

“Warcraft’s” Mangled Narrative - and How to Fix It

Introduction

“Warcraft” film (2016), the newest effort to pull off a successful video game adaptation, is currently playing in cinemas all over the world. Even though its acclaimed director Duncan Jones (*Moon*, *Source Code*) seems to be a genuine fan of the famous game franchise, doing everything he can to deliver the top-notch fantasy adventure, the reception of the “Warcraft” movie seems to be mixed at best. Some markets (especially Chinese) love it – while the critics in West are tearing the movie to shreds. A lot of people are even dissing the notion of a “good” video game adaptation outright – according to them, such a thing is simply not possible.

Amongst the fans of the Warcraft games, however, there seem to be a general consensus, that “Warcraft” is a good film, albeit with its own fair share of problems; namely – a botched editing and superficially shortened running time, which ruins the pacing. If that problem would be fixed, “Warcraft” movie could (supposedly) be just fine.

What is my opinion? Well, this is not a review, so I’ll keep it short. The film is serviceable. It is not “*Green Lantern*” (2011) or “*Battlefield Earth*” (2000) type of terrible (like some people suggested); neither is it a good fantasy film. The visuals are generally great – “Warcraft” has a unique, cartoonish style (in lieu with the source material) which sets it apart from the more gritty-looking “*Lord of the Rings*” (2001-2003), “*Game of Thrones*” (2011-) or even “*Pirates of the Caribbean*” (2003-). Nothing in the “Warcraft” fantasy world seems believable (i.e., as it could actually exist), yet the film wisely does not even aim for believability. Occasional cute visual humor nicely compliments the chosen style (for example, apprentice-wizard Khadgar casually transforms a random guard into a poofy sheep and no-one even cares, because hey, this is the world they are living in). The quality of CGI is also impressive (as usually is the case when the masters from Industrial Light and Magic are at the helm), and the few shoddier shots are masked by the ever-convenient cartoonish visual flair. The acting is all over the place, with some good, some downright bizarre performances (the lead Travis Fimmel (Anduin Lothar) seemed particularly out of place – at least for me). The pacing is indeed off, especially in the beginning, and the extremely poor expositionary writing does not help either. However, even with these problems the film could still have been OK – even with a potential of being truly good if the possible Director’s Cut could fix the pacing. Yet this is

not the case. Because the problems of the “Warcraft” movie run deeper. Because the film’s main problem is such that the additional scenes could actually *harm* the film even more instead of saving it.

The said problem is the narrative structure – the carcass on which the entire production rests. Simply put, it is completely mangled to the point that the question of what the “Warcraft” movie is actually about becomes incredibly difficult to answer. The main issues of the narrative structure are as follows:

- 1) Missing motivation of villains;
- 2) Many lengthy plotlines that have nothing to do with the main story;
- 3) Too much time spend setting up the sequels – not enough attention given to the main plot;
- 4) Half of the characters disconnected from the main story, some – completely unnecessary;
- 5) No central “theme” or idea;
- 6) No focus;
- 7) Central conflict makes little sense, ending lacks resolution.

The list is pretty long; the rest of this non-review will be spend in examining each and every one of these points in one way or another. The saddest thing is that each of the issues could have easily been avoided by making some minor alterations to the narrative and the characters. Thus, let’s dig in.

Story time

The story of “Warcraft” (oh, by the way, I’m going to spoil everything) involves evil orc wizard Guldan (Daniel Wu) opening an inter-dimensional portal between a dying orc world and the lush, prosperous human world, so that a great chunk of the orcish Horde could come through and make way for the rest of their warmongering race. Some of the orcs (like Durotan, chieftain of the Frostwolf clan (Toby Kebbell), and Garona, a conspicuous half-orc-half-something-else (Paula Patton), seem like genuinely nice people, but Guldan is clearly *not*. He is vicious, despotic, very evil and to top it off, his magical technology is fueled by human (or other species) life energy. Bottom-line - not a nice guy, probably a villain.

Thus, the orcs set out to capture as much humans as they can to give portal enough of the life force to transport their entire race out of the dying wasteland into the human lands of milk

and honey. The word of the day is “genocide,” yay. It would be very dramatic indeed, except for the fact that we don’t see anything from the captured humans’ point of view, hence, it is very hard to care about them. Too bad.

