

ARTICLE

Underworld vs the World of Darkness: Players and Filmgoers Respond to a Legal Battle

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ABSTRACT

Even before its release, *Underworld* (2003) had proved controversial following a legal action for copyright infringement from White Wolf, a games publisher, and Nancy A Collins, a horror writer. Reaction was marked among White Wolf fans who debated the case in forums on both gaming and film sites. A significant number of fans were deeply critical of the actions of White Wolf, and they were more concerned about being able to see 'their' *World of Darkness* on screen than demonstrating loyalty to the company. This paper will explain the case and examine the reactions of fans at the time.

KEYWORDS

Role-playing; film; audiences; response; Internet.

In September 2003 Sony Pictures released the film *Underworld*. Even before its release, the film had proved controversial following a legal action for copyright infringement from White Wolf, a games publisher, and Nancy A Collins, one of their fantasy writers. White Wolf alleged that Sony had used unique elements that they had developed for their *World of Darkness* line of role-playing games. It was also alleged that *Love Among Monsters*, a short story by Nancy A Collins and written for White Wolf's game line, had been plagiarised in the film's plot. This paper will explain the background to this case, including an examination of fans, Gothic and the *World of Darkness*.

Henry Jenkins argues that 'fandom ... is born of a balance between fascination and frustration: if media content didn't fascinate us, there would be no desire to engage with it; but if it didn't frustrate us on some level, there would be no desire to rewrite or remake it' (Jenkins 2006: 247). As a result of this desire to rewrite a text, many fan activities revolve around a violation of someone's property rights. The interactive nature of role-playing games makes it easy for fans of a game to refashion it to their own desires unlike film and television programmes. The paper will examine the reactions of fans of the *World of Darkness* in internet forums at the time and develop a picture of what they thought and felt about both *Underworld* and the legal action. It might be expected that fans of the *World of Darkness* – a setting that was unique to White Wolf – would support its only producer. In addition White Wolf might be perceived by fans to be the 'underdog' in a legal battle against Sony, and therefore elicit more sympathy. This paper

will show that the opinions expressed by forum posters, particularly those who claimed to be fans of the *World of Darkness* did not follow this pattern. Instead, there are similarities to John Tulloch's examination of Australian *Doctor Who* fans, who expressed (in fanzines) dislike of particular individuals responsible for the production of *Dr Who* such as John Nathan-Turner, while still enjoying the programme (Tulloch 1995). In comparison Joss Whedon is a notable exception, celebrated by fans who are willing to give him authority over his own texts. The fans of the *World of Darkness* were supportive of a genre – that of gothic-punk rather than White Wolf.

The discussion of the *World of Darkness* leads to an examination of the game and its relationship with both *Underworld* and, surprisingly, *The Matrix* (1999). Many fans were convinced that *Underworld* had taken from both sources in its development. As a result I will examine the similarities between the *World of Darkness*, *Underworld*, and *The Matrix* and also consider the similarities between *Underworld* and *The Matrix*. This demonstrates the popular cultural literacy of internet forum posters who recognised the similarities between these sources.

For this paper I examined the forums of several websites which date back to 2003 to find out what people were saying about *Underworld* and the legal action by White Wolf. These forums included role-playing devoted forums such as RPG.net, RPG Junction, Gamewyrd and Ogre's Cave; film forums such as Geek Roar and Rotten Tomatoes; and Halloween Forum, which is devoted to the Halloween holiday. Before the release of *Underworld*, websites such as RPG Junction, for example, had a dedicated forum, 'Goth vampire/werewolf movie alert', following the development of the film and speculating upon it. I chose to look at internet forums because forums such as these had replaced fanzines by the end of the 1990s as the main source of communication between role-playing game players. Internet anonymity means that posters can say what they think but there is no way to verify what is written, so thoughts and feelings written about may be accurate, but facts may not be true. Forums can give a fuller and more varied picture of what fans were thinking, particularly as some of the posts would have never seen publication in a fanzine because of issues of space and quality. Unlike fanzines, internet forums have moderators rather than editors which allows all online fans to participate and not face the censorship of the editor. Instead, censorship of posts revolves around forum rules which are often clearly defined. Interestingly for this study, no censored posts or locked threads were found, except on White Wolf's own forums, where there is a notable lack of discussion, suggesting relevant forums may have been deleted.

