From Games to Gamification: A Classification of Rewards in World of Warcraft for the Design of Gamified Systems

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Abstract

Background. Gamification commonly uses a limited set of design elements to enhance applications and services in a variety of contexts, such as learning, health and work. However, gamification techniques are based on well-established design practices and rarely new game elements are added to the catalogue available to gamification designers.

Aim. This article enriches such catalogue by taking inspiration from WORLD OF WARCRAFT (WoW). Specifically, it focuses on WoW’s rewards to show how games are capable of creating complex and diversified design elements that may have different impacts on players.

Method. Through an ethnographic study, this article defines a classification of WoW’s rewards based on the values that players ascribe to them, as well as on the effects that such incentives produce on players’ experience.

Results. Starting from these findings, the article describes a series of design considerations for using rewards in different application fields, such as learning and behavior change.

Conclusions. The considerations can be usefully applied to the gamification domain, as well as to the design of games with serious purposes.

Keywords
auto-ethnography, ethnography, gamification, reflexivity, rewards, WORLD OF WARCRAFT

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Introduction

Recently, we witnessed an increasing spread of non-ludic applications leveraging game elements to engage people and motivate them. Gamification, known as the use of “game design elements in non-game contexts” (Deterding, Dixon, Khaled, & Nacke, 2011), reached a variety of contexts, from crowdsourcing (Melenhorst, Novak, Micheel, Larson, & Boeckle, 2015), learning (Barata, Gama, Fonseca, & Gonçalves, 2013) and work (Stanculescu, Bozzon, Sips, & Houben, 2016), to behavior change (Cafazzo, Casselman, Hamming, Katzman, & Palmert, 2012). This phenomenon is part of a growing trend in contemporary society, which is characterized by the progressive merge of recreational and serious activities: pervasive games, for example, overflow in real environments, merging reality with the world of game (Montola, Stenros, & Waern, 2009); while serious games join game and educational goals for the purpose of simulation or training (Michael & Chen, 2006). Gamification can be precisely inscribed in such trend and is now widely affecting the design of interactive systems.

Although gamification techniques proved to be effective in specific domains (Hamari, Koivisto, & Sarsa, 2014), there are still many concerns about its ability to turn a “serious” experience to the better (Bogost, 2011; Robertson, 2010): critics, for example, are related to the exclusive employment of isolated design elements (Laschke & Hassenzahl, 2011), and the impoverishment of the overall game experience (Rapp, 2015b).

I argue that one of the main issues in current gamification practices is represented by the limited number of game design elements available to designers, as well as the scarce understanding of how they affect the users’ experiences. Most of the elements currently employed in gamification are simply taken for granted: their knowledge and use are drawn from habitual design practices or game design text books, while how they impact the users’ subjectivity is rarely taken into account. Rewards, for example, despite of the complexity of their design in many full-fledged games, are mostly implemented as points or badges in gamified apps, through a one-size-fits-all approach: although they play a fundamental role in gamification design, there is almost no research on how we can use them to produce a rich and diversified experience, as it happens when they are distributed within games. Here, I precisely want to explore how rewards can be designed in a more meaningful manner in the gamification domain.

To this aim, I believe that we have to bring back our focus to video games, as they have much to say on how game elements might be designed, and this knowledge should be used for gamification purposes. I also claim that we need to explore such knowledge from the players’ point of view. Gamification aims to get the user close to the enjoyable experiences of games. However, to replicate such experiences even in non-game contexts, designers should first understand them from the inside. Therefore, I propose to adopt a “phenomenological” approach to gamification exploring how players experience rewards, and how such elements impact on their subjectivity. I also argue that reflexive ethnography (Rode, 2011) can represent the election technique to study games for gamification purposes. Through reflexivity, the fieldworker experiments directly on herself the impact of certain game elements. Then, she can compare
her experience to those of other players through observation and inquiry, to account for her hypotheses or formulate new ones. The knowledge she gains could then be used to design new game elements in the gamification domain.

Here, I will explore the design space of rewards in WORLD OF WARCRAFT (WoW). Massively Multi Player Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) engage players for much longer periods of time than other video games (Ng & Wiemer-Hastings, 2005) and represent an ideal object of study when the aim is to increase the user’s involvement. In the following, I will make two primary contributions. First, I will classify WoW’s rewards on the basis of the values that players ascribe to them, as well as the effects they have on their experience: this will produce a categorization grounded on the players’ perspective instead of on the rewards’ objective design features. Second, I will draw from such classification some considerations on how designing rewards for gamification, which could be used to improve “serious” applications and services in different domains, such as health and learning: these considerations could be also applied to serious game design, to increase the effectiveness of the simulations provided.

