

Playing another Game: Twinking in World of Warcraft

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates one of the more controversial player practices in MMORPG's, twinking, not in terms of value judgment but as a play from negotiating, working against and even transforming a MMORPG's intended structure and design. Making use of participatory ethnographic observations of one of *World of Warcraft*'s particular forms of twinking, this devious behavior is discussed as being luxury play, dominance play, transformative play and standardized play, each form having its own influence on the way these virtual worlds are experienced by the player community and, notably, twinkers themselves.

Author Keywords

MMORPG, World of Warcraft, twinking, individualized group play, player-versus-player, devious play

INTRODUCTION

After doing research on the sudden popularity of tabletop role-playing games in the early 1980s, Gary Allen Fine noted that the most popular game *Dungeons & Dragons* lacked a cohesive social structure: 'D & D was designed as an adventure game, pitting good against evil, and was not designed as a sociological simulation. As such, it has the largest and the youngest audience' [5]. Since its dawn, the role-playing game has evolved with leaps and bounds in many different forms, the most visible being the massively multiplayer online role-playing game or MMORPG. The most successful of these types of games, Blizzard Entertainment's *World of Warcraft*, was once again not designed as a sociological simulation but as a true game¹. Like *Dungeons & Dragons*, this game too gathered the largest audience by far and attracts younger players than its more sedated, complicated or more socially oriented peers. Naturally, within *World of Warcraft* many unexpected forms of socially structured practices – like role-playing communities – came into existence as a supplement to the rules and structures offered by the game. This paper does

¹ One of the game's lead designers, Jeffrey Kaplan, emphatically described *World of Warcraft* as 'rules-oriented and goal-oriented' during a pre-release interview [13].

not discuss such practices. Instead, it investigates a form of play often not considered to be part of or even directly opposing social play: twinking. This practice involves using accumulated wealth or power within a MMORPG to create situations of unbalanced competition during the early stages of a game character's life. How twinking functions and why players are prone to indulge in it will be explained in detail further on in this paper. Using participatory ethnographic observations within the MMORPG *World of Warcraft*, in which I created and played with a twink for several months, as well studying the many guides and discussion forums devoted to (or arguing against) twinking, I have tried to construct a more extensive view on this form of play. My main questions revolve around the influence twinking has on the rules and structures – be it instrumental or social - of the MMORPG in question. How does twinking compare to 'normal' or intended play and how do twinks fit within group play? Is twinking purely devious play or does it have more fundamental implications on game design? Four different interpretations are recognized and discussed: twinking as a form of luxury play, twinking as a form of dominance play, as a form of transformative play and finally, twinking as a form of standardized play. Throughout the paper I will try to refrain from value judgments, instead trying to provide a neutral stance on twinking. If possible, as twinking has long been and remains a controversial activity within multi-player role-playing games.

TWINKING: A NEVER ENDING CONTROVERSY

According to the Oxford English Dictionary a twink is, among other things, an effeminate young man or, in more commonly used terms a sissy, pansy-ass or weenie. Twinking as a verb in the meaning of creating a twink has no dictionary entry. Twinking, is nevertheless a notable term in the culture of massively multiplayer online role-playing games or MMORPG's. Games of this type have been around for decennia in text based forms (MUD's and their ilk) but have exploded in popularity in the last few years through games like *Everquest*, *World of Warcraft* and the *Lineage* series. In MMORPG's, a twink is defined somewhat differently. On wikipedia we can read: 'In its most

basic definition, a twink is a character with better gear than they could have gotten on their own.². A similar definition comes from an official MMORPG strategy guide; a twink is 'a character that owns items that are normally above their capability of obtaining on their own' [11]. All hint to the fact that these characters - we are talking about game characters - are in fact 'sissies' in the original dictionary meaning as they do not seem to be able to manage on their own. In reality, they actually are far removed from a 'pansy-ass' situation. Twinks, sometimes called powergamers or munchkins³, are the strongest amongst characters of their own level, certainly not the weakest. In gamers jargon: they own the place. As a result, twinking has been an issue under great and largely negative discussion since the days of the textbased MUD.

