MMOs as Practices

Ren Reynolds
www.renreynolds.com
ren@aldermangroup.com

ABSTRACT

This paper examines those acts that occur within MMOs and are chiefly given meaning by the context of an MMO, and asks whether they fall under MacIntyre's definition of a Practice. The paper argues that many MMO acts are best understood as occupying a nexus between the purely social and the purely ludic. That is, acts occur in the context of a rich and nuanced set of traditions and practices, in which acts can attain a level of excellence and other acts can be understood as negative. Given this acts, in MMOs can meet MacIntyre's definition of Practice, thus we have a framework in which to morally evaluate acts such as *Ganking* and *Ninja Looting*. However, this is just a framework, as a matter of practical ethics we need to then examine the factors and particular context that surrounds a given act, such as the MMO, whether there was a prevailing guild, whether it occurred during a raid with well-understood rules, etc. But what this paper suggests we do have to hand is at least one theoretical argument with a practical application for the ethical basis of some acts that occur within the context of MMOs.

Author Keywords

MMO, ethics, practice

INTRODUCTION

This paper addresses the question of whether Alasdair MacIntyre's notion of Practices, as set out in *After Virtue* [9], provides a framework for assessing the moral content of acts that occur within MMOs. Specifically the paper will focus on those acts that are given meaning broadly through the context of the game, and not the wider set of acts that are understandable in a general social context. That is, the paper will not cover general acts of *Griefing* such as harassment [4] but will focus on game specific acts such as *Trains*, *Camping*, *Twinking*, *Power Leveling*, *Ganking* and *Ninja Looting* [11, 15].

The paper recognizes that there are outstanding meta-ethical questions in respect of practices as a basis for moral norms, in particular the relativist charges made against it. These questions and the degree to which looking at games in general and MMOs in particular can inform them are outside the scope of this paper and shall be the subject of further work.

PRACTICES

To a large degree MacIntyre's *After Virtue* [9] is just what it says on the cover, a re-evaluation of some of the core elements of virtue ethics, chiefly those of Aristotle. As such MacIntyre has an emphasis on 'virtue' or 'excellence' (from Homer's *aretê*). Drawing from sources as diverse as Homer and Aristotle to Benjamin Franklin and Jane Austin, MacIntyre draws a common theme from a diverse set of accounts of excellence by suggesting that there are three stages to the logical foundation of the concept of excellence. These are Practices, the narrative tradition of a single human life, and a moral tradition. As MacIntyre points out, in this context 'Practice' is being used in a specific technical sense that MacIntyre defines as follows [9]:

> *[Practices are] any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and practically definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellences, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended. Tic-tac-toe is not an example of a practice in this sense, nor is throwing a football with skill; but the game of football is, and so is chess. Bricklaying is not a practice; architecture is.*

DO MMOS MEET THE CRITERIA?

If we look at MacIntyre's formulation of a Practice element-by-element we can ask if practices associated with MMOs meet the criteria laid down. This, of course, is a highly subjective exercise but we are given examples of games that do fall under the rubric; these include football and chess. Thus for each of MacIntyre's component elements of Practice we might ask whether an MMO fulfils that element more or less that the games give as examples and the practices associated with these games. Taking the elements one-by-one:

Coherent - one might imagine that MMOs, which tend to be centered on conflict or some form of struggle for power, might be chaotic [10]. However this is far from the case. While there are certainly episodes of chaos and confusion in MMOs they tend to stand in contrast to the structured

behavior that is governed by code, explicit rules and implicit rules of conduct [13].

Complex – here we might use the chess and football comparison. As a rule system MMOs are much more complex than chess.

Socially established cooperative human activity – to take these all in one go, MMOs are socially established by virtue of the number of people that engage with them and the duration that they have been around. Most are also necessarily co-operative, as opposed to just multiplayer, as many raids and instances are designed explicitly for, and only for, co-operative play requiring genuine trust between players [13, 14]. Moreover, some MMOs such as *A Tale in the Desert* are based on the notion of social cohesion as a central theme.

Excellence

Having looked at MacIntyre's necessary but not sufficient criteria for an activity being a Practice I believe we get its defining characteristics: Internal Goods and Excellence.