Formed in 1991, White Wolf is one of the largest companies in the role-playing games industry, behind Wizards of the Coast. By 2003 White Wolf had a market share of 26% of the tabletop role-playing game market, with book sales of over 5.5 million. White Wolf is now owned by CCP Games, the Icelandic publisher of the massively multiplayer online role playing game (MMORPG) *Eve Online*, who bought them in 2006. White Wolf is best known for its *World of Darkness* line of role-playing games which included *Vampire: The Masquerade* (1991) and *Werewolf: The Apocalypse* (1992). As the success of White Wolf's games shows, this setting is very popular. To exploit this popularity the

World of Darkness has been licensed for a variety of merchandising outside of the role-playing game sphere. These include other kinds of tabletop games including collectable card games such as *Vampire: The Eternal Struggle*, and board games such as *Vampire: Prince of the City*, novels, comics, computer games such as *Vampire the Masquerade: Bloodlines*, and the Aaron Spelling television series *Kindred: The Embraced* (1996). The setting is clearly of great interest to consumers, and is considered a viable proposition for a MMORPG created by CCP Games. In 2003 White Wolf took the remarkable and financially risky step of rebooting their *World of Darkness* setting to remove a mass of internal contradictions that had occurred because of their previously often chaotic game development methods. The original games were replaced with redesigned and updated versions including a core rulebook and *Vampire: The Requiem*, and *Werewolf: The Forsaken*. 2003 was therefore a vulnerable time for the company.

2003 also saw the release of *Underworld*, a film about a centuries-old war between vampires and werewolves starring Kate Beckinsale. Beckinsale's character, Selene, is a vampire 'death-dealer', who hunts werewolves as part of this war. In the pursuit of her duty, she meets and falls in love with a young werewolf, Michael Corvin. While protecting him from both sides, she discovers that the werewolf threat is worse than the vampires believe. Ultimately she discovers that the vampires are the villains of this war because of their genocidal actions against the werewolf population. Corvin is linked to both sides and, after being infected, becomes a vampire/werewolf crossbreed, referred to as 'an abomination'. The film ends with Selene and Corvin on the run together. The film was highly successful; with a budget of \$22 million, it grossed \$95.7 million at the box office worldwide, and spawned two sequels – *Underworld Evolution*, released in 2006 and *Underworld: Rise of the Lycans*, which is scheduled for 2009 (Box Office Mojo 2008).

Copyright law is complicated, and it is expected that copyright holders will go to court to protect a copyrighted property. If they do not then they can risk losing copyright. As an intellectual property, the *World of Darkness* is a valuable asset for White Wolf that must be protected from copyright infringement. It would be the *World of Darkness* that was at the heart of the legal issue that resulted from the film *Underworld*.

On 5 September 2003 White Wolf and Nancy A Collins, sued Sony Pictures, Screen Gems and Lakeshore Entertainment alleging seventeen separate counts of copyright infringement. They claimed over 60 points of unique similarity between *Underworld* and the *World of Darkness*. It was also alleged that the script of *Underworld* was based on the story *Love of Monsters* (1994) by Collins, which featured a romance between a werewolf and a vampire. The case rested on more than just the use of a couple of unique concepts. It was significant to the case that, although some of the ideas are not original to the *World of Darkness* and include a number of different mythical and literary elements, Mark Rein-Hagen combined them in a way that is unique to White Wolf. As William Strong explains: 'an original exposition of public domain material may take the form of an arrangement. [...] [the] originality lies (partly) in the juxtaposition of these public domain elements, and [the] copyright extends only to the limits of [the creator's] originality' (Strong 1999:5). This appears to be an appropriate way to understand the copyright issues

surrounding Rein-Hagan's creation of the *World of Darkness*. The case revolved around the suggestion that the same mythical and literary elements are combined in *Underworld* in the same way as the *World of Darkness*, in addition to the plagiarism of Collins' short story *Love of Monsters*. However, an idea or plot cannot be copyrighted; instead copyright protects the way the idea is expressed (Strong 1999: 13). Problematically 'no one has reliably defined [...] the boundary between idea and expression' (Strong 1999: 179-180). It is not possible here to examine each of the seventeen counts of copyright infringement. The areas that this paper will look at are the aesthetics, the vampire/werewolf war and the abomination.

