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My Life as a Night Elf Priest

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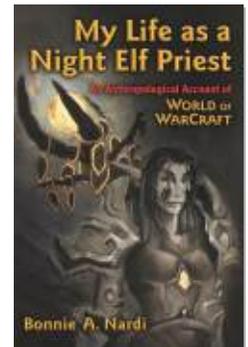
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PART TWO

Active Aesthetic Experience

CHAPTER THREE

Play as Aesthetic Experience

An obvious question about *World of Warcraft* is: Why do people like it so much? What is the nature of this human activity that captivates so many people? Why is *WoW* “addictive,” compelling, absorbing, pleasurable?

It is tempting, and for good reason, to see *WoW*'s hold on players as the outcome of an elaborately designed Skinner box (Ducheneaut et al. 2006; Yee 2006). The constant, predictable forward progress of moving through the levels is a strong motivator. As one study participant, Mark, a teacher in his thirties, said:

I think what drives the majority of the people is sort of goal orientation. You have goals. And so, there's this very easy goal of leveling, right? It's this numerically-defined kind of thing. You have this target. You get these rewards of experience. There's also goals of, say, improving your character's abilities through equipment. Things like that. So, you—really, you're trying to improve yourself.

In addition to the regularized progress of leveling, there was the intermittent reinforcement of unpredictable rewards. We know that intermittent reinforcement is the most compelling schedule for both rats and people (Perkins and Cacioppo 1950). Although I have not seen a clinical analysis of *World of Warcraft*, a Canadian player who was a psychology student with a specialty in addiction wrote to me in an email (used with permission):

WoW rewards players systematically with level increases that happen fre-

quently at first and then less frequently as time goes by (and you and I both know the little thrill we get every time we “ding” [attain a new level]). This is also reinforced socially by the congratulations we receive from other players). So *WoW* uses the principle of shaping to reinforce play behaviour. There are also the randomly generated rewards of having good gear drop unexpectedly from mobs or [treasure] chests. This intermittent reinforcement may be the most powerful variable that maintains play. Gambling works on a similar principle. We’ve known since Skinner’s work in the 30s that intermittently reinforced behaviours are the most difficult to extinguish, and *WoW* capitalises on that.

Players watched the “experience bar” which visualizes experience points. It always, satisfyingly, moved upward. In real life, progress is up and down when there is progress at all. In *WoW*, play was rewarded with advancement. Many players started new characters because they liked the leveling process so much. In the interviews, players reported that they enjoyed leveling and considered it a major attraction of the game.

But as the psychology student pointed out, it is perhaps the intermittent reinforcements that really kept players hooked. When one sits down to play *WoW*, there are a thousand little opportunities for intermittent reinforcement. A miner might acquire a rare jewel stone along with his everyday ore. A mob might drop a rare item of great value. As a member of Scarlet Raven commented in guild chat, such game events “can brighten your day.”

One of the main forms of intermittent reinforcement in *WoW* was the acquisition of a piece of rare, high-end equipment. First there was a difficult mob to defeat. Then the equipment had to drop according to probabilities laid out in loot tables. Chances of the equipment dropping were often less than 10 percent (and in some cases much less). Then the player rolled the virtual dice against other players who might also want the equipment. When a player won, it was big! Players floated on the excitement for hours or even days. Skinner does indeed tell us something useful about *World of Warcraft*.

But there was more than Skinnerian dynamics at play in *World of Warcraft*. The gaming experience was woven of sociality, the visual beauty of the game world, and a sense of performative mastery. This chapter begins the task of exploring these themes, drawing on activity theory (Leontiev 1974; Kaptelinin and Nardi 2006) and the work of the American prag-

matist philosopher John Dewey. Ideas from these sources will be used throughout the book to examine issues of design and to critique theories of play.

In his book *Art as Experience* (first published in 1934), Dewey developed a theory of *aesthetic experience* that I have found useful for thinking about player experience in *World of Warcraft*. Dewey argued that aesthetic experience is part of ordinary life and should not be confined to viewing the works of a few elite artists presented in museums. Aesthetic experience for Dewey is *participatory*—not merely passive “appreciation” as we think of it in relation to high-culture art. Dewey complained that the English language has no word to capture a notion of *active aesthetic experience*. He reconceptualized the term aesthetic experience to express an active, participatory relation to artful material and collective activity.

