

## Ethics and Practice in Virtual Worlds

### *Abstract*

*This paper argues that acts that occur in MMOs (virtual world games), even those which have meaning only in relation to the internal values of the virtual space can (and in some cases do) have moral content.*

*The paper focuses on arguments presented by T. M. Powers in *Real Wrongs in Virtual Communities*, which support acts in social worlds such as *LambaMOO* having content but denies that MMOs meet the necessary criteria. It is argued that there is good reason to modify Powers's criteria for establishing if act online have moral content and that some acts in MMOs meet these modified criteria. Powers's and others' belief that MMOs are Hobbesian worlds are shown to be a misreading of the highly regulated conflict and game play that they host.*

*Lastly it is argued that acts occurring in the context of practices that have arisen in MMOs do have moral content just in case they meet the criteria set out in this paper and the specific context provides sufficient signaling of norms and the acceptance of those norms, that is that they occur within the context of an identifiable community of practice.*

### **1 Introduction**

This paper argues that acts that occur in virtual world games that only have meaning in the context of that game can have moral content. The paper examines arguments that have been made against virtual acts in general having moral content and specifically against virtual game acts having said content. Focusing on T. M. Powers's arguments from *Real Wrongs in Virtual Communities* (2004), which support acts in social worlds such as *LambaMOO* having content but deny that virtual game worlds met the necessary criteria; the paper will show how these arguments are too restrictive, and how a refined set of criteria are met by some acts that occur in virtual game worlds.

There is often doubt that what occurs in computer games generally and virtual worlds specifically has ethical content; even the notion of anything actually occurring within them is moot. This doubt can be summed up in the oft-heard expression "it's just a game". This rhetorical trivialization (Southern 2001, Consalvo 2003) seems to have three related roots. First, virtual worlds are virtual, at least at the level of abstraction that is under examination here. This is often conflated with being not real, hence outside the consideration of normative ethics. Second, there are elements of fantasy and role play both in the setting of the game and type of play that some people engage in when interacting with and via the virtual world. This is taken as separating act from actor in a way that is akin to theatrical actor's moral responsibility for the actions of a character in a play. Third, some virtual worlds are games, which seem to entail acts that have less weight than supposedly more serious activities. What's more, games seem to be set in opposition to traditional norms, allowing actors to lie, use physical violence, etc., with no fear of censure. Across each of these concerns run threads related to anonymity or pseudonymity and disembodiment.

Before examining whether a case can be made against this rhetoric of trivialization and the underling philosophical issues that it suggests, it is worth defining the scope of context and act that this paper is chiefly concerned with. The paper will focus on a type of virtual world commonly known as a MMORPG (Massively Multiplayer Online Role Play Game) or MMO for short, examples include *World of Warcraft*, *EverQuest*, *EvE Online*, *City of Heroes*, *Final Fantasy XI*, *Anarchy Online*. These are virtual worlds that are ostensibly created for game play, thus are subject to all three of the objections raised above. The so-called social worlds such as *Second Life*, *There* and *LambdaMOO* are outside the scope of this paper.

In terms of the scope of act that this paper focuses on, it is chiefly concerned with acts that can be said to occur within MMOs. That is, while recognizing issues that come to light from an external view of virtual worlds such as representation of gender and race, and issues of addiction, these are taken to be, at least on face value, a different class of moral issue from acts that derive their meaning primarily from the context of the virtual world itself.

The class of act that this paper will focus on includes in-world altruistic acts such as gift giving and a range of acts that are variously termed *Griefing* and / or *Cheating*. Specifically this includes most of what is defined under Foo and Koivisto's Taxonomy of Grief Play (Foo & Koivisto 2004): *Harassment*, *Power Imposition*, *Greed Play* and *Scamming* (though scamming is on the boarder of the focus of this paper as typically it will have external financial consequences). Also included as in-world acts of interest are: *Kill-stealing*, *Trains*, *Camping*, *Begging*, *Twinking*, *Power Leveling*, (Pargman & Erisson 2005, Smith 2004) and acts variously termed *Ganking* and *Ninja Looting*.

While social worlds are outside the scope of this paper, scholarship devoted to their ethics will be introduced. A theme that will run through the paper is that a number of writers support a case for the ethics of virtual acts but place limits on these that typically exclude MMOs.

