

Playing dirty – understanding conflicts in multiplayer games

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ABSTRACT

Multiplayer games, while obviously providing attractive entertainment, face serious social issues. While most games are of course *about* conflict, many multiplayer games also rely on implicit rules and are therefore subject to destructive social dynamics, some of which are referred to within gaming as grief play. This paper maps the various types of conflicts reported in three multiplayer games attempting to answer the question *How can we understand such conflicts and what is the relationship between multiplayer games and other types of social software?* By addressing this question, the paper seeks to position games within thinking on internet sociality more generally.

Author Keywords

Games, conflict, grief play, cheating, norms, community, social order

INTRODUCTION

The legions of terms employed to describe in-game deviance is testament to one thing: Gamers are not always nice to each other. Transgressors, sometimes seriously jeopardizing the social fabric of a game space, attract labels like *cheaters*, *player-killers*,

kill-stealers, *exploiters*, *team-killers* and *campers* some of which are subsumed under the more general heading of *grief play*.

Studying the phenomenon of in-game deviance I am often met with disbelief from non-gamers. This attitude goes through two stages. First, many find it improbable that gamers would care so deeply about a leisure activity as to get truly emotionally upset. Secondly, accepting that in-game interaction does cause heated conflict many will put this down to the childishness of the gamers involved. The second stage is exemplified nicely by a recent editorial in British daily The Independent, commenting on social tension in The Sims Online: “*we have a simple message: get a (real) life.*” (Independent, 2004).

As internet researchers are well aware, such disparagement may of course be partly put down to lack of familiarity and the relative novelty of the phenomenon in question.

However, in an important sense the skepticism is understandable. Gamers, after all, are *supposed* to be in conflict. What is chess but all-out strategic aggression? And isn't the objective of *Counter-Strike* to

eliminate the enemy by unscrupulous employment of virtual armory? Some people may not enjoy losing but what do they get so mortally offended about?

To explain this apparent paradox this paper distinguishes between two main types of conflict, *intra-mechanic* conflict (a direct consequence of the game rules) and *extra-mechanic* conflict (a consequence of multiplayer games being social spaces). Whereas the first type in some ways set game spaces apart from other social spaces the second type make games relevant in the larger endeavor to understand social behavior in online communities, computer-supported work settings as well as real-life social spaces. Thus, the paper ends by discussing more broadly the relationship between multiplayer games and other types of social software in order to situate games within work on internet sociality.

To illustrate how specific game genres produce different kinds of social tension, three different games, introduced below, are examined.

The games are all central to my larger study on managing destructive social dynamics in multiplayer games and I have spent time with them as a player while taking notes on the social interaction. Furthermore, I have followed forums and news sites related to the games in order to understand the issues underlying the most pertinent social tensions. This paper does not offer strong claims about the relative importance of conflicts in multiplayer gaming. Nor does it settle major theoretical issues. It does, however, provide an overview of certain persistent conflict types, attempts to divide those into useful categories and in this

sense help lay the ground for further systematic study on the topic.

Game 1: Age of Empires II – Age of Kings



Figure 1 – *Age of Empires II* (Ensemble Studios, 1999)

Age of Empires II is a real-time strategy game in which the player assumes a god-like perspective of the battlefield as players vie for resources and attempt to eliminate enemies. Players may strike alliances which are either locked throughout the whole game or susceptible to collapse as power distribution or player strategy changes.

To find opponents and allies players log on to Microsoft's web-based gaming portal Zone.com. Here, players set up games according to individual preferences and chat with others to pass the time, exchange information, negotiate implicit rules etc.

Games can be either rated or unrated and on average last for one hour.

Game 2: Battlefield 1942

Figure 2 – Battlefield 1942 (Digital Illusions CE AB, 2002)

Battlefield 1942 is a tactical first-person-shooter in which two teams battle for various strategic positions (sometimes with one side defending against the other side's attack). Victory is highly dependent on cooperation with one's team mates and elaborate strategies can be planned although usually gameplay is hectic.

Player matching uses built-in features which list available servers to which the player can log on. A single game usually takes 10-15 minutes.

