



Slave to the Grind

How Online Gameplay Has Adopted the Grind

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Your Host

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Topics for Discussion

- What is the grind?
- Why do players hate it?
- Why can't we stop making them?

A Definition

- *The Grind is what happens when you make the player do something he doesn't want to do in order to do something he does want to do*
- My own personal definition, works about 95% of the time

Levelling systems are not the only grinds
-- but levelling systems can be grinds

Examples in MMOs:

- Master poisoner in Ultima Online*
- Grinding reputation in WoW*

Grinds don't just exist in MMOs

A good way to watch for grinds

Does the player say « Why do I have to do X to do Y »?



Why do I have to kill 8 million giant rats to play your battlegrounds?

LAS VEGAS



The wait is over. Welcome to Vegas.



Choose your Path
The paths you pick determine

Build your Casino
Build your casino into a five-star

Fight for your Might
Vegas has the most fearsome

In Mafia Wars, Why do I have to reach level 18 before I can go to Las Vegas?



In Civilization V, why do I need to learn 55 upgrades before I can start dropping nukes?



In most racing games, why do I have to beat the game in single-player to play the tracks multiplayer?

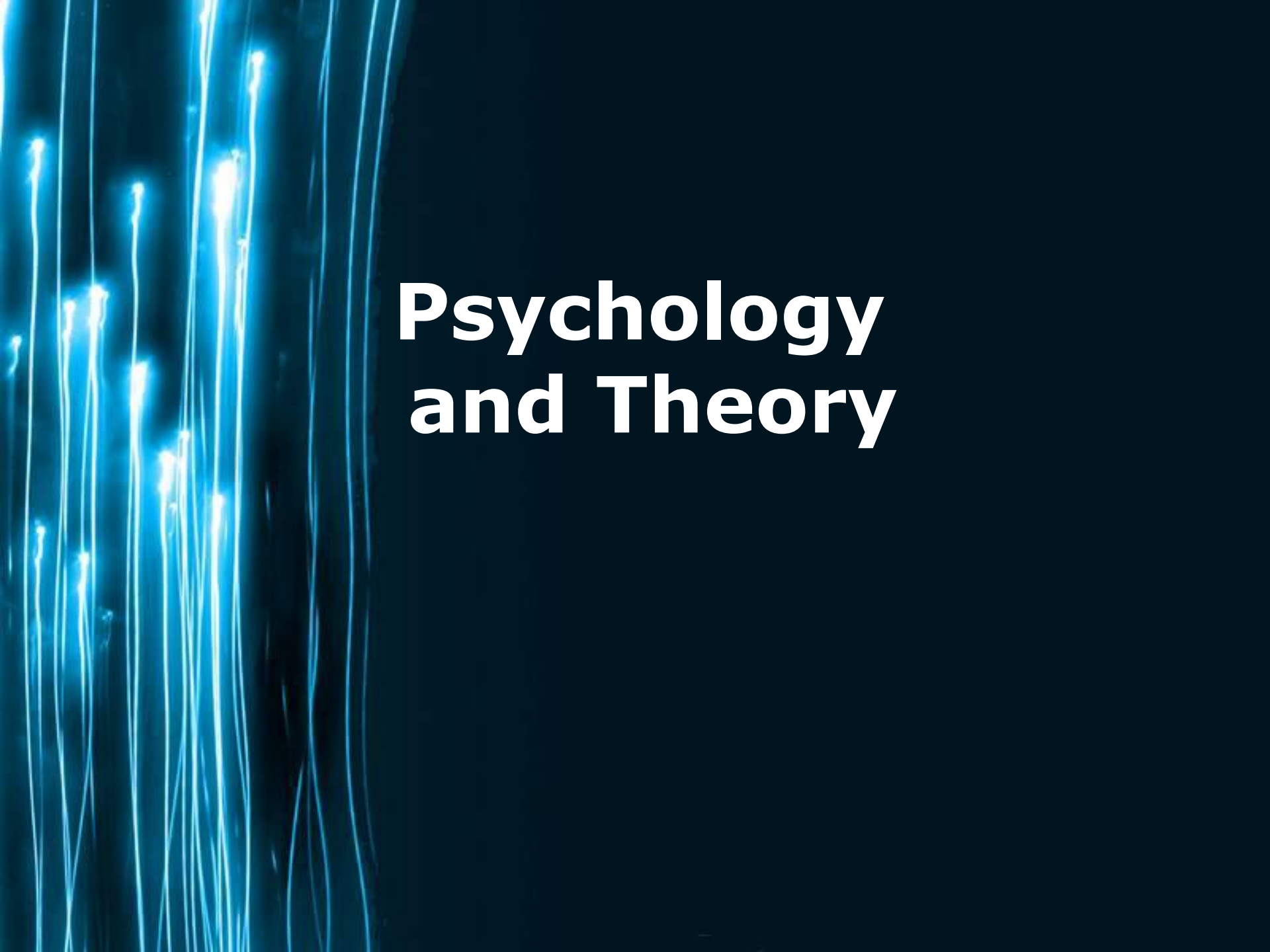


Why do I have to buy boxes and boxes of boosters in order to build a magic deck?



In many cases, the designer has very good reasons for introducing the grind.

This doesn't necessarily mean that players will be sympathetic to your reasoning.



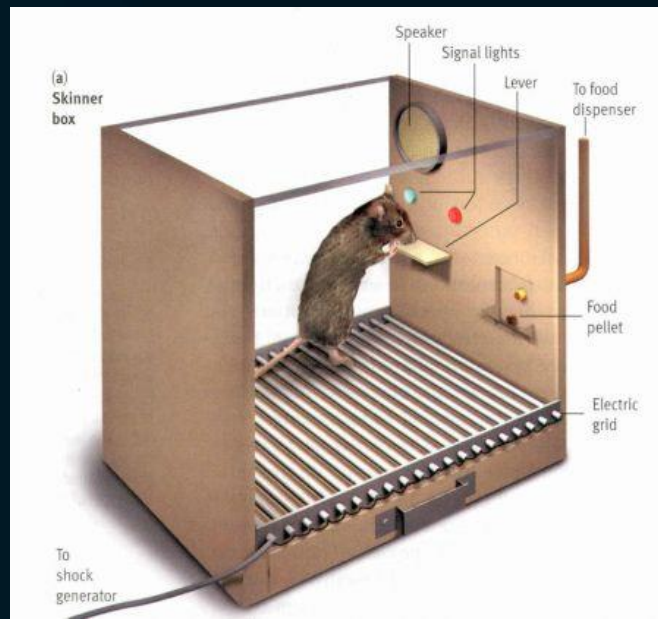
Psychology and Theory

Positive Reinforcement

If you perform an action, you will gain a reward.
The basics of operant conditioning.

The classic « Skinner Box ».

But are the rats having any fun?



Extrinsic and Intrinsic Motivation

Intrinsic rewards: rewards from doing: joy, delight, fun, senses of accomplishment, mastery and purpose, novelty.

Extrinsic rewards: artificial rewards such as levels, experience, achievements

Extrinsic and Intrinsic Motivation

Intrinsic rewards are more powerful and more rewarding, but often (especially in a content-based game) are unsustainable.

