

Symbolic Exchange in Myth: Object, Truth, Reality of Werewolf Games

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Abstract: This study primarily explores the structure of desire in Werewolf games. Building on the diagram Lacan presented in his lecture on Knowledge and Truth, this article examines gameplay through three aspects: the object of desire, the truth of jouissance, and the reality of symbolic exchange. Using Lévi-Strauss's analogy of gaming as myth and Lacan's interpretation of the myth of Oedipus, the study engages in an analysis on the structure of desire of Werewolf games, focusing on the desire of the Other. To address this issue, the author developed an algorithm based on the previously mentioned Lacanian diagram. Given that Werewolf games have recently gained attention in philosophical and cultural studies, its structure of desire should not be overlooked.

Keywords: Werewolf games, myth, object-truth-reality, Lacan, symbolic exchange

1. Introduction

The board game Werewolf and its various derivatives have become extremely popular among the urban middle class in contemporary China. Despite significant variations in media and rules, the common feature is identifying the imposter/werewolf through language and actions.

Recently, there have been sharp criticisms of the Werewolf games. Yang and Jia investigated the discourse power and truth in Werewolf gaming. They argue that the fierce discourse confrontation is “a struggle against hegemonic discourse, while truth possesses no direct power but relies on power construction” [1]. Wang Linfei and Wu Guanjun discussed the status of the werewolf in Werewolf games using Agamben's concept of thanatopolitics. “The Werewolf, as an uncanny monster, exists between the ‘state of politics’ and the ‘state of exception’. There is a short-circuit between the ‘politics of discourse’ and ‘thanatopolitics’” [2]. “In Werewolf games, under thanatopolitics, the politics of identity precedes the politics

of discourse in logic, but the former must be acquired through the latter” [3]. However, all scholars agree that the persistent struggle against hegemonic discourse is our only option [2, 3].

Liu Tingting approached Werewolf games from a different perspective. She examined the addiction of the Chinese middle class to the game within a neoliberal context, noting that they played it overnight after a day of overtime work. She interpreted this as “a revenge reclaiming autonomy and a sense of control over their own time and energy through the game [...] in the form of a pessimistic and even self-destructive attitude” [4]. Her fieldwork makes her study quite convincing; however, her empirical method does not explain why these specific groups find Werewolf games so addictive, nor does it clarify the extent to which Werewolf games are noteworthy among various forms of entertainment in terms of addiction. While numerous forms of entertainment employ more enticing strategies to sustain the desires of neoliberal consumers, Werewolf games rely

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solely on language, which does not seem capable of creating the same allure as internet hyperlinks.

In this study, I argue that the issue is not the specific game causing the addiction, but rather the logic of the unconscious that drives desire through gaming, which is relevant to our case, the games of Werewolf. In the meantime, we should always bear in mind the dimension of struggle that consistently appears in previous studies.

This unconscious issue falls entirely within the realm of addiction, but such logic can extend beyond what “addiction” originally suggests. The unconscious issue may encompass a far broader domain than the individual mind. Lacan states, “the unconscious is structured as a function of the symbolic” [5]. It is inscribed into the individual by culture even before they regard themselves as a subject. “Before any experience, before any individual deduction, even before collective experiences related to social needs are inscribed in it, something organizes this field, inscribing its initial lines of force” [6]. Lacan acknowledged that his opinion on the unconscious was influenced by Lévi-Strauss, who introduced the concept of symbolic exchange and elaborated its crucial function in the community, stating “without symbols, social feeling could have ... no existence at all” [7]. Wu Qiong commented, “any social and cultural behavior of humans is to a large degree a symbolic solution to the insoluble conflicts in reality” [8].

When investigating the “addiction issue” within our theme of concern, it is vital to consider the symbolic function of desire. Consequently, desire is not solely a matter of the individual body but always travels intersubjectively. As Lacan states, “man’s desire is the Other’s desire” [9]. The environment in which the subject believes they are situated determines their flow of libidinal force and demand for love and recognition, thus contributing to their addiction. “You never consume the object in itself (in its use value); [but] as signs which distinguish you either by affiliating you to your own group taken as an ideal reference or by marking you off from your group by reference to a group of higher status” [10].

