go forth and feed the masses! (Monroe-Cassel, 2016:13)

This extract serves as an ode to the “levelling-up” processes in WoW where cooking is also something that is levelled up through practicing and cooking multiple dishes. Here, we see a reference to the progression we would see in the game itself, and it’s been translated to our world. Whether it’s a type of friendly challenge, or a comment intended to satisfy current gamers, the fact that there is a path to take, while adhering to a set of rules (however simple) in order to reach a quantifiable outcome, is evidence that this piece of text is very much a ludic piece. This is essentially a challenge to prepare a substantial thirty dishes (that is, a recipe a day is a month’s worth of cooking) to be crowned a “master cook”, and is very much within the spirit of the game’s often-lengthy progression systems.

These examples of Warcraft transmedia should give us a good idea of how diverse these transmedial works of media can be. This fact is very much in-line with what Metzen said about each Warcraft-themed “expression” that exists, and the apparent approval of this expansion of the Warcraft universe. Ultimately, these instances show us some examples of how Warcraft can be experienced; it can be read to your children; it can be read by adults; it can be chronicled; it can be watched; it can be analytically unpacked; and, finally, it can even be experienced through food.

WORLD OF WARCRAFT: BEFORE THE STORM

Golden’s latest novel (2018) serves as a prequel to the events of the *Battle for Azeroth* expansion. While this novel considers events that happen outside of the virtual realm of the game, it still takes place within the canonical, theoretical space of the world due to its official *World of Warcraft* affiliation. The synopsis on the back of the book provides us with the overall scenario.

Azeroth is dying.

The Horde and the Alliance defeated the demonic Burning Legion, but a dire catastrophe is unfolding deep below the surface of the world. There is a mortal wound in the heart of Azeroth, struck by the sword of the fallen titan Sargeras in a final act of cruelty.

For Anduin Wrynn, king of Stormwind, and Sylvanas Windrunner, warchief of the Horde and queen of the Forsaken, there is little time to rebuild what remains and even less to mourn what was lost. Azeroth’s devastating wound has revealed a mysterious material

known as Azerite. In the right hands, this strange golden substance is capable of incredible feats of creation; in the wrong ones, it could bring forth unthinkable destruction.

As Alliance and Horde forces race to uncover the secrets of Azerite and heal the wounded world, Anduin enacts a desperate plan aimed at forging a lasting peace between the factions. Azerite jeopardizes the balance of power, and so Anduin must gain the trust of Sylvanas. But, as ever, the Dark Lady has her own machinations.

For peace to be possible, generations of bloodshed and hatred must be brought to an end. But there are truths that neither side is willing to accept and ambitions they are loath to relinquish. As Alliance and Horde alike grasp for the Azerite's power, their simmering conflict threatens to reignite all-out war—a war that would spell doom for Azeroth. (Golden, 2018)

The synopsis refers to events that happened prior to this story (that is, in the *Legion* expansion), as well as a new cause for conflict in the form of Azerite, the seeping crystallised lifeblood of the planet itself (Blizzard Entertainment, 2016). In addition to being a theoretical topic in the novel and narrative space of *Warcraft*, it is also a gameplay feature in the newer expansion which will have a direct impact on player character progression. Narratively, the expansion encourages Alliance and Horde players to amass as much Azerite as possible, in the hopes of securing an edge in the renewed faction war. Mechanically, the accumulation of Azerite will empower players and allow them to equip potent equipment which grows in effectiveness the more Azerite the players accrue. However, even before the traditional WoW pre-expansion content updates, and the actual launch of the expansion in August 2018, this novel discusses a chain of events that are not viewable in the game, even though it forms part of the canonical progression of the game's timeline. Before we continue further with regards to the novel's purpose, it will be worth considering the final cutscene cinematic of the *Legion* expansion, as this will be the first time that both faction leaders learn about Azerite. Additionally, the ending cinematic of *Legion* shown to the player is determined by their faction; it shows the perspectives of both factions and how they intend to deal with the new resource.

Video: 5

Please watch the video labelled “The Defeat of the Burning Legion: Alliance Epilogue” before proceeding.

It is significant that these perspectives (both Alliance and Horde) accompany the arrival of Azerite at the world’s wound. At the end of the final raid of the *Legion* expansion, in one last act of spite, the leader of the Burning Legion plunged his sword into the planet before he was imprisoned in a far corner of the cosmos. While both factions celebrated the defeat of the Burning Legion, we are also shown how quick both sides are to react to this new power source. From both Horde and Alliance cutscenes, we see an eagerness to amass the substance (despite the factions’ not yet knowing what it truly is), as well as a cautious apprehension regarding what the opposite faction knows about the substance. That said, we are given a fitting opportunity to measure the differences between the two forms of media, because the novel describes this revelatory experience in detail. Thus, it will be important to discuss the portrayal of this discovery in the game, and how the novel treats this exact moment in the story:

Anduin pressed his lips together for a moment before speaking. “So. The Horde has found something valuable in Silithus. What is it this time? Another ancient city to scavenge?”

“No, Your Majesty. They found...this.”

The king turned around. In Shaw’s palm was a dirty white handkerchief. Wordlessly, he unfolded it.

In the center was a small pebble of some golden substance. It looked like honey and ice, warm and inviting, yet also cool and comforting. And...it was glowing. Anduin eyed it skeptically. It was appealing, yes, but no more so than other gems. It didn’t look like anything to warrant a huge influx of goblins.

Anduin was confused, and he glanced over at Genn, an eyebrow raised in query. He knew little of spycraft, and Shaw, though well regarded by all, was still largely an enigma that Anduin was only beginning to decipher.

Genn nodded, acknowledging that Shaw’s gesture was odd and the object odder but indicating that however Shaw wished to proceed, Anduin could trust him. The king removed his glove and held out his hand.

The stone tumbled gently into Anduin’s palm.

And he gasped.

The heaviness of grief vanished as if it were physical armor that had been seized and yanked off. Weariness fled, replaced by surging, almost crackling energy and insight. Strategies raced through his head, each one of them sound and successful, each one of them

engendering a shift in comprehension and ensuring a lasting peace that benefited every being on Azeroth.

Not only his mind but also his body seemed to ascend abruptly and shockingly, rocketing in an instant to whole new levels of strength, dexterity, and control. Anduin felt like he could not only climb mountains...he could *move* them. He could end war, channel the Light into every dark corner. He was exultant and also perfectly, wholly calm and completely certain as to how to channel this rushing river—no, tsunami—of energy and power. Not even the Light affected him as this...*this* did. The sensation was similar but less spiritual, more physical.

More alarming.

For a long moment, Anduin couldn't speak, could only stare in wonder at the infinitely precious thing he cupped in his palm. At last he found his voice.

"What...what *is* this?" he managed.

"We don't know." Shaw's voice was blunt.

What could be done with this! Anduin thought. *How many could it heal? How many could it strengthen, soothe, invigorate, inspire?*

How many could it kill?

The thought was a gut punch, and he felt the elation inspired by the gemstone retreat.

(Golden, 2018: 14 – 15)

In terms of dialogue, this mirrors the events of the cutscene. However, while both instances come to the same conclusion, we are given far more information surrounding the internal motives of the characters involved; especially with regards to King Anduin. Anduin's contact with the stone was not a simple sensory sensation coupled with wartime insecurities; the novel paints this contact as a significant physical, mental, and even spiritual experience for the young priest King. The novel provides far more depth regarding these personal motivations and drives behind the characters involved, and it is especially revealing for players who have seen the cutscene before reading the book (which is likely, due to the book being released well after this cutscene was made widely available in the game or on WoW's official YouTube Channel). The novel, in essence, shows the very core of Anduin's desires and intentions regarding the new power source. This little pebble is refreshing, reassuring, invigorating, hope-inspiring, and, obviously, very powerful even in such a small quantity; most of these observations are not communicated at this level of detail within the cutscene. The only visible signals for this complex wave of internal considerations found in the cutscene are (1) Anduin's facial expression, (2) his tone of voice, and (3) his renewed sense of urgency. Without the specific insights provided by the novel, it would have been fair to deduce that these signals given by Anduin in the cutscenes

are prompted by possible dangers, the surprising power of the little stone, and the suspicion behind the Horde's presence around this substance. However, if the novel is considered alongside this event, we learn far more about the dimensions of Anduin's character, making his game character, in the absence of accompanying transmedia, seem almost incomplete in comparison. However, though the novel can *tell* us what, for example, Azerite looks like, it cannot *show* the blue and gold colour of the substance. The game's cutscene does show the precise shades of these colours, as well as the crystalline texture and a few jagged edges. The same can be said about the appearance of the three characters who are involved here. In the cutscene, we see precisely what they look like and even sound like, but (at least in this case) we see examples of affordances and limitations behind the two examples. The game cutscene is more sensory-driven and, as a result, more concrete and characteristically prescriptive. However, it is a brief cutscene (which can be the result of a multitude of reasons) which doesn't do overly much in disclosing thoughts, or describing the emotions of king Anduin. In essence, this cutscene, while sensationally pleasing to experience, shows the king's contact with Azerite as a physical/magical response to a powerful artefact. The novel, however, shows us how this seemingly isolated and brief moment was significant, with an array of internal considerations and responses surrounding this new source of power.

