THE INFINITE FRONTIER: IMPERIALISM, FRONTERISM AND NOSTALGIA IN WORLD OF WARCRAFT

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Once a month, millions of people pay Blizzard Entertainment a $14.99 entrance fee to the *World of Warcraft*, answering the company’s call to “leave the real world behind and undertake grand quests and heroic exploits in a land of fantastic adventure” (Blizzard Entertainment, “New Milestone”; Blizzard Entertainment, “Game Guide”). When my research began in 2008, Blizzard reached a record 10 million players. Each of these players entered the world as a character they created by choosing one of two political factions, two genders, ten races and nine classes (Blizzard Entertainment, "New Milestone"). They could also customize their skin color, hair color, hair style and facial features. Any number of these characters can still be found daily exploring the various frontiers where the game is set. During their explorations, players complete quests, discover new lands and fight enemies in various landscapes, such as the snow-covered mountains of Dun Morogh, the Swamp of Sorrows, the rainforests of Stranglethorn Vale and the grassy plains of the Barrens, in order to gain honor, experience and gold.

*World of Warcraft* players start out from one of the world’s major cities, where they can train, buy or sell on the auction house and place items or gold in the bank. Like any major city
in the real world, these cities are densely populated and crowded with people conducting various errands, traveling from one place to another and meeting with other players. As players get farther from the cities, they are less likely to run into other players and must conduct their business through outposts located along the way. Players can also pick up quests at these outposts from non-player characters (NPCs), which usually assist the occupants of the outpost with their missions. Quests can include rescuing prisoners taken by enemies, collecting food by killing animals, exploring an enemy camp, or killing off rogue tribes of humanoids who are threatening the settlements.

World of Warcraft is its own world with its own politics, economy, races, classes and enough subscribers to populate a small country in the real world. Yet, it's only one of many virtual worlds created by games that are known as Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs).

To understand the term MMORPG, it is important to remember that it is made up of two parts: massively multiplayer online and role-playing game. The later portion of the term refers to a video game genre that has been popular since the beginning of gaming consoles. Role-playing games are games like the Final Fantasy series where a single player plays as a preset main character or a group of characters and progresses through a
predetermined storyline to accomplish a goal, like a character in a book. In MMORPGs, players play a role and progress through a storyline. But due to the massively multiplayer online nature of the game, their progression is rarely linear because there are many factors that influence game play. For example, in World of Warcraft, if a player is supposed to complete a quest to kill the chief of a certain town, but another player has just completed the quest, the player will find the chief already dead and need to complete a different quest while waiting for the chief to reset.

Another important aspect of the MMORPG is that the makers can constantly add new quests and new characters or continue the storyline. In the case of World of Warcraft, Blizzard constantly produces new updates for the game to fix problems, address concerns or add new material, often as a result of feedback from players who comment in official forums. This paper focuses on the original World of Warcraft, termed "Vanilla WOW" by veteran players, and the first expansion of the game, World of Warcraft: The Burning Crusade, but the game is significantly larger in scope than what is covered here. Since the first expansion in 2007, the game has been expanded three more times for a total of four expansions since the original was released in 2004. Each
expansion brought with it new material, new opportunities for advancement and new frontiers.

Clearly, the MMORPG is a dynamic world that players exist within. The world goes on even after they turn off their computers. Players can influence certain things like the outcome of their quests, but they do not determine the fate of the world on their own like they would in a traditional role-playing game. It is important to remember that even if a player cannot complete a quest or fails to defeat an enemy they can just try again. Therefore, the only way for a player to lose is to quit the game, and even then, the game continues because there are millions of others to carry on.

As of July 2013, World of Warcraft had 7.7 million subscribers, maintaining its position as the most popular MMORPG on the market (Kain). The game's reduction in subscriptions since 2008 is attributed to a number of factors including the age of the game, subscription costs and the popularity of new games in the genre. Games like Star Wars: The Old Republic, which gained a record 1 million subscriptions in three days, have increased competition in the MMORPG market. This growing market is expected to reach $2 billion in subscriptions by 2014 (Harding-Rolls). MMORPGs create entire societies within our real-life societies and millions of people are participating,
which make these games extremely important and relevant for study. Therefore, I think it is very useful to delve deeper into World of Warcraft, which remains the most popular MMORPG, in order to understand some of the reasons for this phenomenon and the implications it has for real-life American society.

Regarding what he terms the “exodus to the virtual world,” New Media scholar Edward Castronova suggests that players are attracted to virtual worlds because “the outer world has spent the last 500 years gleefully tossing all its systems of lore out the window. And now, the surprising early growth of synthetic worlds and their burgeoning competition with the Earth reveals that perhaps it was all a mistake” (275). In other words, each of these societies hold one thing in common: they contain some form of myth that attracts players because those players desire the myths that have been destroyed or marginalized through the processes of modernization. I believe this theory is especially true of World of Warcraft and by extension, World of Warcraft: The Burning Crusade, which both make use of a longstanding American myth, the Myth of the Frontier.¹ Therefore, although I

¹ Throughout this paper, I refer to the Myth of the Frontier as an American myth. Versions of this myth certainly run rampant in other societies, especially considering imperialism is not a uniquely American trait. However, in the past two centuries, I think America has co-opted, packaged and globalized this myth so that, in many ways, it has become the long-standing myth upon which our culture is based and by which other cultures view us. Of
believe there are infinite avenues for studying the world, I am particularly interested in the ways that the world perpetuates and alters the longstanding American Myth of the Frontier.

*World of Warcraft* provides a means for a kind of national nostalgia, but the attitudes surrounding this nostalgia reveal an ambivalence toward standard American ideologies that appears unique to this particular moment in history. In this paper, I would like to interrogate this seeming ambivalence to understand the ideology being presented and its meaning for the post-9/11 world.

I would like to begin my study by defining nostalgia, imperialism and frontierism in an American cultural studies context. Then, I will briefly show the role these concepts have played in the formation of American national myth from the Cold War until today. Although imperialism and frontierism have influenced American ideology from its inception, my goal in focusing this section on the last 60 years of American mythological development is to track changes to the myth of the frontier since America’s emergence as a superpower to provide a background for my analysis of *World of Warcraft*’s version of American myth, which makes up the next part of my paper.

_of course, my analysis and conclusions are somewhat applicable to colonizing societies as a whole._
Ultimately, I suggest that the myth propagated through *World of Warcraft* comes with some slight but significant alterations that allow the game to deconstruct and simultaneously promote the Myth of the Frontier, or the belief in “regeneration through violence” (*Gunfighter Nation* 12). I argue that performing frontier violence in a virtual world filled with uncertainties about enemies, goals and alliances leaves players with a sense that violence is somehow pointless but necessary. This ambivalence marks a growing sentiment toward American ideology that I believe surpasses the confines of this game and holds significance for American civilization.
II

Nostalgia is simply a desire for the past. However, the reasons why a person or society feels nostalgia and the ways in which they experience it are more complicated. In his study of nostalgia, David Lowenthal suggests that the nostalgist desires an “actual desertion from the present” (12). In many ways, nostalgia is a kind of melancholic refusal to relinquish a lost object and an attempt to rejoin something past. The assumption is that the nostalgist is dissatisfied with the present and believes the answer is in a previous experience. According to Lowenthal, this dissatisfaction is rooted in our postmodern condition, where “modernity has lost its charm” and “we shed tears for the landscape we find no longer what it was, what we thought it was, or what we hoped it would be” (8; 12). Of course, nostalgia can be purely personal or societal, meaning that similar feelings of nostalgia are experienced by groups of people in a society.