If we return to the text, MacIntyre seems to set rather a low hurdle for the understanding of Internal Goods speaking of 'good pitching' in baseball and 'the art of batting in cricket' [9]; these being achievements which 'enrich the whole relevant community' - as opposed to External goods such as, in this context, winning vs loosing.

These examples however relate to sports and physical excellence has been held in particular regard since, if not before, the time of the foundation of virtue ethics from which MacIntyre draws inspiration. MMOs like most computer games lack the kinds of social legitimization that are given to sport. Broad social recognition of achievement as a game (i.e. non-sports) player is rare, recognition of computer game play is almost non-existent even with the growth of so-called Pro-Gaming and personalities such as 'Fatal1ty'.

Notwithstanding this, I believe we can find excellence in MMOs but we need care in assuming what it is we examining. At present MMO discourse, both academic and public, fall between a range of conceptual frames [7] each with its own set of proponent actors. Extreme views of two of these are MMO as instrumental game practice and MMO as society.

MMO as Instrumental Play

One way to interpret what MacIntyre says about non-Practices such as "Tic-tac-toe" or "throwing a football with skill" is that they are acts where it hard, in an every-day sense, to say that someone really excels, whereas one commonly might say that someone excels at architecture, football or chess.

Seeing MMOs framed purely as a game and its associated practices as a set of instrumental acts lends sympathy to the view that their associated practices lack any meaningful notion of excellence. Playing an MMO is a matter of pressing keys. While in this respect MMOs share properties this property with, say, being a writer – almost anyone can reach level 60 in World of Warcraft, but very few people can write a saleable novel.

What's more while chess has a very simple set of end conditions (win, loose and draw); the permutations and the requirement for understanding the permutations that precede this state are highly complex. MMOs, constructed as games, can be seen as lacking such nuances. So while a guild might be the first to kill a Boss or open a portal – which is something that helps the whole community, the button pressing that got them to this point it easily trivialized.

MMO as Social Space

Another way of characterizing an MMO is as a social space in which a game happens to be played. MMOs are online communities. The issue with seeing an MMO as essentially a community is that excellent behavior is unlikely to be particular to the community. Rather, excellence is likely to be defined in terms of generally accepted social norms derived from the cultures in which individuals are physically located. In the general literature on practices, derived from the likes of Hart [5] and Rawls [12] there are broad definitions of what constitutes a practices. For example Blum [1] states:

> *a practice, like a profession, is characterized as much by the way its participants conduct themselves as in the skills they develop and the purposes to which they are committed*

In general philosophical terms, this seems a good working definition of a practice. However MacIntyre defines things more tightly in order for them to be consistent with the normative theory he is outlining. In particular he includes what are termed Internal Goods defined as good that are "practically definitive of, that form of activity". Broad social norms do not meet this definition, thus do not support the idea of MMOs as Practices in this strict sense.

MMO as hybrid

Where I think we can mount a strong argument for the existence of Practices within MMOs in the interplay between the social and the ludic - a nexus that is essentially characteristic of MMOs. That is, there is a particular set of techno-social practices that are shaped by: the technology of MMOs, the actors that interact with each other, and those that ostensibly regulate acts through various forms of overt punishment (such as suspension and banning) i.e. the publishers of MMOs.

This notion of virtual worlds being a form of meta or liminoid [18] state is one that, under different interpretations and emphasis, is gaining ground in recent Games Studies literature. For example, Jull's work Half Real [6] and Taylor's Play Between Worlds [19].

If we take the example of a high-raid in a game such as World of Warcraft [8] the act of participating in a raid in and of itself requires understanding of one's role (tank, healer etc.), as well as the particular strategies for a given Dungeon. Beyond this there is the planning of the Raid - which may require negotiations between two or more guilds, bringing into play the supporting skills associated with running and participating in a guild. In addition there is the development of Raid strategies, which emerge over time through constant re-play of Dungeons where different tactics are attempted then documented and shared through community and guild web sites.

The relationship between ludic requirements, technology, and social structure can be seen in the player formations and raid taxonomies defined by Taylor [19]:

Player formations - Solo, Pairs, Pickup group, Friend groups, Guild and ally groups, and Hybrid groups.