So what is a twink or twinking in laymen's terms? Relating twinking to our 'real life' we can imagine the following. The offspring of a rich and powerful individual might be able climb to own successes but, when knowing this will take enormous efforts and time, why not just use this power and influence, financial or otherwise, to make a lot of steps (like choice of school, or getting a good job) much easier. Transferring power from high to low has been natural course of events in human society for ages through preferential treatment, (hereditary) succession and so on. Imagine now that you as a player in a virtual game world are both the benefactor (a rich and powerful high-level character) and beneficiary (a newly started low level character) and you will understand the advantages of twinking. By levering virtual money from an old to a newly started character, this character's virtual life will have an easier start. Like in real life situations of potentially unfair wealth and power distribution, twinking is not always perceived positively. Is twinking unfair for those without a higher level 'sugar daddy', often newcomers to the game? Does it even exploit game design?

There is a lot to say for both sides. Yes, twinking could be considered unfair as success is suddenly based on who has the greatest resources instead of the best skills, making competition based playing near impossible when twinks are around. Twinking is not prohibited through design; it does not alter game code but rather bends it, finds its flaws. As such, twinking cannot be called cheating, at least not on a technical level. Instead, twinking makes parts of the game's design often considered boring – grinding your way through the lower levels to get to the end game content - more bearable, especially for those who have seen the game worlds from a to z several times before. Moreover, what is the difference between helping a friend with a lower level character who is stuck in some quest or giving this

² <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twinking>

³ An often used term in role-playing games, munchkin's history too refers to being silly or childish (remember Munchkinland from *The Wizard of Oz*).

character some better gear you had laying around - totally acceptable 'social' behavior - and fully twinking a character with the very best gear and running them through otherwise non-reachable game situations with the help of high-level friends? Naturally, not much.

When speaking of a game there usually is a magic circle, the now widely used term from Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* (1955) framing a game in time and space. During a game like soccer, when a player decides to go against the rules and structures of the game, he steps outside of the magic circle. This is called cheating or unsportmanshiplike behavior and, when discovered, usually stops play for a while or indefinitely. When a player decides to go against rules and structures in a MMORPG, play does not stop simply because a MMORPG never stops due to its persistent nature. Instead, this behavior is still seen as antisocial⁴ and is discussed as such by its objectors. As the software itself does not stop twinking from happening like an umpire (or the players) would stop a soccer match when cheating is going on, only socially negated implicit rules or local norms remain which cannot be imposed, only negotiated endlessly. Such conflict has been called extra-mechanic, as it is not the game rules per se which are the cause of the conflict (intra-mechanic conflict) but the fact that multiplayer games are social spaces [15]. The ambiguous nature of twinking may leave it outside of 'intended' gameplay for some, breaking their magic circle, for others they are simply part of the negotiable consequences of the game [9]. As said, this paper will not indulge in the discussion on twinking as either an acceptable or condemnable activity. What it will do is discuss twinking as a form of play reconfiguring the way the game world or game itself can or does function.

To be able to do so I created my own twink character, a process more accidental than on purpose. As part of ongoing participatory ethnographic research into *World of Warcraft* I had started a new character, a sturdy shaman called Brikk, for other purposes I won't get into here. During the lower levels of Brikk's life, I arranged he got some help from a player with a high-level character of the guild I just joined. Without many problems he helped me finish up a quest in a dungeon called Shadowfang Keep. Normally, this dungeon would take a carefully balanced group of five characters between levels 20 to 25 to successfully complete. Because Brikk, himself only level 20, received help from a character of level 60 – strong enough to complete the dungeon on his own– no group was needed.

⁴ Note here that I used the term 'antisocial' in its meaning of 'contrary to accepted social customs and causing annoyance'. Antisocial's other meaning, 'avoiding the company of others', is covered further on in the paper with the use of the terms individual and individualistic. Both meanings here are derived from the Oxford English Dictionary.

The level 60 helper fought its way through the monsters like a knife through butter while Brikk looked on and reaped the rewards. Fortunately for me, not only did I walk away with the quest rewards and some other nice pieces of gear I could use, I also received a pair of rare cloth bracers called Mindthrust Bracers. While Brikk had no use for them, I knew I could sell them through the in-game auction house. Before I put them up for auction, I decided to read up on them in one of *World of Warcraft's* many online information databases. Here I encountered the influence of twinkling⁵ in all its glory as I read the following: *'If you are lucky enuf to get them to drop, congratz. But, if your a twink who has to buy em, do it cuz these things OWN!'. 'Twinks rejoice. More twink caster gear.'* *'Ok i will pay 25-30g for these if u have them'*. *'I'm offering a 65 gold reward to whoever fetches me these'*⁶. And so on. To put all this in perspective: the bracers had a vendor value of 4 silver and 64 copper and the accumulated wealth of most regular characters at that level was still well below one gold coin (which is 100 silver). In other words: Brikk was on the verge of becoming nouveau rich. In the end, Brikk was able to sell the bracers for just under 20 gold within two days. From here, Brikk's life as a twink began to take form.