An example of societal nostalgia is imperialist nostalgia, which was first termed and observed by anthropologist Renalto Rosaldo in his work on the Philippines. Rosaldo defines imperialist nostalgia as the process by which “people mourn the passing of what they themselves have transformed” (69). Stanley Corkin offers a very useful “twist on Rosaldo’s term,” presented
in his study of 1960s Western films, where he explains that these films “mourn figures who are symbols of the past but who are also agents of empire” (219). Rather than mourning the passing of the native societies they have transformed, I think much of our popular culture demonstrates a kind of imperialist nostalgia that mourns the passing of opportunities for successful empire-building and domination that, in the name of progress, we ourselves have diminished. This nostalgia manifests itself in the variety of media used to transmit national mythology that remind us of our superiority and quell fears of displacement.

According to Richard Slotkin, national myth is created through “symbolic narratives” expressing the values of a culture’s ideology (Gunfighter Nation 5). The Myth of the Frontier, closely related to imperialism, is probably America’s most persistent national myth, embodying a good deal of our nation’s ideology. In Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in the Twentieth Century, Slotkin explains that the American Myth of the Frontier developed out of a history of emigration, separation and regression often born out of violence that always led to progress (11). Therefore, “the Myth represented the redemption of American spirit or fortune as something to be achieved by playing through a scenario of
separation, temporary regression to a more primitive or 'natural' state, and regeneration through violence” (Gunfighter Nation 12). Progress, according to American national myth, is intricately tied to violence. In his work, Slotkin demonstrates that a belief in regeneration through violence legitimated the conquering of the frontier and the displacement of the American Indians until the 1890s, when the closing of the frontier caused American progressivists to look outward for new territories and, eventually, perform frontier violence on an imperial stage (Gunfighter Nation 86). In short, the myths and ideas developed on the frontier carried over into 20th century, infiltrating both the political rhetoric and pop culture that supported America’s development into a superpower.

In order to better understand the importance of the Myth of the Frontier to American national identity, it seems useful to briefly track the development of the myth from the 1950s, when America first emerged as a superpower, and onward. Throughout this history, we can detect a potential pattern surfacing as Americans move from belief to doubt to unbelief to belief again. In the context of a possible cycle of belief, the versions of myth put forth by World of Warcraft, which I will later argue mark a transition to the “doubt” part of the cycle, gain more meaning. More so, it is not only useful but important that we
understand the ways myth has evolved and how this process molded myth into what it is today.

Belief in American frontierism was never stronger than it was in the 1950s, when the timeless appeal of the Myth of the Frontier was tested on the world stage. The Allies’ victory in World War II had confirmed the American belief that God favored America, and as a result, “American political, economic, and social values were advanced as the means to achieving a global utopia” and anti-communism gave Americans a global manifest destiny “to defend the free world from Communism, which Winston Churchill had identified as a ‘threat to Christian civilization’ in 1946” (Aronstein 60-1). In other words, Americans transferred what they did on the frontier to a global stage.

Naturally, Arthurian, Western and science fiction narratives abounded in the 1950s, when Americans were eager to view films that reaffirmed their superior values and new global role. Films like The Knights of the Round Table (1952), Prince Valiant (1954) and The Black Knight (1954) all promoted “Camelot and its knights as a proto-American ideal” (Aronstein 64). In these films, as in many other Cold War films, we see a clear distinction between a Christian good and a pagan evil that threatens the kingdom from inside and outside. Similarly, Westerns and science fiction provided a backdrop for frontier
myths to be put into action as American heroes fight savage enemies in space, on ranches or in deserts and defeat them in the name of progress. In this moment, following America’s great success, the idea of regeneration through progress seemed to hold a lot of truth, and the replications of the myth were more positive and idealistic then they ever would be again.

In 1960, the hopeful and optimistic America of the 1950s found its leader in President John F. Kennedy, who touted American myths and encouraged benevolent imperialism. In his 1960 Democratic nomination acceptance speech, Kennedy delivered his famed “New Frontier” speech, in which he claimed:

Today some would say those struggles are over—that all the horizons have been won, that there is no longer an American Frontier … But I tell you the New Frontier is here, whether we seek it or not. Beyond that frontier are uncharted areas of science and space, unsolved problems of peace and war, unconquered pockets of poverty and prejudice, unanswered questions of poverty and surplus … I am asking each of you to be pioneers on that New Frontier (qtd. in Corkin 233-4). Kennedy’s rhetoric spoke to America’s new global role and expanded the concept of the frontier beyond America’s borders into space, foreign countries and ideological territories. In
order to call Americans to global action, “Kennedy looks back to an idealized conception of the ‘frontier’ experience” (Corkin 234).

Kennedy’s rhetoric embodied the optimistic mood of the 1950s that Americans should and would play the hero on the global stage. However, America’s exact role in solving problems of peace and war was more troublesome, and in the early 1960s, movies reveal a struggle between Kennedy’s optimism and the realities of the Cold War.

In 1962, “the Western’s most significant year,” according to Michael Coyne, three Westerns marked a shift from belief to doubt in the American worldview: Ride the High Country, Lonely Are the Brave and The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance. Both Corkin and Coyne call these elegiac Westerns due to their somber messages. In John Ford’s The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance, a hero of an old Western tale, Ransom Stoddard, returns to his home town to attend his friend’s funeral and admits to a newspaper editor that his dead friend, Doniphon, was the true hero who killed the outlaw, Liberty Valance. However, the newspaper editor who hears his story refuses to print it, stating, “This is the West, sir. When the legend becomes fact, print the legend” (qtd. in Coyne 107). In other words, readers, viewers and, by extension, Americans prefer the comfortable lie
to the jarring truth. Each of these films involves some form of disillusionment where the Western hero is dead or dying and the victim of an inevitable modernization that has forever changed their way of life (Corkin 211).

Fittingly, the year of 1962 also saw the release of the quintessential epic Western *How the West Was Won*, which ended with the image of a sunset (Coyne 118). Together, the three elegiac Westerns and *How the West Was Won* suggested to their 1962 audiences that the romantic American past was gone. The sun had set on clear narratives of triumph, and some of those narratives were a lie. According to Coyne, “the genre had attained its pinnacle” in 1962 with four superb Westerns, each presented with a sort of finality on the subject, but the year also saw a shift in the dominant American view of myth, ideology and violent war (118).

In 1963, Kennedy’s assassination brought a brutal end to the optimism of early years, completed realists’ victory over American myths of progress and finalized the culture’s disillusionment. Within five years of Kennedy’s assassination, the nation erupted in turmoil that consisted of more “political assignations, violent racial discord and a costly, brutal Asian war” in addition to “a series of grotesque slayings” (Coyne
Overall, “in the 1960s America appeared to be drowning in blood” (Coyne 120).

In an attempt to quell the violence that swept the nation, President Johnson convened a National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence, which concluded in 1969 that America was an exceptionally violent nation and criticized the “myths by which Americans had rationalized their social violence” (Gunfighter Nation 556). Many Americans agreed with the commission and, for most of the 1960s and 1970s, demonstrated what Jean-Francois Lyotard terms “an incredulity toward metanarratives” (xxiv). As a result, Westerns became increasingly pessimistic and brutally violent (Coyne 124). After all, “a culture cannot blithely produce a self-congratulatory pageant similar to How the West Was Won in the midst of obscenities, and it was hard to cling to the concepts of American Exceptionalism and Manifest Destiny in the age of Manson and My Lai” (Coyne 122).