Raids - Guild raids, Ally raids, Pickup Raids, and Scheduled (sign-up) raids. In addition to Taylor's list, there is the emergence of what might be called Paid raids, ones where people pay in-world money to be a part of for agreed terms on any resulting loot.

There are a number of important aspects of the guild / raid relationship in respect of MMOs as Practices. One is that this combination often results in events such as new MOBs being beaten. As Taylor [19] points out, in achieving these goals, "[groups] symbolically act as proxies, standing in representational for all the other players on the server" and "by taking on difficult new mobs, high-level guilds help out the entire server".

This is a key point in MacIntyre's construction of Practices, and their relation to internal goods, as he states [9]:

> *Internal goods are indeed the outcome of competition to excel, but it is characteristic of them that their achievement is a good for the whole community*

EXCELLENT DUDE!!1111

From the above we know that at least some individuals which participate in MMOs fall into social structures that through practice based acts result in goods that are internal to and, in part, definitive of that practice. Thus we seem to have reached at least MacIntyre's minimal conditions of a Practice.

Building on this we can extend our understanding to acts seemingly less regimented than raids. Again being mindful of the way that MMO practices sit in a mid point between game, technology and social order, when one examines the types of acts that occur within MMOs and the context that gives them meaning one can see a far subtler picture than a purely social or instrumental game analysis might illuminate. What's more, as Bartle [3] has written, virtual worlds are made up of a complex set of traditions, built up over years, passed from one virtual world to another, and

modified as each new group of players and technologies overlays the existing generation. Further, as Stromer-Galley & Mikeal [17] have identified, norming is a continual process that occurs with reference to the particular virtual culture in which acts occur.

As a number of writers have identified, trust and reputation are key elements of the practice of MMO participation. Indeed, there is an on going debate as to whether reputation systems can reliably be coded into the fabric of an MMO. Thus there is, it seems positive i.e. excellent, notion of participation in MMO practices that is self-identified by MMO communities and developers. Taylor notes further how this is integrated with the group structures previously mentioned, suggesting that some guild rules require public guild identification and that "People often do good deeds in the name of their guild" [19].

Cashing out Practices

Where this leads us, should we follow MacIntyre, is that in MMOs we have Practices, thus we have a framework in which to evaluate acts, not just in respect of norms, but moral norms. What's more we have a framework in which we can evaluate the moral norms of acts that at first sight might be seen to be valueless due to their context as part of a video game. That is this framework resists the rhetoric of trivialization that is often applied to video games [2, 16].

Another advantage of a Practice based approach to ethical evaluations is that it provides a flexibility of approach that can encompass the nuances of individual communities. This gets round one of the issues often encountered when people attempt to assess the ethics of online acts; that is, online spaces are framed as a homogonous space.

So, when we come to look at acts variously termed *Trains, Camping, Twinking, Power Leveling, Ganking and Ninja Looting* – we have a framework that gives these acts meaning and potential moral value partly in virtue of the communities in which they are cited.

However we cannot simply cash this out by saying that because some in a given community regard these practices as negative they automatically have negative moral value. Rather, we need to look at acts within the context that they occur. In doing so we would need to take into account a number of factors such as the community in which we are evaluating the act. This means not only that the act occurs in an MMO but the specific MMO and potentially the shard (whether it is PVP, PVE or RP), whether it is in the context of a guild, a pick up group or solo play. We also need to take account of this group and its norms relative to those around it, and the frame in which we are making an evaluation – such an evaluation would include factors such as the stability of a given set of norms, and whether they are actively contested in the group.

To take two examples:

Ninja Looting (taking rewards that are usually the result of a group effort outside local rules explicitly or implicitly set by that group) – this often occurs in the context of a Raid. Here there is likely to be a group effort to gain rewards to be shared among that group. The notion of Ninja Looting contains within it the assumption that the method of sharing those rewards has been agreed. This might be further established through signaling behavior such as setting the MMO software to a particular form of loot distribution, or formally agreeing to rules up front. Thus, typically one can say that *Ninja Looting* is an act that carries, at least some, negative moral weight when seen in the light of Practices.

