

“Elune be praised!” World of Warcraft, its People and Religions, and Their Real World Inspiration

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Introduction

Popular culture has long been drawing upon the religions and symbolism of pre-Christian societies as well as the beliefs and cultures of the numerous minority religions that Western society has encountered. It comes as no surprise that the computer game industry, which in recent years has seen its annual revenue succeed Hollywood's, has also delved into this appropriation of religious and cultural symbolism. Blizzard Entertainment's World of Warcraft is a hugely successful computer game, and its creators have found inspiration in a variety of cultures, both ancient and living, as well as modern 'cult' fiction, when developing this creative fantasy world. This paper will examine some of the ways a number of cultures and religions have been incorporated into this game, from the mythology of the game's created world, to the different peoples that populate that universe, as well as how this appropriation of real world iconography and religious beliefs might affect the religious imagination of the players.

Introducing World of Warcraft

World of Warcraft is a Massively Multiplayer Online (MMO) computer game produced by Blizzard Entertainment. The most successful game of its type, it boasts over eleven million subscribers worldwide.¹ World of Warcraft follows on from other successful Blizzard games, which take place in the created universe of Warcraft, and primarily on the planet of Azeroth. The previous games were Real Time Strategy (RTS) games, which could be played as single-player, or with a few other people in a multiplayer game. These RTS games involve the player commanding groups of military units and playing through scenarios, such as attempting to control a map, or protecting resources from opponents. In these games, part of the history of Azeroth was told: the invasion by Demons and their Orc followers; the eventual freedom of the Orcs

¹ 'World Of Warcraft® Subscriber Base Reaches 11.5 Million Worldwide', Blizzard Entertainment (21 November, 2008), at <http://us.blizzard.com/en-us/company/press/pressreleases.html?081121>. Accessed 18/05/09.

and their settling in Azeroth; and the coming of the undead plague and the rise of the Lich King. These are just some of the stories told through the previous Warcraft games. In 2004, Blizzard released World of Warcraft, which, while based on the same created universe of the previous games, as an MMO plays very differently to RTS games.

The MMO style of game differs from conventional computer or video gaming as it requires an internet connection and can only be played online. The game world also continues to function when the players are logged off, so it is possible to miss events occurring or be unable to ever participate in certain activities within the game. Before the release of the latest expansion, there was an in-game event called *The Scourge Invasion* where undead invaded specific areas of the Warcraft world. Killing these undead yielded an item which could be traded to a Non-Player Character (NPC) for novelty items or armour for their character. If a player did not participate in *The Scourge Invasion* for whatever reason (lack of interest in the event, unable to play the game during the short period the event occurred), they are unable to ever purchase or receive the items offered during this event. This differs to the usual single-player computer games, where the game does not progress without the player being there and triggering events.

There is no end point to the game and no specific win condition; the game continues on, regardless of the player completing objectives or ignoring them. There is also a significant amount of content in the game that is inaccessible by a single player. Groups of five or more people are often needed to complete certain objectives in the game, such as dungeons and raid instances. It is not, however, required of a player to participate in group objectives. There is plenty of solo content, as well as 'casual' content, for people who do not wish to, or are unable to, play for long periods of time.

As a result of these differences from single-player gaming, examining a MMO like World of Warcraft requires significant periods of time to play, experience, and interact with the game, but also relies on the information the player community provides on game help websites. These websites provide the exact wording of quests as well as what is required to complete them, in-game books, the specific actions players must perform to achieve an objective, as well as screenshots of the game. They are extremely useful tools for the player and for academic observers studying the game. The websites give information that is not necessarily available to a player such as quests they cannot access due to their choice of race or faction.² There are also Wikipedia-style sites

² The word 'race' is used in fantasy settings, most notably in the game *Dungeons and Dragons*, to denote different humanoid species, not as it is commonly used to refer to a person's ancestry, ethnic or cultural background.

about the game that give background to the story and explain the in-game history of the game world, which, although freely edited by the public, are generally reliable because of the nature of fans, who want to provide the factual information about something they care about, and because they are moderated by those who run the wiki.³ These sites allow people who have not played the previous Warcraft games or read the different novels to learn about the game world without having to spend time playing and reading other sources.

When beginning in World of Warcraft, the player chooses which race they wish to play, and subsequently which faction they will belong to. On the Alliance side there are Humans, Dwarves, Gnomes, Night Elves and Draenai. The Horde comprise of Orcs, Trolls, Taurens, Forsaken (undead who are free of the Lich King), and Blood Elves. Most of these races start in their own area with their own story as well as their own capital city. The Gnomes and Trolls, however, have lost their homelands, and thus share their starting zone and capital with the Dwarves and Orcs respectively. After choosing a race, the player must also choose a class, which might also be described as the career of the character. The different classes are: Death Knight, Druid, Hunter, Paladin, Priest, Rogue, Shaman, Warlock, and Warrior, although each race only has a select number of classes available to it, with Death Knight being the only class every race has access to. Some of the different races and classes shall be discussed later. First, however, the narrative arc of Warcraft should be examined.

The Titans and the Norse

Although not universally the case, religions and cultures around the world frequently explain its origins through creation myths. The Warcraft universe does not have a creation story, instead it details a world-shaping myth much like the Irish *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* or Australian Aboriginal Dreaming stories. In Warcraft there is no mention of the origins of the universe, but, rather, the ordering of it and its various planets by a group called the Titans:

Though the exact origins of the chaotic universe remain unclear, it is clear that a race of powerful beings arose to bring order to the various worlds and ensure a safe future for the beings that would follow in their footsteps.

