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## The Orc – Playing the ‘Wholly Other’

Investigations of Kant’s Sublime and The Technological Sublime in Blizzard Entertainment’s Massive Multiplayer Online Game *World of Warcraft*

Author 1, Author 2

### ABSTRACT

While the complicated scheme of the philosophical sublime may at first hand seem mere platitude when brought to life in computer games, this article claims that the action/adventure game *World of Warcraft* wedges open a space in which to operate the sublime and navigate radically ‘other’ subjectivities. The hypothesis is that the assembly of fantastic elements in *World of Warcraft* duplicates the Kantian sublime while at the same time commenting upon and even radicalizing it. The Romantic tradition of the sublime as it unfolds in Immanuel Kant’s third *Critique* is outlined followed by an attempt to topologize elements of the fantastic in Blizzard’s game design philosophy leading to a clarification of what we call ‘the knotted point of play’ where game object, game interaction, and game subject intervene. Finally, we explore how the notion of the technological sublime relates to *World of Warcraft* and beyond.

### KEYWORDS

The sublime • The fantastic • Computer game theory • Technological sublime • Object-Oriented Programming

## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

Elements of the fantastic and the sublime blend in both clichéd and ingenious ways in *World of Warcraft*, originally released in 2004 by game company Blizzard Entertainment. Our article sets out to examine the hypothesis that the congregation of fantastic elements in *World of Warcraft* duplicates the Kantian sublime while at the same time commenting upon and even radicalizing it. Our investigation does not focus on empirical numbers or sociological analysis, but instead scrutinizes the ways in which *World of Warcraft* restyle ‘old’ material that reside in the border areas between philosophy, theology, and the arts.

Originally, the sublime tells the story of the overwhelming object viewed and classified from an enlightened distance. According to Immanuel Kant, the transgressive features of the sublime object are ultimately resolved through abstraction and a priori reason. Kant really isn’t that much interested in the sublime objects themselves. His focus is the potency of reason that is capable of enduring such objects and which catalogues them. Hence the hegemony inscribed in Kantianism; not only through the Cartesian position that elevates the subject in relation to the perceived object; but more importantly with

<sup>1</sup> The authors wish to thank an anonymous reviewer for strong, thoughtful comments on an earlier version of this article that helped shape and sharpen our analysis.

regards to the hierarchical superiority of reason itself (Kukla 2005). What Kant calls *Vernunft* (abstract knowledge) is always-already higher and more precious to the philosophical system than *Verstand*, sensuous experience.<sup>2</sup> Our hypothesis is exactly that *World of Warcraft* revivifies *Verstand* and places it at the level of *Vernunft*, all the while initiating a sophisticated dialectic relationship between them, which both mocks and masters Kantian thinking.

Jacques Derrida writes in the posthumously published *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (Derrida 2008) that the sublime can lead to ‘animalization’, the invocation of ‘the other’ within the perceiving subject itself. This seems to signal that the human subject can somehow embrace ‘the other’ within itself; but also that, in doing so, it must acknowledge that the other transcends the kind of hegemo-structural rationality otherwise attributed to the subject – what it means to be human. The ‘Animal’ within remains counter-hegemonical but also mute, effectively numbed by a hierarchically higher and rational ‘self’ that speaks on its behalf. Turning to Kant, the object that is the ‘animal’, which Derrida mentions, falls prey to the hands of a much harsher destiny: within Kantian

<sup>2</sup> The same kind of hierarchical dichotomy as that between *Verstand* and *Vernunft* applies to Kant’s division between *Erkenntnis*, which he understands as a practical cognition that too easily leads to subjective judgement, and *Wissen*, i.e., knowledge that lends itself more readily to scientific truth.

philosophy the sublime signals the denunciation of the object as it must answer to the supremacy of rationality.

*World of Warcraft* is a case of both Derridean and Kantian thinking: It is a game about becoming a beast (or a Derridean animal) and mastering the beast (or being truly Kantian). In *World of Warcraft*, the player is free to play as the ‘wholly Other’, an orc<sup>3</sup>. Even the very notion of *an* orc – and not orcs, in the plural, neutral sense – is a demonstration of counter-hegemony (Rearick 2004). What we ask here is what it’s like not only to behold and meditate on the sublime but to be entrenched, as a player, in a game structure that both expresses sublimity and actualizes it as a playable entity. Why, and to what extent, is *World of Warcraft* both Kantian and anti-Kantian? As we shall see, the fantastic and the sublime is, simultaneously, present in contemporary video games as industrious cliché and radical denigration.

However, at this point it is important to mark out two possible ways such a critical project could venture. One direction would assess the category of the sublime through the narrative of playing *World of Warcraft* as an orc. Another direction would clarify and

<sup>3</sup> The reference to ‘the orc’ should at the same time be understood literally and metaphorically since players can choose from a range of other ‘creatures’. All of them signifying otherness, though.

interpret the aesthetic experience of playing an orc via the application of Kant's aesthetic theory. Rather than making a commitment to one or the other, the analysis that follows is an attempt to do both in a dialectic fashion: We will perform a two-step analysis and prove that they are nonetheless dialectically interwoven. 1) The first step consists in showing the anti-hegemonic potential of playing *World of Warcraft* as/like an orc, that is, the sensation of interacting with a fantastic world inside the computer as an orc-avatar and to experience the action in the game in an 'orchish' manner. 2) The second step is to show how this potentially anti-hegemonic play not only shifts the balance from the 'mighty' and frightening object (which Kant effectively didn't care about) to a playful object that is *playable as a subject*; but, in addition, that in incarnating the object-as-subject the player is still inscribed (or even trapped) within a Kantian scheme. Another way of putting this is to insist that the *systematics* with which one plays as/like an orc is very much 'Kantian', while the *experience* of this encounter and this interaction with a game world is 'anti-Kantian'. This subtle dynamic coincides with what we call the 'knotted point of play' as well as with the equally subtle interplay – or reversal – of the Kantian concepts *Vernunft* and *Verstand*, both of which we shall return to. The steps mentioned above can thus be secluded and looked upon analytically, which we will do in the

following, however, both are unmistakingly and reciprocally tied to each other. Basically, this point is what is inferred by our chief hypothesis, namely that to play *World of Warcraft* is to master Kantian rationality and to do tricks with it.