A film that captured 1960s America’s disenfranchisement was Sam Peckinpah’s Wild Bunch (1969). Peckinpah’s film chronicles the escapes of a gang of outlaws, the “Wild Bunch,” operating on the Texas/Mexican border during the Mexican Revolution. In the first action scene of the film, the Bunch rides into town disguised as American soldiers in order to rob a bank. The scene
escalates into a bloody shoot out between the Bunch and a group of bounty hunters with a parade of Temperance marchers caught in the crossfire. Once the remaining members of the Bunch escape, they realize their bags are filled with steel washers instead of the money they thought they stole. Immediately, the futility of the violence comes to the forefront and pervades the remainder of this notably violent movie. Additionally, the movie presents a disturbing image of children, who typically symbolize innocence. In the beginning of the film, we see a group of children torturing scorpions and ants while the Bunch enters their town. After the shoot out, the children play amongst the corpses and eventually cover the scorpion with burning straw. In the final action sequence, Pike, the leader of the Bunch, is shot by a woman and a small boy (Coyne 158).2 Clearly, the film characterizes the waning decades’ senseless violence, feelings of disillusionment and loss of innocence. Here, the myths of American exceptionalism and manifest destiny are shattered.


2 My entire synopsis of Wild Bunch borrows from Coyne’s own synopsis.
revealing “a history of deceit related to American foreign policy” (Aronstein 107). Following the Watergate scandal, Nixon’s subsequent impeachment and the induction of the unelected Gerald Ford into the presidency, Americans made the transition to complete unbelief, and many of the decade’s movies reflected the public’s postmodern worldview. According to Aronstein:

> Postmodernism, with its assumptions that society and its ‘truths’ are mere constructs, that the ‘essential self’ is the product and subject of ideology, and that cultural narratives function to mask the operations of power, paved the way for a new generation of writers and filmmakers who exploded narrative conventions, celebrated fragmentation, and reveled in pastiche (Aronstein 109).

Perhaps the best example of this national mood and the films of this decade is *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975).

Although *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* was a British film, its message, or lack thereof, drew a large American audience who knew all too well the myths constructed by Arthurian legends and stood ready to join in the film’s derision of the revered story. According to Aronstein, the film deconstructed myths of “national identity, benevolent
patriarchy, manifest destiny, and the promise of science and reason at the moment of their supposed origin” (Aronstein 100).

The film consists of a series of farcical episodes revolving around King Arthur and his recruited knights on a quest for the Holy Grail, all intended to ridicule Arthurian legend and its values. In a clear summary of the film’s main point, King Arthur eventually declares, “On second thought, let’s not go to Camelot, ‘tis a silly place.” The comedic nature of this 1970s version of Arthurian legend and its popularity in America reveals the cynicism that had swept the nation. Americans were not only disillusioned; they were prepared to deride their illusions and refused to participate in continued myth-making.

However, this moment of clarity, or perhaps confusion, did not last very long. By the late 1970s, Hollywood sensed Americans were “weary of protest and disillusionment, of moral quandries and ambiguous grays, and ready for the reassertion of good and evil” (Aronstein 117). One filmmaker by the name of George Lucas was prepared to comply. The first Star Wars film, aptly titled A New Hope (1977), marked the return of belief in American myths that had been lost in the previous decades. Lucas, conscious of the shift in the American mood, said, “I wanted to give young people an honest, wholesome fantasy life,
the kind my generation had. We had Westerns (and) pirate movies,” and he certainly succeeded (qtd. in Aronstein 117). After viewing Star Wars, one reviewer declared, “I believe may be the only proper response to Star Wars. I believe in Tinkerbell and flying nuns, prissy robots and talking lions, munchkins and King Arthur’s court” (qtd. in Aronstein 121). Lucas had rebuilt American myth in a galaxy far, far away from the tainted American West or troublesome foreign countries, but he successfully rebuilt myth nonetheless.

And who better than Ronald Reagan, a former Hollywood movie actor, to lead the nation in the rebuilding process? After an unsuccessful bid for the Republican nomination in 1976, Ronald Reagan was inaugurated to the presidency of a nation much more suited to accept his idealism on January 20, 1981. In his inaugural address, Reagan prophetically declared a new era in American society, stating:

We are not, as some would have us believe, doomed to an inevitable decline. I do not believe in a fate that will fall on us no matter what we do … We have every right to dream heroic dreams. Those who say that we are in a time when there are no heroes just don’t know where to look (Reagan).
Reagan refused to comply with the fatalism of the 1970s, arguing that American ideals and their sources were still very much alive in the United States. He offered a cynical nation “a veritable feast of optimism, seasoned by his restoration of America’s post-World War II vision of itself as a global City on the Hill,” and perhaps, “one of Reagan’s greatest triumphs is that he convinced Americans to agree with him” (Aronstein 118-9).

America’s renewed optimism is best illustrated by another George Lucas trilogy, Indiana Jones. Like Star Wars, the Indiana Jones trilogy is claimed by a variety of genres, namely the Western and Arthurian legend. Indiana Jones is a modern American knight fighting for the new Camelot against an empire of evil, mostly Nazis, in third world countries. When we first see Indiana Jones in Raiders of the Lost Ark (1981), he is a cynical, self-seeking archaeologist bent on recovering the Ark of the Covenant for personal gain. By the third film, The Last Crusade (1989), Jones must shed his cynical persona and recover his lost values and beliefs in order to complete his Grail quest. Aronstein says the message of the last Indiana Jones film, and ostensibly, the entire trilogy, is “America has failed because we have lost our religious and familial (read patriarchal) values … the Grail symbolizes the God that the
postmodern world has left behind" (132). Lucas’ message summarizes the mood of Reagan’s America. Society is failing because they have lost their beliefs in God, heroes and American exceptionalism, which made the United States a unique nation. In the 1980s, Hollywood worked to recover these myths. According to Richard Slotkin:

the nostalgia in these films is not only a fondness for the simplicity of old images but a yearning for lost innocence, regret for the condition or sentiment of belief that (we like to imagine) existed in simpler and ‘better’ times ... Myth is the language in which a society remembers its history, and the reification of nostalgia in the mass culture and politics of the 1980s is a falsification of memory (Gunfighter Nation 640, 655).

It should also be considered that underlying this quest for God, heroes and American exceptionalism is a quest for the masculine. In "The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War," Susan Jeffords shows how 1980s movies like Rambo (1982) and Missing in Action (1984) create a "remasculinization" or a "regeneration of the concepts, constructions, and definitions of masculinity" through violence that was most necessary in the post-Vietnam era when America was recovering from a loss in Vietnam and the feminizing influences of the anti-war movement (51). Though an in-depth discussion is outside the scope of this project, it is important to note that regeneration through violence is also a regeneration of masculinity that is only attainable by escaping the feminine confines of civilization into the Frontier. It is certainly possible that implied in the Myth of the Frontier, the idea that taming the wilderness through violence brings progress, is the notion that violence regenerates masculinity which brings progress. Given that World of Warcraft has a fairly large female player base, gender issues that arise in the game should, at some point, be evaluated.
Here, Slotkin weaves some skepticism into his language that I would like to adopt in my approach to myth from the 1980s and onward. A renewal of the Myth of the Frontier, or regeneration through violence, takes place here, but America’s belief in the 1980s version of the myth does not seem as naïve as it was in the 1950s. From the 1980s through the 1990s, I think we see belief that has been incurably influenced by previous doubts. Americans at this point understand their myths are, in fact, myths. Yet they choose to believe them anyway, revealing that myth cannot move from belief to doubt to unbelief and back again. Perhaps, once a society has passed through doubt and unbelief, it cannot return to belief unhindered. This idea remains at the forefront of my analysis of myth in the 1990s and 2000s.

