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A Flourishing Revolt

MIGUEL SICART

A Warrior fights. A Warrior fends off the enemies that populate every corner of Azeroth. A Warrior ensures that others can survive, that monsters will focus only on him, the Warrior, the first line of defence, the first line of hope. A Warrior is a hero from the beginning—through sacrifice, strength, and diligence a Warrior saves his mates one monster at a time.

But for Warriors to become the heroes they aspire to be, they need to have power. And Warriors feel underpowered. The might behind their names, behind the appearance of their powerful weapons, is only decorative, a myth. Warriors need more power, and someone, the gods, need to hear this claim.

Warriors unite! This war cry spreads through Internet forums, from warrior to warrior, from player to player: the meeting will take place in the Argent Dawn server, in the city of Ironforge. Players will create a Gnome Warrior, they will take off their clothes, they will parade—the developers need to know that the Warriors' humiliation will not prevail, that they need to be respected, that Warriors need to live up to their epic lore.

A revolt takes place. Dozens, maybe even hundreds, of Gnome Warriors parade, attracting the attention of other players who sympathize, mock, or just ignore the protest. The developers are also aware of the event. Their reaction? They threaten to temporarily ban the accounts of those protesting players if they don't desist. Some don't yield. Their accounts are banned. The developers win.

This is an account of an event that took place in *World of Warcraft* in the early days of the game, and that is now known as the "Gnome Tea Party." It was a player revolt against what they

believed was a design flaw. What makes the event memorable is the consequences, the banning of player accounts by developers, under the argument that players were disrupting the "spirit of the game."

One has to wonder what an in-game event like the Gnome Tea Party says about ethics and morality, issues of right and wrong, even the reminiscence of Thourau and Ghandi's philosophy of non-violent protest. Should the game developers be the ones to lay down the law? Or should the players themselves have a say? Is there such a thing as too much authority when it comes to Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs) such as *WoW*?

A History of Many Players

At the moment of writing, any reference to online computer games is illustrated by *World of Warcraft*, the incredible success story that has gathered over eleven million players around a fictional world of Orcs, Zombies, Gnomes, and Dwarves. Its popularity has made *WoW* a synonym both of economic success and of the very genre of games of which it's a part. And given its success, we can only predict that in the future, all MMORPGs will look like *WoW*.

However, the story of this genre and these games does not start, and will not end, with *World of Warcraft*. In fact, just to be purists, *WoW* is the direct culmination of a design history that was made popular with *Ultima Online* (Origin Systems, 1997), a game that was "just" an evolution of the early Multi-User Dungeons, or MUDs. Role playing over the internet has a long and rich history.

Play is an activity better practiced with others. Playing alone, like in single-player games, can be considered a historical anomaly. Yet early computers afforded the perfect "other player": ruthless, determined to win, and, best of all, easily designed by the creator of the game. Hence, most early computer games were single-player, from *Adventure* to *Asteroids*.

However, a computer is seldom a worthy opponent. It can probably match, or even beat, our skills, but it will do so without wit or soul, as the machine it is. And for games like role-playing games, that's all there is, more or less. In the late 1970s this problem was solved with the development of Multi-User Dungeons, mostly text-based environments connected through computer networks in which a number of players could meet and role play dif-

ferent kinds of adventures. The future of multiplayer was born.

Most multi-user dungeons had two crucial differences with regards to contemporary MMOs: 1. players of certain experience and skills could actually create content for the game; 2. the game had an end for players—once they reached the highest level, they became administrators too. These two design choices implied that MUD communities were highly empowered, as both users and creators of the content they were enjoying. I n this sense, MUDs gave powers and tools to players to participate in the game beyond the limits afforded by the developers. Furthermore, on those MUDs, the boundaries between developers and players, producers and consumers, were either nonexistent or irrelevant.

With the advent of graphical user interfaces, some of this freedom was lost. MUDs became online adventure games, produced by larger corporations that wanted to produce revenue as well as to engage a customer base in the lavish virtual worlds they created. As noted above, the current trend of MMORPG design can be traced back to *Ultima Online*, a game that set the trend in terms of technical architecture, graphical metaphors, gameplay and community management. All current MMORPGs are some kind of offspring of *Ultima Online*.