The Titans, colossal, metallic-skinned gods from the far reaches of the cosmos, came forward and set to work on the worlds they

³ Barb Dybwad, 'SXSW08: How Gamers are Adopting the Wiki Way', *Massively* (8 March, 2008), at <http://www.massively.com/2008/03/08/sxsw08-how-gamers-are-adopting-the-wiki-way/>. Accessed 21/05/09.

encountered. They shaped the form of their worlds by raising mighty mountains and dredging out vast seas.⁴

Though they are named for the ancient Greek mythological beings,⁵ the Warcraft Titans are generally modelled after Norse deities. While the 'Pantheon',⁶ the ruling group of Titans, are not specifically based on any entity (though fans have their theories),⁷ the Titans players encounter in the latest expansion are entirely influenced by ideas about the Old Norse deities and mythology. The Warcraft Titans also differ to those of Greek mythology, for they were often malevolent beings, the most notorious being Kronos, who slew his father and ate his own children,⁸ whereas the Warcraft Titans are mostly viewed in a positive light.⁹ Although the main group of Titans are not clearly based on entities from pre-Christian religions, those found on the continent of Northrend are an exception.¹⁰

In Northrend the player encounters Titans and their avatars, named, Freya (Freya/Freyja), Thoirm (Thor), and Loken (Loki).¹¹ In the latest patch, 3.1, Hodir (Hod) and Mimiron (Mimir) are also found.¹² All of these Titans are directly influenced by the Old Norse religion and mythological texts.¹³ Areas in Northrend also give further information about the Titans, such as that there are two Titan families, the Aesir and Vanir, and that in Azeroth these words mean

⁴ 'Medievaldragon', 'Mythology of the Titans', *BlizzPlanet.com* (16 January, 2008), at http://www.blizzplanet.com/blog/comments/mythology_of_the_titans/. Accessed 12/03/09.

⁵ Apollodorus, *The Library of Greek Mythology*, trans. Robin Hard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 27.

⁶ 'Medievaldragon', 'Mythology of the Titans'.

⁷ Anon., 'Eonar', *WoWWiki.com*, at <http://www.wowwiki.com/Eonar>. Accessed 12/02/09.

⁸ Hesiod, *Theogony, Works and Days, Shield*, trans. Apostolos N. Athanassaki (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1983), pp. 16-25.

⁹ 'Medievaldragon', 'Iron Forge: The Awakening of the Dwarves', *BlizzPlanet.com* (16 January, 2008), at http://www.blizzplanet.com/blog/comments/iron_forge_the_awakening_of_the_dwarves/. Accessed 12/03/09.

¹⁰ This analysis of the popular culture uses of pre-Christian pantheons builds upon my unpublished Master of Philosophy thesis; Lauren Bernauer, *Age of Mythology: The Perils of Representing Pagan Gods in Popular Culture* (Unpublished MPhil Thesis: University of Sydney, 2007).

¹¹ 'Avatar of Freya', *Wowhead.com*, at <http://www.wowhead.com/?npc=27801>. Accessed 12/03/09; 'Thorim', *Wowhead.com*, at <http://www.wowhead.com/?npc=29445>. Accessed 12/03/09; 'Loken', *Wowhead.com*, at <http://www.wowhead.com/?npc=28923>. Accessed 12/03/09.

¹² 'Daelo', 'Ulduar PTR Testing Information', *World of Warcraft: English (NA) Forums*, at <http://forums.worldofwarcraft.com/thread.html?topicId=15198911211&sid=1>. Accessed 12/03/09.

¹³ Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Anthony Faulkes (London: Everyman, 1987), p. 24ff.

“Storm and Earth Giants”.¹⁴ In Norse mythology these terms are the names of the two families of gods.¹⁵ Though the story of the Titans in World of Warcraft is not directly from Norse mythology, it is heavily influenced by it. In it, the Titan Loken was responsible for the murder of Thorim’s wife Sif, however, he also fooled Thorim into believing that the Frost Giant king Angrim, son of Hodir, was the murderer. This led to Thorim’s fall into depression and his retreat from engaging with the world.¹⁶ In Norse mythology Loki does not kill Sif, but cuts off her hair, which is taken as an indication of adultery.¹⁷ Although it occurs later in the mythology, Loki does end up betraying the gods and will lead an army against them at *Ragnarok*.¹⁸ Loki's betrayal stems from an underlying animosity toward gods, but for Loken, his betrayal comes from being corrupted by a being the Titans first encountered when they discovered Azeroth.

The Old Gods and Lovecraft

When they first arrived on Azeroth, the Pantheon discovered a group of malevolent, parasitic deities there, known as the Old Gods. The Titans waged war against these gods, but realised that they were unable to kill the Old Gods without destroying the planet,¹⁹ and so the Titans imprisoned them within it,²⁰ though from their prisons they are still able to corrupt and deceive certain characters in the story.²¹ Twice now the Old Gods have begun to emerge and break free from their captivity. The first God to break free was C’thun in the city of Ahn’Qiraj,²² the second was Yogg-Saron, who is located under the Titan city of Ulduar, and is responsible for Loken’s actions against his fellow Titans. The Old Gods are not based on the beliefs of a real world religion, but,

¹⁴ Anon., ‘Quotes – Tribunal of the Ages’, *WoWWiki.com*, at http://www.wowwiki.com/Tribunal_of_Ages#Quotes. Accessed 12/03/09.

¹⁵ Sturluson, *Edda*, p. 23.

¹⁶ ‘The Reckoning’, *Wowhead.com*, at <http://www.wowhead.com/?quest=13047>. Accessed 26/03/09.

¹⁷ Margaret Clunies Ross, ‘Þórr’s Honour’, in *Studien zum Altgermanischen: Festschrift für Heinrich Beck*, ed. Heiko Uecker (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1994), pp. 48-76.

¹⁸ ‘Seeress’s Prophecy’, in *The Poetic Edda*, trans. Carolyne Larrington (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 8-13.

¹⁹ Anon., ‘Quotes – Tribunal of the Ages’.

²⁰ Anon., ‘The Old Gods and The Ordering of Azeroth’, *WoWWiki.com*, at http://www.wowwiki.com/The_Old_Gods_and_the_Ordering_of_Azeroth. Accessed 01/06/09.