At first glance, it appears, though unstable at times, a kind of belief in American exceptionalism and regeneration through violence continued through the 1990s. The presidents of the 1990s, George H.W. Bush and William Jefferson Clinton, had an unusual national situation in which to reinvigorate myth. Following the demise of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s, the United States emerged from the Cold War as “the world’s only remaining superpower,” and the presidents were left to deal with an increasingly complex world, still politically unstable but
with no clear enemy (Aronstein 193). Both Bush and Clinton proposed “new world orders” with America at the head, but each took a different approach. President George H.W. Bush led the United States into its role as a global policeman with wars like Desert Storm, designed to keep other countries’ aggression in check as well as renew a belief in America’s military superiority. Clinton also desired to highlight American leadership capabilities. But rather than a global police state, Clinton sought to “build a community of hope that will inspire the world” (Clinton). Clinton’s concept of community translates well into Terry Gilliam’s massive rewrite of the Arthurian tale in *First Knight* (1995).

Fittingly, Gilliam’s mid-1990s film, *First Knight*, is a very optimistic view of Camelot and its knights. Rather than presenting the demise of Arthur as the end of Camelot, Gilliam’s Lancelot takes Arthur’s place and establishes a new age in Camelot with Guinevere at his side following the Arthur’s death. Instead of focusing on the enemy within or extreme foreign dangers like most other filmic version of the tale, *First Knight* focuses on “how to maintain peace once the major (cold) war has been won—how to assure the continuation of order in the face of petty rebellions and dictatorial tyrants” (Aronstein 198). In an age where the clear, looming evil has already been defeated,
this version of Camelot has more resonance with viewers. Yet, its suggestion that Camelot ignore the sins and betrayals of its knights and move past its tragedy in the name of peace is an intriguing one. Perhaps Clinton’s regime uses old “city on a hill” exceptionalism myths to cast a new vision of America, benevolent and humanitarian. But rather than addressing previous, dangerous versions of those myths, 1990s America simply adopted the good and covered the bad in order to enjoy a decade of peace.

However, in recent years, numerous scholars have touted the decline of American ideology, which, according to Slotkin, holds the Myth of the Frontier as its heart. Specifically, globalization scholars Samuel Huntington and Thomas Friedman have suggested that America faces an identity crisis of sorts. While Friedman suggests 9/11 as the event that shattered America’s belief in its ideological superiority, Huntington argues that the fracturing of American identity is the fault of “intellectuals and publicists” who, beginning in the 1960s, “in the name of multiculturalism ... have attacked the identification of the United States with Western civilization” (305). Regardless of cause, both scholars certainly agree that the questioning of American myth, also noted by Slotkin and Castronova, has led to a national identity crisis. Without an
identity, the real world remains in a precarious state because, as Castronova points out, more and more people are retreating to a virtual one where they can find some form of mythology and perhaps recover a sort of identity.

One question we should ask is what kinds of mythologies and identities are players finding in these worlds. In World of Warcraft, I think players find a mythology very similar to the Myth of the Frontier, with some specific alterations that highlight the crisis of national identity and ideology many of the players experience in their real lives. At first glance, this world appears to be a means for players to immerse themselves in a world where comforting myths abound, a place where they can build their own narratives of frontier violence and recover their identities as Americans. However, certain subtleties of the game prevent or at least hinder players from completely satisfying their needs for myth and identity, making this form of myth dissemination different and perhaps stronger than previous frontier narratives, as this myth is built to withstand doubt and disillusionment.
A comprehensive explanation of Warcraft lore would be impossible and probably unproductive as the storyline spans several real-time strategy video games with expansions, comics, novels and more, in addition to the MMORPG *World of Warcraft*. Therefore, I will simply give an overview of the storyline crucial to this paper. The battles begin as Sargeras, a fallen Titan, decides to destroy the world of Azeroth with his demonic forces, the Burning Legion, in his Burning Crusade to destroy all of the Titans’ creations by unleashing his forces called the Burning Legion. After one failed attempt, Sargeras’ forces seduce the orcs, which they find on another world, and curse them with bloodlust leading them to form the Horde and conquer the peoples of Azeroth.

Recognizing the danger presented by the Burning Legion, some of the orcs overthrew Sargeras’ influence and used the Horde for their own purposes. The Horde attacked a society of humans, leading the rest of the human kingdoms to form an Alliance. The Horde and the Alliance battle each other for Azeroth, resulting in the eventual defeat of the orcs, who are cut off from the Burning Legion and its demonic influence. In another attempt, Sargeras’ forces create a Lich King and send him to Azeroth where he unleashes a plague and gathers a new
army. Eventually, the Burning Legion attacks Azeroth, and the peoples of Azeroth must band together with the Horde to defeat them. Sargeras’ forces are pushed back and a truce between the Alliance and Horde is put into effect. This portion of the story takes place in strategy games and novels before the events in the MMORPG. However, through quest texts, in-game books and online guides, Blizzard ensures that players can access the background information for the storyline presented in World of Warcraft.\(^4\)

In the initial version of World of Warcraft, Azeroth is rebuilding following the Burning Legion’s last attack, and the orcs and humans, operating under a fragile truce, have recruited other indigenous races of Azeroth, such as elves, dwarves, tauren and trolls to their factions. Players can choose from a variety of these Horde and Alliance races to create their characters, which each start from different cities in the world and get different quests. A fair amount of research has been dedicated to the varying races in Azeroth and their similarities to real-world ethnic groups. While an in-depth discussion of race is unnecessary for this paper, it is helpful to understand that the Alliance is generally made up of traditionally heroic

mythological races like elves and dwarves; while, the Horde consists of races "whose belief systems and aesthetic senses borrow heavily from real-world cultures that have themselves been marginalized and colonized" (Langer 87). Though these factions are supposedly working under a truce, ongoing tensions between the groups can be witnessed throughout the game as I will discuss later.

From the start, players are confronted with us versus them decisions that help World of Warcraft propagate the Myth of the Frontier, like its heroic adventure predecessors, in the three parts Slotkin outlines. First, players experience separation in two ways. They literally separate from the real world and their real lives to participate in this virtual reality. Once inside, players get acquainted with their cities, then separate from these cities to perform tasks on the virtual frontier.

Most of the early quests have players participate in the rebuilding process to acquaint them with their respective cities. For example, in a level 5 Horde quest called “A Peon’s Burden,” a citizen asks the player to return some food that the troops did not need to an inn, saying: “I'm afraid of all the beasts along the way. Can you take it for me? I'm just a peon, but you're a hero. You fear nothing!” (Guillaume et al). It is important to note that these menial tasks do more than introduce
the player to game play. They also establish a sense of national identity and patriotism for the player, who realizes instantly that they have a role in a larger struggle. Immediately upon entering Azeroth, players are called to play the hero and take action to support the troops in their struggle to clear the land of enemy forces and rebuild their cities.

In the early stages of the game, quests are easy and provide players with a lot of experience points, a resource used in the game's character advancement system, so they can quickly gain levels, which are a measurement of character advancement, feel instant gratification and understand a good deal of the storyline quickly. This method ensures that players are indoctrinated early by easy, fairly innocent tasks before they embark on darker, morally ambiguous quests.

