

Bending the Rules ...and Adding Some New Ones: Legal and Illegal Behaviours of Players in Massively Multiplayer Online Games

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Abstract. In this paper we focus on the interaction of the players' community in MMOGs with the game environment from the perspective of the rules, and the possible implications of these interactions, for the game design. We identify and describe two main types of behaviours: the breaking of rules and the development of new ones, and conclude that whether these rules and behaviours are acceptable or not depends on both personal criteria and the social context.

Keywords: cheating, massively multiplayer online games, player community, rules, player interactions

1 Introduction

Although our broader study was mainly focused on the investigation of collaborative interactions and learning practices in MMOGs, a large number of participants –mostly moderate and expert players of different MMOGs- made references to legal, illegal, acceptable or unacceptable behaviours: to illegal activities (cheating) of other players, to prohibited practices they had employed, and to behaviours they considered un-acceptable, even though they did not seem to break any official game rules. The extent and the content of these references could indicate that the issue of what is acceptable and what is not may not only be a factor affecting the gaming experience but also it could signify a constant negotiation of what is a rule and what is cheating, between the designed environment of the developers and the social environment of the players. The players, as end-users of the game environment, intervene, through these practices, in some extent, in the design of the game and modify it according to their goals and preferences.

In this paper we attempt to go beyond the issue of cheating, the potential benefits [1] [2], and how players perceive it [3], and view the issue of rules and acceptable behaviour spherically: not only from the perspective of player cheating but also the perspective of the players' setting additional rules, as a means to control their gaming experience, their environment and the community.

2 Methodology

Data presented in this paper were mainly collected from a mixed method research - through participant observation in different MMOGs, from 20 semi-structured interviews and 2 focus groups with MMOG players, and from a questionnaire and particularly one open-ended question¹: “*Is there something you would like to change in the game you play?*”

For the 1st Phase of the interviews analysis we thematically coded all the references to any type of illegal behaviour under one code (“Illegal”), references to rules set by players (“Unofficial rules”), and references to unpleasant behaviour of others (“Unwanted behaviour”). We then cross-examined the references for emerging sub-categories and trends (2nd Phase).

In the particular question of the questionnaire, there were 163 valid responses. Answer to this question was optional. 61 of the responses which were considered directly or indirectly relevant to our focus will be cited in the following sections.

3 Rules and Categories of Rule-related Behaviour

Four patterns relevant to the attitude and behaviour of players towards the rules seemed to emerge from the data:

- Game rules broken for causing distress or giving unfair advantage
- Game rules broken for help and support
- Cause of distress when no game rule is broken
- Emerging players’ rules

For our operational definition of a rule, we went through the Terms of Use of the games reported, cross-examined it with our data and identified the following categories:

1. **Game Rules:** Rules provided through the EULA, the Terms of Use, or other relevant official documentation were separated into the following two categories:
 - **Technical Tampering:** Use of external software applications for running automated game tasks (i.e. bots), hacking or cheats, alterations to the code
 - **Rules of Conduct:** Rules moderating the behaviour of the players and the use of the available environment affordances. In games, though, with a strong Player versus Player (PVP) aspect, it is difficult in many occasions to identify what falls into this category (for an example, see also *grief playing* in the documentation of the MMOG *EVE Online*²).
2. **Player Rules:** Not defined by the official game but emerging from the players

¹ The questionnaire was not focused on the study of cheating behaviours.

² EVE Online Support Knowledge Base. Grief play. What is grief play?
<http://support.eveonline.com/Pages/KB/Article.aspx?id=336>

3.1 Game rules broken for causing distress or giving unfair advantage

Bots and Disorder: Through the 2nd phase of the interviews analysis two main sub-categories emerged: discontent against *bots* and the requirement for better *monitoring* from the administrators against such violations. In the questionnaires, there were 7 references to bots, cheats, hacking and spam, as the thing they would like to see changed in their game and 3 to the requirement for better monitoring. Indicatively:

“Bots are a chronic problem never fixed. It’s fraud. It’s unfair. There are xp-bots for levelling up the character or farm-bots for gathering drops and selling them [...]. And it’s also a practical problem because in some areas you can’t even XP³ because there are too many bots” [Female 27y]

“What I don’t like in the game is the tolerance to bots. I would like to see better monitoring of the game, for fair play” [Male 29y]

Abuse: As previously described, it may be difficult to decide whether a player’s behaviour is against the Rules of Conduct. An example of abuse could be the malicious behaviour against novice or lower level players. On the other hand, these Rules of Conduct, in most MMOGs, explicitly prohibit the use of “sexually explicit, harmful, threatening, abusive, defamatory, obscene, hateful, racially or ethnically offensive language”. There were a number of comments in our interviews and questionnaires against the abusive behaviour, swearing, and name-calling, and in favour of the protection of lower level or novice players.

3.2 Game rules broken for help and support

Although there was not a specific question in our interviews on cheating, 4 interviewees and 1 focus group reported resorting to illegal applications or practices for facilitating their gameplay. 32 respondents in our questionnaire reported that they felt the game did not correspond to their level or requirements (e.g. too boring, complex, time consuming). Players seem to resort to illegal practices for avoiding aspects of the game they consider routine, and focus on what they consider “real game” that is the end game.