²¹ Most notable is the dragon Neltharion, ‘Deathwing’, *WoWWiki.com*, at <http://www.wowwiki.com/Deathwing>. Accessed 18/05/09.

²² ‘The War of the Shifting Sands’, *World of Warcraft: Info*, at <http://www.worldofwarcraft.com/info/story/shiftingsands.html>. Accessed 01/09/09.

rather on the works of early twentieth-century horror author, H. P. Lovecraft. The two deities or beings from Lovecraft's work that Blizzard have utilised are Cthulhu and Yog-Sothoth, both of whom are referred to as "Great Old Ones" in the Cthulhu and Lovecraftian mythos. In one of his works, Lovecraft describes a statue of Cthulhu:

Above these apparent hieroglyphics was a figure of evidently pictorial intent, though its impressionistic execution forbade a very clear idea of its nature. It seemed to be a sort of monster, or symbol representing a monster, of a form which only a diseased fancy could conceive. If I say that my somewhat extravagant imagination yielded simultaneous pictures of an octopus, a dragon and a human caricature, I shall not be unfaithful to the spirit of the thing. A pulpy, tentacled head surmounted a grotesque and scaly body with rudimentary wings; but it was the *general outline* of the whole which made it most shockingly frightful. Behind the figure was a vague suggestion of a Cyclopean architectural background.²³

Although the Old God, C'thun, does not resemble this description, monsters in Ulduar, however, where Yogg-Saron is imprisoned, do. Blizzard also seem to have incorporated Cthulhu's ability to cause insanity in people into the fight with Yogg-Saron. At the start of the encounter with this Old God, players' characters receive a one-hundred stack debuff, or negative effect, which slowly loses charges. If the debuff counts down to zero, the character becomes insane and the player loses control of it until the end of the encounter.

Yog-Sothoth is not mentioned in many of Lovecraft's works, though his appearance is described: "Imagination called up the shocking form of fabulous Yog-Sothoth — only a congeries of iridescent globes, yet stupendous in its malign suggestiveness".²⁴ Like C'thun, Yogg-Saron does not resemble this image, but he is given a number of epithets: "The Beast of a Thousand Maws", "The Death God", and "Fiend of a Thousand Faces".²⁵ Although none of these appear in Lovecraft's work, the use of "Death God" may be connected to the use of Yog-Sothoth's name in an incantation which will revive a person from the specially prepared ashes of their corpse.²⁶ Blizzard might also draw upon

²³ H. P. Lovecraft, 'Call of Cthulhu', in *Tales of H.P. Lovecraft: Major Works*, ed. Joyce Carol Oates (New York: The Ecco Press, 1997), p. 53f.

²⁴ H. P. Lovecraft and Hazel Heald, 'The Horror in the Museum', in *The Horror in the Museum: Great Tales of Supernatural Terror*, ed. H. P. Lovecraft (High Wycombe: Panther, 1970), p. 27.

²⁵ 'Yogg-Saron', *WoWWiki.com*, at <http://www.wowwiki.com/Yogg-saron>. Accessed 19/05/06.

²⁶ H. P. Lovecraft, 'The Case of Charles Dexter Ward', in *The H. P. Lovecraft Omnibus, Vol. 1: At the Mountains of Madness and Other Novels of Terror* (New York: HarperCollinsPublishers, 1999), p. 279f.

the works of other authors who expanded on Lovecraft's mythos, as on Azeroth, elementals, beings made of earth, air, fire or water, are viewed as servants of the Old Gods.²⁷ This may relate to August Darleth's writings on Lovecraft's work, where he assigns the different deities to the four elements.²⁸

Ahn'Qiraj and Egypt

While Yog-Saron was imprisoned under the Titan city of Ulduar, C'thun emerged beneath the city of Ahn'Qiraj in the desert of Silithus. This is one of the major cases of Blizzard changing the world players had access to. With Patch 1.9, the zone of Silithus was changed. Prior to this it was an extremely desolate area to which players had little to no reason to venture, but after the patch there was a new town and outposts for players to visit and receive quests to aid the war against the newly active Qiraji. The civilisation of the Qiraji is based on Ancient Egypt. Though the members of the Qiraji are essentially bug people, their buildings and some of their members are taken from Egyptian architecture and mythology. There is the Scarab Wall, behind which the Qiraji empire lay dormant for thousands of years. The scarab was important in Ancient Egyptian culture, depicted in a variety of broaches and amulets,²⁹ as well as included in funeral rites, where it was believed to hold the heart silent while it was being weighed and the deceased judged in the underworld.³⁰

There are also the Anubisaths,³¹ giant warriors of the Qiraji, whose form resembles the Egyptian deity Anubis, god of funeral rites.³² There is only one 'named' Anubisath,³³ Setis, who is named for the Egyptian god Set or Seth. This creature, however, has not been given any story by Blizzard. Aside from Setis, Ossirian the Unscarred is the only Anubisath of importance. In the War of the Shifting Sands, Ossirian turned the tide of the battle for the Qiraji,

²⁷ 'Elemental Lord', *WoWWiki.com*, at http://www.wowwiki.com/Elemental_Lieutenants. Accessed 19/05/09.

²⁸ Daniel Harms, *The Encyclopedia Cthulhiana: A Guide to Lovecraftian Horror*, 2nd ed. (Hayward CA: Chaosium, 1998), p. 101.

²⁹ Carol A. R. Andrews, 'Amulets', in *The Ancient Gods Speak: A Guide to Egyptian Religion*, ed. Donald B. Redford (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 14f.

³⁰ *The Book of the Dead or Going Forth by Day: Ideas of the Ancient Egyptian Concerning the Hereafter as Expressed in Their Own Terms*, trans. Thomas George Allen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), pp. 97-101.

³¹ 'Anubisath', *WoWWiki.com*, at <http://www.wowwiki.com/Anubisath>. Accessed 01/06/09.