Most of the quests in World of Warcraft are much more complicated and require a great deal of violence, especially as the player moves into the Azerothian frontier. In these quests, the myth of regeneration through violence is foregrounded as players must perform violent tasks on the frontier in order to rebuild their cities. For example, in “Patrolling Westfall,” level 14 Alliance players are told “A foul wind of depravity

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5 In his article, "Corporate Ideology in World of Warcraft," Scott Rettberg makes an interesting argument that these quests are also a form of corporate, capitalist training, teaching players that, if given equal opportunity, hard workers who are faithful with tedious tasks will succeed.
rustles through the plains of Westfall. This was my homeland and I will not turn my back on the citizens who choose to remain here ... Your task, should you choose to accept, is to patrol the grasslands of Westfall. Track down and slay the vile Gnolls” (Guillaume et al). Here, we see the quest giver initially establish his own patriotism then appeal to the patriotic tendencies of the player, calling them to take part in the protection of Westfall by killing gnolls. After the task is completed, the quest giver reminds the player of the purpose for the violence, stating “With valiant adventurers such as yourself fighting alongside The People's Militia, Westfall just might return to the prosperous breadbasket it once was” (Guillaume et al). Through this quest, the player is infused with a sense of heroism and patriotism gained from killing humanoids who threaten the progress of their nation.

Additionally, players are often asked to destroy entire tribes of humanoids because they are threatening more civilized settlements. In “A Grim Task,” level 31 Alliance players are asked to find the leader of a rogue tribe of dwarves described as “a devilish breed,” kill him and return his ear to the quest giver. Upon the player’s return, the quest giver explains that the leader needed to die in order to make his people more manageable (Guillaume et al). Now that their leader is dead, “we
must wipe them out before a new leader is sent to these parts” (Guillaume et al). A similar level 37 Horde quest, “Bloody Bone Necklaces,” requires the player to kill at least 25 of the Bloodscalp trolls and bring their necklaces to a friendly troll tribe. Interestingly, because of the number of Bloodscalp trolls in this particular area of Azeroth, this quest requires the player to enter the Bloodscalp settlement and kill every troll. Depending on the number of other players in the area, it may even require the player to wait for trolls to reappear so they can kill them again.

In “Encroachment,” a level 10 Horde quest, we begin to understand a little more about the purpose of the violence and the history of Azeroth. In this quest, the player’s mission is to “kill 4 Razormane Quilboars, 4 Razormane Scouts, 4 Razormane Dustrunners and 4 Razormane Battleguards for Gar'Thok at Razor Hill” (Guillaume et al). The quest giver explains that “when we arrived, the Razormane quilboars possessed much of the land, and proved a thorn in our sides. Through our efforts we have driven out the largest part of their numbers, but still they remain well-fortified in some areas. It has gone on long enough, however. For our own protection, we cannot allow the Razormane any hold in our lands” (Guillaume et al). Here, we get the idea that there were native tribes on the land before the dominant
peoples of Azeroth began constructing their cities. However, the quest giver still presents the player and his nation as the victims who need protection from the dangerous quilboars. Like the real world, it is the dominant nation’s propaganda, ideology and rationale that become history and truth.

A similar reasoning for violence is seen in “Blackrock Menace,” a level 21 Alliance quest. According to the quest giver, “The Blackrock orcs have travelled from the Burning Steppes and claimed Stonewatch Keep to the north. From there they maraud the areas north of Lakeshire and keep its citizens in town, penned like cattle” (Guillaume et al). The quest giver is vilifying the orcs and creating a sort of righteous anger in the player in order to justify the violence he is requesting. In response to the orcs’ mistreatment of the citizens of Stonewatch Keep, the player is asked to “help rid Lakeshire of this menace” (Guillaume et al). Even more pointedly, the player is told that if there are any orcs in other places besides northern Lakeshire, “they too should be hunted” (Guillaume et al). Here, the quest giver requests that the player wage a kind of savage war against the orcs. This violent response is justified by the quest giver’s explanation that the orcs are treating the citizens like animals so they should be treated with the same
cruelty. Clearly, only violence will bring progress in many of these situations.

This concept of necessary violence for progress’ sake carries through into the expansion of the original MMORPG, The Burning Crusade, which takes place after the Alliance and Horde have rebuilt and are beginning to explore new lands. In this story, The Dark Portal, the original means of the Horde’s invasion, has been reopened to the Outlands, a dark and lawless place inhabited by a few tribes of peoples who escaped Azeroth or were stranded when the portal closed. In Blizzard’s The Burning Crusade trailer, players are reminded through images of game play and text, “you have conquered every mountain, vanquished every foe” but told “the battle has just begun.” Through the advertisement, players’ are offered “uncharted dungeons” and called to “explore the shattered realm” of Outland. As the music and images fade, the words “a new world awaits …” flash across the screen, enticing the player to imperial ambitions, like America’s 1950s transition from the frontier to the world stage.

Of course, many of these quests are more of the same, slaying rogue tribes and wild animals to clear the way for the Alliance and Horde. Yet, whereas World of Warcraft encouraged player violence as a means to protect their cities and ensure
national progress, *The Burning Crusade* often uses the excuse of progress as side note to racism. For example in “Bonechewer Blood,” the quest giver asks for 12 vials of Bonechewer orc blood for an apothecary to test. According to the quest giver, “They should all die! The sight of their red skin and depravity makes my blood boil” (Guillaume et al). The player is not presented with any reason for the violence besides the sight of the orcs’ skin. Within the context of the game, it is assumed that the orcs pose a threat to Azeroth, but the threat is never stated outright. Perhaps after 60 levels of game play, players' have been adequately indoctrinated and no longer need to be constantly given excuses. This quest is a particularly good example of one of *World of Warcraft's* major themes which is "that physical appearance is often determined by inner nature" (Langer 103).

However, there are also quests that give some reason for the violence. For example, in “Ango’rosh Enchroachment,” a level 64 Alliance quest, the player is called to protect a temple of a group referred to as the Broken who are threatened by the Ango’rosh ogres. According to the quest giver, “they have cleared the Hewn Bog of its towering mushrooms and draw ever closer to our refuge” (Guillaume et al). Again, the would-be victims of player violence are described as aggressive threats
to society, specifically a religious establishment, and the people being protected are characterized as victims called the “Broken” who are being attacked in their “refuge.” Clearly, the us versus them binary still applies in this new land.

Given that The Burning Crusade calls players to participate in Azeroth's imperialism, many quests require more intelligence gathering operations. In “Impending Attack,” a level 64 Horde quest, players are asked to search the Ango’rosh Grounds for their attack plans and steal them for the Horde. Rather than slaying the entire tribe, the quest giver is asking the player to perform a tactical mission to uncover Ango’rosh plans to destroy Horde settlements. However, the follow-up quest is entitled “Us or Them,” which almost requires no explanation. In this quest, the player is called to “end the Ango’rosh threat” by making “an example of the overlord and his followers” (Guillaume et al). The player is exhorted to “show no mercy” because “they certainly wouldn’t spare any of us” (Guillaume et al). Violence is presented as retaliatory even though it is actually preemptive.