Ganking (the killing of a lower player by a higher one where there is no question of a contest) – this is a more problematic case. Some MMO players hate *ganking* and find it one of the most negative parts of the game. However its status in many MMOs is disputed. Other players see PVP of which *ganking* can be seen as an essential part, as the most exciting element of MMO play. What's more some argue that *ganking* falls more naturally into the narrative of many MMOs that are supposed to be sites of war-like inter-group conflict. Having said this, ritualistic events such as weddings and funerals are now a common part of MMO life and such rituals that have begun to have meaning within the MMO community as well as being an expression of external values. Often truces between factions are agreed for events like this, these are also sometimes broken. In these cases we might argue that there are strong singled Practices occurring that would lead to negative evaluations. However as I hope this brief sketch has illustrated, even in such cases making clear moral evaluations is often difficult.

CONCLUSION

MacIntyre's concept of Practices is a potential framework for evaluating the ethical value, or lack thereof, of acts that occur within MMO and whose meaning is largely internal to MMO practices. An examination of MMO practices shows that they fit MacIntyre's criteria for a Practice as many MMO acts are best understood as a social-ludic set of practices that mutually shape MMOs as technical artifacts.

However this does not provide neat answers to the oft vociferous views of players as to what is good and bad in a moral sense. Rather, taking on-board the notion of Practices gives us a framework in which we can examine acts and their context to discover whether there is a valid community-based claim for their moral status.

REFERENCES

1. Blum, L.A. *Moral Perception and Particularity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

2. Consalvo, M. "Rule Sets, Cheating, and Magic Circles: Studying Games and Ethics", *International Review of Information Ethics*, vol. l, no. 4.

3. Bartle, R. A. *Managing to Manage*, Presentation at Community Work: Managing Multiplayer Culture, IT University of Copenhagen. Available at http://game.itu.dk/comwork/ppt/Bartle.zip.

4. Foo, C.Y. and Koivisto E. M. I. "Defining Grief Play in MMORPGs: Player and Developer Perceptions," *Proceedings of the Advances in Computer Entertainment Technology ACE2004*, Singapore, June 3-5, 2004.

5. Hart, H. L. A. *The Concept of Law 2nd ed*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1994.

6. Jull, J. *Half Real*. The MIT Press, 2005.

7. Klastrup, L. "Towards a Poetics of Virtual Worlds: Multi-User Textuality and the Emergence of Story", phd thesis, Retrieved on 12 December 2006, from http://www.klastrup.dk/thesis.htm

8. BradyGames, *World of Warcraft Dungeon Companion*. Brady Games, 2006.

9. MacIntyre, A. *After Virtue 2nd Ed*, Duckworth, 1985.

10. Powers T. M. Real Wrongs in virtual communities, *Ethics and Information Technology*, (2003) 5: 191-198.

11. Pargman, D. & Erissson, A. (2005), Law, order and conflicts of interesting in massively multiplayer online games, in Proceedings of *DiGRA 2005 Conference*, Vancouver, Canada, 2005.

12. Rawls, J. Two Concepts of Rules, *The Philosophical Review*, 65 (1955) 3-32.

13. Reynolds, R., Ethics and Practice in Virtual Worlds, paper presented to *The Philosophy of Computer Games*, Reggio Emilia Italy 2007. Available at http://game.unimore.it/Papers/R_Reynolds_Paper.pdf.

14. Smith, J. H. Avatars you can trust - A survey on the issue of trust and communication in MMORPGs, Game Research. Retrieved December 12 2006, from http://www.gam e-research.com/art_avatars_trust.asp

15. Smith, J. S. Playing Dirty: Understanding Conflicts in Multiplayer Games, Paper presented to *AoIR 2004*. Available at http://www.itu.dk/people/smith/texts/playing_dirty.pdf.

16. Southern, M. (2001), *The Cultural Study of Games: More Than Just Games*, IGDA, Available at http://www.igda.org/articles/msouthern_culture.php

17. Stromer-Galley, J. & Mikeal, R. L. Participant Norms (Simulated Manners: Mechanisms Of Social Control In An Embodied On-Line Environment, Paper presented to *AoIR 2004*.

18. Turner, V. *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*. PAJ Publications, New York, 1982.

19. Taylor, T.L. *Play Between Worlds*. The MIT Press, 2006.