Ethics and Morality in a World of Warcraft

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Abstract

How do ethics and morality apply in a massively multi-player online role-playing game (MMORPG)? This paper discuss the ethical views and moral codes that are experienced, expressed, and more often than not, disputed, in today's most popular MMORPG – World of Warcraft. Ethics and morality is introduced in relation to society at large as well as computers and games. World of Warcraft is presented in terms of personal, social, and global experiences that a player may have. For each level, applicable ethical theories and moral codes are discussed. Given the millions of people that subscribe to MMORPGs, and more importantly, the billions of hours they spend in the game; this paper argues that the issues of ethics and morality in such games are not confined to virtual worlds as they impact people's everyday life in reality. It is suggested that ethics should be studied more in relation to social online games; in this venture the theories and frameworks of computer ethics may prove beneficial. It may just be the case that as much can be learnt from online games today as there was to learn from marble games in the past.

Keywords: *Ethics, Morality, Computer, Game, Player, Community, Society*

Introduction

Games are just as old as any notion of ethics and morality. In fact, as social constructs, they have probably co-existed long before we even started to call ourselves humans. Given this outlook, the massively multi-player online role-playing games (MMORPGs) we see today are very interesting from several perspectives. A MMORPG is a genre of online computer role-playing games in which a large number of players, typically thousands, interact with one another and the environment in a virtual world (Bartle, 2003; Jakobsson, 2006; Wikipedia 2008a). The world usually offers a sprawling, rich, and active environment in which things are constantly taking place. As in all role-playing games, players assume the role of a fictional

character and take control over most of that character's actions. MMORPGs are distinguished from single-player or small multi-player games in part by the sheer number of simultaneous players, but also by the world's persistency as it continues evolve also when a player is away from the game (Bartle, 2003; Zackariasson, 2007). They provide thousands of hours of game play, with a nearly infinite variety of goals to achieve (World of Warcraft, 2008a). It is estimated that 30-40 million persons immerse themselves in MMORPGs (extrapolated from Woodcock, 2008). The average player spends around 22 hours per week in the game; some actually spend more time in virtual worlds than they do at work or in any other real life activity (Yee, 2006; Cole and Griffiths, 2007). This makes ethics and morality in MMORPGs very interesting as it is likely to have a large impact on people's everyday lives.

So, how does ethics and morality apply in a MMORPG? Before we look for the answer, we must clarify what we are looking for. Ethics is commonly defined as the philosophical study of morality. Morality in turn refers to the ideal code of conduct, or the doctrines or systems concerned with moral conduct. Ethics thus relates to moral behaviour like theory does to practice. This paper will discuss ethics and morality in relation to MMORPGs in terms of ethical views and moral codes. Ethical views have to do with how different philosophical theories of ethics can be applied to the game; moral codes have to do with code of conducts, implicit as well as explicit, and their function in the world. The MMORPG discussed in this paper is Blizzard Entertainment's World of Warcraft (2008a). The reason for using this game was primarily that it was the most popular MMORPG at the time of writing; moreover, future games in the genre are likely to share many similarities with it. The fact that the author also had some experience of this game did also influence the choice (Leonides, 2008a). Nonetheless, many points and issues discussed in the paper are valid regardless of the MMORPG, computer game, or even society, in question.

In the next section, a few common ethical theories (Aristotelian, Kantian, and Utilitarian) are introduced and discussed. Following that, I will briefly review some previous work on ethics and morality in games and MMORPGs. Thereafter, the game of World of Warcraft is introduced and discussed in terms of the personal, social, and global game experiences. The intention is not to describe all the inns and outs the game; it is rather to describe the fundamental game mechanics from a bottom-up perspective. For each level of experience, applicable ethical views and moral codes are discussed. Finally, a general discussion together with directions for future work and a few concluding remarks wrap up the paper.