The idea of the sublime, going back to Ovid and Longinus and later to be found in Kant, Otto, Benjamin, and Derrida, expresses a paradoxicality (Mann 2006). On the one hand the sublime object contravenes the faculties of human perception. On the other hand, it can be seized triumphantly by human analysis (De Bolla 1989). While this complicated scheme of the sublime may seem mere platitude when brought to life in computer games, the supremacy of the technological – to foreshadow David Nye’s concept to which we will return (Nye 1996) – wedges open a space in which to operate the sublime and navigate radically ‘other’ subjectivities (such as orcs).

Our reading of the fantastic and sublime in Blizzard’s *World of Warcraft* will proceed in four sections. First, we outline the Romantic tradition of the sublime as it unfolds in Kant’s third *Critique*. This is followed, in the second section, by an attempt to topologize elements of the fantastic in Blizzard Entertainment’s game design philosophy leading to a clarification of what we call ‘the knotted point of play’ where game object, game interaction, and game subject intervene, dealt with in the third section. Fourth, we

relate the game's structure of sublimity with the view of the technological sublime (Nye 1996) and the interesting similarities it has with the role of the 'object' in Object-Oriented Programming (OOP). This view further contrasts Kant's rather abstract enquiry of the sublime, as it is more 'materialistic' in its core.

## THE ROMANTIC SUBLIME

At the intersection of language theory, rhetorical studies, and onto-theological reflection, the notion of the sublime is the epicenter of the fascinating helplessness of a subject, or even language itself, when faced with that which surpasses our cognate capacity. Right from E.T.A. Hoffmann's *The Sandman* through J.R.R. Tolkien's *Silmarillion* and *Lord of the Rings* to China Miéville's literature of the New Weird and Blizzard Entertainment's *World of Warcraft* strange scenarios together with worlds filled with alarming monsters take center stage: mega giant trolls, roaring serpentine creatures, flying beasts straight out of the mixed bag of mythology and parochial folklore. This bag typically consists of Freudian uncanniness, Jungian archetypes, and tropes of the grotesque from the Gothic and the Victorian nightmare.



The relationship between monsters and rationality viewed through the looking glass of Kant's sublime recaps to us the inscrutable sovereignty of what can only be grappled as a thing in itself (*an sich*), the monster, which belongs to the noumenal realm, the reality existing independently of human perception. The sublime object or situation exceed the limits of understanding and sensibility.

However, what we do possess according to Kant are mental faculties, which are properties of our *Vernunft* (as opposed to the *Verstand* that basically stands for practical perception) that enable us to rationalize and effectively tame precisely this unintelligibility (Doran 2015). Thus, the sublime objects 'arouse' something in us, which is 'called to mind', and which is caused by the objects that do not, at first, lend themselves to appropriate classification. But it is the human reason and the means with which it installs 'sensibility' to our perceptions<sup>4</sup> that in the end comes out strongest.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Contrasting the noumenal realm is the phenomenal realm (*phenomena*), which is reality depending on human perception. This realm of epistemology, which belongs to matter and the sensuous, is structured around *aposterioric* (as opposed to *a priori*) judgements.

<sup>5</sup> It would be fair to say that Kant is not remotely interested in an ecology of (natural) objects, but rather centers his philosophical findings on the hegemonic principles of human understanding and dominion. Because of its power to instantiate and deploy categorical rules based on universal principles humans rise above the dumb matter of objects.

In many ways, human reason's ability to 'handle' sublime objects runs parallel to epistemology in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781, 1787). Kant argues that while time and space are unintelligible and forever sealed off from further inspection (Esposito and Beck 2009), they nevertheless form the basis of the kind of categorization that our cognate mind uses as both tool of perception and abstract scheme of reason. Thus, time and space provide a platform for an adequate perception of the world. We may not know what time and space are in themselves (*an sich*), the same goes for the sublime objects, but we definitely know how to structure reason around them and on top of them.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, it seems that Kant is envisioning abstract thinking as a kind of 'universal classical computer', way before Alan Turing who in the 1930's used the same name for his computational device. In Kantian philosophy, abstract thinking derives from the functions of reason, the same way that a computer performs calculations based on sets of functions. Turing first devised the universal computer as an abstract way to definitively test the viability of mathematical proof (cf. Alan Turing: "On Computable Numbers With an Application to the *Entscheidungsproblem*," in *Proc. London Math Society* 42(2), 1937). Much in the same vein, although within the realm of epistemology, Kant states that the operability of reason – the way it 'works' – hinges on the ability to possess and conduct a *rule* to operate on information in the form of discrete perception of objects. This means, that for the computer as well as for the mind knowledge equals the custody and performance of *regularities* within an infinite number of such information processing. Thus, Kant provided the philosophical blueprint for the universality of reasoning: Knowledge can be regarded as a 'program' instantiated in the human mind. Sensuous experience, on the other hand, are emergent properties in the shape of external inputs. Interestingly, the functional programming paradigms we use today were first explored mathematically in the 1930's with the so-called *lambda calculus* and the Turing machine, which are alternative formulations of universal computation (formalized systems which can perform general computation). When it comes to the infamous question that Kant raises, *is there such a thing as a synthetic a priori reasoning*, it can thus be said to foreshadow the universal, *digital* computer: Information comes here in the shape of discrete values – contained in the a

Kant further divides the sublime experience into two modalities, the mathematical and the dynamical. Both of them relate to the confrontation with marvelous natural objects; the former in relation to size, the latter to might (Kant 1987). Dynamical sublimity is especially intriguing in that it fuses nature's potency and production of fear with a concept lodged within the human mind, which is the capacity for reason to assert its 'independence of natural influences' (Kant 1987, p. 129). As Eugénie Shinkle remarks, reason's superiority both to external nature and to the nature within man himself is reaffirmed through the moral and universal vocation that sets the human subject above and apart from the domain of brute nature (Shinkle 2010). Thus, the sublime is a dialectical concept: It escapes from reason only to reinstate and celebrate the authority of said reason.

