

Ethical tensions between the roles I play

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Introduction

I am a researcher. I observe human behavior in online game systems and report what I find. I talk about the social networks that form between players and the systems and about distributed knowledge and goal sharing among players. I watch people make friends and enemies both in the context of the game and on a more personal level. Sometimes I see things that happen between players which I find distasteful or even detrimental to one or more of the players' emotional state. Yet, I am hesitant to intervene because I fear it may jeopardize what may occur and what I may observe.

I am an educator. I believe in inclusiveness and equal education for all. I believe education is empowerment and agency. I feel a compelling need to intervene when I can to help people understand key points about their games and their social interactions and to help them socialize into a community of practice. In fact, when I observe in-game antisocial behavior, this educator role sometimes prevents me from distancing myself and discontinuing interaction with the offending party.

I am a gamer. I just want to play and have fun. I don't have, nor do I feel I should have, the authority to tell other gamers how to play. As one gamer out of many in a huge social world, I have to follow the norms set by the community. I also feel that I should help others learn what the social norms are, but I can do little more than letting them know what constitutes normal behavior and what constitutes deviancy.

These three roles I take on while playing an online game have presented me with several situations in which I had to decide whether to intervene, whether to introduce

ideas from scholarly literature to the other players, and generally whether to treat the game and the other players any differently than I would have if I were simply playing a game. This paper will cover two examples of the ethical dilemmas I encountered which put to question the whole purpose of identifying myself as an educator with its trappings including the notion that people should have equal access to ideas and understanding. This is especially true when looking at specific communities of people in which the communities have identified themselves as cooperative nurturing ones. First, however, I should explain why I'm doing research in this setting and say a little about the setting itself. I should note here that in writing this, I'm taking as much a cue from the New Games Journalism movement (Gillen, 2004, Stuart, 2005) as I am from academic discourse. Essentially, I'm giving my personal account of a game and the observations I make in my particular setting rather than trying to generalize too broadly within and across genres of games and types of gamers.

Background

I am interested in how computer game players come to see their roles in their gaming communities and whether working cooperative identity strategies help players make cooperative choices or take on participatory roles in non-game settings. People take on different identities or ways of being and acting depending on the situation or, more specifically, depending on the “communities of practice” (Lave and Wenger, 1991, Wenger, 1998) or “domains” (Gee, 2003) they participate in at any given moment. The identities people use may be defined through the use of active trial and error. People also learn passively simply by being immersed in a particular setting; they see how others act

and generally learn what makes up the social norms for a given community or domain. Constance Steinkuehler (2004), who has done a lot of research in the massively multiplayer online role-playing game *Lineage*, says, “[t]hrough participation in a community of practice, an individual comes to understand the world (and themselves) from the perspective of that community.” Over time, people continually refine their identities, but some people, for whatever reason, are more successful than others. Their actions are viewed as more acceptable or legitimate somehow, and they may even be able to weigh in and help define the community itself.

Online communities have traditionally been viewed as separate from offline communities, but if one thinks about all communities and their acceptable social norms as being defined by its members’ practice then the only difference is in how participants’ communication is mediated. In other words, “...the distinction of real and imagined or virtual community is not a useful one” (Wilson and Peterson, 2002, p. 456). The medium of communication should not be confused with the content communicated or the particular situations bringing about the communication. Rather, the form of communication is bounded in a specific community of practice. The community, in *all* its likenesses and dissimilarities to other communities, is what makes it unique, not simply the fact that it is computer mediated.

If certain situations resemble others, the idea is that some identities or ways of acting that are successful in one might be successful in others. If people can recognize similarities between contexts, do their strategies transfer or do people divide their time/space in such a way that each domain is a separate space where strategies from other domains are illegitimate?

I've been looking into the identities people take on while playing computer role-playing games with the idea that since players are encouraged to try out different strategies through the nature of the games, they have an accelerated way of finding strategies that work. My assumption is that, with proper scaffolding, they can then see similarities between the situations modeled in the games and other non-game settings, and, therefore, parts of their successful in-game strategies will transfer. Working with this assumption allows me to attempt to foster specific cooperation strategies through design intervention rather than just observing what kinds of behavior make up the social norm. Why bother seeing if something can occur *naturally* when we know the social practice in question is what we're hoping to foster? Wouldn't it make more sense to actively try to bring about that practice? The gist of it is that I want to nurture cooperative behavior in an online game so that I can see what elements of a community are needed to get people to cooperate, and, eventually, this may inform the design decisions in "real world" communities to allow transfer of cooperative behavior.