Related Work

Rewards appear to be a fundamental component of gamification: incentives, however, are mainly implemented as points in gamified interventions (Lewis, Swartz, & Lyons, 2016), so that Robertson called this phenomenon pointification, stressing that it takes the thing that is least essential to games representing it as the core of the game experience (Robertson, 2010). This mirrors a wider issue that is related to the scarce variety of game design elements available to gamification designers, together with a scarce understanding of the impacts of such elements on the user’s experience (Seaborn & Fels, 2015).

Recently, Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) researchers started investigating how gamification could provide users with a richer experience, by e.g. proposing to surpass current game mechanics employing a value-based approach (Sakamoto, Nakajima, & Alexandrova, 2012), incorporating meanings in them (Laschke & Hassenzahl, 2011), using personalization in gamified systems (Busch et al., 2015), and going beyond the leverage of extrinsic motivations (Jacobs, 2013). On the same vein, some categorizations of game elements for gamification have been defined, in order to enlarge the set of tools usable in gamified systems. Exton and Murray (2014), for example, tried to classify game elements on the basis of theories of motivations (Deci & Ryan, 2000), while Robinson and Bellotti (2013) first described a reward taxonomy specific for gamification. They differentiated rewards depending on the diverse motivations they support (extrinsic vs. intrinsic), as well as the level of engagement required to put them into action.

Strangely, however, gamification research avoided a thorough confrontation with game research. Within this context, different researchers tried to classify video game rewards. Hallford and Hallford (2001), for example, differentiated rewards depending on their inner nature, describing rewards of access, facility, sustenance and glory,
while Wang and Sun (2011) listed eight types of rewards, pointing to the diverse ways in which rewards may be distributed (e.g. experience points, unlocking mechanisms, etc.). Phillips, Johnson, and Wyeth (2013; Phillips, Johnson, Wyeth, Hides, & Klarkowski, 2015) built on the Hallford & Hallford’s classification, to widen its applicability, by stating that it could also be used in the gamification domain.

Nevertheless, all these attempts, both in the game and gamification contexts, share two main features. First, they draw on video game reviews (Phillips et al., 2013) and surveys (Robinson & Bellotti, 2013; Wang & Sun, 2011), or interviews with game experts (Phillips et al., 2013), missing to account for those who ultimately benefit from rewards, namely the users/players. Second, they scarcely take into account the impact that rewards have on the player’s subjective experience. Instead, I believe that we need to study rewards from a phenomenological point of view, explaining the various modalities in which individuals experience rewards, as well as how rewards affect their experience. This would produce a first person view on rewards that could help designers reproduce players’ experience in other contexts. To this aim, I claim that exploring how a game like WoW rewards its players might provide useful insights also for the gamification domain.

WoW entered “the offline culture’s everyday speech to a greater extent than have most other computer games” (Corneliussen & Rettberg, 2011). It set the MMORPGs “genre standards” (Debeauvais, Nardi, Schiano, Ducheneaut, & Yee, 2011), representing the most typical case of MMORPGs (Rigby & Ryan, 2011). As selecting a typical case is fundamental to generalize the results of a qualitative study (Gobo, 2008), I chose WoW as the object of my research to better ground the considerations for design I intended to draw from my research findings, giving them a more general validity.

In years, HCI researchers investigated WoW players’ motivations (Yee, Ducheneaut, & Nelson, 2012), personality (Yee, Ducheneaut, Nelson, & Likarish, 2011), intimate experiences (Pace, Bardzell, & Bardzell, 2010), riding styles (Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell, & Moore, 2007), and characters (Livingston, Gutwin, Mandryk, & Birk, 2014). In particular, several studies adopted an ethnographic approach to outline the characteristics of WoW’s social life ad culture. Nardi, for example, reported how the design of the game contributes to construct gendered experience (Nardi, 2010), how players engage in collaborative play (Nardi & Harris, 2006), and how they learn to play through chat conversation with peers (Nardi, Ly, & Harris, 2007). It is worth noting that ethnographic accounts of WoW focused especially on the social relationships that may flourish while playing, even outside the game world. Golub (2010), for instance, found that players’ commitment (immersion) to WoW is due to a structure of care that emerges from the game, highlighting the importance of creating collective projects of action during play. Snodgrass, Lacy, Dengah, and Fagan (2011) emphasized that playing WoW with real-life-friends allows players to transfer in-game accomplishments and experiences into offline social networks, enhancing gamers’ offline lives. While Glas (2013) described negotiations between Blizzard and players to exert control over the game. Furthermore, research engaged in understanding one of the most peculiar WoW’s social structures, namely the guilds, in-game associations of like-minded players. Williams, Ducheneaut, Xiong, Yee, and Nickell (2006), for
example, created a typology of basic guilds types and player roles. Vesa (2013) further conceptualized them as virtual organizations, identifying three bundles of managerial practices for running them. Chen (2012) showed that WoW’s guilds, although not exempt from conflicts, can provide their members with supporting spaces of confrontation. While Snodgrass (2016) stressed that guilds can develop and propagate unique norms and governance styles that shape online gaming experiences, ameliorating the distress that can emerge from highly competitive raiding.