Ethics and Society

Ethics originate from the teachings of the classical Greek philosophers: Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Each educated the later and others through investigative dialogues. In essence, ethics is thus the result of their argumentation around issues as: What constitutes a good life, what does it mean to do right, and, how do you systematically study it? Socrates did not leave any writings behind, but luckily some of Plato's dialogues and Aristotle's lecture notes were saved for future generations (Wikipedia, 2008e). In the "Nicomachean Ethics" collection (Wikipedia, 2008f), Aristotle presents a theory of ethics based on virtues and vices. Virtues are positive character traits that balance between two vices (in similar to how body temperature balances between fever and hypothermia). Aristotle believed that all human beings were born with the potential to become ethically virtuous, but to actually do so they had to learn from experience. People who were brought up well by their family and community are likely to adopt behaviour consistent with good virtues. Once they get practical experience they will be able to recognize the most virtuous course of action. In Aristotle's view, every thing has a purpose and an end. The purpose of humans is to reason, and if we do this according to proper virtues, we reach the end, which is the good life. The focus is thus on the importance of continually behaving virtuously and developing virtue rather than specific good actions (Stanford, 2007a).

Virtue ethics remained the dominant approach in Western moral philosophy until the eighteenth century. The explanation to why virtue ethics prevailed so long was likely its adoption by the Catholic Church. In the Age of Enlightenment, when both state and church was challenged, time was ripe for a new perspective. Philosophers at the time struggled with how knowledge could be attained – from reasoning (rationalism) to observation (empiricism). In the "The Critique of Pure Reason" (1781), Immanuel Kant merged the rationalist and empiricist disciplines by introducing the notion that the mind always has an active role in experience and that knowledge thus presumes active thinking. From this stance he developed a theory of ethics based on a view that only the individual performing an act can decide if it is moral or not (Wikipedia, 2008g). According to Kant, it is a human obligation to reason about our actions, but since we are not perfectly rational beings, to act morally must also confirm to a categorical imperative (e.g. universal rule). Kant offered three different definitions of the rule. All conceive that for an act to be morally right, one must act in the same way as any other person would do in one's place, regardless of consequence (Stanford, 2008).

The work of Kant has had a tremendous impact on science and philosophy as we know it today. Yet, a problem with Kantian ethics is that it does not take consequence into consideration although most persons intuitively do so. Following the industrial revolution, Jeremy Bentham and Stuart Mill advocated a new view of ethics based on the principles of utility and equability (Stanford, 2007b), the Utilitarian. According to the principle of utility, an act is morally right if it promotes benefit and reduces harm. According to the principle of equability, each person counts the same when the benefits and harms are added up. The imperative of their ethical view is that actions are moral if they cause the least harm and the most benefit for the greatest number of people.

It is notable that new theories of ethics arise in times of large social change. The views discussed so far are not really mutually exclusive, nor are they the only ones that have been presented since Socrates. However, they are the most influential in Western moral philosophy and together they have a place in most peoples shared view of how to behave, live well, and do right in everyday life. Now, how does ethics and morality relate to MMORPGs?

Morality and Games

In regard to the possibility of even discussing ethics and morality relative to games, there is at least no lack of precedent. Jean Piaget's (1932) work on the moral judgements and ethical considerations of children playing marbles is a definite forerunner (as hinted to in the last line of the abstract). The aim with this paper is however not to dwell on individual choices, quandaries, or deliberations. Instead, the scope is on a more general discussion of how ethics and morality relate to games with a virtual, yet in social terms very real, content. MMORPGs are today studied in a wide range of research disciplines: Interaction design (Bartle, 2003; Jakobsson, 2006), social sciences (Ducheneaut et al., 2006, Zackariasson, 2007), economics (Balkin and Simone, 2006), law (Lastowka and Hunter, 2003), and even, epidemics (Balicer, 2007). The discussions around ethical and moral issues relative to these games have however been fairly limited, not without exceptions though. Miguel Sicart's PhD thesis on "Computer Games, Players, and Ethics" (2006) presents a philosophical approach to the ethics of computer games in general. Although it is not about MMORPGs in particular, Sicart draws a few conclusions based on experience from them. Primarily he argues that games are ethical objects/experiences and that players should be considered as moral beings:

"At the centre of the whole discussion on the ethics of computer games we should find the players – not as inane input providers, but as complex moral beings that will think, reason, and argue about the ethical implications and values of their actions within the game-world." (Sicart, 2006 p. 279).

