

Living, Charming, Epic

The World of Warcraft Aesthetic

By Damon Chandler

The incredible success of Blizzard Entertainment's *World of Warcraft*, a Massively Multiplayer Online Role-playing Game (MMORPG) with over 10 million international subscribers, can be attributed to many factors: a loyal fan base of the already popular *Warcraft* series, innovative gameplay, immersive lore, an engrossing gameworld, and even good timing. Throughout my experience as a *World of Warcraft* player and my time reading about other games of the MMORPG genre, I have seen numerous criticisms of *World of Warcraft's* simplistic graphics. Upon its launch in the fall of 2004, *World of Warcraft's* graphics were less advanced than the industry's standard at the time. More than three years later, it remains one of the most popular games, despite few changes in graphics amidst the fast pace of the industry. *World of Warcraft* features very basic lighting effects with no real time shadows, minimal textures, simple models, and no advanced physics. Yet, despite all of these shortcomings in the realm of computer graphics, it reigns as the most successful MMORPG in the history of the genre. This paper will focus on *World of Warcraft's* artistic style: how it evolved, why it stands out, and why it played an enormous role in the game's success.

In order to understand how Blizzard crafted such a dynamic world with a cast of memorable characters, it is necessary to look at the scope of the entire series. Although *World*

of *Warcraft* is Blizzard's most popular game yet released (perhaps until the much anticipated *Starcraft 2 hits the shelves*), its predecessors received wide acclaim and earned Blizzard its fame. The lore of *Warcraft* dates back to Blizzard's first release in 1994, *Warcraft: Orcs and Humans*, which sold more than 1 million copies (Daly, 2003). It introduced a Tolkienesque gameworld full of mythical creatures, magicks and romantic settings. At this point, the company only consisted of a dozen or so employees. With this new success, Blizzard could expand its development team, recruiting new members such as designer Chris Metzen and art director Samwise Didier. These new talents helped produce and release *Warcraft II: Tides of Darkness* in just one year after its predecessor selling more than 3 million copies (Daly, May 31, 2008). It was during its development that the recognizable characters, lore and aesthetic style were first evolved. With this release the Blizzard team deviated from the generic portrayal of Azeroth's mythical creatures, and introduced their own interpretations and unique creations.



(1.a)



(1.b)

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Above are examples from the *Warcraft II* manual artwork, including (1.a) the newly introduced troll axethrower and elven archer, by Chris Metzen along with (1.b) a goblin demolition team. Figure (1.b) in particular illustrates the art department's shift towards a cartoonish style in its infancy. As well as visual improvements, developers began forming unique cultures and personalities among the races through use of audio. The troll's dialogue mentions voodoo in a Jamaican accent, while the Dwarven demolition team barks at the player in Scottish accents.

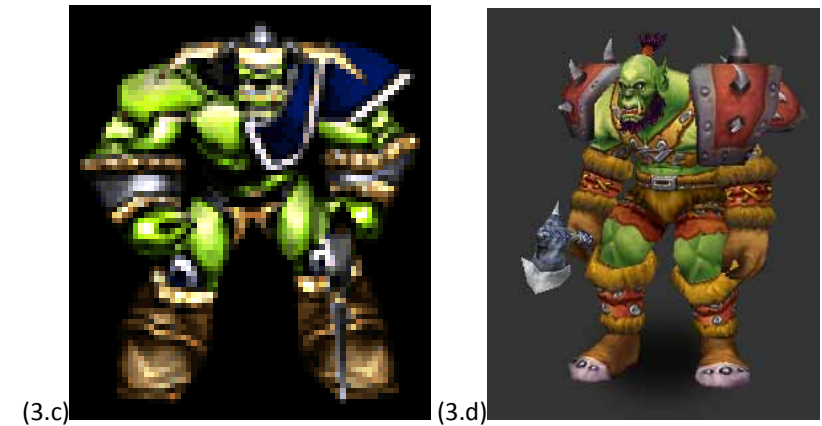
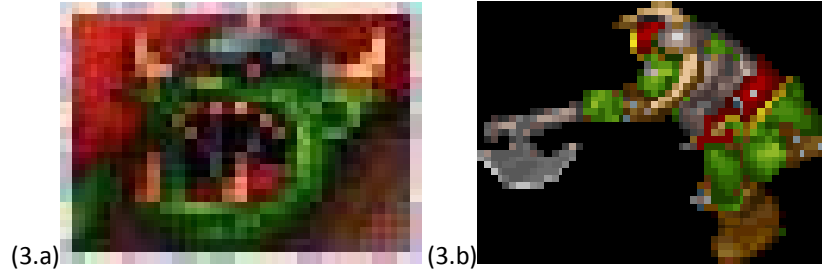


(2) Concept painting of a troll by artistic director Samwise Didier. Image: blizzard.com