TWINKING AS LUXURY PLAY

This first encounter with the world of twinkling touched its relation to (virtual) money, an issue under growing attention among MMORPG academia⁷. As Benjamin Franklin once famously said, remember that time is money. When players don't want to invest too much time in a new character, they simply buy the best gear available from in the in-game auction house to ease and accelerate the leveling process. This implies that another player invested time into attaining a certain item, time you don't have to spend. As such, twinkling is a luxury, an activity made possible by having enough spending money within the game world. While we can consider twinkling as luxury play, this does not mean it is entirely innocent. A direct result from these forms of luxury play is hyperinflation on the lower levels; because of high demand a lot of good low level items are sold for many times its actual worth. This is especially applies to rare items like the Mindthrust Bracers mentioned above,

⁵ As said before, there are some who will see the way I got these bracers in the first place – getting help from a high-level character to race through a dungeon which would normally take several players and way more time - as a form of twinkling. Especially on lower levels and depending on the reason, most will consider this as just friendly help, not exploitation.

⁶ All quotes taken from Thottbot.com (<http://www.thottbott.com/?i=11136>)

⁷ Search on MMORPG academia hotspot Terra-Nova for twinkling and most comments are to be found in the area of economic issues: http://terranova.blogs.com/terra_nova/

making such gear near impossible to obtain for players who do not have wealthy high-level characters as sugar daddy's for their low level characters. As many fear, the high prices in some cases cause players to get more virtual money through illicit channels to be able to compete. Such channels can be the so-called real-money trading (RMT) - buying virtual money with real money - made possible by the once fabled and now very real goldfarmers [2, 3]. These characters, played by either real human players or, frequently and even more controversial, software programs or 'bots' simulating a real player, gather large amounts of virtual money and - through wholesalers – sell this on to regular players. Injecting virtual money bought from 'the outside' into the game world makes competition with twinkers even harder as money outclasses skill even further. Certainly, these forms of hyperinflation can cause unwanted game balancing issues and are fought against by many game developers. Hyperinflation caused by high-level characters using their fairly earned (as in earned by play) in-game money to buy low level items for their low level characters is nevertheless an unavoidable result of general MMORPG design. The only thing Blizzard as a company can do is maintaining a constant crackdown on players using malicious third-party software (software infringing Blizzard's End User License Agreement) for goldfarming and related activities as well as on players who either buy or sell in the RMT⁸.

Unfair or not, hyperinflation did cause Brikk to become relatively rich and a young level. This sudden injection of money as well as a fascination for those players wanting to spend so much money on such a low level item (I had bought rare high-level items with my main, high-level characters for much, much less) urged me to look further into twinkling. Especially as *World of Warcraft* sported a particular form of twinkling diverging from regular definition: battleground twinkling.

TWINKING WARCRAFT

In *World of Warcraft*, not all twinkling is done to bring down the time to level up or ease play at low levels. This particular MMORPG has a strong emphasis on player versus player or PvP combat. In June 2005, Blizzard introduced the PvP oriented battlegrounds to the game world. These battlegrounds offered PvP situations in zones especially crafted for this very purpose, zones which in design more closely resembled first-person shooter maps than it did the rest of the game. For example, in the

⁸ Only recently, Blizzard closed off more than 105,000 *World of Warcraft* accounts and removed 12 million gold from the game world making the player community note that 'selling *World of Warcraft* content, such as gold, items, and characters, can result in a permanent ban'. (General News, www.wow-europe.com, 27 December 2006). For *World of Warcraft's* game policies check: <http://www.wow-europe.com/en/policy/>

battleground called Warsong Gulch two teams of 10 characters face off in a round of capture the flag, just like in a classic first-person shooter multiplayer game. The first team to capture three flags wins the match. Naturally, winning such a match (and killing each other) results in better and exclusive gear. To prevent high-level characters from facing much less powerful low-level characters in a match, the battlegrounds are subdivided into level groups. For example, all players between levels 20 and 29 are grouped to face opponents of the same levels. As soon as you reach level 30, you have to fight in the 30-39 group. The players who have reached the highest level⁹ have an own bracket for most of the battlegrounds to prevent these strong characters to play against characters who are still in the process of leveling up. The logic behind this simple framework is as follows. Not accounting for class differences¹⁰ and/or sheer skill, we can say that characters gain victory over other characters when their level is higher. With each level, a character's attributes (health, agility, strength, etc.) are automatically upgraded slightly and every even level, characters also receive new class abilities. As such, they become stronger and more capable at each level.