Unlike the other examples of transmedia in this chapter, this novel is the first of its kind in the *Warcraft* franchise; meaning, it is the first WoW novel intended on tying in directly with upcoming content for the game while aiding the story's progression in moving forward. The Illidan novel by William King was also published prior to the *Legion* expansion, which served a similar function to Golden's *Arthas* novel; in that it was a contextual codex intended for bringing readers up to speed with this re-emerging character who was last seen in-game during the *Burning Crusade* expansion. King's novel would essentially provide the history for this character, and therefore challenge the reader to possibly identify patterns in the character's stories that could hint towards future patterns. However, Golden's *Before the Storm* novel essentially provides a new chapter of the WoW story outside of the game, where most WoW novels recount past events in greater personal detail than, say, the chronicle books and their broad placements of histories and characters. Upon reading this book (assuming the reader is playing the game as well), the player in WoW will start the *Battle for Azeroth* story after the events of this novel, a fact which shows a greater emphasis on transmedia as a constituent part of this game's narrative progression and experience.

This chapter has shown how phenomenal franchises like Star Wars and Warcraft, despite their media-based differences, can make use of transmedial materials to bolster their universes and overall means of expression. While these external forms of media include obvious monetary considerations along with their motivations of production, games like LSW provide new but familiar opportunities that pay homage to certain "primary texts" in ways that can often introduce

newer generations of fans. This is especially interesting to consider when one takes into account that the first Star Wars film was released back in 1977, so it is reasonable to assume that there are now several generations of Star Wars followers. While Warcraft is significantly more recent than the initial Star Wars films, it has still been a growing franchise for well over 20 years; the franchise was already over 10 years old at the time WoW was released in 2004. Therefore, it is likely that we will see a similar multi-generational demographic behind the Warcraft franchise, and materials that mirror the effects of LSW and the *World of Warcraft: Traveler*, while profitable, will also prove to be appropriate with regards to maintaining the relevance of certain aesthetic objects.

Returning to WoW transmedia, the chronicle series is surely the most revelatory piece of transmedia as of writing, due to its clarification of certain timelines and its clarifying certain relationships, characters, and events that weren't entirely clear before. Upon interacting with the game and other materials that help flesh out the Warcraft world, materials like the *World of Warcraft: Traveler* (as a possible example of a story that isn't entirely dependent on the game) can also be greatly augmented by them, while offering a new potential introduction for younger generations. The Harbinger series is probably the most accessible example of transmedia in this discussion as it is viewable for free on WoW's YouTube channel. While its immediate relevance might be waning at the conclusion of the Legion expansion, it still serves as a fitting example of how chunks of context are delivered to aid in both marketing game features, as well as setting the stage for narrative atmosphere in a given event or occasion in WoW. Unlike the serious narrative moments that can be found in these aforementioned examples, the WoW cookbook is perhaps an unexpected example for analytical discussion. However, as can be seen in this chapter, this book is, in a sense, the most "playable" piece of media (at least, in spirit) on the list, with its cooking challenges and its recipes often mimicking game rules, mechanics, and fiction. While it's not likely to be intended as a serious contextual or transmedial source for Warcraft, it is still worth discussing the playability behind the book, as well as the transfer of in-game materials (previously, strictly fictional) to the real world in a tangible (and edible) recreation.

I conclude with remarks on Golden's *Before the Storm* in its role as the first example of a WoW novel that behaves like an exclusive chapter of the current WoW narrative progression. In the game, the Burning Legion has been subdued, and inter-faction tensions are rising again as before. When the *Battle for Azeroth* expansion releases (and probably some weeks or days prior to the formal release via the "pre-expansion update") players will be taking part in stories that, canonically, occur after the events of the novel, making the novel's contents an integral part of the overall WoW narrative progression. All of the examples above regarding transmedia offer their own contributions towards the fictional "worldness" of WoW, which is interlinked with the game systems that govern these "worlds". Materials ranging from the existential and

anthropological accounts of the chronicle series, to the exclusive chapter-like offerings of Golden's *Before the Storm*, show us that fictional world settings like Warcraft are approachable from a variety of angles and, as a result, require an equal variety of inter-disciplinary lenses through which to make valuable analyses of the numerous constituents that form part of Warcraft.

CHAPTER 3: NARRATIVE STRUCTURES IN WORLD OF WARCRAFT

INTRODUCTION

This chapter will make use of gameplay footage captured by the writer of this dissertation, in order to illustrate how various narrative structures exist in WoW. Three of these structures involve (1) the game's questing system, (2) 5-player dungeons, and (3) raids that involve over 10 players to overcome obstacles. The questing system typically makes use of text to communicate instructions and context for the player, with a type of reward for this task's completion. WoW's quest system is a valuable starting point for this chapter as it is most likely the first ludic narrative experience presented to the player upon creating a new character. In addition to showing the way(s) players can interact with quests, the questing sequence chosen for this illustration shows parallels with Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, offering inter-textual play that can involve questers in ethical dilemmas not immediately obvious, thereby underlining the continuity between game and text, as well as the instructive potential of the game.

QUESTS

Video: 6

Please watch the video labelled "World of Warcraft: Christ Metzen on World Creation" before proceeding.

WoW quests function on two basic levels: they are a ludic device that can guide and empower players upon completion, and they can tell stories or provide (at the very least) some degree of context or motivation for the player's immediate action. These quests are gathered within the game from non-player characters (NPCs) and can exist as once-off chunks of narrative, context, or (on the most fundamental level) experience point gains. As noted by Metzen in the DVD discussion, the quest system is described as a "staple" for the player's experience due to its intended contribution to the game's sense of world. The following section will show examples of how a chain of events are communicated through quests and quest-associated (in-game) items. Additionally, the motifs used in this quest chain are very reminiscent of Joseph Conrad's *Heart*

of *Darkness* as well as Ernest Hemingway's stories of hunting and being in-tune with nature. Due to the fact that these aesthetic motifs are frequently discussed in literature, it makes this comparison between literary and ludic expression all the more interesting to explore due to their structural and communicative components.

STRANGLETHORN VALE QUESTS

Video: 7

Please watch the video labelled "World of Warcraft Meta stories: Stranglethorn Vale" before proceeding.

Stranglethorn Vale is one of the original playable zones of WoW, which underwent some changes with the Cataclysm expansion. This expansion involved an apocalyptic event where the world itself was cracked and ruptured throughout many of Azeroth's original zones (Blizzard Entertainment, 2017). In addition to the actual environmental changes, this offered a new opportunity for the older parts of the game to have new quests and stories added to certain zones, or to alter existing quests to achieve a different outcome. As noted in the video, Kurzen was very much alive pre-Cataclysm ("alive" being the operative term, as players were tasked with killing him in the past). However, according to the quest texts, Kurzen managed to survive, but was executed by his followers. This video aims to serve as a short and simplified illustration of how a media-inclusive experience is formed.

While this section doesn't entirely focus on postcolonial literature and its debates, what we do see here is how colonial forces translate in a world of play. From a player's perspective, the idea of "conquering an untamed and alien land" is a prominent theme in most of WoW's expansion content, as in the cases of invading Outland, Northrend, Pandaria, and even Draenor (being a landmass which can only be explored by travelling through time). Therefore, it is fair to deduce that WoW players enjoy "conquering" new horizons, due to Blizzard's continual introduction of new landmasses and voyage settings (Blizzard Entertainment, 2017). However, bearing in mind WoW's probable emphasis on creating content that is fun and satisfying for its players, we see a unique situation here in the likes of the northern Stranglethorn Jungle. In addition to this, these quests (at least the ones in the rebel camp) are exclusively for Alliance players; another example of how one's choice of race and faction can influence the content one experiences in this game.

So, what we see here is a possible relationship between postcolonial literature and the "pioneering" into new game environments. Mechanically, the pioneering quests function pretty much within the norm of WoW's questing system; enemies need to be slain, items need to be collected, and you need to travel a bit to reach the objectives. However, the meta-story we

experience here is very similar to the perspective and approach in J.M. Coetzee's *Foe*, which offers (in the simplest terms) a type of "alternate reality" to Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. While the formal allusions to *Heart of Darkness* (like the name Conrad Kurzen, topics of madness, and "savagery" themes) might be solid evidence for a Conradian influence. Conrad's outright critique of imperialism is at first countered by the additional ludic effect, through which colonising a world is an enjoyable activity. However, it becomes clear after a while that this activity has its own responsibilities, cautions, and dangers to counter any simple-minded acceptance of the colonial mind-set. The pinnacle of this quest chain can be found in the final quest text after one defeats the leaders of the Kurzen compound:

Marvelously executed, <player name>. My men and I can handle the rest. With Kurzen out of the picture, we may be able to continue our original expedition here in Stranglethorn, which was...ah... No matter. Please, feel free to peruse our armor stores. You may find something that fits you well. (Lieutenant Doren) (Blizzard Entertainment: A Stranglethorn Vale Quest from World of Warcraft Game)

The tone here is almost satirical. This proves that there was a definite purpose regarding the placement of these quests, as well as a philosophical understanding behind "why" the players were there in that zone. Throughout the quest chain, the NPCs were well-mannered and grateful towards you for helping them "in the name of the king". However, after everything's been completed, and beyond any point of return, you learn that the soldiers who've sent you on these missions were not angels either. This fact might make one question motives involved, and hence the actual nature of what one has been (perhaps unwittingly) enjoying. Another example: while mercilessly hunting a plethora of wild animals might have seemed initially glorious, with, say, Ernest Hemmingway's colonialist stories of hunting and exploration in mind, and when considering all the background inspirations and motifs, we might also experience a sense of the moral complexities involved:

World of Warcraft is a tricky, complex construction of cultural meaning in this way: it is both racist and antiracist, frequently at the same time. Of course, part of this complexity is because World of Warcraft is not a fixed text: it is a game. However, the game also mirrors the real complexity – and, often, ambiguity – of wider discourse about race and colonialism. (Langer, 2011:105)

Thus, being aware that WoW (already a complex multimedia work that requires an equally complex set of analytical lenses to gain fair and adequate meaning from it) is also informed by the presence of morally ambiguous colonial traces, further deepens the sense of complexity associated with this particular experience within the game. This, I would argue, is a strength of the multimedia work: it clearly has the potential to stimulate thought and moral awareness in an environment that is relatively risk-free and enjoyable.

