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Social Context in Massively-Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs): Ethical Questions in Shared Space

Abstract:

Computer and video games have become nearly ubiquitous among individuals in industrialized nations, and they have received increasing attention from researchers across many areas of scientific study. However, relatively little attention has been given to Massively-Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs). The unique social context of MMOGs raises ethical questions about how communication occurs and how conflict is managed in the game world. In order to explore these questions, we compare the social context in Blizzard's *World of Warcraft* and Disney's *Toontown*, focusing on griefing opportunities in each game. We consider ethical questions from the perspectives of players, game companies, and policymakers.

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- Relevant publications:
 - Salonijs-Pasternak DE, Gelfond HS. The next level of video game research: Culture and context. *Human Technology* 2005: 1:5-22 (Dr. Warner changed her name from Salonijs-Pasternak in September, 2005)
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Since their inception nearly four decades ago, electronic games have received increasing attention from researchers across many areas of scientific study, including psychology¹, biology², child development³, and social policy⁴. Despite this growing body of literature, Massively-Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs)⁵ have received relatively little attention from researchers.

MMOGs allow thousands of individuals to play simultaneously in a persistent online world. In these online game worlds, players gain and lose points, abilities, and resources as they work alone or together in order to accomplish goals within the game. The complex organization of these social structures raises ethical questions regarding players' personal responsibility, behavior, and expectations of each other, as well as how conflict is managed. An additional ethical concern involves how these issues are handled among audiences comprised primarily of children versus adults.

In order to explore these ethical concerns in the context of MMOGs, we present the demographics of players and the unique characteristics of MMOGs that differentiate them from other genres of games. We compare the communities of two games – Disney's *Toontown (TT)*, whose audience is primarily children, and Blizzard's *World of Warcraft (WoW)*, whose audience is primarily adults -- as well as how players try to "get around the system" through intentional violations of communities' expectations or rules of conduct. Finally, we raise ethical questions from the perspectives of players, game companies, and policymakers in different countries.

Demographics of Players and Games

According to the United States-based Entertainment Software Association, of the most frequent American game players, 43% reported playing online games,

and 60% of these players were male⁶. A study of individuals who play *WoW* showed that the mean player age was 28.3 years, 84% of players were male, the mean number of playing hours per week was 22.7, and players' mean income was approximately the same as the US national median income⁷.

Social Context

Social dynamics are central to the popularity of MMOGs. An integral part of the gaming experience involves strategic navigation through shared space while competing with and against each other for shared resources. Consequently, MMOGs expand the typical social context of electronic play to include identity development, community building, establishing rules of conduct, and efforts to manage conflict that occurs within game communities.

Depending on the game and particular mode of play, individuals can play with or against other players, Non-Player Characters (NPCs), and "mobs," or monsters/enemies⁸. Games such as *WoW* allow players to form guilds within the game, in order to facilitate community building and mutual cooperation. In addition, several games offer players the opportunity to interact within a personalized section of the world that excludes players who have not been specifically invited into that section.

Working toward accomplishing goals within the game is classified as the advancement subcomponent of achievement, an aspect of MMOG players' motivation⁹. While this subcomponent focuses on gaining power over the game environment, another subcomponent of achievement – competition – involves power over other players, frequently through trickery. Intentional harassment of other players is called "griefing," which utilizes aspects of the game structure or physics in unintended ways to cause distress for other players.

¹ Funk, et al., 2002

² van Reekum et al., 2004

³ Griffiths, 2004

⁴ Haninger & Thompson, 2004

⁵ This genre of games is also frequently referred to as MMOs, MMPs, or MMORPGs.

⁶ ESRB, 2005a

⁷ Yee, 2005a

⁸ The term "Mob" originally referred to "mobile" monsters who could move from room to room in Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs), non-graphic predecessors to MMOGs.

⁹ 2005b

The social context of MMOGs incorporates online forums that are dedicated to particular communities of players. These forums host discussions regarding problems encountered in the game, tips or tricks learned by players, grieving activities, and in some cases, even blacklists of characters whose grieving activities have exceeded acceptable levels within the community.

Social Context in Two Games

In order to further examine the social context of MMOGs, we compare the communities and opportunities for communication in *WoW*, a game played primarily by adult players; and *TT*, which is designed for children. For each game, we focus on grieving activities in which players have intentionally harassed or caused trouble for other players.

Blizzard's World of Warcraft

WoW is a fantasy MMRPG (Massively-Multiplayer Role Playing Game) in which players take on the identities of characters of different races, classes, and professions in order to explore the medieval world of Azeroth, complete increasingly challenging quests, and battle other players or NPCs. Players use and gain experience with weapons (e.g., swords, dynamite) or special abilities (e.g., spells) to attack their foes¹⁰.