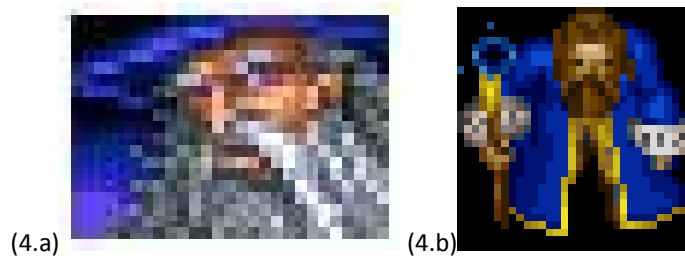
Moving on to *Warcraft III: Reign of Chaos* and the expansion *The Frozen Throne*, Blizzard shifted to the 3D stage. With more capable technology, the developers could give the characters more personality and distinct culture through more detailed symbology. Didier's concept painting, Figure (4), shows how drastically the characteristics that define trolls had changed by the release of *Warcraft III*. The images seen in Didier's shadow priest painting, such as the runes, skulls and doll, call to mind characteristics of voodoo and shamanism. Blizzard's artists have

used symbology like this to give their characters history and ideologies inspired by pre-existing ideas. In *World of Warcraft*, other examples include: the Tauren and their peaceful, animistic culture in the style of Native American tribes as well as the centaurs' nomadic, warlike lifestyle and names (e.g. Khan Dez'hepah) associated with the ancient Mongolians. The residents and landscapes of Azeroth have become so rich and engrossing that *Warcraft* stand out from every other strategy and MMO game. Graeme Clark of GameSpy calls this charm "the zug zug factor" (Qtd. in Daly, 2003). The "zug zug factor" describes all of Blizzard's subtle elements of humor added to the games, such as each race's unique jokes, the dozens of pop-culture references, exploding sheep, and the caricature-like qualities of many Azeroth's creatures like goblins. Programmer Frank Pearce stated, "We just wanted to make a fun game we could play" (Qtd. in Daly, 2003).

While the new technology allowed for more stylistically detailed characters and environments, Blizzard did not take advantage of it to make them more realistic. As the technology improved over the development of the *Warcraft* series, the graphics improved, but many aspects remained the same. As can be seen in Figure (3), artists evolved cartoonish proportions of the Orc's body as well as illustrative representations of his musculature. These features work well in the context of their equally cartoonish surroundings.



The progression of the Orc Grunt character over (a) *Warcraft: Orcs and Humans* (b) *Warcraft II: Tides of Darkness* (c) *Warcraft III: Reign of Chaos* and (d) *World of Warcraft* images: wowwiki.com



The progression of the a wizard or mage type character over (a) *Warcraft: Orcs and Humans* (b) *Warcraft II: Tides of Darkness* (c) *Warcraft III: Reign of Chaos* and (d) *World of Warcraft* images: wowwiki.com

Now that we understand how the content of *World of Warcraft* was evolved, we can discuss how the developers adapted a distinctive visual style to suit it. Some gamers call *World of Warcraft's* graphics “ugly” and Blizzard “lazy” for releasing “directx 7 era” material. However, I would argue that Blizzard’s choice in artistic direction was quite deliberate. First of all, the style continues on the path of cartoonish rendering that was started with *Warcraft III*. Second, it is the perfect solution for two potentially major problems in the reception of an MMORPG: performance and the paradoxical “uncanny valley,” which I will explain later.

The most obvious of these problems is the issue of performance. In a multibillion dollar industry that is video game development, a larger audience of gamers that a product naturally means a greater potential of customers. If users need a high-end gaming rig to run the game properly, few players will be able to commit to a monthly subscription. The MMORPG, *Vanguard: Saga of Heroes* (2007), failed for this very reason as it required a powerful machine and a hefty 20 Gb of disk space to run. Even in the genre of First-person Shooters (FPS), where carnage is most appreciated in the most cutting edge graphics, possibly the most technically impressive game to date, *Crysis* (2007), did not do as well as *Team Fortress 2* (2007), also an FPS, despite *Crysis's* numerous awards and excellent ratings (98% from PCGamer). *Crysis* barely sold 1 million copies whereas Valve’s Orange Box package reached 5 million (GameSpot, 2008). *Crysis's* technology, which requires a computer chip specifically for calculating physics to run at its full potential, was simply too far ahead of the average gamer.

Thus, even in 2004, Blizzard decided to maintain a less demanding graphics engine for the development of *World of Warcraft*. To make a game that mid-range computers could run,



5.a) *Crysis* (Crytek) flaunts the most advanced graphic technology available to consumers (those that can run it).

Image: www.thatvideogameblog.com



(5.b) *Team Fortress 2* (Valve Corporation) attracts a wider audience with a simpler yet effective cartoon-like style.