When having reached the highest level in the game, the balance between level and gear shifts. As they cannot attain a higher level anymore, characters now begin gaining victory over other characters through superior gear (again ignoring class difference and skill). At this point, players reach the endgame, the hardest and most time-consuming stage of the game if one decides to take part in it. Here, the players with the most time on their hands and thus able to join the very time-demanding raiding groups or PvP guilds - both oriented on repetitive grinding in order to obtain the best of the best - are able to achieve the ultimate 'epic' gear. Casual players with level 60 characters, not having the highly powerful gear of the epic characters due to an inability to partake or sheer disinterest in such time devouring efforts, are easily defeated by these powerhouse-characters. Most of the epic gear is not available through the auction house so simply buying your way to full epic gear is not possible. Escaping this unbalanced situation is only possible by injecting more and more time in the game

⁹ Since the release of expansion pack *The Burning Crusade* early 2007 the level 'cap' is 70

¹⁰ As a MMORPG very much oriented at the possibilities of individual, casual play, Blizzard continues to put a lot of effort into class balance. Even though each class (priests, warriors, hunters, rogues, etc.) has a main task in group formations (healing, tanking, etc.) and can specialize itself into several 'talents' even further (a bit more offensive, a bit more healing-oriented, etc.), they are all designed to be able to survive on their own and/or face other classes without automatically losing. Nevertheless, some particular classes are still considered to be better equipped to beat other particular classes.

to be able to join the endgame stages to gain access to this gear. Naturally, not everyone wants to or can inject more time to be able to dominate others.

Within this framework, a new form of twinking has blossomed. Players started to create characters who never left the 10-19 or 20-29 battleground level brackets by stopping to level up when reaching the maximum level capacity (either 19 or 29 in these examples). Next, these characters were outfitted with the very best gear and magical enchantments achievable at that level. The result is a character which not only out-levels the lower-leveled characters in the bracket but also out-gears characters of the same level. Especially within the 10-19 and 20-29 level brackets of *World of Warcraft's* battlegrounds, battleground twinks have begun to reign; non-twinks can only make a difference if they group up against single twinks. And battleground twinks have become omnipresent: in the many battlegrounds Brikk took part in, I seldomly if ever encountered a situation where he was the only twink¹¹. Usually, both sides have at least several characters who can be considered a twink and these are the characters that top the battleground charts (most kills, most flags captured, etc.). Naturally, this new twink situation did not occur without its own ongoing controversies, be it in a more contradictive way. As Mortensen has put it: 'while everybody hates meeting twinks in the battlegrounds, having them on our side is not a social stigma, but a nice convenience' [12]. While this discussion sounds familiar and once again touches the extra-mechanical negotiable consequences of being an online, multiplayer game, battleground twinks are unique amongst their twinking peers. This is twinking not as a form of power leveling towards the endgame but as a form of creating an endgame situation mid-game as battleground twinks never leave their battleground bracket of choice. The lower the bracket, the weaker the average adversary and the easier it becomes to overpower them. This has at least two implications for play in a MMORPG like *World of Warcraft*, both of which will be discussed below. The first is the aspect of domination instead of socialization as a final stage of play. The second is a radical departure from MMORPG design and logic.

¹¹ Recognizing a twink is easy. If they are on your team you are able to review their gear through a pop-up window. If most of their gear is of rare quality and has expensive enchantments on them, they are twinks. On the other team, the players who seem not be able to die however hard you pound on them often are twinks too. In both cases, the twinks are easily recognizable at the end of each round: they have the highest scores and the most kills on their name. A considerable amount to twinks are furthermore rogue or hunter, highly popular classes for their ability to inflict high amounts of damage quickly and superb survival abilities.

TWINKING AS DOMINANCE PLAY.