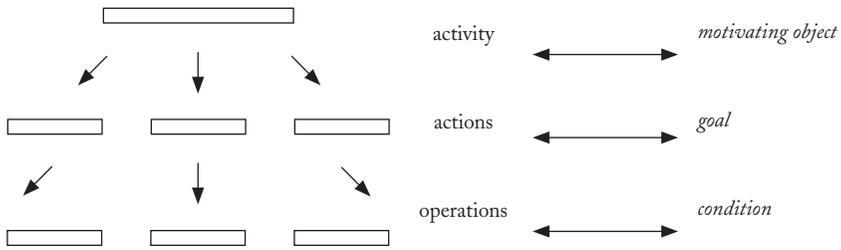
Dewey’s work starts from the same fundamental principles as activity theory (Leontiev 1974; Kaptelinin and Nardi 2006), my own theoretical orientation. I will weave the two approaches together in what follows. Dewey appears to have independently arrived at certain formulations similar to those of activity theory. Many activity theorists read and appreciate Dewey, recognizing the resonance between the two approaches, as well as Dewey’s distinctive, complementary contributions.

Dewey’s account is in some ways less elaborated than activity theory’s, but addresses aesthetic experience in unique, useful ways. On the other hand, certain of activity theory’s concepts implicit in Dewey’s work are made more accessible by their precise definition in activity theory. I will utilize, in particular, the activity theory hierarchy which distinguishes three levels of activity of a human subject (Leontiev 1974; Kaptelinin and Nardi 2006).

Activity, at the highest level, is motivated by an *object*. A motivating object gives shape and materiality to a subject’s needs or desires (Leontiev 1974). Needs and desires are transformed to specific motivating objects which are a concrete instantiation of the need or desire. Motivating objects may be conscious or unconscious. They may indicate deep emotional engagement, what Kaptelinin and Nardi (2006) refer to as *passion*.

Actions are undertaken to fulfill the object. They are directed by conscious goals. Operations are unconscious, habitual movements underlying actions.

Let us develop an example to ground these concepts. A person feels a



The hierarchical structure of activity. Activities are composed of actions, which are composed of operations. Activity is dynamic; it may move up or down the hierarchy.

strong desire to express herself, to organize and transmit her thoughts and experiences to others. She undertakes a novel. The novel is an object—a specific means by which to satisfy a desire for self-expression. The novelist engages the project with deep interest and attachment; it is a passion for her.

To realize the object of writing the novel, the novelist sets about completing certain conscious actions—devising a storyline, imagining characters, securing a publisher, revising the manuscript.

To capture her words, the novelist types—a practiced, habitual skill, or operation in activity theory terms, that requires no conscious attention.

The novelist develops carpal tunnel syndrome requiring that she input words into the computer differently. Since activity is dynamic, with potential movement between levels in the hierarchy, the novelist will, for a time, consciously attend to the necessary actions for inputting words such as using an ergonomic keyboard or voice system. Eventually she will become familiar with the keyboard or voice system, at which point her actions directed at input again become operations.

Any level of activity may transform to an adjacent level. If, after many years of writing novels, the novelist no longer feels passionate about expressing herself and is merely writing for money, writing becomes an action directed at the object of financial security (about which the novelist feels very passionate).

Going forward, I will use the terms *action*, *object*, and *activity* in the technical sense established by activity theory.

Dewey's Dimensions of Aesthetic Experience

We turn now to Dewey, who concerned himself with a particular kind of human activity: aesthetic experience. In Dewey's usage, experience is a very broad term. For our purposes, we can regard it as a kind of activity. Dewey paid attention to the *quality* of experience; he believed that explaining and understanding aesthetic experience would be a means of *promoting* it, something he very much wanted to do in line with the philosophical preoccupations that shaped his life (see Hook 1995; Jackson 1998).

