

Law, order and conflicts of interest in massively multiplayer online games

Daniel Pargman

Media / Computer game development
School of Humanities and Informatics
University of Skövde
Box 408, 541 28 Skövde, Sweden
daniel.pargman@his.se

and

Media Technology
School of Computer Science and Communication
Royal Institute of Technology
100 44 Stockholm, Sweden
pargman@kth.se

Andreas Erisson

Human-Computer Interaction
School of Computer Science and Communication
Royal Institute of Technology
Stockholm, Sweden
andreas@glajm.se

ABSTRACT

In huge online games where great numbers of players can be connected at the same time, social interaction is complex and conflicts become part of everyday life. There is a set of rules and norms in the game for what is allowed and what is prohibited and these are partly set up by the game publisher and partly evolve among the players themselves over time.

This paper describes and exemplifies a number of often-contested behaviors around which most in-game conflicts in the massively multiplayer online games (MMOG) *Everquest* revolve. Using these examples as a starting point, the paper presents a conceptual framework for analyzing conflicts and allegiance in MMOGs.

Keywords

Everquest, MMORPG, MMOG, social dilemmas, conflicts of interest, guilds

INTRODUCTION

Everquest is a fantasy-oriented MMORPG and it is one of the most popular games of that genre. Many thousands of players¹ can be connected to the game at the same time to fight, explore,

¹ We are sloppy with the terms “player” and “character” in this paper. While it is formally the

love, hate, dance, conspire or converse with each other. *Everquest* constitutes of the land Norrath, a giant virtual world that span five continents and has a great number of zones and cities that players can explore. The game is in many respects designed to encourage players to interact and cooperate with each other. Players can take on a variety of monsters in the game, but at least as important for many players is the fact that the game is a meeting place where people can get together and spend pleasant time in each others' company.

Everquest is a technically complex product, but the social interaction between players can become even more complex. Players' have friends in the game that might or might not overlap with their real-world friends [6] and for many it is while exploring the virtual world together with others that the game experience is at its best. This close social interaction can however lead also to irritation or worse between players. Arguments and excited discussions are part of everyday life in *Everquest* too. Conflicts are often based on disputes and quarrels revolving around a limited number of rules and norms that have been established over time by the players themselves. In addition to this, the game publisher (Sony) has set up a number of rules that all players must accept in order to get access to the virtual world in the first place.

This paper presents the results of an empirical study. Material has primarily been collected through participant observations (400 hours of gameplay between February and April 2004) comparable to the "quick-and-dirty ethnography" of Hughes et al. [5] or Delwiche's [3] "ethnography light". Participant observations have been complemented by extensive bookkeeping during gameplay, in-game interviews and reading two *Everquest* discussion forums on the Internet (including the large official forum that Sony provides).

RESULTS: A GALLERY CONTESTED BEHAVIORS

A relatively small number of different unsuitable (objectionable) behaviors account for a large proportion of the "incidents" in the game. What follows here is an enumeration of the half a dozen different sorts of unsuitable behaviors that we found to be most common in the game.

Kill-stealing

"Kill-stealing" refers to the practice of intentionally "stealing" other player's monsters for experience points – something that is prohibited according to the official rules of conduct [13]. The general rule is that a monster (and the experience points that the killing of it generates) "belongs" to the player who first attacked it. Deep discussions about what is and what is not considered to be kill-stealing are conducted on the discussion forums. That kill-stealing is serious business is evident from the fact that it can result in a canceled game account! Kill-stealing can also happen unintentionally:

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Dyndar says, 'WTF [What The Fuck]'  
Dyndar tells the group, 'Wtf was that?'  
You tell your party, 'They took our xp [experience points]'  
Delphi tells the group, 'Kill-steal'  
Ilenaii says, 'Sorry didn't realize Dyndar'
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In this example Ilenaii misunderstood the situation and started to kill a monster that our group had already begun to fight. Ilenaii quickly realized the mistake and apologized, thereby clearing up the incident. Do also note that the term "WTF" passed through the built-in language filter of

character that acts within the game, it is the intent of the real-world player that guides those actions. We often do not make any distinction between these two entities as it is not relevant to arguments presented here.

the game.

Trains

An event that often occurs in *Everquest* is that a player “pulls” more monsters than the player can handle. It is not unusual when a player fights *one* monster that more monsters come along – sometimes dozens of them. The right thing to do then is for the player to flee head over heels. If there are many monsters and they pursue the player, he gets a tail of monsters following him and this tail is called a “train”. The sensible player will run towards the zone line (as monsters can’t follow the player to another zone). Unfortunately, zone lines are also popular meeting places where players hang around to team up with other adventurous players and when someone pulls a train to the zone line and “zones out” (leaves the zone), the pursuing monsters might attack “innocent” players hanging around there. Therefore, when pulling a train to a zone line, it is important for the puller to warn other players about the impending danger:

Magz shouts, 'Train to zone! Move it or lose it!'