Bartle has used his infamous player types – killers, achievers, explorers, and socializers – to chart the ways the average player changes in play style over time in a MUD and MMORPG. He explains his main sequence as follows:

Players typically start of testing the immediate bounds off their behavior (killer) then begin to acquire knowledge of their environment (explorer); following this, they apply their knowledge (achiever), in the course of which they forge bonds with other players; finally, they retire and spend their time chatting with their friends (socializer). [1]

Bartle's explains killers in terms of wanting to dominate other players. Most twinks, especially those oriented on player versus player combat, can easily be put within this category. He nevertheless uses the desire to dominate as a unavoidable but nevertheless negative side of these virtual worlds. Therefore he includes not only attacking other players but making other's life difficult in other ways as well, including verbal harassment, within the definition of killers [1]. While grieving –jargon for devious behavior against other players – is certainly an unmistakable part of PvP play, this is a somewhat limited view on player versus player behavior, especially in a MMORPG like *World of Warcraft* where dedicated, sports-like options for PvP exist in the form of battlegrounds. Bartle's main sequence in which 'killer' behavior only (or most outspokenly) exists among starting, still experimenting players therefore gets problematic when dedicated PvP play enters the picture. Nevertheless, his main idea that players evolve from experimentation through instrumental play towards a purely social situation can still be recognized in *World of Warcraft*. Even, or especially the repetitive, instrumental nature of raiding in the end-game, social play forms the point of departure and condition for group cohesion [16, 17]. The practice of battleground twinkling, on the other hand, seems to move backwards in Bartle's sequence. That is, dominating other players, not necessarily socializing with them, is the outspoken goal for these characters. Having achieved a firm understanding of the game world and its rules (ie. having leveled up to the maximum level capacity), creating a twink character purely for PvP combat in battlegrounds means using your knowledge and in-game wealth to actively return to killer status.

Focusing on the negative sides of player versus player behavior, Bartle can be considered to be amongst those recognizing MMORPG's and MUD's as social communities. And certainly not, in game designer Raph Koster's words, as 'just a game' [10]. In *World of Warcraft*, the idea of playing 'alone together' [4] is more apt to describe average usage though; most players enjoy the visible company of others (for example characters playing in near vicinity or the constant chatter in the different chat channels) but that does not necessarily mean they want to

socialize with them. In fact, the most popular classes in *World of Warcraft* are those best equipped to play solo (hunters, rogues, etc.) and in addition, the players who have chosen these characters also show the least preference in team play and socializing [6, 18]. Especially when playing with players who are not directly aligned (through in-game communities like guilds or real-life relationships), most social communication can be seen as temporal and fleeting. I have called such forms of play 'individualized group play' which can either exist in free form - like the non goal oriented grieving - or in instrumental form - which is goal oriented like PvP in battlegrounds [6].

Battleground twinkling is a perfect example of individualized group play, born mostly out of inevitability rather than choice. For players who have high level characters already, creating a battleground twink is more of an exception than the norm; as a form of luxury play only the wealthiest, bored and/or domination-oriented players venture into creating such a hobby. This means that only a few of their playing peers (fellow guild-members, real-life friends who also play, etc.) also have battleground twinks. Even more so, because of the social stigma surrounding twinkling not all high-level players will admit they have such a side hobby. On top of this, most non-twink characters they meet within the battlegrounds tend to out-level them eventually as they move on in the game, making it hard to get to know others to play with for prolonged amounts of time. With the arrival of the cross-realm battlegrounds in August 2006 (making it possible to play battlegrounds against characters from other realms¹²), pre-forming a battleground group to play with became even more rare as (why bother looking for players on your realm when chances are they are just waiting to join on other realms?). Battleground twinks are therefore forced to play rather individualistically. Mind, the term individualized group play does not describe players who play purely solo. Instead, it denotes play within a group without having much interest in this group or, as said earlier, playing alone together. Battleground twinks usually do not mind playing individualistic as they do not play their twinks to socialize but to dominate. What surprised me when playing with Brikk was the lack of group oriented play. Most battlegrounds sport goals which are best achieved by working together but in most situations, twinks just opted for seeking out and destroying as much of the opposition

¹² The millions of *World of Warcraft* players are grouped by the thousands into hundreds of different 'realms' – parallel versions of the same game world. These realms are furthermore grouped into geographical location (European, Asian, North-American) and language (English, German, Chinese etc.). Crossrealms battlegrounds let players from different realms play against each other. This system was introduced to reduce waiting times for the battlegrounds.

for as many times as possible, either in small groups¹³ or alone, without much interest in shared goals. In several cases Brikk was called back from achieving a battleground too quickly as this would mean less kills and thus less fun and gain for the other twinks (non-twinks usually don't mind winning the round quickly at all). Communication during these battlegrounds is almost always limited to short messages concerning battleground objectives, the occasional insult ('12p n00b!!!') or pat on the back ('gg', 'gj', 'owned!!!')¹⁴.