The main human protagonists are not too keen on this invasion plan – an apprentice wizard Khadgar (Ben Schnetzer) senses that there is something wrong with the magic the orcs are using (really?) and sets out to investigate the means of how these big bad monster-men managed to cross dimensions in the first place. He is helped by Lothar, the main character who does very little throughout the film. During the course of the story it is revealed that Guldan is such an evil bastard because he uses *an evil type of magic*, which has corrupted him. He was actually responsible for the destruction of the orc world in the first place. Khadgar also finds out that the guardian of the human kingdom – a sort of Jesus-looking super-wizard Medivh (Ben Foster) – actually opened the portal for the orcs in the first place and is about to do it again. What a twist. Apparently, Medivh *also* used the same type of evil magic, which turned him evil. Convenient. At the same time Durotan tries to stage a coup – yet totally fails and is killed. Finally the heroes manage to defeat Medivh and save the human prisoners. Guldan is still up and about with his usual evil bastard-y ways, while the son of Durotan survives and is curiously *not evil*, even though infused with the same evil magic. Convenient.

...What a story, eh. OK, where to start?

The Villains

To begin with, the villains have no motives – to that extent the entire conflict has no real stakes. The film has two central villains (Guldan and Medivh) and one secondary one (Guldan’s lackey Blackhand, chieftain of the Blackrock clan, played by Clancy Brown), yet on their own they have no motivation – or rather a looping motivation. Why is Guldan invading human world? Because orc world is dying. Why is it dying? Because Guldan uses evil “Fel” magic. Why is he using evil magic? Because it gives him power, needed for an invasion.

Riiiiight...

Why is Medivh helping Guldan then? Because Medivh also uses evil magic, which corrupts his mind, I guess. Why is Medivh using doing that? Because he is... lonely? It’s not really explained.

Thus, two of the central villains either have motives that loop back into themselves (no real motivation) or are evil just because some external force corrupted them – which yet again is a none-motivation. It harks back to Marvel’s “Ant-Man” (2015)– an otherwise very serviceable comedy-superhero mish-mash, which had a villain corrupted by the technology he was using. If the villain only engages in villainy through the manipulation/side effect of some external force which has no apparent agency on its own, he is not really a villain; and the conflict of the story loses all the stakes. What are the heroes of Warcraft truly opposing? Is it a barbaric invading force? Is it prejudice? Maybe conflict is ideological? Neither one of these answers are correct. The main opposing force, the main enemy of the film is an evil “Fel” magic, some sort of green light/goop, which corrupts because... it is evil. Is it evil because it is powered with the life force of the people murdered? Not necessarily. Medivh does not seem to engage in the same industrial-scale slaughter as Guldan, yet utilizes “Fel” magic with even better efficiency. The green goo aspect of the film is not only an abstraction without motivation or clear agency – it also does not have any established in-world rules. Thus, the entire “war” aspect of “Warcraft” is totally nonsensical from the audience’s point of view – which is truly bizarre, seeing how easily such a problem could have been side-stepped.

You see, the villains with the face (i.e., *not* a magical green goo) do have some snippets of agency, of understandable motives – snippets that are almost entirely neglected and not elaborated upon. In the latter part of the film it is revealed that Medivh is actually the father of half-orc Garona. He has visited the orc world, fell in love, begotten a child. Garona, in turn, reveals that her mother was sentenced to death due to the forbidden inter-species relationship that was going on. That is a basis of some pretty understandable and relatable drama. A loner super-wizard Medivh travels through dimensions in quest for knowledge, encounters the orcs, forms a relationship he truly cares about. However, his love is killed on Guldan’s orders and Medivh partially blames himself; he has actively gone against the orcish laws, Romeo & Juliet type of storyline, yadda, yadda, yadda. Very self-explanatory.

Medivh’s child is also about to be killed, yet Guldan offer a deal – if the super-wizard would use the same inter-dimensional travel shenanigans to bring the orcish Horde to the far more prosperous human world, Garona would be spared. Thus, Medivh, feeling responsible for his child, the only person he still truly cares about, feeling guilty for the demise of his partner and experiencing the harshness and despair of the dying orc world makes the deal, tricking himself into thinking this is the best course of action and that the two races might eventually

find a peaceful co-existence – he and his love managed to do that, after all. Medivh opens the portal willingly – due to this a lot of innocent people die and the war begins. Medivh is still a villain, yet a tragic one, his motivation is very clear, even relatable. Everything’s absolutely fine, except...

