

<http://www.eludamos.org>

---

**Objects of Desire: A Reading of the Reward System in *World of Warcraft***

Lasse Juel Larsen

*Eludamos. Journal for Computer Game Culture*. 2012; 6 (1), pp. 15-24

---

# Objects of Desire: A Reading of the Reward System in *World of Warcraft*

LASSE JUEL LARSEN

This article is written in an attempt to navigate the reward structure in World of Warcraft (WoW). Alongside its analysis of the reward structure in WoW, this article draws upon the paradoxical design of desire itself. In doing so, it takes a binocular perspective that addresses both the interplay between WoW's reward structure and a player-centric approach that seeks to explain the transcendent design of desire itself. The interplay between game structure and the design of desire is approached by means of a narrated scene from a personal experience of WoW dating back from the time of classical WoW, where the level cap was 60 and the guild raids in the high-end instances demanded the participation of 40 players. The scene is intended to provide the reader with insights both of the reward structure of WoW and of player's experience of the game world.

The analysis of the reward structure has its point of departure in Charles S. Peirce's semiotics and his idea of infinite semiosis. From there it moves on to Jacques Derrida's philosophy on *différance* including his understanding of the sign. This perspective is fruitful when trying to understand the reward structure of WoW as a dynamic between desire as a field of tension and progression in the game world. Derrida's definition of the sign and his philosophy of *différance* cast light on an intriguing dynamic that arises between the players' desire and the design of WoW's reward structure, especially on how players lose themselves between present and future, between distance and closeness in a game world that has no finalisation. The analysis will show how WoW's reward structure successfully draws upon the paradoxical design of desire in a game world based on a deteriorating value system. The interpretation is further supported by Sigmund Freud's analysis of the pleasure principle, where fulfillment of desire yields to the acceptance of disinclination. In addition it has to be said that, although it takes an interpretation of epic items (highest quality items) as its starting point, the analysis expands into a broader perspective that encapsulates the entire structural design of WoW. Before I begin the analysis, let me describe a scene from Blackwing Lair in classical WoW.

## Blackwing Lair

I see him now. The dragon is impressive. His name is Nefarian. He nests in Blackrock Mountain or to be more precise in the dungeon Blackwing Lair. We have killed him before. Tonight the spirit is high. We are 35 out of 40 people in the guild raid and everybody knows what to do and when to do it. The raid has lasted three hours. The fastest run yet. We have come a long way. Spending night after night combating our way through the instance. Tonight all those hours, weeks and month are reduced to a distant memory. Nefarian is the end boss of Blackwing Lair. He holds treasures beyond what most players' dream of. Only few are rewarded. The

lucky few. We have wiped countless times and made almost as many ghost runs back for yet another try. Still we are the best horde guild on the server. Every player with ambition wants to join our guild. We feel good about ourselves. Why shouldn't we? We possess the highest rewards - the most sought after epic items. The door to epic riches goes through the guild. Without it players can't get near them. Can't fulfill their dreams and hearts desires. After all who would spend every night raiding, waiting, wiping, and listening to teamspeak in between pockets of action with no goal in sight? Nobody. It is all about items or rewards. It comes with a price: obligation. The guild has its own distribution system. It is called dragon kill points (dkp). Every boss we kill gives dkp. Even if we don't receive items from a boss kill, we earn dkp which we later on can spend on an item. I play a warlock and I want the nemesis robe. The robe is part of a set that consist of eight items. The Nemesis Raiment. I have seven parts. Nefarian holds the robe. Maybe he will drop it tonight. If I get the last one I will be the first horde player on the server to own the full set. A full set emanates respect, produces hope and ignites desire in other players. Players can look at me with envy. Drool before I quest on or fight alliance - our mortal enemy.