WoW supports a typical set of communication opportunities. Players can send text messages to a single person, to the immediate vicinity, or to a larger area. In addition, players can perform "emotes", which are animations that display gestures and actions. Emotes exist for many emotional expressions, from dancing or flirting to spitting or other rude gestures. If players are being harassed by other players, they are given the option to "squelch" the offending individuals, effectively stopping those players from sending them text messages. In extreme cases, players can ask human game masters for help to remove a problem player. External communication in *WoW* occurs through web-based forums maintained by Blizzard, which allows the company to police content. Players can have their game accounts banned for posting inappropriate information on the forums.

Some of the most prevalent methods of grieving in *WoW* involve killing other characters or preventing access to resources by using aspects of the physics of the game world for unintended purposes. A recent update to *WoW* added a "Corrupted Blood" spell that is powerful enough to kill lower level characters almost instantaneously, and the effects of the spell can be spread to other characters, like a plague. As surviving characters returned to towns to restock supplies, they spread the plague to new areas. Many players took advantage of the circumstance as a grieving opportunity and began to intentionally infect other characters, and to "store" the disease by infecting their pets. In order to hamper this type of grieving, developers changed the characteristics of the plague to limit its spread. Another grieving tactic, "corpse camping," involves staying near other characters' corpses so that they are immediately killed upon coming back to life. This method of grieving can lead to iterative retaliation, with increasingly powerful and larger groups of characters getting involved.

Disney's Toontown

TT players protect and defend the colorful world of Toontown from the business-robot Cogs, who attack the world by replacing its landscape with monochromatic skyscrapers. In order to attack Cogs, players can employ the following gags: throws, squirts, drops, lures, and sound effects¹¹. Players gain more experience and power as they use these gags, which eventually unlock more powerful combat items, which can then be mastered to unlock yet more items.

In order to safeguard children's communication in *TT*, Disney allows two options for communicating with other players in the game: SpeedChat and Secret Friends. Using SpeedChat, players click an icon that displays a list of categories, each with appropriate phrases underneath them. In order to speak more freely with others, players must communicate through the Secret Friends option. Players first exchange game-generated security codes, which can only be exchanged outside of the game, so that players must know each other outside of the game in order to communicate within the game world. Once the security codes have been exchanged, players can communicate in an unrestricted manner in the game. However, since Dis-

¹⁰ Kasavin, 2004

¹¹ Colayco, 2003

ney does not run its own *TT* forums, it cannot control the content posted in forums established by players.

Methods of griefing in *TT* are more limited than in *WoW*, and they tend to be performed by more experienced players against “newbies.” One way that *TT* players engage in griefing is to harass other players by following them around and repeatedly telling other players “You Stink” through the Speed-Chat communication option and using the laugh emote. Although this may seem mild relative to griefing methods in *WoW*, it has been reported as a frequent source of frustration in the *TT* forums. Another way that more experienced *TT* players can engage in griefing is to escort newbies through tougher areas of the game, which require greater levels of experience, and to “ditch” them by leaving them alone in these areas.

It appears that the structural and design elements incorporated into *TT* in order to regulate content and protect its young audience are effective. The social context of *TT* remains appropriate for children, with almost no opportunity for offensive communication. In addition, far fewer opportunities for griefing exist in *TT* than in *WoW*.

Ethical Questions

One can question how much responsibility rests with the game companies to promote ethical play. Companies communicate and enforce players' responsibilities and expectations of behavior by requiring them to agree to terms established in End-User License Agreements (EULA). Depending on the circumstances of the offense, players who violate the terms of the EULA can have their access to the game suspended temporarily or have their accounts terminated. American game industry officials have stated that it is the responsibility of adult players and parents of child players to make decisions regarding the appropriateness of content in the games that they play^{12,13}. Beyond the financial interests of game companies, their goal is to facilitate a quality game experience – focusing on the playability of the game and players' enjoyment, and leaving primary ethical responsibility in the hands of the players.

¹² ESA, 2005b

¹³ ESRB, 2005b

Some players have defended their potentially objectionable behavior with the argument that any action that is allowed by the game must not be cheating or truly violating any rules. A consequentialist perspective raised by players is that anything that takes place in the game is just part of the game – since it is not “real,” there are no “real” acts, or consequences¹⁴. However, given the level of involvement and investment demonstrated by dedicated MMOG players, these arguments may be too simplistic or may portray these problems as less significant than they actually are – particularly for children, whose levels of moral development may limit their understanding of these issues.

