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MMO Morality

Richard A. Bartle
University of Essex

Abstract

When people sign up to play a game, they have broad expectations as to what will be involved in terms of time commitment, gameplay, skill requirements, genre and atmosphere. If the game does not meet their standards, they don't play; if they do play, it means they are acquiescing to the game's demands. This is as true of Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMOs) as it is of *Monopoly*: if you don't like it, you don't play. Otherwise, so long as what you're asked to do sits within the boundaries of your expectations, you can happily immerse yourself.

Sometimes, however, you may be asked during play to do something outside what you thought were the boundary lines. For example, if you were enjoying a cerebral role-playing game and suddenly discovered that in order to progress you had to undertake a fast-reactions, high-speed racing mini-game, your level of engagement might be compromised[1]. When this kind of thing happens, you are tugged out of the game back into reality; you then have to make the decision as to whether to carry on playing or not.

This paper considers one particular kind of expectation held by players of MMOs – the morality imbued in the game world's fiction – and examines problems that can arise when the views of players and the game's designer fall out of step. It concludes with an assessment of what this means for the morality of game design itself.

Keywords

MMORPG, MMO, virtual world, morality, magic circle, game design.

Introduction

This paper concerns morality in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMOs). Almost all of what it says also applies to other games, but the longevity and evolutionary nature of MMOs makes them especially vulnerable to troubles in this area.

Miguel Sicart defines the ethics of computer games as follows:

the ethics of the game as a system of rules that creates a game world, which is experienced by a moral agent with creative and participatory capacities, and who develops through time the capacity to apply a set of player virtues. (Sicart, 2009)

Sicart's methodology considers the ethics of computer games as a function of: the ethics inherent in the game's design; how these ethics are

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[1] Yes, I'm talking to you, *Knights of the Old Republic*.

exposed to players; players' own ethics. It is particularly sensitive to what it means to be a "good" player, determined using a virtue ethics approach (Reynolds, 2002; Sicart, 2005a).

The argument I put forth in this paper concerns a topic which only requires that the game designer and players are considered as real-world culturally embedded moral agents; it does not draw on matters arising from gameplay. Therefore, although it is compatible with Sicart's approach, it addresses a much narrower range of issues – but it does so in some detail.

The term *culturally embedded moral agents* presupposes that each individual has their own, personal, moral code which they strive to adhere to and that they feel is right. "Morality" here is not fixed or impartial, but is relative to the individual[2]. Now although different people can have widely different ethical standards, it is not the purpose of this paper to make judgments about these; what is under consideration here is *not* morality itself – what is, in absolute terms, right or wrong – but rather the situations that arise when the morality of the designer and the players of an MMO are not in line. In particular, it is concerned with what happens when the designer pushes players further than they comfortably would wish to go, which leads to a moral issue that *is* under consideration.

Frames and Boundaries

The formal acronym for Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games, MMORPG, proved too long and unwieldy for everyday use, which is why today the term is usually further abbreviated to MMO. However, the missing RPG part is important: people do role-play in these games.

Speak to an MMO player about "role-playing", and they'll suppose you mean communicating in old forms of (in my case) English while trying to act as if you *really are* an elven druid. Now while that is indeed a form of role-playing, it's what's called "hard" role-playing (Bartle, 2003): the player attempts to become the character, but the character doesn't change a great deal. Most players engage in "soft" role-playing – they take on the role of the tank[3], or the healer[4], or DPS[5] for example – in which the player and the character are both able to change in the light of experience. Players are pretending to be someone else (their character) in order that they can be and become themselves (Bartle, 2005; Mayer, 2010).

Through their characters[6], players can interact with the game world and with other characters (which is to say, conduits to other players). They will do things that they cannot do in real life, not just physically (no fireballs in real life) but also socially (age, race, gender and class barriers are different). They can experiment with being themselves, knowing that if they do mess up, well, "it's just a game".

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[2] This does not have to be your view – you're at liberty to define morality as fixed or God-given if you like. The point is, players all have their own views and act on them accordingly, irrespective of whether anyone else shares those views.

[3] Tank: "Don't hit them, hit me".

[4] Healer: "This will help stop you getting killed, tank".

[5] DPS (Damage Per Second): "Take *this*, varlet! And this! And this! Muahahaha!"