In closing this discussion, I emphasise that it is important to note that a video like the one introducing this section is not a truly accurate representation of the game. Although we might be able to experience various aspects such as visual effects, sound effects, and music, the video lacks the all-important ludic dimension. Videos like these are supplements and tools for introducing others to the given game, which have also been edited and manipulated to ease the process of reading and viewing the footage.

DUNGEONS

Dungeons are isolated spaces within the game that typically contain enemies that are significantly more dangerous than most enemies found in the open shared world. They require 5 players, with each player performing a role in the group's dynamic. This group usually consists of a tank, a healer, and 3 damage dealers. The tank's responsibility is to initiate combat with enemies, and to keep their attention focussed on the tank, in order to safeguard the whole group. As a result, tanks are usually the most durable players in the group, a quality that can be identified, roughly, by that player's class, class specialisation, and equipment. The healer's role is easily recognisable as the caretaker of the group, restoring group members' health points, removing detrimental spell effects, and even resurrecting dead players. While healers have some offensive tools to deal damage, they are typically more focussed on the health levels of their teammates, rather than the health levels of their enemies. Lastly, the typical dungeon group consists of 3 damage dealers. As recognisable as the healer, the damage dealers are tasked to reduce the health points of enemies as quickly as possible. This group of players progresses through a specific game space to defeat groups of enemies in order to engage in boss encounters. A boss is typically a solitary, but very powerful enemy, who has unique abilities and mechanics that differ from other bosses or the smaller enemies in the dungeon. These bosses are the most ludically rewarding enemies to defeat in the dungeon and, as a result, are usually the most challenging. The number of these bosses vary from dungeon to dungeon, and they often exist as significant characters in the game's story and lore. This structure will be apparent in the following two dungeon-related sections, with evidence of significant lore/narrative characters presenting ludic opportunities for players.

Many players regard WoW's dungeons and raids as principal features of the game, as they are some of the most identifiable features of traditional MMORPGS. Both types of group content involve team-based systems for overcoming powerful foes in a concentrated and isolated space. These group instances often serve as story markers or, in the case of raids, even climactic endings for significant storylines or even expansion sets. The following sections will showcase three such instances; namely two dungeons and a raid. These three instances were selected and recorded because of their relation to each other, as well as their relation to other

aspects of the game outside of grouped content. In this example, the two dungeons are immediately relatable to one another, while the raid (which only became available sometime after the two dungeons) serves as a conclusion for the story of the two dungeons. In the *Legion* expansion, dungeons were deliberately used as story supplements and were typically slotted into each quest zone's storyline, serving as a mini-conclusion for that zone's story. In addition to providing more gameplay opportunities with enemies and monsters that require a group to defeat, they can also be poetic devices that coincide with the overall theme of the *Legion* expansion, one of which is maintaining unity in the face of great peril. Therefore, the Halls of Valor dungeon contained the concluding storyline for the Stormheim quest zone in the Broken Isles, while the Maw of Souls (Wowhead, 2018 (c)) dungeon existed adjacently to it (as seen in The World of Warcraft Legion edition). These dungeons share the same subject matter and, while relevant to the grand scheme of Warcraft's lore (Metzen, Burns & Brooks, 2016), are somewhat (but not completely) removed from the immediate dangers and challenges presented in *Legion*.

THE HALLS OF VALOR DUNGEON

Video: 8

Please watch the video labelled "World of Warcraft Dungeons: Halls of Valor" before proceeding.

The first thing we notice here is that the dungeon's art style offers an interpretation of the Norse realm of Valhalla or Asgard. Upon entry, the players cross a bridge to these halls, and are faced with ascended champions who attempt to stop them. It doesn't take long before the players encounter their first "boss" (that is, typically, the primary entity who holds both the most valuable rewards, and who displays the more difficult ludic mechanics). The first boss is called "Hyimdall" which is clearly a reference to the Nordic Heimdall, the gatekeeper of Asgard and Bifrost. In terms of narrative meaning, as well as ludic intention, this boss is a key example of the multimedia fusion of the two realms; he is an important lore character, while behaving true to that Nordic identity via gameplay and ludic interaction. The Prose Edda describes Heimdall thus:

Heimdall is one. He is called the white god and is powerful and sacred... He is also known as Hallinskidi and Gullintanni [Gold Toothed], as his teeth are gold... He lives near Bifrost at a place called Himinbjorg. He is the watchman of the gods and sits at heaven's end, where he keeps watch over the bridge against the mountain giants... He has the horn known as Gjallarhorn, and its blast can be heard in all worlds. (Sturluson, 2005:36 -37)

In terms of power, WoW's Hyndall is a powerful and sacred character because (1) he resides in the Halls of Valor by invitation of Odyn, and (2) he is fairly high on the "ludic hierarchy" of the game, as he is a dungeon boss, and a mini-boss in the upcoming raid. Furthermore, his position at the very "gates" of the dungeon, on the other side of a bridge, is clearly significant. The following extract from a popular WoW resource website proves useful in accounting for both the lore of the character, as well as his ludic characteristics:

Clad in gleaming golden armor, with an imposing frame that looks to have been chiseled from granite, Hyndall remains ever vigilant at the gates of the Halls of Valor. Tasked by Odyn to keep the unworthy from entering the Halls, with deadly storm drakes circling nearby ready to heed the call of his horn, he will never falter in his charge.

Hyndall is a single-target encounter with heavy movement and awareness requirements. The movement intensifies over time, so players should use their strongest damage-increasing cooldowns at the start of the fight.

The most important mechanic in the Hyndall encounter is Horn of Valor, which summons Storm Drakes to aid Hyndall in defeating the party. (WowHead, 2018 (b))

This account of the boss encounter should help us to understand that, especially with examples like these, isolated considerations of lore and gameplay that occur separately will be unjust and ineffective. Although the summoning of storm drakes via a visual and audible cue (that is, the horn of valor) is an intentionally ludic device for creating a playable encounter, it is bolstered with a theoretical and mythological layer which is narratively relevant to both the overarching story of WoW, as well as the most immediate context that the players find themselves in. Why is Hyndall using a horn called Gjallarhorn? Why does he summon storm drakes? Why is he positioned at the start and entrance of the dungeon? These questions show that, in addition to the fine-tuning of game systems and the nuanced game designs that characterise this experience as a game, these gamey elements are intertwined with lore and narrative systems and they give us something in addition to the playable experience. Here, I would argue that (in WoW at least) if this boss encounter should be considered as a 100% exclusively ludic experience, then the boss' character model, name, background lore, the artistic environment, sound effects, dialogues, and mention in other transmedia are all of no consequence. The boss might as well be a big blank cube that does gamey things that can harm the smaller cubes that are trying to do other gamey things in attempts to "solve" the big cube's encounter riddle for no particular theoretical reason. This oversimplified account dramatizes a fully ludic encounter stripped of all informing background.

However, the inverse might be said about the narrative and multimedia assemblages that comprise this encounter. Stripped of its game function, this encounter greatly resembles a type

of movie or television sequence. If this encounter was exclusively a narrative encounter, then it would exist as an extended cutscene or video sequence, rendering the encounter's gameness (in a modern sense) null and void. So, even from this angle, the resulting "product" would not be WoW as a game; it would be a cutscene in isolation, much more closely related to filmic or cinematic art as a viewable expression, rather than as something that involves playable interactions and reactions.

The second boss we've encountered was Hyrja, an ascended shieldmaiden who later became a Valkyr. Like many bosses in WoW's dungeons, this character was involved in a separate aspect of the game as well, as players interacted with her during the Stormheim questing experience. In addition to the visual aspects of this dungeon (the mead hall, the Bifrost-like bridge, Hyndall, and the upcoming Fenryr), the Valkyr is very much akin to the Norse Valkyrie:

There are still others whose duty it is to serve in Valhalla. They bring drink and see to the table and the ale cups... These women are called Valkyries. They are sent by Odin to every battle, where they choose which men are to die and they determine who has the victory. (Sturluson, 2005:44-45)

It isn't too difficult to make the connection here, but, just like Hyndall, Hyrja isn't killed by the players, appearances to the contrary. She re-emerges in the Trial of Valor raid which is intended to be completed after dealing with these dungeons. In addition to Hyrja's link to Norse Valkyries, Eyir, from this area, has a name surely linked to a Norse goddess, "Eir, the best of doctors" (Sturluson, 2005:42).