³² Denise M. Doxey, 'Anubis', in *The Ancient Gods Speak: A Guide to Egyptian Religion*, ed. Donald B. Redford (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 21.

³³ A 'named' monster refers to a creature which has given a unique or special name, rather than the generic one which are shared with other creatures of the same type, such as Anubisath Guardian or Anubisath Defender of which there will be many that are encountered.

however, he was near death as a result of his actions. As a reward for his service in the war he was transformed into a Horusath,³⁴ and thus appears with a hawk head, rather than the jackal head of Anubis. Ossirian appears as a combination of Horus and Osiris. Wearing the Sun Crown and hawk head of Horus, while also having the blue skin of Osiris and a variation of his name, Blizzard have blended these two deities into one being.

Demons, Greek Gods and Hinduism

Part of the ordering of the universe the Titans engaged in involved one of the Pantheon being charged with keeping the demonic forces at bay and protecting the worlds they had developed. This Titan, Sargerath, battled, defeated and imprisoned demons for millennia, however the unending war against these forces slowly corrupted him:

As doubt and despair overwhelmed Sargerath's senses, he lost all faith not only in his mission, but also in the Titans' vision of an ordered universe. Eventually he came to believe that the concept of order itself was folly, and that chaos and depravity were the only absolutes within the dark, lonely universe.

His fellow Titans tried to persuade him of his error and calm his raging emotions, but he disregarded their more optimistic beliefs as self-serving delusions. Storming from their ranks forever, Sargerath set out to find his own place in the universe. Although the Pantheon was sorrowful at his departure, the Titans could never have predicted just how far their lost brother would go.

By the time Sargerath's madness had consumed the last vestiges of his valiant spirit, he believed that the Titans themselves were responsible for creation's failure. Deciding, at last, to undo their works throughout the universe, he resolved to form an unstoppable army that would set the physical universe aflame.³⁵

While demons are generally considered to be a Judeo-Christian concept, some of the demons in the Warcraft universe are based on beings from other religions. There are also two kinds of demons in Warcraft, those that began as demons, and beings that have been corrupted by demonic forces and transformed into demons.³⁶ One of the most encountered demons in World of Warcraft is the Satyr. Named for the followers of the Greek god Dionysus,³⁷ the Satyrs in the Warcraft universe were originally Elves that aligned themselves with Sargerath in an attempt to gain more magical power. In turn,

³⁴ 'Horusath', *WoWWiki.com*, at <http://www.wowwiki.com/Horusath>. Accessed 01/06/09.

³⁵ 'Sargerath and the Betrayal', *Wowhead.com*, at <http://www.wowhead.com/?object=175724>. Accessed 16/03/09.

³⁶ 'Demon', *WoWWiki.com*, at <http://www.wowwiki.com/Demon>. Accessed 01/06/09.

³⁷ Richard Seaforth, *Dionysos* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 16.

these Elves were transformed into demons. These beings only vaguely resemble their namesake, with goat legs and hooves.

One of the original demon races is the Shivarra, a race of female demons who resemble Hindu iconography, as their name would suggest. These six-armed beings are considered to be the religious leaders of the Burning Legion:

Exodar Holographic Emitter says: Function: Priestesses, Military Chaplains

Exodar Holographic Emitter says: Devout and exceedingly charismatic, these priestesses live only to evangelize the power of Sargeras' dread vision.

Exodar Holographic Emitter says: They are the driving heart of the Burning Crusade.³⁸

The Shivarra are one of the main instances of a living religion being utilised by the developers of the Warcraft games. It is not, however, the only case of Hinduism in this created universe.

While some of the Highbourne Night Elves who decided to follow Sargeras were transformed into demons, others, specifically Queen Azshara and her court, were changed into a different type of creature. Obsessed with magic, Azshara had pledged herself to Sargeras as a means of gaining greater magical power. Another group of Night Elves were against the use of arcane magic and went to war with the High Elves and the Burning Legion. This led to the Well of Eternity imploding and caused the Great Sundering. Azshara and her court were dragged to the bottom of the sea where Azshara made a bargain with the Old Gods and they saved her and the other elves by transforming them into the serpentine Naga.³⁹

The Naga are Indian fertility deities. Often in iconography, "they appear as cobras with one or many hoods or can metamorphose into humanlike creatures with dilated cobra hoods springing from the neck and spreading over the head".⁴⁰ In other imagery, however, the Naga also appear as humans with the lower half of their body replaced by a serpent's body.⁴¹ Both of these appearances are incorporated, as in World of Warcraft the Naga are large humanoid blue serpents, though with many physical characteristics that define

³⁸ Quote from Game Object 'Exodar Holographic Emitter', *World of Warcraft: The Burning Crusade* (Irvine CA: Blizzard Entertainment, 2007).

³⁹ 'Naga', *WoWWiki.com*, at <http://www.wowwiki.com/Naga>. Accessed 01/06/09.

⁴⁰ Lowell Bloss, 'Nāgas and Yakas'. *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Lindsay Jones, Vol. 9, 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005), p. 6395.

⁴¹ naga_kanya_the_snake_woman_zf52.jpg, at http://images.exoticindiaart.com/brass/naga_kanya_the_snake_woman_zf52.jpg. Accessed 20/06/09.

them as beings who live in the water (long spiny fins adorn their backs and arms). The most powerful female Naga are portrayed with snakes growing from their heads, and although reminiscent of Greek mythology's Medusa, this representation does tie into the iconography of the Naga as found in India. Iconography of Hindu deities is also apparent in the various statues of the transformed Queen Azshara.⁴² She has two sets of arms and is in a pose that is similar to the statues of dancing Shiva.⁴³ These statues are found in nearly all of the areas in which the Naga reside in the Warcraft universe.