World of Warcraft

I am the guild master for a cooperative guild in the massively multiplayer role-playing game *World of Warcraft (WoW)*. All of the members joined with the knowledge that we focus on cooperation and on cultivating an environment where cooperation is easy and beneficial. They (at least the ones I recruit) also join knowing I'm doing academic research.

A computer role-playing game (CRPG) can be defined as a game that puts the player in the role of a character that develops over the course of the game. The genre has

its roots in traditional pencil-and-paper role-playing games like *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*), where the point is to *role-play* or act-out or describe the actions and reactions of your character when placed in hypothetical situations. Most of them follow the same model where characters are defined by character class (warrior, rogue, mage, priest, etc.) and by using numbers for various attributes (strength, intelligence, dexterity, etc.) and skills (driving, climbing, melee weapons, etc.), and usually the relative power of a character is summarized by character level. When starting, characters are usually level one. Characters improve with situational experience, and, in *D&D*, each monster killed or problem solved is rewarded with the characters gaining experience points (XP). After earning enough XP, characters would become more powerful by gaining a level (moving from one to two, for example) which lets them improve skill abilities or gain new skills, etc. In addition, in many computer RPGs, monsters killed might drop money (usually in the form of gold coins) or valuable items for the player to use or sell. With the new found riches and higher character level, the player may then buy better equipment for his or her character to help defeat more powerful and therefore more rewarding monsters or take on harder but more rewarding quests. There exists, then, a built-in incentive, apart from the unveiling of the story, to continue playing which is to improve one's character.

A massively multiplayer online game (MMOG) adds another element found in paper-and-pencil games which is that one plays with other people who each control their own character or avatar. The draw for many players is no longer the story being told through personal actions in the game but instead the story being told through shared actions in a social space. *World of Warcraft* boasts the American record of simultaneous players in an MMOG—over 200,000 during the holiday 2004 season (Blizzard, 2005)—

easily outpacing the previous record set by *Everquest* (about 100,000 simultaneous players). These people play on different servers, and currently popular servers host up to 3500 players on a weekend evening. The developers (Blizzard Entertainment) have divided the servers into three types depending on the kinds of play the developers thought different players would prefer. These are the normal servers, the player vs. player (PvP) servers, and the role-play (RP) servers. The demographics and social norms that occur in each type of server are arguably different, forming sub-communities within a larger gaming community. The server I play on is an RP server. The idea is that players talk “in character” (IC), where using modern slang and making modern references are not appropriate, and players are encouraged to actually *role-play*, letting themselves embody the avatars they control so that in-game occurrences with the game system and with other characters are met with realistic reactions. The truth of it is, however, that many players don’t act out their avatars so much as simply refrain from leet speak (or 133t sp34k, a hacker/gamer way of communicating through text) and generally follow the established social norms of proper conduct and nicety.

The culture around massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs), while still relatively new, has established certain codes of conduct or specific social norms or ways of practice due to the nature of the games. It is sometimes necessary to compete with others for monster kills and item drops. To tackle a particularly hard monster or set of monsters or a particularly difficult quest, it is also sometimes necessary to team up with a group of player characters (PCs or player controlled characters as opposed to non-player characters or NPCs which are controlled by the game system or AI—I try to use “PC” when the actions of a character are

entwined with its player's motivations and use "character" and "player" when speaking specifically about those aspects of the PC.). If, for example, a group of PCs who have allied themselves to each other encounters a group of monsters, it is generally accepted behavior to kill all of the monsters before searching their bodies for loot. If a PC starts looting before all of the monsters are dead, he or she might jeopardize the safety of the rest of the party. Yet, some players will opt to "ninja-loot" for the chance of getting the good items first, preventing the other PCs from having a chance at getting the monster drops. *WoW* has in-game mechanics to counter this and other types of anti-social behavior, but there are many agreed upon behaviors which are not enforced by any set of in-game mechanisms. New players to *WoW* and MMORPGs in general have to learn these social rules. Some of them learn faster than others. The key thing to remember is that people learn them the same way they learn (or not) how to behave in "real" life or other domains or communities.

