

MMO MORALITY

19TH MARCH, 2009

COMPUTER GAMES/PLAYERS/GAME CULTURES:
STATE AND PERSPECTIVES OF DIGITAL GAME STUDIES

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INTRODUCTION

- TODAY, I'M GOING TO TALK ABOUT **MORALITY** IN MASSIVELY MULTIPLAYER ONLINE ROLE-PLAYING GAMES
 - OR, BECAUSE THAT'S TOO LONG, **MMORPGS**
 - OR, BECAUSE EVEN THE **ACRONYM** IS TOO LONG, **MMOS...**
- ALMOST **ALL** OF WHAT I'M GOING TO SAY APPLIES TO **OTHER** GAMES, TOO
 - SO THOSE OF YOU PLANNING ON WATCHING **YOUTUBE** FOR AN HOUR CAN **FORGET** IT...

MORALITY

- WHEN I SAY "MORALITY" HERE, I MEAN IT **RELATIVELY**
- EACH INDIVIDUAL HAS THEIR **OWN** PERSONAL MORAL CODE TO WHICH THEY (TRY TO) ADHERE
- I **WON'T** BE MAKING ANY **ABSOLUTE** STATEMENTS ABOUT WHAT IS OR ISN'T MORAL OR ETHICAL
- WHAT I **WILL** BE DISCUSSING IS WHAT HAPPENS WHEN PLAYERS AND DESIGNERS HAVE **DIFFERENT** VIEWS

THE GAME CONCEPT

- MMOS PRESENT A **CONCEIT** THAT THE VIRTUAL WORLD IS **SEPARATE** FROM THE REAL WORLD
 - “IT’S **JUST A GAME**”
- THIS ALLOWS PEOPLE TO ACT IN WAYS THEY **CAN’T** ACT IN THE **REAL** WORLD
- PSYCHOLOGISTS CALL THIS A **FRAME**
- IN GAMES STUDIES, IT’S THE **MAGIC CIRCLE**
 - PEOPLE AGREE TO **LIMIT** SOME BEHAVIOURS SO AS TO **LIBERATE** OTHER BEHAVIOURS

ELSEWHERE

- THIS SORT OF THING HAPPENS IN EVERYDAY LIFE
ALL THE TIME
- IF YOU WALKED DOWN THE STREET WEARING
16TH CENTURY CLOTHES, PEOPLE WOULD
STARE
 - DO IT ON A **STAGE** IN A SHAKESPEARE **PLAY**
AND PEOPLE ACCEPT IT WITHOUT COMMENT
- IT CAN EVEN SET THE **NORM**
 - IF YOU **DON'T** DRESS IN OUTRAGEOUS CLOTHES AT
MARDI GRAS IN RIO DE JANEIRO, **YOU'RE WEIRD!**

BOUNDARIES

- THE PROTECTION OF "IT'S JUST A GAME" ALLOWS PEOPLE TO CROSS **BOUNDARIES**
- HOWEVER, THERE **ARE** STILL BOUNDARIES
- EXAMPLE: *DARK ROOM SEX GAME* IS PLAYED BY TWO PEOPLE USING **WIIMOTE** CONTROLLERS
- IT HAS **NO** GRAPHICS – ONLY SOUND/HAPTICS
- IT'S A **RHYTHM** GAME
- PLAYERS WORK TOGETHER TO REACH **ORGASM** FASTEST

FRAME

- *DARK ROOM SEX GAME* IS INTENDED TO PUSH PEOPLE **OVER** BOUNDARIES
- HOWEVER IT **STILL HAS BOUNDARIES**
- **TWO** MALE VOICES – YES, HA HA!
- ONE MALE VOICE, ONE **DONKEY** VOICE? ER...
- ONE **ADULT** MALE VOICE, ONE **CHILD** VOICE..?
- JUST BECAUSE A GAME GIVES YOU **PERMISSION** TO CROSS A BOUNDARY, THAT DOESN'T MEAN YOU **WILL** CROSS IT
 - YOUR PERSONAL **MORALITY** BECOMES A FACTOR

MMO DESIGN

- THE DESIGNER OF AN MMO:
 - SETS THE **FICTIONAL FRAMEWORK**
 - PROVIDES POSSIBLE **ACTIONS** (MEANS)
 - PROVIDES A RANGE OF **GOALS** (MOTIVE)
 - PRESENTS EVENTS SUCH THAT PLAYERS HAVE TO MAKE **DECISIONS** AS TO **WHICH** GOALS THEY SHOULD PURSUE AND **HOW** (OPPORTUNITY)
- HOWEVER, PLAYERS **DON'T KNOW** IN ADVANCE WHAT IS **EXPECTED** OF THEM
 - THIS IS **PART OF THE FUN!**