Night Elves, Japan, and the Norse and Celts

Those of the Night Elves who remain have sworn off using arcane magic. Rather, they are a people dedicated to the power found in nature and they worship the moon goddess Elune:

Strongly associated with healing, peace, and tolerance, Elune has been revered by the Night Elves and other races since ancient times. However, the Mother Moon is not a goddess who advocates peace at all costs. Indeed, one of Elune's aspects since ancient times has been the Night Warrior, who is said to take the valiant dead from the battlefield and set them riding across the evening sky as stars.⁴⁴

Elune also has a consort, the white stag, Malorne or Apa'ro. Their story is told in one of the many in-game books.⁴⁵ While Elune is not directly taken from a real world deity, fans have their own speculation as to where Blizzard has gained their inspiration for her:

In modern mythological studies, Elune can be considered a 'Great Goddess' figure. See Myth for more information. As with many lunar fantasy goddesses, aspects of Elune's character are likely drawn from the Greek lunar goddesses Artemis (Roman Diana, goddess of the moon and the hunt), and Selene (Roman Luna, the personification of the moon).⁴⁶

This raises the issue of whether or not their needs to be a direct correspondence between the Warcraft beings and real world religious figures, as well as alluding to the implications of mixing historical with fictional information for

⁴² 'Know Your Ley Lines', Wowhead, at

<http://www.wowhead.com/?quest=11547#screenshots:id=72903>. Accessed 20/05/09.

⁴³ David Smith, *The Dance of Śiva: Religion, Art and Poetry in South India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 16.

⁴⁴ 'Elune', *World of Warcraft Encyclopedia*, at

<http://www.worldofwarcraft.com/info/encyclopedia/392.xml>. Accessed 16/03/09.

⁴⁵ 'The White Stag and the Moon', *WoWWiki.com*, at

http://www.wowwiki.com/The_White_Stag_and_the_Moon. Accessed 19/03/09.

⁴⁶ 'Inspiration - Elune', *WoWWiki.com*, at <http://www.wowwiki.com/Elune>. Accessed 16/03/09.

some aspects of the game aspects. This is something that will be discussed later.

Perched atop an enormous tree, the Night Elf society is stated to be based on Norse and Japanese mythological architecture by the Vice President of Creative Development, Chris Metzen.⁴⁷ While the Nordic elements are not necessarily evident, the buildings and structures of the Night Elves are similar to Japanese pagodas. It should be noted, however, that pagoda-style buildings are not limited to Japan, but may be found in a number of East Asian societies. There are also gateway structures in Night Elf settlements that have clearly been influenced by *torii*, the Japanese entranceways to Shinto shrines and holy areas.⁴⁸ Greek and Roman are other potential influences on the Night Elf civilisation, as among their ruins stone columns can be seen, which bear resemblance to the columns of Ancient Greek and Roman buildings. The only significantly visible Nordic element of the Night Elves is the names of their sacred trees, Teldrassil, Nordrassil and Vordrassil, which strongly resemble the Norse world tree, Yggdrassil.⁴⁹

The Night Elves are deeply connected to nature and they are one of two races that are able to be Druids. Though from ancient Celtic societies, the Druids in the Warcraft universe are a much more aligned with the Romantic and New Age views of Druids than with historical reality.⁵⁰ They believe in the balance of nature and are caretakers of the wilderness:

Druids are the keepers of the world and masters of nature with a diverse array of abilities. They are powerful healers, capable of curing poisons and raising fallen comrades in the thick of battle. Druids also command nature's wrath, calling down ranged blasts of energy, summoning swarms of insects, or entangling their foes in the earth. But druids are also masters of the wild, able to shapeshift into a great bear, cat, or even sea lion, gaining their powers in combat or travel.⁵¹

While the game is influenced by high fantasy, these ideas of Druids as nature-aligned are part and parcel of the romanticising of the Celts that has occurred over the past three centuries. Aside from the high fantasy aspects and Japanese

⁴⁷ cgw_nov_2005-p3.jpg, at http://www.wowcentral.com/images/content/cgw_nov_2005-p3.jpg, accessed 18/03/09. The image is a scan of Jeff Green, 'World Of Warcraft: The Burning Crusade – To Outland and Beyond', *Computer Game World* (Nov 2005), p. 3.

⁴⁸ Thomas P. Kasulis, *Shinto: The Way Home* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), pp. 20-22.

⁴⁹ John Lindow, *Handbook of Norse Mythology* (Santa Barbara, Denver, Oxford: ABC-CLIO, 2001), pp. 319-322.

⁵⁰ Marion Bowman, 'Reinventing the Celts', *Religion* vol. 23, no. 2 (1993), pp. 147-156.

⁵¹ 'The Druid', *WorldofWarcraft.com*, at <http://www.worldofwarcraft.com/info/classes/dru>. Accessed 18/03/09.

architecture, the Night Elves and their religious beliefs may be classified as quite Pagan or Wiccan. While Modern Paganism has a large variety of differing beliefs and religious concepts, there are those in both Paganism and Wicca who hold to the belief of a single great goddess (aligned with the moon) and her horned god consort.⁵²

Taurens and Native Americans

The other Druidic people are the Tauren, who are based on the concept of the Minotaur from Greek mythology,⁵³ although the Tauren are more like cow-people than simply men with a bulls' heads. This group is based on the Native American peoples of the Great Plains. Originally a nomadic people, the Tauren have now settled in the lush plains of Mulgore, erecting tent towns and building some structures, as well as founding their capital, Thunder Bluff, on top of the four large bluffs found in Mulgore. Although a developer has not specified the cultures drawn upon for the Tauren, fans have made the connection, and the similarities between the imagery seen in the game and the clothing, weaving and structures of the Great Plains tribes are overwhelmingly visible.⁵⁴

While identifying the Tauren as Native Americans is not an entirely negative portrayal, there is the overall issue of their inclusion in the game. One of the quests given by the Tauren involves the summoning and killing of a creature called 'Arikara', a name of one of the Great Plains tribes. In the game, the name 'Arikara' is said to mean 'vengeance', yet the tribe name means 'horns' or 'elk'.⁵⁵ The overarching issue of the cultural appropriation, particularly in regard to colonial and post-colonial concepts of indigenous peoples, shall be discussed later.