This epistemology of sublimity is echoed in the game of *World of Warcraft* as it relates to not only how objects perform, but also how the game's architecture implants a structure that showcases the drama of sanity's superiority over fear. The point is that this

priori 'rules' – of physical entities and motion (i.e. the synthetic sense experiences). See further on this John von Neumann's *The Computer and the Brain* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1958), also David Deutsch: *The Beginning of Infinity* (London: Penguin Books, 2011), p. 140ff.

structure exactly duplicates the epistemological lesson of Kant: that *Vernunft* triumphs over *Verstand*.

## THE FANTASTIC IN BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT'S GAME DESIGN PHILOSOPHY

In *World of Warcraft*, game objects feed from the dramatic forces of The Fantastic (with a capital F). Similarly, ways of interacting with the game world are typically equally fantastic. This implies overtaking the Kantian, hierarchical subject-object structure where the subject comes out strongest: if the object is mighty, then the player-subject is even more mighty – not in size, but in skill (Author 2 2020). The *Verstand* of the player may be momentarily brought out of control because of the magnitude and fear inspiring capabilities of the object; but, in the end, it is the *Vernunft*, the means to strategize and otherwise use categorial reason, that wins the game for the player

Let's have a closer look at the videogame *World of Warcraft*. Here players find themselves in a quest-laden world distributed across several separated but also interconnected digital landmasses. This huge digital world goes under the exotic name of *Azeroth*. When players log into the realm of Azeroth for the first time, they have to choose which

race and class they wish to play before they can venture forth on their journey. It will bring them across barren deserts and green forests and into sprawling capitals and further into deep, mysterious and dangerous dungeons. Encounters include numerous creatures of different designs, among them the green-skinned orcs, whom the artists from Blizzard borrow from the catalogue of mythopoetic legends and the modern (most often Tolkien inspired) fantasy genre (Author 1 2020).

During these quests toward higher levels, rare achievements, better gear and equipment, as well as the envy emanating from fellow characters (Author 2 2012), players will have to combat a multitude of crazed beasts, wild titans, roaring cyclops, savage dragons, barbarian composite snake and bird creatures, hellhounds, corrupted dwarves, elves, and humans dwelling in the immense realm of Azeroth.

When it comes to games, and *World of Warcraft* in particular, it is vital to understand ‘the fantastic’ as an ontological and much often genre driven category bearing a double meaning: On the one hand, fantastic objects are imaginary entities derived from fantasy. On the other hand, and more computer scientific, they can also be understood as relational action-events, or simply objects, within Object Oriented Programming (OOP) designed to consistently perform within the ‘laws’ of physics defined by the program.

Note that such laws may not align with the laws of our world; but however weird they may seem, they must always behave adequately.<sup>7</sup> In more semantic terms, the fantastic relates roughly to the opposite of what is commonly accepted as reality. Inside *World of Warcraft* the fantastic constitutes a stable ontological category.<sup>8</sup> When confronted with a fantastic object the player has no doubt about whether or not the represented object is ‘fantastic’, in the sense that it defies the standard conception of physical reality.

<sup>7</sup> The reason why actions assigned to objects in OOP must always behave adequately is precisely because they are *simulations* of an ‘outside’ world (i.e. a library software program is a simulation of what a real librarian in a real library would do). Thus, as Steven J. Zeil notes, the quality of a program’s design is proportional to the faithfulness with which the structures and interactions in the program mirror those in the real world. Cf. Steven J. Zeil: “The Object-Oriented Philosophy”, last modified August 20, 2013: <https://www.cs.odu.edu/~zeil/cs330/latest/Public/themes/>. See also Justin Joque: “The Invention of the Object: Object Orientation and the Philosophical Development of Programming Languages”, in *Philos. Technol.*, 29:335, 2016, pp. 335-356.

<sup>8</sup> We must stress that the word ‘stable’ here refers to the stable *representation* of the object – and not what the object ‘is’ in itself. This touches upon the difference – but also intimate connection – between objects and classes in OOP. In OOP object refers to a particular instance of a class, where the object can be a combination of variables, functions, and data structures. Thus, a finished object in a game, say, *World of Warcraft*, a monster or a wizard, is an object that implements members of the corresponding class – including preprogrammed player input variables. Think of an analogy: My house is built on a certain architecture, and it has specific features. For instance, it automatically opens the front door when I arrive at the gate (in real life, it doesn’t). This entire architecture including the in-built feature for interaction is the class. Suppose my friend sees the house and decides to build an exact copy for himself, with sensors and all. Then we would have two distinctly different copies, my house and his house; although there is still only one class. In OOP we would then say that the two object-houses are different *instantiations* of the same class. The closeness to Plato is obvious: Instead of the relation object-class we have, in Plato, physical things (or ‘copies’) versus the non-physical ideas. See A. Evens: “Object-oriented ontology, or programming’s creative fold”, in *Angelika: Journal of Theoretical Humanities*, Vol. 11 (1), 2006, pp. 89-97. Also B. Smith: *On the origin of objects* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996); D. Golumbia: *The Cultural Logic of Computation* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2009); and M. Pristley: *A Science of Operations* (New York, London: Springer, 2011).