Image: www.gameriot.com

programmers and modellers had to minimize the amount of information need to be processed. The complexity of the character models were kept low by minimizing the polygon count, or the number of shapes required to form a 3D model. To compensate, artists used rich textures to add depth. The painted quality of these textures also gives the settings a feeling of a cartoon and “a combination of anime-inspiration and western comics” (Zenke, 2008). The artists’ efficient use of textures also makes up for the game’s inadequate lighting effects. A good example is the Earth Spirit, the black figure in Figure (). Take note of the white and, especially, the red highlights on the creature’s stone body. These highlights are static parts of the texture. They are not rendered in real-time or animated. However, knowing that this model would appear only in deserts and fiery dungeons, the developers added the red static highlights to the undersides of the model to make the desert appear to be reflecting off the shiny stone. Even



(6) Personal screenshot from *WoW* showing the simple models and the use of textures and pre-rendered lighting.

though the graphics were modest even by 2004 standards, the game possesses such a consistent feel that it doesn't seem to bother players that it isn't realistic. Numerous sources have described the style as having "aged well" (www.joystiq.com, WoW Forums, Zenke) and "beautifully" (*The Bronze Kettle*). This means that, although graphic capabilities have progressed far above that of *World of Warcraft*, the tightly designed style helps it age as artwork rather than obsolete technology.

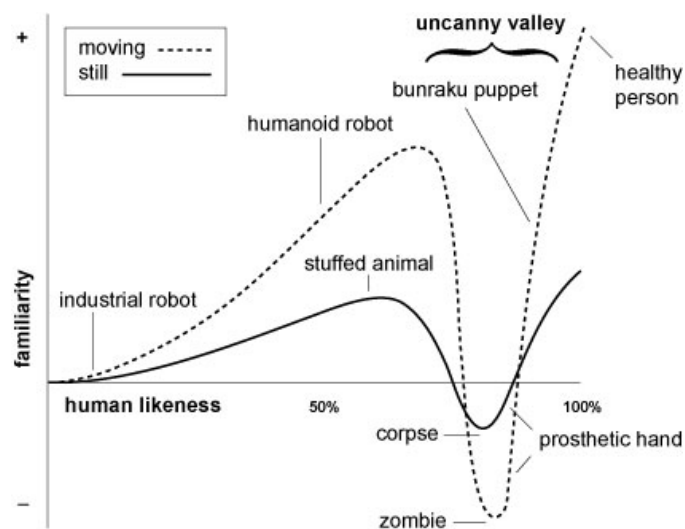


(7) Another personal screenshot shows how the elaborate textures make-up for the lack of advanced lighting effects.

Besides the obvious effort to make an easily playable game, the visual style owes to the attempt to avoid the paradox known as the "uncanny valley." The term was first coined in 1970 by Japanese roboticist, Masahiro Mori, to describe a phenomenon he noticed during his work

with humanlike robots (Gouskos, 2006.) The term has since been applied to computer graphics. As described in *The Bronze Kettle* (2008),

“The uncanny valley theory refers to the paradox of computer generated depictions of humans that seem less real and more “creepy” as they approach photorealism. When the image in question attempts to be realistic our brains will focus on the details that just aren’t right; like plastic-looking skin and hair, or weird eye-balls and false-looking teeth. When we’re shown a cartoon image, we compensate for the missing detail and the subject seems warm and lifelike, often even cute.”



(8) A graph of the familiarity of an image or figure as a function of likeness, illustrating the “uncanny valley” theory.

When comparing *World of Warcraft* with other MMORPGs such as *Lord of the Rings Online* (2007) and *Hellgate: London* (2007), 17 of the 22 respondents (to both *WoW* and *LotRO* forum surveys) preferred the “cartoony flavor” (“Tom”) of *Warcraft* over at least one of the two others. The others defended *LotRO* saying that *WoW*’s style is not appropriate for Tolkien’s



(9) The fluid animation and balance of detail and stylization help Ubisoft's *Assassin's Creed* (2007) avoid the "uncanny valley." Image: <http://www.gamespot.com/features/6153667/index.html>

world. "Chad" commented on *The Bronze Kettle* article, "[the graphic style] matches the look and feel of Middle Earth. How many of us, when we read through the books, picture Middle Earth in the WoW-style art? Most likely, not many." This is true, but *LotRO* could still be rendered in such a way that is stylistically realistic, as does Ubisoft's *Assassin's Creed* (2007), and not fall prey to the "uncanny valley." Since this is one of the biggest challenges of animators and artists, I do not pretend to offer the solution. However, the faces, although more realistically rendered, seem flat and unexpressive, almost puppet-like. This is due to the developers' attempt to mimic human faces by simulating the face's musculature rather than by use of textures. The former approach leads to nearly inevitable uncanniness.



(10) This screenshot of the *Lord of the Rings Online* character creation shows its realism but also its blank faces.

When asked, “why do you enjoy playing WoW?” it is difficult to think of anything better to respond with than, “it’s fun.” Truthfully, that is the reason most people play, and the reason a number of subscriptions equaling half the population of Australia were renewed last month. But when it is broken down, the brilliance behind *World of Warcraft* seems obvious. It is an alternate and beautiful world, with as much history as one cares to discover, that goes on living even when players log out, and keeps on growing via the work of the its exceptional artists and creators. It is the unique art that ties these elements together in a consistent gameworld which is both a pleasure to look at and to experience through play.

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