A guild is a group of PCs who have formalized their relationship to each other. They tend to play together or group together over grouping with non-guild members. They tend to share the same goals while playing the game. Guilds have been likened to extended families, social circles, and sports teams among other ways of defining them. When some friends of mine and I decided to form a guild, I had originally intended to introduce the existing and future guild members to the notion of social dilemmas (Felkins, 2001), to articles on online community management (Kollock and Smith, 1996), and to ideas in new literacies study (Alvermann and Heron, 2001, Burbules, 2000, Gee, 2003). I wanted them to be able to reflect on their game-play at a higher level, to be able

to self-assess their behavior to each other and to non-guild members in the game, and to collectively focus on creating a constructive, in-game society.

One problem, as I soon found out, was that there is a lot of work that goes into forming and managing a guild (and I assume any self-governing community), especially since players are starting new relationships and don't have as solid a foundation for what norms are socially acceptable. I've found that much of my time is spent on the administrative tasks of introducing members to each other, making guild-wide chat repairs (catching confusion or mistakes in chat and repairing them— Schönfeldt and Golato, 2003), mediating disputes between members, and actively lessening anger and destructive behavior.

I've also discovered a more subtle tension between the community I want to create and the purpose of the game, which is to have fun, and the natural practice of its participants. This is partially why I have not yet introduced a lot of the academic stuff to the other guild members, even though I believe they should know the purpose of the guild so that they can self-assess their own behavior. I don't ever want the research or creation of the community for specific purposes to supersede the enjoyment of the game. I do not want to impose outsider, non-legitimate behavior onto the other guild members but would rather see cooperation emerge from the context of the in-game social environment.

In this backdrop of management issues and worries about legitimacy, I've encountered several ethical issues for which I was not prepared. I am continually ambivalent about them, easily swayed one way or the other by friends and peers. I'll relate two of the cases here. One of them was an immediately recognizable case of a particular player not "fitting in" with the rest of the guild and the socially constructed

norms of all the game players on our server in general. The other case is an on-going issue, for which the officers of the guild and I are taking very small cautious steps to remedy. Both cases caused ethical issues to surface as a result from a clash between anti-social behavior (as defined by the in-game social practices that the community of players has developed) and the tenets of the guild and my personal tenets as an educational researcher.

Yar's player

One day while playing, I received an in-game private message from a guild member saying that he met two PCs who wanted to join our guild. I asked him to have the two of them contact me. When one of them (I'll call Yar) did contact me, he did so very informally with no punctuation or capitalization and with many words spelled incorrectly. I should have known from the get go that he would not have fit in to the guild.

The guild's policy on potential new recruits was to first inform them about the guild and its purpose and to ask why they wanted to join. The guild would then have them group up or party with existing guild members for a few hours. The existing guild members could then recommend whether we invite the potentials into the guild. This way of screening our members ensured that all its members share the same focus on cooperation and a friendly environment. We also could tell how the PCs performed in a group situation and whether they knew how to party with a group effectively and conscientiously. Unfortunately, this screening method has one major flaw.

Since this game follows the same design pattern that a lot of CRPGs follow, each character has different amounts of experience which means not all characters are the same level and equal in terms of power (power to kill monsters, generally). In order to get a good sense of a player character and his or her performance and social behavior, it is important to have the PC interact with other characters of about equal character level. If this doesn't happen then the obstacles the party must overcome are either too difficult or too easy for a particular character and so the player may act differently than he or she would normally behave in natural in-game situations.

Our guild at the time had no characters of about the same level as the two potential members. I decided that they should not be denied due to a failing of the guild's and so I invited them to the guild on a probationary period. If, after a week or so, it was clear they fit in nicely then they could become full members. It became quickly apparent that one of them, Yar, did not fit in.

Yar tended to ask a lot of questions which made clear his or her inexperience with the game, questions which one could discover the answers to from just a few hours of playing and socializing. He or she also continually begged for in-game currency (gold) to buy equipment with when all the other members knew that for a character of his or her level, the best way to acquire better equipment was to complete quests and kill monsters. Any items purchased would be overshadowed and made obsolete within a few hours of playing. Furthermore, Yar did not seem to understand the difference between the three kinds of servers. He tended to use l33t sp34k type abbreviations more so than what the guild felt was socially acceptable and "spam" the chat channel with questions about what to do next. Finally, it was discovered that Yar's player and the other player who joined

the guild with Yar's player were 13 and 10 years old. Ironically, the 10 year old was the one who socialized just fine. After a couple of days in the guild, Yar's player decided to make a new character (I'll call Tla). In fact, he created many new characters to try them out and get a feel for which class he wanted to stick with. For each new character, he wanted a guild invite. The guild is composed of characters, not players, so a specific player could have multiple characters in the same guild. Most other players, however, try out different classes or characters on their own and ask to join a guild only after finding a combination that they want to stick with for at least several weeks.

