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Ethics Concerning MMORPGs and their Design

In the past two decades, video game technology has grown exponentially, from a niche market to a booming industry catering to a wide demographic of modern consumers. Along with this growth has come a new, often criticized type of game called the Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game (MMORPG). MMORPGs are somewhat controversial because of their social emphasis and their indefinite goals. MMORPGs have no concrete end and can thus be played forever. In some respects, MMORPGs are the precursors to virtual reality systems and should be examined as such. These unique aspects of MMORPG gaming stimulate us to look into the ethical systems and practices that surround it. Particularly, we will be interested in ethical practices by the user in and out of game, as well as implications for creators, and how their role affects the former.

MMORPGs largely appeal to a subset of the general population and in order to fully build our understanding of the situation, we have to analyze why this phenomenon is occurring. In their statistical study, "Excessive use of Massively Multi-Player Online Role-Playing Games: A Pilot Study", Zaheer Hussain and Mark Griffiths use a statistical analysis of a wide range of MMORPG gamers to examine the characteristics of gamers and the degree to which certain variables were related to the number of hours a subject spent playing MMORPG's. Using a

questionnaire, Hussain and Griffiths identified “dependent” gamers who considered MMORPGs to be very important in their lives (including but not limited to hours spent playing) and those who were “non-dependent” and felt these games were significantly less important in their life. Along with the questions that identified which time of gamer they were, Hussain and Griffiths also added questions that they could derive social data from regarding the types of gamers. The questionnaire found that 57% of dependent gamers found socializing in game easier than in real life. Approximately 20% of non-dependent gamers also said the same thing (6). About the same percentages of both dependent and non-dependent gamers said that gaming fulfilled a social need in their lives that was not present in the real world. This correlation seems to imply a social motivation for MMORPG gaming that can be evidenced directly in the case of Shawn Woolley, a young man with personality disorders and an avid MMORPG gamer studied in a 2005 article by Judith Spain and Gina Vega. According to his mother, Shawn’s difficulty in real life social scenarios encouraged his addiction to *EverQuest*. Shawn became so engrossed in the *EverQuest* world that eventually something occurred online that caused him to commit suicide. While details of the event may never become fully clear, Shawn’s mother makes it apparent that she thinks *EverQuest* was a causal agent in the death of her son (1). The case of Shawn Woolley indicates how MMORPG addiction can often be the result of social inability and indeed how grave consequences can be derived from over investment in the in game world.

Given that people with certain social attributes can be drawn to MMORPGs, we should also investigate the social effects of MMORPGs on their users. According to, “The Role of Context in Online Gaming Excess and Addiction: Some Case Study Evidence”, by Mark Griffiths, there can be multiple social implications of MMORPGs. He studies two individuals who both used MMORPG’s in extreme proportions (most likely these gamers are considered

"dependent" in the context of the previous study); we will call them Subject A and Subject B. Griffiths finds that the MMORPG acts as a mediator for Subject A, positively filling areas of life that had since lain dormant after his college graduation but prior to employment. Once Subject A began to have time commitments again (employment and social activities), he could easily let go of MMORPG playing since all it did was fill his temporarily empty time. Subject A's only social consequence was a romantic interest that he met via the MMORPG, hardly a negative side-effect. On the other hand, Subject B had many real life commitments, such as a job and a new family. His decision to continuously play games had social side-effects on his life, causing conflict with his employment and relationships, and negatively affecting his mood (3-4). Griffiths argues that while social repercussions do arise from MMORPG's, they vary and must indeed be judged based on both the social causes as well as the context in which they occur (6). The degree to which social consequences can arise as a result of MMORPG gameplay is of interest when evaluating those who create MMORPGs. Specifically we should begin to ask ourselves if it is ethical to create a system that can have potentially negative repercussions such as these. Most organizations hold a code of ethics in high regard when it comes to creation of new systems, so when we examine MMORPG systems and their creators, we should have a strong reference frame in mind.