Back to the battle. Nefarian is soaked in color flashes from our spells and weapons. The raid leader's voice is tense. Nefarian's minions swarm the screen. The computer freezes for a short second under the workload. For a moment Warcraft loses its fluent gameplay. In fire and ice Nefarians minions die. Afterwards everybody breathe easier. Now we have him. Nefarian dies one more time accompanied by our customary hails. I hold my breath while I watch the screen. Will he drop the nemesis robe? It is the most exciting moment of the entire night. The raid leader links the rewards. My heart stops. There it is. The last part of the nemesis raiment. It is amazing. I frantically bid all my dkp. Receive the item. Full nemesis. It is perfect. The game is perfect. Life is perfect. Everybody in the guild sends their congratulation.

Back in Orgrimmar before I log out a feeling mixed of emptiness and unendingness creeps up on me. The game will never end. Already the guild is speaking of completing another high-end instance: AQ40. And in a few months Blizzard will release the long awaited upgrade: Burning Crusade. What will happen with all our efforts to gain epic items? Will they be lost? I decide not to think about it and go to sleep.

## **Semiotics: Reward as Signs**

From the scenario presented above, I hope the reader gets a sense of the complex field of meaning surrounding items in WoW. I have chosen for analysis a particular group of items: items of the highest quality, or 'epics', as they are called in WoW. They primarily represent endgame goals. In other words, they constitute a highly sought-after group of items, i.e. epic items. As a group of items 'epics' are not fixed in time, but change when updated. With updates Blizzard continuously introduce new and more powerful epic items. In essence this means that their value deteriorates over time. This dynamic in itself presents an ongoing challenge for the players to keep up, stay in front and never lose sight of possible future rewards. This constant updating and changing of the value of items creates a complex reward system in WoW. In order to focus the analysis and understand the dynamic of epic items in WoW I have chosen to use semiotics. Semiotics is about signs: how meaning is

negotiated and created from a sign or signs. A sign can be many things, ranging from a letter to an epic item in WoW. The progressive and continuous production of signs in WoW fits better with Charles S. Peirce's triadic (1958) semiotic conception of infinite semiosis than with Ferdinand de Saussure's (1995) dyadic conception of the arbitrary linguistic sign that is divided between 'signifié' and 'signifiant'.

## Reward Structure as Deferred Semiosis

Generally, Peirce views a sign as "something that stands for something, to somebody, in some respect or capacity" (Pierce 1958, p.17). The quotation refers to Peirce's triadic model: a sign represents something besides itself, signs are to be interpreted. Meaning arises from the interpretation of signs and, finally, the context frames the interpretation (Pierce 1958, Salen and Zimmerman 2004). It is easy to employ this understanding of signs in the analysis of computer games, and particularly in an analysis of WoW. In Peirce's understanding, the sign continues ad infinitum and establishes unlimited semiosis. In computer games, signs function both in-game and out-of-game. This article is interested in the in-game function of signs, rather than their out-of-game function. The latter is usually about the player as sign, or, especially, about a sign that shows off or brags about in-game achievements, thereby establishing a particular social role or position, or, as is the case with this text, about writing an article on games.

The use of the terms in-game and out-of-game could be perceived as merely a play on words, but the terms have greater significance, since signs in-game can serve as both objects and interpretative signs. Epic items read as signs are both, since they are objects in their own right and also change the status of the player's game character. Equipped epic items (signs) transcend the notion of a pure sign, which is a mere graphical presentation. They change game mechanics, i.e. the characteristics of the game character. The *functional* sign of the equipped item translates into game mechanical effects such as higher/lower armour, more/fewer hitpoints (health), more/less intelligence (mana), or more/less melee power or spell power, among a host of other effects. The *interpreted* sign of epic item rewards constitutes a complex layer of meanings to the player. It has to do with players fulfilling personal dreams and goals, signaling to other players that behind the in-game character there exists a dedicated flesh and blood gamer, an experienced guild member, a team player and a player worthy of other players' respect or one who becomes an object of envy in other players' eyes. The interpreted sign is closely related to social dynamics or pressures between players to obtain the best items (Linderoth and Brennerstedt 2007). *In other words, there are two factors involved in regarding rewards as signs: with regard to the formal game mechanics, they function as interpretative and meaning-producing signs on both a personal and on a social level.* Since epic rewards in this reading is understood as the signs that propel and engage players to achieve new and better rewards I have chosen to name these signs or rewards *objects of desire*. During game play players achieve new and better rewards and thereby change current rewards with new ones. This ongoing change of objects of desire constitutes a chain of signs. This chain of objects of desire can be paralleled with chains of signs, in which the player passes through from item to item, from sign to sign, from reward to reward in an unending chase after the next sign, the next