Battleground twinkling as dominance play is one reason if not the only one for players to decide to create them and, admittedly, I found it thoroughly enjoyable too having the power and eventual skill to out beat most of the opposition in one-on-one or, even better, on-on-many battles. The resulting an often visible frustration with the opposing force was a constant reminder of my devious actions but for some is a big part of the fun. As referred to earlier, the path towards the fully twinked Brikk meant creating an endgame situation mid-game. There lies the third aspect of twinkling I want to discuss in this paper, and one of the most interesting ones for the way the MMORPG is experienced.

TWINKING AS TRANSFORMATIVE PLAY

MMORPG's are a problematic type of game as they do not fit the typical definition of what constitutes a game. They are intrinsically open-ended, while the common conception of what defines a game is, amongst other things, a quantifiable outcome. MMORPG's, like other role-playing games, are instead 'structured like serial narratives that grow and evolve from session to session. Sometimes they end; sometimes they do not' [14]. Juul also recognizes MMORPG's as being an exception to the rule of what constitutes a game as, through the open-ended nature of the MMORPG, 'the player never reaches a final outcome but only a temporal one when logging out of the game' [8]. Juul does not provide a place for the MMORPG within the classic definition of a game, suggesting it is a type of game that tries to break with the standard model of games [8]. Salen and Zimmerman argue that quantifiable outcomes are still present in a MMORPG because of the missions that can be accomplished, levels that can be achieved and goals that players set for themselves [14]. Such goals are fleeting

though; there are always next quests to do and other goals to set.

Battleground twinkling does actively pursue a quantifiable outcome mid-game; these twinkers want to gather the very best gear possible without ever passing a certain level threshold and then stay there indefinitely, repeating the same play over and over again. I am not arguing here that battleground twinkling causes *World of Warcraft* to transform into a classical game. The activity and influence of battleground twinkling does not directly affect the game's coded design for such a claim to stand - that is if the discussion on whether MMORPG's are 'true' games is even worth pursuing. What we can say about battleground twinkling is that by creating a quantifiable outcome - an end point - during what could normally be considered the early stages of a character's life span, it is contradictory to the MMORPG's overall design. It changes play on very fundamental levels while approaching the moment at which a battleground twink is 'finished', i.e. when a twink can no longer acquire better gear and nothing is left but increasing PvP skills in the battlegrounds. I will discuss some of these levels I encountered while playing Brikk to full twinks status.

I had already surpassed level 19 shortly after I got my hands on the Mindthrust Bracers so twinkling within the 10-19 bracket was no longer possible. I decided to make Brikk into a level 29 battleground twink and started to read up on twinkling on the many websites and forum discussions dedicated to twinkling. It was soon clear that I had to approach twinkling very carefully. Twinking did not (only) mean hawking the auction house for those perfect rare items, hoping to buy them for a reasonable price (reasonable for twinks that is). Some of the most coveted twink gear could only be obtained by doing quests. But each time you defeat a monster within the game world or finish a quest your character earns experience points or XP. Increasing XP means increasing levels, so minimizing XP gain became everything nearing level 29; too much XP and you are suddenly and irrevocably level 30. While a regular character can just kill and quests away - for them all XP is more than welcome - a twinker has to start planning his way through quests. An open world where more is better thus becomes a game of minimizing XP gain while maximizing rewards, forcing twinkers into relatively narrow play possibilities. The open world nature of a MMORPG is contradictory to such activities. Normally, the further you venture into the game world and up in levels, the more the game branches outwards. This is why MMORPG's have been referred to as games of emergence with only selected moments of progression - predefined sets of actions - like quests [7]. When battleground twinks start to reach their level limit, this turns around into a game of progression with some emergent elements as every action is planned in advance. Ultimately, when all the self-imposed goals (getting the best gear) are met and thus closure is found, battleground twinkling changes once more and turns into a

¹³ There are dedicated twink guilds. This form of battleground twinkling is still domination oriented (extra so; organized twinkling results in what is called 'steamrolling' the opposition) but will loose its individualistic edge. As I did not actively pursue a twink guild for Brikk, further research would be needed to investigate what this means for social play within such guilds.