[6] Note that I don't mean *avatars* – the graphical representation of characters – I mean the in-world entity that the real-world player controls, which acts as a conduit for their actions and interactions. You can have a *character* in a textual world, but you can't have an avatar in one. Sicart calls these *player-subjects* (Sicart, 2009).

This works, because MMOs present a conceit that the virtual world is separate from the real world. The players are aware that the virtual world *is* part of reality, of course, but they so *want* for it to be separate that they are prepared through strength of will to treat it as if it were. This is because the benefits they gain from treating it as a separate world with its own set of rules outweigh the benefits lost from no longer operating under all the social norms of everyday life.

In game studies, this is called the *magic circle* (Huizinga, 1955) – an agreement between players to limit some behaviours in order to liberate others[7]. Psychologists use a more general term for packages of meaning-in-context: *frames* (Goffman, 1974). The supposition is that in order to keep decision-making manageable, individuals maintain multiple sets of details and related rationalisations, and use whichever set is appropriate for the situation to inform their choices. Todd Gitlin describes them succinctly as:

Principles of selection, emphasis and presentation composed of little tacit theories about what exists, what happens and what matters. (Gitlin, 1980)

Frames occur everywhere in everyday life. If you were to walk down the street dressed in Elizabethan garb, people would stare and wonder as to the state of your mental health – there is dissonance with the expected "pedestrian" frame; do it on stage in a production of a Shakespeare play, however, and your actions would pass without comment – the "actor" frame kicks in and explains it. Sometimes, a frame can even be the norm: if you dress in a formal business suit during Mardi Gras in Rio de Janiero, *you're* the weird one. People can switch effortlessly between frames they recognise, even when the boundaries begin to blur, as can happen with MMOs and real life (Hemminger, 2010).

The protection of a frame allows people to cross otherwise socially-enforced boundaries. When you say, "it's just a game", you can do things that you simply couldn't do if it weren't a game – the "game" frame is extremely powerful in this regard[8]. However, there *are* still boundaries.

For example, an entrant for the 2008 Nordic Game Jam[9] was *Dark Room Sex Game* for the Nintendo Wii. This is a (now award-winning) game for two players, using Wiimote controllers but with no graphics. Players take it in turns to swing their Wiimote, which causes a sound of pleasure to be made (as if the players were engaged in a sex act). It's essentially a co-operative rhythm game: players gradually speed up their swings until they are close enough together to trigger the "orgasm" moment, and the game ends.

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[7] For example, if I were playing white in chess then I could, on my first move, physically move my queen to where your queen is and remove your queen from the board, then move my queen back to her starting position. However, this would be against the rules of chess, and you would stop playing with me if I did that. If I want the benefit (in this case, fun) of playing chess, I have to give up the freedom I would ordinarily have to move around small objects (in this case, chess pieces) in my vicinity. While all players of a game are giving up their freedoms in order to gain benefits, the magic circle holds and there is a game.

[8] The sport of *Boxing*, for example, is a game that involves attempting to deal sufficient brain damage to your opponent to lead to concussion – something that would not be acceptable in almost any other circumstance short of self-defence.

[9] This is a competition held yearly at ITU Copenhagen. The theme for 2008 was "taboo". http://nordicgamejam.org/08/

Part of the rationale for writing *Dark Room Sex Game* was to push players across boundaries, and it does indeed do this. Normally, people would be embarrassed by the sounds alone, never mind the point that they themselves were causing them to be made by swinging their Wiimote. However, the protection of "it's just a game" allows them to overcome their reservations; in fact, most of the fun derives from this very crossing of boundaries – the gameplay itself isn't especially compelling.

There are, though, still boundaries. What if it were two straight men playing and both the voices were male? Some people might laugh it off, but others might stop playing: for them, the game would have overstepped the mark of their own personal morality[10]. What if one of the voices were that of a donkey, rather than a human? OK, well we may lose a few more potential players. What if one of the voices were that of a child? Ah. There would probably be very few people who would want to play under those circumstances, "it's just a game" or not. There is an interplay between the fiction of the game and the reality in which the game is embedded, a concept Jesper Juul calls *half-real* (Juul, 2005); when the reality intrudes too much, the fiction is unsustainable and collapses.

As for when that collapse might occur, it depends on the individual. The point is, though, that there is always *something* that, were it to appear in a game, would be sufficiently emotive that it would yank the player out of the game and back to reality – something that bursts the protective bubble of the magic circle. Just because a game gives you *permission* to cross a boundary, that doesn't mean you *will* cross it – your own, personal view of what's right and what's wrong becomes a factor.