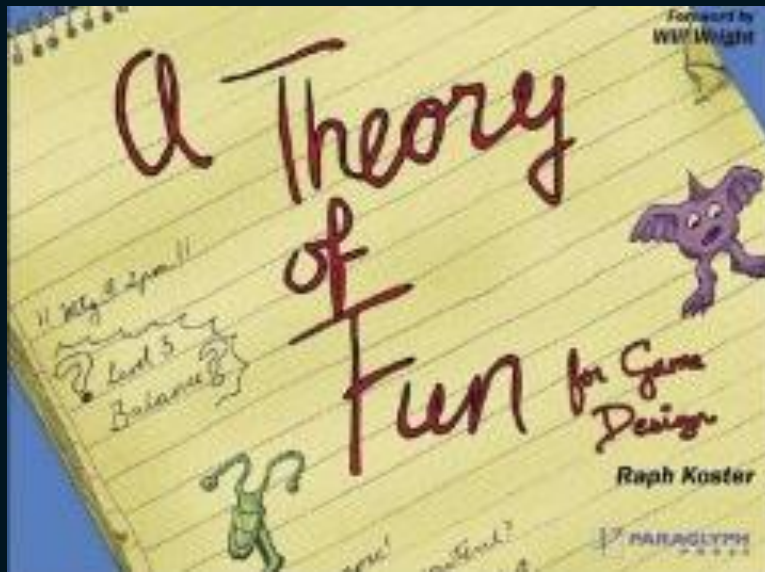
Extrinsic rewards are more sustainable, but less meaningful, and repeated extrinsic rewards tend to make future rewards less meaningful over time.

The grind is typically all about extrinsic rewards.

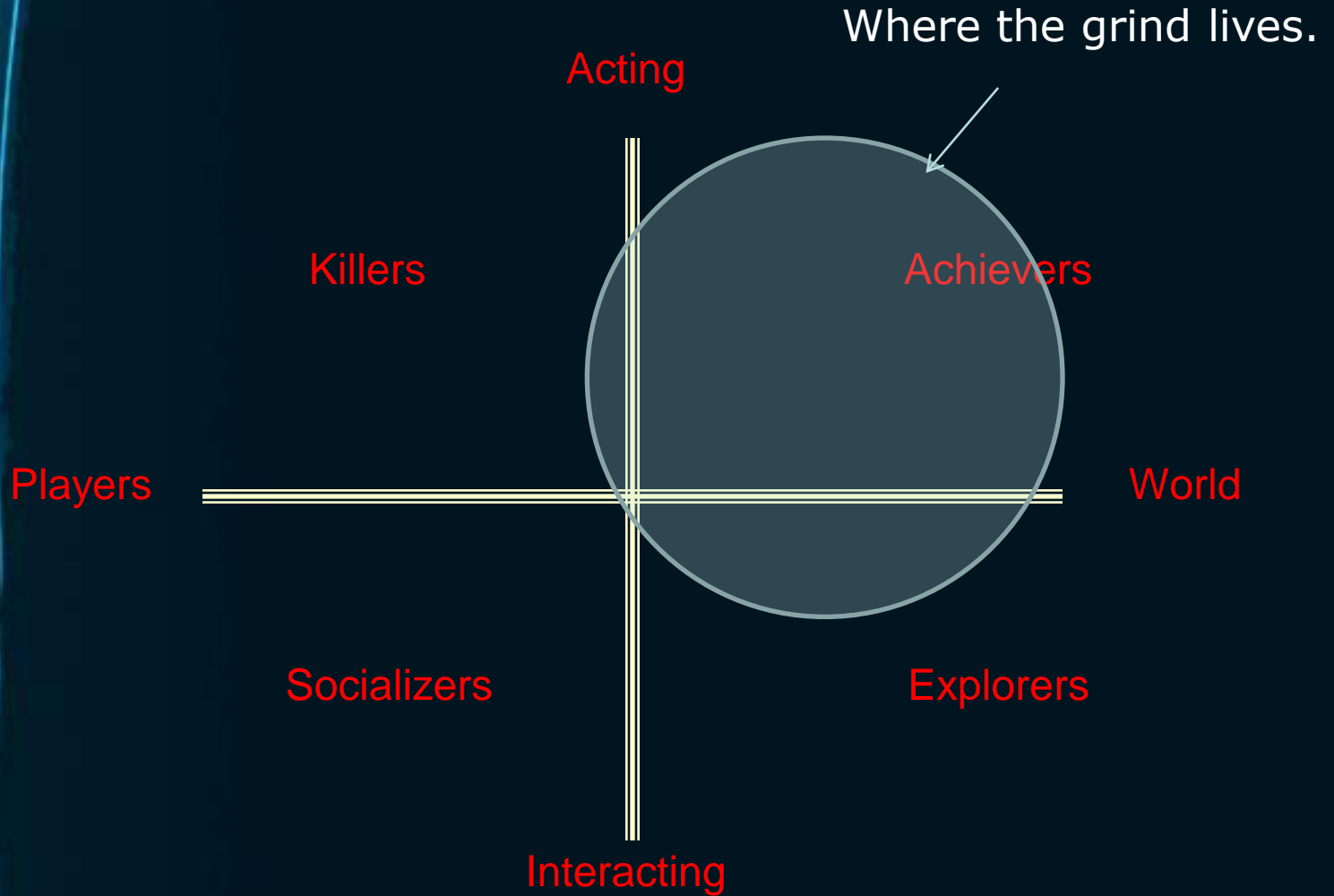
'A Theory of Fun'