The *World of Darkness* is the brand name for the setting of a number of linked White Wolf role-playing games. The first game in this setting was *Vampire: The Masquerade*, which was followed up with, among others, *Werewolf: The Apocalypse*. The *World of Darkness* is a modern urban horror setting with a strong gothic undertone. It is based in the real world of today but is twisted very slightly to create an image that the rulebook describes as 'through a looking glass darkly' (Rein-Hagen 2000: 28). The setting is described by Rein-Hagen as gothic-punk (Rein-Hagen 2000: 28-29). It combined aspects of vampire mythology and Goth style with the ambience of Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire*. In 1991 this setting was highly original and one of the first aimed specifically at mature players. Typically player characters are supernatural beings, including vampires, werewolves and mages. Characters are often filled with personal angst and torment over their monstrous natures whilst the urban cityscape is threatening and out of human proportion.

The most important aspect of the *World of Darkness* is the Gothic. Victor Sage and Allan Lloyd Smith define the Gothic as 'not merely a literary convention or a set of motifs: it is a language, often an anti-historicising language, which provides writers with the critical means of transferring an idea of the otherness of the past into the present' (Sage & Lloyd Smith 1996:1). As a concept the Gothic continues to be as relevant today as it was in the 18th and 19th centuries and as a result appears in a range of contemporary media. Catherine Spooner summarises its key themes as: 'the legacies of the past and its burdens on the present; the radically provisional or divided nature of the self; the construction of peoples or individuals as monstrous or 'other'; the preoccupation with bodies that are modified, grotesque or diseased' (Spooner 2006: 8).

It is possible to identify all of these themes in both the *World of Darkness* and *Underworld*. The legacy of the past is important in both texts. In *Underworld* it is critical to the plot with two intrusions of the past into the present. On the wider historical scale, Selene doesn't know the origins of the vampire/lycan war and on a personal level she doesn't know the truth about the murder of her human family. This makes Selene vulnerable to manipulation by Vicktor, her father-figure, who has suppressed the truth. Equally, the *World of Darkness* features the intrusion of the past, although it is represented physically through the vampire elders. The vampire elders and younger vampires are in perpetual conflict. The elders are afraid of younger vampires because of their greater numbers and so use their power and influence to control them. This creates disquiet among the younger vampires who become envious of their elders' power.

In terms of the division of the self, both texts have examples. Selene is internally conflicted. She believes that werewolves murdered her family and her occupation is hunting werewolves; yet she has fallen in love with a werewolf and begins to see the werewolves' viewpoint. In *Vampire: The Masquerade*, a key part of the game is the struggle between the humanity of the individual and their vampire desires, which are nicknamed 'the beast'.

Both texts construct groups of people who are defined as monstrous and 'other'. In the case of *Underworld* and the *World of Darkness* the groups are literally monstrous – werewolves and vampires. This has escalated to war and because each group is so radically different and can do things that the other cannot, this makes the enemy that much stranger and more 'other'.

Modified bodies are central to both *Underworld* and the *World of Darkness*. Vampires and werewolves are by their very definition no longer human, and therefore modified from the norm. Werewolves can even change shape, moving from human to man-wolf and even full wolf forms. Both texts feature the abomination, a werewolf/vampire hybrid which is a monstrous modification of the already modified werewolves and vampires. The vampires in *Underworld* are concerned about the purity of their bloodline, while the vampires in the *World of Darkness* are more concerned about the bloodline being diluted through the generations. The abomination appears grotesque to characters who are already grotesque in and of themselves.

There is no doubt that both *Underworld* and the *World of Darkness* are Gothic constructs and deliberately so. Both use the key Gothic themes and a similar Gothic aesthetic. In particular the cityscape of *Underworld* bears close resemblance to the description of the world in *Vampire: The Masquerade*:

'Buttressed buildings loom overhead, bedecked with classical columns and grimacing gargoyles. Residents are dwarfed by the sheer scale of the architecture, lost amid the spires that seem to grope to Heaven in an effort to escape the physical world.' (Rein-Hagen 2000:28)

Selene is depicted moving through an old-world city lost among the rooftops and spires of gothic churches.