2. A Psychoanalytic Game Study?

The power of discourse is strongest when people believe it leads to the object. In Werewolf, recognition is maintained within the player’s temporary politics through the dominant discourse and perceived “truth”. The game creates an environment for “the natural bodies [of politics] when the bounds of discourse are suspended at night” [2]. The simulated dire situation generates a desperate desire for “truth”. Yet, “an ‘anxiety’ always presents [in game] [...] no matter how much proof or how many truths you hold, the words are the only form to show them; the value of information lies in its exchange” [1]. It is therefore not surprising that psychoanalysis is interested in this question. There is significant commonality between the game setting and the desire for truth. Within the three basic registers—imaginary, symbolic, and real—the object (the

real object inferred from the symbolic), truth (the true statement expressed by the symbolic), and reality (the real imposed on the imaginary) allow desire to travel. (See **Figure 1** below)

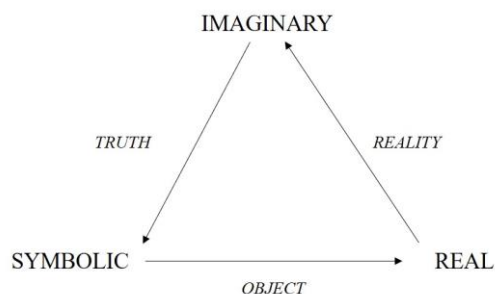


Figure 1. Object, Truth and Reality in the Structure of Desire

Whether there is a pack of werewolves threatening a village or imposters imperiling the crew members of a spaceship, this is the setting that most Werewolf games adopt, which nonetheless relates to community crises. The virtual society generates a desire to find a scapegoat: “the main dimension of every crisis is the way in which [the scapegoat] affects human relations” [11]. The scapegoat itself is not our main concern, but Girard discussed scapegoat finding in relation to myths, including the myth of Oedipus, which he described as “the first stereotype of persecution” [11]. “The oracle declares that, to end the epidemic [in Thebes], the abominable criminal [guilty of patricide and incest] must be banished” [11]. King Oedipus committed patricide and regicide and slept with the woman closest to him by blood.

“Where the imaginary creates symbolic disorder, initiation restores symbolic order” [12]. In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud presented his well-known myth of the tyrannous primal father. “There is a violent and jealous father who keeps all the females for himself and drives away his sons as they grow up [...] One day the brothers who had been driven out came together, killed, and devoured their father, thus ending the patriarchal horde” [13]. By this act, they initiated a new law in the “name-of-the-father” to prevent future tragedies and withstand the guilt of father-killing.

The issue at stake, we should emphasize, extends far beyond questions of psychology. As Liu mentioned in her study of the Werewolf game in China, “the psychological approach is inappropriate in the Chinese context” [4]. Perhaps Liu’s statement is still a bit too cautious in restricting this claim to the context of China. By this, I mean it is not illegitimate to regard gaming as something else altogether, that is, a myth. Freudian myth, rather than deriving from psychological analysis, is more of an anthropological thought experiment. The unconscious is embedded more in the social context than in personal experiences of guilt or anxiety. Similarly, players do not feel guilty about killing characters in the game. If we understand the unconscious as something flowing within the social

structure, then it is more Lacanian than Freudian. “The unconscious is that part of concrete discourse qua transindividual, which is not at the subject’s disposal in reestablishing the continuity of its conscious discourse” [9]. It is probably in this sense that Baudrillard claimed the myth of ritual regicide is by no means psychoanalytical, because “The king’s murder does not come from the depths of the unconscious or from the figure of the father; on the contrary, it is **our** unconscious and its peripeteia that result in the loss of sacrificial mechanisms” [12]. Thus, paradoxically, this patricide and regicide are capable of restoring symbolic exchange when the flow of libidinal force is stuck, and in turn, create the unconscious and the demand to pass the law of the father to all generations.