Raph Koster argues that pattern-matching and pattern-breaking are the 'fun' to be found, at least in games.

Arguably, the grind arises when players are being asked to beat a pattern they are no longer challenged by, or do not find interesting enough to learn.



Bartles Four



The Well Centered Game





Why the Grind Is Hard To Avoid

Players Like Rewards

Players like *significant* rewards.

Players like well-defined paths to reach these rewards.

Every time you do this, you risk creating a grind.

Players Like Direction

Players like having a sense of where to go and what to do next. Clearly defined goals give players a good place to at least start.

Even 'find your own fun' players often need help figuring out the possibility space.



A couple years ago, Erik Bethke described how adding a couple grindy elements to GoPets – a game almost entirely ‘for socializers’ – made it immediately and measurably stickier.

Perception of Playstyles

What is a grind is a matter of perception.

To those who want to raid or run high-end arenas in WoW, the level game is a grind.

To millions of casual players who never target endgame play, the level game is *the game*.

For these people, the journey is the reward

Resource Disparity

Resource disparity between players can dramatically change perception.

One man's close, tense MMO fight is grind fodder for a more skilled player.

A player who has plenty of time to surf facebook might find visiting *Vampire Wars* hourly not grindy at all.

The Replay Factor

The more you've 'been there, done that', the more it feels like a grind to do it again.

Cheap, Robust Content

It's not that we're lazy. *(Usually)*

Grindy content is easier to build, but also easier to design, to QA, to repair, and support.

Cheap, Robust Content

The goal of social game design is to hit *social critical mass*.

In MMOs, players need a reason to be there.

In Facebook games, players need a reason to revisit.

In both games, players can devour through handcrafted content faster than designers can create it.

But Make No Mistake

Grindy content is usually seen as inferior by most of your players.

That's because it usually is.



Managing the Grind

Sometimes the grind serves design's needs.
And that's okay.

But the question to always ask is: « is this
really necessary? »

Introduce Novelty

A little novelty goes a long way.

Mentally memorable interactions, humor, unique points of interest, new game mechanics can break up the monotony.

Understand that random generated content does not necessarily introduce novelty.

Milestone Grinds

Not all grinds are equally loathed.



Time to level per level in World of Warcraft at launch. Why are there dips in this graph?



Getting your last name in Everquest is similarly a big milestone.

Low Investment Play

Players can only track so much 'gold-quality' content at once. Throw too many stories at a player, and they will care less about each of them.

Simpler content can be a way to ensure that the gold-quality content has room to breathe.

Boiling the Frog

You will intrinsically have fewer rewards (extrinsic and intrinsic) and less novelty the further you get into the game. You can manage this pacing.

Avoid 'hell levels'.

Kills to Level per Level



Avoid 'hell levels' and betraying your established cadence.

Avoid Sticker Shock

Nothing makes the grind more tangible than an utterly absurd goal.

Encourage Diversity of Activity

Repetition is the devil.

Reward the players doing new things.

But don't make them do something they don't want to do.

Proving Devotion

Some players like very hard, very grind-y achievements in order to establish their dedication or 'hardcore-ness'.

These should be called off and seperate, so players don't feel they're obligatory.