Similarly to all these studies, my research is inscribed in the virtual ethnography approach (Hine, 2000), which has been used as anthropological investigation of social interactions and cultural dynamics of digital worlds (Boellstorff, 2008). In this work, however, I focused my attention on how rewards may affect players’ experiences. This somehow narrows the wider perspective of previous virtual ethnographic studies, which aimed at outlining the embedded culture and the social structure of a specific digital environment. Nevertheless, it allows to direct the ethnographer’s attention at specific game elements suitable to be translated, with opportune adjustments, to other environments.

**Method**

The ethnographic work was composed by participant observation, document analysis and interviews, which were carried out in three different periods, each of them with a different main purpose: in the first phase, from October 2012 to March 2014, to explore how WoW engages its players; in the second phase, from June 2014 to May 2015, to investigate how it drives their behavior; and in the last phase, from October 2015 to September 2016 to study how it makes them reflect on their personal identity.

My fieldwork is inscribed in the reflexive approach where the ethnographer’s experience is explored together with that of other participants, and her choices are constantly made accountable in order to ground her findings (Cardano, 2009; Rode, 2011; Van Maanen, 2011). This approach differs from both the postmodernist constructivism, where ethnographies become no other than “fictions” (Clifford & Marcus, 1986), and the realist positions, where the ethnographic discourse is evaluated with the same criteria adopted by scientific research in the quantitative sciences (Runciman, 1983). Differently from the more common (at least in HCI ethnographies) ‘realist teller’, reflexivity paints the observed reality from a unique and subjective point of view (Van Maanen, 2011). For this, such an approach is often paired with auto-ethnography (Tedlock, 1991), where the ethnographer’s perspective is considered valuable on its own, being continuously reported in the ethnographic narration. By adopting auto-ethnography, I collected, analyzed and considered as relevant also the data related to the effects that WoW’s rewards had on my personal experience. Such findings were then be used to ground my considerations for design and their possible use in gamification design.

I also tried to go beyond the traditional separation between ethnography and design (Dourish, 2006). This attempt is also reflected in the exposition of results: I avoided
enclosing the implications for design in a separate section of the article, actually embedding them in the recounting of the findings.

I played two expansions of WoW, Mists of Pandaria and Warlords of Draenor, reaching the maximum level with my main character, participating in a variety of guilds and playing almost all the instances and raids of the game, as well as being engaged in questing, crafting, and managing my guilds’ life. During the fieldwork, I gathered different materials. First, I analyzed a huge amount of WoW related documents, searching for how specific game elements impact on players’ experience and behavior, and how players account for them in their everyday interactions: e.g. the forum posts of the guilds I belonged to, the official WoW forum, the fandom websites of Wowpedia and WoWWiki. Then, I observed and participated to hundreds of hours (more than 1200 hours) of game sessions: I recorded most of the informal conversations I made with other players through the WoW’s chat log, I took screenshots of significant moments and aspects of the game; I took notes about players’ behaviors and dynamics; I wrote down my own experiences and reflections in the form of a diary. Written notes were reviewed on a daily basis, immediately after the end of a game session. Besides the hundreds of informal conversations, I also formally interviewed 36 players during the three years of my permanence in the game, both in the WoW’s world (18) and in the real world (18), differentiating the sample on the basis of their experience of play, frequency of play and social centrality. The final sample can be differentiated in the following player types: hardcore gamers, who developed their character at the maximum level, have more than 2 years of experience in WoW, and play for more than 20 hours per week; normal players, who have a character at level 80-90 (Pandaria) or 90-100 (Draenor), have more than 6 months of experience and play for 10-20 hours per week; novices, who have a character at level 30-80 (Pandaria) or 40-90 (Draenor), with less than 6 months of experience, playing for less than 10 hours per week.

Interviews lasted almost three hours each, exploring the players’ histories of play and their relations with WoW’s design elements. The questions were defined on the basis of my personal experience in the game, as well as the informal conversations I had during the ethnographic work. They were focused on exploring how WoW affected players’ behavior, how it helped them acquire a better knowledge of themselves as players, and how it supported their social interactions. Participants were free to talk of the game elements they considered important and to explore themes not foreseen in the initial list of questions.

Interviews were registered using an audio recorder, or the WoW’s chat log. Data analysis was made through a thematic analysis, following open and axial coding techniques (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Such techniques can be inscribed in the grounded theory approach, which aims to provide explanation for actions that are relevant for the social actors involved in the study, through discovery of relevant categories and relationships among data. I generated initial open codes by individuating data characteristics that I considered interesting. Then, I broke data down by taking apart sentences and by labeling them. Resulting codes were then categorized together in themes: to this aim, I also used affinity diagrams. Finally, I reviewed and named the themes.
Once the themes were individuated, I also relied on different behavioral and psychological theories to interpret and generalize the results.