The educator in me wanted to encourage Yar's player to try out different roles and eventually learn the social norms of the game community and why he or she currently didn't quite fit in. I did not want to kick someone out of the guild just due to their age. There was discussion about Yar on the guild's website, however, which changed my mind. Here's a good reason why the guild should filter by age:

I mean some of the conversations we have in guild chat...are inappropriate for kids 13 and under. I mean Het hits on Sce and Mas 24/7 and I was thinking (what if they are like 13 years old in RL that's not really good.

There was also concern among guild members that they would have to censor what they say or somehow lessen the impact of their utterances for fear of emotionally damaging a minor. One member said, "...I don't want to feel 'driven to silence' inside our own guild for fear of harming someone who isn't clueing in." Perhaps a more compelling reason why the guild should drop Yar is that he or she did not fit in, regardless of age:

Yar, it seems, isn't learning the rules. I am not the most patient of people, I know this, but long years of tech support have trained me to give everyone one 'get out of stupid free' card. Not everyone knows everything, so I'll explain once fully and with small words. My issue comes up when the same question is asked over and over and over. What class is best? Can I have...? And so on.

I have nothing against most 'Can I have's', to keep that clear. We offer stuff on guild,

someone wants it, it goes. We need a resource, we ask those who have it. So long as things are kept reasonable, there's no problem.

Where I started getting irked was in the wanting of everything, usable or not. Of being level 10, and wanting gold, above and beyond that used to buy a tabard. Attitudes like that risk destroying the freeflow environment we've got set up, because those who are generous with their time and supplies would become less so.

I decided to (gently) remove Yar and the friend from the guild. I did, however, explain to Yar why they didn't fit in, and I found them another guild to join because I did not want them to feel like there was anything inherently wrong with them. The guild had to remove both of them since they came as a pair and wanted to stay together. A few days later, Tla sent me an in-game message and we had a conversation which squelched some of the guilt I was experiencing. Here's part of the transcript with my *comments*.

[Tla] whispers: and I just turned 14 today

To [Tla]: Happy bday!

[Tla] whispers: hehe ty *[laugh, thank you]*

[Tla] whispers: maybe bday present? hehe

To [Tla]: Was the tabard not enough? *[I had given Tla money for a guild tabard (featuring the guild emblem and particular design) when he first joined the guild not knowing he would later be kicked out. The tabard once purchased stays with a character even if that character joins a different guild. It then takes on the attributes of the new guild's tabard. In other words, one doesn't have to purchase it ever again.]*

[Tla] whispers: maybe some hard cold w *[I think he meant "cash" but not sure exactly what "w" means.]*

[Tla] whispers: hehe , well that's just out of niceness with u are *["with" is probably "which"]*

To [Tla]: If I remember right, it cost 1 g. *[1 gold is quite a bit to a character of his level.]*

To [Tla]: Yes... :)

[Tla] whispers: u are right shoot u never wrogn *[I wish.]*

Even after telling Yar/Tla why the guild asked me to drop him or her, the player persisted in asking for in-game money and favors and continued to not understand that proper grammar counted in this particular setting (an RP server). I now realize that removing them from the guild was the wise decision if only to keep the guild together and support our "freeflow environment." Due to this experience, the guild has adopted a new

screening criterion. If we think we can tell that the potential guild member is a kid, he or she is not allowed. In other words, if someone acts like they are 10, even if in real life they are 45, they are not allowed in the guild. The problem with our new criterion is that now we may be too critical of new recruits. More recently, someone wanted to join who we found out was also 14. Our initial reaction was no, based on his age. Since I was “in charge” that day and because I’m such a “softie” I eventually persuaded the guild to let him in. We have not regretting our decision; at least, not yet.