Game 3: Everquest

Figure 3 – EverQuest (989 Studios, 1999)

EverQuest, among the most intensely studied of multiplayer games, is a massively multiplayer online role-playing game (an MMORPG) in which thousands of players interact in a fantasy setting. The game has no specific winning condition but players usually attempt to advance their characters through experience levels and skill improvement. Players are not in direct competition (one player's advancement is not contingent on the status of others).

Players cannot directly fight one another and the game mechanics inspire different character types to team up in order to be able to take on more formidable foes and to complete certain quests.

Each game session can be long or short but dedicated players often put in 10-20 hours a week (some go far beyond that).

TYPES OF CONFLICT

Standard game definitions usually stress that games imply conflict. In their account of game design fundamentals Salen and Zimmerman write that “*A game is a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict,*

defined by rules, that result in a quantifiable outcome.” (Salen & Zimmerman, 2003: 80).

In *The Study of Games* Sutton-Smith and Elliot Avedon define games as “an exercise of voluntary control systems, in which there is a contest between powers, confined by rules in order to produce a disequilibrium outcome.” (Avedon Elliott & Sutton-Smith, 1971: 405)¹.

Although such definitions have a tendency to make software products like *EverQuest* or *The Sims* look somewhat peripheral they capture quite well the fact that most games are competitive. Of course, even this competition takes a number of forms. It can be strictly zero-sum as in the case of *Age of Kings*² or it can be non-zero sum as in MMORPGs in which in-game resources are limited but where players can do much better by cooperating than by solo play.

But it is rarely the actual conflict emerging from the game mechanics (the intentional conflict, if you will) which causes strife. Sore losers frequent all games, but rarely does killing another player’s *Battlefield 1942* avatar or *Age of Empires II* soldier units in ways compliant with the general spirit of the game cause the victim to seriously lash out towards the other player personally.

In other words, conflict itself is not a problem. A special type of conflict can be highly disruptive to a game space, however. While we can think of the “artificial conflict” of the game rules as *intra-mechanic* this often-resented conflict type can be considered *extra-mechanic* as it does not

emanate directly from what is usually thought of as the core game (although its particular form is highly influenced by the game rules).

The scope of the problem

A few examples serve to illustrate the extent of the problem.

In September 2003 game developers Blizzard chose to cancel 400.000 accounts at their Battle.net gaming portal. These accounts had been associated with “a hack or a cheat program” and the players involved were seen as harmful to the status of Battle.net as a “fun and safe place” (Battle.net, 2003).

Players themselves largely agree. In one somewhat informal survey 41% of the respondents felt that multiplayer gaming is “troubled by saboteurs (player killers, cheaters etc.)” ‘often’ or ‘all the time’ (Smith, 2003).

So do the designers. Since the early MMORPG *Ultima Online* became the site of massive tension between different player preferences (Kim, 1998; King & Borland, 2003) quickly making the world resemble “*Afghanistan after the Soviets left: unremitting random violence, feuds, continual victimization of the weak by the strong...*” (Rollings & Adams, 2003: 527) online game designers have usually gone to great lengths to limit possibilities for destructive play. Often this has taken the form of severely limiting player options. As game developers Mulligan and Patrovsky warn “*It may seem weird that a significant portion of the player base is willing to do anything to win, but that’s the reality of the situation*” (Mulligan & Patrovsky, 2003: 182).

¹ Some definitions do leave out conflict (Juul, 2003).

² Assuming we are talking about opponents playing a standard game.

Types of extra-mechanic conflict

Clearly, there are infinite ways in which players may upset other players and anecdotes abound from practically every online game. Here we shall focus on three main categories - cheating, grief play, and the violation of local norms – and consider how they apply to our three game specimens.

Cheating

Although noticeably relevant to the understanding of gaming cheating has received limited academic attention.³

Behavior labeled as cheating typically gives the cheater an unfair advantage over opponents and/or runs contrary to the spirit of the game. The terms “unfair” and “spirit of the game” are clearly subjective and make cheating an altogether social construction.

However, some consensus exists and the term is not used in an entirely arbitrary way. First of all, the advantage must be somehow “unfair”. If I am an expert *Tekken* player and you have never tried the game before, using my skills against you would not be unfair (although it might not live up to higher ideals). Re-ordering chess pieces while you were distracted, however, would constitute cheating since it is unfair (you have not had a similar chance, since I have not been distracted) and goes against the spirit of the game (strategic skill should decide the winner).