MMO Design

The main job of the lead designer of an MMO involves the following:

- Setting the fictional context of the virtual world.
- Providing a set of possible *actions* that the players can undertake that make sense within this context. Players have to be able to do things, both positive and negative, that they can't do in real life.
- Offering a range of *goals* for the players. Players need a reason to *want* to do the many things that they *can* do.
- Presenting events in such a way that they allow players to make *decisions* as to which action to undertake or which goal to pursue. (Note: games are very good at this).

So, the designer sets the fictional framework, tells the plays what they can do within it, offers reasons why they might want to do it, and supplies multiple alternatives so they have decisions to make[11]. If you don't think any of this is going to give you what you want from the game, you don't play.

However, there is a problem: part of what people find entertaining about MMOs is *not knowing* what will happen in them. The designer *can't* tell

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[10] Just as a reminder, I'm not making moral judgments myself here. You don't get to hate me for saying that some people think gay sex is amoral and other people don't.
[11] The actions, goals and decisions correspond to the "means, motive and opportunity" that detectives consider when solving crimes – which, by a happy accident of the English language, also has the acronym MMO.

players exactly what is expected of them, because that would spoil their fun! Yet if you don't know what a game involves, how can you tell whether you'll like it or not?

Well, what happens is that designers create a set of general expectations that show where the boundaries lie. They covenant with players that, even though the players don't know exactly what is coming up, it will fall within these boundaries. There are several such boundaries: this paper is only concerned with those to do with morality, but others do exist – genre[12] and gameplay[13], for example.

For example, suppose you are told up front that a game is all about knitting. Were you to play it, you couldn't complain if it indeed turned out to feature a lot of knitting. You *could* complain if it didn't feature much knitting at all. You could also complain if it featured a lot of knitting but also had your character stabbing people to death with knitting needles – you would have expected the designer to have mentioned that, er, point, as it isn't something traditionally associated with common knitting practice.

The same applies to games about dancing, soccer management, killing zombies, … You don't know exactly what you're getting, but you know enough to make a reasonably informed decision as to whether you would want to play or not. Sicart's whole methodology for the morality of computer games is predicated on this very assumption: that players are playing voluntarily (Sicart, 2005b).

Games aren't the only medium where this has to happen – it's a widespread issue. For example, J. K. Rowling could write *Harry Potter 8* to include harrowing scenes of drug abuse and wife-beating – she'd be breaking no laws. However, it would be a major act of irresponsibility not to mention this misalignment with reader expectations before putting the book on sale – preferably in very large letters on the front cover.

As with novel-writing, game design is an art form (Feige, 2010). Designers say things in their designs, just as authors do in books, screenwriters do in screenplays, songwriters do in song, choreographers do in dance, … This means that game designers get to set the moral stance of their games; they define what, in the context of the game, is good, evil, and in between. Furthermore, this is the case *whether they like it or not* – it's intrinsic to the act of design.

Players are made aware of this moral stance before they sign up. If it has guns then you know someone is going to get shot at; if you don't like that kind of violence[14], then you don't play. It's actually possible that there may be several moral boundaries involved. For example, if you take the side of the FBI in a 1920s gangster game, then you won't get to firebomb shops; if you take the side of the mafia, well, you may.

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[12] I know it's not a game, but I can't have been the only person to have experienced a WTF moment when *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* suddenly turned the franchise from supernatural to (bad) science fiction.

[13] A game that promises to be in-depth but isn't (or *vice versa*) is just as likely to cause a player to stop playing as one which promises to be erotic but isn't (or *vice versa*).

[14] There is some debate as to whether this is merely the depiction of violence, or whether the interactive nature of computer games and the ways that players read the symbols of the fiction qualify it to be something more. This is a general problem with MMOs: how much of what is presented as real actually maps to real-world analogues? (Williams, 2010)

Designers can excuse otherwise boundary-crossing behaviour if it makes sense in context. For example, in the MMO *World of Warcraft: Wrath of the Lich King*, a new character class was introduced called the "death knight". It's made clear when you start to play one of these that you are, initially, under the influence of an evil power. You can therefore expect to be told to do evil things, which indeed you are. If you're uncomfortable with this, well you shouldn't really be playing a death knight. If you trust the designer and accept the situation, you find sure enough that it is only short-lived: you are soon freed from your servitude, to spend the rest of your death knight career seeking atonement. The overall moral stance of the game is therefore not unbalanced; boundaries are crossed, but they are crossed for a reason which makes the return all the more powerful.