Het’s player

A less clear-cut case presents itself in the form of a long-standing member of the guild I am in. This member, I’ll call Het, role-plays very well, knows a lot about the game, and likes to contribute to the guild in any way he can. The problem is that he also tends to complain a lot about his class, brag about his playing skills, baits us on the guild chat channel for attention, and is abrasive and insulting to those who don’t agree with him or help him immediately when he requests help for quests or grouping. Additionally, he tends to drop our guild name when making claims on the public game forums as a way of legitimizing what he says which is not quite right in that many of his posts are harsh and do not reflect the general mentality of the rest of the guild. The reasons why the guild has not confronted Het with these issues include the fact that no single occurrence seems enough to argue over. Rather it is the whole history of his behavior as a pattern that the guild has issue with. Unfortunately, not having any solid evidence makes it very hard to ask Het to change his behavior. Attempts in the past have been met with, “what are you talking about?”

The ethical issues of booting him from the guild are much the same as with Yar. I do not want to turn someone away if he can learn the acceptable norms. It goes against egalitarian education and an inclusive guild mentality. Furthermore, some people in the guild believe he just plays differently and needs to be treated differently (to which I'd argue that he needs to curb some of his passive-aggressive behavior rather than have the guild conform to his needs). Unfortunately, at least one guild member thinks Het will never change. Here's a chat transcript the officers of the guild and I had regarding what to do about Het. Portions of the full transcript have been removed since they were chat utterances on other game channels or were unrelated threads on the channels we were using. Again, my *[comments are in brackets and italicized]*.

[En]: so about Het!

[Tut]: yeah... not sure about Het

[En]: I reckon we need to just tell him to straighten up his act.

[Bug]: I don't think he'd understand without an itemized list

[Bep]: But we HAVE. That's the thing.

[Tut]: the problem as I see it is that none of us can explicitly tell him what is wrong with his behavior otherwise we would have done so already?

[Bug]: ...I can? And have been doing so?

[En]: He's an ass.

[Tut]: that doesn't say anything

[En]: an opinionated ass!

[Bug]: At least he approached me civilly after yesterday's conflaguration to talk

[Tut]: yeah but it doesn't tell him what he should be doing instead

[En]: So we just be explicit and tell him to cut out his baiting and combativiness. *[En and Tut argue over the evidence that is needed to justify confronting Het starting with the line "He's an ass."]*

[Bep]: we aren't his fuckin parents though! *[Bep exemplifies the role of a gamer who is there just to have fun.]*

[Bep]: he is an adult. And if he acts like an ass, we should treat him as such

[Bug]: Plus side, he was able to acknowledge he was being thinned skinned and overreactive. Downside, I don't think he's trainable *[Bug does not think Het will learn the positive social norms of our community.]*

[En]: Yes. It's not our job to teach him to shape up.

[Bep]: its not like we all haven't told him to tone it down a million times.

[Bug]: Any time I began offering suggestions, he'd come back with excuses. It seemed like the mentality of someone who expects the world to change for them

[En]: Terrible mentality.

[En]: did you tell him \"you're making excuses.\"

[Bug]: I did indeed [*I believe none of us have been able to articulate exactly what his behavior is like, no matter what Bug says.*]

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. .

[Bug]: We're not going to just punt him. He will be warned and talked to first

[Bug]: And as I said in group, I nominate Tut to be his surrogate parent

[Tut]: the prob is that warning him without telling him exactly what is wrong or how to improve doesnt help him

[Tut]: anyway, I was saying that we need to give him a warning presented as an ultimatum so he knows he will get booted before he does

[Tut]: and that we need to be able to tell him exactly what the problem is and suggestions for improvement otherwise he will not be able to improve

[Bep]: He wont improve and we aren't his parents. It is not our responsibility to try and make him a better person. And i will have none of it. [*The two lines by Tut before this one and this one by Bep sums up our debate pretty well.*]

The reason why I have such a hard time dropping someone from the guild is that no one, at the start, is an expert player in *World of Warcraft*. Just as in any domain, to become an expert takes time. It takes time to learn the system just as it takes time to understand the background history of the game setting and the social structures players create in the game. Of specific emphasis here is the fact that, in a MMORPG, players and their roles are valued differently than in a single-player game. Due to its social nature a MMORPG places more emphasis on social skills. In an effort to show Het and other players that the guild values people, not just specific character classes, I wrote a message on the guild's discussion board.

So, realize that *World of Warcraft* is NOT a single-player game. The things that make someone a good player in a single-player game do not hold the same value here.

In a single-player game, for example, you could concentrate on working the system and maximizing your efficiency in winning the game. In an RPG, this means min-maxing, picking the right feats and talents which complement each other and generally make for a really powerful character. It also means completing quests in an efficient fashion, minimizing backtracking, etc. (It may also mean getting into the story and letting yourself be immersed in a good narrative.)