However, the opposite is true in Todorov's narrower epistemological definition found in his famous work *The Fantastic* (Todorov 1975). Here Todorov focuses on the 'reader's' perception, and he places emphasis on the reader's hesitation – understood as a prolonged state of uneasy indetermination springing from a faltering ability to categorize the perceived phenomenon. Especially, when the phenomenon seems to transgress classification and the natural order of things (Douglas, 2002, Carroll 1990). The reader finds herself questioning her perception of reality. What is real and true and what is not? Here the reader is swirled in questions concerning the ontological state of objects and the phenomena of reality.

In contrast to this understanding, the objects in *World of Warcraft* are clearly defined and securely footed in the fantastic scheme of objects and worlds adhering to designs and architectures far beyond our daily understanding of the natural order of things. The unquestionable state of the objects in *World of Warcraft* also applies when the objects are 'viewed' from a formal game defining perspective. Here objects are defined by their relations, properties, and behaviors (Fullerton 2014), which the player respond to through a finite set of game mechanics (Sircart 2008, Burgun 2015) understood broadly as methods the player can instantiate when interacting with the game state.

Thus, the fantastic object of *World of Warcraft* must make consistently sense in relation to the overall architecture of the game, its overarching story, and specific quest-lines. However, the imaginary laws of physics which the game is based upon is concerned less about the supernatural and more about the relational physics that allows for interesting interactions and gameplay (Author 1 and author 2, 2019). Abstractly understood, a game is universally defined as a ‘configurational entity’ containing a multitude and in principle infinite set of states, but a finite and more restricted set of object configurations. The internal rule system of the game determines what state is represented to the player provided a given input, and what the player can do in this state. The sum of the set of configurational states of the game added to the actions pertained by the player is known as the *ontology space* within Object Oriented Programming.

The fantastic thus points in two separate yet interdependent directions; one has to do with content, the other with form. The first focuses on the object of the fantastic, mostly the dramatic visualization and animation of it; the second features the array of actions that take place in time and space and laid out in the game’s configuration, i.e., within the ontology space. The latter is structured via the game mechanics, which thus becomes the interface that directs the player’s actions, which again are defined (and



determined) by the configuration of the game and its rule system. Both of these directions, mechanics and configuration deeply entrench the player's experience of the fantastic.

As Rob Pardo explained in a talk at MIT in 2014 (Pardo 2014), Blizzard Entertainment's design philosophy rests on fantasy combined with scalability. Simply put, designers upscale every object in order to make them bigger and mightier. This process correlates perfectly with Blizzard Entertainment's desire to instill a sensation of overpowered faculty in the enemies. Every object on the screen, especially world and instance bosses (the really bad guys of the game), needs to be scaled up to the point where they almost fill the entire screen. The dimensions of these bosses are close to 10 to 30 times taller and bigger than the players' average size. They are meant to imbue fear and implant awe in players and of course call upon them to take up arms.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, these enormous bosses radiate might and power beyond belief. This goes for *Ragnaros the Firelord*, the end boss of the instance of Molten Core in the classic *World of Warcraft* (2004), as well

<sup>9</sup> As Longinus, in *Peri Hypsous*, remarks: "[...] what transports us with wonder [*ekplexis*] is more telling [*aei krateri*] than what merely persuades or gratifies us" (Chapter 1). In other words: show, don't tell.

as for *N'Zoth the Corruptor* (2020) from the present expansion pack, *The Battle for Azeroth* (see figure 1).



Figure 1: To the left *Ragnaros the Firelord* from the classic *World of Warcraft*. To the right *N'Zoth the Corruptor* from the current expansion pack *Battle for Azeroth* (this picture was cropped from FatbossTV).

Blizzard Entertainment's design philosophy reverberates Rudolf Otto's description in his *Inquiry into the non-rational factor in the idea of the divine and its relation to the rational* and how it relates to the feeling one have when confronted with the genuine wonderment of divinity (Otto 1973 [1917]). Otto's comprehension of the divine revolts against the sterile concept depicted by philosophers, most noteworthy the distanced

Kantian category of the divine or perhaps the sublime. Dissimilar to Kant, Otto injects emotion into the equation, especially in regard to the experience of the ‘*numinous*’. Here Otto points toward the overwhelming sensation of ‘creature-feeling’ when confronted with the divine, which he associates with the religious concept of ‘*mysterium tremendum*’ (p. 12).<sup>10</sup> This ‘creature-feeling’ manifests itself in the encounter with the ‘*majestas*’ of the divine. The corresponding, classical trope for this *majestas* would be the *adynaton*, the vocation of something which cannot be formulated properly in language and which therefore voices a very poetic exposure to the limitations of words.<sup>11</sup> ‘Creature-feeling’ is far from simpleminded in nature; it comprises a range of emotions such as fear, dread, paralysis, all prompted by the “‘might’, ‘power’ and ‘absolute overpoweringness’”(Otto 1973, p. 19) of the divine and its unapproachable majesty and ‘wholly otherness’. The ‘wrath’ of the divine symbolically expresses “vitality, passion, emotional temper, will, force, movement, excitement, activity, impetus” (p. 23). In the context of *World of*

<sup>10</sup> Actually, the complete Latin phrase is *Mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, meaning that because of God’s unfathomable mystery we are equally awestruck, trembling, and find ourselves inexorably drawn into relationship in ways we cannot fully explain.