In this work, I want to focus the reader’s attention on the analysis of the WoW’s rewards, based on a review of all the data collected during the three years of ethnography. This renewed data analysis made emerge the importance of rewards for the players’ experience: themes like agency, progression, instrumentality, and social appearance highlighted the multifaceted nature of WoW’s incentives. Such analysis also allowed me to revise my previous findings (Rapp, 2015a, 2017): the initial observations on WoW’s rewards that I had made in my previous works were revised, deepened, and systematized on the basis of the new data gathered in the last phase of my research, leading to the present classification. Players’ names have been changed due to privacy reasons.

**Results and Considerations for Design**

WoW puts into action different kinds of rewards. I will classify them into three main different groups. Each group presents shared characteristics in relation to the values that players ascribe to the rewards and the experiential effects that such rewards have on players. These aspects are relevant for a twofold reason. First, ascribed values unveil how players account for the incentives offered by the game. They show how players appropriate the rewards by embedding meaning in them. This produces a subjective ontology that, apart from the designers’ intentions, makes evident what players “see” in the rewards and why they consider them worth to be pursued. This focus on subjectivity and on how reality is subjectively constructed reflects the phenomenological perspective that I aimed to follow in this work. Phenomenology, in fact, precisely conceives the mind as subjectivity and our take on the world as subjective (e.g. Heidegger, 1982; Husserl, 1968). Second, studying the experiential effects that rewards have on players is a prerequisite for transferring such design elements in other environments. Understanding what kind of experience they are able to produce and at what conditions may suggest how and when it is appropriate to reproduce such experience in non-game contexts. However, the experiential effect actually depends on the value that players see in a certain reward. For example, it is because players perceive an extremely difficult achievement as worth to be lived that such reward is capable of modifying their habits in the long term. Differently from Exon and Murray (2014) and Robinson and Bellotti’s (2013) categorizations, this classification not only differentiates rewards depending on the diverse motivations they support, but aims to dig deeper into the meanings that lie behind and sustain such motivations. Moreover, it does not focus on the intrinsic and somehow objective characteristics of the rewards, as done by Hallford and Hallford (2001), Wang and Sun (2011), and Phillips et al. (2013). Instead, it values the players’ perceptions, how they experience and are affected by the rewards, proposing a view from “within”, rather than an external take on them. This yields a subjective-oriented classification that can help designers reproduce experiences, rather than simply replicate game elements.

In outlining such classification, I will also refer to my personal histories in WoW, by reporting reflections and notes taken during the ethnographic work, as well as
recounting from a “first person” perspective the values I found in WoW’s rewards and the impacts they had on me. Table 1 resumes my findings highlighting the reward classes’ features, the design elements that exemplify them, and the game situations in which they are more visible.

Before moving to the outlining of the results, however, I need to discuss what, in this study, I considered to be a reward. WoW is not a gamified system but is a full-fledged game. This means that each of its components is inserted in a coherent structure that precisely represents the architecture of the game. Rewards are always embedded in a context made up of the general rules of the game, the environments in which the action take place, and so on. So, what makes them a reward? What makes

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<td>Completion of mythic raids</td>
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the difference from the other game mechanics present in the game? On the one side, they are core game elements that provide meaning to sustain the functioning of the game. From this perspective they are integral parts of the WoW core game design. On the other side, they have something special. For WoW’s players rewards are all those elements that can enrich their in-game experiences, represent a reason for playing the game, and are perceived as valuable by them. An example may clarify how a reward might differ from a simple, even if important, game mechanic. Mists of Pandaria introduced the possibility of buying mounts with real money at the in-game shop. Mounts are used by players to move more rapidly in the game spaces and to gain access to remote zones of the game world. Finding or conquering a new mount has been always perceived as a rewarding experience. However, acquiring new mounts through real money has immediately downgraded the status of such mounts from rewards to mere objects. Players like Aion stress that mounts gained through such means have no value: they do not produce any sort of satisfaction and cannot represent a reason for playing the game. Value, therefore, is the essential element that makes a game mechanic a reward. From this perspective, to recreate the same rewarding experiences that players live everyday in a game, gamification design should first aim at recreating its rewards’ values, rather than copying the structural elements that characterize their design. Otherwise, designers would transfer only their shell, precisely their mechanics, without the guarantee of reproducing their experiential effects. This goes along with the seminal suggestions of Sakamoto et al. (2012) and Laschke and Hassenzahl (2011), who recommended to focus on how to incorporate values and meaning in gamification design.