The fact that, of necessity, each playthrough of a WoW dungeon starts anew, leads to an interesting observation: technically, no death is permanent in this area of the game world. As discussed in earlier sections, it is likely that players will continue to participate in dungeons even well after they've absorbed the narrative offerings of a given dungeon, in pursuit of player power or even simple ludic enjoyment. It would also be highly impractical for Blizzard to create a dungeon that can only be completed once per player, so the invariable nature of these narrative layers in this dungeon are mostly (as of writing) a limitation or trade-off in favour of offering a somewhat linear story event in this dungeon. However, intentional or not, this invariable repetition of both narrative and ludic events in the dungeon can be interpreted as being appropriate when regarding the theoretical and mythological space of the dungeon. The following extract regarding Valhalla's inhabitants (that is, the Einherjar) provides us with the related Norse notion of eternal glory and battle:

Every day, after they dress, they put on their war gear. Then they go out to the courtyard and battle, the one attacking the other. Such is their sport. When it comes time to eat, they ride home to Valhalla and sit down to drink, as is said here:

All the Einherjar
In Odin's home fields
Fight among themselves each day.
The slain they select
Then ride from the battlefield;
reconciled, they sit again together. (Sturluson, 2005:49 -50)

In the Halls of Valor, the inhabitants are often called the Valarjar; the connection with the Prose Edda is clear. Essentially, the inhabitants of this realm were selected by Odyn to prepare for a coming conflict (Metzen, Burns & Brooks, 2016), very much in line with how Odin from Norse mythology gathered worthy souls to protect Asgard during the time of Ragnarok (Sturluson, 2005). Essentially, after completing this dungeon (and after the rules are followed, depending on the chosen difficulty level of the dungeon), it can be completed again with very much the same content. This, whether intentional or not, shows the similarity of outcome between Norse mythology and the technical requirements of the game. In Norse myth, battling and dying to be reborn again in time for the feast is core to the overall mythology; in the game, the dungeon would not hold much value to players (or for the developers) if it could only be cleared once. In the end, both related instances encourage engagement and use of skill, the slaying of enemies in battle, and the knowledge that the entire battle can be repeated again regardless of outcome. This would then potentially be another effective example of unifying ancient lore with the ludic.

To mention Ragnarok is to bring to mind Loki's child, Fenrir. The great and ferocious Norse wolf is also referenced in this dungeon as the third boss. Before we move on to discuss the in-game interpretation, the following will give us a clue regarding the beast's ferocity. After the gods of Asgard (the Aesir) have constructed a fetter strong enough to bind the wolf, they are tasked with the actual binding of the beast in an attempt to prevent a grim future.

The wolf answered: "If you were to bind me in such a way that I was unable to free myself, then you would betray and abandon me, and it would be a long time before I received any help from you. I am unwilling to allow that band to be put on me. Rather than questioning my courage, why not let one of you place his hand in my mouth as a pledge that there is no treachery in this offer?"... No one was willing to hold out his hand until Tyr raised his right hand and laid it in the wolf's mouth. But when the wolf strained against the fetter, the band only hardened, and the more he struggled, the stronger the band became. They all laughed, except Tyr; he lost his hand... He [the wolf] gaped horribly, trying to bite them, but they slipped a sword into his mouth. The hilt stuck in his lower gums and the blade in the upper gums, wedging his jaw open. As he growled menacingly, saliva drooled from his mouth, forming the river called Van [Hope].
(Sturluson, 2005:41 -42)

This extract shows the wolf's intelligent level of distrust when confronted by the Aesir, in addition to his vengeful ferocity after he's been bound. Both of these elements are "translated" well in the game, when the players enter Fenryr's domain. Odyn's warning is a key indicator of this: "The mighty Fenryr stalks these grounds. It will take cunning and guile to slay this beast – a perfect test of your worthiness" (Blizzard Entertainment, 2016 (c)). So, cunning and guile, as well as the beast's being "mighty", are all significant elements to keep in mind when players are given the brief contextualization on entering this area. Upon meeting the wolf, we can see how it suffered numerous past injuries from unsuccessful hunts. As the fight gains momentum, we see how the identity of this character is communicated via the boss' mechanics; its ferocity is illustrated through its abilities, that come across as merciless. In addition to his ravenous leaps from one player to another, he also fixates on a random enemy and chases him/her exclusively until he either (a) kills the player, or (b) the ability's timer runs out. This is especially devastating when considering group compositions and difficulty levels, as anyone who is not the main tank in these groups ends up sustaining a lot of damage, often leading to death. The above serves as another example of how gameplay and traditional narrative meaning are fused. In addition to this, the game's dungeon journal provides more context for Fenryr's theoretical identity in the Halls of Valor.

In the Fields of the Eternal Hunt, the greatest vrykul champions keep their skills sharp, competing to see who can fell the largest beast. But man and beast alike give a wide berth to the fearsome worg Fenryr, true master of the Fields, who stalks his prey and pounces with unnerving quickness. (Blizzard Entertainment, 2016 (c))

The in-game dungeon journal has many texts describing the various boss encounters in the game's dungeons and raids (as seen in the example above). This in-game journal further supplements the aesthetic allusions of the dungeon in text form; we are used to such allusions in classical literary works. This fact opens up the possibility for discussions surrounding gameplay as a mode for communicating a story to an initiator (or multiple initiators, as in this case).

Before reaching the next encounter, players gain a movement-speed increase, and they eventually find themselves in Odyn's throne room. There, we find former Vrykul kings, all of whom are in Odyn's presence, which is indicative of their being favoured by the ruler of the Halls of Valor. However, this is not the first time players encounter these four mini-bosses. They've made a brief semi-appearance during the *Wrath of the Lich King* expansion when a misguided Vrykul king desperately seeks their aid in a battle against players. This, though, is insufficient to defeat the players (also in a dungeon setting); thus the misguided king (King Ymiron) is defeated. However, he is not in Odyn's halls, but he actually appears in the Maw of Souls dungeon (which will be discussed later). This fact, without a word being said or written in-

game, is a fitting example of a (in Forster's sense) "why" moment in a game setting. I will return to this character in the section dealing with the Maw of Souls dungeon.

The penultimate boss of the dungeon is God-king Skovald; another character who the characters meet and interact with during Stormheim's quest sequence. As can be seen in the video, Skovald contests the ownership of a powerful artifact (the Aegis of Aggramar) which the players require to propel the Burning Legion from Azeroth. In the battle, Skovald uses an ability called "Ragnarok" which involves a rain of green chaotic fire whose effect is only mitigated by the use of the Aegis. The player who picks up the Aegis must raise the shield in time to form a barrier to protect her allies. As remarked in the video, the defeat of "Ragnarok" can be a significant message, which is enough to impress Odyn to the point where he challenges the players himself. Here it might be useful to compare the accounts of the Prose Edda with the remarks from the in-game dungeon journal:

Odin is the highest and oldest of the gods. He rules in all matters, and, although the other gods are powerful, all serve him as children do their father... Odin is called All-Father, because he is the father of all the gods. He is also called Father of the Slain [Val-Father], because all who fall in battle are his adopted sons. With them he mans Valhalla and Vingolf, and they are known as the Einherjar. (Sturluson, 2005:30-31)

Odyn, a titan keeper, was empowered by the titan Pantheon to lead the titan-forged armies against the Old Gods. In the aftermath, he raised the Halls of Valor into the skies, assembling a force of the greatest vrykul champions to defend Azeroth. But when Ulduar fell into the clutches of Yogg-Saron, he was betrayed by Loken and cursed by Helya, now trapped within these halls for eternity. (Blizzard Entertainment, 2016 (c))

An important similarity is found in one of Odin's most recognisable roles in Valhalla: the harbouring of champions for an upcoming calamity. Up to this point in the dungeon, the Norse inspirations are undeniable, although they are adapted to suit the lore of Warcraft. In the chronicle, we learn of how the world-shaping titans forged an army to defend Azeroth from dark forces; the highest ranking of those soldiers were known as titan keepers. Each of the keepers were made in the likeness of a titan, and Odyn was named the prime designate of Azeroth in the titans' absence. So, in terms of Warcraft lore, it is significant that one encounters this character in such a way for the first time. As we will learn later in the Trial of Valor raid, Odyn is a prisoner in his own beloved halls; so in addition to the immediate stories and threats in the *Legion* expansion, the freedom Odyn attains after the triumphs of the Trial of Valor raid opens up new possibilities for upcoming stories in Warcraft.

THE MAW OF SOULS DUNGEON

Video: 9

Please watch the video labelled “World of Warcraft Dungeons: Maw of Souls” before proceeding.

This dungeon also requires the typical 5-person composition that we’ve seen in WoW’s past dungeons. However, some notable differences include the dungeon’s duration (it is fairly short). It only has three boss encounters, and it mostly takes place on a (seemingly) moving locale. The majority of time spent in this dungeon is spent on the ship called the Naglfar, another allusion to Norse myth. Before we begin discussing the dungeon’s events in chronological order, it is worth noting that the fantasy and theoretical elements of this dungeon are a result of mythological fusion, as we see elements from various types of folklore and mythology contributing to the whole of the dungeon’s experience. These fusions are perhaps most apparent on the Naglfar itself, including the second boss encounter with Harbaron.