<sup>11</sup> Noteworthy, within the reservoir of rhetoric, is also the *anacoluthon*; from the Greek for ‘lack of sequence’. It is typically defined as an abrupt change in the syntax or grammar of a statement caused by the emotional interruption of a sublime or otherwise transcendent object or situation. See Jan Mieszkowski: “Who’s Afraid of Anacoluthon?”, in *MLN*, Vol. 124, No. 3, German Issue: Emotionality, April 2009, pp. 648-665.

*Warcraft*, the player submerges as a being of nothing, ‘dust and ashes’, sheer nothingness. Still, this account fails to include the reservoir of positive emotional responses that the subject experiences when faced with the valor of the ‘wholly other’ of the divine manifestation: these emotions range from stupor, blank wonder, astonishment or amazement. Players of *World of Warcraft* may escape the *eo ipso* religious experience described by Otto; however, echoes of budding, numinous sensations awake in ‘the player’ when facing the “overplus of meaning” (p. 5) emanating from the monumental world and dungeon bosses in the game.

Simultaneously, the fantastic also manifests itself in the backstories of *World of Warcraft*, especially in their bifurcations and plotlines, which concern events that certainly did not take place yesterday. The significance of these stories is that they always occurred in the distant past 10.000 years or longer ago (Pardo 2014). The point here is less about what the stories document and more about the temporal distance as a structural design principle between the player’s present, her moment of gameplay (Author 1 and 2, 2019), and the long-forgotten past where the mythic events originally manifested. What is interesting is how players’ actions in specific quests bridge the distance between past and present. Faced with sublimity the game design introduces a kind of ‘temporal zoom

effect'; one that teleports the past to the present, and vice versa. When players re-actualize the past, they transport it into the present: all by taking part in heroes' past deeds by enacting (once again) their epic events. Players' participation in those quests serve as momentary vehicles that revive the mythological exploits. This reenactment of past events collapses the traditional segmentation of temporality: past, present, and future. Instead, temporality merges into a saturated 'now-ness' or 'presentism'.

This perspective inspires further reflections about fusing the stories of the past with the actions of the present. Specifically, how stories ferry beliefs, activities, and meanings and their legendary and mythic status onto the player-character's current engagements. Suddenly, it seems, the player symbolically (but also quite literally) metamorphosizes into the 'fantastic' hero of the mythic and sacred past. According to Mircea Eliade this transformation capsizes the interval between sacred past and profane present: actions of the past, as well as their semantics and consequences, now merge with the current actions (Eliade 1968). Eliade writes that in order to bring this process about one has to dive – or, as a player, reach – into the past and lift the iconic characters and their actions into the present. Thus, the fantastic past, together with its marvelous characters, heroic actions, and spectacular stories, gets catapulted into the 'now-ness' of gameplay

while fusing *and* infusing players with the amazing and fantastic past. On top of this, these processes are repeatable, replayable.<sup>12</sup>

Eliade's dichotomy between the sacred and profane domains also inserts a separation between the players' experience of being either outside or inside the game world. The outside of the game world equates to the profane domain while being logged into the game, which then teleports the player to a 'religious' realm. When stepping into the domain of *World of Warcraft* one undergoes a transformation created through and by the 'rite of passage' (Van Gennep 1960); an act that transports the player from the tiresome duties of everyday life and into the sacred and fantastic world of *World of Warcraft*. As Joseph Campbell would phrase it, players move from an ordinary to a special world (Campbell 2008).

<sup>12</sup> The entanglement between present and past can also be analyzed in finer detail, one that focuses on the moments of play or the gameplay experience (author 2 2012). The moment of gameplay reveals itself as a dual process, which on the one hand considers temporalization as a detour or retardation towards an intermediate or end goal; and on the other hand, in terms of spatiality, gameplay concerns the dynamic structure of changing intervals between objects (signs). The key point here is that a Derrida inspired take would unearth a tension within the experience of playing *World of Warcraft*: Namely the subtle way in which spatial distances between game objects co-exist, or perhaps collide with, temporality in the shape of retardation or postponement of finalization. The continuous stream of stories, quests, and sought-after gear in *World of Warcraft* never reaches an end point – they never arrive at a conclusion. The final moment where the game ends is always deferred. The player is ultimately left with 'traces' of the present as forever withholding, finalized moments. One could even speculate that the gameplay of *World of Warcraft* becomes a kind of operationalized *différance*.

## THE KNOTTED POINT OF PLAY

Let us dwell on how *World of Warcraft* orchestrates a complex relation between game world, interactions, and player experience. In order to get the hang of this complexity we must refine our focus on the interrelation, or *inter-esse* (meaning ‘between essences’), that takes place *between* the observer (player) and the confronted object (the sublime object). Thus, encounters with the sublime, both mathematic (size-wise) and dynamic (might-wise) in the Kantian sense, in *World of Warcraft*, are inscribed in a dynamic structure: We have the fantastic creature (the sublime object) and the equally fantastic subject (the avatar/player) involved in a no less sublime fantastical interaction. This complex structure sits in the intersection of ontology and epistemology.

However, what goes on here is not ‘just’ a shallow exchange between transecting aspects of the game or between past and present (or between being ‘inside’ or ‘outside’ the game world) as the previous section outlined. On the contrary, this structure stages the composite ‘experience of a sublime moment’ of play. We may describe this moment of play as a convoluted, knotted point wherein game object, player-subject and interaction converge. The knotted point of play is especially evident in the special game

instances, *Horrific Visions*, in the expansion pack of *World of Warcraft: Battle for Azeroth* (Blizzard Entertainment 2018). The architecture of the *Horrific Visions* is interesting since it portrays and mirrors the structure of Kant's depiction of the sublime. Upon entering *Horrific Visions*, the player finds herself facing a great many sublime objects ranging from *Corrupted Tormentors*, *Corrupted Mind Eaters* to *Corrupted Doomsayers*, just to name a few. The creatures threaten to overwhelm the player's avatar with fear and drive the avatar to the border of sanity: unless careful the avatar succumbs to madness.

