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"Because it just looks cool!"
Fashion as character performance: The Case of WoW

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Abstract

This paper explores the neglected area of clothing and fashion in computer games, particularly MMORPGs, which we claim is an important aspect of game aesthetics and player performance. Combining knowledge from the cultural studies of fashion with a study of the function and importance of clothing in the gameworld World of Warcraft (WoW), and drawing on qualitative methods, we argue that fashion in an online gameworld like WoW is a vehicle for personal storytelling and individualization.

Keywords: game design; players; storytelling; fashion; clothing; World of Warcraft*;* MMORPGs.

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Anyone that has ever spent any time trading at the auction house in the immensely popular massive multiplayer online roleplaying game (MMORPG) World of Warcraft (WoW), will have noticed items that are not only armor and weapons, but also fashionable pieces of clothing of no combat worth such as embroidered shirts, wedding dresses and tuxedos can be purchased at the in-game market. This observation inspired us to start a research inquiry on fashion and appearance in a MMORPG like WoW. From our observations, it appears that many World of Warcraft players are interested in fashion, as understood from what their character is wearing. This interest is not only focused on what is popularly referred to as *stats* (how much armor protection and boosting of abilities the individual pieces of clothes offer their bearer), but is also a question about how their characters look.

The title of this paper is a direct quote from one of the players that took part in the survey we conducted about fashion in WoW. The way our character looks is important to us, even in cases where appearance plays no role whatsoever in the reward system of the game. Our hypothesis is that appearance always plays a role in the social fabric of a multi-player game. Therefore, providing players with ways to customise their appearance should enhance the personal experience within the game. Players´ engagement with fashion is one of the expressions of the emerging culture of game worlds, where participants have developed unexpected ways of making statements about their identity. Game worlds – at least this kind of MMORPG which does not emphasize personal customization in the manner that games such as The Sims does – are more constrained in that players cannot create their own content, but are limited to the finite number of options the game offers. Another limitation is the predominance of rules over social interaction. This means than generally, everything in the game world has an instrumental function related to gameplay, which gives a tight frame for identity exploration. Still, there is a lively culture around fashion in these games, as we have observed in our ethnography and confirmed through our empirical work. We approach the subject applying relevant insights from fashion theory to an analysis of the WoW game fashion mechanics, a qualitative survey on fashion in WoW to which more than 200 World of Warcraft players from all over Europe have responded, and a focus interview with two very experienced players.

Clothing and Fashion in Computer Game Research

There is a curious lack of discussions of the importance of clothing in computer game research. Even a book such as Robbie Cooper's *Alter Ego – Avatars and their creators,* about players and their game avatars and filled with pictures of people's game characters in flashy clothing, barely touches upon the subject (Cooper, 2007). Clothing is also just mentioned in passing in David Freeman´s *Creating emotion in games,* a book that otherwise discusses character development in great detail (Freeman, 2004). Similarly, in their seminal book on Game Design, Rollings and Adams only briefly mention "cosmetic things such as clothing color" as one of the "intangible" attributes that goes into defining an avatar in a MMORPG (Rollings & Adams, 2003, p. 522). In Edward Castronova's *Synthetic worlds* he points out that "shiny

clothes" is one of the elements through which status can be expressed, concluding that "the status distinctions found in synthetics worlds engage emotions that correspond to the ones we have on Earth" (Castronova, 2005, p.113). Several essays in the *The video game theory reader* likewise touch on characters and players' relation to them, but do not engage in discussions of clothing (Wolf & Perron, 2003). Like most work on players, avatars, and characters, these essays focus on broader issues of identity, psychology, and sociality when discussing how to analyze and understand player-character relations.

A recent notable exception is the Ludica-collectives paper titled "Dress-Up: Costumes, roleplay and imagination" which examines the functions of dress-up from a gender perspective, both in general as cultural practice, and more specifically, as it takes place in various forms in digital games and worlds (Fron et al, 2006). The authors make a distinction between two forms of dress-up: dressing up dolls and dressing-up *as* somebody, for instance when you play a character in a MMORPG. The later form of "dress-up" can take place in many ways, including what they describe as the very typical MMORPG "instrumental" activity of "donning armor, which for many players are typically "dressing up by numbers" (p. 6). They point out that some players prefer to combine the "statistical and aesthetic" features of armor, but do not discuss clothing and fashion in much more detail, and in general primarily focus on dress-up as roleplaying ("being someone else") rather than the concrete practice of dressing-up *with clothes* as we do here.