Some techniques may run against the spirit of a game without being technically unfair.

These are in fact the most common. The phenomenon known as *camping* is one example. *Camping* refers to the less-than-brave tactic of placing one’s first person shooter character in a highly secure spot, waiting patiently for the enemy to come close enough to be surgically dispatched with. *Camping* is not technically unfair since the option is equally available to the enemy (in which case the game would grind to a halt). In fact, since camping is such a probable strategy many players will infer that it actually does not go against the intentions of the spirit of the game (i.e. the intentions of the designers) making camping issues into questions of local norms.

Local norm violation

Camping is an example of a player strategy which is so obvious and “probable” that it usually is not considered to be a violation of the intent of the designers. After all, it might easily have been made impossible by the game code.

The rule against camping is a local norm, a type of ‘implicit rule’. As we shall see in the concrete examples below multiplayer games are highly dependent on such rules (see also Salen & Zimmerman, 2003: 130; Sniderman, 1999).

Having the core rules refereed by an impartial machine, computer games clearly offer far less cause for confusion about winning conditions and core rules than do traditional games. But despite the algorithmic nature of the core rules multiplayer games are often dependent on players reaching a mutual understanding on how the game should be played.

³ Andy Kuo’s student paper *A (very) brief history of cheating* is often referred to (Kuo, 2001).

Such implicit rules are the subject of intense debate among players. Often such discussions go directly to the “spirit of the game” relevant to cheating issues while at other times discussion hinges on the interpretation of specific local rules or player actions as regards these rules.

For instance, a player of a real-time-strategy game may object to limitation in choice of civilization/race. If the player community find that one or more civilizations are comparably too powerful these may not be accepted if chosen by a player. Should the player insist strongly he or she may end up being evicted from the game in question.

Or a first person shooter player may not respect the tacit (or explicit) server rule that one should not attack team-mates. Finally, regarding interpretation of action players may of course often disagree about whether allegedly carelessly thrown explosive weapons hurting an ally constitutes an attack on a team-mate.

Interestingly, when an implicit rule reaches a certain degree of consensus it is often built into the actual rules of game sequels or later games in the same genre. For instance, *Age of Kings* players would often attempt to draw up an agreement that attacks should not be launched before a certain period of time had passed in the game. Such agreements were obviously often shaky, and the ability to make early attacks impossible was built into the game *Rise of Nations* (Microsoft Game Studios, 2003).

Grief play

The broad category of grief play includes player behavior which causes another player a severe, stressful disadvantage which is (usually) unrelated to the winning conditions of a game. Severe, unprovoked harassment through an in-game chat channel is a common example.

If stress-inducing behavior is a consequence of a player pursuing a personal goal, Foo and Koivisto has suggested that the term *greed play* is more appropriate (Foo & Koivisto, 2004). They give an example:

A player persistently camps a high level mob for an item he wants. But because his character isn't advanced enough, this mob kills the player, and proceeds to kill other neighbouring players. The others are unhappy and feel their gaming is being affected, but this player refuses to leave the area and continues to fight the high level mob, as he wants that item. (Foo & Koivisto, 2004: 2)

In this case, the player may be scrupulous but his actions are not motivated by the harm that they inflict on innocent bystanders.

Grief play, in other words, can be understood as the intentional causing of anxiety in another player. There are grey zones, however, since a player is represented in a game space by some type of avatar. Thus, if one player has created an explicitly anti-social character it can obviously be difficult to distinguish between behavior which is aimed at displeasing another player and behavior which merely hurts other game characters and is actually consistent with the identity

of the aggressive character (King & Borland, 2003: 161-162).

Extra-mechanic conflict in Age of Empires II

The unmistakably most pervasive issue in AOK concerns cheating. However, since the game depends primarily on the strategic capabilities of the player the scope of software cheats is in fact limited. Software lending direct assistance to the player (analogous to software improving the player's aim known from shooters) is usually not applicable to games not relying on motor skill. Players found many other loopholes, however.

One such loophole was the 'drop trick'. Here players were able to disconnect from a losing game while remaining logged on to the matching service. Under certain circumstances the disconnecting player would then be able to trick the server into thinking that it was in fact the other player who had left the game prematurely thus assigning points to the drop tricker⁴.