In *WoW*, things work a little differently. The first thought most players have is that to be a good player and work well with a party is to know your class. If you choose a good talent build and know which abilities to use in which situations, know how to adapt to the

party, etc. that makes you a good player. I'd argue that it is only a part of what makes you a good player.

This is because a MMOG is a social game. You have to deal with other people who may or may not be as adept as you. They have different personalities, goals, motivations... Sometimes they are having a really great day, sometimes a really bad day. All the players form a social network and community in which certain behaviors are considered normal and others deviant.

Ninja-looting, spamming chat channels, begging for gold. These are examples of bad behavior. In an RP server, there is an implicit understanding that even more emphasis will be placed on the social nature of our game.

So, my point is that just because you are good at your class, doesn't mean you are a good player. Keep this in mind before you develop an over-inflated sense of self. Also keep it in mind before you think you are not contributing to the guild because your class is nerfed. We value you as a player, not as a class.

I've been working under the assumption that knowing one's goals helps one to achieve them. This is why I want the guild to have the common focus of cooperation. I want the guild members to know that we are working on building a strong cooperative guild and individual strengths need to be measured by group standards.

A few weeks later, I finally caught an example of Het's behavior in a transcript. Again, this is just one example of many and it is the sum of all the occurrences, including ones with more abrasive language and insults, that make up the guild's desire to confront him.

[Het]: ...Got some quests that need doing and I was hoping someone(s) would be willing to help.

<~1.5 min>

[Het]: Alrighty, everyones busy or not talking to me, key, Ill see if i can find help in the zone

[Ala]: You should post to the forum if you need help with quests. It makes it easier for people to plan.

[Het]: Right, ill go wait the 48hours for a topside quest

[Het]: Ill just try to find a pickup group thank you

[En]: And bite the hand that offers to help you in the process!

[Ala]: I don't know what you are talking about with 48 hours. You've spent more than 48 hours trying to get someone to help you.

[Het]: Right and as I turn off guild chat so I can find a group.

[Officer] [Ala]: Better than the guild turning off the guild chat to not hear from him.

[Ala is using the Officer channel to talk to just me and the other officers about Het.]

To [Het]: thing is we agreed to help Gak in 30 min already... thru the forums! [*I'm sending him a personal message here and referring to the guild's website.*]

[Officer] [Tut]: just told Het that we are helping Gak in 30 because he asked thru the forums

[Het] whispers: look Im busy finding a group, Ala/Gak ect dont have an issue with that because you all group with each other on a regular basis

To [Het]: yeah because he asks thru the forum

[Officer] [Ala]: You better tell him to lay off the attitude at the guild too.

[Officer] [En]: Seriuosly. We try and help and he comes bakc with that shit?

To [Het]: if you want to feel included, try following protocol

[Officer] [En]: we offer constructive advice and he sasy \"Yeah right. I'm outta here.\"

[Officer] [En]: That does not stand in my book.

To [Het]: when we tell you how to get us to party with you you blow us off

[Officer] [Ala]: He's done it twice today.

[Officer] [En]: I said in party chat taht I was going to talk to him and I mean it! but if you have it in hand...

[Officer] [Tut]: i wrote \"if you want to feel included, try following protocol\"

[Officer] [Tut]: and \"we tell you how to get us to party with you and you blow us off\"

[Officer] [En]: Does he expect us to drop everything to run off and help him after the attitude he gives us?

[Officer] [Ala]: Yeah, what En said!

[Officer] [Ala]: I had someone else complain about him today.

<~6.5 min>

[Officer] [En]: and what'd Het say?

[Officer] [Tut]: Het ignored me

[Officer] [Ala]: didn't respond at all?

[Officer] [Tut]: not one peep

[Officer] [En]: He needs to curb his attitude and pronto. The \"Fix him\" mentality is turning into a \"kick him out\" mentality.

[Officer] [En]: If you don't want to be a bad-guy, I can do it :)

Conclusion

It is arguable that online spaces are less risky and allow for a wider range of behavior because users can start anew very easily by changing their screen name (Clark, 1998). These arguments, however, are mostly made by using instant messaging and online chat communication as examples. An MMORPG, like MUDs before it (Turkle, 1995), does not lend itself to the same sorts of persona abandonment because of the amount of time and effort needed to cultivate one's avatar or on-screen character.