The gameplay scenario around which the game instances of *Horrific Visions* are rooted is a progressive loss of 'sanity' (see figure 2).





Figure 2: The player, in the screenshot, is almost ‘out of sanity’, or experiencing a loss of reason (*Vernunft*) in a Kantian context. The sanity bar is the purple bar at the near bottom end of the screenshot.

The overall goal of the player is to continuously resist the increasing levels of fear without being swallowed by madness while at the same time performing somewhat traditional acts such as completing quests and confronting and slaying mythological bosses. The player, though, still has the capacity to counteract the mounting and very sensuous pressure of fear and looming madness, which emanate from the sublime objects and the scene of the *Horrific Visions* themselves. This countermeasure is precisely the rationality of reason – Kantian *Vernunft* – that momentarily reinstates sanity and thus successfully battles the ‘inadequacy’ of particular sense experience (*Verstand*). In terms of gameplay, this invocation of the light of reason is renewed by the restoration orb of sanity, as illustrated in Figure 3 below.



Figure 3: The player calls upon the restoration orb of sanity. This reestablishes reason making it possible for the player to further combat evil and postpone or altogether prevent being overwhelmed with fear and the subsequent collapse in madness. The shining orb in the screenshot depicts the orb of sanity (reason, *Vernunft*) while the purple bar of sanity highlights replenished sanity (reason).

Upon entering the *Horrific Visions* for the first time, the player has to equip a legendary cloak (*Ashjra'kamas, Shroud of Resolve*), which of course is upgradable. The legendary cloak is particularly noteworthy in this context as it induces the enhancement of corruption resistance enabling the player to tolerate more and more fear or reduce the loss of sanity while immersed by the *Horrific Visions*. The legendary cloak inserts an upgradable

bulwark against the rising pressures on the avatar's reason (sanity). Indeed, this is no small feat since upgrading the legendary cloak demands successful runs completing *Horrific Visions*; and to achieve such goals requires discipline, resolve, and strategy on the part of the player: all of which are hallmarks of reason (*Vernunft*). Thus, reason and rationality become pivotal for player discipline and game progression. Through repetition, effort, and strategy – and the structuring of reason – the player learns to combat the avatar's fear by disciplining its senses, the chunks of Kantian *Verstand*. Symbolically, this is represented by the continuous upgrade cycle of the legendary cloak. More importantly, the player's own senses and sensations of fear, anxiety, and stress – in sum: the elements of the *Verstand* – are equally disciplined, 'called to mind' as Kant puts it. Thus, the knotted point of play is a convoluted entanglement of game architecture and player experience. Transgression springs from this knotted point, on behalf of the avatar and the upgradable, legendary cloak, as well as being rooted in the player's pursuit of discipline, i.e., the means to strategize and resolve the powers of rationality ('*Sanity*' or '*Vernunft*') when facing the sublime.

## THE TECHNOLOGICAL SUBLIME

We will now once more expound the hypothesis that *World of Warcraft* not only duplicates the principles of thinking, the kind of abstract, universal categorization that one finds in Kant, but furthermore pushes thinking to *critical* thinking. The game does the latter, we insist, by playfully instantiating new modes of interaction with the sublime rather than just treating it as a legitimization of the rational authority of man. The way in which the game performs this dynamic operationally and in terms of interaction is, as we saw above, the knotted point of play, and the foundation for the possibility of this mode of critical thinking is, one could argue, the technological sublime.

There are two sides of this critical stance. One is the argument that without the vital introduction of universality as means to perform a priori abstractions rather than rely on the continuous ‘counting’ of finite perceptions there would be no computers. And without computers there would be no games (like *World of Warcraft*) to question the hegemonic principles of epistemological universality, i.e., anthropocentric superiority.

The second stance is the concept of the technological sublime. David Nye (1996) steers the concept of the technological sublime in the direction of a legitimization of American progress and the goal-oriented views that helped shape modernization. Technology, in the widest sense, includes things like infrastructure, roadmaps, steam engines,

and television sets, and becomes, Nye says, larger than life while still being the structural pillars of modern life and the symbolic exchange values of capitalist economy (Nye 1996, p. 8). In that respect, Nye's version of the sublime is much more prosaic and materialistic than Kant's 'mathematical' rigor as it becomes a metaphor of the New Frontier that sways forward not only a nation in the pursuit of welfare and colonial expansion but which also subjugates reason into a 'megamachine' of technological sovereignty.

The capacity for abstract reasoning, and the bells and whistles of the technological frontier that build modernity, are transformed into computerized object-relations. Such relations allow players to observe the sublime objects and furthermore to *enact* them; play them, feel them; and, as we saw previously, lift the objects from their aloof past to an action-packed present. This is already, as we mentioned, a shift from the disinterestedness of Kant to the more sensuous analysis made by Otto. The hegemony and Cartesian dualism of the Kantian sublime, where the subject triumphs over the 'mute' object, submits to the relation between objects and the preprogrammed means for interaction *with* the objects.

We find here a peculiar connection between Kant and computer games such as *World of Warcraft*. Not in a semantic or historical sense (and this is a vital point), but in a

formalistic sense. While Kant was not interested in the sublime objects themselves, but focused entirely on the subject who reasoned with them, game objects are similarly uninteresting in the ontological and strictly philosophical meaning. What matters is their *relational properties*.<sup>13</sup>

In Kant the sublime object 'is' effectively nothing. Importance lies in what the subject does with it (and to it); or, rather, with the idea of it. In the vocabulary of games, the ontology of an object is likewise non-existing. The difference is that the game object *does* something (which is preprogrammed) so that, afterwards, the *subject* can do something.<sup>14</sup> And since this is due to the technicality of the game system as such, the technological sublime must serve as the transcendental base *of* this relation between the computer and the player *within which* stuff happens between objects and players. Or, to put it in other words: It is the technological sublime that drives an evolution with which

<sup>13</sup> In Object Oriented Programming, and C++, confusion piles up because it is exactly the sum of these relational properties within a game space that is called 'ontology'.