Another way to exploit the particularities of the server connection was to exploit an unintended consequence of extreme lag. Under such circumstances it became possible to order multiple cancellations of a building construction. Since such a cancellation returned the price of the building to the player's treasury the player was able to enrich himself in a manner clearly unintended by the game designers (Pritchard, 2000). This exploit had the unfortunate side-effect of actually creating incentives to produce lag.

It is unlikely that many players will have been confused as to the (un)legitimacy of such techniques. Somewhat more ambiguous was the so-called 'farm bug' which enabled a player to build upon a farm foundations laid down by an ally. Such co-built farms would produce far more resources than a normal one which would have to be rebuilt frequently. Now, with a bit of ingenuity a player could think up a reason why this might be an intentional feature of the game (for instance that it was meant to encourage highly coordinated team-play).

Finally, the setup of the game's matching system (see Figure 4) invited a wide range of possibilities for cheats that were more social in nature (Smith, in review). Friends could of course carefully rehearse special strategies that would give them advantages at a given map while claiming that they had never met before.



Figure 4 –The Age of Kings pre-match setup screen (one of several)

Also, the possibility to play on custom maps would sometimes result in players joining a game only to have the host demand that the game be played on the

⁴ In more general terms such practices are often known as 'disconnect hacks'.

host's own map. In one game which I took part in, the host argued that his custom map was just a minor variation of a popular standard map. When the actual match began the host's score immediately increased at an unnatural rate followed by extremely fast attacks with very advanced units. Exploring the map we (the losing side) found that the host had begun the game surrounded by large amounts of sheep which made it unnecessary for him to consider standard ways of procuring food thus giving him a considerable advantage.

Such tricks are mostly unambiguous. The contents of the *Age of Kings* forums (at <http://aok.heavengames.com>), however, show that players are often in doubt as to whether they were cheated. And in some cases other forum members recommend that the self-acclaimed victim considers the possibility that he was merely bested. For instance, one player claimed that he and his friends were convinced that *“that MP-playing on the Zone suffers from people that are cheating.”* To this two forum moderators (within one hour) raised the suggestion that the poster had just lost fair and square. One of them added *“I don't know how many times people have accused me of cheating when I rolled over them so fast. Having a different skill level is not cheating.”*

This illustrates a pervasive problem regarding cheating in multiplayer gaming. Since accusations of cheating can be motivated by shame of losing or, more strategically, be intended to harm a competitor such accusations cannot be taken at anything approaching face value.

Extra-mechanic conflict in Battlefield 1942

Battlefield 1942, like *Age of Kings*, has inspired a large variety of cheats and exploits. The possibilities for software-based cheating, however, is moderated by the widespread requirement that players must have Punkbuster (a popular anti-cheat program) installed and enabled.

The upholding of local norms, however, plays a very important role on most BF servers which usually have a more or less elaborate list of how the game should be played. The game server running at the IT University of Copenhagen, for instance, highlights the following local rules⁵:

- A. Don't spawnrape in fixed spawns.
- B. Don't teamkill.
- C. Don't attack team-mates.
- D. Don't use inappropriate language.
- E. Don't steal from enemy base.
- F. Don't use vehicles as taxis.
- G. Don't leave vehicles on the runway.
- H. Don't drive on the runway.
- I. Firing artillery upon fixed spawn NOT allowed.
- J. Sniping is allowed OUTSIDE fixed spawn
- K. Raping enemy fixed spawns is NOT allowed.
- L. Destroying enemy manned artillery in fixed spawn is allowed.
- M. Destroying enemy SA3 in fixed spawn is allowed.
- N. No SA3 shooting at Fixed spawn.

Apart from the rule disallowing inappropriate language, these rules are ways of tweaking the game dynamics in ways that comply with the preferences of the players (and particularly the server admins). They are not mutually exclusive. Rather it

⁵ Listed at <http://battlefield.itu.dk/> (September 8th, 2004)

seems that the most important ones get repeated in a different format (B and C; A and K).