It was not that game, though, that made the genre famous. Sony Online's *EverQuest* (1999) was yesteryears' *World of Warcraft*. Academics, the press, game developers, we were all astonished by the 250,000 players that gathered in Norrath to play a game that foreshadowed the future of PC gaming. Built on the tradition of *Ultima*, but focusing on creating a pleasant and challenging experience for as many players as possible, *EverQuest* also symbolizes the success of a way of establishing player-developer relations.

Essentially, developers saw players as consumers, engaged with a product over which they had absolute control. Phenomena like the trading of in-game assets for real money, or the extension of real communities into virtual communities were often harshly regulated by the developers, who wanted to keep strict control over the contents, products, and interactions they had designed for players. Developers used their absolute, omniscient power over the game to control behaviors, convinced that *EverQuest* was a business more than a game or a place for communities to gather.

World of Warcraft, the hugely popular game based on the *Warcraft* franchise, has only expanded these policies. In fact, *WoW* is a game controlled by the developers to a very large extent,

expanding on the policies of control and the architectures of power created for *EverQuest*. These practices, and the way they relate to players, are what make *WoW* an interesting game to analyze from an ethical perspective, since it illuminates issues on player values, virtual-world ethics, and developer responsibilities.

What this history shows us, however, is a conflict between a player model imposed by developers and the actual behaviour of these worlds' denizens. As T.L. Taylor has argued, designers embed an image of a user, an "ideal" user in the products they create.[1] This means that games are designed to be played in specific ways pre-determined by the game developers. In fact, designing is not only creating interesting games, but also identifying what appeals to a core audience of players. Designing is, then, imagining players and catering to their needs, while limiting their possible behaviors.

Taylor has argued that the models that game developers tend to embed in MMORPGs fall into two categories: players-as-consumers, and players-as-troublemakers. The players-as-consumers model implies that the users of these online worlds do not have rights as citizens or producers of content, but should merely be interacting with a product in the prescribed ways. This model understands players as unproductive button-mashers who will obey the rules and comply with the decisions of the developers, regardless of how arbitrary those may be.

The second model, players-as-troublemakers, explains the reaction of *World of Warcraft*'s developers after the Gnome Tea Party. In this approach, players are seen as disruptors of a specific vision of the game imposed by the designers. Since that vision is somewhat sacred, any action that threatens the status quo, be that creating their own rules or content or publicly complaining about imbalances, will yield punishing responses, such as banning accounts. Developers are zealous over their designs, to the extent that they have even included a clause in the End-User License Agreement that allows them to act in case a player acts against "the spirit of the game." The vagueness of this phrasing, seemingly, is just an umbrella to justify interventionism in case any player tries to play in a different way as that plotted by the designers.

These two models are very troublesome. Players are not necessarily either consumers or troublemakers. In fact, players of online

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[1] Taylor, T.L., "Beyond Management: Considering Participatory Design and Governance in Player Culture," *First Monday* (October 2006).

game worlds tend to build large social networks, contributing to the life on those worlds as much as any system of rules does. For instance, players form guilds that, on occasions, compete to be the first in accomplishing a particular feat and thus become famous. Guilds are institutionalized social networks that involve both the game world and social relations outside of it. Players may not own the world, but they certainly inhabit it, and produce social, cultural, and personal content by merely being there and playing the game. In this sense, players are more than just button-mashers: players are creative beings with the capacity of incorporating their values into their experience of the game, as well as their culture and history as players and as human beings. The Gnome Tea Party in itself is an example of this creative capacity: by appealing to the tradition of non-violent protest, warriors united against a superior authority with righteous claims. The rest is (this) history.

This capacity of players to make these worlds "theirs" is the heart of the complex relations between players and developers, and it is also relevant when understanding some of the ethical issues generated by online game worlds. The values of such worlds should be mapped first and foremost as the values that the designers have embedded in the game world, and how those affect the creative capacities of players. Being a player of *World of Warcraft* means playing by some community-values, but also creating ethical discourses they want to live by.