<sup>14</sup> One could say that the defining aspect of 'object' in Object-Oriented Programming is not the uniqueness and autonomy of the object in an ontological sense but, rather, the epistemological vitality which is nested in the object.

computers are build; and inside those computers we find technologically advanced representations of the sublime that are relational by nature.

Moreover, in computer science objects can actually interact with themselves; or, rather, with the set of attributes assigned to them, which are then triggered by the user (player) input. Thus, objects in OOP are dynamic because of their data fields which 'open up' for interaction and flexible because of them being instances of classes. Again, this way of thinking objects is a far cry from Kant's understanding. Not only because of the inherent vitality of the object, the 'Otto quality' of the object that speaks to the feelings; but furthermore because of the intimate relation *from* an object *to* the subject – whereas, in Kant, all the commotion about objects and what they are *springs* from the subject (Abadi and Cardelli 1998).

However, the relation between object *and* the relation it 'suggests' to the player-subject – who can then perform and have fun with it in a variety of ways – does not posit all the power of reasoning in the Kantian subject. Rather, the relation merges into a schematic of the sublime object, the subject, and the corresponding action. The result of this triangular structure (as opposed to the dual structure of Kantianism) is, as we discussed in the previous section, the knotted point of play. The pivotal fact here is the reversal of the

Kantian ontology where the sublime game object is dead and buried; instead the sublime game object, we propose, enacts a ‘thing’ *and* a relational being which ‘sees’ and ‘controls’ the player-subject. Read this way, there is much more power in game objects than in Kant’s very stylized and one-dimensional catalogue of sublimity. *They*, the objects, and not the subject, are the power with which to empower the subject to play along. But if the object was an orc?

## BECOMING AN ORC

We have arrived at two conclusions: First, that the computer is in itself a piece of technological sublimity. Second, that game objects essentially turn Kantianism upside down – a lesson that can be derived from Derrida as well as from OOP. The fascination of things that occur in the knotted point of play stems from the relational power of objects to ‘see’ and thus ultimately dictate the behavior and interaction of player-subjects. In *World of Warcraft* objects are way cooler and much more self-contained than Kant would have it.

This brings us finally to orcs of *World of Warcraft* and the way they possibly cue into critical thinking. Unlike the other races of the Horde (Blood Elfs, Taurens, Trolls,



and Undead), orcs are not native to Azeroth.<sup>15</sup> They are an abounding and physically potent race hailing from the former paradisiacal world of Draenor, now known as the shattered realm of Outland. Like a warfare recap of The Fall in Christianity, and of course bearing many similarities with J.R.R. Tolkien's *Legendarium*, the orcs abandoned their peaceful culture when Kil'jaeden, a demon lord of the Burning Legion, corrupted them and used them in his rancorous plot against the *draenei*, who were exiles from Kil'jaeden's home world. In *World of Warcraft* the orcs cleverly escape the routine, Tolkienesque label of de-individualized horde beings, always running, disfiguring and cutting down trees for fun, bred directly as they were from machines and soiled dirt.<sup>16</sup> Instead, orcs in *World of Warcraft* change into opportunities for existence that one can play with, shifting – as we explained above – the focus point from a Cartesian subject-object hierarchy to a 'flattened out' relation between subject (player/orc) and object (the

<sup>15</sup> It should be noted that *World of Warcraft* is not alone in rendering orcs as avatars. In the 1987 released tabletop game *Warhammer 40.000* orcs are a playable race. The same goes for Ed Greenwoods fantasy universe add-on to the *Dungeons and Dragons* roleplaying game, originally from 1987 but popularized during the nineties. The 2004 'campaign' for D&D *Eberron* portrays so-called druidic orcs. Not to mention the 1987 D&D campaign *Spelljammer* that belongs to the sub-genre of 'astrophysics adventure' which introduced 'scro' – highly advanced militaristic orcs in space!

<sup>16</sup> The 'megamachine' referred to by Nye resembles Tolkien's dark and dystopian notion of 'The Machine' as it is outlined in the Preface to *Silmarillion*.

monster).<sup>17</sup> As we also explained, this relation bridges the gap between (historical) times and, to a certain extent, that between an active subject and a computerized object providing the means for interaction (mechanics). Furthermore, as an immanent cultural critique the orcs seem to undergo a transformation from scraping along the bottom of hierarchical rationality to personifications of subjective willpower and teleological reason.

The orcs in *World of Warcraft* once were the denizens of a Romantic fairyland. Such backstory is far from the hazy offspring they have in Tolkien's works where they equal the 'Machine' of Evil, spewed out in legions as a perverted inversion of the original races. Orcs once, in *World of Warcraft*, cultivated a noble, shamanistic society on Draenor. Tragically, the proud orc clans were corrupted by the Burning Legion – reminiscent to Tolkien's story of Sauron's betrayal of the people of Númenor – and used as pawns in the Legion's invasion of Azeroth. The orcs managed to rebel and helped turn the tide against their demon masters. The orcs then entered Azeroth through the magical gateway known as the Dark Portal, and waged war on the humans. And thus, the player enters the action.

<sup>17</sup> Which would bring this relational objectivism close to the Object-Oriented Philosophy of Graham Harman, a connection that cannot be pursued here.