Except it is not. Yet again the existence of green goo ruins everything. Apparently, Medivh opened the portal *unwillingly* – he does not even remember doing so. The usage of “Fel” magic corrupted him and somehow *made him* open the gateway. That is the only explanation – the only explanation behind the premise of *the entire friggin’ movie*. It is truly strange why the filmmakers bothered with the backstory of Medivh and Garona to begin with – it doesn’t lead anywhere even though it could have been the crux of the narrative.

Green goo ruins Guldan as well. The hulking old man (old orc, whatever) is actually more interesting than he seems to be at the first glance. He is not an all-powerful evil mastermind with drones of blindly-following fanatics. Guldan is the leader because other orcs *appointed* him to be one. He has to follow the laws that have more sway on the society than his magic ever could. Guldan cannot simply order others around – he has to make alliances, deals, sometimes solve problems forcefully, other times – diplomatically. The internal orc politics, at least for me, were the highlights of the film – mainly because they had established, non-contradictory rules. The careful plotting disappears when “Fel” magic is taken into consideration, though. Let’s say Guldan simply wants power – a basic villain motivation, nice and simple. Riches, influence, good food, all that jazz. Why the hell then he would actively destroy his own world? Why get rid of all the things power is worth having for? To unite everyone with a promise of wealth and riches in some other dimension? Yet it is established that before Guldan’s magic the orc world was lush and ripe with natural resources.

Destroying it made no sense – the usage of the same destructive magic to “kill land” in the human world makes little sense as well. Guldan destroys everything he comes into contact with because the green goo corrupted him. Why? Well, because green goo is evil, ya’ll. That’s it. That’s all there is to it.

Compared to what we have now, a film including Medivh, who is potentially sacrificing his people to save his only child and the orcs, seeking shelter in another world, because theirs is ravaged by some external (not Guldan-induced) catastrophe would be infinitely better. The source of the conflict would be understandable: Guldan is brutal not because he is made to be brutal by some external force, but because the brutality is required by the orcish law, which

formed due to the harshness of their hostile environment. Medivh makes a fatal mistake of being too compassionate towards the clearly war-thirsty army due to guilt and the love for his child. Even if Guldan would be just a power-hungry despot – conflict could still work, as it would be about something: a clash of two intrinsically different cultures, a one man's (Medivh's) impossible choice between the life of his child and the well-being of his entire people – *something*. Instead we have a war, the both sides of which are manipulated by the abstract, nonsensical green light.

Heroes

The heroes of the film do not fare better either. The problem is that there are so many of them – and only handful have any development and purpose in the story. The one who truly makes sense is a benevolent orc chieftain Durotan – he wants to save his people and (especially) his family from the self-destructive idiot that is Guldan. Very understandable motivation. The only problem is, it has almost nothing to do with the main narrative of the film, which is the supposed mystery of Fel magic and the origins of the orc invasion; even more, Durotan's storyline doesn't lead anywhere (the war-chief fails, his people and wife are slaughtered, he himself – killed) except setting up a sequel, involving chieftain's surviving child. Durotan, however likeable, is not the film's main protagonist.

The main narrative threat, as I already mentioned, is the mystery; how exactly did the orcs enter human world? Mystery leads to Medivh, his connection to Garona and the climactic fight between the former-Guardian and his successor. So, would that make the said successor – Khadgar – the main hero of the film? He is the one who figures out the mystery, outs and defeats Medivh and is ultimately responsible for sort-of saving the day, after all. No. Curiously, Khadgar is not the hero. He is mainly allocated to comic relief duties, his investigations have very little screen time, furthermore, they continue even after everyone in their audience have already figured out that Medivh is the bad guy.

Who is the hero then? A character who carries most of the film? Why, this guy, of course.

Anduin Lothar. Certainly looks the part. Who is he? Why is he important?