While they can be Druids, the Tauren, along with Orcs, Trolls and Draenai, are also able to be Shamans. Again based on romanticised ideas, the World of Warcraft Shaman calls upon the nature spirits to aid them through offensive and defensive magic:

The wolves are not tamed, not as you might understand the word.
They have come to be our friends because I invited them. It is a part
of being a shaman. We have a bond with the things of the natural

⁵² Vivianne Crowley, *Wicca: Old Religion in the New Millennium*, revised Ed. (London: Thorsons, 1996, p. 1f.

⁵³ Apollodorus, *The Library of Greek Mythology*, trans. Robin Hard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 98.

⁵⁴ 'Trivia – Tauren', *WoWWiki.com*, at <http://www.wowwiki.com/Tauren#Trivia>. Accessed 19/03/09.

⁵⁵ John R. Swanton, *The Indian Tribes of North America* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1952), p. 273ff.

world, and strive always to work in harmony with them. Warlocks would term them spells, but we shamans simply term them calls. We ask, the powers we work with answer. Or not, as they will. I can call the snows, and wind, and lightning. The trees may bend to me when I ask. The rivers may flow where I ask them to.⁵⁶

Shamans also place Totems on the ground, which are essentially small Totem Poles that represent different elements (earth, air, fire, and water).⁵⁷ Shamans also learn to transform into a 'Ghost Wolf', and have the potential to summon 'Spirit Wolves'. While the use of Totems and Totem Poles does seem to continue the appropriation of the Native Americans, Shamans are sometimes referred to by different terms depending on their race. Troll Shamans, for example, are called 'Witch Doctors'.⁵⁸

Trolls, Mesoamerica and African-American Syncretic Religions

Spanning ten different zones or areas, with six different dungeons, the Troll civilisation is the most prevalent in Azeroth. Though named for a creature from Germanic mythology, the Warcraft Trolls are based on an amalgamation of South American architecture, Mesoamerican beliefs and a variety of African-American syncretic religions. Due to how widespread they are, the Trolls receive a lot of attention and story in the game, and much of it dealing with their beliefs and, as such, will be examined in depth in this paper.

While Trolls are a playable race for the Horde, this does not mean that the Trolls scattered across Azeroth are helpful, or even neutral to players. Rather, the majority of the Troll tribes are aggressively hostile to both Horde and Alliance. Indeed, it may be learned from the Horde-aligned Trolls that the other tribes of Trolls are extremely savage, engaging in human sacrifice and cannibalism, while those who have pledged allegiance to the Horde have given up these distasteful practices.⁵⁹ There are also different types of Trolls, often grouped by where they are found. Jungle Trolls, for instance, are mostly found in the jungles of Stranglethorn Vale,⁶⁰ while Sand Trolls are found in the desert

⁵⁶ 'Shamanism and nature worship', *WoWiki.com*, at http://www.wowwiki.com/Shamanism_and_Nature_Worship. Accessed 23/03/09.

⁵⁷ 'The Shaman', *WorldofWarcraft.com*, at <http://www.worldofwarcraft.com/info/classes/shaman/>. Accessed 23/03/09.

⁵⁸ 'Witch Doctor', *WoWiki.com*, at http://www.wowwiki.com/Witch_doctor. Accessed 23/03/09.

⁵⁹ 'Cannibalistic Cousins', *Wowhead.com*, at <http://www.wowhead.com/?quest=7844>. Accessed 23/03/09.

⁶⁰ 'Troll Compendium: Jungle Trolls', *WorldofWarcraft.com*, at <http://www.worldofwarcraft.com/info/story/troll/jungletrolls.html>. Accessed 22/05/09.

of Tanaris.⁶¹ It should be noted, however, that most of the Troll architecture is similar, regardless of the type of Trolls that reside in that area, though this may relate to the act of reusing textures by Blizzard rather than creating new architecture and motifs for each tribe or type of Troll. In the latest expansion of World of Warcraft, the Trolls found on the continent of Northrend have a quite different building style for most of their settlements.

The buildings and structures the Trolls reside in vary from simple huts to large stepped and tiered cities. Various elements from Mesoamerican architecture can be found in these larger settlements. Objects such as the serpent columns from the Temple of Warriors at Chichen Itza are found in both the functioning cities and ruins of Troll civilisation on the continents of Kalimdor and Eastern Kingdoms in Azeroth.⁶² Large stepped pyramids, like those found in the ruins of Mesoamerican civilisations, function as temples for the Trolls. There are also two specific motifs that are found throughout the Troll settlements, in a style similar to the stone-carved motifs found in Mesoamerica.⁶³ The entire zone of Zul'Drak in Northrend is a large tiered area, and bears substantial similarity to El Mirador in Guatemala.⁶⁴ It is also here that the general look of the Troll architecture changes. Rather than flat walls with motif repetition that is seen in the large Troll settlement of Jin'thalor, Zul'Drak has been further influenced by the South American civilisations. It is also likely that because Zul'Drak is such a large zone in the latest expansion, that the game developers sought to create a new look for the Troll civilisation that is encountered in Northrend. Aside from the large stone cities and structures, the Trolls reside in small huts, which reinforce the Caribbean influence as well as the primitiveness of this group.

There are six different dungeons, or instances, that focused around the Trolls and their civilisations. Two of these only have vague dealings with the religious beliefs of the Trolls, while the remaining four are quite involved with the spirituality of this group. There are two instances that are closely connected as they deal with the same deity, Hakkar the Soulflayer.

Over a thousand years ago the powerful Gurubashi Empire was torn apart by a massive civil war. An influential group of troll priests, known as the Atal'ai, called forth the avatar of an ancient and

⁶¹ 'Troll Compendium: Sand Trolls', *WorldofWarcraft.com*, at <http://www.worldofwarcraft.com/info/story/troll/sandtrolls.html>. Accessed 22/05/09.