On many servers the local rules are open to debate. Some are even specific that a majority of users can decide to have a rule changed or added. Leagues for truly competitive players/clans spend the most effort on arriving at well-thought-out local rules. Much can be learnt about the potential for conflict by studying such rule sets. As an example let's look at some of the rules applying to the Up North Battlefield League⁶:

§1.3a

The purpose of these rules are to make the game experience fair and enjoyable for all participants. It is impossible to cover all situations and in case of a situation not covered by the rules an administrator can rule according to §1.2b [stating that administrators are above the rules].

In case a rules' literary meaning is in conflict in the spirit in which the rule was written, an administrator can change the interpretation according to §1.2b.

Basically, this gives enormous power to the game administrators who act as executive *and* judicial powers. Admins do not have legislative privileges although the rule grants them the ability to distinguish between the letter and spirit of the "law" in a somewhat unclear way.

§1.3c

If a players/clan notices that the opponents are breaking a rule, they should notify them. To start or continue a game without giving

the opponents a chance to correct their mistake is unsportsmanlike and administrators can decline protests involving situations where a clan silently accepts breaking of a rule just to be able to complain afterwards if they loose.

This rule illustrates a way to minimize the possibility of accusing the opponent of cheating to achieve a strategic advantage (see also page 8). To be protected by the law, a player/clan must immediately react on rule violations and cannot just wait until some far more prosperous time.

§11.1

All players must behave in a sportsmanlike way.

§13.4

A bug [which players should not exploit] is considered as a function in the game made by a technical mistake by the developers.

Such rules leave a great amount open to interpretation (although examples of bugs and non-bugs are given).

The interpretation of rules (their spirit) and the interpretation of player actions (usually whether the action was intentional or not) can, not surprisingly, lead to a great deal of debate. A forum user having been accused of violating the server norms asks the wider community for their interpretation of the situation:

After chasing an enemy bomber back to its home base I was shot down by their AA guns. I bailed out and after a few minutes of hiding in the bushes I made a dash for one of their bombers so I could get home. As I started the engine one of their guys saw me and started laying mines in my path so I jumped into the front gunner seat and took him out. Now other baddies started spawning and coming for me. I had nowhere

⁶ <http://www.up-north.org> (rules quoted as displayed September 8th, 2004).

to go as the mines were still there so all I could do was defend myself with the gun, I got about 4 all up. As soon as the mine timed out I got back in the pilot seat and headed home. All this time I had a couple of guys screaming about me base camping when all I wanted to do was get out of there but their engineer made that a longer task than I expected.

He then asks what the other forum users believe he should have done. Most who react find no fault with his choice and many express a certain annoyance at servers (and players) who take local rules too seriously or apply them too rigidly. One poster feels that constant discussion over local norms distract from the game:

This along with 309,094 other situations that can arise during the course of a game, are the reasons I believe BF should be played as the programming was designed. Take it for what it's worth, good and bad.

It seems clear that many *Battlefield 1942* players spend large amounts of time and effort in discussing and policing local norms. Indeed, most game servers will signal this to players as proclamations about local norms and sanctions to be levied against norm-breakers (see Figure 5). In case of norm-breaches players



Figure 5 – Battlefield 1942.

The upper left messaging section of the screen cycles through various ‘rules’ such as, in this case, “Racism in any form is NOT allowed”.

themselves usually have quite powerful means of self-policing available as they can initiate a “kick-poll”, inviting all players to vote as to whether a given player should be dismissed from the server.

Extra-ludic conflict in Everquest

In *Age of Kings* and *Battlefield 1942* individual games are relatively short and relatively varied when it comes to settings. Thus, a player can seek out a game which matches his preferences (regarding winning conditions, number of players, map type etc.) and invests a limited amount of time in any given game. The opposite is true for *Everquest* players. Here, a player has little control over game settings and has to remain in the same game (although she can choose or change servers).

On the other hand *EverQuest* affords much less inter-player competition than the two other games (players are unable to fight each other directly). Thus many of the hacks introduced into the game make the player more powerful in his or her private game against nature (the game system). One such hack exploits the fact that the game client has information on nearby monsters not meant to be shared with the player. The hack makes these monsters, although perhaps hidden by trees or rocks, visible⁷.