The Bloodsail Admiral's Hat in WoW was one of several long grind rewards in the game... put well off the beaten path. Those who had one were respected.



Subverting the Grind

Overlap your Grinds

Having multiple avenues for progress means the player is always close to progress somewhere.



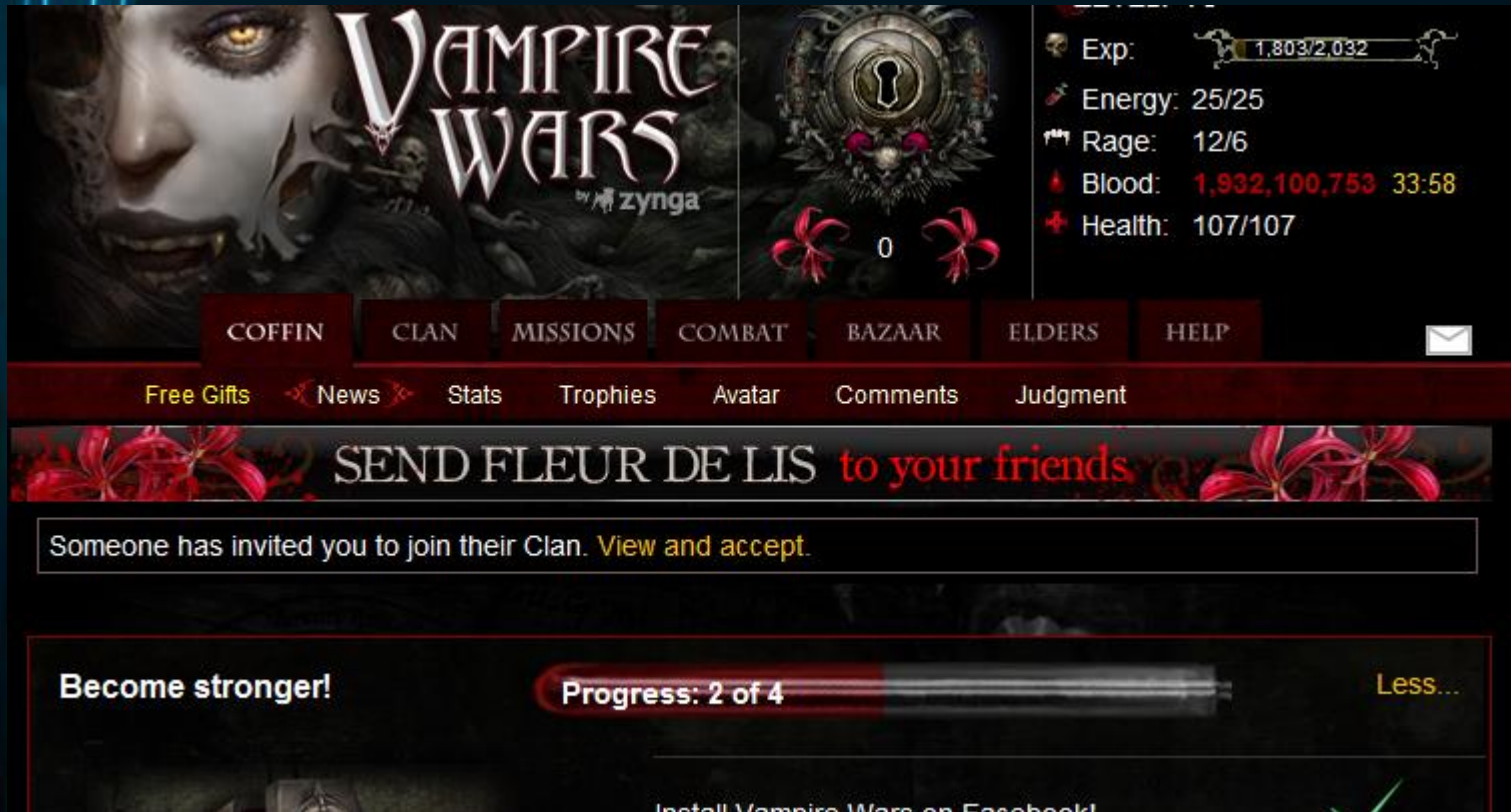
This screen has a dozen little grinds, all different distances from popping off a reward.