## **2 Virtuality, Fantasy & Gameness**

As noted above people typically raise three objections to taking MMOs seriously. These are: virtuality, fantasy and gameness. Here we will look at each of these issues in turn and whether they present any solid grounds on which to base the supposition that acts in MMOs are devoid of moral content.

### **2.1 Virtuality**

Put simply, the issue of virtuality is that things that appear to happen in virtual worlds are not 'real'; hence they have no moral content. Horner (2001), for example, references Negroponte's claim that a move to the digital is an ontological shift, on which conventional normative ethics fail to gain purchase.

A number of writers have challenged the idea that the virtual, in the context of virtual worlds, can be equated with being devoid of moral content. Floridi and Sanders (2001) support the differential treatment of the virtual and the inability of

conventional normative ethics to gain a purchase. However, he suggests this is a limitation of theory and not the scope of moral content. To this end Floridi and Sanders add to the ontology of moral acts coining the term Artificial Evil to capture the specific type of harm that can occur virtually.

Brey (1999) suggests two arguments to animate moral content in virtual acts. First Brey argues that disrespect to 'virtual characters' may lead to a tendency to be disrespectful to humans. This is a position that is close to the so-called Media Effects argument that, according to many writers, is weak both theoretically and empirically (Consalvo 2005). Brey does concede the empirical point. Second, Brey argues that virtual acts have moral content in virtue of the potential for psychological harm that people may suffer from the knowledge that representations of things for which they care are not treated with respect. This reliance on representation also seems a weak argument given the variety of artifact that we might encounter in virtual worlds. However, if we drop the need for identification (a point that will be argued for below) and focus on the value that we might place on virtual objects, the argument seems to have some merit.

Huff, Johnson and Miller (Huff *et al* 2003) distinguish between physical harms and virtual harms that can be created using a virtual world, stressing that both are harms that affect a human being; though they add that we might also think of moral harm between virtual entities.

Sicart (2006) takes a mixed ethical stance to computer games in general, stressing factors such as the phenomenology of the play experience, the intentional stances of actors in respect of it, and the affordances of the game itself as a moral object. That is, the act of playing is a process of making moral choices in a specific context: a process of 'ludic phronesis'.

Other writers have proposed various solutions that rest on some form of denial of any central ontological shift. As a general matter of language and metaphysics Ludlow (2004) suggests that propositions concerning virtual worlds are metaphysically no different from those about the physical world, they simply have a particular domain over which they are true. Horner (2001) and Powers (2003) both look to convention and language to base their critique.

Powers's detailed analysis suggests that there are causal links between agent and effect. Powers states that the 'meanings and moral boundaries of behavior [...] are constructed from within the practice' (Powers 2003 p.195). Here Powers is specifically invoking Rawls's idea of practice (Rawls 1955), though I believe we might also look to MacIntyre (1984) as an alternative source of normativity in practice. Powers also employs Austin's concept of speech acts to give metaphysical grounding to virtual acts and their moral content. This analysis however is restricted to social worlds, *LambdaMOO* and Dibbell's *Rape in Cyberspace* being the cases in question. What's more, Powers explicitly excludes MMOs for reasons that include the fantasy and game issues we have touched on. In the sections below we will look at why Powers's exclusion of MMO is unfounded even on the terms that he defines.

## 2.2 Fantasy

The fantasy elements of MMOs suggest a logic that is internal to some underpinning narrative. We might liken the relation of this fantasy element to ethics, to the situations that pertain when acting. For example when someone playing Hamlet kills Polonius on stage we do not assume that an evil act has occurred, and the actor is not arrested. In our evaluation of the situation there is a separation between person, character and text.

Virtual worlds, however, are not quite like this. They are much more akin to having a basic plot structure and improvising within that structure. Read as a text virtual worlds are what Aarseth (1997) terms *Ergodic*; that is, they are texts that necessitate an active or non-trivial reading. Users of virtual worlds are not subservient to the fantasy element, and to assume that they do not know the difference would, in Consavlo's words, be an 'infantilization' of the space (2005). As Sicart (2006) notes, this active negotiation of the virtual world is one replete with moral choices – a point to which we will return.