Although violence against indigenous peoples is still rampant in The Burning Crusade, one of the major components of the expansion is the growing war against the Burning Legion. Rather than fighting small pockets of Sargeras’ supporters in
Azeroth, they are now fighting the armies of the Burning Legion on another frontier where the inhabitants become victims of the clash of two imperial powers. In other words, the Horde and Alliance face a full-scale war. In fact, once a player passes through the Dark Portal, their speakers fill with the sounds of fighting as they witness an ongoing battle at the portal between Azerothians and the Burning Legion. Additionally, most of the towns throughout Outland are highly fortified with guards and patrols roaming the areas around the settlements. And, in testament to imperial cooperation, the only city in Outland is shared by both the Horde and the Alliance.

Immediately upon entering Outland, Horde and Alliance players are faced with quests that engage them in the war with the Burning Legion. In a level 61 Horde quest, “Eradicate the Burning Legion,” the quest giver, explains, “Though this land is full of strange new enemies, the Burning Legion is still the greatest threat to our Expedition. One of my most trusted warriors, Sergeant Shatterskull, has been studying the Legion’s tactics” (Guillaume et al). The player’s initial mission is to seek out Sergeant Shatterskull, who provides them with follow-up quests that include killing camps of Burning Legion warriors and destroying portals to prevent reinforcements. In quests like, “Disruption—Forge Camp: Mageddon,” “Enemy of My Enemy...” and
“Invasion Point: Annihilator,” Alliance players are instructed to perform similar tasks, destroying the armories and portals supplying the Burning Legion.

In “Bombing Run” and “Bomb Them Again!”, level 70 Alliance and Horde players are recruited to fly aerial missions over Burning Legion Camps. Like many of the level 70 quests, “Bomb Them Again!” is a daily quest, which can be completed every twenty-four hours for a certain amount of gold, the game’s currency. In both of these quests, the player’s mission is to fly over “Forge Camp: Wrath and Forge Camp: Terror” and destroy their guards and weapons stockpiles because they are threatening the “peaceful Ogri’la” (Guillaume et al). Here, we see stark contrasts between the Burning Legion and the Azerothian armies.

The Burning Legion’s camps are identified as “terror” and “wrath,” while the army’s mission to protect the city of Ogri’la seems like a noble purpose. However, couched in the language of the quest is the suggestion that the protection of Ogri’la is only a side note. The quest giver initially asks players to bomb the Burning Legion because they “are a major pain in my backside, as well as being a threat to peaceful Ogri’la” (Guillaume et al). Protection of the innocent seems to be only an excuse or a tangential benefit for the violence being requested.
However, like any retelling of myth, World of Warcraft’s version of America’s beloved story comes with some peculiarities reflective of post 9/11 America that warrant our attention. First, despite the initial appearance of a clear “us versus them” binary, the complexity of relationships in World of Warcraft certainly reflects our postmodern mindset that scorns a dichotomy between good and evil. This confusion is exacerbated by the fact that many of the tribes players are asked to kill off look just like them. A player can play as a troll but still be asked to kill trolls who have been corrupted by the Burning Legion. The result is a kind of self-violence that eliminates evil within as well as without. Though, like in any other version of the myth, there is a clear, savage enemy, the demonic Burning Legion, we get the sense that there is also some evil or guilt on our part. It also allows for some confusion over the cause of the violence and the identity of the enemy. For example, in a level 1 Alliance quest, “A Threat Within,” players are called to “defend their home” from the “corrupt and lawless groups” that “thrive within our borders” (Guillaume et al). The quest giver reminds the player that “it is a many-fronted battle we wage” (Guillaume et al).

World of Warcraft also confuses the traditional dichotomy between good and evil by continuously highlighting the
uncertainties of the alliances in Azeroth. One series of quests, “The Battle of Hillsbrad,” asks Horde players to kill humans so they can “quell the human infestation until our apothecaries can develop the new plague” (Guillaume et al). Despite a supposed truce between members of the Horde and humans, there are still instances where chemical warfare tactics are acceptable. Similarly, Horde and Alliance players are invited to join special PvP (Player vs. Player) servers where players on opposing factions can kill each other while performing quests. These servers have been the most popular amongst players (Langer 87). As a result, many PvP players develop very strong feelings towards opposite factions regardless of whether or not the basic storyline of the game suggests they should be allies.

In her article, drawing comparisons between World of Warcraft and World War I, Esther MacCallum-Stewart uses the example of the Battle in Warsong Gulch to show how the fragile alliance between the Horde and the Alliance is used to question the purpose of war and violence. This battle is the source of quests for both factions. The Alliance is seeking to preserve forestlands from being cut down for military supplies. The Horde needs the lumber from the forest to defend themselves. By giving each side a justification for their actions, "Warsong Gulch questions the rightness of war" (MacCallum-Steward 46). The
purpose of war is further questioned by the lack of resolution of the dispute. A player may complete the quest and support their faction, but the battle continues.

*World of Warcraft* capitalizes on this idea of endless violence. Players have no final goal to reach. There is no single enemy that can be defeated to end the game. In fact, Blizzard is continually expanding the game. Theoretically, the violence in *World of Warcraft* could go on forever. Far from destroying the myth, the idea of endless violence perpetuated through the *World of Warcraft* gets at the essence of this longstanding national myth. Imperialism, frontierism and our nostalgia for both is not about gaining a specific new territory or defeating a particular enemy. Rather, it is about finding an outlet for, as Slotkin says, regeneration through violence. For some reason, we believe violence brings progress, and *World of Warcraft* clearly reveals this belief. The enemy is mostly unseen, there are no obvious goals, no defined frontiers and societies are flawed. Yet, like the knights, cowboys and starship commanders of other tales, millions of players log on every day to participate and find solace in violently conquering a virtual frontier.

The cause for violence and a defined enemy are not always given, but it does not matter. The violence perpetuated in *World*
of Warcraft is not even really bringing progress, but for some reason, it is desirable and gets us what we want even though we are not sure what that is. While World of Warcraft promotes the idea that violence brings progress, it also questions it, suggesting that it is somehow simultaneously pointless and necessary.

We see this ambivalence in quests where quest givers question the violence, but they ultimately assign violent tasks anyway. In “Sharing the Land,” a level 6 Horde quest, players are asked to “kill 10 Palemane Tanners, 8 Palemane Skinners, and 5 Palemane Poachers” (Guillaume et al). Although, this mission is presented with language similar to other quests, the unusual portion of the quest is that the quest giver bemoans the violence being asked. He explains, “There are many conflicts that wound this land. It is my hope that you will not bear witness to as many of them as I have. Yet there is one that I would ask you to seek out” (Guillaume et al). Here, the quest giver explains that violence is undesirable but suggests that it is necessary. He suggests that killing the Palemane gnolls “will give you some sense of how terrible, if left unchecked, even a small threat can be to the land” (Guillaume et al). Violence is awful, but sometimes civilized peoples must resort to violence in the name of progress to keep savages under control.
Ominously, the quest giver declares, “Words are no longer the answer” (Guillaume et al).

Similarly, in “A Dark Pact,” players are asked to slay Burning Legion supporters to prevent further alliances between Azeroth’s enemies. After the player completes the task, the quest giver merely responds, “It is done then. We come here, hunt them down and slay them at the bidding of our masters. No quarter is given or expected. Makes you wonder sometimes” (Guillaume et al). Again, violence, even against the enemy, is called into question, but only for a moment because players are still rewarded for violent behavior.