To play as/like an orc is, one could argue, to assume the role of individualized and even tragic creatures. Interestingly, as if to *really* mock Kantian wisdom, the orcs moreover become vehicles of player interaction; not only as ‘skin’ to dress up the player’s avatar and make it look cool, but as beings with which the player can operate encounters with the sublime. From an orc’s perspective, and through the distinct physicality that the orc incarnates, the player experiences *tremendum* – all the while being an orc, a product of a ‘vulgar’ or serialized figure of horror.

The orcs in *World of Warcraft* – or, in fact, *the* orc, from *legio* to *solo* – come to stand for the resurrection of what the New Weird novelist China Mieville has called the ‘repressed repressed’. Once deterred from Paradise the orcs now risk demise for the second time because of their position as de-individualized beings that can only be used for massive slaughter and sweeping warfare. On top of that, players have to willingly suspend the disbelief that orcs are any good for other than random killing. In fact, they have now become the very *reasonable* fuel with which to tackle the sublime. Being an orc is to play in an Anti-Kantian fashion – to summon every possible, rational skill to navigate the world of the (Kantian) sublime. This way, *World of Warcraft* is, perhaps unintentionally, both a playground for Kantianism and a profound critique of it.

At the outset, the orcs in *World of Warcraft* represent ‘dirty’, non-abstract perceptions, and are therefore not allowed into the conceptual machine of Kant. Whenever orcs are humanized and thus trapped in the violent hierarchization of man’s epistemological reason, the orcs become repressed singular plurals – orcs. However, as we saw, they are so much more, vehicles and operators of interactions with the sublime. Note also that in *World of Warcraft* the orcs are green-skinned, which is usually a color associated with (Tolkien’s) Elves. They are fair, and while their *Sein* is traditionally sunk to a position on the ground, or beneath it (like dirty, hidden *Ding an Sich*’s); their *Schein* (green skin) speaks a different story. Presumably, the orcs were once lofty titans. One can speculate that their fall from grace at the hands of the Burning Legion is also a fall from individualization to de-individualization. The revenge story of *World of Warcraft* is exactly to reinstall their capacity for individualized play.

The orcs take up action, and thus colonize a site of critical thinking within thinking. What they represent, through the player’s instantiation and playful ‘teleportation’ throughout periods of time, is a non-universality combatting our two conclusions: 1) the universality of the computer and 2) the scheme of Kantian reason. Cartoonishly put, orc-

play knows about Kant, but gives a damn about his philosophy. The orcs that we play and embody become animalistic leftovers of the Romantic sublime.

## CONCLUSIONS

The findings of our investigation of how the Kantian sublime is both reproduced and radicalized in *World of Warcraft* revolve around *the knotted point of play*, which – as we have demonstrated – is rooted in a triangular architecture: a convoluted site of convergence between object, subject and interaction. We established how the game instances, *Horrific Visions*, in *World of Warcraft* not only portray and mirror but also turn Kant's representation of the sublime upside down. Players no longer observe the sublime objects (mathematical: size-wise or dynamical: might-wise) from a secure, disinterested position. Instead they engage, enact, feel, and play them. The knotted point of play epitomizes thereby a shift in perspective from the dissociated disinterestedness of Kant towards Otto's emotional and sensuous experience of the sublime.

But this perspective is not an either/or scenario. On the contrary, it is a both/and composite, which inserts a reciprocal and flexible exchange between *Verstand* and *Vernunft*; that is, between being, sensing, and playing the beast *and* rationally mastering

the selfsame beast. We thus argue that the knotted point of play is located in the intersection of emotional reactions and behaviors balanced by rational decisions and responses situated in reason. In other words, what matters in regard to the sublime game objects is their *relational properties*. Keep in mind, the sublime object of Kant 'is' firmly nothing. In Kantian philosophy, the emphasis is placed strictly on the subject and its idea of the object – not on the object itself (*an sich*), which 'exists' beyond the intelligible. Contrary to this, the game object is not a distanced and non-responsive 'thing'; quite the opposite, it *does* something and thereby it instigates a relationship between game object and player-subject. The agency of the game object is precisely what reverses the Kantian scheme completely. In Kant's philosophy the 'objects go first', but the advanced perspective of this article advocates the opposite: that 'subjects go first'. In conclusion: The game object commands not only a 'thing' but also a relational exchange which 'sees' and 'controls' the player-subject. Objects rather than subjects sanction the subject to play along. Following this way of thinking we examined how the Orc is inscribed in an equally reversed structure: the orc itself is elevated from the bottom of hierarchical rationality to an emblematic and forceful manifestation of willpower and teleological reason.

To play as/like an Orc, we argue, transforms the Orc from its amorphous foundation in the *legio of orcs* to an emancipated subjectivity that no longer represents de-individualized beings devoid of reason. In fact, the Orc has become a *raison d'être* with which to handle the sublime. Being an Orc is essentially to play Anti-Kantian. The player inserts herself 'inside' the sublime object and enacts from this embodied position every rational skill to navigate the world of the (Kantian) sublime. In this way, *World of Warcraft* is both a playground for Kantianism and a serious critique of it.

For the Orc to be able to question its being or 'being altogether', it has to scourge itself in anthropocentric qualities. But, by doing so, it instantaneously injects itself into a hierarchical relation to man. The orc of *World of Warcraft* is fighting its way back to and away from the primeval injustice of de-individualization. The revenge story of the Orc in *World of Warcraft* is a fantastic, and dare one say sublime, fable of reinstalling the Orc's knack for reason, the disciplined, strategized, and, of course, individualized play which is needed to combat the challenges of the game. The Orc, then, becomes a site of critical thinking fueled by the player's playful 'teleportation' of the Orc through periods of historic time simultaneously taking up arms against the organization of Kantian sublimity.

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