Powers casts the person / character / space relationship in terms of speech acts, proposing that in the context of social worlds these come in two types: transitive performative or t-performative, and reflexive performative or r-performative. t-performative acts are ones whereby the characters in the social world are mediating technologies through which a community of practice is built. That is, the virtual world is little more than a communication device through which a community is formed, though no doubt the particular affordances of the technology have some impact on the way the community is shaped. r-performative acts, on the other hand, are those that are directed at the person (in Powers's terms, 'controller') as well as other characters. These come into play when the character is not simply a mediating technology but in some sense a persona, even one that might be a different gender or temperament from the person.

Powers states that t-performances establish the 'boundaries and expectations' (Powers 2004 p.196) of the community, and r-performances connect the person with the character; this provides a nexus between person and practice. Added to this Rawls's concept of practices, Powers provides a justification for virtual acts having moral content even when there is an element of fiction in the characters that people create and interact with.

However, in structuring this argument Powers makes certain assumptions that become criteria for acts having the potential of moral content. These are:

- Acts trade on trust
- There is a strong identification with character
- Reasonable expectation of behavior

Turning his analysis to MMOs, as opposed to social worlds such as *LambdaMOO* that are the focus of his analysis, Powers asserts that none of these conditions are met. This appears to be chiefly in virtue of MMOs' gameness. Not only does Powers deny that the identification condition is met, he states, "we can only hope that participants of the MMORPG do not increasingly identify with their avatars" (Powers 2004 p. 198). Thus if we grant Powers's argument for the moral content of acts in virtual

worlds in general, to apply this to MMOs we need to show that each of Powers's criteria are met in spite of his own assertions to the contrary.

### 2.3 Gameness

The ostensible purpose of an MMO is game play. The ethics of games is a notoriously difficult area. As noted previously, games are often associated with the trivial, or at least the non-serious. The aims of any given game seem utterly contingent: getting a counter round a board, getting a ball through one net and not another, delivering a virtual item from one part of a virtual world to another, etc. What's more, games often appear to stand in relation to social norms: poker relies on deception, boxing on hurting an opponent.

Powers, as we have noted, believes that there can be moral content in acts that occur in social worlds, but not in MMOs. In respect of MMOs and moral conduct he states that they "*feature* kinds of deviance" (Powers 2004 p.197; emphasis in the original). He goes on to say, "Role-playing games seem only to share features with a bizarre Hobbesian world, and hence must lack moral relations" (Powers 2004 p.198).

It is a mistake to think of MMOs and games in general as utterly contingent, as social spaces where anything goes – this is like confusing boxing with a brawl. Similarly it is a mistake to think of games as not serious or having purely hedonistic goals (Malaby 2006). At an intuitive level we can see from the fact that any multiplayer game that ever occurs suggests that there is at the very least some common assumption between the participants as to what the goals and rules of the game are. The fact that people are accused of cheating suggests that at least some people have expectations of adherence to these rules and make normative assumptions about conduct in relation to them. While this is hardly grounds to mount a defense of ethics in games, it is grounds to give the matter serious examination.

In some senses the gameness of MMOs is much like the fantasy element, which we might think of as a form of play. That is, those engaged in game play are not passive. Indeed, players are required for there to be a game; the formal rules and artifacts are not sufficient nor determinative of what the game experience is. The content of an MMO with which people interact to create the experience of the game is polysemic (Consalvo 2005); that is, the encoding of meaning is necessarily incomplete. As Sicart (2006) puts it, players through their acts create meaning and moral content in the phenomenology of game play through the interaction of three elements: the ethics of game design, the game as experience and the player as moral actor. To put this another way, the act of playing a game is a set of moral choices.

I want to suggest further that we can give those acts that seem to be internal to the values of the game appropriate moral weight by understanding them in terms of a practice community in a specific socio-cultural context. While games contain contingency not all aspects of gameness is contingent. The fact that games exist seems common across human cultures. What's more, the types of games that exist in a given culture at a given time, and the bounds and meanings of game acts, seem strongly linked with the culture in which they exist (see, for example: Struna 1986, Allison 1980 on class and sport; Brailford 1985 on the emerging ethics of pugilism / boxing). As Midgley (1974) points out, society is not indifferent to the differences

between games: we cannot simply substitute ‘lawn tennis for football’; and as Consalvo (2005) notes, games have a role in the context of the life of the individual. Moreover, MacIntyre (1984) cited games such as Football and Chess as archetypal of norm generating practices.