Experience is subjective; that is, it requires an active self or subject. Dewey and activity theory regard human beings as biological organisms with biological needs satisfied through interaction with the environment. Humans developed culture as a special means of managing such interaction. Culture manages biological needs but at the same time generates its own social and cultural needs and desires. Within this conceptual framework, the self is an active agent responsive to culture but not determined by it. Dewey said:

The self acts as well as undergoes, and its undergoings are not impressions stamped upon an inert wax but depend upon the way the organism reacts and responds. There is no experience in which the human contribution is not a factor in determining what actually happens. (2005)

Experience is subjective and thus variable across people. No experience is *inherently* aesthetic—the “human contribution” is always in play. As Dewey noted, the human organism is not an “inert wax”; the organism responds according to its own history. (See also Kaptelinin and Nardi 2006; Bardzell and Bardzell 2008; Spinuzzi 2008.)

Aesthetic experience is, then, a *subjective disposition toward activity*. Aesthetic experience incorporates the contribution of the subject as essential—aesthetic activity can never be realized purely through the structural or formal qualities of an artifact (such as a game). To understand aesthetic experience we cannot stop at analyzing an artifact as a text, or narrative or set of functions or composition of elements, but must also undertake to examine the actual activity in which the artifact is present.

Having established that aesthetic experience is a subjective disposition

toward activity, Dewey went on to describe aesthetic experience more precisely. He characterized aesthetic experience as composed of means-ends relations, phases, and collective expression.

Means-Ends Relations

Dewey asserted that aesthetic experience is “whole,” carrying with it “its own individualizing quality and self-sufficiency.” Aesthetic experience moves toward its own fulfillment or end:

Any practical activity will, provided it is integrated and moves by its own urge to fulfillment, have aesthetic quality. (2005)

Aesthetic activity is “a consummation and not a cessation” (Dewey 2005). Aesthetic activity flows toward a satisfying completion, or end, not simply the relief of being over with. The means to the end must satisfy in themselves.

There are ends which are merely welcome cessations and there are ends that are fulfillments of what went before. The toil of a laborer is too often only an antecedent to the wage he receives . . . The means cease to act when the “end” is reached; one would be glad . . . to get the result without having to employ the means.

Under this broad definition, a very wide range of human activities are potentially aesthetic. Dewey offered, for example, “The intelligent mechanic engaged in his job, interested in doing well and finding satisfaction in his handiwork, caring for his materials and tools with genuine affection.” In describing the aesthetic he enumerated:

A piece of work is finished in a way that is satisfactory; a problem receives its solution; a game is played through; a situation, whether that of eating a meal, playing a game of chess, carrying on a conversation, writing a book, or taking part in a political campaign, is so rounded out that its close is a consummation and not a cessation.

In *World of Warcraft*, much of the pleasure of questing or running dun-

geons lay in devising the particular means by which to accomplish a quest or defeat a mob. The means themselves were of interest to the player, not merely the experience points. At the same time, the completion of a quest or the conquest of mob were moments of pleasure. Aesthetic experience entails a temporal flow of actions that are valued in themselves, ending in a satisfying “consummation.”

Phases

Dewey, however, wanted us to understand aesthetic experience as something more complex. He pointed to the “successive phases that are emphases of [the] varied colors” of aesthetic experience. In other words, aesthetic experience requires an internal structure of differentiated phases. A simple repetitive behavior such as pulling the handle on a slot machine would not, for Dewey, count as aesthetic experience. Leveling a character in *World of Warcraft* (so long as the player enjoys the necessary actions) can be considered aesthetic because the completion of a series of quests, each unique, eventually leads to a new level. The successive phases of aesthetic activity in *World of Warcraft* recurse; the goal of reaching a new level is internally differentiated into a series of quests. Each quest itself is structured as a goal and a “description” which entails fulfilling the goal, with the description, or backstory, adding further “color.”

A challenge for game designers is to create an environment in which a lot of paying customers will experience aesthetic activity—that is, they will enjoy the actions necessary to play the game.