Some other questions tangentially related to clothing investigate how gear is linked to social status and the relation of looks, gender, and power. The first topic is dealt with by Duchenaut et al (Duchenaut et al, 2006) in the paper "Alone Together." In their discussion of reputation and audiences in MMORPGs, they briefly point to the fact that in cities in *WoW*, high level player characters are sometimes simply left standing outside the auction house to "show off" their newly acquired gear as a mean to showing their accomplishments. Though they do point to the need of also providing players with more opportunities to gain an audience of admirers, or what one might describe as "making a spectacle of themselves," they do not discuss further the role clothing could have in this context (p. 7-8). The second aspect is introduced by Corneliussen and Mortensen (2005), who criticize the fact that even games with a high number of resourceful feminine characters dress them rather stereotypically. The article notes that stereotypical dressing means different things for the different genres: "big muscles signify power, big breasts do not." Although our interest is in clothing generally and not in the gendering of clothing, we will return to this discussion at the end of this paper, specially as our findings suggest that the play with clothing in certain MMORPGs actually brings the gender closer together.

Clothing has on the other hand received quite a lot of attention from a programming and technical perspective; however, this strand of research focuses primarily on how to portray and represent clothing in the most realistic matter, and does not pay much attention to the function of clothing as such. Authors interested in this area do, however, recognize that clothing is a "a key storytelling tool used to convey an intended impression to the audience" (Bridson, Marion & Fedkiw, 2005, p.1)

It thus largely appears that even though the interest of clothing is generally recognized in both computer game theory and design and graphics research, its function and importance seems to have received little attention. Here might therefore be a fruitful field for further studies and

research, as our field needs more concrete analyses of the relations between players, their characters, and the gaming experience.

There is a certain irony in the fact that fashion shares with computer games a status of low-brow pastime, even though the perceived consumer groups are very different and would no doubt gaze upon each other in horror if confronted. However, we are convinced that exploring the connections between these two popular culture forms will demonstrate that games do not operate in isolation from the rest of popular culture and that cross-over discussions can reveal interesting perspectives in our cultural panorama.

In computer games, fashion has been the focus of some very popular games among girls, such as Barbie Fashion Designer, where game producers try to tap into one of the best known female pastimes in order to reach the female market segment. These products are typically despised by "real gamers" (usually male) as not worthy of being called games. However, games with a fashion component are not an isolated phenomenon any longer. One could argue that an interest for the appearance of game characters and for "dressing" them in different ways has grown with the new generation of MMORPGs (which introduce more possibilities for customization than the early ones), doll-house games such as *The Sims*, the customization orgy of *Animal Crossing*, or even the success of the virtual world Second Life.

It would be foolish (and judgmental) to reject fashion as a superficial ingredient when thinking about how players interact with virtual worlds. As early as 1998, Casell and Jenkins (1998) advise us against "dismissing traditional girls interest too easily" (p.21). Indeed, there seems to be a growing general interest for games that play with appearance and identity like the ones mentioned above. Flanagan (2003) talks about a "feminization" of computer game players in relationship to managing the domestic space of The Sims, and Wirman (2008) finds the same feminine quality in the possibilities of customizing content that some games offer players, which many of them take further in the modding practice known as *skinning*. *Skinners* create different appearances for their avatars by altering the computer code or using the tools some games provide, so this is an even more performative praxis than the mere choosing of clothes, which is all WoW allows, but still a comparison is useful. Wirman has studied skinning practices around The Sims and stressed the ways in which game affordances are also symbolic communication:

> The Sims and Barbie Fashion Designer games afford a player to set her own goals, look closely at a game character, move characters in different directions and customize the character. They also offer an avatar, or a character through which the player interacts with the game world or which carries the player´s agency in a game. [. . .] All of these factors encourage attention to what a character looks like and acknowledge its importance, including possibilities for identification, as well as empathy, within the game (Wirman, 2008, p. 405).

We would like to expand Flanagan and Wirman's interpretation, both concerned with the feminine, and argue that this new interest in appearance and clothing can be extended to male players as well, as our empirical findings demonstrate. Likewise, men also perform their identity through the exploration of their appearance in game worlds.