In summary, although games appear to be contingent and removed from social context, conduct within the practice of a game is both generative of and subject to moral evaluation.

### **3 Trust, Identification and Reasonable Expectations**

Given the general defense of games as sites where moral acts can occur (outlined above), I believe that we cannot rule out acts in MMOs as putative moral acts because they occur in a game. What remains then is to look at each of Powers’s criteria and ask if they do pertain in MMOs despite Powers’s reservations. To revise, Powers suggested that virtual acts could have moral content just in case three criteria were met: acts trade on trust, there is a strong identification with character and there is a reasonable expectation of behavior.

#### **3.1 Trading on Trust**

Powers’s comments on MMOs suggest that trust is absent. Looking online in general one might make three levels of argument to suggest that the relevant morally motivating trust is absent from MMOs:

1. That virtual environments in general are not spaces where there can be trust
2. That MMOs in particular are places where there cannot be trust (this is Powers’s argument)
3. That the kinds of trust generated in MMOs are not relevant to our analysis; i.e., they do not motivate ethics in the virtual acts under consideration

##### **3.1.1 Can we trust online?**

A number of writers have suggested that genuine trust cannot be generated through interactions that occur, and only occur, virtually. The argument generally is that the virtual lacks one or more elements essential to the generation of trust. Nissenbaum (2001) suggests three such elements: lack of identity; lack of personal characteristics; and inscrutable social setting and clear roles (see also Pettit 1995, 2004).

De Laat (2005) has directly challenged these assertions. Focusing on trading communities and ‘non task’ groups, De Laat shows that situations of primary trust (where acts make clear that they rely on others and signal expectation that this should motivate behavior on the part of others); and situation of secondary trust (where a group is used reflexively for feedback - seeking respect, admiration etc.), both can and do exist in online communities between ‘pure virtuals’ (individuals that have only interacted online). Moreover, there is nothing to suggest that such situations of dynamic reliance should not occur online. However, De Laat excluded virtual worlds from his analysis due to their use of constructed ‘persona’. Thus having established that there can be genuine trust on-line we need establish whether it can and does occur in MMOs.

### 3.1.2 *Trust in MMOs*

As we have seen above, Powers and others argue that persona *per se* is not an argument against the construction of trust relations online. De Laat and to some degree Powers seem to give too much credit to the degree of identity construction that occurs in the context of MMOs. Indeed, if we look at the work that people put into identity in MMOs as opposed to social worlds like LambdaMOO, there seems to be much less effort put into identity construction. Typically MMO characters are stock types that allow for little customization (though games such as *Star Wars Galaxies* have pioneered character customization). What's more, while early analysis of virtual worlds suggested a rather idealized idea of identity construction (Turkle 1995), more recent work has shown that much more limited than the initial utopian ideas of cyberspace took into (see, for example Paasonen 2002; Krzywinska 2005).

However, all this theorizing of persona seems to ignore the practice of MMO use. As noted previously MMOs are ostensibly multiplayer games; and games are, to borrow De Laat's phrasing, dynamic interactive situations of reliance, i.e., situations that engender trust for successful outcomes. Thus, if we look at how people use MMOs we do see trust relations (Smith 2004). What's more, social structures created by users of MMOs, for example guilds, act to establish and regulate local norms (Jakobsson & Taylor 2003), and peer groups act to constantly create and reinforce local norms (Stromer-Galley & Mikeal 2003), thus institutionalizing trust relations between peers.

### 3.1.3 *The right kind of trust?*

In respect of an act having ethical content, I am not sure there can be a wrong kind of trust. We have already discounted the notion of virtual or ludic acts as not being morally relevant. We have also found that trust and situations of mutual reliance are core to the MMO experience. Thus I suggest the trust that we see in MMOs is just that form of trust that Powers necessitated as a component of the moral composition of virtual acts.

## 3.2 Identification

Powers uses identification to forge an ethical link between player, persona and acts that occur between these persona. Brey (1999) also sees identification (in this case in terms of representation) as key to virtual ethics. As noted above, the relative degree of identity construction that occurs in MMOs seems, on the face of it, to be lower than that in social worlds.