COVENANT

- PROBLEM: IF YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT THE GAME FULLY **INVOLVES**, HOW DO YOU KNOW IF YOU'LL **LIKE** IT?
- DESIGNERS THEREFORE:
 - CREATE A SET OF **GENERAL** EXPECTATIONS AS TO WHERE THE **BOUNDARIES** LIE
 - **MORAL**, GENRE AND **GAMEPLAY** BOUNDARIES – WE'RE ONLY INTERESTED IN MORAL ONES TODAY, THOUGH
 - **COVENANT** WITH PLAYERS THAT, EVEN THOUGH THEY DON'T **KNOW** WHAT'S COMING UP, IT WILL FALL **WITHIN** THOSE BOUNDARIES

WEDNESDAY



WEDNESDAY ADDAMS
(LISA LORING)

- WHAT, YOU WANT AN **EXPLANATION?**

EXAMPLE

- EXAMPLE: IF YOU'RE TOLD UP FRONT THAT THIS IS A GAME ABOUT **KNITTING**, YOU CAN'T **COMPLAIN** IF IT TURNS OUT TO FEATURE A LOT OF KNITTING
- HOWEVER, YOU **CAN** COMPLAIN IF IT INVOLVES **STABBING** PEOPLE TO **DEATH** WITH A **KNITTING NEEDLE**
 - YOU WOULD HAVE **EXPECTED** THE DESIGNER TO **MENTION** THAT, ER, POINT
- LIKEWISE GAMES ABOUT DANCING, SOCCER MANAGEMENT, KILLING **ZOMBIES**, ...

SETTING THE TONE

- GAME DESIGN IS AN **ART** FORM
- THIS MEANS DESIGNERS GET TO DETERMINE THE **MORAL STANCE** OF THEIR GAMES
 - THEY CAN'T **HELP** BUT DO THIS – IT'S **INTRINSIC** TO THE MEDIUM
- PLAYERS ARE MADE AWARE OF THE **GENERAL** NATURE OF THIS MORAL STANCE **BEFORE** THEY SIGN UP
 - IF YOU KNOW THE GAME HAS **GUNS**, YOU CAN SURMISE SOMEONE IS GOING TO GET **SHOT** AT

CONTEXT

- THROUGH SETTING THE **CONTEXT**, DESIGNERS DETERMINE THE **BOUNDARIES**
- EXAMPLE: IN *WOW* WHEN YOU START TO PLAY AS A **DEATH KNIGHT** YOU'RE UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF AN **EVIL** POWER
 - YOU CAN THEREFORE **EXPECT** TO HAVE TO DO **EVIL THINGS**
- NOTE THAT THERE **ARE** STILL BOUNDARIES
 - YOU **DON'T** GET ASKED TO **RAPE CHILDREN**

MISUNDERSTANDINGS

- THIS DOESN'T **ALWAYS** WORK, BECAUSE DESIGNERS MAY NOT GET THEIR MESSAGE **ACROSS** PROPERLY
- EXAMPLE: IN *OBLIVION* I KNEW WHEN I STARTED THAT THERE WAS A **CHANCE** I WOULD GET TURNED INTO A **VAMPIRE**
- I **DIDN'T** KNOW THAT IT WAS ALMOST **GUARANTEED** TO HAPPEN IF I PLAYED THE GAME ALL THE WAY THROUGH
 - NOR THAT IT WOULD BE A HIGHLY **DISTASTEFUL** EXPERIENCE

CHANGE

- MMOS ARE ONGOING PROJECTS, AND SOMETIMES DESIGNERS WANT TO **CHANGE** THE BOUNDARIES
- THIS HAS TO BE EXPLAINED **OUTSIDE** THE CONTEXT OF THE GAME
- *STAR WARS GALAXIES* WAS LOSING PLAYERS AND WANTED TO **STABILISE** AROUND COMBAT
 - “NEW GAME ENHANCEMENTS” WERE ANNOUNCED
 - PEOPLE WHO LIKED **CRAFTING** RATHER THAN **COMBAT** HAD THE CHANCE TO **LEAVE**
- THIS IS **FAIR ENOUGH**

MORAL DILEMMAS

- WHEN MORAL DILEMMAS ARISE, THEY ARE USUALLY PUT IN BY THE **DESIGNER**
 - DO I FEED THE VILLAGERS OR THE NOMADS?
 - DO I SUPPORT THE PARANOID KING OR HIS POWER-HUNGRY HEIR?
- PLAYERS ARE **Disturbed** WHEN THE “RIGHT” SOLUTION FEELS LIKE THE **WRONG** ONE
 - “I’M SUPPOSED TO MAKE A **HUMAN** SACRIFICE?!”
- IF IT OVERSTEPS THE MORAL BOUNDARY THE PLAYERS **BELIEVED** WAS IN PLACE, THEN THE DESIGNER HAS **BROKEN** THE **COVENANT**

LEGITIMACY

- ACTUALLY, DESIGNERS CAN BREAK THE COVENANT **LEGITIMATELY**
- YOU **CAN** OVERSTEP A BOUNDARY IN ORDER TO **ESTABLISH** IT
- EXAMPLE: *WOW* QUEST "ZENN'S BIDDING"
 - KILL CREATURES YOU'RE NOT REALLY SUPPOSED TO
 - HAVE TO DO A PENITENCE QUEST TO **ATONE** FOR IT
- EXAMPLE: *WOW* QUEST "ARMY OF THE DAMNED"
 - ROLE-PLAY THE BAD GUY AND FIND OUT JUST HOW BAD HE **IS**