Upon entering the dungeon, it doesn’t take long for the players to engage in the first boss encounter. Ymiron was a former king of the Vrykul people, and held some prominence as a character during the *Wrath of the Lich King* expansion. As briefly mentioned in the *Halls of Valor* discussion, we know that Ymiron held former kings of the Vrykul in great regard, and all of those from the *Utgarde Pinnacle* dungeon are now in the *Halls of Valor*, in the direct presence of Odyn himself. Ymiron’s presence here in Helheim is significant, as it reflects an element of Norse myth where an unworthy king is denied entry into Valhalla. Much like Hyndall from the *Halls of Valor*, Ymiron serves as a type of gate watcher as well. In addition to this, the name Ymiron possibly references the primal Norse giant Ymir, whose body comprises the physical mass of the mortal world. It might be useful to look at a brief account of Ymir and his role in Norse mythology:

In no way do we accept him as a god. He was evil, as are all his descendants; we call them frost giants. It is said that as he slept he took to sweating. Then, from under his left arm grew a male and a female, while one of his legs got a son with the other. From here came the clans that are called the frost giants. The old frost giant, him we call Ymir.

(Sturluson, 2005:14-15)

It is significant that Ymir was always regarded as evil, but he did play an important part in the creation of the world (Midgard). Here an interesting parallel with Ymiron is to be found, as the WoW dungeon journal also provides us with some of his agendas and motivations. From the journal, we learn that the negligence of King Ymiron and his vrykul followers essentially gave rise to a new “world” for the current-day humans to live in.

Proud Ymiron ruled the northern wastes until the vrykul's long slumber relegated him to insignificance. He regained consciousness to find that his wife had been murdered, his lands besieged by enemies. He has cast off his mortality and demands vengeance, eager to show the terrible resolve of an awakened giant. (Blizzard Entertainment, 2016 (c))

That is, Ymiron's apparent "insignificance" is a reference to the curse of flesh that caused all of the titanforged to develop fleshly bodies. This means that the vrykul are more vulnerable than they have ever been; they no longer have the status of titanic defenders of the planet, but have become corrupted mortals that can bleed and die far more easily than before. Without delving too deeply into the chronicle's history, I note that the vrykul were among the dutiful agents of the titans to help order the planet of Azeroth; essentially, the titanforged are the predecessors for all vrykul and humans (Metzen, Burns & Brooks, 2016). This is thematically relevant, as Ymiron, being a vrykul, tried to escape the curse of flesh by falling into a deep and magical sleep with his brethren (evident from the above quoted passage), which proved ineffective. When Ymiron awoke, he was filled with a new sense of drive; he wished to save his people, but by terrible means. Furthermore, all of Ymiron's brutal actions and decisions shared a contextual space with the Lich King who proved to be a genuine threat to all living things on Azeroth. The following extract references the penultimate boss for king Ymiron's dungeon (from a previous expansion) and it gives us a brief glimpse of the extreme measures Ymiron took to safeguard his people:

The vrykul assign nicknames based on accomplishments. Cleansing a Drakkari [troll tribe] bloodline or decapitating taunka [gigantic tauren cousins] might garner the appellation of "dutiful", but it takes a true act of depravity to be called "ruthless". Skadi earned his title long ago for relentlessly hunting down vrykul who sheltered the malformed infants, predecessors of humanity, condemned by Ymiron. ((Blizzard Entertainment, 2016 (c))

The chronicle also explains (in far greater detail) how the current human race came into existence, but with the "malformed" vrykul children came the fear that the vrykul nation would become impure, weak, and easily contaminated. Assigned to Ymiron is a tragic and emotionally-ambiguous character complex that shows that he had some genuine concerns for the survival and preservation of his proud people, but was blinded by rage and frustration that lead to extreme measures (much as in the case of a tragic hero from Western tradition). These measures would eventually force unwilling vrykul parents to ship their children away in secret, so that they would not fall into the hands of Skadi or other followers of Ymiron, who would butcher any children born with flesh rather than the metallic forms that the original vrykul titanforged used to sport. Considering these details, we can say that Ymiron, being a wrathful and somewhat evil giant, is befittingly linked to the Norse giant Ymir, as he both (1) resembles a

giant with malicious intent, and (2) despite his malevolent actions, enables a new order to arise. This story of the emergence of the first humans is explained in far greater detail in the chronicle. These references, in addition to the Norse notions of gate keeping in Valhalla and being worthy or unworthy of entering the sacred afterlife, are key motifs used to bring Ymiron (the Helheim version) to life with a significant level of historical depth and significance regarding current Azeroth. Despite his cruel and merciless actions in the earliest days of Azeroth, he was at some stage a titanforged warrior who helped cleanse Azeroth of darkness, and sought to preserve his people's identity; but his actions and his apparent draconic outlook suggest a type of madness or desperation (much as in the case of a similar king in Northrend's origin story, Arthas Menethil, the Lich King).

Moving on from Ymiron, players find themselves on a great ship manned by the damned. Thoughts of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, *Pirates of the Caribbean*, Norse myth, as well as Greek myth, all come into play here. As mentioned before, the ship is called the *Naglfar*, which is a direct allusion to the story in Norse mythology of a ship which is built from the nails of the dead who weren't properly groomed in life and before burial; it is steered by the giant Hrym (Sturluson, 2005: 72). We now know (by the inclusion of a short cutscene) that the helmsman of the game ship is called Harbaron, an allusion to both Hrym and Charon (as discussed later). Here is an account of the Naglfar as it appears in Norse mythology:

The sea will surge on to the land as the Midgard Serpent writhes in giant fury and advances up on the land. Then it also will happen that the ship Naglfar loosens from its moorings. It is made from the nails of dead men, and for this reason it is worth considering the warning that if a person dies with untrimmed nails he contributes crucial material to Naglfar, a ship that both gods and men would prefer not to see built. On the flooding sea, Naglfar comes floating. The giant steering Naglfar is named Hrym. (Sturluson, 2005:72)

In the mythology, the Naglfar is associated with the end of the world (namely Ragnarok) and is directly related to the dead. When it comes to the clearly related elements of the game, the helmsman is perhaps the most interesting character to discuss here. The game developers deliberately keep the character's origins, motives, and history a mystery, as is evident in the following extract from the in-game dungeon journal:

The mysterious ferryman of souls stands at the helm of the Naglfar, gathering the damned and bringing them to Helya's domain. His connection with the fallen queen of the val'kyr is unclear, but when the breeze catches Harbaron's cloak, an expanse of shimmering stars unfolds beneath. Strange. (Blizzard Entertainment, 2016 (c))

It is through mysteries like this that Blizzard sets up future stories that can unfold at a later stage. To the observant and explorative player, this is one of the biggest mysteries regarding the conflict between Odyn and Helya.

Harbaron's being referred to as the "ferryman" reminds us of an entirely different mythological canon. In addition to this reference in WoW's in-game dungeon journal, his dialogue during the encounter provides even more evidence that Charon from Greek myth is being evoked here. In fact, when taking the Norse Naglfar helmsman's name "Hrym" and the Greek name "Charon" into consideration, we see that the name Harbaron is a likely fusion of those names:

"The spirits grow hungry from the scent of blood."

"All who enter Helheim must pay the blood price. Resist if you wish... In the end, I always get my payment!"

"If I cannot bleed the payment from you, the spirits will!"

"The flesh burdens the soul. A nuisance that must be flayed from your bones."

"Life... death... I am but a ripple in the eternal ebb and flow." (Harbaron, from Blizzard Entertainment, 2016 (c))

These are the lines that Harbaron utters during the encounter and serve as clues for the possible inspirations behind this character and his actions. Harbaron's scythe is reminiscent of the universal symbol for the grim reaper, which, when coupled with both Norse and Greek mythological notions of death, results in an interesting mythological fusion. In addition to the use of mythological entities, the entire journey into Helheim aboard a ship is also a significant motif found in the Greek mythos, as we can see below:

Book 11 of the *Odyssey* narrates the voyage of Odysseus to the Land of the Dead. In order to find this place, he must sail to the edge of the world, beaching his ship on the shore of the Ocean which encircles everything that exists. The spot is dark and gloomy, heavy with fog, and shaded with poplar and willow; two of the rivers of the Underworld, Pyriphlegethon ("Blazing with Fire") and Kokytos ("Lamentation") flow into a third, Acheron (perhaps "Groaning"). Odysseus sacrifices a ram and an ewe, filling a pit with their blood; the effect is to attract the souls of the dead, who, on drinking the blood, temporarily regain the power to speak to a living person. (Buxton, 2015:206)

As mentioned in earlier sections, it is clear that the traditional "hero's quest or journey" is a deliberate device in the game's design, and is therefore reinforced when these journeys share a likeness to some of the oldest stories in the world. The similarity to Odysseus' journey is unmistakable, and the presence of the ferryman of the dead relates directly to Greek myth. Nordic mythological layers fuse with the Greek to inform this distinct gaming experience. In the gaming format this "hero's journey" serves as a template for player progression, with various

distractions, events, and characters found along the way. The formula is used both mechanically and thematically. In terms of mechanics, players accrue experience points from defeating monsters, completing quests, and discovering new environments. This system provides numerous metrics for measuring a player's progress, such as player experience through character levels; completed quest chains and stories; and number of player visits to the world. On top of this mechanical layer is the thematic layer, which functions in tandem with it. These include things like visual representations of spells; the decoration of the user interface to suit the medieval fantasy setting; the stories that run parallel with player progression; and the visual representation of the world map and the "colouring in" of newly discovered areas in the world. This dungeon can only be completed (or even entered) by high level characters, so in order to explore the possible narrative functions associated with it, the player will most likely have to complete other forms of prior content (that is, complete other "hero's journeys"). Thus, this notion of the hero's journey is closely related to the game's rules, and it serves as a tool for enabling (to some extent) a linear progression of experience in the game. In terms of narrative structure and textuality (as this dungeon can be seen as a "chapter" of the overall Legion expansion's story and game features) previous "chapters" will need to be completed before reaching this one.