Note, however, that although boundaries are crossed, there *are* still boundaries. You may *suspect* you'll be asked to kill innocents, but you *know* that you won't be asked to rape children.

This exposition of the moral context for a game usually works just fine, but it can break down. The message may not get across, or may be ambiguous. For example, I knew I could get turned into a vampire in *Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* because it was made clear from the onset that this was a possibility. However, I didn't know it was almost certain to happen if I played the game through, nor how frustrating and distasteful an experience vampirism would be. The designers presumably did know this, but failed to communicate it – I imagine because so many players had been asking to play as a vampire that they thought it obvious.

With MMOs, the moral flavour is in part the result of an ongoing dialogue between designers and players. In general, a designer makes an offer of a product made up of a set of features (gameplay, graphics, genre and so on) on the basis of which potential players will choose whether or not to buy it. Those who do buy it will develop a culture (Thimm, 2010) that designers can respond to through patches and expansions; this in turn will shape the virtual world in ways that the players react and adapt to, and the cycle continues. One of the important features "discussed" this way is the MMO's moral tone. When it is far from the real-world norm, it should be stated (and indeed usually is, often as a selling point[15]). However, having set the tone, designers can do whatever they like within its limits; players who complain are effectively asking designers to break the covenant they have with all the other players, which, if they did do this, would be wrong.

Here, suddenly if not subtly, we get to the central issue of this paper. I used the word "wrong" there – I was making a *moral judgment*. What I'm ultimately discussing is not so much the morality inherent within an MMO as the moral obligations designers have to uphold the pledges they make to players – of which the MMO's moral stance is but one. If I start to play a game that promises X and I get Y instead, I have a right to feel cheated; and, as every designer knows, players do *not* like feeling cheated...

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[15] This is the case whatever the direction away from the norm. An MMO that is child-friendly and contains no scenes of violence has just as much reason to advertise this fact as one that is adult-only and features gore scenes galore.

Breaking the Covenant

What happens when a designer actually wants to break their covenant with the players?

Well, it depends on for how long they want it to be broken, by how much they want to break it, and why they want to break it.

If it's a permanent affair, then basically they have to step out of the magic circle to announce it, as they're effectively ending one game and starting another. There may well be some fictional cover for reasons of continuity (*e.g.* to explain why all of a sudden there are aliens in the wild west), but you have to tell people beforehand that the game they are playing is about to change into a new game. If you don't, and simply break the covenant without plenty of warning, why would anyone ever believe that you wouldn't do the same thing again? It's a matter of trust.

Although it might seem to a player that breaking the covenant is *never* excusable, there are actually several legitimate reasons for doing so, especially in MMOs (which have long lifetimes compared to regular computer games). For example, *Star Wars: Galaxies* was originally an MMO with a high emphasis on crafting as well as combat, but after a few years of success it began to shed players. The developers were faced with the choice of seeing it fail completely, or changing its direction in the hope of stopping the rot. They decided to try to stabilise it around that part of the player base interested primarily in combat[16], and announced some time in advance that "new game enhancements" were in the pipeline. Those players who preferred crafting to combat were understandably upset, but they were given ample warning and were able to say their goodbyes before they left for, well, probably *World of Warcraft* actually. Whatever, the ploy worked: although *SW:G* is not as popular as it once was, it is nevertheless holding steady in its niche sufficiently well for its long-term future to be reasonably assured. If the design team had stuck with the original covenant, the MMO would undoubtedly have been closed down completely by now and no-one at all would be able to play it; at least this way combat fans can.

Designers can also legitimately step over a moral boundary in order to establish it. This trespass can't last too long, and it must make sense in context, but it's a handy weapon in the designer's arsenal so long as it is only used sparingly. The example with the death knights in *WoW* is a case in point: the players get to play on the evil side for a while, in order to show just how bad the enemy (the Lich King) truly is. When they break free of his influence, they now know where the boundaries lie: evil people do these things, but you're good – you *don't* do them.

