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WRIT 1133

May, 2014



Origins of the World of Warcraft Dwarf

In the canon of the fantasy genre dwarves¹ are widely accepted. However, they are curious characters with not-so-widely accepted backgrounds. Today, when anyone is asked to describe a dwarf they will likely respond in the same way: short, stocky stature, long beard, a tankard of ale in one hand, an axe in the other, and a booming voice with a Scottish accent. The dwarf is greedy for gold and lives in a mountain. But where did this all come from? How did myth, lore, and media shape our generally accepted image of dwarves today and especially in *World of Warcraft*? This paper will explore the origins of the mythical beings from Norse mythology to the modern interpretation of dwarves in *World of Warcraft*.

World of Warcraft (*WoW*) was released in 2004 and includes a number of playable and non-playable fantasy character tropes such as elves, gnomes, orcs, humans, and goblins. *WoW*'s entire world of Azeroth is based, more or less, on common interpretations of these fantasy races and their creation. In fact RPG games such as *WoW* have unmistakable similarities across genres and platforms, “the formation of the collaborative story is a core feature of these games” (Tychsen 75). So, naturally *WoW* draws much from various outside lore and mythology. The development of *WoW*'s lore is important to its consistency. Krzywinska discusses this, “the presence of a coherent and extensive myth scheme is core to the way differences and conflicts

¹ The plural of dwarf will be referred to as *dwarves*, rather than *dwarfs*, because it is the convention used by World of Warcraft. Tolkien was the first to use *dwarves* instead of *dwarfs*, Lewis used *dwarfs* (Wilkin).

between races are organized” and “any fantasy-based game draws on a range of preexisting sources relevant to the invocation of the fantastic to lend breadth and depth to a game world” (Krzywinska 383). *World of Warcraft* was developed very recently and has extensive mythology supporting it which makes it an interesting lens from which to study various races, and specifically dwarves. There are four important features of dwarves in *World of Warcraft*—creation lore, architecture, culture, and language—that will be useful in determining their source.

There are a few creation myths that should be important when discussing dwarves, and especially the ones that have influenced the dwarves of *World of Warcraft*. The first mention of dwarves was in Norse mythology (Hojbjerg). J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis—pioneers of the fantasy genre, “Tolkien’s conception of elves and dwarves have come to dominate most genre fantasy” (Wilkin 61)—painted their own pictures of these humanoids, elaborating on Norse myth.

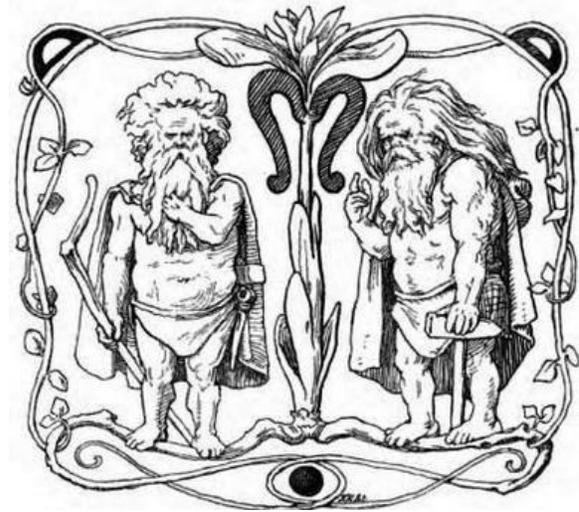


Figure 1 A couple of Norse dwarves.
<http://www.germanicmythology.com>

However, their creation stories are all different. For instance, in Norse myth, the dwarves (Figure 1) were born from maggots, brought to life by the gods, yet could not bear sunlight and made their homes in the caves of Nidavellir (Hojbjerg). In Tolkien’s *Silmarillion* the dwarves were created by impatient Aulë, who was not supposed to have created any beings before the elves. The dwarves were put to sleep under request of Eru (a higher deity) until the birth of the elves and humans. Eru calls the dwarves, humans, and elves “the children of my adoption” while he calls the humans and elves “the children of my choice” (Tolkien Gateway). For C. S. Lewis, the dwarves have a more vague creation; simply that they were created by Aslan (like all things in

Narnia) and are sometimes referred to as the “Sons of Earth” (WikiNarnia). In all accounts, the dwarves live underground and have a penchant for high craftsmanship and mining. They are tough, not susceptible to disease, and have long beards. In *WoW*, they are much the same. Their creation is similar to that of the dwarves of Narnia in that it is a reflection of equality, and rather than coming to life from maggots or second to other beings, they were brought to life from the



Figure 2 An earthen proto-being.
(WoWhead)

titans (higher beings that created much of Azeroth) originally as earthens (essentially dwarves made of stone, Figure 2) until they were afflicted with the curse of flesh, which turned them into the playable character dwarves that are found in *WoW* (WoWhead). Being that the origins of dwarves in *WoW* lore is shrouded in mystery, they have a strong focus on archaeology and finding out more about their history. It cannot be denied that the dwarves of *WoW* are heavily based on Tolkien’s, which, in turn, are based on those of Norse mythology.