Before moving on to Helya, one last comparison between Harbaron and Charon can be made through the following:

Before leaving the topic of rivers, we must revert to the old, cantankerous figure of Charon. Perhaps for the reason mentioned by Kephalos in Plato's *Republic* – that proximity to death concentrates the mind on the possible nature of the Afterlife – vases employed in funerary ceremonies provide us with our fullest evidence for representations of Charon. On several examples of the white-ground vase known as a *lekythos* (an oil-container used to make offerings to the departed) Charon appears in his characteristic role, receiving a soul from Hermes Guider of Souls and preparing to ferry it into the Underworld proper. In literary sources, by contrast, Charon is seldom as prominent as he is in Aristophanes' *Frogs*. But the very nature of his job – that of a menial worker who, for a modest fee (normally the coin known as an 'obol'), ferries every single person who has ever lived, whatever their grandness or humbleness in life – lends itself to exploitation in comic or ironic narratives. (Buxton, 2015:211)

Here, we gather an interesting idea regarding a dualistic relationship between the *Halls of Valor* dungeon, and the *Maw of Souls*. The notion of how the "proximity to death concentrates the mind on the possible nature of the Afterlife" (Buxton, 2015:211) can possibly, in this case, be an example of a "translation" to the ludic realm. Essentially (assuming the player has completed the Stormheim storyline, as well as the *Halls of Valor* dungeon), completing one of the two

dungeons should make one think of the corresponding dungeon; and vice versa. As Helya commands a realm of the unworthy, this can elicit the obvious question, “where do the worthy go?”. The same is true in the case of the *Halls of Valor*. “If this is where the worthy gather, what happens to the unworthy?” With regard to WoW as a game, this contemplation regarding the effects of the proximity of death creates room for speculation for future content, as well as possible clues for the varying motivations for overcoming certain challenges.

The final boss of the encounter is Helya, a fallen val’kyr who now resides in Helheim. The following extract from the dungeon journal provides us with a brief contextualization:

Helya, fallen queen of the val’kyr, was once at Odyn’s right hand, raising the spirits of vrykul champions to the Halls of Valor to prepare for the final battle for the fate of Azeroth. But following Loken’s betrayal, she was persuaded to join him and turn upon her master. She now lurks in the shadowy realm beneath the world, plotting her revenge. (Blizzard Entertainment, 2016 (c))

The chronicle does far better justice in describing the complex betrayals and emerging motives for this character’s actions, but in essence, Helya was manipulated and turned against her master by the whisperings of a once-trusted and fellow titan keeper, Loken, who (without their knowledge) had succumbed to dark forces (Metzen, Burns & Brooks, 2016). An interesting parallel can be gathered here from the Norse entities Loki and Hel. Loki is often depicted in the Prose Edda as unpredictable, cunning, and unreliable, as well as responsible for the worst cause of harm for the Aesir. Hel, the daughter of Loki, was thrown into Niflheim by Odin, and she governed the unworthy dead (Sturluson, 2005). We also learn that, during Ragnarok, Loki broke free from his torture and prison (along with the Midgard Serpent, Surt, and the Fenris wolf), and Hel’s forces were also under Loki’s command (Sturluson, 2005). This correlates with the chronicle’s account of how Loken (an obvious allusion to Loki) manipulated Helya to turn against Odyn. This, along with the detail of the dark influences that guided Loken’s actions, is characteristic of the canonical Loki that we find in the Prose Edda. However, Helya shows some characteristics of both Hel and Brynhild, which we can unpack with the aid of the following extract:

In order to defeat the other keepers, Loken realized that he would first have to neutralize Odyn and his mighty Valarjar army. But a direct attack against their floating citadel, the Halls of Valor, would be impossible. Instead, Loken took a more insidious approach. He reached out to Odyn’s adopted daughter, the Val’kyr Helya. For millenia, Helya had dutifully followed Odyn’s commands, transporting the spirits of slain vrykul to the Halls of Valor. Yet even while she did so, Helya nursed the cold anger that stirred in her phantom heart. She never forgave Odyn for turning her into a Val’kyr against her will. Helya dreamed of a day when she might avenge what had been done to her and the others

who had been transformed into Val'kyr. Loken called out to Helya and played on her simmering anger and feelings of betrayal. He promised he would break the chains of servitude that bound her to follow Odyn's will. In exchange, she would seal off the Halls of Valor from the world forever. Thereafter, Helya could usurp Odyn's role as the caretaker of all vrykul spirits. Enticed by this chance to sate her appetite for revenge, she agreed to Loken's plans. (Metzen, Burns & Brooks, 2016:57).

While maintaining a convincing Loki-like persona, Loken turns Helya against Odyn. What's even more interesting about Helya's secret dislike for Odyn's actions echoes the story of Brynhild, one of Odin's most beloved Valkyries. In the Volsung Saga, Brynhild was banished to earth for disobeying his orders. As punishment, he pricked her with a thorn that would cause her to sleep for eternity, or until a truly noble and fearless man passed through a fiery threshold to awaken her (Byock, 1999 and Morris, 2012). Although the possible feelings of resentment may be different on the surface, the presence of any resentment towards Odyn/Odin is significant as it opened up opportunities for more stories to unfold (for example, Brynhild's banishment would lead to her meeting Sigurd the Dragon Slayer, and Helya's forced servitude harboured a bitterness that could be exploited by a malevolent force). In some ways, Helya, as much as Brynhild, is a victim of destiny, as well as a spiteful and vengeful villain, despite her ignorance of the fact that she was not serving Loken, but rather a far greater and far more dangerous cosmic threat in the Warcraft lore (Metzen, Burns & Brooks, 2016).

In terms of the encounter, Helya is depicted as an oceanic entity with an array of barnacles, ship debris, shells, and tattered wings. Furthermore, she uses octopus-like tentacles to disrupt players during the encounter and is very much (in addition to the other sailor-themed motifs in the dungeon) linked to such figures as the Kraken, and to seafaring mythology.

RAIDS

Much like the aforementioned dungeons, raids are also isolated game spaces specifically designed for group-based gameplay. Two of the key differences between the two types of game content are (1) the number of players involved, and (2) the types of boss encounters that are found in them. In older versions, raids had fixed player brackets for the number of players that could (or should) participate in a given raid. Older raids like Molten Core required 40 players to participate optimally, while in the *Legion* expansion, the game can scale the raid's encounters to suit the number of players in the raid group. However, the highest difficulty raids are, as of writing, locked at 20 players, so as to help ensure a fine-tuned and consistent encounter for these players (that is, this design choice is heavily geared towards the ludic spectrum of the experience). As for the raid boss encounters, they are typically longer encounters with more advanced abilities and encounter mechanics than their dungeon counterparts to accommodate

the larger group of players. As a result of this larger (and sometimes grander, in terms of the collective spectacle of this game's genre-based affordances) template for group encounters in WoW, raids are usually where big story threads are continued, concluded, or (in some cases) introduced. As for the *Legion* expansion, the Trial of Valor raid was not a formal continuation of the expansion as a whole, but it still served as a conclusion to smaller stories found during this expansion's questing and dungeon experiences. The story of Odyn and Helya started with the quests found in Stormheim; it was continued during the aforementioned two dungeons; and it was concluded in the raid. As far as the player involvement is concerned, high-difficulty WoW dungeons are typically more concentrated experiences of the entire dungeon as a "boss" encounter which makes use of a smaller, more tightly knit player group. This content is usually quicker to complete and due to relatively new systems like timed dungeon runs of an ever-increasing difficulty (known in-game as "Mythic plus" dungeons), there is a focus on the speed of completion that is not typically found in raids. In contrast, raids offer large scale battles with dozens of players all focussed on (usually) one primary target at a time, which, again, with narrative and textual parallels in mind, results in a longer experience that has the potential for providing significant story markers for the current narrative of the game as well. This is not to say that dungeons do not contain key narrative moments (as seen in the previous footage), but raids are especially reserved for climactic and focussed moments in the narrative.

TRIAL OF VALOR RAID

Video: 10

Please watch the video labelled "World of Warcraft Raids: Trial of Valor" before proceeding.