The vampire/werewolf war and the abomination are ideas that both appear in the White Wolf campaign supplement, *Under A Blood Red Moon* (1993). In this supplement a vampire leader, desperate to find an external enemy to unite his fractious followers, attacks and kills a werewolf. His miscalculation is that he believes that werewolves, although powerful, are essentially small in number. The retaliation from the werewolf tribes is immense – hundreds of werewolves descend onto Chicago with the aim of exterminating all vampires. There is a marked similarity between *Under A Blood Red Moon* and *Underworld*. Both feature wars between vampires and werewolves, the vampires not recognising the large werewolf threat, and the intention to unify various vampire factions by creating a common enemy. However the concept of conflict between vampires and werewolves is not new. Paul Barber shows this is well established in

folklore and suggests that its origins are in the scavenging of dead bodies by dogs and wolves (Barber 1988:134). In addition there are numerous earlier examples in film including *Frankenstein's Bloody Terror* (1968) and *The Howling VI: The Freaks* (1991).

The level of hatred between the two warring sides in *Under A Blood Red Moon* is a key part of the story: 'the mood is one of *revulsion*. This story is about two very different races. Their values, their beliefs, their morality and even their tactics differ from one another. Each side is sickened by the other. They do not respect their enemies; they are instead repulsed by them, seeing them as blights to be removed' (Brown 1993: 11). This hatred leads to each side's willingness to undertake what would be called ethnic cleansing. In *Under a Blood Red Moon* the werewolves explicitly plan to eliminate all vampires in Chicago whether they are involved in the war or not. Neither side is interested in taking prisoners or negotiating a settlement, and the concept of civilian or neutrality is meaningless.

The same mutual hatred applies in *Underworld*. Both the Lycans and the vampires despise the other group. In *Underworld* this is taken to a logical extreme, with Selene acting as a dedicated anti-Lycan fighter with hundreds of years of experience. The vampires and werewolves of the *World of Darkness* use not only tooth and claw, but also high-tech weapons such as phosphorous rounds to kill vampires and silver nitrate rounds to kill werewolves. Many of these weapons are developed by a multi-national corporation run by werewolves. Similarly in *Underworld* there are clearly advanced research facilities dedicated to developing more effective methods of killing each other. There are also similarities to the weapons depicted in the *World of Darkness* with *Underworld's* vampires armed with silver nitrate bullets.

Into the middle of the war in *Under a Blood Red Moon*, comes the abomination – a werewolf that has been deliberately infected by a vampire's bite. An abomination is a rare creature with a mix of werewolf and vampire characteristics that is rejected by both vampires and werewolves as unnatural. Werewolves particularly despise the abomination because not only is it physically tainted but spiritually tainted. As spiritual eco-warriors the werewolves consider the walking dead, like vampires, as unnatural. Again there is a marked similarity between *Under A Blood Red Moon* and *Underworld*. *Underworld* features a vampire/werewolf hybrid in the character Corvin, who is born a werewolf and then bitten by a vampire. The film uses the word 'abomination' twice to describe a vampire/werewolf hybrid. The concept of a vampire/werewolf hybrid and the use of the word 'abomination' to describe it is unique to *White Wolf*. The difference in the handling of the abomination between *Underworld* and *Under a Blood Red Moon* is that in *Underworld* the abomination is partially the result of Lycan experimentation and genetic development, whilst in *Under A Blood Red Moon* the abomination comes from vampires capturing werewolves and torturing them.

The merits of the case between *White Wolf* and Sony were debated on both role-playing and film forums. Many were self-proclaimed *White Wolf* fans who prefaced their comments with statements about their level of involvement with *White Wolf's* games. These usually express a level of personal enjoyment, such as 'I really enjoy *White Wolf's*

games' (Wolfie 2003) and 'I love W[orld] o[f] D[arkness]' (Margi 2004) or express their involvement in terms of years played, such as 'I had followed W[orld] o[f] D[arkness] for years' (eruditus 2003) and 'I've played vampire and werewolf for years...' (Margi 2004), along with those who simply say 'I am a fan of White Wolf' (Sephiroth 2004). This appears to be an attempt by the posters to justify their opinions by stating their credentials or subcultural capital.