According to the ACM code of ethics, creators of computer systems have a responsibility to create systems that avoid or minimize harm to various people. In its code of ethics it decrees that computing professionals should, "Prohibit use of computing technology in ways that result in harm to any of the following: users, the general public, employees, employers" (1). According the ACM, knowledgeable creation of a dangerous or harmful system would be a breach of ethical and professional conduct. With reference to social consequences such as the death of Shawn

Wooley or the case studies of Griffith, we can clearly see that MMORPGs do indeed possess the potential to negatively affect the lives of players, or in ACM language "users". Not only do users suffer, so do their relationships with others such as in Subject B's family above; this extends the potential for harm to those who are not users but in the "general public" in the terms of the ACM.

In his article, "The Ethics of Representation and Action in Virtual Reality", Phillip Brey also examines ethics in a manner that can be used to evaluate MMORPGs. Specifically, Brey analyzes "virtual reality (VR)" systems not MMORPGs. While MMORPGs aren't really a fully fledged virtual reality, they do share many similarities with proposed and existing VR systems: MMORPGs are designed to be heavily immersive and emulate the real world with select modifications. This close relationship between MMORPG's and VR systems allows us to utilize Brey's work when evaluating our MMORPG systems. Brey claims that designers must be fully aware of the kind of behavior that they are condoning or approving of in their VR systems. In MMORPGs, designers often structure their systems around online socialization. Most games require multiple people to reach the greatest achievements online; this encourages users to network with people online and stay online while they have friends helping them to achieve various tasks. The main focus of Brey's analysis however, is immoral action. Many games (MMORPGs included) allow the user to make actions that are impossible in the real world. For example, many MMORPGs encourage players to kill other players because of the high reward that you get from killing someone else. When it comes to immoral action in VR, Brey claims that designers of these game should ask themselves, "Should this be possible at all?" and if so they should analyze carefully the structure of the game and how it prevents or encourages such immoral action (6).

The case study of Shawn Wooley touches on the ethics of creation and whether or not

Sony Online Entertainment, the company responsible for *EverQuest* was acting ethically. According to the Spain and Vega article, “Pressure for players to continue playing the game and not logging off was tremendous” (2). Their case study cites specific structural reasons why *EverQuest* was so addicting, including the possibility of a player being attacked while he or she was not logged in which could result in severe in-game consequences. This indicates that at least in some regards, the structure of the MMORPG can be related to some of the problems we have studied thus far. If the structure of the MMORPG creates situations where users are encouraged to neglect social obligations or otherwise cause danger to them, then the creators are certainly in an area of questionable morals. While the system is not directly harming users, it puts users in a situation where they can easily and are encouraged to risk social or physical harm, possibly violating the ACM code of ethics studied above. In recent years, the designers of *EverQuest* have corrected some of these structural problems, such as making it impossible to receive permanent consequences from death, arguably removing pressure to reach extreme levels of play time. As to whether or not this means that Sony Online Entertainment (SOE), the company who publishes the game, has become aware of the implications of their actions, we cannot say because of our lack of information as to their motive. While this may cause the user to be able to log out freely and stop playing, it also may simply be an attempt to appeal to a larger audience, further netting SOE more money.

As discussed earlier, MMORPGs, among games in general, are especially addictive. However, most MMORPGs lack any truly controversial content displayed in other games. In this section, we will discuss the potential real-world consequences of the creation of MMORPGs containing such content. In his article, Brey points out a particularly horrific example of controversial in-game violence:

> In the computer game Postal, published by Take 2 Interactive, the player personifies a crazed serial killer operating in a in a realistic neighborhood setting, evading hordes of police and killing as many innocent bystanders as possible. Actions that may be undertaken include the killing of children at school, the napalming of a marching band, and the blowing away of an anti-game-violence protest, all of which are awarded with extra points. The game also includes realistic sound fragments such as female victim's voices begging for mercy, an execute button that allows players to 'finish off' wounded people, and a suicide option, in which the killer exclaims 'I regret nothing,' before killing himself (7).