But again no experience is inherently aesthetic. Take character leveling. While most study participants reported that they enjoyed leveling characters, others did not. What was a pleasing aesthetic experience for some was irksome to others. Some players simply wished to reach the level cap in order to access high-level game content (which for them was aesthetic). They may have been in a hurry or they may have leveled other characters and found repeating the same quests uninteresting. Our free market economy readily obliged these players; they could purchase an account on eBay and other places on the Internet (see Lin and Sun 2007). Players sometimes sold their characters when they left the game, as a side business, or when they got tired of a particular character. One of the young players in my guild sold his well-equipped warrior for 900 dollars when he lost his job

A *WoW* Quest Log
Showing Quest with
Goal and Description



at the Home Depot (gaining enough to live on for a month). There were businesses that offered “power-leveling” services and game gold (although they were against Blizzard terms of service and players could lose their accounts for using them).

Players were of two minds about buying and selling accounts. The vast majority of players I knew found the idea of buying a character nonsensical; the whole point for them was to actually *play*. They observed that you cannot learn to skillfully play a character unless you play it. They made derisive comments about “eBay characters” when, for example, they encountered a poor player in pickup groups. On the other hand, there were many online discussions about busy people who did not have time to level a character but wished to participate in *World of Warcraft*. Aesthetic experience, as Dewey formulated, is variable because it is subjective. We can understand these variable responses to the experience of character leveling only by attending to the subjective dispositions of players with their own personal histories,

beliefs, and inclinations. As *World of Warcraft* itself ages, and players accumulate personal histories with the game, the game changes in response through the mechanisms of expansions and updates. Understanding the histories of the human subjects playing the game materially influences game design.

Dewey spoke of the “flow” of aesthetic activity from “something to something,” that is, from a set of satisfying actions needed to complete an activity to the completion itself. The psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi developed a notion of flow somewhat related to Dewey’s. Csikszentmihalyi observed that creative or accomplished people experience a state of deep focus that occurs when they undertake an activity that is challenging but still possible. The activity has clear goals and provides immediate feedback. Csikszentmihalyi’s formulation pointed, like Dewey’s, to the temporal flow of satisfying actions leading to completion (not cessation).

However, Csikszentmihalyi (and other theorists such as Stevens [1978]) emphasized means over ends. Csikszentmihalyi (1997) suggested that attaining an end can even be “anti-climactic.” Dewey’s conceptualization, by contrast, specified the *unity* of means and ends, their dependence on each other for meaning, purpose, and satisfaction. Part of the appeal of aesthetic activity, as formulated by Dewey, is a satisfying completion in which we eventually experience a distinctive, concrete moment of pleasure.

Collective Expression

Where Csikszentmihalyi focused on extraordinary, high-performing people, Dewey held to the promise of incorporating aesthetic experience into everyday collective activity. Dewey hoped to promote aesthetic experience in all walks of life:

Works of art that are not remote from common life, that are widely enjoyed in a community, are signs of a unified collective life. But they are also marvellous aids in the creation of such a life. The remaking of the material of experience in the act of expression is not an isolated event confined to the artist and to a person here and there who happens to enjoy the work. In the degree in which art exercises its office, it is also remaking the experience of the community in the direction of greater order and unity.

For many who played *World of Warcraft*, the game was a stimulus to the “remaking of community” (see Steinkuehler and Williams 2006; Williams 2006; Williams et al. 2006). As Arian, a Scarlet Raven player, posted to the guild website:

Welcome to a group of people who’ve built a guild “empire” around this game. Including: Forums, Vent, and Late-night hilarity.

Arian invoked ways in which players came to feel connected in and around *World of Warcraft*: forums on the guild website, the use of voice chat (“Vent”), and a spirit of fun, often heightened by the loss of inhibition induced in the late hours.

Collective expression in *World of Warcraft* constitutes a huge topic; I touch briefly on it here to introduce a tenet of Dewey’s formulation of aesthetic activity. Notions of collective expression will be woven into subsequent discussions in the remaining chapters, all of which analyze, in varying ways, how aesthetic activity played out in multiple, varied game activities.

To summarize, Dewey’s understandings of active, participatory, aesthetic experience incorporated community as well as decomposing the internal structure of aesthetic activity into temporal and structural dimensions. Dewey formulated aesthetic experience as participatory engagement in activity that is organized in distinctive stages and in which a satisfying completion is the end point of actions which are themselves pleasurable. To invoke concepts such as “pleasure” or “satisfaction” is to invoke an active subject for whom pleasure and satisfaction are products of a particular personal history rather than inherent characteristics of a set of actions. Aesthetic experience for Dewey required collective expression; it connects us to others in relations of community and “common life.”