Not warning other players about an impending train usually results in social punishments, e.g. rebukes or reprimands:

Amina says out of character, 'TY [Thank You] for pulling Dvinn [monster at a relative high level] to zone and not telling'

To warn other players is a norm that has been set up by the players themselves. The effectiveness of decentralized social approaches to managing deviant behaviors [2] varies a lot depending on how hard skin the individual player has². When we have pulled a train to a zone line and forgotten to warn other players about it, it is easy to feel a moment of panic and a fear of being humiliated in front of other players so verbal punishments obviously do work in some cases.

Camping

Attractive spots in *Everquest* can be “camped”. When one or more players camp a spot, they hang around and wait for attractive monster to appear there. When the monsters finally show up no one else is allowed to kill them as they are “reserved” by the camping party. Camping spots are sensitive places in the game and arguments are common as it is not obvious exactly which area belongs to the camp. It is sometimes easy to see if a spot is camped and sometimes it is not. If not, one should proceed with caution as interference at a camped spot easily upsets players and often results in conflicts:

Rondur says out of character, 'Gutek It is rude of you to kill them goblins when another character is already at the camp'

As with trains, punishments in such situations are of a social character. As an aside, even a group of dead characters littering the ground around an attractive (and dangerous) monster can be considered to camp that spot.

Twinking and power-leveling

The purpose of two quite common behaviors in the game, “twinking” and “power-leveling” is basically the same – to quickly reach the next level in the game.

A twinked character has much better equipment than he or she “ought” to be taking the character’s present level into account. That character can therefore kill more difficult monsters than otherwise and subsequently rise in level(s) faster.

² The effectiveness of *any* approach varies a lot as seen by the failure of the language filtering function above (a centralized technological approach).

Power-leveling happens when a player uses help from high-level characters – as a crutch or a pole in the game. A low-level character can take on difficult monsters while his high-level friends help keep the character alive.

Although the majority of players seem to think that twinkling and power-leveling are objectionable, there is no consensus around their (un-)suitability. Some think it is ok and others do not. To those who don't like it, *Everquest* is supposed to be experienced through playing, and by taking these kinds of shortcuts the fascination disappears. On the other hand, do really experienced players who have already played one or more characters up to the highest level want to struggle through it again rather than take a (for them) convenient shortcut?

When a character is twinked, other players can react negatively and gossip about it:

Ahran tells the group, 'Dhark is getting twinked...'

Ahran tells the group, 'Like a madman'

Randor tells the group, 'Probably'

Ahran tells the group, 'He went from 7 to 11 in less than an hour'

Ahran tells the group, 'And he's killing emissaries as if they are food.'

Do note that this was said within our group and Dhark could therefore not hear our conversation. Even though twinkling and power-leveling are formally legal within the game (or rather, not formally illegal), they are not fully accepted by the players and Dhark would never have been invited to join *our* group.

Automatic play

Everquest gives players the possibility to write their own small programs, or “macros”. With a macro, often-used chains of commands can be coded and invoked quickly instead of having to be written anew every time.

Macros have however been misused by players who write complicated macros that automatically order their character around while they are away from the keyboard. Characters can then be programmed to quickly and automatically kill monsters and rapidly climb in experience levels. It is for example also possible to program characters to automatically manufacture virtual items that are later sold for in-game money or real dollars.

Virtual commerce

The *Everquest* End User License Agreement (EULA) states that:

“You acknowledge and agree that [...] any character(s), item(s), coin(s) [...] are exclusively owned by us.”

and:

“You may not buy, sell or auction (or host or facilitate the ability to allow others to buy, sell or auction) any game characters, items, coins or copyrighted material.”

Despite the existence of these very clear and unambiguous statements, commerce with virtual items from *Everquest* is widespread, brisk and difficult to ban on the Internet. There are several companies that are specialized in buying, selling and auctioning virtual items from *Everquest* (and other online games) for real money.

SOCIAL DILEMMAS AND CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

A social dilemma can concisely be describes as a “tension between individual and collective rationality” [7]. The most well-know example of such a dilemma stripped down to its bare bones

is the prisoner’s dilemma [1, 11].

Most of the examples above can be related to tensions between what is best for the individual and what is best for “all of us who play *Everquest*”. Kill-stealing can be tempting for me here and now, but if everyone kill-stole... Zoning out as quickly as possible seems like a really good idea when I am pursued by a long tail of bloodthirsty monsters, but if no-one warned about impeding trains... Buying a powerful character for real dollars can be a way to “get ahead of the competition”, but the value of that character becomes lower if many other players are also in the habit of buying powerful characters. Do note that only conflicts based on contradictory interests (as apart from those based on misunderstandings, lack of knowledge of proper etiquette etc.) are of interest here.

A player can however belong to several groups that operate on different levels and there can be conflicts and trade-offs not just between the individual and the collective rationality but also between different levels of collective rationality. We consider these levels in terms of group structure (see Table 1.1 as well as [12] for an example of analyzing conflicts of interest in file-sharing networks in these terms).

