

A Brave New World:

Allusions and Popular Culture References in the World of WarCraft

A Collaborative Analysis

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It has been said that imitation is the greatest form of flattery. Well, the developers at Blizzard decided to flatter many movies and personas by imitating and referencing them in the game World of Warcraft. Throughout the world of Warcraft, there are many people and places that resemble or are almost exact replicas of icons that have been seen throughout the real world through television, movies and books.

Since the game is enormous in scale, so too are the amount of references to basically anything famous. The references lie anywhere between the obscure, a possible relation to Fraggie Rock, and the obvious, a definite representation of *The Shawshank Redemption*. The finding of these references took a combination of internet research, dumb luck and intuition to connect the in-game quest or item to a real world media icon.

The Eastern Plaguelands, a place that used to be known for its PvP towers and ghosts and ghouls, also contains the first of many references. Caretaker Alen, just outside Light's Hope Chapel, says every once in a while, "I should have taken the translucent pill." What Caretaker Alen says is a reference to the Wachowski Brothers film called *The Matrix*. In that movie the main character chooses a Red Pill, which frees him from *The Matrix*, over a Blue Pill, which lets him remain in the world he always knew. Caretaker Alen is inferably drunk all the time, so maybe the translucent pill refers to water or some transparent drink. Caretaker Alen also declares that he, "Comes from the land down under...where women plague and men sunder." This quote is a reference to the song, "Land Down Under" by Men at Work. The real words are "...where women glow and men plunder", which is similar to what Caretaker Alen says, but Caretaker Alen's words relate to his habitat of the Eastern Plaguelands. Caretaker Alen also alludes to Gilligan's Island when he tries to begin a story, "Just sit right back and you'll hear a ta... *hic* a tai... *hic* a tiiii *hic* Damnit!" This line, or half line, is from the very beginning of the theme

song from Gilligan’s Island. This reference is probably introduced because Caretaker Alen, despite his name, is supposedly inebriated at all times and trying to tell a story or sing a merry song is a way to express that.



Figure 1.1 Argent Dawn Caretaker Alen makes a variety of references and allusions, clockwise from upper-left: Matrix reference to the “translucent pill,” attempt to tell the tale of a fateful trip, Men at Works “Land Down Under” *a la* WarCraft.

The next area of interest is Un’Goro Crater. This secluded location contains a bevy of television and Nintendo references. First of all Un’Goro itself is, according to The Easter Eggs Archive, a reference to the television show, Land of the Lost. It is a “steep walled valley filled with dinosaurs”, which is like the Valley into which Marshal, Will and Holy fell into. Un’Goro also holds references to Marshal, Will and Holy with NPC’s called Williden Marshal and Hol’anyee Marshal, who stand in Marshal’s Refuge, the almost creature-free sanctum of Un’Goro crater.



Figure 1.2 A fully explored map of Un’Goro Crater

The only harmful creatures that exist inside of Marshal’s Refuge are called Bloodpetal Pests, who two NPC’s have dedicated their lives to destroying. Those NPC’s are Larion and Muigin, in-game references to the famous Super Mario Bros. from Nintendo’s line of games. Larion is dressed in red and blue, a visual reference to Mario, and Muigin is clad in green and blue and based upon Mario’s brother Luigi. These are not the only Nintendo characters in

Un’Goro Crater though. Hyrule’s fabled hero appears in Un’Goro crater in the form of a short gnome named Linken. Linken is the representation of Link, the hero of time and defeater of Gannondorf. He has a quest chain that entails getting Linken’s Training Sword, and his memory back, and an eventual quest reward of Linken’s Boomerang. Also from The Legend of Zelda is Dodongo, according to the Easter Egg Archive, in the form of Dadanga, a Kodo at the entrance of J.D. Collie’s cave, who has a dislike of smoke, just like Dodongo. Also within Un’Goro crater is an NPC named Spraggle Frock, a possible representation of the kids show Fraggles Rock.

The NPCs throughout the world that help everyone, like the zeppelin engineers and innkeepers, also hold references to real world things. In tribute to one of Alfred Hitchcock’s most celebrated films, Psycho, the people at Blizzard have named the innkeeper in the Undercity, Innkeeper Norman, and the innkeeper in the Sepulcher is named Innkeeper Bates. Norman Bates is the psychotic killer from the movie “Psycho” who owns a motel called the Bates Motel. So calling the innkeepers, who technically own the resting stops for players at the Undercity and the Sepulcher, Norman and Bates, creates a nice tie to both the character and his profession.