Fashion and Clothing in the *WoW* Game System

In order to understand the function of clothing and fashion in a multiplayer gameworld, it is important to look more closely at the particular game mechanics and of the types of personal performance they afford. In the following, we will examine the interplay between character development and use of clothes in World of Warcraft.

When the character enters the world, he or she is typically dressed in very simple clothing, often revealing quite a lot of skin. It will not take the player long to pick up or be able to buy better quality clothing that covers the body a bit more, but a character will have to reach a specific level before she can, for instance, wear shoulder or head gear. Having progressed somewhat in the game, the character will often be able to go on class specific quests, the reward of which will be "good" pieces of armor. This armor might be desirable because it is rare and can be used to signal that the character has completed some of the more demanding class or race quests. At an even later point in the game, depending on the players interest and financial means, the player may start to switch between clothing (armor) worn for combat outside the cities and in-city clothing. In-city clothing does not have very good stats, but might look smart, serve as the guild uniform, or help the character explicitly role-play his or her character when hanging out with role-playing oriented players.

If the player wants to stand out and not wear standard class armor, the game allows for several ways of obtaining more unique pieces of clothing. Hence, one of the skills that characters in WoW can acquire is the "tailoring" skill, which allows the player to produce more and more elaborate pieces of clothing, beginning with simple linen wear, then wool wear, silk wear, and more refined "silks." The pieces of clothing the tailor makes can then be used by the player himself, which is the original intention with the tailor trade; given away to other players at the cost of materials, a way to upgrade one's tailoring skills; delivered to a guild; or sold on the auction house, the in-game player-driven market. Other players with an interest in more unique clothing or armor can either trade or buy these player-made items, if they are not interested in developing their own tailoring skills. As an example, pieces of clothing such as the "orange martial shirt," "tuxedo pants," or "white bandit mask" which have no significant stats will often sell at quite a good price because they are consistently fashionable items that can give a character a more original look. On player-driven sites such as Thottbot.com, players will often give advice to each other on how to obtain the desired piece of clothing and put a perfect set together.

Another way to obtain more unique pieces of clothing is to participate in one of the seasonal related quests that celebrate real world well-known holidays and occasions (e.g., Christmas, "Winter Veil"; Halloween, "Hallow's End"; or the Chinese New Year, "Lunar Festival") or in-game seasonal events, such as the Darkmoon Faire. During these festival seasons, players can pick up special quests, the completion of which will earn them a piece of festival clothing which will typically be worn at festival or guild parties.

Finally, in the end-game part of the game, players can earn points in the high-end dungeons or go up again certain monsters in order to collect entire sets of clothing with especially good stats, designed to fit perfectly together and to be used for specific end-game activities. These are also by some referred to as *tiered sets* and are typically class-specific. These items worn in combination will boost the chosen class talents. These sets stand out by matching perfectly and make the player look larger and more colorful; for instance, the tiered set for the druid includes antlers which are designed to stand out in a crowd as a marker of status. Thus,

wearing one of these sets will signal to other players that you are a competent and seasoned end-game player.

Figure 1. The Druid Tier Sets.

This analysis exemplifies how clothing and character progression seem to be closely intertwined in WoW and that the designers may be conscious of this in their world design. It appears that clothing can be used both to make a character stand out such as when a character is wearing a "hard-to-get" outfit or his own combination of armor and fashionable clothing; as a way of marking one's status as experienced player such as when a player is wearing a tiered set; and as a means to encourage role-play and interaction with other players.

Our Empirical Work: The "Fashion in WoW" Survey and a Focus Interview

Our main method in this study has been ethnographic, specifically through participant observation. One of the authors has been playing WoW periodically for three years, with a focused period of observation of clothing practices from February through May 2008. The other author has been playing WoW for a year. As observers, we noted certain phenomena, elaborated some hypotheses, and worked with the game from a fashion theory/cultural perspective. In order to complement our own ethnographic observation experience of the interest in "fashionable" items in WoW, we decided to conduct a survey and a focus interview to examine players' actual interest in their own as well as other players "looks." This is no attempt at quantitative generalizing, but a qualitative exploration of some ideas. Our survey is limited by its small size and its self-selected nature, although our hope was that by announcing the survey as "Does Clothing matter in WoW?" (not mentioning the word "fashion" in the title), we would attract

more than just the players particularly interested in fashion. But we understand it is likely that the people who accepted to take it already had some form of interest in clothing. The survey did provide us with the impressions of more players, and we use their descriptions as stories and texts that can be interpreted further in relation to our main hypothesis that WoW players use fashion as character performance.