In Ultima Online, players would grind craft skills at the bank, where other players might ask for business or otherwise provide social entertainment.

Offline Grinds

Players hate the grind enough that giving them some for free is a great way to welcome them back into your social space.



Stay away from any Zynga game long enough, and you'll get a big welcome back in terms of XP and/or resources.



EVE[®]
ONLINE

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In EVE, players can craft and advance their skills while offline.

Bypassing the Grind

Enough people hate the grind that offering ways to cheese past it feels really good.



Civilization 'Great People' allow players to learn difficult technologies or wonders in one big hunk. Players feel smart for using them correctly.

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LIMITED EDITION LOOT

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Caffeine doesn't even come close.

Now 8 ● RP (20% OFF) (originally at 10 RP)

SALE
ONE HOUR

Time Left: 33:36

You have full energy

RECOMMENDED FOR YOU ?

10 Extra Mafia Members



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Three 7 Deadly Sins Crates



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10% **RARE**

30% UNCOMMON

60% COMMON

Buy for 35 ● RP

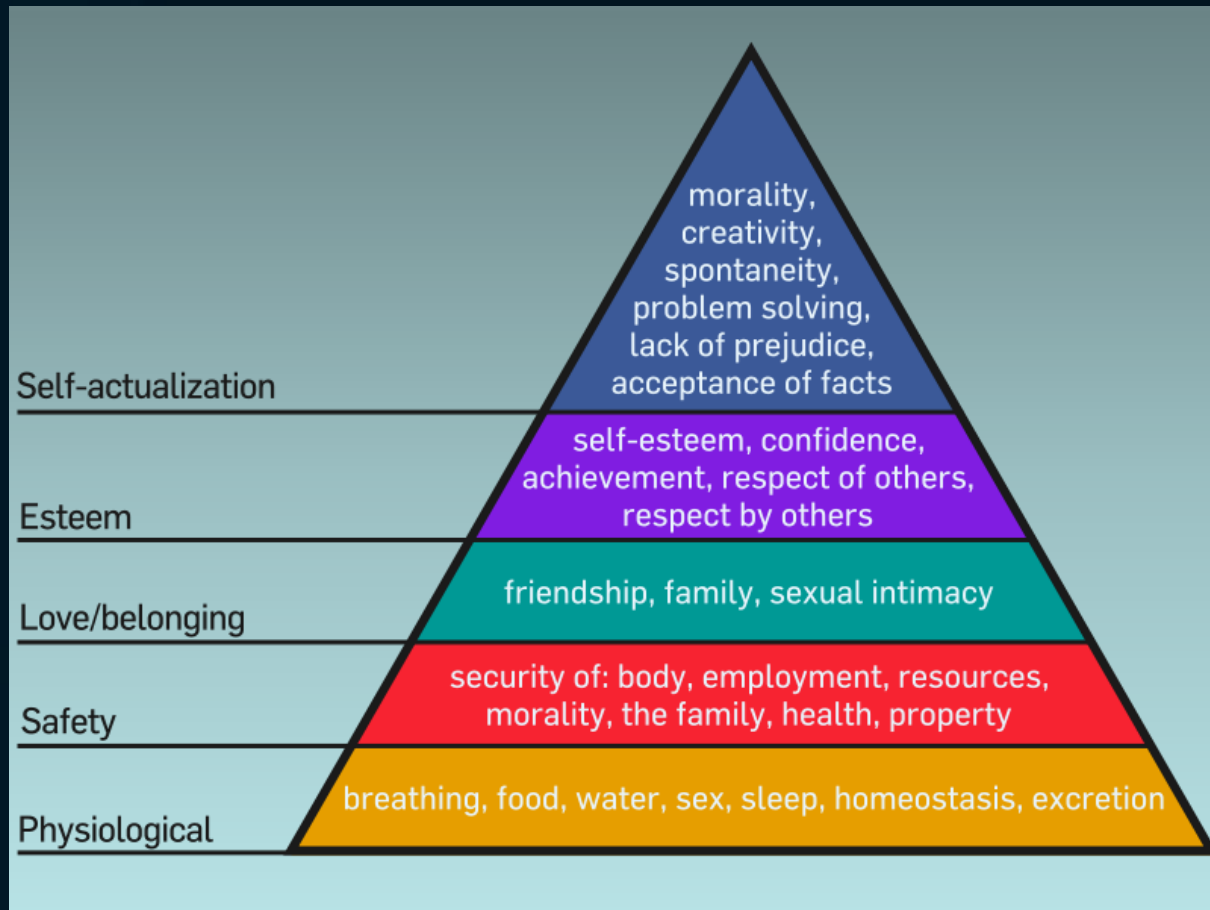
[Purchase Now](#)