Figure 1.3 Innkeepers Norman and Bates pay homage to the Hitchcock thriller *Psycho*

Another NPC with a name relating to their occupation is the zeppelin master in Tirisfal Glades, Hin Denburg. According to the Thottbot.com page, “LZ 129 Hindenburg was a German zeppelin. Along with its sister-ship LZ 130 Graf Zeppelin II, it was the largest aircraft ever built. During its second year of service, it was destroyed by a fire while landing at Lakehurst Naval Air Station in Lakehurst, New Jersey, USA, on May 6, 1937. Thirty-six people died in the accident, which was widely reported by film, photographic, and radio media.” It is ironic that an NPC named Hin Denburg is running a zeppelin company because of the epic failure that was the original Hindenburg.



Figure 1.4, Hin Denburg, and his infamous namesake, the LZ 129 Hindenburg

Along with Innkeeper Norman, the Undercity also has a reference to the club where the first rule is that you can never talk about it. Fight Club is seen in the Undercity in the War Quarter, manifested in the shape of two warriors fittingly named Tyler and Edward. To add to this, Blizzard even threw in an NPC named Marla Fowler and Chloe Curthas. Tyler Durden, played by Brad Pitt in the movie, is the other personality inside the mind of the Narrator, played by Edward Norton. Marla Singer is the “love interest” in the movie, played by Helena Bonham Carter, so that is where Marla Fowler comes from. Chloe is a cancer patient that is about to die, in the movie, so having a character named Chloe as an undead NPC is ironic and sensible.



Figure 1.5 , The Undercity's own *Fight Club*, the names are a combination of actor and character names from the film.

There are hundreds upon thousands of in-game references and “Easter eggs”, so a compilation of a few of the more famous ones is in order. In Stranglethorn Vale, there is an old man at a place called Hemet's Expedition, and the NPC is Hemet Nelsingwary, a scrambling of Ernest Hemingway. Ernest Hemingway often sought solitude and placing Hemet Nelsingwary in the outskirts of Stranglethorn Vale makes the connection evident. There is a server called Area 52 that players can join and begin a character. Area 52 is a reference to *Men in Black*. In the quest, “Cuergo's Treasure”, a reward for defeating the five looters that spawn is a treasure chest, containing within “Cuergo's Gold with Worm”, which is an obvious allusion to Jose Cuervo Tequila. In a little hut north of Steamwheedle Port, there is an NPC owl flying about, named O'Reily. This could be a reference to O'Rly owl, or Bill O'Reilly. As mentioned in the introduction, there is a quest named the Scrimshank Redemption, which alludes to the book by Stephen King and the movie starring Tim Robbins and Morgan Freeman. While the quest contents have nothing to do with the movie or the book, the title is a clear reference. In the Outlands, within the Lower City, is an NPC labeled as a <Socialite> with the name Haris Pilton. It is quite obvious that this is a direct representation of the Hilton heiress, Paris Hilton, as she has

a dog named Tinkerbell. What makes her reference ironic is that she vends alcohol and the real Paris Hilton was thrown into jail for drunk driving.



Figure 1.6 Haris Pilton, and Tinkerbell a far cry from their real-world namesakes.

It is easy to see that not all of the magic and in-game environments in World of Warcraft are fictitious and fabricated solely for the game. The real world references prove that iconic and widely known people, places and things are so popular and influential that a multi-billion dollar corporation like Blizzard would inject them into their game. As Krzywinska said in here article “World Creation and Rhetorics of Myth in World of Warcraft”, “Having a material presence in this fictional world along-side other players with whom we interact raises all kinds of questions of a philosophical nature about the relationship between fantasy and reality.” In World of Warcraft, the barrier between reality and fantasy is crossed many times with in-game references and even looking at the /played can cross the boundary. Real world icons in popular video games

crosses a boundary that, once it disappears and technology engulfs reality, will make one think to themselves, “I should have taken the translucent pill.”

Krzywinska directly addresses the problem raised by these popular culture references: the game world’s cohesiveness and feel of being a separate reality is upset. The game is supposedly set in a different world where knowledge of human reality does not exist. It is an escape of sorts and as such allows role playing and immersion. While some players pay no mind to outside popular culture references or even enjoy them, others may feel that the quality of their game experience is lowered by this sudden jerk back to reality.