Therefore, we are neither claiming to conduct studies on the so-called “socio-psychoanalysis” nor merely “using” Lacan’s theories for our inquiry. Instead, our thinking will “stand Lacan on his feet,” that is, think based on his diagram. In a study concerning Lacanian diagrams, Clint Burnham identified three aspects of their history. First, the role of the formulae: “the graphic representations [...] are not a system of signification that explains his concepts” [14]; second, the acceptance of the graph by post-Lacanian scholars, such as Žižek, who adopted many diagrams to support his analyses of mass culture; and third, the aetiology of algorithms, where he summarized, “the graphs are more than just pedagogical tools. They are the way Lacan thinks. Lacan does not merely work out arguments in prose and then condense them into graphs. He often works out arguments graphically and then struggles to describe them discursively” [14].

These points provide a guide for our approach. Instead of searching for evidence of desire in each case, we will start with the diagram, exploring what its structure reveals.

3. Object, Truth, Reality and the Flow of Desire in *Werewolf Games*

3.1. “The Object” of Desire in the Werewolf Gaming

A game has its goal, the MacGuffin, from which the mechanism of jouissance activates. In Werewolf games, this object is often related to the question, “Who is the imposter?” However, does the discovery of the imposter imply the retrieval of the object?

This leads to our suggestion of viewing gaming as myth. Certainly, interpretations of myth vary and serve different purposes, such as “an expression and confirmation of society’s religious values and norms” [15], “a thematic narrative ... that refers to an individual or collective cosmogony or eschatology” [16], or even as a “necessary psychological product” [13]. However, in a language-driven game such as Werewolf, the structural perspective is more direct. “Myth is language: to be known, myth has to be told; it is a part of human speech” [17]. Through language, myth reconstructs events. In the following lines, Lévi-Strauss distinguishes between Saussurean langue and parole in terms of reversible (synchronic) and non-reversible (diachronic)

aspects. Unsurprisingly, we also find support for this mythical aspect of the game in Hamayon’s study:

A characteristic feature of play [...] makes up the games as a structure, and moreover as a structure from which an “effect” upon reality is expected, namely as a rite. As for the shamanic ritual, it fits the Lévi-Straussian definition of rite, which, like myth, “takes to pieces and reconstructs sets of events”. [18]

Needless to say, this interpretation aligns closely with Lacan’s concepts of metaphor and metonymy: “metaphor and metonymy—in other words, the effects of the substitution and combination of signifiers in the synchronic and diachronic dimensions, respectively, in which they appear in discourse” [9]. This reading of myth is especially relevant to the language-driven game, as the entire mythical events are reconstructed into a diachronic sequence. “The host announces, ‘Night falls, close your eyes; werewolf, open your eyes...’” On the other hand, the discourse within the game desperately seeks a way to end the “threat” (even players holding the “Imposter” identity must submit to this discourse) to “restore the desirable peace.” At first glance, it seems that the game exiles the player out of mythical time, so the discourse speaks of nostalgia for peace. However, if we insist that language constructs myths, the latter must be regarded as the effect of symbolic exchange. As Fisher argues, “the myth does not repeat so much as it abducts individuals out of linear time and into its ‘own’ time, in which each iteration of the myth is in some sense always the first time. Here, the myth resembles a fatal compulsive pattern” [19], a repetition aimed at “retrieving” the *objet petit a*.

Here, a master discourse dominates the entire discursive field. In its formula between the subject and the *objet petit a*, the relation is marked as “impotence”, which Lacan termed “the impotence of truth” [20]. The production of knowledge regarding the jouissance of the Other/Master, which cannot be fully articulated by the player, will never sufficiently embody the truth, that is, the desire of the barred subject.

