What I won't do in pixels: Examining the limits of taboo violation in MMORPGs

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ABSTRACT

This paper examined the emotional impact that engaging in or witnessing *Symbolic Taboo Activities* (STAs), as represented in MMORPGs (massively multiplayer online role-playing game), such as killing, torture and rape, has on adults. We focused our study on two games: World of Warcraft and Sociolotron. The study employed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which was chosen because of its emphasis on 'lived experienced' and how participants make sense of their experiences. Five participants, all over the age of 18 years, were interviewed via Instant Messenger, four of which were men. Most of our participants felt they could easily separate gamespace from the real world; however, when asked to examine specific actions in-depth, we found this was not the case for all STAs. Activities that did not have a sanctioned equivalence (e.g., rape) were found by most to be more difficult to separate, especially emotionally. However, this was not the case for all participants. The findings suggest that not all individuals can psychologically cope with engaging in and/or witnessing certain STAs in MMORPGs. The results, we believe are important for game designers, censoring bodies of video games and psychologists.

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1. Introduction

Psychological research into videogames has focused mostly on the relationship between gaming and aggression, online identities, and the social and addictive nature of these spaces. However, psychologists have spent little time examining whether there are certain aspects of a game (including how it looks, the rules of the game, and what behaviours ought to be constrained or allowed in the game), certain role-playing behaviours or interactions that are deemed inappropriate or upsetting for players. For example, are some killings too graphic? Is it ok to engage in sexual talk or erotic activities in these games and, if so, what are the accepted limits of these activities? Is cannibalism a psychologically healthy fantasy to engage in within a game? How does it feel to play out rape in a game? In this study, we were interested in the emotional impact that engaging in or witnessing *Symbolic Taboo Activities* (STAs), as represented in MMORPGs (massively multiplayer online role-playing game), such as killing, torture and rape, has or might have on the individual adult. Research of this kind, we believe, will assist organisations involved in the censoring and rating of games, psychologists (both researchers and therapists), game designers, as well as the individuals who opt to play these games.

1.1. Symbolic taboo activities in games

Numerous video games include representations of activities that are taboo, criminal or immoral to engage in offline. Many games, for instance, contain graphical representations of violence, where individuals maim and kill (e.g., *Left* 4 *Dead* 2, *Kill Zone* 2, *Soldier of Fortune* 2), and in a growing number murder, mutilate and even torture (*Reservoir Dogs*). In some games these acts are an integral part of the plotline and gameplay (*Manhunt 2*, *Postal 2*, *MadWorld*). In a few cases, it is even possible to witness the cannibalisation of victims. The *Resident Evil* series, *Evil Dead*, and *F.E.A.R.* all feature cannibalism, although more in the form of a threat to the player than something he/she engages in. It is rarely the case, however, that characters engage in acts of rape or incest. Exceptions to this are *Phantasmagoria* (rape is possible), *The House of the Dead*: *Overkill* (in which incest is implied by an action), and *No More Heroes* (where it is a feature of the game narrative, but not interaction). Rape is a key feature within *Battle Raper* (defeated female opponents can be raped and sexually assaulted); and in *RapeLay* the entire gameplay centres on hunting down and raping a mother and her virgin daughters, although it is also possible to rape other women.

In MMORPGs, players take on the role of a fictional character, typically in a fantasy world, and have agency over many of their character's actions. MMORPGs differ from single-player games in that many people are logged onto the game at the same time, and opponents and team players include both computer generated characters and those controlled by real people. The worlds created in these games continue to evolve even when the player is absent

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from the game – examples include *EverQuest*, *World of Warcraft*, *Final Fantasy XI* and, more recently, *Warhammer*. The popularity of these games continues to grow. More recently, the nature of this interaction with some MMORPGs has become more 'adult' based. *Age of Conan*, *Warhammer*, 2 *Moons*, and *Requiem*: *Bloodymare*, for example, provide increased opportunities for extreme violence and more graphic depictions of violent outcomes. Continuing the adult theme, *Sociolotron* promotes itself as a world with different values and rules in which you are allowed to explore your 'darker side'. Sex, both consensual and non-consensual, is permitted and graphically represented, as is politically incorrect behaviour, including blasphemy and all forms of discrimination. The general philosophy of the game seems to be that if you are given the freedom to express yourself within this space then you should allow others to do the same. Exempt from this freedom, however, is any form of simulated paedophilia. It is explicitly stated on the game's homepage that this is unacceptable (a point we shall return to). Similarly, in *Pangaea*, a game originating in Korea, sex is either a main feature of the gameplay, or appears indirectly in gambling and fantasy battle options – female warriors lose their clothes when hurt or wounded, for example, becoming fully naked when killed. Continuing the cybersex theme is 3 *Feel* – launched as the first English adult MMORPG.