¹⁴ These shortenings/pieces of jargon translate into 'learn to play, newbie' (newcomer), 'good game', 'good job' and 'owned' (referring to a person having just dominated another).

pure game of emergence, a sports-like situation of endlessly repeating the same battleground mini-games with nothing more to improve but sheer skill. Both structures - progression with only some emergent elements and pure, sports-like emergence - are a long way from what non-twinking players experience when playing through *World of Warcraft*.

TWINKING AS STANDARDIZED PLAY

While Blizzard has kept adding new content to the back-end of the game through patches and the inevitable expansion pack not much changed mid-game in terms of available content and gear. This meant it became possible to draw up a stable list of the best gear attainable at, for example, level 29 for each class. Many guides of these sorts exist online and there might be some discussion about certain classes benefiting more from extra stamina points or agility. But overall, these lists and guides present the same pieces of gear as being 'the best'. For Brikk, it became a matter following such guides and checking the acquired items off these lists until the ultimate set of weaponry and clothing had been collected. Such guides not only provide the best tools to plan and execute the collecting phase of twinkling by showing which quests and dungeons have rewards worth pursuing (the progression-like structure as discussed above). They also cause standardization amongst twinks of each class. When there is only one set of 'ultimate' gear, in the end all dedicated twinks wears and wields the same. This in contrast to most other characters, who sport a wide diversity of gear found, bought or rewarded to them¹⁵. Naturally, this situation is a hypothetical one as in reality some items are just too rare for everyone to have, even for twinks. Different preferences in play style also lead to a diversity of worn gear. Nonetheless, most twinks of the same class have considerably more gear in common than non-twinks.

The result of this near standardization of battleground twinks is that after optimizing gear only sheer skill factors as a winning condition in PvP situations against similarly optimized twinks. This is what the fully twinked Brikk encountered many times over when he began fighting in the battlegrounds. While most fights against one (or more) non-twinks usually resulted in quick victories, especially when level differences were present, one-on-one fights against other twinks became tests of skill and endurance. Through the shaman's ability to self-heal battles between Brikk and other healing enabled twinks became especially stretched out; several one-on-one fights lasted minutes instead of seconds. These clashes of titans, I will argue, are one of the few moments within *World of Warcraft* where winning or losing a duel with another player are purely a result of skill

rather than gear or level. The only other instance such equality can exist is amongst the utmost high-level, fully epic players who, with their raid guilds, have conquered the hardest dungeons and somehow managed to collect the mightiest gear the game has to offer. As most *World of Warcraft* players will concur, in practice, very few players are able to achieve such heights. And by the time they do so, Blizzard has added new content which ups the ante once more by adding new gear to slaver over. Battleground twinks on the other hand do offer standardization - a stable selection of 'best' gear without many new additions - and thus relative equality. This situation of equality is hardly discernable as battleground rounds are never filled with purely twinks and even when it is, fights rarely take the form of a duel, instead presenting many-vs-many situations where balance is often hard to find. While in practice, standardized play might be hard to spot, theoretically speaking battleground twinks stand alone in their ability to show skill over gear or level.

CONCLUDING

This paper has tried to investigate twinkling from several viewpoints, including its relation to virtual money, its dominance oriented nature, the way it interferes with intended MMORPG design and how it standardizes a game distinguishing itself with diversity. My aim is not to claim or pretend that these practices totally change the way twinkers experience their game. As a form of luxury play, a battleground twink is rarely a player's main character. Having a battleground twink is like having an expensive hobby, while the meat of the game experience for these players often still takes place at high levels, near or in the end-game content. Twinking is an activity pursued as diversion or variety in the overall play experience. What we can say is that twinkling points to the fact that a considerable number of players choose an form of play activity far from the often extolled social nature of these games. Out of reach for this particular paper but nevertheless interesting to pursue would be the question why exactly players create and maintain twinks, how much time they spend playing them in comparison with their other characters and if they do so instead of or parallel to more socially oriented group activities. Either way, twinkling is a form of transformative play that does provide an entirely new way of approaching play within a MMORPG as most of the intended design led by variation - doing a lot of quests while leveling up - is replaced by a very limited form of play aiming for a clear, quantifiable outcome. As such, twinkers do seem to play another game.

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