There's a later quest in *WoW* available to all characters, "Army of the Damned", in which you get to role-play the Lich King himself in order to understand the magnitude of his power. Again, although this involves killing a hundred good guys and raising an undead army from their corpses, it fits in with the fiction and establishes where the boundaries lie: the enemy takes glee

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[16] When it came down to it, crafting, though a very popular part of *SW:G*, was justified solely on the grounds that it provided items needed for combat; therefore if combat were removed there would be no point to the crafting. Furthermore, by removing crafting, combat could be streamlined and made more intense, so the combat-oriented players would be inclined to stay. Thus, bye bye crafting…

in the indiscriminate killing of good people, but you don't[17]. The text of the quest makes it *very* clear that you are crossing a boundary temporarily; this design technique is called *flagging* – marking a situation (in this case a quest) as being different from regular situations, so the players know to treat it differently (*i.e.* that it has its own frame-within-a-frame).

There are other examples of similar boundary-setting quests in *WoW*. One, "Zenn's Bidding", which occurs relatively early in the game, has a shady satyr asking you to kill things for him that you know you're not really supposed to kill. If you do it anyway, the authorities find out and make you undertake another quest to redeem yourself. Thus, you are implicitly informed that there's a moral boundary in place that you're not expected to cross (or at least that if you do cross it, expect consequences). Here, the flagging comes after the quest, with the follow-up: you're tempted over the line, but the next quest makes it plain (*i.e.* flags) that this is not something you can expect to happen routinely. Flagged quests are making a point.

"The Art of Persuasion"

I've mentioned *World of Warcraft*'s quests several times here, because they show that the designers of *WoW* do know how to do things right.

Here is an example of where they do things wrong…

There is a quest in *World of Warcraft*, "The Art of Persuasion", which is part of an eight-link chain. Earlier quests in the chain have established that mages are being kidnapped at random, and that one of the archmages of the Kirin Tor – Lady Evanor – is among them. The Kirin Tor is a "good" faction of non-player characters who are opposed to the Lich King; their city was almost destroyed earlier in the fiction when one of their archmages defected, so quite reasonably they don't want Lady Evanor to be broken and change sides too. Using a Kirin Tor device called an "arcane binder", you have been able to capture one of Lady Evanor's kidnappers (a Beryl Sorcerer), and now the whereabouts of Lady Evanor herself can be determined – *if* the sorcerer talks.

Here's how the Kirin Tor representative lays out what he wants you to do[18]:

> *It is fortunate you're here, <race>. You see, the Kirin Tor code of conduct frowns upon our taking certain 'extreme' measures – even in desperate times such as these. You, however, as an outsider, are not bound by such restrictions and could take any steps necessary in the retrieval of information. Do what you must. We need to know where Lady Evanor is being held at once!*
>
> *I'll just busy myself organizing these shelves here. Oh, and here, perhaps you'll find this old thing useful….*

At this point, a device called a "Neural Needler" appears in your inventory. The quest summary states:

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[17] Unfortunately, judging by the comments regarding this quest on Wowhead, the designer was not entirely successful in conveying this conclusion…
http://www.wowhead.com/?quest=13395
[18] http://www.wowhead.com/?quest=11648

Librarian Normantis on Amber Ledge wants you to use the Neural Needler on the Imprisoned Beryl Sorcerer until he reveals the location of Lady Evanor.

So, the Beryl Sorcerer knows where Lady Evanor is, but isn't saying. Members of the Kirin Tor are forbidden by their own moral code to torture him, however they see no contradiction in giving you a pain stick to do the torturing for them.

Most players did this quest without a second thought – "it's just a game". A significant minority, however, were completely *dismayed* by it. Up until this point, on the Alliance[19] side at least, everything that players have been asked to do has fallen within boundaries that approximate those of the Geneva Convention[20]. Suddenly, they're being asked to torture someone. This isn't something that good people *do*. It's something only *evil* people do. Isn't it?

So why isn't it flagged?

The quest *could* be flagged in any number of ways: there could be a means to refuse to do the torture, which might enhance your reputation with the Kirin Tor ("You have passed our test"); there could be a way to reason with the sorcerer so you don't have to needle his neurons; there could be bad consequences, for example his giving you the location of a trap rather than Lady Evanor; there could be an about-turn, in which *you* are captured and tortured to provide information – perhaps information you don't know. There are any number of ways that the quest could be flagged to say "this is not a normal quest!", but none are present. The quest is *not* flagged.

There are several possible explanations for what is going on here[21].