Bots: Interviewees reported that they are using or have used external applications for automating actions. It is worth mentioning that these interviewees were expert players and used these automations not for lack of knowledge or skill, but for overcoming too time-consuming or repetitive processes or because they considered it impossible to cope in demanding situations manually. They explained that they felt compelled to use them in order to catch up, since most of the other players use them. The extent of the use of such applications seems, therefore, to be linked to the community of the players. In some communities, even in the same game but in different servers, such practices may not be tolerated, and the abusers are punished:

³ XP: level up the virtual character

“In server [X] a lot of people do it. But in our server [Y] they don’t use bots too much because [...] players have this attitude that ‘if I find a bot I will take it down’” [Male 29y].

Of course, although these bots provide help and support to some players, it does not mean that they do not distress or provide an unfair advantage against other players.

Real Money Trading: Some of our interviewees reported that they had resorted to the services of websites for Real Money Trading (RMT), for buying in-game currency or equipment for real life money. They explained that although they were not happy to resort to such services they felt that they had no other real option if they wanted to catch up with other team members and other players:

“[...] it was something that I couldn’t get in the game at the time, but I really needed it for progressing. Otherwise my clan would fall behind [...] I was the leader of the clan.” [Male 32y]

“I got to the point where I could not help resorting to [site for RMT]. It was impossible not to” [Male 29y]

Purchasing Levelled-up Characters: Although relevant to the previous category of RMT, in this case whole virtual characters and character progress is purchased. There was an incident during our participant observation in an MMOG, where most of the characters of the leadership members in our group were officially banned from the game for using xp-bots. These players were experts, and although they wanted to continue playing the game, having spent 2-3 years on these banned characters, felt discouraged to go through the levelling-up process all over again, and 2 of them actually resorted to the purchase of characters already levelled-up. At that point, these players felt that there was no other option for them. This was not an isolated incident, though. There is a flourishing market for the purchase of characters or levelling up, in exchange for real life money.

Play in Free Servers: It is in most cases prohibited to play on servers not authorised by the official designers of a game. Some of our players, though, reported that they are using or have used in the past such servers. These servers are created and maintained by individuals; they are free to play and are usually modified so as to allow faster levelling up and reaching the end game. Players reported that they resort to such servers mainly because of the cost and also for testing items and tactics, and for seeing aspects of the content which would otherwise be difficult or time consuming to see in the official servers.

3.3 Cause of distress when no game rule is broken

In our interviews there were reports, by expert players, of many incidents where others maliciously lured them into traps, without really breaking any official rules but rather using the affordances of the environment.

“There was this one time a player asked me to use some [reinforcing] buffs on him. While I was buffing him, he got himself flagged [as aggressive] so that my buffer would get flagged too, and then went on to kill my buffer.” [Male 31y].

Such practices though, soon become known within the community, and players learn to avoid them.

3.4 Emerging players' rules

In many cases, players develop new systems, features and rules, which sometimes may seem to contradict the goals of the game [4], in order to create a more balanced community, or for enhancing their gameplay.

Never leave your team. To be member of a team in MMOGs entails both privileges and responsibilities. To leave your team, without prior notice, is considered unacceptable behaviour; even worse if you leave during a critical time (e.g. a battle or a war). In our participant observation in the web based strategy MMOG "Tribal Wars" members who would leave our team, would subject to the coordinated attacks of the team members. Similar were the reports from our interviewees:

"There is no punishment from the game but it is considered as bad behaviour to leave when others need you, and it is going to have implications on your future relations with others." [Male 37y]

Never attack an opponent when s/he is down. This is more like a "code of honour" transferring from real life. Our team in Tribal Wars was disbanded when members of the leadership considered the behaviour of an opposing team offensive and violating the ethos of the game, and left the game. Our team was weakened after an extensive period of war against other player teams. A third team had taken advantage of the situation and attacked with no prior negotiations, as was the usual practice. From another interview:

"If a player is involved in a war between alliances [...] and another player grabs the opportunity to take him/her down, without any provocation, I consider it cowardly" [Male 32y]

Adding new features: We further encountered cases where the players would come up with new features and processes. In some cases it was difficult during the interviews to identify whether processes mentioned were actually part of the game mechanics or a player intervention. Further clarifications from the players or reference to the game documentation were in these cases required. Such examples are the *Dragon Kill Point (DKP)* system, a point-based system which also considers the commitment and participation of a player to the team activities, for the distribution of game reward items, and the *Fraternisation* of groups (in the game *Ikariam*), a mutual agreement for help and support among groups, and not quite a game-mechanics *Alliance*.

4 Conclusions

In this study, we viewed the interaction between the MMOG player community and the design of the environment, from the perspective of the rules. We identified

two main types of player behaviour: a) bending or breaking the game rules and b) inventing new rules.

Players may break the rules for their own benefit, for causing distress to others, for gaining an advantage, for overcoming game areas they consider difficult, for avoiding specific gaming processes [5]. With many contradictory views expressed by our participants, it is difficult to distinguish which behaviours are acceptable and which are not. That is because, as Consalvo [3] concluded “there are different types of cheating, for different reasons and with different implications”. Some players may feel keen on breaking the game rules; others may feel strongly against it.

Players may also develop new rules for facilitating their gameplay and regulating their interactions; rules relevant to the game mechanics or as a transfer from real life ethos and values producing what Kucklich described as an “osmosis between ordinary life and gamespace” [6]. Again, some players may accept these rules, others may disregard them, depending on their own personality, motives and aspirations and on whether they prioritise achievement or a balanced social environment [7][8].

Beyond the indications of the complexity of the player community, the conditions, nevertheless, under which players resort to cheating or develop their own rules, may provide some interesting insights for the design and development of MMOGs, relevant, for example, to the support of the players, the personalisation of the gaming experience, and the close cooperation of the developers with the player community.

5 References

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