⁶² Robert J. Sharer and Loa P. Traxler, *The Ancient Maya*, 6th Ed. (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), p. 571.

⁶³ Andrea Stone, 'Architectural Innovation in the Temple of the Warriors at Chichén Itzá', in *Mesoamerican Architecture as a Cultural Symbol*, ed. Jeff Karl Kowalski (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 303-309.

⁶⁴ Michael D. Coe, *The Maya*, 7th Ed. (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2005), p. 32f.

terrible blood god named *Hakkar the Soulflayer*. Though the priests were defeated and ultimately exiled, the great troll empire collapsed upon itself. The exiled priests fled far to the north, into the Swamp of Sorrows, where they erected a great temple to Hakkar in order to prepare for his arrival into the physical world.

In time, the Atal'ai priests discovered that Hakkar's physical form could only be summoned within the ancient capital of the Gurubashi Empire, Zul'Gurub. Unfortunately, the priests have met with recent success in their quest to call forth Hakkar - reports confirm the presence of the dreaded Soulflayer in the heart of the Gurubashi ruins.

In order to quell the blood god, the trolls of the land banded together and sent a contingent of High Priests into the ancient city. Each priest was a powerful champion of the Primal Gods— Bat, Panther, Tiger, Spider, and Snake -but despite their best efforts, they fell under the sway of Hakkar. Now the champions and their Primal God aspects feed the awesome power of the Soulflayer. Any adventurers brave enough to venture into the foreboding ruins must overcome the High Priests if they are to have any hope of confronting the mighty blood god.⁶⁵

The god Hakkar is generally considered to be based on the Aztec deity, Quetzalcoatl, due to the Quetzalcoatl meaning 'Feathered Serpent' which is how Hakkar is depicted.⁶⁶ This is not the only instance of Quetzalcoatl inspiring the Blizzard development team, as will be seen.

In Zul'Gurub, the player, and the group they are playing with, must battle against these now corrupted High Priests. During the encounter with them, the High Priests will call upon their deity and they are then transformed, either into the animal, or a hybrid of the animal (part animal, part humanoid). This may relate to deity possession which is found in the Afro-Caribbean religion of Vodun (Vodou, Voodoo). It also finds its way into another Troll dungeon, Zul'Aman, which was introduced in Patch 2.3, "The Gods of Zul'Aman". In Zul'Aman, however, the beings that players encounter are already at the hybrid stage of transformation. This may be due to the fact that animal gods are trapped inside Troll warriors:

Zul'jin has spent several years plotting behind Zul'Aman's walls. Furious at the Horde for allowing his hated enemies, the blood elves, to join its ranks, he eagerly embraced a scheme that the witch doctor

⁶⁵ 'Zul'Gurub', *WorldofWarcraft.com*, at <http://www.worldofwarcraft.com/info/underdev/zulgurub.html>. Accessed 25/05/09.

⁶⁶ J. Eric S. Thompson, *Maya History and Religion* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1970), p. 201.

Malacrass recently proposed: to seal the power of the animal gods within the bodies of the Amani's strongest warriors.⁶⁷

Both in Zul'Gurub and Zul'Aman the deities of the Trolls are being subjugated and this concept continues into the latest expansion and the Troll area of Zul'Drak. In Northrend, the Trolls are being attacked by the Lich King's undead forces, The Scourge. As a result, the Drakkari Trolls have taken to enslaving their deities, sometimes killing them, and drinking the blood of the divine, so as to gain more power in the hope of being able to win against The Scourge.

It is among these enslaved and slain deities that the goddess Quetz'lun is found. Visually identical to the god Hakkar, Quetz'lun also bears a name similar to Quetzalcoatl. So, while the feathered-serpent figured used for both these deities may not be entirely similar to the iconography of Quetzalcoatl, the name of the second deity does indicate that Blizzard has been inspired or influenced by this important Mesoamerican deity.⁶⁸ Aside from one of the Zul'Aman deities bearing a striking resemblance to an image from the *Codex Borbonicus*,⁶⁹ Quetzalcoatl is the only real world deity the Troll deities can truly be linked to in the game. There is a table-top role-playing game version of the computer game that names various Haitian Vodoun deities as Troll deities,⁷⁰ but these do not appear in World of Warcraft. Rather, it would seem that the Troll deities are generally only animal spirits. In Zul'Gurub there is Bat, Spider, Snake, Panther, and Tiger; Zul'Aman has Bear, Eagle, Lynx, and Dragonhawk (a creative fantasy animal of Blizzard's); and in Zul'Drak Snake, Polar Bear, Snow Leopard, Mammoth, Rhino, and Wind Serpent (the name given to the Quetzalcoatl-like feathered-serpent) are found.

For the most part, World of Warcraft is only just beginning to be examined. There are some scholars writing about the game and its social aspects. One such study is the *Dedalus Project*, which surveys MMO players

⁶⁷ '2.3.0 Patch Notes', *WorldofWarcraft.com*, at

<http://www.worldofwarcraft.com/patchnotes/patch2p30.html>. Accessed 25/05/09.

⁶⁸ Mary Miller and Karl Taube, *The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Mexico and the Maya: An Illustrated Dictionary of Mesoamerican Religion* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993), p. 141f.

⁶⁹ 'Akil'zon', *WoWWiki.com*, at <http://www.wowwiki.com/Akil'zon>. Accessed 25/05/09 and 'Codex Borbonicus', *Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc.*, at http://www.famsi.org/research/graz/borbonicus/img_page11.html. Accessed 25/05/09.

⁷⁰ 'World of Warcraft – the Loa Gods Lore', *BlizzPlanet.com*, at http://www.blizzplanet.com/blog/comments/world_of_warcraft_-_the_loa_gods_lore/. Accessed 25/05/09.

and publishes demographic information online.⁷¹ There are also those who are writing about the content of the game, though not really in any depth. Although this paper has not examined the entirety of the game, nor been able to discuss in great detail its various areas, research into the religious inspirations behind the game is something that will be taken further in coming years. Aside from just exploring where Blizzard Entertainment has found its inspiration, it is also necessary to analyse the effects of the appropriation of certain cultures, and the way the information they are using has been implemented.