1)   It could be an artistic statement. The Lich King is actually a dual entity, formed from the merger of the original Lich King with Arthas Menethil, a human prince who became so consumed by his efforts to defeat evil that he himself became evil. By a series of incremental steps, he pushed his moral boundaries further and further back, each action seemingly justifiable to him but increasingly unjustifiable to others (*e.g.* setting fire to his troops' ships so they couldn't obey the king's order to come home, which would have left Arthas with no army). By asking players to do a small wrong (torture) in order to do a greater right (save a life), the designer may be hoping to give some insight into Arthas' descent to evil; the quest lets the players see how he came to be what he became.

This would be a legitimate thing to do, but if it were indeed the designer's intention then it should have been flagged. If you want to point out that someone has crossed a moral line, you have to do just that – *point it out*. If you don't, people either won't notice it or they'll think you don't believe you crossed a line (*i.e.* that you're a jerk).

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[19] *WoW* has two opposing sides, Horde and Alliance. Although they are united against the Lich King, they are nevertheless deeply suspicious of one another so do not act in concert. The Horde is more ends-justifies-the-means than Alliance, so may feature some more morally dubious (in some views) quests. I've only ever played Alliance, though, so have no direct experience of these myself.

[20] Strictly speaking, Geneva *Conventions* – there are four of them, dealing primarily with the treatment of non-combatants and prisoners of war.

[21] My attempts to contact the designer of the quest to find out which is the correct interpretation have come to nothing. If it's you, get in touch, please..!

2)   It could be a political statement. The US government is forbidden by the US constitution to torture prisoners, but, having prisoners it wished to torture, is alleged (Grey, 2006) to have outsourced it using a process known as "extraordinary rendition". The quest could be drawing parallels to this in an effort to comment on the USA's anti-terrorism strategy.

Again, this is fair enough but it has to be flagged in order to work. If the prisoner gave false information, or if other factions turned against you because of what you did, then you would have pause for thought. However, it's not flagged. People will either fail to notice, believe the designer sees nothing wrong with torture, or (for those who are very into politics) suspect that the designer put the quest in without comment in order to show tacit support for extraordinary rendition.

3)   *World of Warcraft* was launched in 2004. Perhaps the designer wanted to reflect its growing maturity by incorporating edgier material?

Again, this is legitimate *if* you let the players know what is happening. People who play under the old covenant need to be informed *external* to the game that the covenant is changing (because the covenant is itself external to the game). This is so they can decide not to play if they want. I certainly didn't know when I bought the *Wrath of the Lich King* expansion that my character would be asked to torture non-player characters. I knew I'd have to kill them in a "justifiable homicide" kind of way, but I didn't know I'd be poking them with a Neural Needler while they were tied up in a chair.

4)   The default reading is the one that applies to all unflagged quests: it wasn't flagged because the designer didn't believe that it fell outside the normal moral boundaries of the game. It transgressed no expectations because it was, the designer believed, within them.

Well, the designer was wrong. Sufficient numbers of players *were* alarmed by the quest that it was definitely an issue[22]. So either the designer didn't know where players drew their moral lines, or the designer didn't believe that torture crossed those lines, or (in my opinion the most likely explanation) the designer didn't actually think about it beyond the level of gameplay mechanics ("what shall I make this quest involve, hmm, what modules haven't I used for a while..."). None of these situations is satisfactory.

In cases where the players don't notice the crossing of a line, whether through its not being a line for them or because they weren't paying attention, this quest presents no problem. Concern only arises when the designer's moral boundaries are not in harmony with those of the player and the player spots it; when this happens, the player has to decide whether to continue playing or not. In this particular example, some chose the latter.

However, even though there were lots of people who did find "The Art of Persuasion" disturbing, they were vastly outnumbered by those who

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[22] I speak as the butt of hundreds of forum postings and emails on the subject… I should perhaps mention that I blogged about this quest when I first encountered it, and my opinion was rapidly picked up and commented upon until something of a firestorm arose. Having read every mention of it I could find (close to a thousand of them), I'm therefore in a reasonably good position to summarise what different sections of players thought about the quest (which I indeed do in the next few pages).
http://www.youhaventlived.com/qblog/2008/QBlog191108A.html
http://www.youhaventlived.com/qblog/2008/QBlog261108A.html

apparently didn't; most players went right ahead and did the quest as normal. Why was this?