Table 1.1: Conceptual framework for analysis of collective rationalities.

Relationship	Group structure
Private.	Single individuals, close personal friends.
Micro-public.	A small group of close peers and well-known friends bound together by <i>strong ties</i> [4] and where everyone has a personal relationship with everyone else.
Meso-public.	A small network of peers and recognized acquaintances – typically a <i>guild</i> in <i>Everquest</i> – with personal relationships or overlapping relationships between members.
Macro-public.	A large group of anonymous strangers bound together by <i>weak ties</i> [4] or by no ties – typically ten thousand characters on the same sever in <i>Everquest</i> .

The right column describes prototypical relationships between actors at each level of the model. That is, the typical relationship at the private and micro-public level is one of being *friends*, the typical relationship at the meso-public level is one of being *acquaintances* and the typical relationship at the macro-public level is one of being *strangers*. An example of a conflict between different levels of collective rationality would for example occur when guild members are let in on “secrets” which they promptly leak to a small group of “non-certified” non-member friends. We can also relate the concepts in the table above to the traditional (sociological) categories *family and close friends*, *peer group*, *community* and *society*.

Based on the conceptual framework above, it is possible to analyze MMOGs (or “virtual societies”) from a perspective where tensions, conflicts, misunderstandings, critical incidents and breakdowns are fruitful entry points for identifying conflicts between different levels of collective rationality. This in turn could improve our understanding of how these games work and of how people work (when they play) in these games.

An especially interesting aspect of MMOGs is how much power some guilds can wield over individuals and how far guild members are prepared to subsume their personal interests in the interest of the greater whole (e.g. of the guild). While there is little space for conflicting interests between individual members and the guild in these cases, conflicts can naturally instead arise

between the interests of a guild and (for example) all other guilds on that server.

Some guilds make high demands and regulate the behavior of their members in detail, for example in terms of the required level of their character's abilities (high), of how much time they have to play per week (a lot), with who and how they must play, exactly when they have to show up for participating in an important raid, the kind of hardware (new) and network connection (fast) they need to be able to join the guild etc. Many powerful guilds also have a strong presence outside of the game itself (e.g. through web pages etc.) and it has also happened that whole guilds have collectively migrated from one game to another, i.e. that a player give higher allegiance to the guild than to the context/game in which the guild was created.

DISCUSSION

It is interesting to muse on the similarities between an *Everquest* guild and a pre-modern medieval guild or small community. With the rise of modern society and the modern state, individuals were progressively emancipated from medieval communal institutions. What is less apparent is the parallel decline of those small-scale high-commitment structures and associations from which the individual was emancipated, i.e. family, neighbors, local community, guild and church [9]. What we now see in MMOG guilds can be construed as a revival of the power of the small-scale high-commitment group (community) where a person can both be acknowledged as an *individual* and as someone who makes a difference while also subsuming his/her personal interests to that of a greater cause. It is now also quite clear that being a good member of a guild also can stand in conflict with competing allegiances to off-line institutions such as school, work or marriage (c.f. the discussions about "Evercrack", about "Everquest widows" and of MMOG addiction in general).

A way to concretely regulate guild members' allegiances and keep them accountable for their in-game actions is described in [8]. They start by reporting that their informants describe the Taiwanese MMOG environments as "dark" and "dangerous" places for the single player, making the need to join a guild high. This is directly comparable to a similar need in the medieval society where "the profound hold of the family and the local community and guild upon human lives was simply the fact that, apart from membership in these and other groups, life was impossible for the vast majority of human beings" [9, p.77]. Lin et al. [8] furthermore give examples of how Taiwanese MMOG guilds develop mechanisms for securing trust and reducing risk, of which the most important is to base online networks on pre-existing off-line social relationships. By ensuring offline traceability it is possible to look up a specific person and keep that person accountable for the actions of his/her character in the game (see also the discussion in [10, pp.251-253]). This is also a way to literally go "outside the box" (of the MMOG environment) to find a solution to a difficult problem. In this sense it is similar to the eminently practical solution of how real prisoners went "outside the box" to solve the game-theoretical problem of the prisoner's dilemma: "if you squeal on me, I'll kill you when I get out of prison".

Using examples of recurring conflicts in *Everquest* as a springboard, this paper is an attempt to raise the stakes and describe a conceptual framework for analyzing and discussing (especially conflicts and allegiances in) MMOGs. It is not an exhaustive description but rather an initial attempt to describe how these issues can be perceived, described, analyzed and discussed. Especially the comparison between MMOG and medieval guilds seems fruitful to explore. What has not been touched upon here at all is the further similarities between the lack of a strong state

in pre-modern times and the timid role of the game publisher in upholding law and order in the sprawling worlds they have brought forth. In the pre-modern world, “the solidarity of each functional group was possible only in an environment of authority where central power was weak and fluctuating” [9, p.77] and this seems to be the case also in MMOGs. These issues will be addressed in a future paper.

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