The view that actions in a virtual game can have a real life moral value (which obviously is the foundation for discussing ethics in games) is not shared by all. This doubt can be summed up in the trivializing expression "it's just a game" (Reynolds, 2007). In the paper "Real Wrongs in Virtual Communities", Thomas Powers (2003) used speech act theory to show that acts in virtual communities can have a real moral value provided that there is a strong bond of identification between the player and the online identity. However, he also argued this was not possible in virtual communities based on games, especially not role-playing games. On last year's Philosophy of Computer Games Conference, Ren Reynolds rebutted Power's claims concluding:

"…acts in MMOs, even those that seem only to have meaning within the internal structure of the MMO, can have moral content, but do not necessarily have such content. The key factor in determining whether a virtual act that meets the criteria (…) is the context in which that act happens and expectations that other's might reasonably have. (Reynolds 2007, p. 10)

In my view, there is no doubt that acts in virtual communities can have a real moral value. The key is to acknowledge that ethics and morality are social phenomena and that that the ways acts are mediated are irrelevant as long as they affect real human beings. Denying acts affecting real people moral value is wrong regardless of circumstance. The reason for this is that it prohibits ethical reasoning and dissolves responsibility (which historically has been shown to have far reaching and disturbing consequences). Power's limitation is thus not only trivializing, it is potentially dangerous. Now, if we can agree upon that ethics and morality in social online games can, and should, be studied. How should we go about it?

A pioneer in discussing ethics and computer technology was Norbert Wiener. In 1950 he published the book "The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society" (1950), in which he argued that the integration of computer technology into society would eventually represent a second industrial revolution. He foresaw this as a time of challenges, among them

the need for philosophers to redefine social and ethical concepts (Bynum and Rogerson, 2004). After a hiatus of some 25 years, Walter Manner began defining the field of computer ethics as the examination of "ethical problems, aggravated, transformed or created by computer technology" (Bynum and Rogerson, 2004 p. 17). He also suggested that we should use traditional ethical theories to examine these problems. In the first major book on the subject, "Computer Ethics" (1985), Deborah Johnson's agreed with Manner on using existing theories. However, she did not think that computers created new problems, rather she thought them to:

> *"… pose new versions of standard moral problems and moral dilemmas, exacerbating the old problems, and forcing us to apply ordinary moral values in uncharted realms."* (Johnson, 1985 p. 1)

In the same year, James Moor extended the scope of computer ethics and presented the currently dominating view of the field. In the paper "What is Computer Ethics?" (1985) he argued that although computers cause new ethical issues, they also offer new options for action. Computer ethics has since become a cross-disciplinary subject where one is concerned with how information technology impacts human values; it today employs concepts and theories from most fields in which computers are used (Bynum and Rogerson, 2004). Personally, my belief is that computer games, especially social online ones, can benefit from being studied within the computer ethics framework. After all, studying ethics and morality in a MMORPG has everything to do with how moral values apply in uncharted realms.

World of Warcraft

How do you describe a phenomenon? Well, let's start from the beginning. Blizzard Entertainment was founded in 1991 (Wikipedia, 2008b; Blizzard 2008a). Early on the studio focused on porting established titles such as Lord of the Rings to computer games with limited success; however, in 1994 the company struck gold with their own Real-time strategy (RTS) game Warcraft: Orcs and Humans. Between 1994 and 2003 the company developed several Warcraft RTS titles as well as their immensely popular (at least in Asia) Starcraft series. On the 23rd of November 2004, commemorating the 10th anniversary of the Warcraft franchise, Blizzard released World of Warcraft. One can easily say that they struck gold again; five years later WoW is the worlds largest MMORPG around with a subscriber base in

excess of 10 million customers (Blizzard, 2008b).What makes so many people play the game? Even if it the game was free of charge, a simple answer would make entrepreneurs dizzy. Given that it costs about 40 euros plus a monthly fee of 12 euros (World of Warcraft, 2008); even the giddiest of entrepreneurs realize that there cannot be a simple answer (figure 1).
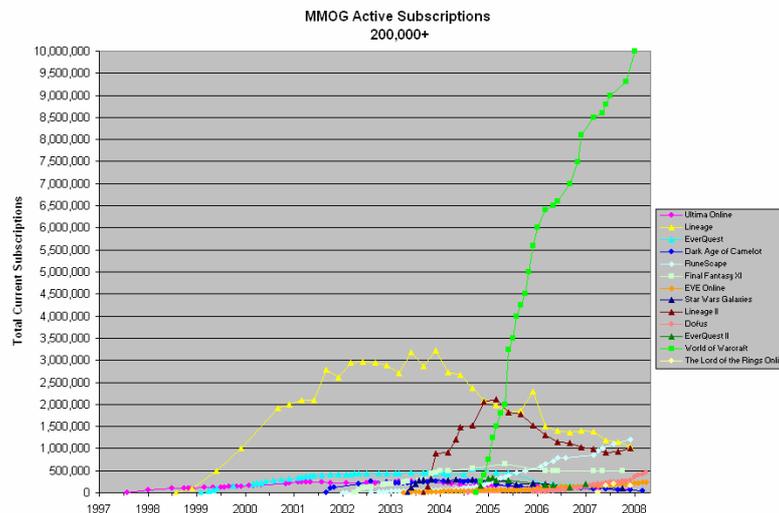