Clearly, violence still brings some form of progress, whether it be the survival of a superior species, the gaining of new land or simply defeating an enemy. While this violence can be read as racist or merely gratuitous, within the context of the game where national survival and expansion are the driving factors for violence, any violent act against the Other would be seen, similar to American frontier violence, as progressive. Yet, the constant, subtle reminder that violence is wrong adds a sense of ambivalence to the value of that progress. For example, in “Kick Them While They’re Down,” a level 70 Alliance and Horde quest, the quest giver explains that she does not “take particular glee in the senseless slaughter of my own kin ... but
the tactical advantage here is too high to pass up” (Guillaume et al). The quest giver is pulled in two different directions. On one hand, the killing of her kin seems senseless, but she also knows they need to progress regardless.

This questioning of the purpose of violence comes out in other quests where quest givers begin using others for violent tasks because they question it themselves. In “High Value Targets”, a level 68 Alliance and Horde quest, the quest giver thanks the player for assassinating members of the Burning Legion, explaining “If there’s one thing I like more than killing Kael’s lapdogs, it is having someone else do it for me. Less blood on my clothes that way” (Guillaume et al). Similarly, in “Blood of Innocents,” a level 23 Horde quest, players are instructed to steal innocent blood from mages who collect it stating that, “the blood of innocents is not an easy thing to obtain. We are lucky the Syndicate shadow mages did the difficult work for us” (Guillaume et al). In these quests, we see that violence is distasteful, yet players are asked to perform violent tasks anyway.

In short, the version of frontier myth presented by World of Warcraft is straightforward frontierism in a lot of ways. Players are encouraged to protect their cities by killing savage enemies and clearing the land of natives in the name of
patriotism and national growth. Violence is most often presented as necessary for achieving national progress. However, the game also contains subtle contradictions, like unclear enemies, shaky alliances and less-than-satisfactory justifications for violence that remind players that violence is wrong, or at least, questionable.

The biggest difference, however, in this version of myth is the fact that the game presents a means for endless violence. As a result, nothing is really accomplished by the violence and progress is redefined as violence itself. It is not about gaining territory or protecting yourself from savage enemies, it is about the act of violence bringing regeneration just because the player is performing it. Players are asked to perform violence that does not bring any tangible results despite subtle reminders that violence is wrong in hopes that it will help them progress somehow. As a player, it seems you need to learn to exist within the gray areas. Players are told violence is wrong, it’s immoral and it’s pointless, yet for some reason, it still needs to be done.
IV

This ambiguity translates to an ambivalence that is detectable in American mythic identity today. In order to fully understand this ambivalence, we need to look as far back as the fall of the Berlin Wall when American ideology had reached its pinnacle and American myth prospered in political rhetoric and popular culture. According to Thomas Friedman, the fall of the Berlin Wall combined with the rise of the Windows-enabled PC “didn’t just help flatten the alternatives to free-market capitalism … It also allowed us to think of the world differently—to see it as more of a seamless whole” (54). After the demise of the Soviet Union, America believed “there was no ideological alternative to free-market capitalism” and thus began packaging their myths and ideologies for universal distribution (59).

World of Warcraft is an excellent example of the universalization of the Myth of the Frontier. For the most part, it has been decontextualized and stripped of historical signifiers that make the myth it carries specific to Americans. As a result, World of Warcraft has been exported throughout Europe and Asia. In 2008, Blizzard reported that of 10 million active subscriptions, 5.5 million came from their Asian market, which included “mainland China, Korea, Australia, New Zealand,
Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, and the regions of Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau” (“New Milestone”). So, in addition to providing Americans with a means to confront their country’s myths, World of Warcraft introduced those myths to other countries. Of course in addition to presenting the standard Myth of the Frontier, World of Warcraft’s ambivalence gives foreign players the opportunity to question those myths as well.

While universalization of American ideology may have seemed the realization of America’s global Manifest Destiny, it came at a cost that is reflected in the attitudes toward myth revealed in World of Warcraft. According to Baudrillard:

any culture that becomes universal loses its singularity and dies. That's what happened to all those cultures we destroyed by forcefully assimilating them. But it is also true of our own culture, despite its claim of being universally valid. The only difference is that other cultures died because of their singularity, which is a beautiful death. We are dying because we are losing our own singularity and exterminating all our values. And this is a much more ugly death.

In other words, by flattening our ideals for universalization, we have stripped them of what made them unique and definable.
Without the cultural referents and historical signifiers, our ideals, including the Myth of the Frontier, are emptied of their meaning, and we are left with only the attractive comforting shell of a myth that, at one time, had enough historical grounding that we could still believe it to be true.

Again, Slotkin points out that the Myth of the Frontier developed out of a history of emigration, separation and regression often born out of violence that always led to progress (11). This myth developed as Americans were colonizing the land and performing frontier violence that had very obvious results. When the myth got taken out of its historical context and applied to America's global role in the 1950s, the myth slowly began to lose its meaning. People in the 1950s were ready to believe that this American Myth of the Frontier, which had proven itself throughout America's expansionist history, could easily apply to the nation's mission to eradicate Communism. Yet, by the 1960s, people began to realize that the world is much more complicated than their myths led them to believe, and they questioned the clear lines between good and evil that had thus far justified American violence.

The doubt and unbelief of the 1960s generation never truly went away despite attempts made in the 1980s and 1990s. The near revival of the 1980s showed that Americans were desperate to
believe in their myths again, and it is this desperation combined with lingering doubts from the 1960s that has produced the ambivalence we find in Americans today. The 1960s and 1970s produced questions about our myths that 1980s revivalists could not answer. Instead, a conscious effort to embrace the good and ignore the bad was made in the 1980s and on through the 1990s. Filmmakers and political officials alike seemed to strip myths of troublesome historical referents in an attempt to leave searching Americans with a façade of hope and goodness and purpose. The myth that emerged from the 1980s and 1990s was beautiful but superficial.

World of Warcraft’s approach to the Myth of the Frontier reveals our response to this superficiality. At first glance, the game adheres strictly to the Myth of the Frontier in its basic myth and game structure. However, as we look deeper into the game’s lore and quest texts, we see that the game questions the same myth that it bases its gameplay on because the myth lacks meaning or reason. Players are required to perform the myth, knowing that their actions are, at best, pointless and, at worst, wrong. World of Warcraft’s approach to the Myth of the Frontier shows that we understand the emptiness of our myths yet return to them because we need something to believe in and find nothing else.
This realization that one of our most important national myths is empty has led to a kind of identity crisis. According to Castronova:

"myth solidifies a framing that allows actions to have meaning, unless we allow it to perform that function, life will seem terribly empty. And thus if a people gives over its myths, its members must languish in emptiness until a generation comes along that can create new myths to replace those that were abandoned." (276).

This emptiness pervades World of Warcraft’s presentation of myth and has been recognized by numerous scholars, especially since September 11, when Osama bin Laden unleashed his “ideological alternative to free-market capitalism—political Islam” (Friedman 59). However, the second part of Castronova’s argument, that new myths need to be created has yet to be seen. Thus far, I think we have only seen two reactions to this loss of confidence in our myths.

First, people like President George W. Bush forcefully reiterated the Myth of the Frontier explaining to Congress on September 20, 2001 that “on September the 11\textsuperscript{th}, enemies of freedom committed an act of war against our country” and “whether we bring our enemies to justice or bring justice to our
enemies, justice will be done.” Drawing immediately from myths of savage war and American exceptionalism, Bush announced that the United States stood for freedom, and it was under attack because “enemies of freedom” desired to “remake the world” and “we stand in their way.” Bush employs black and white, us versus them, Cold War rhetoric, declaring:

we have seen their kind before. They are the heirs of all the murderous ideologies of the 20th century. By sacrificing human life to serve their radical visions -- by abandoning every value except the will to power -- they follow in the path of fascism, and Nazism, and totalitarianism.