Many facebook games allow players to use microtransactions to bypass or accelerate the grind.

Graduating Past Grinds

It is very natural, as players advance through the game, for them to want to not worry about 'lesser concerns'.

I.e. it's okay to make players chase food and water from levels 1-10, but allow players to get advances that allow them to not think about that anymore.



In Maslow's hierarchy of needs, humans only move upwards when previous needs are met. I.e. 'lesser grinds are forgotten' as the player moves on to meatier problems.



Complications

The Efficient Path

Players will find the most efficient path to your cheese. They will then complain about it if its not any fun.

Safe Optimizations

Death penalties that are too punitive can create grind-y behavior.

Indirection

The more layers of indirection you have between what the player is doing and what he wants to do, the more frustrating the grind will be.

Social Grinds

You must have a group to advance.

Facebook games take this to the next level: you must convince 15 of your friends to tolerate your vampire fetish so you can advance.

Recursive Grinds

Or the 'Catch-22' grind:

I can't PvP until I have PvP gear, which I can only get if I PvP.



Tanking in many MMOs typically has a similar problem. It's hard to tank effectively without the gear – which you can only get through dungeon runs. Your choices, wipe your group a lot, or run it as DPS and roll against the tank.

Competitive Grinds

Grinds that compare scores end up favoring early entry and those who have more real life time and resources.

Can act as a real barrier of entry for latecomers.



In Shadowbane, you needed a fully loaded city to compete – but new guilds and cities were at a severe disadvantage to established ones.

Grinding for Upkeep

Grinding to keep something from decaying has fallen out of favor – and probably rightfully so.

Upkeep costs on your house are a powerful motivator to log on – until you accidentally miss a payment, then its a powerful motivator to cancel your account.



Strategies and Opportunities

Be Kind

Be honest with how much time and/or devotion your business model needs from the players.

- Do you really need a 500 our play cycle?
- Are daily play sessions healthy?

Be Inclusive

Be sure your grind doesn't keep people from your interesting (and usually expensive) endgame.



The makers of *Magic* have taken a multistrategy approach to helping players work around their grind: closed drafts, peasant leagues, more powerful uncommons.



Eve's endgame battles are the stuff of legends. Trick is getting the player to the point he can meaningfully contribute to the contribution and see it.

The Slutty Design

Your competitor's grinds are an *opportunity* for game designers.

You can 'give the milk away for free'.

Scratch the gaming itch while noticeably getting rid of tedium from the existing gaming paradigm, it can be a huge word of mouth advantage.

Another good reason to be sure your grinds are justified.

The Sims Online tried to make 'architect' player types grind before they could build houses.



This player type could retreat to the offline Sims products.

The Slutty Design

Note: the concept of *the Slutty Design* is why games in many genres, have gotten progressively easier over time.

To the infuriation of the hardcore.

Give Feedback

Life is full of real grinds:

- Go to school to get a job.
- Work hard to get a promotion
- Go on multiple dates to get... *married*

One way game grinds are superior: the progress bar.



In Conclusion

Players generally perceive the grind as bad.

Even in cases where it's not, this perception needs to be managed and overcome.



Questions?

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