Enabling Rewards

November 24th, 2015. When I started playing WoW, I found myself powerless and trapped in a small area of the game. I was wondering how much time I would have needed to explore the world of Azeroth, play in group, experiment the thrill of a raid. Soon, I left all these thoughts aside. It happened, more or less, when I begun to raise my character’s level and to collect more powerful items. Each piece of gear, each new experience level, and each new unlocked dungeon opened new possibilities for action. This progression was somehow exponential. The more I advanced in the game, the more I felt free of choosing my own direction. The interesting thing was that I was connecting all those rewards with my character’s abilities, and through them with my sense of agency in the game. For me, gaining a new weapon meant to become more powerful; acquiring a new spell meant to become more skillful. The game somehow drove me along a path where each reward was only the nth trigger for pursuing the next one. I clearly remember when I finally conquered the “Unerring Vision of Lei Shen”, which considerably raised the item level of my mage. I was so happy not for the object per se, but because, with that trinket, I could face more difficult challenges. Now, things are subtly changed. Having outstanding gear is still crucial for facing the most difficult raids, but such items have also other meanings for me.
The first class is represented by rewards that allow players to develop new skills or have access to new privileges, making them advance in the game. Players value them since they fulfill their need of autonomy, expanding their opportunities of acting within the game. In fact, most of these rewards are intertwined with the character’s skills. They may be experience points, equipment, and objects given after completing a quest, an instance, or a raid. “Gear is the only thing that counts in WoW. It makes you more powerful… Being powerless precludes all chances to progress in the game”, Aaron says. This kind of reward is also embedded in social gratifications. In most of the guilds, for example, players need to show their abilities to the rest of the group for being accepted. This is essential to obtain a place in the next raid, and “progress” in the guild rank. Caska, for example, emphasizes that “I’m constantly seeking for my companions’ acceptance. It’s like having always something to show. In my guild it’s very simple to lose your position in the raid, if you don’t play well”. This concern is shared by most of the players that I interviewed in the game. An exception is represented by those hardcore gamers who fill positions of power in their guild: they do not risk of being marginalized by the rest of the group, since they are those who lay down the law. The other players, instead, find value in the enabling rewards also because they represent a prerequisite for having access to group play: bad players put at risk the party members in a raid, and thus are frequently ostracized if they do not meet the group’s expectations. I observed such exclusion/inclusion mechanisms many times in the guilds I belonged to during my fieldwork in WoW: in all such cases the character’s item level represented one of the main criteria for letting a player enter the guild, and then participate to a raid.

If players value the enabling rewards for their power of increasing their agency in the game, their main experiential effect is to enhance the players’ performances and motivation, by pushing them to perfect their in-game abilities. Such effects are best exemplified by monster drops, basically gear, which gradually empower the players’ characters. This gradualness is the key that makes players feel “hungry” of progressing: “It’s like a drug… I mean, I’m always in search of drops that can make my character a little bit more powerful. Basically, I do instances and raids for this... I think that it is an immediate gratification... you can immediately see how that piece has improved you”. To obtain rewards players need to face challenges that require the improvement of their in-game skills; when conquered, they enhance their character, enabling it, at the same time, to face harder battles; these, in turn, also require better skills, but allow players to gain further better rewards. The comparison with drugs is not trivial. I could experience myself how this mechanism may drag the player into a spiral of desires where the present reward is only a means to obtain the future one. I discussed with other players how this influenced their way of play. Their shared perspective was that these rewards mainly appeal players with a medium grade of experience, orienting them toward the short-term future, and constantly pushing their goals a step forward. This mechanism is also present when players are playing in group: they feel themselves under a constant visibility (as their stats can be made public through certain add-ons, such as Omen), and the willingness of being recognized for their ability constantly pushes them to perfect their skills.
Enabling rewards could be useful employed in learning domains. WoW shows that players invest a huge amount of time in bettering their in-game skills when there are incentives that can open new possibilities for action. The key point here is to exploit the user’s need of autonomy, as well as her desire to progress and being recognized by others, by designing rewards that can not only be possessed, but also enable her to access new opportunities and expand her social circle. The value that players ascribe to such rewards is related to their capability of increasing their “powers” in the system, making them feel a sense of progression toward a greater autonomy. Thanks to these game mechanics, WoW’s players rapidly learn the fundamental abilities needed for advancing in the game, and are continuously supported in acquiring new skills even in its advanced phases.

WoW also suggests that enabling rewards should be designed by providing a direct feedback to the user, gradually increasing her possibilities for action, privileges and features available. These rewards should be also strictly tied to visible goals, achievable in the short term: once obtained a reward of this kind, the user should be immediately presented with other objectives, reachable from the new starting point. Alternatively, or complementarily, these rewards can be implemented as social feedback from others, making the user gain social recognition, which should, nevertheless, be also materialized in social benefits and advances.