He characterizes terrorists as murderers, who “make no distinction among military and civilians, including women and children.” According to Bush’s rhetoric, America stands on the cusp of another major war against a large, savage enemy who threatens the fate of the entire free world. And, although, “the course of this conflict is not known … its outcome is certain. Freedom and fear, justice and cruelty, have always been at war, and we know that God is not neutral between them” (Bush). At the dawn of the 21st century, Americans, once again on the side of God and freedom, stand ready to challenge the next evil empire.
Of course, Bush’s response is quite natural. As Huntington points out, “identity at any level—personal, tribal, racial, civilizational—can only be defined in relation to an ‘other,’ a different person, tribe, race, or civilization” (129). Therefore, if one’s identity is threatened, it is a natural reaction to create or highlight an enemy that one can define oneself against. Additionally, Baudrillard argues that:

once a culture has lost its values, it can only seek revenge by attacking those of others. Beyond their political or economic objectives, wars such as the one in Afghanistan aim at normalizing savagery and aligning all the territories. The goal is to get rid of any reactive zone, and to colonize and domesticate any wild and resisting territory both geographically and mentally.

In short, one way of coping with a loss of myth and meaning is to war against the myths and values of other cultures in an attempt to redefine oneself.

The other response, which we have already seen in World of Warcraft, is also demonstrated in the only Arthurian film since September 11, David Franzoni’s King Arthur (2004). In his film, Franzoni capitalizes on George W. Bush’s acknowledgement that “the course of this conflict is not known.” Unlike previous
films, fatalism permeates this version of Arthur’s story. According to Aronstein, “with its over-the-top violence and its dark moody tone, fractures of visions of martial glory and casts serious doubts upon the myth that there is peace on the other side of war” (206). Arthur’s final battle speech, as his small army faces a seemingly insurmountable foe, reflects America’s uncertainty: “The gift of freedom is yours by right. But the home we seek lies not in some distant land. It’s in us and our action on this day. If this be our destiny, then so be it” (qtd. in Aronstein 210). Unlike Bush’s speech that suggests American victory despite uncertainty, Arthur calls his army to war in the face of almost certain death and to face their destiny even if it is a tragic one. Although they win the final battle, the course of the action is extremely chaotic, with enemies emerging sporadically from behind dense, eerie mists to fight the knights in quick, bloody skirmishes. The battle costs Arthur many good knights, including Lancelot and Tristan, and the end of the movie is hardly triumphant as Arthur prepares to embark on the difficult, likely violent task of creating a free Britain. Like the World of Warcraft, violence here is presented as necessary but it’s also pointless.
This response to the disillusionment of September 11 was predicted by Richard Slotkin in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*:

At the bottom of our reaction to a traumatic event like this is rage, grief, humiliation, and a sense of helplessness. We invoke our myths to help us begin to function again—and they work often enough for us to continue believing in them. The danger in our present use of myth is that our myths of choice may be so at odds with reality that their imperatives can never be fulfilled (*Myths* B11).

As we see in *King Arthur* and *World of Warcraft*, uncertainty and the tension between myth and reality is at the crux of post-9/11 American ideology. This uncertainty stems from a sort of self-blame for the destruction of our identity. According to Baudrillard, we know that our loss of meaning and myth is the result of our “excess of reality, power, and comfort, our universal availability, our definite accomplishment.” He argues that Westerners suffer from:

> the invisible despair of those whom globalization has privileged, on our own submission to an omnipotent technology, to a crushing virtual reality, to an empire of networks and programs that are probably in
the process of redrawing the regressive contours of
the entire human species, of a humanity that has gone
"global" ... This invisible despair, our invisible
despair, is hopeless since it is the result of the
realization of all our desires.

In other words, a major source of post-9/11 ambivalence toward
myth and confusion of national identity is the understanding
that the myths that encouraged us to universalize our ideals
were destroyed by that universalization.

In short, the ambivalent nature of World of Warcraft’s
version of the Myth of the Frontier reflects a larger attitude
toward myth that goes beyond this video game, current films or
even pop culture. The fatalistic ideas that violence is
pointless but necessary and that our myths are meaningless but
central to our identity are not unique to World of Warcraft or
its players. Perhaps, the confusion highlighted in the World of
Warcraft is a result of America finally completing its global
Manifest Destiny through the universalization of its ideals and
experiencing the ensuing consequences. Like Castronova, I think
a large part of World of Warcraft’s appeal is the return to the
mythic frontier that it offers. Players enjoy the game because
of the frontier violence they can no longer experience in the
real world. In one sense, the game is a vehicle for nostalgia.
However, the challenges to the Myth of the Frontier that are also built into the game prevent a player’s complete immersion into the comforting past.

While I would not consider *World of Warcraft* in its present form a political commentary or even means of propaganda, I do think it reflects real life issues about American myth and attitudes toward violence. As Castronova points out, we have experienced a mass exodus from the real world into the virtual world, suggesting that the real world may be missing something important.

The Myth of the Frontier gave Americans a national identity. When that identity was questioned and lost, it was never fully restored or replaced. So, 21st century Americans were left without an identity, simultaneously desiring and rejecting ideologies that brought their predecessors comfort. Players turn to games like *World of Warcraft* to find identities and to feel like they are part of something. I do not think it is any coincidence that American players gravitate toward games that are modeled on myths that represent their lost national identity.

People need something to believe in. Slotkin explains that national myth embodies a culture's ideology and gives it an identity. The process of globalization, according to Friedman,
Huntington and Baudrillard, has emptied our myths and ideologies of meaning, thus taking our identity. Castronova argues we cannot exist without these myths so we will find them in the virtual world when we can no longer find them in the real one. It seems clear that there is some connection between our identity crises and our ambivalence toward myth. Surely, those who have attempted to revive myth by covering up contentious points, stripping them of their history or simply clinging to them blindly have been greatly motivated by myth's relationship to national identity. After all, common myths and ideologies bring people together. However, their efforts have been largely unsuccessful, and many Americans, like those who play this game, are left with uncertainty.

Currently, I think players experience most of what I have discussed subconsciously. However, further psychological research would be necessary to understand how much players are aware of when they play games like World of Warcraft. If players learn more about the myths they are acting out, I think players could learn quite a bit about themselves, their attitudes toward American ideology and perhaps start to develop new ideologies.

The potential for educational use of MMORPGs also needs further research. Countless studies have been conducted regarding the negative aspects of video games, but more
attention should be paid to their benefits. These games cannot be simply dismissed as inconsequential pop culture phenomena. They could be invaluable educational tools or even a means to discover and test solutions for real-world issues. However, it is important that they be continuously interrogated because they could undoubtedly be powerfully harmful or helpful. As scholars, I think it is important for us to continue researching MMORPGs and their potential uses beyond entertainment.

Additionally, it would be interesting to see research expand to other violent games like Halo, Call of Duty or God of War. These games are often played in small groups and are less time consuming than a MMORPG so it would be interesting to see how these games produce myth and how they could be beneficial. Given the inherent differences between RPGs and MMORPGs, I would imagine a study on RPGs could offer many additions to my findings here.

Another avenue of study would be seeing how the values promoted through games like World of Warcraft and other popular war games are influencing other cultures where they are being sold. In short, there are infinite ways to approach a game like the World of Warcraft, and as these games grow in popularity, it will become increasingly important that we understand the effects they have on our culture.