Well, Lothar is, erm... a soldier man. Good at killing stuff. Has a son – I guess – not quite sure, as the lad only appears in like three scenes (dies in the third. No emotional impact, as we knew nothing about the bloke). Kind of an asshole. Doesn't do anything important... well, kills Blackhand, a secondary villain, but that happens after the main battle, when there

are literally no stakes left. Kind of... kind of have a feeling that the filmmakers just needed a physically strong, relatable lead. The problem is that when the character has nothing going for him, is as bland as a rock and spends the entire film either whining or dissing people who actually push the plot forward (Khadgar), he is neither interesting nor relatable. He is a bloody nuisance – and the answer to the question “why nothing in this movie is properly developed?” This dude. He’s the reason.

The plot goes to great lengths to make Lothar relevant – he is queen’s brother, for example, which leads into soldier-man becoming a sort of king-regent when the real one (played by Dominic Cooper) is killed. All right. Fair enough. What does that have to do with the main plot, i.e., orcish invasion into the human world? Practically nothing. This particular little twist is just another set up for a sequel. A badly telegraphed one at that, as the queen and Lothar have exactly zero scenes exploring their sibling relationship. It should have been quite an interesting family dynamic – king, queen and her military commander brother, who is also king’s friend. Narrowing down the (supposedly) complex politics of the human kingdom to the single family’s relations – that’s a smart move on the filmmaker’s part. However, we have none of that. The only noteworthy scene between Lothar and his sister is the one during which they deliver a painful exposition, *explaining* their familial ties – which are important solely for the sequel baiting.

The similar situation is with Lothar’s son. The film briefly mentions that the big, tough soldier Lothar may have had pressured his son into military service – or at least encouraged him, whilst he clearly wasn’t ready for it. Yet that fleeting remark is all we are getting. We do not see this particular dynamic – it happens off-screen. If it existed, such plotline could have had mirrored orc’s warrior-culture, the ultra-macho mindset being self-destructive. As it is now though, the existence of Lothar’s son contributes nothing either to the plot or the main protagonist’s characterization. It serves a single purpose – Lothar’s son’s death motivates the commander to kill Blackhand. An act, which (as we already discussed) has zero relevance to the overall story. It certainly seems that Lothar became “Warcraft’s” main character for one of two reasons: either the studio thought that having a physically-strong, white male lead is good for marketing, or Lothar is just too important in the “Warcraft” game lore to be ignored. Questionable as these reasons may be, the decision could still have worked – the problem is that Lothar as a character has absolutely nothing to do with the chosen narrative for the film. His only contribution is a massive waste of screen-time spend on justifying contrived reasons for him to be included at all.

Let's take a look at the film's main poster. A collage of seven faces, seven principal characters. Two of them, Lothar and Durotan, supposed leads of the film, are either disconnected from the main plot or do not contribute *to any plotline in any way*. A character who drives the plot forwards – Khadgar – is allocated the smallest face, Medivh does not fare much better. What about the trailers? Majority of them promised, that the heroes will “unite”, will have to work together against the common foe. The common foe, as it turns out, is the color green for some reason. Neat. What about the “unite” part? Well, two biggest plotlines – orcish politics, centered around Durotan and the main story of Khadgar solving the mystery of “Fel” almost merge together at one point, when orcs and humans are about to make a secret alliance. The pact fails, however, and the plotlines never truly merge again. In fact, at the end of the film the remaining “heroes” oppose each other even more than before – Lothar hates the orcs and Garona for the supposed betrayal, Guldan is still in power and angrier than ever, peace-inclined Frostwolf clan is destroyed. The only change is Garona's (former slave's, who does not have any influence upon orcish community) acceptance into the Horde with the vague promise of her maybe – MAYBE – being able to change things from the inside. Good for her, I guess? Not much of “uniting against the common foe” going on, though.

How to fix it

Thus, the answer to the question of what the film is actually about, is... nothing. There is no unifying theme, just a lot of simultaneously happening events that never join into the cohesive whole. How to fix this enormous narrative problem? As mentioned before, simply adding more scenes would not do. The film has to find its focus. I do, however, have some very simple suggestions. Cut out Lothar, everything that has to do with him. Center the story on Khadgar, his quest to find the truth behind the orc invasion and the boy's issues with both his true and the adoptive parents (Kirin Tor floating wizard society). The reveal about Medivh should happen in the middle of the film, not at the end of it – the reasoning behind Medivh's betrayal *should* be explored in depth and it *should not* have anything to do with the green magic (keep it understandable, keep it human). At this point - and only at this point - there should be revealed that the orcs are something more than the horde of mindless brutes. A flashback to Medivh's time in the orc world could serve as a good example. Afterwards let Khadgar convince the human king of the truth, make the same deal with Durotan (who should also become a prominent character only at this point); the deal could still fail, but if Durotan takes the Garona's role at the end (i.e., kills the human king and thus achieves a leading role