Given their experiential effects, however, gamification design should carefully consider when and for what purposes enabling rewards are worth to be employed. Such incentives are capable of enhancing users’ motivation in using a system or improving her performances in a certain task. At the same time, however, they may attract her into a vortex of extreme engagement that might turn into addiction. Therefore, there are many cases in which enabling rewards should not be uncritically employed, for example in all those situations that may risk to lead users to overact or to exacerbate unsustainable consumerism. In the health domain, for instance, an extreme effectiveness of the delivered rewards could not be always desirable: if supporting the user in doing more physical activity could help her adhere to a prevention (or recovery) program, an excess of involvement could also produce harmful consequences (e.g. the risk of doing too much physical activity in relation to her health condition).

**Exchanging Rewards**

*October 11th, 2013. Before entering my first guild, I could not understand why so many players passed so much time farming.¹ It was so boring that I completely avoided this activity for a long time. However, now that I have started raiding, farming is really in need. My companions request me to farm a variety of ingredients to craft potions to be used in raids. I have to hoard a huge amount of herbs, repeating more or less the same route every night. Strangely, after a while this activity has become somehow automatic. I really find no pleasure in the precise moment in which I get these rewards, normally I am thinking of something else. However, I feel rewarded when I use these items to create something that can restore my companions, making them advance in the battle.*
The second class or rewards is composed by those goods that can be exchanged with others. They are obtained after completing a quest, or gathered during farming. Rewards of this class are usually hoarded and then employed to receive other rewards: for example, gold is used for buying equipment, potions, and elixirs, while consumable like minerals and fabrics are used for crafting gear, like weapons and clothes. Casdan, a hardcore gamer with a five-year experience in WoW, describes his motivations to gather such objects: “Playing together means that everyone has to contribute to the needs of the group... My main is a rogue, but when it is needed I also play as a healer... I go out farming all those items needed for crafting potions to heal my companions when we raid. It’s a way to feel that we are tied together, and that everyone has some duties. It’s burdensome but it makes you feel that you belong to the group”. Such motivations are reported by the majority of the interviewees belonging to a guild. Although most of the exchanging rewards require players to perform annoying activities, they favor the creation and maintenance of social ties among the guild’s members, fulfilling a need of relatedness. I personally observed such phenomena in the daily life of my guilds: members had always a role entailing some duties, and such duties were often enacted through the collection and usage of some exchanging rewards for the benefit of the group. Solitary players, instead, amass exchanging rewards especially to perfect their gear: some “professions” in WoW allow players to create new pieces of equipment that would be inaccessible otherwise. To this aim, however, they are required to collect an enormous amount of consumable goods, by endlessly repeating specific quests or through farming.

If players exclusively ascribe to the exchanging rewards an instrumental value, the rewards’ main experiential effect is to increase the players’ retention. This impact is mostly produced by those consumable gatherable from farming. The interesting thing, here, is that these incentives contribute to forge a repetitive process in which players become somehow entrapped: “Farming it’s always the same thing, I make always the same path to take my minerals. I memorized it long time ago... It’s boring, but I think that it’s really useful for me and my group”, Aixia says. As a player, I can confirm that farming supports the establishment of habits, which are carried out regularly and somehow automatically. Right afterwards I enrolled in my first guild, I had to farm practically every night, after the raid, for two or three hours, because those goods were needed for the raid of the following day. This annoying and burdensome activity was nevertheless relieved by the fact that we farmed in group: two friends of mine went along with me during those nights, chatting, joking, making me not think that I was repeating the same identical actions of the night before. While in other moments, when I was alone, I talked via TeamSpeak with other friends, who were in other parts of the world of WoW.

The exchanging mechanism used in this kind of incentives may be used to increase the value of many common gamification rewards, such as points and badges, widely employed in serious and simulation games too (e.g. Aniket, Wolf, Riener, & Novak, 2014), and which actually risk to be interpreted as scarcely meaningful by users (Rapp, 2015b). All the players interviewed during my ethnographic research, in fact, reported to be always pleased by the received rewards, even when they represented duplicate
items or objects that could not be directly used on their own character: this happens because players can change them for something else. However, WoW shows that to make them valuable such rewards should be made exchangeable with something that users believe meaningful, like enabling rewards, or other goods that are needed by the social community to which they belong. For gamified or serious systems, therefore, designing effective exchanging rewards would mean to allow for a greater perceived usefulness of the incentives provided, avoiding the risk of boredom and improving the efficacy of the gamified intervention.