Even though players do not benefit directly from the detriment of others (the principle known from most games) they are interdependent and do compete for the resources of the game world. Also, some

⁷ *Wireframe* or *wall* hacks are common to many games, not least shooters.

players clearly do care about their relative status which makes them oppose cheating and other ways to avoid the hardships of “natural” level advancement (see discussion of game character trade in Castronova, 2003).

The fact that *EverQuest* is persistent paves the way for grief play of a scope not seen in shorter games. The history of MUDs and MMORPGs is filled with examples of players who seem to derive great satisfaction from making other players unhappy or at least disrupting the social order of a game world. Some such players justify their playing style in public, often employing variations of the arguments that a certain amount of deviance is necessary to keep the community “awake” or that such deviance is consistent with the violent nature of many game worlds. The grief player association known as “Player-killer’s Headquarters” expresses its philosophy in detail:

A feeling of guilt does not stop a bandit player. He uses ANY trick to reach his goal, whether it is cheating, theft or murder. Nothing will stop him. Whatever are the measures taken against these evil creatures (PK switch and other crap), they will always find a way to break some rules, and piss everybody off...

The PK-HQ team is made of player-killers
Yes, we do cheat. We kill, we steal, we build
our fortune, we make people crazy, and we
do our best to spread chaos and ill feeling.
And guess what we get from all that? The

greatest pleasure and satisfaction of all our
players’ career. (PK-HQ, 1998)⁸

Although such players explicitly seek to displease others, greed play in *Foo* and Koivosto’s sense is more pervasive within *Everquest*⁹. One delicate phenomenon rises from the way experience points get awarded when a monster is slain. Since those who contribute to the demise of a monster share the reward players may jump into an ongoing fray thus arguably stealing some of the experience points from the players already engaged. “Kill stealing” is considered a serious offence (Sony, 2004) although clearly one open to wide-ranging interpretation. Similarly, players are instructed in the *EverQuest* rules of conduct to display cooperative behavior in relation to attractive hunting grounds. Players have been known to monopolize such places more or less forcefully keeping other would-be-hunters away.

Also, players are required to act responsibly even when fleeing for their lives. Often a player is faced with no choice but to flee as enemies in great numbers descend upon him (whether because he attacked them or unintentionally came too close). As the monsters take up pursuit they form a “train” and the player is tempted to run

⁸ The website includes a “kill-list” listing names of players who have (allegedly) fallen victim to an PK-HQ member: <http://www.pk-hq.com/killedlist.php>

⁹ We should acknowledge of course, that the practices of PK-HQ members may well be motivated by the desire for status within their particular community (and not only by the desire to do harm). Thus, from this game-external perspective they do in fact seek to (greedily) maximize their payoffs.

towards the edge of the zone in which he is located (since the monsters cannot cross zone lines). This can entail considerable danger for other players.

All in all, *EverQuest* players are not as tempted by classical forms of cheating as players of certain other game types. Since *EverQuest* is persistent and only (broadly speaking) exists in one form the administrators are able to continuously change and update the conditions under which the players operate. This happens both as changes to the game code and to the central web-based code of conduct which has no direct analogy – or can be said to be a far more local and thus multi-faceted phenomenon – in games like *Battlefield 1942*.

Discussion of games as social software

Above I have described various conflict types characteristic of three major games (or game types). Extra-mechanic conflict, I have illustrated, is ever-present in online gaming. But what to make of this? First, is there some common framework which may enable us to relate those conflict types to social tension found in other social spaces? Secondly, do gamers in general display more anti-social behavior than (say) USENET posters or even members of physical-world communities?

Multiplayer games construct social spaces in which players are interdependent and where certain behavior types may severely strain – or even destroy – the value of the space to other players. In this sense, gamer deviance is a subset of the larger question

of social order¹⁰. More specifically, we can understand many issues of social tension in games as social dilemmas; situations where individuals are tempted to take a course of action that, should everybody make the same choice, would lead to disaster (Kollock, 1998).