The Survey

In late May 2008, on three of the official European WoW forums, we posted a request titled "Does Clothing matter in WoW Research Survey," including a link to our blog www.fashion-in-*WoW*.blogspot.com. It was through this link that the players could access the survey. In the short survey, we asked players to give us some basic demographic information about themselves (e.g., country, age, gender, the type of server they played on, and how long they have played WoW). Additionally, we asked them if they ever look at or inspect other players clothing (the "inspect" command calls up a window with another character's inventory of worn items), at which occasions they notice other players' clothing, and at which occasions clothing of other players matter to their decision to interact with them. Finally, we asked them whether they have ever spent time or money on in-game acquiring (a piece) of clothing that is not of any particular value to their stats or progress in the game.

A total of 227 players began the survey and 201 completed it. In all, 207 players answered all questions in the survey, except one. The question left unanswered by nearly 20 people asked at which occasions the clothing of players played a role for interaction; we believe this question went unanswered because it was similar to an earlier question asking when players notices the clothing of other players. The numbers provided below are based on the responses of the 207 players. There were two opporunities of elaborating upon an answer with text: respondents could explain their reasons to use the "inspect" command (107 players commented) or they could tell us which piece of clothing with no stats value they had acquired and why (137 players commented).

OUR RESPONDENTS

Average Age	20 years
Gender	82% male / 18% female
Average Playing Experience	26.5 months
Kind of Server	47% Player vs Player / 30% neutral / 22% Roleplaying

This population resembles our in-game experience as to the ratio male-female and the frequency of play in PVP vs RPG servers. Again, we do not claim that this matches the real population of the game, as Blizzard does not provide data verifying these numbers. It should be noticed that even though more players are engaged in PvP servers, they are all interested in which clothes their character (and other people´s characters) wear:

Do you look at what other players are wearing?	77% always does
When do you notice other players clothing?	94% inside a city 76% when instancing 66% when forming groups 59% when raiding 30% at player events 24% questing solo
When is clothing important?	47% when in a city 42% when instancing 35% raiding or in battle 31% in player events

These answers indicate that a majority of players do in fact pay attention to what other players are wearing, especially when it is safe to do it, when they have time to socialize with others inside a city, or when they are with players that they might not know particularly well, but still spend some time with, such as in group or during a raid. However, a more detailed analysis reveals that players on the role-playing oriented servers find clothing at player-generated events more important than the overall results tells us, but this does not change the general impression the survey indicates: responses seem to indicate that clothing does play a role in relation to when and if players choose to interact with other players. As we discovered, 63 percent of the twenty four players playing on a rp-pvp server noticed what other players wore at player-generated (rp) events and 70 percent said clothing plays a role for interaction at these events. Of the twenty players playing on an rp-server, 95% noticed what other players wore at player-generated (rp) events and 85% saod clothing play a role for interaction at these events.

We find it interesting that 70 percent of the players told us that they do spend time and/or money in-game to obtain clothing that has no effect on stats or performance. This percentage is far higher than the number of respondents playing on role-playing oriented servers, which were the type of players we expected might be interested in clothing. What we further learned about players' reasons for acquiring this type of clothing will be discussed below.

As a follow-up to the survey, we decided to do in-depth in-person interviews with players in order to see if their experience of the game and clothing were similar to the impression of the use of clothing we got from the survey and our own analysis. These players were not self-selected (as they had not expressed any previous interest in fashion) and the only thing they knew when they came to the interview was that we would inquire about their experience playing WoW. As one of our main interests was to discover the social meaning constructed in relation to fashion and clothing, we held the interview as a group interview, since we expected the social interplay between the participating players might give us insight that we would not have gotten in one-on-one interviews. We interviewed a 16-year-old male player "Jens" and a 32-year-old female player "Mette" (both names changed for privacy reasons). Both have played WoW for several years, both are end-game players who have levelled a number of characters to the end-level, and both are members of large serious guilds. Mette plays on a PvP and Jens plays on role-playing server. Due to their extended experience and close contact to hundreds of players, these players functioned as "experts," sharing with us their rich observations of how they and other players behave. As a part of the interview, we presented them with some screenshots of differently attired players, and they immediately began to interpret them, making rather accurate

comments about their level, class, race, and their taste in game fashion. These were surprisingly similar to the way we decode fashion in real life.