We might ask why Dewey selected these particular elements to identify aesthetic activity. Dewey was a philosopher interested in questions of virtue and excellence. He found much of modernity disappointing, criticizing its “monotony,” “stasis,” and mindless convention. (We will hear echoes of Dewey in the comments of *World of Warcraft* players in chapter 5 as they discuss the disappointments of their school and work lives.)

Dewey sought movement and development, noting their roots in our animal past. He observed:

The live being recurrently loses and re-establishes equilibrium with its surroundings. The moment of passage from disturbance into harmony is that of intensest life.

He sensed that our animal energies are most satisfyingly discharged when channeled in a pattern of “rhythmic and developing” activity:

An engraver, painter, or writer is in process at every stage of completing his work. He must at each point retain and sum up what has gone before as a whole and with reference to a whole to come . . . The series of doings in the rhythm of experience give variety and movement; they save the work from monotony and useless repetitions.

Dewey thus argues (as activity theory does) that the human condition is continuous with our existence as animals in productive interaction with the environment:

At every moment, the living creature is exposed to dangers from its surroundings, and at every moment, it must draw upon something in its surroundings to satisfy its needs. The career and destiny of a living being are bound up with its interchanges with its environment . . . in the most intimate way.

Dewey observed that these biological realities “reach to the roots of the aesthetic in experience.” He urged us to consider ourselves living creatures primed by millions of years of evolution to engage deeply with our surroundings, to meet its challenges responsively, and to move, grow, develop. For Dewey the “enemies of the aesthetic” were the inflexibilities of modernity that defeat such engagement: “convention in practice . . . rigidity . . . [and] coerced submission.” He was saddened that the modern economy reduces much human activity to “the toil of a laborer” wherein living shrivels to the acquisition of a wage.

Given all this, it is not surprising that Dewey identified the aesthetic as complexly phased action in which both the journey and the destination are rewards and within which we can be “fully present.” Stasis, monotony, submission, aimlessness were, for Dewey, antithetical to the potentialities of

the living being in intimate engagement with its environment—all senses on the *qui vive*, as he put it.

Dewey incorporated a notion of the collective into his ideas of aesthetic experience because his philosophy centered on society. His human subject is always present in a social matrix. Dewey perceived that collective life suffered distortions under the pressures of modernity—one social class was empowered to diminish the horizons of experience of other classes through the imposition of repetitive jobs undertaken only for a wage.

Dewey was no Marxist, but he had sharp words for plunderers and colonizers, observing that the aesthetic came to mean quiet, passive contemplation of “fine art” as a means of reinforcing the power of the ruling classes:

Most European museums are . . . memorials of the rise of nationalism and imperialism. Every capital must have its own museum . . . devoted to . . . exhibiting the greatness of its artistic past, and . . . to exhibiting the loot gathered by its monarchs in conquest of other nations. [This] testifies to the connection between the modern segregation of art, and nationalism and militarism.

Perhaps most important, Dewey wanted to “recover . . . the continuity of aesthetic experience within normal processes of living.” He was genuinely disturbed by what he called the “compartmental conception of fine art” in which art is literally picked up and moved to controlled cultural citadels, separating what is deemed excellent from everyday life:

[In times past,] [d]omestic utensils, furnishings of tent and house, rugs, mats, jars, pots, bows, spears, were wrought with such delighted care that today we hunt them out and give them places of honor in our art museums. Yet in their own time and place . . . they [were a] manifestation of group and clan membership, worship of gods, feasting and fasting, fighting, hunting, and all the rhythmic crises that punctuate the stream of living . . . The arts of the drama, music, painting, and architecture thus exemplified had no peculiar connection with theaters, galleries, museums. They were part of the significant life of an organized community.

Modernity sequesters the aesthetic in regulated institutions outside

normal processes of living. Dewey suggests how deeply *peculiar* this is. He argued that active aesthetic activity must be reconceptualized and reintegrated into everyday life to infuse normal processes of living with the “delighted care” and “genuine affection” that move collective life toward excellence of experience.