Be the Player You Can Be

The idea of players as customers is so pervasive that we tend to apply it when analyzing situations that take place in games. A reader could claim that what Blizzard did, banning those players that publicly complained, was enforcing the implicit contract between two parties: players should play, and developers should make sure that they do so, without any more complaints.

Nevertheless, the nature of online worlds as places where we play, but where we socialize too, seems to demand a more nuanced approach to issues of play. Some game designers like Raph Koster have even claimed that we should think about a bill of rights for players[2]: being a denizen of *World of Warcraft* is

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[2] Ralph Koster, "Declaring the Rights of Players" (2000), at <www.raphkoster .com/gaming/playerrights.shtml>.

much more than just being a player, in its political, cultural, and ethical implications.

Playing is much more than delegating (refereeing) responsibility to the game developers. We're not just players of *World of Warcraft*, we are somewhat citizens of Azeroth, and as such we have duties, and rights, that ought to be respected. It's not a matter of ownership, nor is it a matter of customer-producer relations. Being in a game-world like Azeroth is being an ethical and political entity that is interested in playing, but also in creating social networks and upholding those values that, as players, we want to live by.

Let's return to the Gnome Tea Party: if we analyze the event from the model of players as customers, what we see is players using the "wrong" means to complain about the product. Instead of using the channels sanctioned by the developers, they appropriate the game and "misuse" it: in order to protest for a game design imbalance through the approved means, the official forums, players staged a peaceful revolt in one server, in fact appropriating the space for other means than the designed play. This means breaking the contract between both parties, and hence justifying the actions taken by the developers.

Seeing the event from the perspective of "players as troublemakers," the picture is even bleaker: the developers considered that this protest constituted not a legitimate complaint, but an act of conspiracy against the game itself. Players did not want to criticize, they wanted to break the spirit of the game, and therefore they deserved the banning of their accounts.

However, we can see the Gnome Tea Party from a totally different perspective, one that involves understanding players as ethical beings capable of creating the values they play by. When players of *World of Warcraft* considered that the design of the Warrior class was imperfect to the extent of harming their experience of the game, they acted upon that belief. They did so by applying their agency in the game world to express their concerns. What the Gnome Tea Party shows us is that players of *World of Warcraft* have a deep sense of belonging to a world and ownership of the game, and that translates to the ethical capacity and duty, of contributing with value-based choices and actions to the game world.

In other words, players of *WoW* see the world as partially theirs, and in doing so, they develop a set of principles, values, and ethical codes by which they live. The use of the space to complain

about design issues is an ethical action, understood as their duty to report what harms them and act to prevent harm. Players not only play, they also create values by which they play, and act upon them.

In philosophical terms, this capacity for players to create values and live by them can be explained by applying the general framework of Flourishing Ethics. This framework is a rather contemporary take on two ethical theories: Aristotle's Virtue Ethics and Wiener's early Information Ethics.[3] In the Western world, Virtue Ethics has enjoyed a long history, influencing many different strains of ethical thinking. Wiener's ethical theories have not been so popular, but they critically contribute to the Flourishing Ethics framework, an ethical theory for the information age.

Flourishing Ethics is based on the idea that it is good that humans flourish, that is, that they become the best they can become in moral terms. They can only do so by being *autonomous*, that is, by being in charge of their own lives, creating values and taking decisions as well as responsibility for their actions and their meaning. Humans can chose what to be, and should create their lives according to this wish of fulfilment. Flourishing Ethics, then, is the ethics of becoming the best we can become by creating our lives, and taking responsibility in doing so.

Human beings are seldom alone: in this sense, Flourishing Ethics also recognises that we are essentially social beings, and that to flourish, we need to develop good societies. The ethical development is both personal and interpersonal: we develop our values and the values of our communities. This process means that what is good in each of us, what we must strive to develop, has to be respected by the larger setting in which we live. Laws, and traditions, should then act as frames and reinforcements of the process of flourishing.