desirable object. This progressive dynamic embeds the player in a field of tension between what is already achieved and what is to come, with this important feature: what is to come never comes in a lasting way and at a static position of finality. This progressive dynamic is imbued in all levels of the sign system in WoW. There is always a new and better sign on the horizon, another object of use and desire. Thus, signs as objects of desire enter into a state of endless deferral. The player finds himself embedded in an infinite semiosis, which creates a feeling of boundlessness. The player is always hunting for new objects while forgetting that he is trapped in an endless circle of unceasing process. The constant stream of new objects continuously produces new signs – a vexing dynamic which can be compared to the *différance* philosophy of Jacques Derrida and Sigmund Freud's analysis of the pleasure principle.

### **Différance: Introduction**

In his essay, *Différance*, in *Margins of Philosophy* (1984), Derrida analyses the relationship between spoken and written language. Derrida retypes the word difference on purpose and changing it to *différance* thereby replacing the letter “e” with an “a”. The idea is that the word difference is unable to describe, or only insufficiently describes, what *différance* is. Derrida's aim is to describe what subsequent researchers have referred to as his philosophy on *différance*. The philosophy is about difference in itself, so to speak, although such a formulation is out of place due to its internal references to both Emmanuel Kant's idea of “das Ding an sich” and Heidegger's phenomenological investigation of being. Derrida's philosophy on *différance* is different to both Kant's and Heidegger's philosophy, in the sense that the idea of *différance* is neither a concept in the Kantian sense of the word, nor something ontological, as Heidegger would understand it. The question that propels Derrida's thinking is: how should we or could we understand difference? The answer is at once both straightforward and highly complex; indeed, at times it is incomprehensible.

The first thing one can say about *différance* is what it is not. It is not a word (hence the purposeful misspelling); it is not a concept; nor is it an ontological phenomenon. When all of this is excluded from the meaning of *différance*, what then is left? Nothing? Or a challenge? The short, and perhaps provocative, answer is: the reward structure in WoW – a multilayered matrix of signs that encapsulates its players in temporal and spatial suspension between already obtained and yet to be obtained items.

### **A Semantic Analysis of Différance**

Derrida approaches the question of *différance* semantically. He breaks it down into two different (no pun intended) meanings of difference which he analyses and ascribes to his understanding of *différance*. Both understandings of difference are of particular interest in regard to the reward structure in WoW.

The *first* meaning of *différance* has to do with delay, postponement, detour and reservation – all of which are words that Derrida inscribes in what he calls *temporisation*. This sense of difference has to do with time. It means to regress to the temporal detour, which suspends or postpones fulfilment of desire or will. Furthermore – and this part of the definition implicitly points to the paradox of desire – it means to actualise the fulfilment or accomplish in a way that annuls the initial effect.

The *second* meaning of *différance* is easier to understand but not as intriguing. It means to be not identical, to be different and to distinguish between. This semantic understanding of difference contains an *active* as well as a dynamic interval or distance, which Derrida understands as *spatiality*, since the differentiation creates space. It singles out elements – such as signs – and distinguishes them from each other. From a contrafactual point of view, it would be almost impossible for any kind of perception to form a clear picture of anything without the existence of difference. In this sense, difference is a creative process since it produces distinctions. Viewed together, the two semantic understandings inherent in *différance* constitute a process which both creates difference and delays finalisation. It both creates what Derrida calls ‘traces’ and postpones the final moment.