As Sarah Thornton suggests in *Club Cultures*, 'subcultural capital is objectified in the form of fashionable haircuts and well-assembled record collections' and 'embodied in the form of being 'in the know', using (but not over using) current slang and looking as if you were born to perform the latest dance styles' (Thornton 1995:11-12). As this takes place online, it is therefore more difficult for the posters to demonstrate their subcultural capital. They cannot display their collection of gaming books or their long running game campaign. In this case subcultural capital must be based on affirmations of how much one loves the games or how long one has played them. It is noticeable that the posts critical of White Wolf tend to have far more of these personal justifications than the positive ones. It looks like fans think that a certain amount of subcultural capital is required to justify a negative opinion. This is possibly to 'prove' that they know what they are talking about and therefore have a right to comment. By comparison a significant number of positive posts do not explicitly say that they are fans of White Wolf. A couple of posters specifically said that the law suit had changed their opinion of White Wolf, from positive to negative. For example 'until today I rather liked White Wolf' (Leopoldo 2003) and 'I have really lost respect for them [White Wolf] after this lawsuit' (Wolfie 2003).

Many of the critical posts were vitriolic with some posters believing that White Wolf had ulterior motives for the legal action. There are suggestions that the suit was brought for nothing more than free publicity:

'We all know why White Wolf sued, they just wanted the publicity. If they make no money on this, they have already made a profit in bringing people's attention to a small market company who makes Vampire and Were-wolf games, stories and r[ole]p[laying]g[ame]s!' (BLADE 2003)

In addition this was combined with the idea that White Wolf were looking for a payoff, or were planning on capitalising financially on the publicity. The majority felt that the lawsuit was 'ludicrous' and said this in no uncertain terms in their posts, using phrases such as 'the lawsuit is crap' (T-monster 2004), 'I find it ridiculous' (Margi 2004) and 'the suit is frivolous' (eruditus 2003). Posters express support for Sony, with one poster suggesting that Sony should 'bury them [White Wolf] under so much counter litigation W[hite] W[olf] won't be in a position to pester anyone ever again' (edmund 2003). It seems that although posters like the *World of Darkness setting*, they are far more ambivalent about White Wolf.

White Wolf was surprised at the level of negativity that came from their own fans over the case. In a statement originally on the White Wolf forum, but reposted on RPG Junction, the president of White Wolf, Mike Tinney commented: 'We're also a little remotely surprised by the knee jerk reaction some folks are having to this legal action that

we're taking to perpetually protect what we seemingly believe to be infringements of our copyrights' (JamminJeremy 2003). It is significant that these fans did not appear to support the actions of the company that makes a game that they demonstrated was important to them through their expressions of subcultural capital.

A point that some posters make is that the *World of Darkness* is not unique, in particular, that other writers such as Anne Rice or Laurell K Hamilton may have a better case against *Underworld*. For example:

'Having seen the film itself, I'd say that Anne Rice and Laurel K. Hamilton have much more to be angry about than White Wolf.' (Johnny McKenna 2003)

and...

'Personally, I think that the creators of Blade, Anne Rice, the writers of Near Dark, and just about every other piece of vampire fiction should sue White Wolf. White Wolf should acknowledge that they did nothing original, and just get over it.' (T-monster 2004)

These authors are specifically named because their novels have a similar vampire gothic-punk setting. Anne Rice's vampire novels feature angst-ridden vampire protagonists – rather similar to *World of Darkness's* monsters battling to retain their humanity but also similar to Selene in *Underworld*. While the Anita Blake line of novels by Laurell K Hamilton features a vampire hunter who is in love with both a vampire and a werewolf. Again there are similarities with both *Underworld* and the *World of Darkness*.