Finally, Flourishing Ethics has to be seen as a wide-scoped ethical theory: the ethical demand of becoming the best we can become should not stop on a human or societal level. Flourishing can also take place in ecosystems, informational systems, artificial agents, and even civilizations. In other words, machines can also flourish, as well as artificial environments. Translated to *World of*

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[3] T.W. Bynum, "Flourishing Ethics," in *Ethics and Information Technology* 8:4 (2007), pp. 157–173.

Warcraft? Players, computer-controlled agents, and the very world of Azeroth—they are all subject to ethical duties regarding their development to fulfil their potential.

If we go back to the Gnome Tea Party again, we can frame it as an ethical act. Players developed a number of values that made protesting the right action to take: as players, they believed that they were being harmed, and that the same world in which they were living should stage the protest. Similarly, we can claim that their complaint was aimed at an ethical flaw in the world: the game was poorly designed, which meant that the experience was damaging their capacity to flourish. Players did not just complain: the Gnome Tea Party is an enactment of their ethical duties towards themselves, the player community, and the game world in which they inhabit. Blizzard's response damaged the ethical coherence of the game and the being of their players.

We need to move on from developer-created player models to a model that takes into consideration not only what players can do to win the game, but also what players *do* when they live in that gameworld.

Simple Harassment and Who We Are

In January 2006, a new polemic affected *World of Warcraft*. A game master, the developers' authority in the game world, issued a warning to a player who was recruiting other players for her GLBT (Gay-Lesbian-Bisexual-Transexual)-friendly guild. Interpreting the game's harassment policy in a rather particular way, the game master understood that such recruiting efforts should be taken outside of the game since they cause those recruited players to be harassed for their sexual orientation.

While this is just an example of the particular community management ideas that drive *WoW*, it shows once again that for the developers of this game, there should be not only a strict difference between real life and in-game life, but also that in-game life should follow strict observation of the rules they have laid out, regardless of community practices or values.

This policy is a misunderstanding of players. Players are creative beings. When we enter a gameworld, we not only want to create an avatar that will be our body in that game; we also want to be a part of a community of players. Being a part of this community requires acting according to the rules and values that other players

deem crucial for being a productive member of the game. Playing is never a lonely activity; it is always positioning oneself in a history, tradition, and social network to which, by virtue of the game, we belong.

Since players are social, ethical beings capable of creating values and principles they want to play by, we need to articulate a model that encompasses the Flourishing Ethics framework with the actual behaviors we engage in when playing *World of Warcraft*, or any other online game. This model comes from something called "Information Ethics," and defines agents as *Homo Poieticus*.[4]

This Latin expression, which can basically translate as "the creative human," defines a model of being that places ethical responsibility in participation as well as in self-development of our values in the environments we live in. In this sense, the creative human is the model that answers to the theoretical requirements of the Flourishing Ethics framework, and it can be applied to understand the processes that take place when players enter a gameworld and play within it together with others.

A player is a *Homo poieticus* because playing means adopting the rules of a world, but also committing to live by values that can be adopted and evolved so they match the requirements of personal, social, and informational flourishing. Players of *WoW* who decided to complain about the Warrior class limitations are creative humans: they decided to take their presence in the world one step further from the conventional "consumer" approach, and took the responsibility of identifying and developing a complaint to improve their life conditions.

This ethical capacity is summarized in the concept of creative stewardship. A player is given the right of inhabiting a world. That right involves the management and enjoyment of a game system as developed by the game designers. But it is not a passive position: to be a player also involves a creative aspect, an appropriation of what is given in order to improve it. To play is to become the best player you can be.

Being a player in an online world like *World of Warcraft* means participating in the shared experience of a game, as facilitated by the developers. But it also means being a citizen of Azeroth, caring

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[4] Luciano Floridi and Jeff Sanders, "Internet Ethics: The Constructionist Values of Homo poieticus ," in *The Impact of the Internet in Our Moral Lives* (SUNY Press, 2005), at <www.philosophyofinformation.net/pdf/iecvhp.pdf>.

for other players as well as for the balance and well-being of the
world you've been given and you have to inhabit. Being a player
is the responsibility of being a creative human, capable of playing
by the rules, but also of adapting those rules to the principle of
human flourishing. If that means a revolt then so be it.

