
The Value of Rewards: Exploring World of Warcraft for Gamification Design

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Abstract

Gamification design still lacks of a catalogue of game design elements defined on the basis of the players' experience, rather than of the game designers' expertise. In this work I outline an ongoing project that tries to define a catalogue of game elements for the gamification domain starting from the players' perspective. By investigating how World of Warcraft rewards its players through an ethnographic research, I describe how its rewards embody different values, as well as produce diversified effects on players' experience, and how these findings may be employed in the gamification domain.

Author Keywords

Gamification; rewards; World of Warcraft.

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

Introduction

In recent years, we assisted to an increasing popularity of non-recreational applications and services exploiting game mechanics, in order to engage users and offer them an enjoyable experience. Gamification, the use of "game design elements in non-game contexts" [8], spread in a variety of domains, from learning [1] and

citizen science [4], to work [26], crowdsourcing [16], and behavior change, applied to health [5], sustainable habits [2], and wellness [15]. However, despite its growing acceptance, there is still a shared skepticism about gamification effectiveness and capability of providing a truly pleasurable experience, so that it has been called *pointification* [24] and *exploitationware* [3]. Gamification, in fact, has been criticized on a variety of accounts, for example that it injects stand-alone game elements into existing applications resulting in mere cosmetic interventions [14], or that it exclusively exploits behavioristic principles to push forward users' performances [13]. These critics emphasize the fact that gamification actually may impoverish the user experience by providing a surrogate of games [20].

I believe that one of the main shortcomings of the current gamification techniques lies in the limited kinds of game design elements available to gamification designers, together with a scarce understanding of how these elements impact on the users' subjective experience. In the work that I will preliminary describe here, I want to investigate how World of Warcraft (WoW) may inspire the design of rewards in the gamification domain: despite their crucial role, they are currently mostly implemented as points and badges [12], best exemplifying how gamification can reduce the complexity of games to an one-size-fits-all formula.

Here, I aim, instead, to explore how we can design more meaningful and diversified rewards. To do this, I think that we should bring back our focus to video games, to which gamification claims to be inspired: it is undoubtedly that they have much to say on how effective game elements might be designed, and this should be exploited for gamification purposes.

However, in doing so I propose to start from the players' perspective. Relying on game element taxonomies defined by domain experts is not sufficient for gaining a clear understanding of how games impact on players' experiences, and, consequently, for gaining insights on how we might reproduce these experiences on other, non-game, contexts. I suggest, instead, to employ the ethnographic method as the election technique for studying games for gamification purposes.

By adopting a reflexive approach, the fieldworker may be allowed to first experiment on herself the functioning of various game elements, then ask other players to confirm or call into question her hypotheses, and finally to use this knowledge for defining new design elements suitable to be employed in specific non-game contexts. Thus, I am conducting an ethnographic research in World of Warcraft (WoW) in order to discover how a successful game impacts on its players. Massively Multi Player Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPG), whose WoW is the most representative case [7], involve players for much longer periods of time than other video games [17]. WoW has been considered a MMORPG that "hits on all cylinders motivationally" [23], representing a typical case of games capable of highly engaging, motivating and retaining their players. Selecting a typical case is essential for generalizing the results of a qualitative study [10].

Related Work

Research about video game rewards is limited and is conducted mainly in the game design domain. Wang & Sun [29] gave an overview of how various video game reward systems provide players with positive

experiences. They individuated eight kinds of rewards, focusing on the different mechanics involved when distributing the reward (e.g. experience points, unlocking mechanisms, etc.). Hallford & Hallford [11], instead, tried to classify video game rewards on the basis of the nature of the reward given, dividing them in rewards of access, facility, sustenance and glory. Phillips et al. [18, 19] refined the Hallford & Hallford's classification, being first to claim that this could be used for informing both game and gamification design. However, the first effort for defining a comprehensive reward taxonomy specifically targeted to gamification design was made by Robinson & Bellotti [24], who divided rewards on the basis of the different motivations they elicit (extrinsic vs. intrinsic) and the level of engagement required for making them effective.

Their work represents one of the many attempts of classifying game elements in the gamification field [25, 9] based on theories of motivations. Nevertheless, all these taxonomies share two characteristics. On the one hand, they draw on video game reviews [18] and surveys [29], or focus groups and interviews with domain experts [19], missing to involve those who may benefit from rewards, namely the players/users. In these works the gaze is that of the game designer, failing to address the subjective experience of the player that is receiving the reward. On the other side, they provide lists of game elements without engaging in a thorough investigation of their ways of functioning with regard to their effects on players/users. For this, I think that a "phenomenological" investigation of rewards is in need, through which carefully outlining how players "live" different rewards, how they ascribe a

value to them, as well as how the rewards affect their subjectivity on the basis of the ways they work.

Method

I am conducting an ethnographic research in WoW. Fieldworking started in October 2012. During these years I explored how WoW engages its players [21], drives their behavior¹, and makes them reflect on their identity. During the fieldwork, findings have been applied to gamification purposes, to figure out how the game elements employed in WoW could be abstracted and transferred to other, non-ludic, environments. The ethnography follows a reflexive approach where the fieldworker's experience is investigated together with that of other participants, and her choices are constantly made accountable in order to ground her findings [6, 22, 28]. I adopted a first-person narration, employing auto-ethnography [27], where the ethnographer's point of view is considered valuable on its own, being continuously reported in the ethnographic recounting.