1.2. Video games and aggressive behaviour

Given the amount of violence and adult content in video games, there has been a growing concern in society regarding which of these games children ought to have access to. With regards to psychological research, the main focus has been on whether playing these games causes children to become more aggressive (Buchman & Funk, 1996; Funk, 1993). In a review of the literature, Anderson et al. (2003) found that many studies reported a number of short-term effects of playing video games, such as the increased likelihood of physically and verbally aggressive behaviour, and increased aggressive thoughts and emotions. Sherry's (2001) meta-analysis likewise found that games have some kind of effect on aggression; however, the effect is smaller than that produced by watching television. Moreover, the treatment time in the studies she considered varied from 5 to 75 min, making it difficult to determine precisely how long the effect actually lasts. Few studies have focused on online games. Williams and Skoric's (2005) longitudinal study of MMO (Massively Multiplayer Online) players found no evidence for the claim that online violent games cause substantial increases in real-world aggression; neither did playing online violent games result in more accepting beliefs about violent behaviours. However, Ivory and Kalyanaraman (2007) found that the more immersed an individual was in a game the greater their physiological and self-reported levels of arousal, and aggression. Similarly, Polman, de Castro, and van Aken (2008) found that actively engaging in a violent video game produced higher levels of aggression than passively watching the same game (in boys but not girls). Interestingly, Konijn and Bushman (2007) found that boys who felt more immersed in the game, and identified more with the protagonist, exhibited more aggressive behaviour. In summary, then, it appears that games, including online video games, can lead to a small increase in aggressive behaviour in some individuals.

1.3. Possible psychological impact of violating offline taboos in gamespace

Whilst a comprehensive understanding of the degree to which violent games breed violence is of course important research that ought to be undertaken, it is not our main concern in this study. We were instead concerned with whether engaging in or witness-

ing 'Symbolic Taboo Activities' (STAs) in MMORPGs has a negative psychological impact on gamers.

In previous work it has been theorised that engaging in STAs in gamespace might elicit disgust or distress responses possibility unanticipated by the player (Young & Whitty, in press-a, 2010). This theory is based on previous work on disgust. Damasio's (1994) *somatic marker hypothesis*, for instance, contends that our visceral response to certain events is automated through habituation. So much so that merely *thinking* about similar events can trigger a physiological response. Similarly, Fitzgerald et al. (2004) argue that the excitation of neural pathways underlying our response to disgust-eliciting objects/events can occur even in the absence of external triggers. Therefore, if the mere thought of taboos is sufficient to elicit deep disgust, then it seems reasonable to conjecture that any *virtual* display of taboos will likewise elicit a visceral response. Moreover, if such responses are elicited, is the gamer able to cope psychologically with engaging in or witnessing such activities?

In order to cope psychologically with engaging in activities such as killing, torture and rape in gamespace, it might be necessary to make a clear distinction between gamespace and ordinary life. Whitty and Carr (2006) have argued that:

> the fundamental essence of play is the freedom, the license to create and be set apart from ordinary life. Yet, on the other hand, for this to be accomplished, constraint is required in the form of rules and other factors related to space and time. Thus, in an interesting twist of logic, freedom is created only through constraint. (p. 58)

With respect to cyberspace, Whitty and her colleague (2003; Whitty & Carr, 2006) have argued that it is very difficult to completely separate the realm of cyberspace and the offline world. Turkle (1995) has also made this argument with respect to MUDS (a similar space to MMORPGs but in text only): "the computer can be similarly experienced as an object on the border between self and not-self... People are able to see themselves in the computer. The machine can seem a second self" (p. 30). Engaging in play can be liberating and conducive to the development of the self as well as psychological growth; however, it can also be debilitating, especially when play aligns itself too closely with reality (Whitty & Carr, 2006). According to previous psychologists, it is therefore important to understand the emotional responses and meanings that are imported into the realm of play. With respect to our study, MMORPGs can appear like a completely different reality, with characters that did not exist in the real world (e.g., goblins and wizards); however, not all games do. Moreover, MMORPGs involve individuals playing against other real individuals. Therefore, we are interested in whether people respond differently to actions that appear fantastical versus games that mimic closely the real world and whether this varies depending on whether the action is played out against the computer compared to a 'real person' operating the character. We also wish to examine whether it is easier to separate some gamespaces from the real world compared with others, and whether this separation assists in coping with the STAs gamers engage in or witness in play, or whether it is even necessary to make a clear distinction between gamespace and ordinary life.

It may well be that some actions are easier to deal with in gamespace compared to others. For example, Young and Whitty (in press-a) have pointed out that some taboo activities in the real world are sanctioned. Killing, for example, can occur in legitimate or illegitimate ways. A *sanctioned equivalent* of killing is state authorised execution, or the death of combatants during a war. Torture, they point out, has been justified in the past by legitimate authorities (Soldz, 2008), and in some cases still is; or at least its legitimate use is debated (in the ticking bomb scenario, for