



"Gryphn Rider" is a 2004 print by Bill Petras. It's featured in the Laguna Art Museum's exhibition "WoW: Emergent Media Phenomenon" through Oct. 4.

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'World of Warcraft' quest leads to Laguna

Art museum highlights work featured in and inspired by the popular online game.

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Get your orcs, trolls, elves, dwarves and Forsaken ready.

The "World of Warcraft" has descended upon a museum near you.

The Laguna Art Museum has recently opened a new exhibition, "WoW: Emergent Media Phenomenon," which explores artwork created for and inspired by the world's most popular massively multiplayer online role-playing game. The show runs through Oct. 4.

For those of you who don't play video or online games, "World of Warcraft" is a highly graphic computer-based experience with an intensely loyal following – about 11.5 million subscribers. Created by Blizzard Entertainment, which is headquartered in Irvine, "WoW" (as it's known) has spawned its own art, action figures, board games, comic books, manga and novels.

In short, "World of Warcraft" has become a culture all its own, with fantastical characters, otherworldly settings, a system of values and artistic practices. And it's not just for "Dungeons & Dragons" geeks.

"Think about it, culturally: 11.5 million people spending 10 hours a week on that game – what does that mean? That's a lot of time," said Bolton Colburn, director of the Laguna Art Museum. "It certainly begs the question: How does computer gaming and the change in our culture at that level begin to affect us? When's it going to affect us all?"

The Laguna Art Museum is no stranger to exhibitions that explore popular and alternative cultures. The museum has organized shows examining custom car culture, surf culture and contemporary artists featured in Juxtapoz magazine, considered the Bible for "lowbrow" art.

Grace Kook-Anderson, the museum's curator of exhibitions since October, sought to build bridges within this show to video art, performance, interactive art and conceptualism – fields familiar to those in the contemporary art world.

"I think artists are looking into such things as gaming as a reflection on our society," Kook-Anderson said. "Why do we create these virtual worlds, these other characters? I was also interested in the social engagement that happens, and subversive things that happen in the game."

The Laguna curator also stressed the democratic nature of art created for games, as well as fan art and "machinima" – computer animation that uses the graphic settings and engines from games, yet veers off in different, unexpected directions.

Blizzard has more than 150 artists working for the company, and they are regularly developing new characters, landscapes, continents and scenarios for the planet known as Azeroth.

The artists collaborate closely with one another, making sure the backgrounds and characters and 3-D effects all fit perfectly. Many of the characters and storylines are inspired by J.R.R. Tolkien's "The Lord of the Rings" series and Middle Ages mythology.

"We've made a huge effort to keep the world fresh and relevant and fun," said Matthew Samia, senior director of cinematics at Blizzard.

For the Laguna art exhibit, Blizzard worked with Kook-Anderson to choose works that were clearly representative of "WoW" characters. Some of the selections are by newer artists, and some are by the original guys who came up with the world in the first place, Samia said.

Things don't happen randomly at Blizzard. In fact, there are codes and standards that Blizzard artists generally adhere to, according to Tim Campbell, curator of creative development. The characters are epic and bold, with heavy use of primary colors. And some of the axioms bandied about include: "Less is never more," "Bigger is always better,"

and "If all else fails, add skulls and spikes and paint it red."

THE LAGUNA SHOW

"WoW: Emergent Media Phenomenon" opens with original works on paper and prints of characters made by Blizzard artists for the game and for covers of game boxes. Hand-drawn characters such as orcs, warlocks, elves and medieval humans are on display.

One section highlights several game box covers, and may strike some viewers as overly commercial. Organizers insist that it is not meant to serve as advertising for the game; rather, it's showcasing some of the original concepts for "World of Warcraft" and reflecting aspects of the popular culture, they say.

"WoW" does not include art from other companies besides Blizzard, which is one of the sponsors of the exhibit.

A number of large sculptures are also included in the show. Further inside the galleries, we see works inspired by "World of Warcraft." UC Irvine professor Antoinette LaFarge has combined disparate characters and scenes in her digital print, "World of Warcraft: The Adventures of Malbec and Player" (2009).

Chinese photographer Zeng Han has taken portraits of several people wearing "cosplay" ("costume play") outfits from the game. They are set against a smoggy Chinese cityscape, contrasting the real versus the imaginary.

Laguna Beach artist Jorg Dubin has contributed three paintings to the exhibit. Each captures a female "WoW" elf in less-than-glamorous tones and poses, positing the fantastical figure in an unflattering, real-world scenario.

The exhibit features two installations by Eddo Stern made of plastic, paper and electronics. Light is projected onto the moving pieces with shadows thrust against the wall, echoing the look of Javanese shadow puppet theater.

Stern has also curated a series of machinima video works, in which scenes from the "World of Warcraft" game are used as the backdrop for different, alternative narratives.

More than 145 works of fan art are on view as well, demonstrating the flexibility in interpretations of the "WoW" characters.

Downstairs in the museum basement level, a couple of spinoff role-playing games are available for visitors to view and play. They involve a deer in a forest and a guy who's supposed to do something with sheep, and may prove perplexing to those who do not know the intricacies of playing "World of Warcraft."

Also downstairs, a group that calls itself "Third Faction" has set up four computers for visitors to perform "public intervention acts" within the "WoW" game. "/hug" (pronounced "slash-hug") is a "non-governmental aid organization" on Azeroth committed to providing assistance to those in need. Participants are supposed to fish, apply bandages, protect, and give money or items to real characters they encounter. However, it's not exactly clear what they're supposed to do if they are attacked or killed.

THE COOL FACTOR

For the real-life wizards behind Blizzard Entertainment, this exhibition is an opportunity to showcase some of its aesthetic accomplishments, as well as provide exposure to a completely different audience – one that doesn't spend dozens of hours per week playing online.

"We don't think that we really *need* a museum show, in any sense, since we have a huge fan base and conventions," Blizzard's Samia said. "We just thought it would be cool, a cool thing to participate in. We do many things based on that premise – if it's fun and cool and relevant."

Samia and his colleagues are constantly working on new additions, or patches, to the game, which can be downloaded online by subscribers. They've already developed two major expansion sets.

They're also collaborating with Legendary Pictures, one of the companies that produced the Batman flick "The Dark Knight," "Spider-Man 3" and "300," to create a future "World of Warcraft" feature film.

Samia said he doesn't mind all the spinoffs, machinima and fan art, and the company has not bothered to pursue copyright suits related to fan art or machinima.

"I think it's all great," he said. "It's great that it's happening. What's so interesting and fresh and rewarding about 'World of Warcraft' is, people have gotten involved in different ways. These guys are trying to bring their own sensibilities and values to the game."

As the artwork, spinoffs and programs at the museum indicate, "WoW" is more than just a game. A series of lectures and panels are planned – mostly on Sundays at 1 p.m. – throughout the run of the exhibit. Visit www.lagunaartmuseum.org for details.

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