I played the last two expansions of WoW, namely Mists of Pandaria and Warlords of Draenor, reaching the level cap with my main character, participating in a variety of guilds and playing almost all the dungeons of the game, as well as being engaged in farming, crafting, dueling, and questing. Along with hundreds of informal interviews, I conducted 36 formal interviews until now (lasting averagely three hours each), both in the WoW's world (18) and in the real world (18), differentiating participants on the basis of their experience of play, frequency of play and social centrality (novices, normal players and hardcore

¹ The results of this phase are currently under review.

gamers). Here, I want to focus the reader's attention on the preliminary analysis of the WoW's rewards, based on a review of the notes, reflections and interviews made during the entire period of the fieldwork: this analysis allowed me to revise the findings collected during the last three years and provisionally classify the WoW's rewards on the basis of the value that players ascribe to them for gamification purposes. The main aim of this phase of my research is to define a complete classification of the WoW's rewards and transfer the findings to the gamification domain. In the following I will expose my preliminary results.

Preliminary Results

Rewards in WoW assume different forms. I will divide WoW's rewards in three classes on the basis of the value that players ascribe to them: *enabling* rewards, *exchangeable* rewards and *subjective* rewards. The first class of rewards is represented by all those elements that allow players to acquire new skills or to have access to new privileges, making them progress in the game. Players consider them valuable because they satisfy their basic needs of autonomy, allowing them to expand their possibilities for action in the game. Most of these rewards, in fact, are directly connected with the character's abilities. They may be experience points, gear and items which are given after completing a quest, or killing a monster. *"Experience points are fundamental means for gaining powers and learning new skills, and I may say that they are your unique goal until you reach the level cap"*, said Noein. However, this kind of reward is also embodied in immaterial gratifications, like the social acceptance gained for one's own in-game abilities, when players are playing in group.

The second class of rewards, instead, is composed by those goods that can be exchanged with others. They have mainly an instrumental value for players, and can be gained by completing quests, or through farming. These rewards can be accumulated and then used for having other rewards, as it happens when items, such as herbs and minerals, are used for crafting objects, like potions and elixirs [22]. Eloin, a hardcore player who joined WoW in 2013, well explains why these elements are pursued by players: *"When you reach the [level] cap and enter in a guild you need to accumulate a huge amount of resources if you want to be helpful in raids... as a healer I have alchemy and herbalism as professions... I need to farm tons of herbs for preparing elixirs to be used in raids, it's boring but we need them. So I do it"*. To obtain these rewards, therefore, players have often to be engaged in onerous tasks, which nevertheless are accomplished for the sake of the group.

The third class is concretized by rewards that embody a subjective value, being flexible in embracing the different meanings that players may ascribe to them. They may be unique items, provided after a hard battle (e.g. at the end of a raid, or after an incredibly long series of quests), such as rare gear and mounts, which can be conserved, collected, or exposed; or they may be important achievements, that testify over time the high skills of the player. Basically, players ascribe to these rewards a different value depending on their goals, personality and needs. Kaershan, who plays WoW mainly for the fantasy imaginary that it embodies, emphasizes how *"I spent three years to collect these 25 rare pets. I preserve them like in an aquarium"*. Instead, one of the officers of my first important guild in WoW, strongly oriented to competition and with a

large network of social connections, explains what these rewards mean to him: *"these objects have a great value for me. They are a sort of badge of honor..."*. While Niren, a "lone wolf" that prefers to play WoW alone, claims that these rewards prove to himself his competence in playing. This class of rewards, thus, gathers all those game elements that are worth to be preserved for their subjective value, because they are aesthetically pleasurable, embody players' reputation, or fulfill a self-enhancement function. They, moreover, are not meant to be distributed easily. Erwin, a hardcore gamer that was used to play a large variety of MMORPGs, recounted me how, in games like WoW, it is essential that rewards are given on the basis of the players' abilities: *"if you can buy them with money... if someone that didn't put any effort into the game can have more beautiful items than another one that strived for them... all the logic of the game breaks down..."*. Here, competence, rarity and the extreme difficulty for achieving them are the key: only if they represent something of unique they can gain those values that players consider important to preserve.

Conclusion and future work

What I exposed here is only a preliminary classification of WoW's rewards. Next steps of my research are i) to complete the taxonomy of rewards on the basis of the different values and meanings that players see in them, ii) and to clearly define how each of these kinds of rewards may impact on players' subjective experience: how do specific incentives motivate players in performing certain tasks? How do certain rewards drive their behavior toward specific directions? And how do others are capable to retain them for an endless amount of time? This second point could be extremely useful for those gamification designers that aim at

producing specific effects on their users by introducing game elements in existing applications and services. Here, I can finally report a series of brief provisionally reflections on gamifications design based on the partial findings I collected until now. First, gamified systems should not rely only on a specific kind of rewards, but should combine different rewards for obtaining differentiated effects, which can strengthen their efficacy reinforcing each other. As WoW shows a unique kind of reward is not sufficient for providing an engaging experience. Second, in order to make its rewards effective, gamification should make them valuable. Rewards have not value *per se*: they are worth to be pursued only if they allow the user to progress, to gain useful goods, or to reflect herself in them. Third, to deeply impact on players gamification should aim at creating multifaceted rewards capable of being appreciated under different lights and ascribed with different subjective values (e.g. because they can be collected for the pleasure of their appearance, or used to enhance a positive self-view). They allow for a personalized rewarding experience, where every player can find what she is looking for. These preliminary insights suggest that a game like WoW can be a meaningful source of inspiration for gamification design. A complete classification of WoW rewards along with the specific effects that each class may have on players could lead to nuanced design considerations to be employed in the gamification domain. As a conclusion, I want to specify that these reflections are not meant as a separated outcome of the fieldwork: they are deeply intertwined with it. Here, they are presented separately from the findings only for reader's comfort, given the work-in-progress nature of this work. When it will be completed they will be embedded in the exposition of results, within a unique discourse.

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