However, such rewards have the effect to increase the user’s retention. Since they can be hoarded almost without any limit and often can be obtained by performing simple, even if tedious, tasks, they create a sense of circularity, in which the user could become entrapped. Such effects, again, warn designers that an indiscriminate use of rewards may be harmful to some extent. If, on the one side, exchanging rewards can support users in the accomplishment of repetitive tasks and extend the amount of time spent in a given system, on the other side, they could void the activities for which they are provided. Users could be driven to mechanically perform a series of actions only for the sake of amassing exchanging rewards. This could make them unsuitable for contexts in which the designer’s main goal is to engage users in an activity for its intrinsic value. For example, if employed in learning, these rewards could push students to divert from their major objective, namely that of acquiring new knowledge, valuing such knowledge per se. Moreover, such rewards could lead users to forget that they are somehow trapped into a series of mechanically performed actions, which may risk to turn them into a sort of automatons. To exploit their potentialities and partially avoid these risks, exchanging rewards should be combined with other kinds of rewards, like enabling rewards or flexible rewards, representing only a part of the reward structure of a system, rather than being its unique rewarding mechanism.

Flexible Rewards

October 21th, 2014. I passed my last weeks trying to defeat the world bosses of the timeless isle. This would allow me to gain a legendary cloak to face Ordos, another world boss that promises to drop incredibly precious loot. Even today, I spent about eight hours to empower my character toward this aim. This meant also to repeat a series of raids in the hope of finding a rare drop that could better the skills of my mage. It is strange to say, but the only relevant goal that I had in my mind in the last two months was to reach this achievement. It practically drove all my decisions within the game. Maybe it is because I think that attaining this goal would make my character more respected in the game. Maybe it is only an illusion, but I truly believe that this achievement would be important for me, for my reputation.

The last class of rewards is represented by incentives that are able to embody the different players’ subjective values. They may be unique items (mounts, gear), achieved at the end of a raid, which can be preserved, collected, or showed to others; or they may be outstanding achievements, testifying the players’ unique abilities. Players associate to these rewards diverse values, depending on their personalities,
preferences, and goals. I asked other players what these rewards meant for them and the responses I collected can be categorized in three groups, exemplified by the following quotes. Tera highlights that “For a hunter, collecting pets is one of the main rewarding activities of the game. I don’t know why... They are simply beautiful, I like those in dark colors, as they reflect my personality. It’s a sort of collecting, I think. They make me feel as I were living in another world, with other entities. It is somehow reassuring”. Differently, another player, who is the master of his own guild, explains why these rewards count for him: “Owning rare objects means being respected... my gear is my business card”. Abraxas emphasizes that such rewards fulfill a self-enhancement function: “This list of hard achievements and this gear testify that I was able to overcome all these difficulties. They constantly remind me how much I worked to obtain them and how good I became”. This class, therefore, embraces all those incentives flexible enough to satisfy different needs: they might support the willingness to appear; they might be socially valuable, because they symbolize the player’s reputation; or they might represent means for improving one’s own self-efficacy. It is this “flexibility” that makes these rewards so valuable, allowing users to find what they are searching for, according to their individual characteristics and preferences.

Flexible rewards are able to deeply modify players’ behaviors and habits in the long-term, setting distant objectives, which may require long waits, capability of differing gratifications, and dedication. This impact is best represented by those flexible rewards that are extremely rare, almost inaccessible, which can be obtained only by the most experienced players; however, they may also fulfill the function of myths, orienting ambitions and behaviors of less skilled players, by representing “something to dream about” as noted by a novice like Elys. Epic and legendary items, tier gear (i.e. a complete armor set of a certain kind), and extremely rare pets and mounts are all elements that can orient and shape players’ behavior in the long term: this happens because they are subjectively experienced as crucial missions to be accomplished, or as unique events to be lived. This effect, in fact, can be also produced by the admiration gained during epic moments and battles where a single player may stand out from her group, showing her superior skills: “I invested three years in WoW to become the most powerful dps of my server. I changed almost all my real-life habits to achieve this goal, studying, developing my character, playing all nights, changing guilds to find the best environment where to perfect my skills... I clearly remember at least four raids when I experienced the feeling to be in the spotlight. It’s not like receiving a compliment for having done your job. It’s completely different. It’s like being admired by everyone. I think that I’ve been playing WoW for all these years only to live those moments”, Enea says, expressing a perspective shared by the majority of the hardcore gamers I interviewed.

WoW’s flexible rewards suggest that all those systems that aim at employing game mechanics to serious aims should also foresee a quota of incentives capable of satisfying the users’ inner desires: this would result in an increased perceived satisfaction of the whole user experience. This would be particularly helpful in behavior change systems, aiming at sustaining a behavior modification in the long term.

Basically, the rarity of such rewards is an essential factor to make them effective. They are unique objects that are worth to be preserved: the high skills required to
obtain them satisfy the users’ need of competence, making them feel capable of reaching outstanding achievements. Gamification and serious game designs, therefore, should also foresee special rewards achievable only through strenuous efforts, as well as remarkable for their uniqueness. These rewards should be addressed to the most compliant and competent users, but could also function as orienting goals for less experienced ones. Although I did not observe any particular negative side-effect of this kind of rewards during the fieldwork, they could still demotivate specific users by making them feel incapable of achieving the goals required for obtaining the rewards. Moreover, since flexible rewards are able to steer strengths, thoughts and desires toward a unique objective, they may support escapism from the everyday world, focusing the user’s efforts on the achievement of a specific goal for a very long time.