For the time being, let us set aside the issue of truth, as we will revisit it in the next section. For now, it suffices to say that the jouissance of gaming is beyond the subject’s grasp. Does discovering the “imposter” imply the retrieval of the object? Perhaps we can now say that this retrieval is merely “implied,” as myth is mediated through language. “What we perceive as the reality of the [sexual] relationship depends on a function of ‘seeming’ or semblance, a phantasmatic support necessary to maintain the illusion of sexual complementarity within a closed circuit of desire and exchange” [21]. Through symbolic exchange, we do not acquire the object but a semblance, a “gift.” In describing the function of the symbolic, the distinguished Chinese Lacanian scholar Wu Qiong states in a Lévi-Straussian manner, “The structure and operation of social organization are based on a gift-like exchange system, and all human social and cultural

behaviors are largely symbolic solutions to the unsolvable contradictions of reality. Its structural elements perform a function of value exchange within this solution” [8]. If this applies to the structure of kinship (e.g., the exchange of women between clans), it should also hold for the subject/player as a historical being within the myth of gaming.

3.2. “The Truth” of *Jouissance* in *Werewolf Games*

The object of *jouissance* is rarely clear to the subject in Werewolf games. Therefore, the “truth” claimed by any player is merely a gift in the symbolic exchange, as no one can be entirely convinced that another player holds or adequately expresses the truth.

When the game transitions from its mythical state, the medium of its performance falls under human control. Gameplay constitutes a form of language-controlled rite. Opinions on this matter vary: Leiris argued, “The mechanism of ritual itself leans toward play. Sometimes, rite itself is an excuse to play” [22]; whereas Lévi-Strauss contended that rite and play are similar in that they “result in a particular type of equilibrium between the two sides” [23]. Tite indeed reflects an influence of anthropogenic adjustment. Hanna Wiran and Olli Leino proposed that “the specific feature of the transmediality of games [...] is the possibility that the task of upholding both the rules and the game state can be delegated to humans” [24].

Jesper Juul discussed the human-driven adaptation feature in the “transmedia adaptation” of games. In “adaptation”, “much detail is lost because [...] the game player’s body is not part of the game state” [25]. Pushing this statement to its logical extreme, however, reveals that there is also a loss of substantiality when the game “switches its medium” from its mythical state. A metaphorical cloth shrouds this world of myth, shielding players from the potentially blinding phallic light. While the game is “deceptively protective”, the performers act inversely. Hamayon analogized “playing make-believe” as a form of mimicry, noting that “[Roger] Caillois’ mimicry does not seek to deceive, as it presents itself as a game [...] The field of play, like that of ritual, ensures that, in assuming the appearance of someone other than oneself, there is no intent to deceive” [18]. This phenomenon is perhaps what we refer to as “a sense of immersion”. The objective in Werewolf is ostensibly to avoid being symbolically “killed” as someone else rather than physically. Therefore, one must also act *like* a “real werewolf”, who is expected to hide flawlessly and provoke distrust among the villagers through cunning. He must convincingly portray the “real werewolf”, becoming the best semblance of the *objet petit a*.

Thus, the effect of gaming can be understood within the framework of Lacanian mimicry. Interestingly, Lacan derived his theory of mimicry directly from Caillois. “Caillois assures us that the facts of mimicry are analogous, at the animal level, to what, in humans, manifests as art or painting” [6]. For Lacan, mimicry represents a gaze that

eludes sight. It is “that which always escapes from the grasp of that form of vision that is satisfied with itself in imagining itself as consciousness” [9]. Unlike the adaptation of certain creatures that avoid harm from light, the gaze “offers something for the eye to focus on, yet invites the viewer to lay down their gaze as one lays down a weapon” [6]. These creatures assume the role of the gaze and expel predators out of their identity in the vision.

This reintroduces the issue of truth to our central theme. Does truth exist in the Werewolf games? There is, at least in the Lacanian sense, but it is a truth that can only be half-said. “There is the theatre in which your truth was performed before you took cognizance of it” [26]. One might identify a werewolf through logical deduction, yet the entire myth will merely state that “one player has been eliminated”, without further assurance of “justice being done”. Bruce Fink noted that, for Lacan, “All truth is mathematizable” [27], as written by Lacan as $S(A/)$, the empty signifier of the Other, “a truth, but one which has no meaning; that is, a truth from which no further consequences can be drawn, except within the register of mathematical deduction” [27].