## A Short Detour

Before I continue to explain how Derrida understands *temporisation* and *spatiality* and how they are connected to each other and WoW, I first want to draw the reader’s attention to the meta-level of the present text. I want the reader to stop and pause for a second and think about Derrida’s philosophy of *différance*, especially his first understanding of *différance* – namely difference as detour and postponement – and what it means to differentiate between the here and now and the distant future, and the dependence of the future on the here and now and vice versa. Or, on a lower scale, one can think about this textual detour that comprises this section of the article and how such an explanatory detour is necessary in order both to build an argument and create tension within the reader. Building tension within the reader is what Peter Brooks, in *Reading for the Plot* (1992), calls narrative desire. Narrative desire is a reader’s desire for the end of whatever it is he or she is reading. Brooks argues that “the motor of narrative is desire, totalizing, building ever-larger units of meaning, the ultimate determinants of meaning lie *at the end*, and narrative desire is ultimately, inexorably, desire *for the end*” (Brooks 1992, p.51). This description closely resembles the structural dynamics of Derrida’s temporal dimension of *différance*. Meaning is created in the dynamic process between a start and end point. In comparison to WoW this translates to an interpretation of epic items as desirable because they are, in fact, rare and thus difficult to obtain. If they were easy to obtain, their value would be much less. If players in WoW could obtain all available objects of desire, their value would be lost or if an academic article like this listed its points in the opening paragraph, they wouldn’t be understood and therefore never valued. In other words: the temporal detour is necessary and without it there is no tension between beginning and end and therefore no meaning. This argument stipulates a close connection between detour and ending. They seem to be dependent on each other. Then: what happens in WoW when the end of the game itself continues to

elude the player? What happens when the end is constantly being projected into the future with the promise of another end, which once again will elude the player? In this sense WoW is reduced to a continuous series of pictures or static events which will be dissolved the moment they are created.

## Representing the Absence of the Present

As already stated, *différance* contains both a temporal and a spatial element. They represent a constructive and constitutive causality and a disjunctive and divisionary process. The temporal element is the condition for subjectivity. Nothing can escape time, which is already in the past. Nothing can be present in the now. It is always already in the past. Temporality is the condition which continuously brings about the division between presence and absence. *Différance* creates the difference between close and distant. According to Derrida the past exits only as 'a trace' or 'the trace'. This can be further elaborated from Derrida's understanding of the sign. The sign represent the present in its absence. Signs bridge the distance between the present and absence of the present. In order to try to grasp the present, we take the detour "over" the sign. The sign is deferred closeness. *Différance* therefore becomes both a detour and reservation (temporal) and distinction and distance (spatial). Objects (items) understood as signs of desire in WoW reify Derrida's *différance* philosophy. On the *one hand*, signs are embedded in game mechanics in the same way as this text is embedded in text "mechanics" which, through the act of reading, produce a temporal detour which both defers the end and produce a desire for the end. On the *other hand*, signs produce spatial distinctions, thereby creating distance and absence. *Différance* encapsulates on one side a relation to the past, to the trace (to what is already dead), and on the other side a relation to the future, to the desired but impossible closeness. In Derrida's thinking, closeness is impossible, since *différance* produces temporal and spatial distinctions between near and distant. The temporal dimension is understood as expanding time, delaying or prolonging, while the spatial dimension has to do with the dispersion of space. The dynamic of postponement means to suspend, to conserve or reserve, or to make a detour, while dispersion is the creation of distance that allows for the production of difference.

## The Dynamic of the Absent

This line of thought can be elaborated in the light of Sigmund Freud's essay, *Jenseits des Lustprinzips* (1923). Derrida, himself, makes the parallel between Freud's the principle of pleasure and of reality and the dynamic of *différance*, in particular in conjunction with the idea of the detour. Freud explains how the drive for self-preservation effaces the principle of pleasure in order to make room for the principle of reality. The reality principle forces the subject to focus on a desired point on the horizon, a place in the future, while at the same time accepting immediate notions of disinclination. The subject defers instant gratification in order reach the desired point in the future. This idea of a psychological design presents a solution to understand why we accept postponement of fulfilment of desire instead of just fulfilling our desires as quickly as possible. In Freud's design, we endure the passing of disinclination in order – at a later time – to fulfil our desire. The Freudian idea of

postponement is close to, or perhaps very similar to, Derrida's description of the detour and dispersion. Both include the temporal notion of deferral between past and future and spatial distinction between near and distant.