Figure 1. Chart of subscriptions in massively multi-player online games from January 97 to March 08 (Woodcock, 2008).

According to Blizzard themselves, the key to their success is that they have been adding, and will continue to add, new content on a regular basis, thus ensuring that there will always be new adventures, new locations, new creatures, and new items to discover (World of Warcraft, 2008a). The game also features a relatively fast style of play with an emphasis on combat and tactics against multiple opponents. WoW also differs from other MMORPGs in the sense that their quest system provides a huge variety of story elements, dynamic events, and character rewards. Blizzard did however not invent these concepts themselves. The game mechanics can be easily traced back to the early Multi-User Dungeon (MUD) games in the 1980's. MUDs also combined elements of role-playing, hack and slash gaming, with that of social chat rooms (Bartle, 2003; Wikipedia, 2008c). Just as in those early games, it is probably goal-oriented social interactions with other players that make MMORPGs so compelling today. What Blizzard added to the mix was allowing players to explore a world with a lore they already were familiar with through their RTS game experience. If it was this that made trick, I don't know, but at least they must have made something right.

Ethics and Morality in World of Warcraft

World of Warcraft will now be introduced in terms of the personal, social, and global experiences that a player may have. For each level, the game play is presented with a discussion of applicable ethical views and moral codes.

Personal experiences

The first thing you do as a player in WoW is to choose the realm, or world, you want to playin and create your character. There are two types of realms: Player versus Environment (PvE) and Player versus Player (PvP). In PvE realms your character can never be killed by other players unless you explicitly choose to fight them, in PvP realms any player from an opposing faction may kill you granted that you are in a contested or hostile area. Which faction you belong to, the alliance or the horde, is determined by choosing a race for you character. There are five different races for each faction. The choice of race determines a set of character traits and where in the world you will begin. Each race moreover has a set of classes from which one must be chosen. There are nine different classes in the game and each has a unique set of abilities and powers. The choice of class largely determines your game style and what roles you are going to fulfil in the game (healer, magician, warrior, etc). Finally, you can modify gender and physical appearance, and last but not least, name your character. Now you are ready to get acquainted with the world of Azeroth (figure 2).

Figure 2. Exploring the world of Azeroth.

Following a short movie introducing your racial heritage, you appear as in a small village in the wilderness. Standing in front of you there will be one or more non-playing characters (NPCs); these are computer controlled characters that you can talk to. NPCs typically offer quests, e.g. missions or tasks to perform, but they can also be vendors, trainers, guards, etc. A typical quest may involve slaying a certain number of beasts, gathering items from the environment or looting items from killed creatures. Completing a quest earns a reward such as some gear, items, or a sum of money. Money is needed to buy and repair equipment as well as acquiring new skills. Moreover, quest completion and killing beasts also rewards experience and reputation points. By accumulating reputation you gain favours with different factions in the game, by accumulating experience your character will eventually gain levels. By levelling up your character becomes stronger, unlock more abilities, and can explore more of the world. There are currently 70 levels in the game and reaching the highest can take anything from weeks to months depending on how often you play and the fashion you do it in. On average it takes a player 15 days of game time to reach the highest level (PlayOn, 2007) (Figure 3).
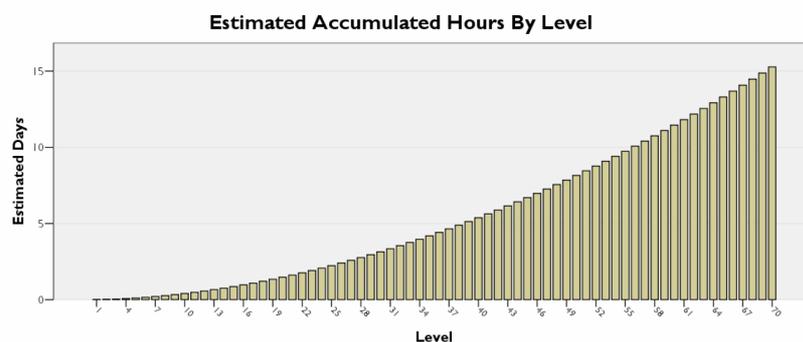