Our conversation with these players reinforced our interpretation of how fashion is a present element in the live culture of the game. They confirmed the importance of how a character looks, although this is different depending where your character is in the levelling process. This means there are some long grinding stretches where playing with appearance is a welcome diversion, and other times when it is not appropriate, such as when doing high level instancing. Their comments are incorporated in our arguments below.

The Importance of Fashion in WoW

> *I used to avidly collect robes despite being a tank. Thought they just looked pretty. Then there are the winterveil festival clothes – thought they looked very well modeled if a bit revealing lol. Its nice to have some clothes to wear while your just being casual around a city or something, to just look different. The same is true in reality I think* (female, 14).

Fashion is important for many people, yet it has always been a suspect topic. To cultural critics like Veblen (1899) or Barthes (1967), fashion is one of the best examples of human irrationality, a futile pastime only practiced by dupes (generally women). But as contemporary fashion theorists argue, fashion is rather a complex object that cannot be dismissed as unimportant, and it has substantial connections to the society and economy that produces it as a form of expression and as symbolic communication (Wilson, 1985 and Roach & Eicher, 1979). Fashion belongs to the aesthetic branch. It is a kind of performance art present in all societies, even the most primitive (Wilson, 1985 and Roach & Eicher, 1979).

What is important for newer cultural critics is the expressive and playful character of fashion (understood as what people wear, and not only high *couture*), and the possibility that it offers ordinary people the chance to express themselves and transform their everyday life "into more elaborate and complex aesthetic experiences by altering the emotional investment surrounding the display" (Finkelstein, 2007, p. 195). Our lives resemble each other, but the clothes we wear can make us special and different. One could argue that our clothes also resemble each other because we all buy them from the same mass produced stores; but the variety is such in the nature of the combinable items, the shapes, the colors, and textures, that each person can have their own style and *feel* unique (English, 2007, p.103).

The same happens in WoW. According to the comments from our survey and our interview, the most common reason for WoW players to go out of their way to get a clothing item that does not give them any stats advantage is "to look different," "to stand out," or "because it is rare." In fact, one of the sure ways to recognize a new player is that their clothing will be completely standard. The most coveted pieces of clothing are those that make their characters "noticeable", which here could be a tuxedo, a Santa Claus hat, a wedding dress or a pirate outfit, all things that do not "match" the medieval-fantasy setting of the game. Players even make their own combinations based on the available pieces. For example, one player stated, "*I made a Bond villain outfit with a monocle from BRB and a black tuxedo*" (Female, 23). However, even though players are always aware that certain sets "look better than others," they are not ready to wear disadvantageous gear in dangerous situations (understood as lower level gear), as our interviewees confirmed.

Comparisons and Status Anxiety

It is clear from our respondents and interviewees comments on why they "inspect" other players' outfits that status awareness and status anxiety plays an important role in their game experiences. A majority of the respondents seem to be inspecting other players in order to "check out" how higher-level players playing the same character class "dress up" or to check if they are dressed well (in terms of armor stats) enough for the level they currently hold. As one players put it, *"I guess we all want the best obtainable gear, and inspect all others to see whether we're slacking behind or not"* (Male, 18). Another player adds, *"It makes me feel better about my own tanking ability when my gear is superior"* (Female, 14). The act of inspecting is not just a question of getting to know the pieces of clothing that will give the character class you are playing the most advantages, but also a question of a motivational "status anxiety": am I performing well enough in my character class compared to other players? Clothing is pivotal in revealing this, *"Gear is a sign of PvE Progress"* (Male, 21). Furthermore, some of the comments indicate that just like in real life, players also "inspect" other players when they are envious of their "cool" looks, *"[I inspect...] to see what they are wearing that makes them look so awesome!" (*Male, 18). Inspecting clothing is therefore an act which seems to both motivate and inspire players in terms of learning about "what clothes to wear" according to the status one currently holds in the game. Mette, our interviewee, told us that at the beginning, she would look at the clothing of the members of a very prestigious high-level guild, Nihilium, in order to learn how to dress and gear-up.