within the ranks of the Horde), his plotline would cease being pointless. The end of the film could involve Khadgar with the Lothar's (as a secondary, not primary character) and Garona's help storming the Medivh's tower and stopping the villain from opening the inter-dimensional portal again. Medivh would still die – yet if he would have a real confrontation with Garona before he does, his arc would serve a strong thematic point, i.e., discussing the responsibility of being a parent vs. that of being a good man; a child, finding their own path in the world vs. overprotective parents, carefully deciding the “best” option for them; etc. After the fight Khadgar should muster the courage to confront both his real and adoptive parents and explain to them his own chosen path in the world instead of just running away. The very last scene of the film could be the one that was used in the beginning of the current one: Durotan and his wife choosing a name for their child, worrying about what kind of the world they will be bringing it into whilst the Horde in the background is preparing to continue war with the humans.

With these changes (that are not even that massive) the entire film would become about the parent-child relationship, the family bond and how the love for your child can be both a wonderful and a terrible thing when pushed into extreme. Villains would have proper motivations, conflict would make sense.

“Avengers” method

If it is indeed very important to the lore, even the “Fel” magic could be intact – as a terrible tool that the villains started using as the last resort. It seems that in the “Warcraft” game lore the green goo has something to do with the third faction, unseen in the movie – the demonic legion, pulling everyone's strings from the shadows. Perfect! At some point in the film Guldan just needed to be shown dealing with one of these demons, who grants him the power of “Fel.” Drop hints at the obviously-ill intentions of demons, drop hints that the “Fel” could be used to manipulate or enslave its users. That's it. This is the extent of the sequel baiting that was necessary. Green light itself is bizarre and really not that interesting – put an actual villainous force behind it and the audience's curiosity would peak. Show the hints of the existence of that evil force within the duration of the single, short scene – similarly how Marvel's “The Avengers” (2012) introduced the series arch-villain Thanos – and you would completely satisfy the game fans, to whom the lore is actually important.

Some comparisons

Even if all of the suggestions are rubbish – which they very well might be – I believe it is evident that “Warcraft’s” main drawback was not the shortened screen time, pacing issues or bad acting, but rather a very messy narrative structure. Duncan Jones and the crew clearly wanted to make a Warcraft movie that is respectful to the source material, yet did not seem to agree on what the movie will actually be *about*. That’s the main reason the film fails. To the non-gamer audiences it does not matter how the film captures the game’s unique visual flair or how faithful it is to the established lore. The general audiences expect a cohesive, entertaining fantasy-adventure flick – and the film with its jumbled plotlines, half of them not leading anywhere, does not deliver. To this day perhaps the most successful (in what it was trying to achieve) video game adaptation is Christoph Gans’ “Silent Hill” (2006) – a film that concerned itself with being an effective horror flick as much as being a faithful adaptation. It changed aspects of the game’s lore that needed to be changed for the story to work while being told couple-hours long, non-interactive manner at the same time retaining the elements and the plot-points that make the “Silent Hill” game franchise stand out from the crowd. Of course, the movie suffered from the cheesy dialogue, questionable acting and weird pacing decisions (not unlike “Warcraft”, as the matter of fact), but its overall plot structure was rock-solid.

Conclusion – translation vs. adaptation

People often pre-judge video-game movies to be doomed from the start – as if you simply cannot translate the interactive medium to the silver screen. They are actually kind of right. How so? Well, let’s look at the “Lego Movie” (2014) – a very successful project, which was based on something even less suitable for the big screen. Or the critically-acclaimed “The Dark Knight” (2008) superhero film – a film with an original story, *inspired* by the characters and the events in the long-running “Batman” comic book series rather than slavishly following them to the letter. The video game adaptations should strive for something similar – to *adapt* rather than translate, yet without losing the unique aspects of adapted property in the process. “Warcraft,” sadly, chooses the latter.