Figure 3. In total it is estimated that it takes a little over 15 days in accumulated game time to reach level 70, e.g. about four months if you play 22 hours per week (PlayOn, 2007a).

The first levels in the game are usually played solo, the quests are easy and there is a lot to learn about the character and the world. Not before long however you will realize that you can talk and interact with other player controlled characters in the game. To talk to a character you write messages in a chat window. If no particular character is selected only those nearby will get your message, if you select a particular character it is possible to talk to each other in private wherever you are located in the world. Asking nearby players about help in completing quests or finding locations is very common and is often instrumental in learning how to play the game or solve different problems (Nardi et al., 2007).

Ethics and Morality from a Personal Perspective

The personal game play in WoW seems more or less molded after virtue ethics. The purpose of the character is to gain experience and get more abilities. If one plays according to proper virtues, e.g. performing actions granting experience, one will reach the good life, which is the highest level. Just as in virtue ethics, the focus is on the importance of continually behaving virtuously and developing virtue rather than specific good actions. The mechanics of the game largely governs how a player should behave to become better. If actions are moral or not in the real world does not matter so much as long as they are moral in the storyline of the game. There is arguably a strong bond between the player and the character in the sense that you as a player take the role of the character. However, it is still a role-playing game and hence you are allowed to perform actions in the game that you would consider unethical in real life.

The choice of server type, PvE or PvP, largely governs the difficulty of the game and the moral codes that are applicable for player interaction. On a PvP server where players are allowed to kill those of opposing factions, the rules are generally more lax and players are supposed to help each other more. The formal rules, or codes of conduct, governing the personal game play at large has mostly to do with naming and exploitation. A player is not allowed to choose a name that is inappropriate, nor are they allowed to exploit bugs or glitches in the game mechanics to advance their character. There are also some informal guidelines, for example it is considered nice to help other players out and not so nice to steal resources from other players. Nonetheless, most ethical and moral judgments at the personal level are decided by the game mechanics.

Social experiences

Many quests in the game are difficult, or even impossible, to complete solo; thereby you are encouraged to team up with other players and play in a group. Apart from making the quests easier, working with other players is beneficial as they often have abilities that you benefit from. Creating a group is done by inviting another player. There can be five persons in each group but several groups may also work together in a raid. Many quest series end up in dungeons. These are special instances in which only you and your party play in. The rewards are often very good, but the beasts are also more difficult. It is often much safer to adventure with a group when in contested areas on a PvP server. That way, if enemy players attack while your group is doing a quest, you'll have a better chance of surviving. If you need a companion for a certain quest or dungeon there is also tool in the game that can be used to

find suitable for groups. As the game progresses you will hopefully learn how to play you character in a group and learn what do and not to do. Even if the game world is large, it is quite common that you will end up playing with the same people over and over. If you find people you like to play with it is possible to add them to a friends list (figure 4).
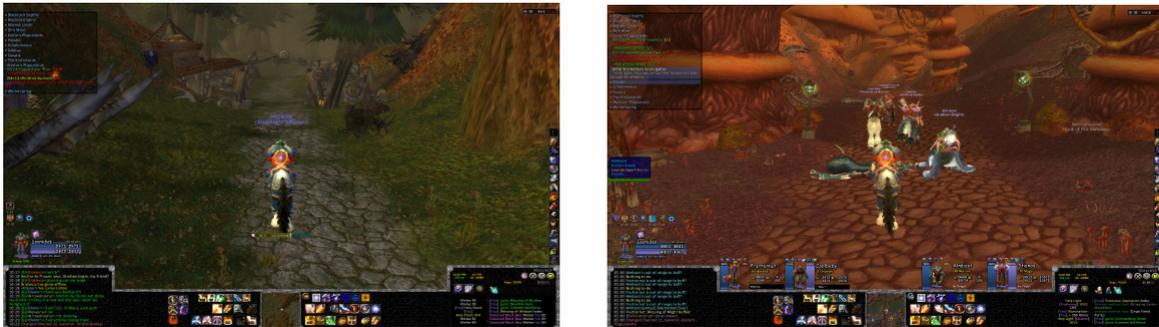

Figure 4. Playing alone (left) or in a group (right).