In WoW, players very often endure the disinclination of tiresome and enduring tasks before they can finally get or achieve desired objects. This dynamic can be found on numerous different levels in the game design of WoW, for example in the progression of character level, skill levels, in gaining a reputation with one of the many in-game factions or, particularly, and in regard to signs, the objects of desire in the shape of epic items. On all game levels, this design is closely linked to rewards, since level progression is a reward, new and higher skill levels constitutes rewards, and gaining reputation with in-game factions is based on rewards, as is obtaining highly sought-after objects of desire. This can be paralleled to, what Nick Yee calls, a virtual Skinner box (Yee, 2003). All the rewards in WoW are latent in a repeated structure of deferral, the dual pull between desiring something and enduring disinclination in order to obtain the objects of desire. In this way, WoW reward structure embodies Derrida's philosophy on *différance* and Freud's reflections on the pleasure principle. In WoW, players more or less consciously find themselves embedded in a mediated version of the economics of *différance*, where temporal detour, spatial distinctions and endurance of disinclination are at play, with the aim of obtaining objects of desire.

### The Allusive Closeness

Derrida's philosophy of *différance* explains the inherent distress in the lack of closure when objects of desire are finally achieved. WoW's game structure consists, as already pointed out, of continuously changing signs. Signs are always already regressing to traces of a present which no longer exists. They become inscribed in Peirce's infinite semiosis or, as Derrida would put it, signs are always traces of the present. The lack of fulfilment experienced when objects of desire are obtained signifies or illustrates how the inherent striving for closeness is an illusion and a substitution of nearness; a nearness which can never be achieved because *différance* creates temporal difference between the present and the past, leaving only the trace or a sign of the trace as a mark of the already-passed present. In this sense, game characters in WoW dress themselves in traces of the present in order to close the temporal gap between the present and the future. This is of course an impossible task, as Derrida's philosophy demonstrates. Players in WoW embody and enact the economy of *différance*. Embedded in the postponement of closeness, they find themselves in an unending regress which entices them to strive for rewards in constant regress, leaving only traces of the present. *Players of WoW thereby find themselves in a reward structure which paradoxically denies rewards even when they are obtained.* This paradox of fulfilment without the feeling of fulfilment leaves players with traces of a dream of closure and nearness – a dynamic which creates a constant flux that consumes player efforts and investment in a state of delay of closeness or a perpetual detour. Closeness or finality will never occur. The game thereby constitutes a multilayered reward matrix where players strive to obtain goals that have already lost their meaning. All game levels and the entire structure of WoW are imbued with this dynamic.



## The Paradox of Desire

The unobtained reward in the form of a trace of the present, together with the dream of temporal nearness and closeness, are veiled in the paradoxical structure of desire itself. This, of course, refers to the design of desire and not to the objects of desire. The design of desire is a paradoxical construct. It springs from a need to fill something, to compensate for some kind of lack or emptiness which must be filled before the subject can be complete (Kemp 1966). In this sense, desire is linked to achieving something and to the fact that the achievement fulfils or completes the subject. The idea of completeness contains the notion of being oneself or creating or building an ever-evolving identity. But desire is a transcendent construct that in itself is not connected with the tangible world (Sartre 1993). It is dynamic of striving for a future condition which as yet doesn't exist. Desire is, in this sense, emerging intentionality. It arises from a more or less conscious experience of lack or emptiness. In WoW, objects of desire constitute a multilayered or intricate tapestry of options and possibilities that the players navigate in order to play out. Players need to fill all the empty possibilities of the game character. They are the factual items that shape the character; they are the first blank slots the player sees in the inventory list when he regards his character. The blank slots constitute a fundamental lack and propel the drive to acquire better and better equipment for the game character. Desire, as a transcendent design, is fundamentally a structure which longs for its own end. It is dissolved when it is fulfilled. The moment the object of desire is obtained, desire dissolves into nothingness. This is what makes desire a paradoxical condition; a condition which makes desire unfortunate. It is forever an emerging intentionality, a bridge between lack and closure. As Derrida has pointed out, closure is impossible. The only option is to acquire items in the form of traces of the present that annul desire when achieved. In WoW, desire is unfortunate, constantly deflated and inscribed in the notion of infinite regress. The paradox of desire, together with Derrida's *différance*, illustrate that the reward structure in WoW is an ongoing and ever expanding detour where the transcendent intentionality always finds itself in the future, forever unable to connect to either the present or the past. The deferred end, as the final reward, is a story of infinite regress embedded in the dynamics of the unfortunate desire and the impossibility of presence itself.