On one hand, many World of Warcraft players react positively to popular culture references. They are widely unknown unless researched or discovered in game. In an interview a character named Evilkurtcobain had the following to say about popular culture references:

“You don’t really know they’re there, you know, and then they just pop out at you. Like the other day, I was in Un’Goro, and a gorilla dropped a barrel. At first I didn’t think anything of it, but then I thought hey, that’s no ordinary gorilla! It’s Donkey Kong!” (Evilkurtcobain, personal communication, 2008)

Furthermore, most of the references are cleverly-placed or witty. Players take enjoyment in knowing where a reference comes from or seeing how the developers worked the reference into the game. Evilkurtcobain felt that “they’re usually funny” and further said that he “couldn’t see them affecting the experience negatively unless you were a die-hard role-player” (Evilkurtcobain, personal communication, 2008).

Conversely, there exist a minority of players who take issue with the outside popular culture references. These players see the references as a hindrance to their game play experience; they disrupt the feel of worldliness and do not allow the escape from reality they so

desire. Like Evilkurtcobain said, these players are mostly role-players who feel that any break in character or break in consistency of the game world is detrimental to their enjoyment. In order to gain a perspective from these players, one can log into a role-playing server and speak with them directly. Several players were happy to comment on popular culture references, but they were also careful to stay in character. For example, a player named Ssjannefrank said, "I left Earth many years ago in a Saiyan Space Pod to come to Azeroth (it's in a Saiyan's blood to conquer, you know), and I genuinely hate being reminded of that puny planet. Kakarot should have destroyed it when he had the chance" (Ssjannefrank, personal communication, 2008). Another player named Colannan was willing to break character for the interview, stating the following:

"I really love this game, and the RP community on this server is great. However, when I see a reference to *Silence of the Lambs* or *Star Wars*, I feel like I can't justify it to my character. I can't ignore it because I know what it means, so it takes me out of the mindset of my Dwarven hunter and puts me back into the real world. It doesn't interrupt my game play; it only interrupts my thinking" (Colannan, personal communication, 2008).

For players like these two, the inclusion of popular culture references indeed detracts from their enjoyment of World of Warcraft. However, for others the popular culture references within the World of Warcraft are among the worlds many attractions. Demarion, on US server Anub'Arak said "It's not often games manage to make enough allusions, in an artistic enough way to be enjoyable. Some times it takes calling Hai'Shalud with a fumper and killing him to remind you you're playing a game." (Demarion, personal communication, 2008) Demarion was referring to a giant elite worm in the Bone Wastes, whose entire questline pays homage to Frank Herbert's *Dune* series, in which the great worms of Arrakis are to the natives as Shai'Halud, and summoned with "thumpers."

The *Dune* novels were written in the mid to late 1960's. Other references range from the 80's Mario Brothers, to Paris Hilton and her dog Tinkerbelle, and their combined continuous inebriation. By doing this Metzen has effectively created a way to entertain people of every age, and in many cases bring people together. Samureye (age 26) of the US Icecrown, who happens to play in the same guild as his mother, Chinna, said that the references to various generations popular culture icons have served as a learning point, and a bridge between generations. Chinna said "it makes the game feel a little more mature, I can laugh about things that I enjoyed as a child, and bond with my son over 'the real slim shady.'" (Chinna, personal communication, 2008) Other quotes from the pair include "Mom can you make me dinner" during a guild raid in Karazhan, and "[Name Withheld] Did you take out the garbage? Otherwise that phoenix is mine." After a winning roll for the Ashes of Al'ar mount from Sunstrider in Tempest Keep instance.

In any case, one can safely assume that the majority of the player base either enjoys popular culture references or at least thinks nothing of them. If there were significant backlash from anything but a vocal minority, Blizzard would be forced to consider removing them altogether. On the contrary, the references seem to be embraced both by players and by developers. There are several player-created websites that keep track of these references, and the Blizzard developers provide places for players to discuss them on the official World of Warcraft forums. The references appear to be a positive addition to the game world, adding hidden humor and depth for those fortunate enough to pick up on them. To the "die-hard role-player," however, they can force the player's mindset from their character's head into their own, causing annoyance rather than a laugh. Nonetheless, the popular culture references are here to stay.

Works Cited

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