Eventually, you may want to join a guild or set one up for yourself and your friends. Guilds are large groups of players that help and support each other. You may discover that a guild greatly enhances game play experience. You can meet friends, share adventures, and find people to protect you if you fight in faction versus faction combat. Typically, players in good guilds can go places and do things those players in none, or poor guilds, can't. The quality of the guild and the guild experience depends entirely on the players in that guild and its leadership. Guilds commonly have their own rules about how the game should be played and what is expected of you. Every guild is different. Finding a guild can be very easy. People often sit in town asking anyone to join them. But, finding a high quality guild with members you like and a cunning leadership can be a difficult task. However, if you are nice to fellow players and good at playing your character in groups, it is in no way impossible.

Ethics and Morality from a Social Perspective

Social interactions are obviously affected by virtue ethics since they revolve around character development in the virtual world. However, the importance of individual acts has a much larger impact as they affect other players. The overall consensus seems to be that if you are nice to others, they will be nice to you. This is not very far from Kant's Categorical Imperative, e.g. for an act to be morally right, one must act in the same way as one would want any other to do in one's place. It is also true that only the individual performing an act

can decide if it is moral or not, however, given that players can communicate with another, they can and do voice their opinion about each others behaviour. The consequence of not being nice to others is that they are less likely to help you. The game mechanics encourage players to seek help from each other, but since these are real persons, it is up to them to value the help they get. The feedback they give also fosters other players to play better. There are a number of formal policies and rules exist to make the game experience better for all player. The reason for them is best explained by Blizzard:

> *"The bottom line is that we want World of Warcraft to be a fun and safe environment for all players"*. (Blizzard, 2008c)

Communication and interaction between players is governed by the terms of use agreement as well as game policies. The use of inappropriate and offensive language in general, or against another player is not allowed. Moreover, behaviour in the game that disrupts the game play in any way for other players is considered offensive. Names of characters and guilds must adhere to the naming guidelines as well as the rules of common decency, e.g. not be offensive. By accepting the terms of use, players also acknowledge that their actions will be monitored by Blizzard. Apart from the general imperative, be nice to others, there also exists a number of informal rules that govern how players should act.

When playing in groups, etiquette is very important. Common guidelines are for example: Stick around until everyone in the party has completed the quest. If you receive an item that you cannot use, but there is another party member that can use it, give it to that party member. Avoid looting during battle, focus on the battle and make sure everything is safe before looting. Go the extra mile for your party – always play your best. Guilds usually have their own rules regarding how to behave. Good behaviour, e.g. helping others or in other ways advancing the guild, is usually rewarded by a higher status (World of Warcraft, 2008x). Bad behaviour, e.g. aggravating other players or breaking guild rules, usually results in a warning or even removal in severe or repeated cases. It is important to acknowledge that guilds are run by players and not by Blizzard. A guild can be run in any way as long as it is not in conflict with the terms of use. If a member does not like they way the guild works, it is up to them to do something about it or simply leave it.

Global experiences

Apart from the personal and social experiences that player's have in groups and guilds, they also become increasingly involved with the community surrounding the game as well as Blizzard Entertainment, the games publisher. MMORPGs often have an unusually active community outside the game, and WoW is no exception. One obvious reason for this is that the game in itself is very social. However, the fact that every player subscribes to the game and that the game continuously is tweaked and updated also has a strong influence. A regular game that you buy is yours to keep, a game like WoW is only available to you as long as you pay the subscription fee. This means that the publisher has an obligation to keep the game available to you during the subscription and that you can expect new content to be added to the game. Since the game is not static, this means that you as a player feel that you can affect how the game should work, or at least voice your opinion. Discussions around balancing, e.g. how well a class can do something or how good some kind gear is relative to others, are extremely common. Since the balance usually shifts in some direction or another as soon as something is added to the game, the discussions are never ending (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Example of a discussion around leadership