However, we can see that *WoW* (as well as Lewis) have their own takes on creation. This is—at least in *WoW*’s case—because the writers of the lore wanted to keep consistency in their creation stories for each race, not just the dwarves. In *WoW*, the titans are creators of worlds, sometimes called the makers. *WoW* titans are split into a pantheon of two groups Æsir and Vanir. This is exactly the same as the Norse pantheon, two clans of gods known as Æsir and Vanir (Hojbjerg). The old gods in Greek mythology are also referred to as titans, so it seems that the writers of *WoW* lore have mashed the two mythologies together. This does not come as a surprise, as Tolkien did much of the same in writing the *Silmarillon* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien drew ideas from many sources such as the *Prose Edda*—a tremendous collection of Norse

mythology—and the Middle High German *Nibelungenlied*, in which dwarves and elves figure in. However, following Tolkien’s creative process “is dangerous at the best of times” (Wilkin 62) as is with any author including those that wrote *WoW* lore. So, one should not be offended by the fact that the invented lore of *WoW* (and *LOTR*) are made up of an amalgam of older mythologies. Additionally, Tolkien’s depictions of dwarves and the entirety of Middle Earth have been susceptible to the interpretation of Peter Jackson, director of the Lord of the Rings trilogy as well as the new The Hobbit trilogy.

After creation, each author’s dwarves made their way underground, into caves or dark places, and often inside of mountains. In Norse mythology, dwarves came from maggots that carved out the flesh of the fallen god from which the world became. After rising as dwarves, they



Figure 3 Left: Peter Jackson’s Erebor. Right: Ironforge.

continued to carve out the earth through mining. Some accounts claim that dwarves cannot bear the light of day, thus they live underground. These dwarves were greedy and dug deep for gold and other ore which they used to craft artefacts such as Thor’s hammer, Mjölfnir (Hojbjerg). Digging is a part of dwarven DNA. The place in which they live is crucial in the formation of their culture. Tolkien expanded the home of the dwarves from simple cave dwellings to the massive under-mountain city of Erebor. In *WoW* the dwarves call Ironforge their home, which

bears striking resemblance to Jackson's Erebor². Both feature an impenetrable front gate (except for to Smaug, apparently) and large statues of dwarves guarding them. Inside, both cities have large cavernous rooms with architecture that exudes strength and resilience, reflecting dwarven



Figure 4 The Great Forge in Ironforge. (WoWwiki)

culture. Tolkien's Erebor, however, does not feature the forging and craftsmanship aspect of dwarven culture nearly as proudly as Ironforge. The center of the World of Warcraft city is called "The Great Forge" (Figure 4). Lava falls from the ceiling into great vats over which there is a bridge and "The Great Anvil."

Various blacksmith trainers are placed here. Another curious place in Ironforge is "The Hall of Explorers" which is the headquarters for the archaeological guild. In Ironforge, the two strongest elements of dwarven culture are on prominent display. So, in terms of architecture, *WoW* lore has drawn significantly from Tolkien, but has again added some elements that make the lore different. It would be no surprise, however, if Tolkien's dwarves lived in Ironforge, or *WoW*'s dwarves lived in Erebor. The culture and creation stories of each type of dwarf make their homes interchangeable.

The dwarves' close connection with the earth and the underground in particular is crucial in the way that their lore has developed. Their common professions stem from it, their cultural values stem from it, and even their names stem from it. The typical dwarf profession is an extension of their creation and home. As it was mentioned above, digging and craftsmanship are essentially their racial trade. In *WoW*, there are no racial traits (bonuses that are exclusive to each

² Jackson's Erebor is more important to the development and inspiration of Ironforge because it is the one seen in media and popular culture, rather than Tolkien's sketches or description.