Mirosław Filiciak (2003) writes:

There are enough niches in the Internet to deconstruct one's identity, giving it a transparent form through the placing of various identities in a number of environments... However, maintaining only one, long-term avatar seems to be an optimal variant [in MMORPGs], because of the advantages that follow from its development, which also leads to a deepening of the player's investment in and identification with the avatar. It clearly shows that the residents of virtual lands treat their net-life much more seriously than it would seem to people from the outside.

Yet, some players, like Yar's player, freely abandon their personae when they have not yet established very strong ties to them. In other words, Yar's player was trying different characters and classes early on in his *WoW* experience. I think if he had spent several weeks on a particular character (and exhibited some patience) he might not have been so keen to treat his avatars as loosely as he had.

Other players, like Het's player, are less adept at fitting in than other players even if they place much value in their avatars' identities. I've come to the conclusion that some people, in any community, will never "get it." This is depressing news for educators. It is especially depressing to realize that some forms of learning proper behavior are seen as illegitimate by the very community one is trying to join. Just like it is not seen as legitimate to learn about hip-hop culture from direct instruction rather than becoming immersed in the culture (Richardson and Lewis, 2000), it is not legitimate to learn about the social practices of *WoW* through mentoring. I should take a moment to say that my experiences can perhaps only speak about my particular RP server on *WoW*. Constance Steinkuehler (2004), on the other hand, describes many mentoring experiences in *Lineage*. On my server, the preferred way of learning is by personal observation. A player on my guild's message board wrote, "Most people adapt to our attitudes quickly, I've found. They join, stay quiet for a bit, then once our 'social rules' are observed they

feel out talking with us. And everyone wins!” It is absurd for me to talk to Yar and Het about their behaviors and how they are anti-social, just as it is absurd to give a pep-rally to estranged employees in a corporate environment. How does an educator begin to address this? How about a researcher or gamer?

In an attempt to be inclusive, some form of mediation needs to develop other than outright rejection from the group. Somehow designers of communities need to legitimately introduce rules and boundaries. Too many specific rules from the start about how to interact and communicate with others would seem to limit the amount of “fun” players could get out of a game they purchased. Instead, these guidelines have to emerge from within the guild for its members to value them. Kollock and Smith (1996) cite Elinor Ostrom’s observed design principles of sustainable, online, virtual communities:

1. Group boundaries are clearly defined
2. Rules governing the use of collective goods are well matched to local needs and conditions
3. Most individuals affected by these rules can participate in modifying the rules
4. The rights of community members to devise their own rules is respected by external authorities
5. A system for monitoring member’s behavior exists; this monitoring is undertaken by the community members themselves
6. A graduated system of sanctions is used
7. Community members have access to low-cost conflict resolution mechanisms

Unfortunately, the actual work that goes into making this set of rules apply to specific communities is mired in all the details. I think all I can hope to do is my best and realize that sometimes a community has to be defined by who it includes *and* who it excludes. I’ll end this paper with a guild member’s post to the guild’s website in an attempt to address Het’s chat behavior.

I love [guild name] which is all of you! This is a wonderful guild and I have made some wonderful friends here. I am calling this home and with spring lurking around the corner I feel like a little cleaning and redecorating.

Since we all respect each other and are here to cooperate and have fun, our guild chat should reflect that. I love teasing and ribbing but it needs to be in fun not actual criticisms of someone. Insults have no place in my home so I am throwing them out. They clutter and mess up the place horribly.

Greed is not only ugly but foul smelling too .It is being tossed out immediately! Even those things that have the slightest resemblance to greed are going. If there is ever an uber item that I find. I will consider who might benefit and offer it to them in tells. That way, no one will be able to even suspect greed or catch a whiff of it. The air in my home will always smell fresh and clean.

My home is fairly small so there really isn't room for any clutter at all. It is necessary to throw out all of the following: disrespect, arrogance, jealousy, hurtfulness, boasting and any random human parts that smell foul. There is especially no room for large egos! If you think you are more important than someone else in my home then the door is just over there, use it.

Incredible, look at all the extra room we have. We need to put in some well placed vases of hugs, praise, and laughter!

brushes her hands off There all done! *Smiles and looks around and takes a deep clean breath.* I love it here!

HUGS

V

P.S. Just so you know, if you bring any crap into my home I will be diligent about pointing it out to you so that you can dispose of it immediately.

V's sentiments were met with enthusiasm and agreement on the discussion boards, and I can only hope we live up to everyone's expectations in the future.

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