This vitriol can be explained. The White Wolf fans are interested in the vampire gothic-punk idea, embodied for them in more than just the *World of Darkness* but in other cultural objects such as *Underworld*, *Interview with the Vampire* and the Anita Blake novels. For them the *World of Darkness* exists independently, without the support of White Wolf. Therefore White Wolf, by suing Sony for copyright infringement, was threatening and limiting fans' supply of vampire gothic-punk. The implication for fans was that White Wolf was suggesting that only their brand of vampire gothic-punk is 'authentic' and only they can supply it. This is problematic for fans because, as their posts suggest, they want a broader supply of vampire gothic-punk and that any expression of this genre is 'authentic' to them. It would appear that fans view the company as an impediment to, rather than an enabler of, their interests. It is possible that the posters are fans of the vampire gothic-punk genre rather than just the *World of Darkness*.

Fans usually position themselves as being alternative to the mainstream. By supporting *Underworld* and Sony Pictures, the White Wolf fans had chosen to support a mainstream cultural product. This is unusual. In part it is a desire for more vampire gothic-punk products among White Wolf fans. However, although role-playing, as an activity, could be described as alternative, in the context of the role-playing industry, White Wolf, as one of the largest companies, is the mainstream. It is not therefore strange that they have transferred their interest from one perceived mainstream company to another.

In the press release announcing that they had filed a suit against Sony, White Wolf claimed that the film had confused its fans. Mike Tinney is quoted in the release: 'The volume of confusion in our marketplace is amazing, our fans think they're going to be

seeing our film. Of course, if the movie gets released, in a way they will be' (White Wolf 2003b). There is little to back this up in forum posts, with only one poster admitting to confusion about *Underworld's* origins:

'When I first saw the Preview at Freddy vs Jason my first thought was it was an 'adaptation' of the game. The whole World of Darkness/Vampire vs Werewolf thing was just like the game.' (The Unknown 2003)

However, once the legal action had become public knowledge it would have been clear to White Wolf fans that *Underworld* was not made with White Wolf's agreement. It is unlikely that many posters would want to admit to any earlier confusion.

The idea of the fans wanting to see a '*World of Darkness*' style film is backed up in forum postings. One of the posters who watched *Underworld* felt that it 'ISN'T the World of Darkness, but pretty damn close' (phish1yem 2003) while another poster on RPG Junction suggested that it 'may look kinda W[orld]o[f]D[arkness]-ey when ya scan it, but it definitely doesn't seem like a Garou vs. Kindred thing' (B. Samedi 2003). So if *Underworld* wasn't the *World of Darkness*, what did posters think it was? Many posters described *Underworld* as being similar to *The Matrix* (1999). There were several areas that posters identified as similar, specifically the costumes, special effects and fights:

'I thought that it had more of a Matrix feel about it. The skin tight leather outfits, guns blazing with the matrix-like special effects. Long leather coats for the other Vamps.' (Giltos 2003)

and...

'I think this movie is more similar to the matrix than any other movie.. damn the visuals, the costumes, the music, cheoreography all seemed similar...' (Bleh 2004)

This idea was well supported in several promotional articles for *Underworld*. On the MTV website, *Underworld* was summed up as 'kind of like *Interview With the Vampire* meets *The Matrix*' (Downey 2002) or as Penny Arcade put it more succinctly: 'like a gothic *The Matrix*' (Tycho 2003). The similarities between *The Matrix* and *Underworld* were felt to be so marked that a poster suggested on Geek Roar: 'O well.. guess they might as well join the bandwagon and sue too.' (Bleh 2004)

There are a number of visual similarities between *Underworld* and *The Matrix*:

'*Underworld*, looks like it was shot on leftover sets from *The Matrix*, not to mention copiously uses the bullet-time special effects *The Matrix* made popular. Even Kate Beckinsale's outfit copies the Trinity latex bodysuit.' (Chung 2003)

As posters noted, the costumes, including the use of trench coats, heavy biker boots and PVC are almost identical. Selene and Trinity wear similar outfits, based on body fitting clothing, with functional boots. However *Underworld's* vampires retain a gothic aesthetic with a mix of modern gothic fashions and Celtic knot-symbols on their practical trench coats. The special effects in *Underworld*, especially the fight scenes, used many of the techniques that *The Matrix* established. A number of the fights are similar to those in *The Matrix*, with 'two or three shots that are literally carbon copies of those in *The Matrix*' (Mackenzie 2003). These include a fight in each film featuring a subway station that uses almost identical positioning of the scenery (the opening gun-battle in *Underworld*, and the closing one in *The Matrix*) and a gun-battle where the bullets catch the surface of a

body of water (the rescue of Morpheus in *The Matrix* and the underground fight towards the end of *Underworld*).