Discussion and Conclusion

My results stress that rewards play a fundamental role in shaping players’ experience. Looking at how games reward their players, therefore, might provide useful suggestions on how to design rewards in the gamification domain. To this aim, WoW’s reward structure can represent an optimal source of inspiration. Despite WoW undoubtedly declined over the last years in terms of number of players, it still represents the most successful subscription-based MMORPG of all times. Players have been engaged for an enormous amount of time by this game, and its longevity has no equals in the current game landscape. Rewards strongly contributed to this success. Friends, group dynamics, and social obligations established in the guilds’ life represent an important factor to play the game. I found that sociality has undoubtedly positive outcomes on WoW’s players: this somehow confirms those ethnographic studies that pointed to how social groups in WoW can provide players with meaningful experiences (Chen, 2012; Cockshut, 2012; Snodgrass, 2016). However, I also observed that players do not engage in such relationships per se: they are always in search for social gratifications, opportunities for exposing their skills, possibilities to acquire reputation, namely for all those “social” rewards that give value to their in-game experience. The robustness of the WoW’s reward structure precisely lies in combining such immaterial incentives with more “concrete” and visible prizes (like gear, mounts, etc.).

By relying on different incentives to reward its players, WoW goes also beyond the one-size-fits-all approach that seems to characterize most of the current gamified systems. Yee (2007) noted that different types of MMORPG players are moved by different motivations when playing. Findings of this research further highlight that diverse kinds of players might be sensible to different incentives: some players prefer to acquire rewards that strengthen their confidence in themselves, others are more inclined to gain reputation and social recognition, through the exposure of visible rewards. One of the reasons that makes WoW so effective in engaging its players is precisely its capability of delivering rewards that might satisfy diversified desires. Drawing inspiration from WoW’s rewards for gamification purposes, therefore, may mean to embrace the idea of designing more personalized gamified systems, as stressed by Busch et al. (2015). Until now, there have been only a limited number of attempts
at implementing personalization in gamification and serious games (Orji, Mandryk, Vassileva, & Gerling, 2013). My results show that rewards, if implemented in different forms and combined each other, may strengthen their efficacy, providing satisfying experiences tailored to the individual’s needs.

Moreover, WoW gives insights on how to surpass the exclusive employment of extrinsic motivators in gamification design, as wished by Jacobs (2013). Kaufmann, Schulze, and Veit (2011) showed that extrinsic motivators are less effective in motivating workers in crowdsourcing, if compared with intrinsic ones. Furthermore, exploiting solely extrinsic motivations could undermine intrinsic ones under certain conditions (Osterloh & Frey, 2000). WoW shows how we can use enabling, exchangeable and flexible rewards to satisfy the needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness, which might support intrinsic motivations (Deci & Ryan, 2000)

Finally, when dealing with rewards, designers should not subtract themselves from a careful consideration of how and for what purposes their work will be used. As we have seen, rewards have strong impacts on individuals’ experience, and when employed in MMORPGs they may also lead to addiction (Council on Science and Public Health, 2007), or escapism (Yee, 2006), which could not represent a desirable outcome. As a conclusion, then, I stress that designers should explore the consequences of their designs, both in the long term and in the short term, especially when they aim to “transfer” extremely effective design elements from a design domain to another one. Making an experience more enjoyable and engaging may not be a valuable outcome per se; increasing the performances by exploiting “fun” elements could not be always desirable; and using a game framework could also turn an experience to the worse. For example, when rewards support the adoption of goals not chosen by the individual (Purpura, Schwanda, Williams, Stubler, & Sengers, 2011) an increased effectiveness of the behavioral intervention could be perceived as an act of constriction. Moreover, gamification design appears to be informed by a variety of assumptions that are rarely called into question in the present debate: for example, that individuals are users, workers, or consumers that somehow need to be “enhanced” (in their performances, motivations, etc.); that games or game elements might make a behavioral intervention more acceptable and somehow less questionable; that a game frame should be applicable to every domains (Rapp, Cena, Hopfgartner, Hamari, & Linehan, 2016). Such presumptions need to be critically discussed, especially if we aim, as researchers and designers, at making gamification techniques more effective and pervasive.

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Notes

1. The term *farming* refers to the practice of hoarding consumable to be used later in the game (e.g. to empower the player’s character).
2. The term *crafting* refers to the practice of forging new items by using consumable and exploiting the skills acquired in a specific profession (e.g. the tailoring profession allows players to produce clothes).

References


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