Although the possible effects of players' actions may be more difficult to discern in a virtual context, this does not mean that they do not exist. According to Floridi¹⁵, the virtual context involves a distance between players and their actions. It seems that this distance could diminish players' sense of responsibility for their in-game behavior – in combination with the anonymity afforded by online play, “[...] [this] diffusion of responsibility brings with it a diminished ethical sense in the [player] and a corresponding lack of perceived accountability” (p. 40). From a Kantian perspective, even if no actual harm is inflicted, players' intentions to enact harm could promote their inflicting harm in reality. However, this perspective deemphasizes the role of contextual influence, implying that behavior exhibited in one domain will be exhibited in other domains as well¹⁶. Researchers have argued that the context of play stipulates that, in normative circumstances, players implicitly understand that their actions take place in a world that allows for fantasy and vividly ‘non-real’ circumstances that are distinctly separate from the ‘real world’^{17,18}.

In some extreme situations, undeniable ‘real-world’ implications of in-game behavior have already been observed. In order to capitalize on the in-game economy of *WoW*, individuals in rural China have been paid to work 12-hour shifts of ‘gold-farming’ – obtaining virtual gold within the game that is sold

¹⁴ G4 Video Game TV, 2005

¹⁵ Floridi, 1999

¹⁶ Brey, 1999

¹⁷ Gelfond & Saloni-Pasternak, 2005

¹⁸ Penny-Arcade, 2001

outside of the game to players. Rural Chinese workers can earn a higher salary through gold-farming than through agriculture, and this business is made profitable by players who can afford to buy the virtual gold – and would rather buy it than obtain it themselves. Although Blizzard's policy is to close the accounts of these 'career farmers,' it is still possible for this practice to continue, since new accounts can be created for the same purpose. These circumstances bring a new dimension to issues of inequity – through the economic implications of cross-over between real and virtual worlds, and through ethical questions regarding the disparate nature of relatively wealthy individuals in one culture paying a pittance for services performed by relatively poor individuals working in sweatshop conditions¹⁹. The theme of this phenomenon is not new, but this innovative context merits further critical attention.

Since MMOGs are played by individuals around the world, there are inevitably differences in cultural expectations and concerns regarding players' behavior, game content, and the potential for legal involvement in order to modify or restrict MMOG activity. Following the murder of a MMOG player who had stolen a fellow player's virtual sword, China has introduced a system to limit the amount of time that players can access MMOGs each day²⁰. The country has also established a censorship committee to ban online game content that has been deemed to negatively effect national unity; Chinese officials are particularly concerned about online game content that includes sex, violence, and superstition²¹. Although other countries have also expressed concern over sexual and violent content, China's concern regarding superstition is more unique – consequently, it is less likely to be considered by game companies.

Despite any country's best efforts to monitor, rate, or restrict MMOGs, their dynamic and ever-changing content makes them inherently more difficult to regulate than other electronic games. Australia, New Zealand, and most countries in North America, Western Europe, and Asia employ structured game rating systems designed to provide relevant information to consumers so that they can make effec-

tive decisions regarding the games that they or their children play. Some rating boards also restrict the general public's access to potentially harmful games. However, most rating boards have acknowledged that it is not feasible to rate online games – the ESRB includes the proviso "Game Experience May Change During Online Play" as part of its rating of the offline content of online games²².

Cultural differences in perspectives on personal responsibility, censorship, and free speech influence the particular policies of the video game rating boards used by different countries. For example, the Australian Office for Film and Literature Classification (OFLC) effectively bans games it deems too objectionable by denying them classification²³, whereas the US's ESRB does not ban games, although most major retailers will not stock games that receive the ESRB rating of "Adults Only."²⁴ In addition, rating organizations vary in terms of the particular content characteristics on which they focus. For example, Germany restricts games whose content includes Nazi symbols or themes, or red blood, whereas the US restricts games whose content includes nudity or sexual violence²⁵. The implications for these cultural differences are greater for MMOGs than they are for other video games, given the context of multicultural play.

Future Directions and Conclusions

MMOGs are an established yet growing genre of games that are immensely popular. As technological developments increase the sophistication and potential of the gaming experience, the social relevance and influence of these games will play larger roles in people's lives. Although no one can predict how the underlying technology and the games themselves will change, it is clear that significant ethical questions already exist. MMOGs facilitate individuals from around the world to play together simultaneously, and the consequent level of diversity of perspectives, circumstances, and expectations results in a particularly complex social context. In addition, the ambiguous nature of play itself

¹⁹ Felice, 2005

²⁰ BBC News, 2005

²¹ BBC News, 2004

²² ESRB, 2005a

²³ Refused Classification, 2005

²⁴ ESRB, 2005b

²⁵ ebusinessforum.com, 2003

makes it difficult to establish specific guidelines that could apply in even a majority, let alone a totality, of circumstances²⁶. It is important that researchers continue to explore these ethical questions as MMOGs become more complex, so that we can address their possible implications in online and offline settings.

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²⁶ Scarlett, Naudeau, Saloni-Pasternak, & Ponte, 2004

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