Here I want to argue three things in respect of MMOs and identification with characters. First, there is a degree of identification with the characters which are created in an MMO. Second, this identification is not only through the reflexive process of persona creation but occurs through the act of engaging with the virtual world via a character. Third, over and above this there is an attachment to the internal values of the MMO as a game, and hence practice, which is sufficient to make the ethical link that Powers identifies.

Powers seems to argue that people identify with their avatar in virtue of reflexive speech acts that have meaning within a community of practice, both for the community and for the individual. Wolfendale (2006), arguing directly against

Powers, suggests that not only does this situation pertain in MMOs but that the attachment is morally significant even in those that facilitate PvP (player vs player combat).

Here I think it is useful to look beyond the idea of identification as simply seeing an avatar as oneself. People have psychological motivations for using virtual worlds. Bartle (2006) suggests that we use virtual worlds as an exploration of self (see also Joinson (2003) on the use of the internet as an 'identity workshop'; and De Mul (2005) on ludic identity formation), and that there are four main vectors of behavior that users of MMOs exhibit, which we can characterize as: Achievers, Socializers, Explorers and Killers (Bartle 1996, 2006). Similarly, Yee's empirical work (2006) suggests that a user's main reasons to 'play' an MMO are: Socialization, Achievement, Immersion, Escapism and Competition; while Mulligan and Patrovsky (2003) categorize players as Barbarians, Tribesmen and Citizens.

For further evidence of identification and attachment we might also look to ritual practices that occur in most virtual worlds such as funerals (Koster 1998) and marriages (the *Star Wars Galaxies* web site include an official Wedding Guide<sup>1</sup>), and the issues that arise when these are brought into the sphere of play (Spaight 2003). Also, there is the simple fact of people's emotions when things that they consider to be outside agreed norms occur to their avatar (Wolfendale 2006). This strongly suggests that an avatar is more than just an instrument. Returning to Sicart (2006) if we suppose that the avatar is necessary to 'preserve that phenomenological experience [of the game]' then it is sufficiently attached to the user to justify an ethical link between persons and virtual practices.

The conclusion I believe we can draw from this is that the relationship between user and avatar in a virtual world is more than a simple subject / object one. A cyber-theory analysis of this would also be fruitful but is outside the scope of this paper (see Hayles 1999). While selection of character is highly limited in most MMOs, and the affordances of the technology together with psychological factors narrow the scope of identity performance, MMOs are used as sites to explore identity. The performance of identity and attachment with the virtual world is not simply or essentially embodied in one's character but through every aspect of one's engagement with the virtual world.

### 3.3 Reasonable Expectations

The last of Powers's criteria for virtual acts having moral content is that there should be a reasonable expectation of behavior. As a test, reasonable expectations, are difficult to meet both empirically and theoretically, this is especially the case with MMOs.

In the discussions above, we have framed MMOs as games and the activities that occur within them as game-play. As we have noted, in so much as people are engaged in game-play, there must be some minimal level of trust if they mutually succeed in playing a game. We might read from this that there is thus a reasonable expectation of behavior in MMOs.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://starwarsgalaxies.station.sony.com/players/guides.vm?id=80000>

However, a game is only one way we can frame an MMO (Klastrup 2003). We might equally think of them as communities or customer service relationships or property regimes. Each frame has its merits and each brings with it a set of assumptions about legitimate bounds of behavior.

Even within the game frame there are broad interpretations of how the game is to be played and the meaning of any given rule – indeed some see this gap between the formal description of a game and any given instance of the game as unbridgeable if it is being used to support a normative description of game practices (McFee 2004). Given this we might argue that it's quite unreasonable to expect someone to act in certain way, especially taking into account the size of MMOs and the fact that we may be playing with a person we have never met (in-game or out) before and will likely never meet again.

I believe that we can grant all this and retain our reasonable test.

Virtual worlds have been around since 1979 (Bartle 2003). During this time a range of traditions centered on virtual worlds have been established. These are passed from virtual world to virtual world by a range of actors including: the creators (who originally were players of other games and now have been and still are players of other MMOs), early users of the virtual world (such as Beta testers), players that constantly negotiate boundaries – all of whom establish an ethos of use through interactions with the given lore and affordances of a virtual world (Bartle 2004).