The question “Who is the imposter?” is essential to the gameplay; without it, the entire platform would collapse. However, “truth” must be situated within a domain of reflection, in the Lacanian sense rather than the Hegelian. For Hegel, truth partially resides in the unified identity of appearance and its reflection (introspection): “The term ‘reflection’ is initially used to describe light, as it travels in a straight line until it encounters a reflective surface that redirects it” [28]. But for Lacan, truth is asymmetrical to the subject in the process of reflection: “it is in this unity that the subject first recognizes himself as a unity, albeit an alienated, virtual unity” [29]. Thus, for Lacan, truth does not manifest directly to the subject as a straight line of light would. “What is the image in the mirror? The rays that reflect off the mirror lead us to locate an object in an imaginary space, which nonetheless exists somewhere in reality. The real object is not the one you see in the mirror” [29]. Lacan admitted in *Seminar XI* that he often inadvertently replaced “Roger” as in Roger Caillois with “René” as in René Descartes, whom he frequently compared with Freud concerning the subject of the *cogito*. The desiring subject reveals itself not directly, but through retroactive reflection, or as Žižek might put it, via a “side glance”, in these unconscious slips of the tongue.

“The imposter” functions merely as a “allure” behind which the true object is concealed. By identifying a “werewolf” (regardless of whether they are the “true holder” of that identity), the temporary community believes that justice has been restored. However, as long as this myth is enacted by humans, language remains the sole means of sustaining the exchange of its mythemes. Thus, the truth remains “not untrue” only when desire is perceived as emerging from the myth, akin to a slip of the tongue, such as “I’m a wollager” (a blend of “wolf” and “villager”), revealing a secret that should have stayed concealed.

3.3. “The Reality” of Symbolic Exchange

Our discussion above confirms the following statement: the symbolic exchange is sustained through a promise or fantasy of imagination. Reality, or “the scant reality” (peu-de-réalité) on which the pleasure principle is based, such that everything we approach remains rooted in fantasy. No one can guarantee that the person who slips up is the actual wolf but nevertheless he has been regarded as the one who finds the “gold” in the treasure trove. “[The big Other], is the locus of the treasure trove of signifiers” [9]. This play can also be regarded as a saint who touches the prophecy of the myth by a gruesome accident, “A sacred man [...] has survived the rite that separated him from others and continues to lead a seemingly ordinary life among them” [31].

We must consider the “strange” dialogues between the two philosophers in our study of Werewolf games. Agamben pointed out the ambiguity of the term “sacred” in etymology, noting that “*religio* does not derive from *religare* (that which binds and unites the human and the divine) but *religere* [...] not what unites men and gods but what ensures they remain distinct” [31]. “[The sacred] establishes a privileged space for the few through exclusion, outside of which all belong to the ‘worldly profanation’” [32]. In myth-like gaming, where the symbolic exchange is performed via language, a mask is required to maintain one’s ongoing status, similar to its importance in some rites. Agamben identified the relationship between games and religious rites, stating, “The passage from the sacred to the profane can [...] also come about by means of an entirely inappropriate use (or, rather, reuse) of the sacred: namely, play” [31]. He then quotes Emile Benveniste, “If the sacred can be defined through the consubstantial unity of myth and rite, one has play when only half of the sacred operation is completed, translating only the myth into words or only the rite into actions” [31]. If a player becomes entirely “sacred”, whose identity as an imposter become self-evident before the intervention of words or actions, his or her ejection from the game is also imminent.