race) for the mining, blacksmithing, or jewel crafting professions. However, dwarves are given a bonus in archaeology from the “explorer” trait, “you find additional fragments when looting archaeological finds and you can survey faster than normal archaeologists” (World of Warcraft), which corresponds with the dwarven lore and culture. The other significant racial trait for dwarves in *WoW* is called “stoneform” which can “temporarily turn [dwarves] to living stone, neutralizing any poisons, diseases, and bleeding wounds, and adding natural armor” (World of Warcraft). This refers back to lore that claims dwarves to have originated from the earthens, allowing them to temporarily resume their past form. In regards to the racial values of dwarves the “stoneform” idea corresponds with the standard-issue dwarf convention. The cultural values of dwarves as first expanded by Tolkien and later by *WoW* are such: they have great respect and admiration to those who show strength, fearlessness, and resilience. These values are brought about from their origins as those who have such a strong connection with the earth. The dwarves embody bedrock, stone, and dirt. They have a blue-collar, workmanlike attitude and are usually stubborn. Dwarven names also reflect their origins. Surnames like Stonehelm (*WoW*), Bronzebeard (*WoW*), and Oakenshield (*LOTR*) have a certain code. That is, dwarven surnames seem to be of two parts and are a vague description of the character or past of the clan. Thorin Oakenshield of *LOTR* got his from a great battle with the orcs in which he defended himself with an oak bough. Tolkien’s inspiration for dwarven surnames in his works likely could have come from the fact that the name Oakenshield appears (roughly translated) in the Norse epic poems (Kuusela 31). The Bronzebeard clan gets its name from having, well, bronze-colored beards. First names, in Tolkien’s *The Hobbit* originate from “approximately 60 dwarf names, mostly strung together in a rhythmic list” (Kuusela 31) given by the *Prose Edda*. For example, “Thorin and company can be found... along with the names of Thorin’s relative Dain, his grandfather

Thror, and his father Thrain” (Kuusela 31). Player names in *WoW* are up to the user, however there is a random name generator that produces names phonetically similar to those of the *Prose Edda*. A few of these names include: Finbarnir, Cathangus, and Gridimli. Some computer-controlled characters have Norse style names as well. A few are: Ulbrok Firehand, Ragnus Thundergranite, Olmin Burningbeard, and Borim Goldhammer (Figure 5). Borim Goldhammer literally holds a gold hammer.



Figure 5 Borim Goldhammer and his gold hammer (*World of Warcraft*).

Another consideration is in dwarven language. In *WoW* it is sometimes referred to as dwarven, other times dwarvish, as opposed to Tolkien’s dwarves’ Khuzdul. Both have a harsh sound, which lends itself to the ruggedness of the dwarves. In Norse myth, Tolkien’s lore, and *WoW* the dwarves did not have a written language until taught one by another race. Tolkien attributed Khuzdul to Hebrew saying Khuzdul “is Semitic in cast, leaning phonetically to Hebrew” (Vink). *WoW* takes much the same direction as Tolkien; its dwarvish sounding very similar. For example “Khaz Modan” (*WoW* dwarvish), “Khazad” (Tolkien Khuzdul), “Kama zeh oleh” (Hebrew) are all very phonetically similar. The writers of *WoW* lore seem to have taken heavily from Tolkien in language, being that it is mostly the same down to the smallest nuances. For example, dwarves in both *WoW* and Tolkien lore prefer to communicate with other races in languages other than their own, making their language rare and secret (Tolkien Gateway, Wowwiki).

The fact that Tolkien’s dwarvish was heavily influenced by Hebrew may come as surprise to those who have watched the LOTR trilogy because the dwarves (and especially

Gimli) were portrayed with Scottish accents. In any case, the dwarves should have an accent, not a Scottish one, but a Hebrew one. However in the depiction of a dwarf today, the Scottish accent seems compulsory. This is a trope that began with Peter Jackson's film adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings* and stuck. *WoW* carried it over obediently. Before this dwarves spoke relatively normally; i.e. *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. There are a number of ongoing arguments on the mashing together of the Scottish accent and dwarves, and for once it didn't start with Tolkien's mythology (which is likely why it is disputed). Peter Jackson evidently chose to give Gimli a distinctive accent in *LOTR* that should be attributed to comic relief. Although Gimli is an honorable character his role in *LOTR* is, at times, undoubtedly funny. Additionally, the actor that played Gimli in *LOTR* is Welsh (IMDb), so his natural-sounding voice is already very similar to that of a Scotsman. Because many Americans tend to think that Scottish accents are funny or strange, it made sense for Jackson to exaggerate this in comic relief for his American-majority audience. Peter Jackson's *LOTR* trilogy popularized and mainstreamed this familiar trope, but some post-*LOTR* movies do not take Jackson's model. For example, the dwarves in Andrew Adamson's adaptation of C. S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia* series speak with a British accent like the rest of the characters in the movie (however slightly rougher and deeper).

In media today dwarves have a very specific depiction that has been a result of a number of factors. The general picture that the average person thinks a dwarf to be began with Norse myth, was expanded greatly with Tolkien's lore, and was standardized and mainstreamed by video games and movies today, and in particular *World of Warcraft*. The most important parts of the origins of fantasy dwarves have been maintained. Dwarves still live under a mountain, mine for gold, forge the best swords, and have the loudest parties. The modern dwarf that exists in the common imagination today is a testament to the power of a good story. Dwarves have proven to

be compelling and worthwhile characters in fantasy stories and have thus continued to appear in new stories.

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