This raid was released sometime after the aforementioned dungeons via a content patch (a post-release update to the game which offered more game content to the players), which means that the prior stories found in the aforementioned dungeons would be concluded later in the expansion's span. The first encounter of the raid starts with the appearance of two mini-bosses: namely Hyrja and Hyndall, both of whom we've seen in the previous Halls of Valor dungeon. After the pair are defeated, Odyn himself challenges the raid party. An observant player may notice that Odyn, unlike in the Halls of Valor dungeon, now actually wields a weapon. Significantly, it is a type of spear which bears a close resemblance to the Prose Edda's account of Odin's spear "Gungnir". WoW's dungeon journal, in addition to giving theoretical context, also provides one with the ability to preview a character's model; when viewing Odyn's model (with the journal or in actual combat) we see that Odyn is also missing an eye. The Norse Odin, to cement the parallel, also lacked one eye:

Under the root [of Yggdrasil] that goes to the frost giants is the Well of Mimir. Wisdom and intelligence are hidden there, and Mimir is the name of the well's owner. He is full of

wisdom because he drinks of the well from the Gjallarhorn. All-Father went there and asked for one drink from the well, but did not get this until he gave one of his eyes as a pledge. (Sturluson, 2005:24-25)

In the *Legion* expansion, players who play as the warrior class have access to Odyn's hall as an exclusive base of operations for warriors only. In this base, more context can be gathered from a stone that tells "The Legend of Odyn":

A great spirit appeared to Odyn from this circle, billowing up from ethereal mists, shapeless, to surround the keeper in shadow. "What will you give," the spirit asked, "to peer beyond the veil of this world?"... Odyn plucked his own eye from his head and presented it to the spirit. The spirit clasped his eye and swallowed it whole ... Seeing through this given eye, great Odyn saw the Shadowlands. He saw life, saw it even in the land of death, and he was satisfied that his Valarjar would live beyond the mortal realm. (Wowpedia, 2018)

Here, we also see Odyn sacrificing his eye to gain insight. To further underline the parallel, if Odin has wisdom and strength, the raid makes these qualities playable by providing obstacles of wit and correspondence, which occur alongside the actual battling of the encounter, suggesting that the abilities of strength and wisdom are both required to achieve victory. So, in terms of Odyn's appearance and backstory, it is clear that he is very much modelled on the mythological Odin (Sturluson, 2005:72).

From the height of the Halls of Valor, the players descend into the dark and misty realm of Helheim. To reach the gates of Helheim itself is often a lengthy process (depending on the group's effectiveness), which can involve a spatial sense of distance from familiar and benevolent locales. As shown in the video footage, even after being sped up, it's still a lengthy process, as the players fight their way through gigantic undead vrykul. It would have been simpler (and even cheaper for the developers) to simply drop the players in the depths of Helheim. However, it is significant that this passage from benevolence (suggested by the almost-heavenly appearance of Odyn's halls), to an earthlier plane (the vrykul ruins that lead to Helheim), and finally to the malevolent setting of Helheim (the underworld-like space) exists as a mandatory progression for players in this raid.

Upon entering Helheim's gates, some players might recognise the immediate area, as, during the Stormheim quests, players actually ventured here before to save a shieldmaiden who would later ascend into the Halls of Valor (namely, Hyrja; the second boss from the Halls of Valor dungeon). However, the second boss of this raid (though seen before as being fast asleep, while the group tried to rescue Hyrja in the relevant quest), is now wide awake and must be defeated before Helya can be reached. This boss is a gigantic, three-headed beast called

“Guarm”, offering more evidence (like Harbaron from the Maw of Souls) of a fusion of Greek and Norse myth:

Here are the words of the Aesir themselves :

“The ash Yggdrasil
is foremost of trees,
and Skidbladnir of ships,
Odin of the Aesir,
and of stallions, Sleipnir,
Bifrost of bridges,
and Bragi of Skalds,
Habrok of hawks,
and of hounds, Garm.” (Sturluson, 2005:50)

By now [near the end of Ragnarok] the hound Garm, who was bound in front of Gnipahellir, will also have broken free. He, the worst of monsters, will fight against Tyr. (Sturluson, 2005:73)

These extracts show that Garm is a formidable monster. The first extract shows that Garm is the foremost hound in the mythology, while the second extract shows that Garm is the worst of all monsters. This would then (in the Norse mythos) put Garm fairly high on the antagonist hierarchy. This malicious prominence is explained further in this edition of the Prose Edda’s notes:

The hound Garm... Gnipahellir: Garm is mentioned in *The Lay of Grimnir* and in *Sybyl’s Prophecy*. *Baldr’s Dreams* speaks of a hound in Hel, which might not be Garm. *Hellir* in the name *Gnipahellir* means *cave*. The whole word could be translated as a jutting or overhanging *cave*, and *Gnipahellir* is perhaps an entrance to Hel. Garm could be another name for Fenrir. (Sturluson, 2005:146)

With these extracts, it is clear that Garm is a malicious hound-or-wolf-like entity which is associated with both the Nordic Hel and Ragnarok. The mention of a cave-like locale, and the possibility of an entrance to Hel are details which offer an interesting parallel to the Greek hound-like watcher of the underworld: Cerberus. As Guarm (in the raid) is shown as a three-headed, hound-like creature, the mythological fusion that takes place here is obvious. Here are accounts of Cerberus:

Few monsters overcome by Herakles are more horrifying than Kerberos, the hound of the Underworld. The serpents growing from the beast's heads and paws intensify the terror. (Buxton, 2015:6)

The fetching of Kerberos (the twelfth labour) was the last and direst of the twelve labours. Herakles descended to the Underworld via a cave at Tainaron, which lies at the tip of the middle promontory of the Peloponnese... Overcoming Kerberos by sheer brute strength, Herakles dragged him up to the light of day, showed him to a terrified, pot-bound Eurystheus, and then returned the monstrous dog to his lawful abode in Hades. (Buxton, 2015:121)

Regarding the fusion, both the Nordic Garm and the Greek Cerberus (Kerberos) dwell in a mythological underworld; both are said to dwell near or in cave-like locales; both are regarded as truly malicious and terrible monsters; and both are associated with an incredibly difficult task (especially at higher difficulty settings) involving heroes and heroic deeds (Herakles' labours, and Ragnarok). This kinship could be a possible inspiration for creating Guarm's appearance and role within the raid's story. The boss' proximity to the entrance of Helheim is also significant; although his wasn't the first boss encounter for the raid, his was in fact the first boss encounter within Helheim and he served as the last line of defence before players could reach Helya.

The following illustration by William Blake (to return to the notion of multimedia) taps into the mythology in a vivid way, conveying the sense of terror and repulsion associated with the beast:



Image 2

Kerebos drawn by William Blake as an illustration for Dante's great poem *The Inferno*. (Buxton, 2015:236)

While Blake's illustration is a different type of medium from a different era and time, its ability to provoke an unsettling and terrified response is often a common aim for game developers. The effect of imagining or reading about such a creature has its own impact, but virtually combating such a creature offers another, much more enveloping level of engagement. Blake's Cerberus is a pictorial image, which is already a more sensory-tangible version than a written one. However, the developers at Blizzard entertainment gave Guarm a style of movement and even certain sound effects that extend and enhance the mythological entity's identity. In addition to this, Guarm is (in a way) given a whole spectrum of ludic identities as well. Because he is governed by an artificial intelligence that has certain prescribed behaviours, he can be seen as a set of basic behaviour patterns which react to the players' collective input (that is, Guarm's set of abilities changes depending on how much damage he has sustained, thus making his actions a direct response to the players' input. However, the strategies employed by the players can differ). For the sake of comparison with Blake and Greek mythological accounts, here is Guarm as he appears in the game:



Image 3

In-game screenshot of Guarm in the Trial of Valor Raid. (Wowhead, 2018 (a))

Considering what has been said about unsettling imagery and motifs in the game, WoW's stylised art direction reduces the game's potential for gory and terrifying representations. A game like *The Last of Us* (also viewable on the HGA YouTube channel) is much more hyper-realistic, despite being a ported version of a Playstation-3-era game. While WoW's developers might not seek to provoke utter discomfort and terror like many other game series (*Dark Souls*, *Bloodborne*, *Diablo*, *Doom*, for example), it is fair to argue that Norse and Greek myth provided them with a terrifying enough creature from an underworld realm that suited the game. Although Guarm might not be as realistically depicted as Cerberus in the *God of War* series on the Playstation platform, it does do well in fitting into the immediate locale, as well as the theoretical space of Helheim as a type of underworld governed by a malevolent entity.

Upon defeating Guarm, the players reach Helya, the final boss. Much like Odyn, Helya is a prominent figure in the Warcraft chronicle, and is thus one of the oldest characters on Azeroth

(Metzen, Burns & Brooks, 2016). The encounter is (on this difficulty level) very dramatic and somewhat chaotic; with tidal waves sweeping the players from side to side, with waves of vrykul enemies appearing on rotting ships to aid their queen, all while Helya's tentacles flail vehemently in the background. As of writing, Helya's defeat in this raid seems final; which again (in a very WoW-like fashion) paves the way for new speculations and stories to be told. Now that she's supposedly dead, what becomes of Odyn? Is he no longer bound to his halls because Helya's curse has lifted? If so, what will his first action(s) be and what will his reappearance mean to his other titan-keeper brethren?