Every realm, e.g. world, in WoW moreover has its own support/police/god force. In similar to most other MMORPGs the game is constantly monitored by game officials. If you experience technical issues or have a problem you can call for a game master whom will talk to you in the game and try to resolve the issue. The game masters also function as a police force to

which you can report players that you think are treating you unjust or act in discordance with the game rules. Depending on the violation, a game master may then take action by issuing a warning, giving a suspension, or in severe cases, terminate the offenders account (Figure 6).
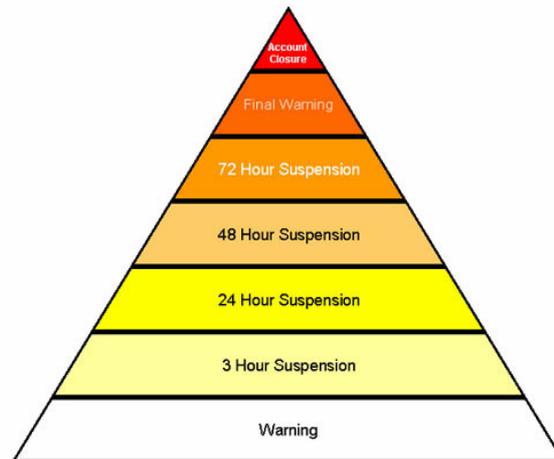
Figure 6. The penalty volcano representing the severity of each penalty and how often each type of penalty is given in relation to the others (Blizzard, 2008c).

Each instance of Azeroth, e.g. realm, is also its own economy. You can trade, sell, and buy items in the game, either directly or through an in-game auction house. You may also send items or gold through the in-game mail system. Money is important as it enables you to buy things that make your character better. You can't buy experience, but you can buy things that make you earn experience faster and thus level up quicker. Some commodities and items in the game are also very rare, and thus expensive, but have a high status to have. However, they are not really yours even if you get your hands on them. In fact, not even your character is truly yours. According to the terms of use, Blizzard owns everything within the game, hence you are not allowed to sell or transfer anything game related (including gold, characters, or accounts) for value outside of the game.

Ethics and Morality from a Global Perspective

The global view of ethics in WoW is more or less utilitarian; acts are morally right if they promote benefit and reduce harm for the greatest number of people, and every player counts the same. One reason for this is that every player is a paying customer, thus actions that make the largest number of people content is the best. However, this is also an issue of fairness. Since every person playing the game has contributed the same, they should also have the

same opportunities and responsibilities. From the publisher's perspective, players must adhere to the terms of use and the gaming policies; moreover they must continue to subscribe to the game if the want to participate in it. From the player's perspective, the publisher should enforce the gaming policies and ensure that the game is fair; moreover they should constantly add new content to the game and provide it as long as the subscription runs. The terms of use as well as the end user licence agreement specifies the responsibilities of the player. Yet, it also explicitly states that the player does not have any rights. For example, if the publisher wishes to stop providing the game they can do so more or less at any given time. On the other hand, if players feel unjustly treated they always have the option to quit subscribing to the game, the ultimate penalty from the publishers perspective.

The moral issues that arise on the global level mostly have to do with fairness, balancing, and violations against the terms of use. Scamming, e.g. acquiring items or any other possession from another player through misinformation, confusion, or fraud, is frowned upon and game masters usually assist the victims to the best of their ability. However, when the transaction in itself is against the terms of use, for example when trading or selling items for real money, both victim and scammer may be punished. Buying and selling WoW gold for real money has become a fairly large industry, especially in China. This is clearly against the terms of use and has the potential to damage the game economy and the overall experience for the many thousands of others who play. Blizzard actively discourages players to buy gold and attempts to close the seller's accounts. Among players gold buying is disputed, some consider it cheating, some consider it a shortcut (why work over 20 hours in the game for gold when a single hour of work in the real world can buy you just as much).