First, there is the issue of real world combined with fantasy inspiration, which can be seen explicitly in the religion of the Trolls. Two deities are directly inspired by a single real world deity of the Mesoamerican peoples, Quetzalcoatl, while the remainder are merely animal deities. This is not to say that the Mesoamericans did not have animal deities, but their gods were more than that. By only having animal spirits as the gods of the Trolls, and combining them with iconic architecture and an important deity, there is a significant mixture of real world information and creative fantasy, and it impacts the religious imagination of the people engaging with this created universe. Perceptions of the cultures on which the Trolls and other peoples in the game are based on can potentially be transformed by the game's presentation of them. This can be seen on the Wikipedia style sites, where, on pages about certain in-game deities, players make speculations about who their real world inspiration might have been:

Some aspects of Eonar's character and powers appear to be based upon the Greek goddess Demeter, the sister of Zeus who presided over agriculture and the harvest. As with Elune and the Earthmother, such an association would class Eonar as a 'Great Goddess' figure.⁷²

When there are such clear examples of real world religious inspiration for some of the beings in the Warcraft universe, it can be difficult to discern the inspired from the created.

This also ties into another area that one scholar has already begun to explore, the colonial and post-colonial attitudes and perceptions that can be seen in the game. While Jessica Langer only really looks at the playable races in World of Warcraft, notably the Horde races, she does note that there is a significant difference between the inspiration for both Horde and Alliance. The Alliance are made up of 'white' people and inspired by cultures that "are often considered, condescendingly, by American society to be 'model minorities'

⁷¹ Nick Yee, 'The Daedalus Project: The Psychology of MMORPGs', *The Daedalus Project*, at <http://www.nickye.com/daedalus/>. Accessed 24/06/09.

⁷² 'Inspiration and Speculation – Eonar', *WoWWiki.com*, at http://www.wowwiki.com/Eonar#Inspiration_and_Speculation. Accessed 26/05/09.

who remain somewhat outside of society but contribute to it positively rather than negatively”, namely the East Asian influence on the Night Elves.⁷³ The Horde are generally based on minorities who are marginalised in American society, such as Mexicans and Native Americans, who have been appropriated in the creation of the Trolls and Taurens. The portrayal of these groups of people is also quite stereotyped:

All of these factors combine to make an environment that is stereotypically, but not authentically, Native: to borrow a phrase from Bhabha’s theory of mimicry as a method of colonial control, it is “*almost the same, but not quite*” [italics in original].⁷⁴

Langer does not examine the Trolls outside what is found in the Horde aligned settlements and tribes. Nevertheless, the Trolls are also deeply stereotyped, engaging in the human sacrifice and general savagery that is often attributed to pre-colonial South America.

Another question to pose is, why have the minorities portrayed in this created universe not spoken out about their depiction? This may relate to lack of exposure to the game. Although World of Warcraft has been released in a substantial number of countries, India and her neighbours are not among them. Only recently has Blizzard opened ‘Latin America’ realms, however, the people playing on those realms are most likely not new players and thus have already encountered the appropriated content. This may relate to a comment made by Langer in an interview about her research:

During the course of researching and writing your own chapter, did you uncover anything that caught you off guard - anything surprising or unexpected?

Hmm. That’s a good question. I’m not sure anything did, but I think that’s because I went into the whole thing without any specific expectations. Although one thing that has surprised me about the reception of this research, when I’ve presented it to different groups of people, is just how resistant some people are to seeing some of the stereotypes and some of the cultural appropriation I’ve written about. Of course, I don’t expect everyone to agree with my conclusions! But I’ve encountered some people who react very badly, even angrily, to the idea that even though *WoW* is a world of its own, the cultures of the different races are often drawn from real-world

⁷³ Jessica Langer, ‘The Familiar and the Foreign: Playing (Post)Colonialism in World of Warcraft’, in *Digital Culture, Play, and Identity: A World of Warcraft Reader*, eds Hilde G. Corneliussen and Jill Walker Rettberg (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), p. 89f.

⁷⁴ Langer, ‘The Familiar and the Foreign’, p. 97.

subjugated cultures, and some of the things drawn from them are stereotyped in quite a negative way.⁷⁵

Indeed, this idea of in-game races corresponding to actual living cultures and religions could be potentially confronting to those who stereotype the Alliance as being good and wholesome while the Horde are believed to be evil.⁷⁶

Conclusion

World of Warcraft is a vast and sprawling game, with hours upon hours of content to experience and explore. This paper has sought to examine game's various people and cultures and analyse where in the real world the developers have found their inspiration for them. While it has not been possible to examine all of the cultural appropriation in the game, significant areas have been discussed: the world-shaping mythology that is used and the pre-Christian inspiration for deities; the modern fiction that has also been drawn upon in the story of this created world; and the pre-colonial societies and their stereotyped religions. Combined with this examination of the game's content, issues arising from that content and its real-world inspiration have also been briefly discussed. As the field of computer game studies expands and MMOs like World of Warcraft are analysed, greater discussion about these issues will occur, fostering further insights into these created worlds and the impact they can have on the religious imagination of those interacting with them.

⁷⁵ Lisa Poisso, '15 minutes of Fame: WoW From the Ivory Tower', *WorldofWarcraft.com*, at <http://www.wow.com/2008/07/08/15-minutes-of-fame-wow-from-the-ivory-tower/>. Accessed 26/05/09.

⁷⁶ Edward Castronova, 'The Horde is Evil', *Terra Nova: A Weblog About Virtual Worlds* (24 December, 2005), at http://terranova.blogs.com/terra_nova/2005/12/the_horde_is_ev.html. Accessed 28/06/09.