## Conclusion

This analysis has thrown light on how, at all structural layers of the game, WoW constitutes an effective reward system that is closely correlated with the "ontological" design of desire itself. On one hand the paradox of desire acts as a motivating force to achieve new items, whether epic or not, and demonstrate players' willingness to accept disinclination. On the other hand, the constant degrading of item values in the game world, both in regard to levelling up and to newly introduced end-game epic rewards, illustrates Pierce's notion of infinite semiosis and shows how Derrida's notion of *différance* reads the deferral of the end as a system of denial. This recognition of infinite semiosis and of *différance* point towards an opaque element in the reward system of WoW, which on the surface seems straightforward and innocent but which, when analysed more closely, displays a disturbing dynamic in which objects of desire are inscribed in a constantly eroding value system combined

with absence of finality. Together they act as denial of reward and closure compared to an endpoint where rewards are stable, measurable and comparable.

The presented analysis has not only attempted to shed light on the general design of WoW's reward structure but also to illustrate how desire should be understood as a paradoxical transcendent construct and more importantly how it translate as a driving force for player engagement. The analysis has further described or perhaps even prescribed how a successful interplay between game structure and desire when merged together creates a highly effective bond. This especially when embedded in a progressively eroding value system in which objects of desire lose value.

This player-centric perspective with its focus on desire, its paradoxical design and its interaction with a reward structure points to a disturbing and paradoxical conclusion: the denial of rewards even as they are obtained. This is, of course, connected to and dependent on WoW's game world as a constant eroding value system. Viewed from the player's perspective, the emotional gratification of acquiring objects of desire is almost instantly annulled. New objects enter the game world to take the place of old ones in order to reignite player desire and propel further game play. This overall dynamic is only possible within the framework of an eroding value system, where the value of objects of desire deteriorates as new items are introduced in their place. The analysis has shown up the importance of objects of desire as driving factors in a reward system and pointed to the disturbing fact that emotional game engagement can constantly be reignited if objects of desire degrade over time. All this is, of course, dependant on a framework that allows endless progression in the game world. Thereby objects of desire constitute the present as absence of the present. When players try to grasp the present by achieving objects of desire, they ultimately find themselves in an endless detour of deferred closeness and are left with the disturbing insight that their rewards are forever ultimately denied.

## Games Cited

Blizzard Entertainment (2004) *World of Warcraft*. Blizzard Entertainment (PC).

## References

Brooks, P. (1992) *Reading for the Plot*. Harvard University Press.

Derrida, J. (1984) *Margins of Philosophy*. University of Chicago Press. Trans: Alan Bass.

Freud, S. (1923) *Jenseits des Lustprinzips*. Internationaler Psychoanalytischer Verlag.

Kemp, P. (1966) *Det Ulykkelige Begær*. Gyldendal.

Linderoth, J. and Bennerstedt, U. (2007) Living in World of Warcraft – The Thoughts and experiences of ten young people. Available at:

<http://www.medieradet.se/Om-Medieradet/In-English/Publications-in-English/>.

Pierce, C. S. (1958) *Selected Writings*. Dover.

Salen, K. and Zimmerman, E. (2004) *Rules of Play – Game Design Fundamentals*. The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England.

Saussure, F. de (1995). *Course in General Linguistics*. Columbia University Press.

Sartre, J.P. (1993). *Being and Nothingness*. Pocket Books

Yee, N. (2003). *The Virtual Skinnerbox*: Available at:  
<http://www.nickyee.com/egt/skinner.html>.