Players usually consider bots (script controlled characters where the actual player isn't present) and hacking (using third-party software to compromise accounts) both harmful and illegal. The penalties for using bots and hacks are also much more severe than any other violations. The reason for this is that they are more disruptive to the game. Moreover, the fact one cheat may cause grief for a very large number of players also come into play. To ensure a safe game environment for all players, Blizzard run an application called Warden on the client's computer that checks for illicit software. Warden has stirred some controversy as it may lead to undetected violations of personal privacy, among other possibilities (McSherry, 2005). Many issues regarding ethics and morality on the global level are thus similar to those that are discussed in computer ethics in general.

Discussion

The aim of this paper was to investigate how ethics and morality apply in MMORPGs. In the introduction it was stated that before we look for the answer, we should clarify what we are looking for. Ethics and morality were then introduced and discussed in relation to society as well as computers and games. The game of World of Warcraft was then presented in terms of personal, social, and global experiences. The division in these levels is far from clear-cut; the reason for making it was that they signified different levels of social interaction. As it turns out, they also seem to represent different ethical views. On the personal level, the ethics as well as mechanics fit well into virtue ethics. On the social level, the ethical view seems close to a Kantian imperative, being nice. On the global level, the ethical view seems mostly utilitarian. Now, have we really looked for an answer, or have just pushed the reasoning around ethics and morality in relation to MMORPGs into a familiar framework?

World of Warcraft is a complex world with a multitude of social interactions on different levels. The game is designed to encourage players to collaborate and interact. Every action and every choice may not fit nicely within a single view of ethics or moral code, but that's the way it is in reality to. Most players seem content with the moral content and the game mechanics of the game. If this is because virtue ethics has been used as a model for the game or if the game mechanics resemble virtue ethics is hard to tell. It seems obvious that acts in WoW carry moral value. If they did not, neither players nor Blizzard would care very much about the relations in the game, yet they do. It may very well be that the ability to play around with ethical and moral issues is exactly what makes the game so attractive.

A game like World of Warcraft is in essence a large sandbox. Each player may communicate and interact with other players at will, more or less anonymously. Apart from the time you have invested in you character, and its reputation, you do not have much to loose. Given this, it is likely that many persons use their characters to define and hone their online identities rather than participate in traditional role-playing per se. However, when a person spends about 18 % of their time awake in an online game like WoW, the border between the online identity and the real identity may dissolve. Since MMORPGs offers a fast trial-and-error approach to trait development, virtual as well as social, ethics and morality may develop faster in games simply because people try more alternatives. For this reason alone, these games should be investigated more from ethical perspectives.

Most ethical and moral issues that arise on the global level in WoW are similar to those that are typically discussed in computer ethics. Hacking, scamming, and exploitation seem like universal problems in computing. Are they ethical problems? In some sense yes, most people consider such acts are unethical and morally wrong. In some sense no, the acts in themselves are unethical, but they are also considered illegal and hence morally dealt with. Other questions are even more difficult to take a stance on, for example: Is a safe game environment more important than personal integrity? Is it right that an end user license agreement does not give any rights to the user? How much support can you expect if you subscribe to a game? Is it ok that people spend billions of hours in virtual worlds rather than helping those that suffer in real life?

Ethics and morality in MMORPGs today does not seem very different from ethics and morality in real life. In some sense they are even quite realistic models of real life. This may not be to strange given that what the players bring to the game is what they will get in the game. However, I am not so sure that this will last forever. When people spend more time in virtual worlds than they do in other real life activities, or just half as much do at work every week, it is likely to change their mindset in some way or another. If it will result in changes regarding our shared views of ethics and morality remains unknown, but the fact that people get to experiment much more is likely predictor for change. Only one thing is for sure, a great deal of man hours will be spent on social online games in the future. It is ultimately up to the players to decide how much they want to play and in which fashion they want to do it.

Conclusions

Ethics and morality in World of Warcraft is quite similar to ethics in real life. In a review of the game based on player experience, three different levels of game play were defined based on the level of social interactions. On the personal level, both ethics and game mechanics seemed molded after virtue ethics. On the social level, the ethical view seemed most similar to a Kantian imperative, be nice to others and they will be nice to you. On the global level, the view of governing view of ethics seemed more or less utilitarian. Every action and every choice does not fit nicely into this model but in general players seem content with the ethics and morality of the game. Given the large number of people that play, it is suggested that that ethics should be studied more in relation to social online games; in this venture the theories and frameworks of computer ethics may prove beneficial.

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