The idea of players as creative beings proposes an alternative
understanding of players that includes ethical duties, and the prin-
ciples of Flourishing Ethics, in the definition of what players are
and how they should be treated. Events like the Gnome Tea Party
show that we can define players as creative beings since they
already behave that way. However, the model becomes relevant
when we compare it to the developers' implicit player models, and
how the clash between both determines the values of *WoW*.

Play Beyond Labor

The two models, player-as-customer and player-as-troublemaker,
heavily influence the design of *WoW* and the community manage-
ment policies.

In order to understand the conceptual roots of these models, we
should return to one of the dominant cultural explanations of play
and games in western culture: Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*, or the
man-player. In his research on play, this Dutch theorist came up
with a definition of players as cultural beings. It was never
Huizinga's idea to develop a coherent model of mankind; however,
his insights on the role of play and its experience in culture allow
us to extract a plausible idea of what *Homo Ludens* means.

Given Huizinga's understanding of play, *Homo Ludens*
describes how humans engage in a separate, free, and creative
action called play with the goal of enjoying the benefits of this
activity. However, the *Homo Ludens*, while creative within the
game, does not have any kind of duty or right regarding the game
itself: the player plays, and that's the extent of her involvement
with the game. *Homo Ludens* explains why we like playing, the
pleasures we extract out of this activity. But it's a very limited
model that cannot account for the values in the game or for the
complex relations between players and game creators, or even for
the values of players within the game and those external to it.

The *Homo Ludens* model is the origin of both the player-as-cus-
tomer and player-as-troublemaker paradigms previously presented.
For a player to be understood as either/or, their creative capacities

need to be ignored. There is pleasure in play, and that's what developers and players should focus on achieving. Focusing on pleasing the *Homo Ludens* radically improves the gameplay experience, and allows for a tighter control of actions and events by the developer. On the downside, it severely limits player moral agency, which can be seen as a form of ethical harm. In fact, games developed with the intention of upholding the *Homo Ludens* model tend to end up equalising play and labor: as long as we follow the rules, countless hours of play will be ensured.

The *Homo Poieticus* model proposes a much more interesting and rich understanding of players—one that is actually already present in their behaviors. Players create the values they play by, and by doing so, they keep the world together and give it a life, a sense of place. The Gnome Tea Party protesters were not trying to break the game, but to fix it. The intrinsic mistrust that developers have of players and their influence in the game is an example of an historic misunderstanding.

Furthermore, not respecting the *Homo Poieticus* means, as I said, limiting the moral agency of players. These policies of control can be therefore seen as unethical: for players to flourish, they need to implement their values in the game world, as a part of their process to become the best being they can be. Any action taken against these capacities ought to be considered unethical.

World of Warcraft is a prominent example of the tensions between the two models: the game is developed with a *Homo Ludens* paradigm in mind, and as such is hardwired with architectures and policies of control that the developers don't hesitate to apply. However, players engaging in creative actions, such as the Gnome Tea Party, shows a deeper sense of belonging and creativity. In that tension, *WoW* so often defaults to a control paradigm by which developers always have supreme power over players, whose actions and behaviors are subject to close scrutiny and punishment, even though they are just expressing who they are and what kind of world they want to live in. Punishing them for their expressive actions is a sign of the questionable values behind the design and management of *WoW*.

This Is Our World

I have written hard words against one of the most polished, well designed, and popular computer games of all time. I have done so

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both with the analytic intention of the philosopher, trying to explain what playing means from an ethical perspective, and with the playful goal of the *provocateur*, who wants to shake up some of our assumed conventions on games and play. As both, I want to make my claim clear: *World of Warcraft*, and any online game similarly designed and managed, presents a number of ethically questionable models that may be considered harmful for the morals of players as creative beings. *WoW*, within the boundaries I have described in this chapter, can be defined as an unethical game design.

   How can an online world, then, ensure its ethical soundness? By encouraging player creativity in their game design; by giving tools to players to express themselves and become who they can become in that world. The values of a game are found in the dialogue between developers and players through the game world as a living space. It's time to move beyond the dated *Homo Ludens* model and remember that Azeroth, like any other world, is also our world.