Similarly, in the context of “myth as language,” this “half of the sacred operation” can be understood without much difficulty. As long as language mediates pleasure, the fantasy of the myth remains in active operation. The players in the game, like the subjects in the rite, share the same big Other/Master and speak through the signifiers it provides. The worship of the master signifier, the symbolic phallus (Φ), is crucial to maintaining the promise of truth. Knowledge exists about it. However, what we know of this knowledge is that it represents the desire of the Master, thereby reconfirming the Master’s capriciousness. “How does it come about that there is a master signifier in this place? For this is truly the knowledge of the master...” [20]

No one can precisely identify this capricious master or what he desires. It continues to propel the game forward, always demanding “*encore!*” without ever revealing itself or its desires. “Access to knowledge comes at the cost of losing enjoyment—enjoyment in its simplicity is possible only on

the basis of certain non-knowledge, ignorance” [26]. When Oedipus answered “man” to the Sphinx’s question, he gained knowledge of his unified identity but concealed his deeper truth, “Who am I?” Immediately after, the Sphinx jumped into the chasm and died, forever closing the door to his truth. At that moment, the horrifying truth revealed itself: he gouged out his own eyes, “placing himself outside all light, letting the veil of nightfall fall around him—and then crying out, as a blind man, for all doors to be flung open so that he might be revealed to the people as the man he is” [33].

Reflecting on our discussion about the game’s “adaptation” and “mimicry”, it is clear how crucial the former is in mediating desire. The phallic light of the myth is so overwhelming that only its symbolic form can protect the subject from the anxiety induced by the brutal natural force. The law, invoked in the name of the mythical father, maintains the subject’s position within the language game. Conversely, mimicry serves as a hidden (hysteric) critique within the game. Players who deemed to be imposters are merely “gifted to death”, with their banishment serving to mock the knowledge as an empty, zero-degree truth.

4. Conclusion

As promised, I would like to develop what is discussed above into a graph in a Lacanian style in closing. (as shown in **Figure 2**)

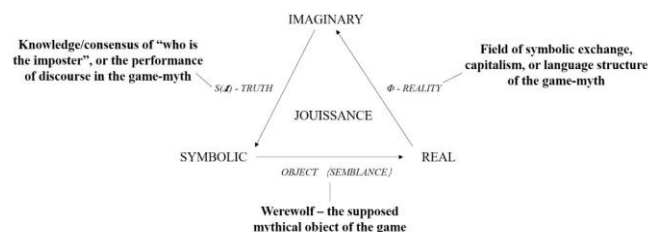


Figure 2. Object, truth and reality in the Werewolf Games

First, between the symbolic and the real, we find “the werewolf, the supposed mythical object of the game”. It must be clarified that a werewolf is not **the objet petit a**, as its presence results from retroactive reflection through the protective/adaptive myth of gaming. Such an object emerges from symbolic exchange, where the desire of the subject, absorbed by the master discourse, is inscribed in the abyss of the real.

The knowledge concerning “who is the imposter” exists between the imaginary and the symbolic. The truth it claims is not a substantial entity of jouissance but rather a promise from the master discourse, which is impotent in closing the gap between the subject and the object of desire. Meanwhile, the subject performs the discourse in the “game-myth” through mimicry, which makes such knowledge ineffective in identifying any truth, as it neither touches the abyss of the subject nor its jouissance but remains relevant only to the

symbolic exchange within this imaginary field.

The last aspect is the scant reality where the symbolic exchange occurs, represented by the (meta-)language of the Werewolf “game-myth,” from which both the master and its opposing discourse arise.

Via language, desire is exchanged within the community through the register of the imaginary “game-myth”. Similarly, this structure mystifies capitalism. Cunning like the Sphinx, the particular ideology pretends to destroy itself, while paradoxically reviving in the game, presenting itself as a “shelter” for those disillusioned with their workplace. In this way, capitalism ceases to exist merely as a myth and becomes a subject that survives as long as the symbolic exchange remains desirable.

The Werewolf games, as addictive as they are claimed to be, reveal the desire of the neo-liberal urban petite bourgeoisie. However, this desire is merely a desire for symbolic exchange, for their wits and heroism to be recognized by the community, whose desires often suffer disappointment in the highly systemic and rigidly hierarchical company. Moreover, the desire, through a significant detour, proves capable of short-circuiting the very system it creates. As these hard-working individuals leave the gaming board and prepare to confront their fate for a new day, another side of their desperate revenge becomes evident.

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