Well the most obvious answer is that these unworried people don't actually see anything wrong with torture so were happy to do it in the game. Torture seems to be effective in TV shows such as *24*, it's only used in exceptional circumstances, and much worse things go on in *WoW* than torture anyway (rogues routinely garrotte people, blind them, stab them in the back and so on). If people believe that torture is no worse than some of the other things they consented to accept as legitimate when they started to play, then they won't even register that a line has been crossed; this is because for them, none *has* been crossed.

Although I don't doubt that there are plenty of people who fall into this category, it's not actually the full story. When challenged about it, many of those who did the quest responded[23] along the lines of "it's just a game", which suggests that they do find the quest a little odd now they think about it, but hey, no real sorcerer was harmed so it's OK. The "game" frame, while not legitimising torture, at least allows it to be disregarded. Nevertheless, if they didn't think torture was bad then they would have felt no need to use the "it's just a game" excuse at all, and although there were some people who put up a spirited defence of torture as a general concept they were heavily in the minority.

Another possibility is that people did feel unease at the quest, but decided to do it anyway because they wanted to explore a related aspect of their personality. The whole point of MMOs is being able to do things in the game world that you can't do in real life, in order to be and become yourself. If you cross a moral boundary, you find things out about yourself (at least subconsciously) that you might not have learned otherwise. This is actually a sound reason for doing the quest even though it might have felt a little disturbing at the time. That said, it doesn't alter the fact that you should still have been made aware *before* you started to play that you might find yourself facing this kind of decision.

My personal opinion is that the reason so many people did the torture quest without really noticing it is because they were so caught up in their headlong rush to reach level 80 that they lost all sense of narrative. They decoupled the relationship between inducements to act and the actions themselves. This is the mirror of how (I would surmise) the quest got in there in the first place: only the syntax was considered, not the semantics. When the semantics is pointed out, well, "it's only a game".[24]

In Defence of *WoW*

WoW has a number of other quests that are problematical for some people. For example, "Tormenting the Softknuckles" involves zapping baby gorillas with some kind of cow poke in order to enrage their mother enough that she comes out from her hiding place so you can kill her. "Surrender …

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[23] I'm reporting my impression from having read what they wrote in their forum postings; I didn't categorise every posting I read as I read them, though, so am unable to provide absolute numbers here.

[24] Aside: what does this mean for games-as-education? If players can breeze through a torture quest without picking up any signals, could they breeze through a medieval history edutainment game and come out having obtained no educational benefit at all?

Not!" is a comedy quest where you dress up in a wacky murloc[25] suit and under the cover of a white flag get close to an enemy leader so you can kill him. It might therefore be surmised that the game is full of morally ambiguous and/or offensive quests.

It's not.

Given that *WoW* has several thousand quests overall[26], it's a testament to the designers' skills that there are so few that cross its established moral boundaries. *WoW* is only mentioned here because the particular example that prompted the writing of this paper came from *WoW*, and because this quest in turn was itself only worth mentioning due to its contradicting *WoW*'s otherwise very high standards[27].

WoW also has a tighter moral boundary than many other MMOs. Here, for example is a summary of the "Saving Silverlake" quest[28] from *Vanguard: Saga of Heroes*:

- A Zar cult has taken over some farmers near a town called Silverlake by possessing them with Zar souls.
- A group called the United Races of Thestra (the URT) wants to ingratiate itself with the inhabitants of Silverlake, so decides to free the farmers.
- A group of bandits has stolen the URT's "soul render" device, which can suck the Zar souls out of the farmers. You have to go get it from them.
- Once you have killed sufficient bandits to obtain the soul render, you use it to suck the Zar souls out of 10 farmers. The souls attack you, but the farmers don't because they're left in a daze.
- The URT learns that the soul render sucked the farmers' own souls out, too! They're not in a daze, they're effectively zombies. If this is noticed, the locals won't like it…
- Zombie farmers are attracted by the dust of gargoyle-like creatures called Netherbeasts. You need to kill a bunch of them to collect 25 piles of dust.
- You use the dust to lure three farmers, one at a time, to the nearby mill. There you kill each one and put their bodies into the meat grinder to dispose of the evidence.
- Put the pieces of ground-up farmer meat into a food barrel and you're done. The reward is a nice piece of leg armour.