These traditions form a practice of use of MMOs that encompasses frames such as game and community. The practice and elements such as the technical affordances of the given MMO, regulatory practices of those running the virtual world etc. mutually shape bounds. In respect of the play elements of MMOs, just like other games, it is within this bounded contingent space that players generate value.

The factor of the heterogeneity of practices across virtual worlds and within any one (Allen 1996) does not mean that there are spaces where behavior is tightly bounded and expectations are reasonable. Thus before asking if there is a reasonable expectation of behavior we need to look at the context of the act. Key elements that we might look for are: the range of behaviors across the given MMO / in that particular shard or server; whether individuals are in a random pick-up-group or a guild organized raid etc.

What these different circumstances provide are indications of the degree of signaling that has occurred that a given behavior is expected and the degree of recognition (both implicit and explicit) that an individual has give to abide by the expected norms.

Guilds, for example, can have highly prescriptive guides to conduct, what's more the creation and enforcement of local norms tends to be highly active (Mikeal & Stromer-Galley 2004), hence there are many cases where it is very clear what a local norm is and that an individual has signalled their acceptance of that.

## 4 Conclusion

In the arguments above we have slightly modified Powers's criteria for acts in virtual worlds having moral content, the revised set can be summarized as follows:

- Acts trade on trust
- There is a performance of identity and an attachment with aspects of the virtual world
- There are reasonable expectations of behavior in the context of act and circumstance under consideration

Assuming that this is a necessary and sufficient set of criteria for moral content to obtain it was argued, and some empirical studies were evidenced, that support the proposition that certain acts in MMOs meet these criteria thus have genuine moral content.

To illustrate how these theories cash out in practice I shall use a number of examples from current MMO practice.

*Ninja Looting* (taking rewards that are usually the result of a group effort outside local rules explicitly or implicitly set by that group) generally meets all the conditions for moral content we established above. The outcome, i.e. the 'loot', has a value that is internal to an MMO; it is generally the product of a group effort where individuals have assumed a level of trust and type of behavior from others. This will often have been reinforced through the duration of an activity such as a raid where individuals will play their role such as *healer* or *tank* in a co-operative fashion. There will typically be an explicit or implicit agreement on reward sharing; in current MMOs this may be facilitated by group loot setting or in-game devices such as the '/roll' command. Hence *Ninja Looting* meets all the criteria we have established and so is a valid candidate for ethical evaluation. This of course is not universal, as on a Role Play server someone playing a Thief might very well loot which may enrich the role-play experience of all.

*Ganking* (the killing of a lower player by a higher one where there is no question of a contest), however, seems to me to be acts that do not necessarily draw moral sanction. In MMOs that are Hobbesian (to borrow Powers's term) it would seem that we might have a reasonable expectation for our characters to be randomly killed. Many MMOs split their servers between PvP (Player vs Player – where players can 'kill' each other's characters), PvE (Player vs Environment – where players cannot generally kill each other) and RP (Role Play – where one might expect people to engage in Role Play). By joining a PvP server there is an explicit acceptance that one's avatar might be 'killed'. There are arguments such as those from fair play (Loland 2002) to suggest that in any game if one opponent is much stronger than the other then there is no question of the outcome of the game thus one of the basic definitions of game has not been met. To apply this to *Ganking* is to look too narrowly at what is occurring. Fair play applies more properly to the whole enterprise of playing an MMO not a single incidence of play. The player being *Ganked* may have a high level *alt* (alternative character) that they may use to gain retribution on the other player, they may have guild mates near by to call on which may result in a chase across the virtual world – all of this, in some MMOs at some times, is accepted as part of the practice of

engaging in a PvP MMO, indeed for some players this is the most exciting and engaging part of MMO play.

To conclude, 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. This is as true for MMOs as it is for social worlds. The key factor in determining whether a virtual act that meets the criteria established above is one that has moral content is the context in which that act happens and expectations that other's might reasonably have. As such we can understand engagement with MMOs as dynamic engagement with a set of communities of practice ranging from the practice of using virtual spaces in general to those of a tightly organized guild raid. These variously breath moral content into the individual decisions made by actors as they perform within a space given meaning and value by the mutual engagement of all participants.

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