For instance, the game might be more fun for everyone if no-one cheated but individuals may still be tempted to do so (perhaps out of fear that the opponent cannot resist the temptation). Such dilemmas exist in other types of social software as well. In a computer-supported cooperative work setting individuals may well be tempted to free-ride on the contributions of others, particularly if no appropriate reward system is in place (Grudin, 1994: 96; Orlikowski, 1996). In an online discussion forum such as a USENET newsgroup users may also be tempted to shy away from the effort often implied in living up to community norms and standards (Kollock & Smith, 1996). As regards games, it is important to emphasize that these social dilemmas are only indirectly related to the game mechanics and are virtually independent of the game's status as zero-sum, non-zero-sum or some mix of these. They are often a consequence of design choices that are not directly related to the core game (e.g. player matching screens).

Grief play, of course, has a non-gaming counterpart in “troll” behavior (e.g. Baker,

¹⁰ The fact that social order and deviance are rather well-studied phenomena is unfortunately not always clear from studies of social tension in gaming contexts.

2001; Donath, 1999) where individuals (or sometimes organizations) intentionally disrupt online activities usually by provocatively disrespecting the verbal/behavioral norms of a community.

Cheating, on the other hand, is particular to gaming. Since other types of social software do not specify winning conditions directly (if they did they would arguably be games) attempting to attain an unfair advantage in such systems is usually not meaningful.

But while we can point to structural differences between games and other social software types such differences should not make us forget that gamers are first and foremost people who go online to interact with other people. As one author put it:

Whether they're in the Corporate Boardroom or the Forest of Eternal Gloom, people are people and interact in much the same way – and the technologies they depend on are much the same. (Dourish, 1998: 6)

I noted above that self-policing among gamers differs slightly from efforts made in other contexts to protect a collective resource or induce others to comply with norms. Gamers (particularly where single games count towards an overall rating) often have an incentive to falsely accuse others. Apart from such variations there is little reason to believe that the community management techniques known from other systems cannot also be used by game designers (just as the reverse is possible). Curiously, trust-dependent game systems such as zone.com and the Gamespy player-matching system offer players very minimalist tools to help govern their own

communities. It seems likely that designers of such systems could be inspired by the community and trust-management solutions used by web-based interaction systems (such as Slashdot or Ebay).

One may, in public debate, sometimes sense the conception that multiplayer games are widely different from other social practices. Unfortunately, the same tendency can be found in game research where some authors do not engage with non-game-specific literature. There can be many explanations for this, one of which may be that games still inspire 'magic circle' conceptual frameworks encouraged by early game thinkers. On this problematic view, games are entirely apart from the outside world and cannot be approached with traditional analytical mindsets. An important challenge for game research is to connect games and gaming behavior to other activities and academic disciplines. Much like internet studies had to convincingly argue that net users in general acted in non-radical ways (e.g. Wellman & Gulia, 1999) game scholars need to document and accept that gamers are people also.

Conclusions

Multiplayer digital games attract millions of players. Some of these players spend time and efforts assisting others while others will go to great lengths to gain special advantages or even to simply cause distress in others. The conflicts evident in multiplayer game spaces are not directly tied to the game mechanics; players rarely become angry at those who best them within the accepted bounds of the game. Thus, the conflict which is actually

perceived as problematic by players is *extra-mechanic*, as opposed to the *intra-mechanic* conflict directly intended by most game designers.

Social tension in games roughly fit into three categories described in this paper as *cheating*, *local norm violation* and *grief play*. While cheating is blatant violation of the game design intent in order to achieve an unfair advantage, local norm violation refers to actions that are only reprehensible in a specific local context (i.e. a specific server) and grief play is any action performed with the specific aim of causing distress in others.

Although these tensions are not parts of the core game, different mechanics – or more generally: different designs – seed the ground for different types of conflicts. In this paper I have illustrated this by examining the conflicts surrounding three games. *Age of Kings*, a real-time-strategy game, was seen as troubled by cheating. In *Battlefield 1942*, a tactical shooter, players spend more time discussing (and arguing about) local norms. Finally, the world of *EverQuest* is mostly vulnerable to local norm violations and grief play. All three conflict forms can be found in all three games, however.

To a large extent, these conflicts can be understood as problems of (and disagreements about) social order. Although they take specific shapes within game spaces they are continuations of social tensions known from other multi-user software types and from traditional physical communities.

While hardly a directly controversial realization this comparison highlights the

challenge of game research to abandon magic circle assumptions (explicit or not) and connect their studies of game sociality to the social sciences more generally.

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