Moving beyond the visual similarities, there are also similarities in the theme and characters. Both films are about secret wars being carried out just outside the sight of normal people. In each film there are groups with special abilities that are not accessible to the ordinary person. Ultimately, a single individual is chosen from the masses who will become uniquely powerful. The intention is that the arrival of this person will end the war. In terms of characters this individual is either Neo or Corvin. Neo and Corvin are sought out by a John the Baptist figure, Morpheus or Lucian. There is a helpful warrior-handmaid in either Trinity or Selene. The character is betrayed by either Cypher or Kraven and his 'death' leads to him becoming more powerful than before.

In later posts this moves on to discussion about how the *World of Darkness* is supposed to look. Some posters have very clear ideas: 'my visual impression of the W[orld] o[f] D[arkness] has always been more like, er... Usually okay, you forcibly know eighties movies like *Lost Boys* and, um, other eighties movies' (helmerj 2006)? Although these are seemingly taken from Rein-Hagen's list of source material for the *Vampire the Masquerade* game:

'Bela Lugosi's *Dracula* and Murnau's silent *Nosferatu* are the granddaddies of the genre. Other good (or at least amusing) films include *The Hunger*, *Near Dark*, *Vamp*, *The Lost Boys*, *Salem's Lot*, the Christopher Lee Hammer Horror films, and the anime flick *Vampire Hunter D*.' (Rein-Hagen 2000: 25)

By comparison some have more unconventional impressions: 'as has been said se7en is, I[in]M[y]O[pinion], how the W[orld]o[f]D[arkness] is meant to look' (LivingForADay 2006).

For those who were supportive of White Wolf's case, the similarities between *Underworld* and the *World of Darkness* were too close to be a coincidence. As one poster on Geek Roar wrote:

'The similarities between the plot, feel, and style of the *Underworld* are WAY too close to the Vampire world of W[hite]W[olf] for me to believe that the writers/producers were not directly and/or indirectly influenced by W[hite]W[olf] novels and sourcebooks.' (Al 2003)

At the same time there is disappointment that White Wolf hadn't put their own *World of Darkness* film into production yet, as one Rotten Tomatoes poster wrote: 'too bad W[hite]W[olf] couldn't have done their own project years ago...' (Thorshammer 2003) There is also the suggestion that a White Wolf film could potentially be very successful, given the box office returns for *Underworld*:

'The moral of this is ... a *World of Darkness* film would possibly do quite well, especially if it was better than *Underworld*.' (straightbourbon 2003)

Those posters who were pro-White Wolf felt that a *World of Darkness* film could be very good, given what they felt was high-quality source material.

An important theme that comes out in many posts is the desirable and aspirational nature of Kate Beckinsale in her role in *Underworld*. There are many comments about Kate

Beckinsale's desirability, particularly her 'ass'. For some later viewers this is the best part of the film:

'Good points: (...) Kate's ass.' (Knut@ 2006, April 9)

'Best part of the movie: Kate/Selene's shapely, shiny, leather-boldly encased butt.'
(TaylrDave 2006)

Her allure becomes almost the point of watching *Underworld* for some viewers: 'Oh come on, you had Ms. Beckinsale in a skin-tight black leather catsuit. What more do you want?' (Olly 2004) Much of this desirability revolves around her costume, particularly the tight PVC cat suit, which emphasised her physical attributes. A group of posters at Halloween Forum discussed how they will make a replica of Selene's costume for Halloween and where to look to find similar items. One poster described Selene as 'so beautiful, in every way! Her looks, her personality, her shape, and that pvc catsuit...omg !!! I'm in love with her! And like others in this forum...want a costume just like HERS !' (selene 2004) For the (presumably) female posters, not only is the character of Selene aspirational but her costume is massively desirable. Something similar is happening here to Pamela Church Gibson's suggestion about the character of Trinity in *The Matrix*:

'Trinity does wear some stunning PVC outfits [...] ; she wears functional, flat-heeled biker boots and is frequently seen astride a Ducati motorbike that might be, for many, as desirable as Carrie-Anne Moss herself.' (Gibson 2005: 120)

For these posters who aspire to be like Selene, rather than desiring a technological item like Selene's Maserati, they have transferred their commodity fetishism onto her costume (Gibson 2005:120). This desire is extended by a poster on RPG Junction who wants to try out the new version of the *World of Darkness* 'if it means I can artistically be a badass who wears black vinyl jumpsuits, mows down mooks with abandon, drives a Maserati, and has the "Never Needs Ammunition" feat' (Knut@ 2006, April 9). In particular this poster wants to create a character that imitates Selene, from her attitude, costume, and behaviour, down to the car she drives.

White Wolf is one of the biggest companies in the role-playing game industry with a large and passionate fan base. Its main development is the *World of Darkness*, a gothic-punk setting that is used in their successful line of role-playing games. This setting has been licensed and generates significant revenue for White Wolf. As a result it was important that they protect their intellectual property when they felt that *Underworld* infringed it. *Underworld* appeared to copy many aspects of the *World of Darkness*, including the aesthetics, the concept of a vampire/werewolf war and the vampire/werewolf hybrid, the abomination.

Reaction to the news of this legal action was marked in fan circles, which included fans of White Wolf products, fans of the *Underworld* film and fans of both. The case was debated by these fans in forums on both gaming and film websites. Given that the case appeared to be clear-cut to White Wolf, it did not seem unreasonable for them to expect to get support from their fans. Surprisingly there were a significant number of White Wolf fans who were deeply critical of the actions of White Wolf, to the point that some declared that they would no longer support any White Wolf products. This is interesting as normally the fans would be expected to demonstrate loyalty to White Wolf, which they did not. Based on the example of White Wolf, fans do not feel that they owe anything to

the company that produces the material that they consume. Instead it appears that the posters are fans of a vampire gothic-punk setting, rather than specifically White Wolf's *World of Darkness*. *Underworld* supported the desire of some fans to see a vampire gothic-punk film. White Wolf's actions, although protecting their intellectual property, threatened fans' supply of gothic-punk material, although many fans expressed a desire for a 'proper' *World of Darkness* film in the future following the success of *Underworld*. Frequently more reasonable debate over the case appeared to happen among those who were not White Wolf fans as the emotional level was often a lot lower.

There is a certain irony that White Wolf sued the makers of *Underworld* stating that they were concerned about confusion in the marketplace, when it quickly became clear that many people felt that the franchise that had most directly been copied from was *The Matrix*. Even so this similarity is not clear-cut. As such the owners of *The Matrix* did not sue the makers of *Underworld* and so this similarity was not explored in a court case. However it can be suggested that *Underworld* appears to take several aspects, including aesthetics, characters and plot from *The Matrix*. Both films have punk sensibilities, with *The Matrix* having a more cyberpunk image, *Underworld*, a gothic-punk one. Characters such as Morpheus and Lucian are very similar, as are Trinity and Selene, and Neo and Corvin. One area that becomes clear in the forum postings is the popularity of Kate Beckinsale's character Selene, a character that manages to be both sexually desirable and aspirational at the same time, rather like Trinity. In comparison Corvin is a far less interesting character, although he is more powerful than Selene and the story in *Underworld* is, to an extent, centred on his re-creation as a vampire-werewolf.

The case itself was settled out of court, with neither side willing to divulge details of the resolution. This may imply that both sides of the suit felt their case was not strong enough to guarantee a win. In addition suits for copyright infringement can be both expensive and lengthy, something that both Sony and White Wolf may have wanted to avoid. The *Underworld* franchise does not appear to have been harmed by the legal action for copyright infringement by White Wolf. The first film, *Underworld*, was commercially successful and a sequel has been made, with a prequel forthcoming.

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