Clearly, anyone who would mirror the above actions in the real world would be considered a serious criminal threat that should be eliminated immediately before their actions have dire consequences. Brey goes on to analyze that "[t]he public debate around these hyperviolent or otherwise morally controversial computer games resembles the debate surrounding violence and morality in other media, such as television, film, and comic books" and that "[k]ey issues in the public discussion are whether such games should be censored, whether they are morally defensible, what harm they can inflict on their users, especially on children, and whether they will induce individuals to behave unethically in the real world" (8). Unlike media such as television, film, and comic books, in the case of a game, the user is solely responsible for the actions of the controlled character. Thus, if any criminal violence occurs, it was the user's intention for it to happen by first choosing to play the game and subsequently executing such actions in-game. Among the key issues discussed by Brey, we are most interested in "whether [controversial games] will induce individuals to behave unethically in the real world." Brey continues by stating the two sides to this issue:

> In the standard pro-censorship position, it is claimed that such games are immoral, that they hinder moral development, that they cause immoral or anti-social behavior in the real world, and that under these circumstances the state has the right to impose censorship. In the standard anti-censorship position, the libertarian viewpoint is defended that since immoral acts in a virtual environment do not cause harm to others, the decision to engage in such behavior is private, and morality of these games or the right of individuals to use them should be decided by private citizens individually and not by the state or other acting body (8).

From the statement of these two positions alone, it is hard to tell which side is correct, as both make good points. In support of the anti-censorship side, Brey adds "that there is no evidence that such games would cause individuals to act immorally in the real world, and it is sometimes claimed that such games may even be beneficial by allowing individuals to release pent-up frustrations and act out fantasies or desires that they might otherwise act out in the real world" (8). In the end, after discussing Kantian theory and how it relates to the way virtual counterparts of humans should be treated (9), he concludes "that designers of VR systems have the moral duty to reflect on the way behavioral options and their consequences are designed in them" (10). Overall, from Brey's discussion alone, it is hard to tell whether playing such controversially violent games will have consequences in the real world.

Returning to the discussion of the potential dangers of controversially violent content occurring within an MMORPG, Aaron Shaw, a renowned teen therapist, writes in an article describing the most addictive types of games:

> [MMORPGs] are epic games with an everlasting storyline. These games do not have an ending – they are designed to be played forever. MMORPG's are usually

> played with thousands of other players online at the same time, adding a highly addictive social component to the game. Also, these games are designed so that the more you play, the more powerful and well respected you become.

In the article, Shaw ranks the MMORPG as the most addictive of all types of video games. The social consequences of MMORPG addiction were discussed earlier, but what about the real world consequences of potentially violent MMORPGs that contain inappropriate themes such as excessive bloodshed and drug use? Truth be told, these kinds of games are already becoming a reality. An example is the game CrimeCraft made by game publisher Vogster. The game depicts player characters as gang members who wage "street wars" for dominance. While Vogster has classified CrimeCraft as a Persistent-World Next-generation Shooter (PWNS), the game has both the RPG and social elements that allow it to fit under the description given by Shaw. David Wildgoose of the gaming news website Kotaku Australia reported that "The Classification Board has stated that 'drug use related to incentives or rewards' is the reason why gangster-themed MMO Crimecraft has been refused classification in Australia." Wildgoose continues by citing the statement made by the board regarding the decision:

> The Board concludes that Crimecraft warrants an RC rating in accordance with item 1a) of the National Classification code, which states that games that "depict, express or otherwise deal with… drug misuse or addiction… in such a way that they offend against the standards of morality, decency and propriety generally accepted by reasonable adults… will be Refused Classification.

The report further states that "Boosts [the in-game drugs] are intended to be used to gain short-term rewards or benefits in various scenarios within the game where the negative effects are mitigated by the positive effects." Clearly, the Australian Board of Classification has good

reason to reject games like CrimeCraft on these premises. The use of drugs in-game leading to positive effects may lead the user to believe that such drugs are also beneficial in real life. Furthermore, given the addictive nature of the MMORPG game genre, the user would likely have many experiences in this kind of game where the drug use turns out to be beneficial. Overall, it is hard to say at this point whether violence and other suggestive themes in MMORPGs, coupled with their undeniable addictiveness, will have any tangible consequence in the real world. Crime and violence themed MMORPGs like CrimeCraft are still only an emerging trend, and the truly popular games like World of Warcraft and *EverQuest* really only pose the social consequence of addiction to their users. However, as Shaw stated, MMORPGs "are designed so that the more you play, the more powerful and well respected you become." If playing an MMORPG means doing actions similar to those that Brey described about the game "Postal," then this system of bad actions followed by the positive consequences of power and renown may well indeed be a problem.

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