We can only speculate as to what could happen further, and thus, with a climax to a built-up story starting in Stormheim's quests, we are now presented with that measure of mystery and speculation which E.M. Forster feels is crucial to a plot. Starting with quests in Stormheim, then progressing to two 5-man dungeons in Halls of Valor and Maw of Souls, and finally (it is supposed) ending a threat in the Trial of Valor raid with 20 or more players, is a type of multimodal-ludic story, involving three different modes of play, all concerning the same fictional/contextual material in a relatively linear fashion. At first glance, we might want to ask Forster's essential question about plot: but why? Stormheim's quests can be completed on one's own with very little (or no) assistance from other players. The pacing and play sessions are dictated by the player, and (as Metzen noted in previous video footage) provide context and story to the player. A 5-person dungeon involves a smaller-sized group encounter which also deals with theoretical material and, in this case, builds on the quests the player might have completed beforehand, but its challenges are too great to overcome alone, and thus require a structured group. And finally, after this stage has been reached, the "grand battle" to determine the outcome of this narrative event involves the key mode of play of traditional MMORPGs like WoW, as raids both adhere to the game's genre and identity, while playing an important symbolic role of how unity and strength in numbers and cooperation can overcome the greatest of foes, as raid bosses are oftentimes the strongest and most dangerous entities in the entire game. Can this multimodal-ludic structure be considered a type of plot? If so, this plot is often (and to a significant extent) readable in a traditional sense, but this type of plot's full substance is gained via multiple dimensions of "absorption". As Metzen said in a behind-the-scenes talk about another game, game worlds can be regarded as spaces "where words and art and sound and design all just kind of smash together to create a very distinct expression of immersion" (Blizzard Entertainment, 2015)

This chapter discussed how quests, dungeons, and raids can offer ludic experiences to gamers that are often bolstered by aesthetic features and narratives that round out the given mode of play. Quests are perhaps the simplest starting point to try to determine any literary motifs or conventions, due to their variable dependence on text. It is probable that any prospective player of WoW will begin a journey with a series of quests as an introduction to the world and to the

gameplay opportunities and styles it offers; an intended effect confirmed by Chris Metzen. In addition to this, these quests can even lead players to 5-player dungeons throughout the initial levelling experience. From here, players will be shifted closer to the MMORPG direction of the game, as they will be performing a role in group-based content. Whereas most of WoW's quests can be completed solo, the dungeons are intended to bring players with different roles and specialties to an isolated space to function together as a small team. Then, finally, the raids offer the larger-scale experiences where, instead of being in a small task force, the player is one of (what feels like) an army combatting daunting, powerful, and pivotal (in terms of fiction) entities. These three systems in WoW offer narrative and gameplay in different ways, despite being part of the same game as a whole, which is indicative of the versatility (in terms of function and creative expression) of the game. It is clear that, in the case of the above-discussed dungeons and raid, a consideration of the fictional components of the game's world can reveal familiar literary and mythological motifs, especially when taken in conjunction with the transmedial discussions found in chapter 2. The fictional world of Azeroth is readable and playable through a multitude of Warcraft-themed products, and even in the likes of the formal examples of "texts" surrounding Azeroth (the game itself, and the chronicle series as examples), multiple lenses can be applied to each individual piece of media. The chronicle series comprises written texts in a historical or anthropological form, but many of the events discussed therein are playable, viewable, and audible in the game. The opposite is also true for the game: while dungeons and raids deal with characters like Odyn and Helya (as briefly introduced and represented in the game world), more is discoverable about these characters and events in the chronicle books. This chapter hopefully shows that, in playing WoW, there are multiple levels of "playing" all within the same game, which can be extended through external Warcraft media, as well as through classical myths and legends that offer motifs for developing game content.

CONCLUSION

A game such as *World of Warcraft* is a complex construction that makes use of an array of multimedia tools to flesh out its experiences. This use of multimedia constituents is clearly a strength of this genre, due to its ability to extend its expressions through a multitude of motifs, player interactions, and possible inspirations for the creative works behind the game's fiction. In the case of *World of Warcraft*, it is clear that, despite the modernity of its platform, it makes use of an array of traditional artistic media to augment the player experience in the game. While this multimedia nature of *World of Warcraft* provides an impressive potential for evocative and stimulating playable content, it is also the primary reason why inter-disciplinary discourse should be encouraged.

Though this dissertation stems from a literary background, its primary aim is to offer analyses based on basic literary principles in the hopes of adding to inter-disciplinary discussions surrounding video games. Literary concepts like characterisation and plots were explored in the first chapter, and it is clear that while they share thematic and structural similarities to their forbears in traditional media, the video game platform of *World of Warcraft* allows for an array of creative expansions on these elements by way of playability and multimedia. Visibly seeing characters move, talk, and interact within the game world offers a level of immediacy that is most prominent in video games. Furthermore, plots in *World of Warcraft* are quite different when compared to their literary counterparts for the same reasons: the player's agency within these plots, and how these plots take (virtual) form. Therefore, traditional discussions surrounding characters and plots can provide useful premises for discussion of the game when one considers the affordances and limitations of the platform as a whole.

The second chapter explored the notions of paratext and transmedia, and how they can apply to *World of Warcraft*. Both the paratext and transmedia (in a broad sense) serve to extend a centrepiece or primary text, and due to the various aesthetic levels that layer a typical player's experience within the game (such as the player's avatars, and chosen character class and themes), it was worth investigating whether these layers behave similarly to their traditional predecessors. When we consider *World of Warcraft* as a game that is 'played', the ways in which we 'play' can vary greatly depending on personal preferences and desires. Five players might find themselves in a dungeon, which effectively means all five of them are 'fighting'. However, the paladin player (while possibly playing the exact same role as the death knight) will seek the same goal as other non-paladin players, but will achieve and experience it differently. The player can be tasked with defeating a dragon, but the aesthetic, thematic, and ludic differences between player avatars are experienced as being very similar to a paratext, because these constituents extend (internally) the game being played.

Additionally, the second chapter discussed examples of transmedia and how they, like paratext, also extend a primary text, but exist externally as novels, fictional chronicles, children's books, and so on. As noted by Metzen in the video showcasing the *World of Warcraft: Traveler*, these varying pieces of *Warcraft* media 'speak' in different ways, conditioned by the conventions, motifs, affordances, and limitations of each platform or medium. Additionally, Metzen spoke about how the *Traveler* book can achieve things that the game cannot by itself (World of Warcraft, 2016 (a)). While this video served a promotional function for a new product, his remarks are still useful and relevant; especially when one considers his past roles at Blizzard Entertainment, as well as his actual involvement in the writing of the chronicle series. With regards to the *Warcraft* franchise, the use of transmedia means that *Warcraft* can exist through different formats and media. Essentially, the franchise can be played like a 21st century MMORPG; it can be read like a young-adult novel; it can be read by children in elementary

school; and it can be viewed through cinematic means. While these examples of transmedia exist through their own formats and structures, the common thread found between them can be found in the fiction of *Warcraft* which underlies all of the examples analysed in this dissertation.

The final chapter of the dissertation explored some of *World of Warcraft's* narrative delivery systems, with emphasis on (1) quests, (2) dungeons, and (3) raids. Quests are significant starting points for discussions surrounding narrative due to their primary reliance on text to communicate themselves to the player. Also, quests are some of the first activities that a player will partake in when playing the game. When one couples the initial placement of quests as useful introductory devices for the game as whole, with Metzen's comments surrounding quests as a "staple" for the player's experience in the game (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004(a)), it is clear that quests are an important motif employed by the game's developers for providing context and guiding the player through the world. Like the quest system, dungeons can perform narrative functions as well, often employing antagonists as encounterable ludic entities that can be fought and interacted with. In addition to its narrative potential, WoW dungeons play an important ludic role by offering players a means of accruing more player power. However, not to diminish the importance of WoW's dungeon as a gameplay offering, raids offer most of what dungeons have to offer, but on a much larger scale. Typically, the treasure rewards are far greater, and (following Blizzard tradition) significant fictional antagonists (and, sometimes, even protagonists) are reserved as raid bosses. In the case of the dungeons and raids discussed in this chapter, the group-based content of WoW can either exist as isolated narrative or ludic environments (or both), or they can serve as chapters for a given story within the game world. This chapter focussed on how WoW can tell stories through different modes of play, while also illustrating the relationships between the different formal game encounters and their impacts on a given story or narrative intention.

In conclusion, it should be clear that many of *World of Warcraft's* narrative structures, themes, and motifs can be approached from a literary angle, provided that provision is made for the platform-based affordances and limitations of both video games and literary theory. The aim of this dissertation is less about approaching the game as a "story machine", than to show how a given game can *choose* to offer narrative moments, ludic moments, or a fusion of the two. *World of Warcraft* is a game that can do all three of these things. Firstly, narrative moments are offered and augmented through quest texts, in-game dialogue, aesthetic representations and themes, in-game cutscenes, and a wide selection of transmedial materials outside of the game. Secondly, purely ludic modes of play exist through multiple difficulty settings for dungeons and raids, with upward-scaling dungeon difficulties (known as Mythic+ dungeons) that need to be completed within certain time limits, and player-versus-player arenas where players are solely focussed on defeating their opponents. And thirdly, the Trial of Valor is an example of a fusion between narrative and ludic function, due to it being a ludically lucrative activity (regarding

player power), while offering a narrative conclusion for the stories offered by prior quests and dungeons. This dissertation aimed at offering and discussing some literary analyses that can take place around *World of Warcraft*, but as a constituent part of a greater inter-disciplinary discussion surrounding the aesthetic potential of video games and their ability to morph into any desired shape by their developers.

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LAST UPDATED 22 MARCH 2019