Inspirational Fashion

Fashion inspires players in many ways. Besides the in-game activity, a group of fans has created the online magazine *Gizmopolitan*, which is one of the many player creative expressions based on the game and which reports to have 35,000 readers from sixty three countries. *Gizmopolitan* is about "Lifestyle for the women of Azeroth," and it is an elaborate parody of real magazines such as *Cosmopolitan* or *Elle*. Fashion is, of course, an important part of its content, and the writers take ironic distance to the importance of fashion in the game, with articles such as "Luscious Leather," "Get that Look for Less," "Little Black Numbers," "Gizmos guide to great hats," or "Stormwind fashion." Fashion is here used as inspiration, discussed as consumption, and as an object of desire, like the interest we also observe in regular players. The difficulty of getting a particular piece of clothing is what determines its value, the more the higher the value. For example, if the item can only be obtained in a rare quest, if the item is very expensive, or if it can only be worn by very high level players, as indicated by the magazine's comment that, *"Sailu generates a lot of interest in her Lovely Dress, result of a seasonal quest, so if you ain't got one, you ain't gonna have one."*

But the magazine also wants to offer good advice to players that might not be that high level, experienced, or rich, in the spirit that it is the right of everyone to look like a million. There are several stories about how creative you can be even with few means. For example, in one series of articles is titled "Get that Look for Less" and is about copying expensive clothing even if you cannot access the clothing for that high level. The magazine stresses the fact that because the items available are many, a player can be special just by combining wisely:

Figure 2. Scholarly Robes and a White Bandit Mask Match Perfectly for an Individual Fashion Statement by Ilusien.

Fashion as a Channel for Playful Personal Expression

If we take the last example above as a starting point, we can see how individual players try to influence the impression that their appearance has on others by donning remarkable clothes. Inspired by Erving Goffman´s (1959) work on identity, Finkelstein shows how popular culture and film teaches us that psychology and appearance are intertwined, "a woman in neat, pale clothing represents a mother; a man in a suit, white shirt and knotted tie is a policeman or a doctor; a man in a dark shirt and bowtie is suspect" (Finkelstein, 2007, p. 7). Because these are signals that can be interpreted by all, players consciously tweak their public display according to the desired effect, *"black tuxido set, for my bank (every bankmanager should wear a suit)"* (Male, 28) or *"Similar thing with my orc hunter, really liked the look of indiana jones style hat on him. Kept it for a long time just to wear it in cities"* (Male, 24). Sometimes they even purposely send the wrong signals, "*Low level clothing in order to appear like a new player to low level characters in the Barrens in an attempt to get them to attack me*" (Male, 17). Jens, our interviewee, also told us how he would dress his bank character poorly so that people would think he was new and they were more experienced than him. He believed this made him get a better price out of his items. All these quotes are interesting because they demonstrate that fashion is not a "private state of being" and it should not be dismissed by game designers as a worthless, more or less decorative, add-on (Finkelstein, 2007, p. 27). It is a social investment that has rewards beyond the aesthetic, as it can reinforce player status, like the player who acquired "*The old Valor set. It was a good way to show my high ranking in my RP (*roleplaying*) guild back then*" (Male, 15).

As our survey shows and our interview confirms, there are very few WoW players who do not care about what others are wearing. They mostly notice it in cities, even though it is always present as a way of forming an opinion other players. Our interviewees talked about "fashion trends," like the obsession with weddings and the dresses players need to attend them. Some of the outfits are slowly turning into stereotypes, like the tuxedos for the banking

characters or the festival dresses for females, so it will be interesting to observe if players begin to look for other pieces of clothing as the ones that are considered special become more popular. This reflects the movement from exclusivity (the new) to mainstream (the common) that happens with real fashion trends and turns items from desirable to disposable.

Our interviewees also pointed to a special phenomenon: fashion accessorizing as collector activity. There are players who collect all dresses, just like others may collect swords, for example, and these characters constantly change their dresses to gain a reputation as "the one with the many dresses." This is especially remarkable given the limited place to store gear, and the player that chooses to spend her precious storage room this way is making a rather extreme fashion statement.

Apart from being a vehicle for individual expression, fashion also can signal belonging to a specific group, as it happens in real life with urban tribe fashion. There is a certain tension inherent to group fashion, as players adopt it to be special, yet the only way to show this is by looking like everybody else in that particular group so that we can be recognized as such. This points to the very complex meanings negotiated in this expression of game culture. In *WoW*, the lasting (as opposed to short-termed) form of organization for players is called a *guild*. Many guilds have a tabard which displays the guild emblem and can only be purchased by the members of the guild and that identifies its members. Guides can require it on formal occasions like guild meetings or at all times if very hardcore.