Vanguard flags the quest as being played for laughs from the beginning, because the URT are that kind of well-meaning but incompetent outfit. Nevertheless, say what you like about *WoW*, you're unlikely to be asked to make burgers out of farmers in it…

"It's Just a Game"

Some players have little depth to their thinking, and will cheerfully use the "it's just a game" argument to assert that there is nothing they wouldn't do for experience points. Everything they are doing in the game world is fictional,

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[25] These are a kind of fish people.

[26] 7,650 as of the *Wrath of the Lich King* expansion.

[27] I can assure you that it was not my hope to bring down the wrath of 11,500,000 players on my head when I first blogged on the topic…

[28] http://www.vgwalkthroughs.com/page/parts/87

none of the apparent symbols mean anything beyond their use as game tokens, and no real harm is done.

So, they'd do <their most abhorrent idea of sexual assault> to a representation of <the deity they worship>? If it looked like their mother and spoke with her voice?

Everyone has *something* that would introduce enough reality into their game world to shock them out of it. It doesn't even have to be offensive: real-world toothpaste advertisements in a Fantasy world would probably do the trick. What these players mean when they say they would do "anything" is that they would do anything within their concept of what constitutes the magic circle.

The designer tries to keep things within the bounds of player expectation because that's their job: people want to play a game, and if you burst the magic circle by collapsing to reality, there is no game. Players have different-sized magic circles of varying robustness, but they all satisfy a set of minimum criteria. This is where designers must strive to contain play. If they don't do that, then the game is being played under a false prospectus which, in my belief, is immoral on the part of those who offered that prospectus – the designers.

Conclusion

The players of games in general and MMOs in particular operate within a moral framework primarily established by the designer through the MMO's design. People who do not find this framework acceptable do not even play the game, therefore the design selects for those who do.

Most moral dilemmas that players encounter will fit within those boundaries that the designer has set. A small few, however, could fall outside these boundaries. When this happens, the designer has to indicate that the dilemma is *deliberately* the wrong side of the boundary, so players a) notice it, and b) understand that the boundary-crossing was for an artistic or political purpose. If this doesn't happen, it suggests that the designer didn't think it was amoral in the context of the game: it therefore makes a statement about the morality of the game as a whole. This can have unwanted consequences ("Blizzard doesn't think torture is a big deal"[29]).

When a game crosses a moral boundary, it causes those players whose own moral boundaries were congruent with this boundary to suffer an emotional surprise. An individual shocked out of a context will no longer frame things within that context; in game terms, this means they are no longer playing – they are released from their self-imposed obligation to follow the rules because they are now outside the context in which the rules are meaningful. They then have to decide whether to accept the change in boundary, or stop playing.

No matter how dedicated the player, there is always something which, if it were to appear in the game, would cause reality to interrupt so much that "it's just a game" no longer applies. Sometimes, this is as a result of an external incident and cannot be helped[30]. However, if it's internal to the game

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[29] I'm paraphrasing some of the things I read regarding the *WoW* torture quest. Blizzard (formally Activision Blizzard) is the developer of *WoW*.

[30] As Wednesday Addams put it so well: "It's all fun and games until someone loses an eye. Then, it's just fun."

then it *can* be helped. By adhering to the moral expectations set up before the game starts, the designer must ensure that such shocks do not arise.

What about the morality of *setting* those expectations, though?

Bill Shankly, manager of Liverpool FC from 1959 to 1974, famously once said[31]:

Some people believe football is a matter of life and death. I'm very disappointed with that attitude. I can assure you it is much, much more important than that.

There is a difference between "it's a game" and "it's just a game". What that difference is, however, is not immediately apparent. It's clear that there is a distinction between the morality embedded within an MMO – which can be fluid over time and the result of negotiation – and the moral obligations of the designer – which can't. For example, the morality of a designer's decision deliberately to add features to an MMO knowing them to be clinically addictive is independent of the moral compass of the MMO's fiction. Designers are creating real rules that will implement fictional games, but they are doing so using unwritten, adaptive, internal creative processes that are moderated by their own sense of what is right and what is wrong. The morality of design does not need to conform to the morality of that which is designed; the two are related, but separate.

Just as play, in Juul's characterisation, is a combination of real rules applied to a fictional world, so the *design* of play is a combination of fictional rules applied to the real world. Game design can therefore also be seen as a half-real activity, only with the halves reversed.

The question is, where do the limits of the fictional rules governing the design process lie?

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