Figure 3. Wolfmoon Guild Tabard.

Apart from tabards, *WoW* does not support uniforms as such, but many guilds have created their own uniforms by favoring a particular color or set of clothes, and many have "dress-codes":

> *Come dressed nice, in "street clothes" or dressy armor and wearing your guild tabard, if you have one. If you have no "street clothes" one of the tailors can whip up a cute outfit, I'm sure (Out of Hand guild).*

Both the personal and the social side of fashion contribute to offering the individual "a sense of uniqueness in an environment that was indifferent to them" (Casell & Jenkins, 1998, p. 208). Finkelstein is mainly referring to postmodern society and particularly to the large cities of the first world, where individuals are insignificant in size and meaning, as so many live in the

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same kind of houses, have the same jobs, and the same kind of hopes. *WoW* is in this way a perfect metaphor for a postmodern metropolis: a huge unchanging world where thousands of individuals run around doing exactly the same quests, with the same strategies, and the same rewards. The choices of class and race are limited and so are the appearances: all characters of the same race look very alike. Except for the clothes they are wearing. This desire to be different is so strong that it can be exploited. Collecting and selling clothes is a very lucrative pastime indeed; our interviewee Jens earns a lot of money this way:,*"People in WoW care about their looks the same way they want their jeans to be Diesel or whatever, in real life, you know. I don´t know why but they do."*

The variety of fashion in *WoW* is spectacular, compared to the limitations of the other possible choices. Players push it to the limit, like this player who:

> *[Bought a] tuxedo suit for my old and grey-haired lesbian hunter. I do this because I like characters that are different to everyone else. Warcraft is mostly full of children who care about big breasts and beauty. I have no interest in that* (Male, 24).

A tuxedo-clad lesbian hunter, a big warrior with a Santa Claus hat, a pirate outfit that matches a rare Hyacinth pet that accompanies the character . . . they are all examples from our survey. All these players want to cry out: I am not like the thousands of other orcs/elves/dwarves/ warriors/hunters/paladins…! and the only way to express it in the game is through fashion. We could compare the creative fashion practices of *WoW* players to the Harajuku Street Fashion phenomenon in Tokyo, where young people mix and match from different styles and cultural references in order to attain a totally original look. The available items are limited, but it is the recycling of these in unexpected combinations like the gothic-kawai or the lolita-nurse that makes them unique. It is dressing up, playing costumes in a performance that is equivalent to a cry: look at me! As Bonnie English summarizes it:

> In highly populated urban Japanese cities, where loss of individual identity becomes inevitable and highly dominant [. . .] this way of dressing was one of the very few which was resistant to the sterotypes of globalization (English, 2007, p. 134-135).

Fashion is our way to notice each other in WoW, to express ourselves, and to make sure that we are not lost in the immensity of the unchanging world.

Conclusions and Design Directions

As our survey and interview revealed, it is far from only role-players or female players that take interest in clothing, in "looking good," and being fashionable in a gameworld like WoW. The fact that many players spend time acquiring clothing with no value to the mechanical game-performance and the wildly popular creative parodies of *Gizmopolitan* point to the fact that to stand out in a world of millions is as important online as it is offline. We are surprised that designers have not explored the fashion production aspects of online gameworlds more consciously and feel convinced that by studying this aspect of the game experience further,

designers can tap into a very non-expensive way to offer players a more individualized gaming experience.

Furthermore, the interest in clothes and fashion is something that has traditionally been considered an exclusive part of the female sphere of interests. However, our argument and findings here point out to the interest of male players in performing their identities in the same way as females, expanding and confirming the notion hinted at in Fron et. al. (2006) that:

> Perhaps the conflation of the "masculine" space of the computer, combined with the notion of "gear" (armor and weapons) actually regenders costume play in more masculine direction. What this suggests is that while costume play on computers may be creating more female-friendly play opportunities, conversely, it may also be opening up more avenues of dress-up for men (p. 13).

We would very much like to see this in light of Henry Jenkins hope that when feminine features become interesting for both genders, we might be witnessing some progress towards genre-neutral gaming (Jenkins, 2001). And that, like getting the Silver-Thread Robe at the Auction house, warms our player hearts.

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