"THE ART OF PERSUASION"

- THERE'S QUEST IN *WOW* WHERE YOU ARE ASKED TO **TORTURE** A PRISONER FOR INFORMATION
 - THIS IS **NOT** SOMETHING THAT ALLIANCE PLAYERS HAVE BEEN ASKED TO DO BEFORE, **EVER**
- THE PEOPLE ASKING YOU TO DO THE TORTURING ARE THEMSELVES **FORBIDDEN** FROM DOING IT!
- **MOST** PLAYERS DID IT WITHOUT A SECOND THOUGHT – "IT'S JUST A GAME"
 - HOWEVER, A **SIGNIFICANT** MINORITY WERE **DISMAYED**

MEANING

- THERE ARE SEVERAL EXPLANATIONS:
- 1) IT'S AN **ARTISTIC** STATEMENT SHOWING HOW SMALL INCREMENTAL "JUST THIS ONCE" AMORAL ACTIONS CAN LEAD TO **DECAY**
 - THE BAD GUY, **ARTHAS**, MADE SUCH A DESCENT
 - THIS QUEST GIVES PLAYERS AN **INSIGHT** INTO **HOW** HE BECAME **WHAT** HE BECAME
- BUT YOU HAVE TO **SAY** THIS IS SO!
 - OR THE PLAYERS WON'T **NOTICE** IT
 - OR THEY **WILL**, BUT WILL THINK YOU'RE A **JERK**

POLITICAL

- 2) ITS A **POLITICAL** STATEMENT, MAKING AN ANALOGY BETWEEN THE "WE DON'T DO TORTURE" KIRIN TOR AND THE **US GOVERNMENT**
 - **WE** DON'T DO TORTURE, SO WE'LL HAND HIM OVER TO SOMEONE WHO **DOES** - YOU!
 - EXTRAORDINARY RENDITION
- AGAIN, THIS **IS** A VALID THING TO DO BUT YOU HAVE TO **FLAG IT UP**
 - OTHERWISE, PEOPLE EITHER WON'T NOTICE OR WILL THINK YOU'RE A JERK

DARKER

- 3) THE DESIGNER WANTED TO REFLECT *WOW'S* GROWING **MATURITY** BY INCORPORATING **EDGIER** MATERIAL
- AGAIN, THIS **IS** LEGITIMATE BUT ONLY IF YOU **TELL** PEOPLE ABOUT THE CHANGES UP FRONT
 - SO THEY CAN STOP PLAYING IF IT **BOTHERS** THEM
- **I** DIDN'T KNOW WHEN I BOUGHT THE *WRATH OF THE LICH KING* EXPANSION THAT IT WOULD BE ASKING ME TO **TORTURE** NON-PLAYER CHARACTERS

DEFAULT

- 4) THE **DEFAULT** SITUATION IS WHAT **USUALLY** APPLIES TO QUESTS
- THE DESIGNER DIDN'T MARK THE QUEST AS TRANSGRESSING PLAYER EXPECTATIONS BECAUSE HE OR SHE THOUGHT IT WAS **WITHIN** THEM
- WELL, THE DESIGNER WAS **WRONG**...
- EITHER THE DESIGNER DIDN'T **KNOW** WHAT PLAYERS THINK, OR THE DESIGNER DIDN'T **BELIEVE** TORTURE IS BAD
- **EITHER** WAY, THE DESIGNER **IS** A **JERK**

COPING

- WHY DID SO MANY PLAYERS **NOT** REGISTER *WOW'S* TORTURE QUEST AS AN ISSUE?
- WELL, MAYBE FOR THEM IT **ISN'T** – THEY THINK TORTURE IS FINE
- PERHAPS THEY **DID** REGISTER IT SUB-CONSCIOUSLY, BUT WANTED TO **EXPLORE** THAT ASPECT OF THEIR PERSONALITY
- OR PERHAPS THEY HAD LOST ALL SENSE OF **NARRATIVE** IN THE RACE TO LEVEL 80
- DID **YOU** NOTICE *HARRY POTTER 7* HAD AN UNFLAGGED INSTANCE OF TORTURE?

OTHER EXAMPLES

- *WOW* HAS SOME **OTHER** NEW QUESTS THAT ARE ALARMING FOR PLAYERS OF "GOOD" CHARACTERS
 - "TORMENTING THE SOFTKNUCKLES"
 - "SURRENDER ... NOT!"
- SOME MMOS HAVE **TROUBLESOME** QUESTS THAT NEVERTHELESS **FIT** THE CONTEXT
- FOR THESE, YOU KNOW THE DEAL **BEFORE** YOU PLAY
 - THEREFORE IF YOU DON'T LIKE IT, **DON'T PLAY**

CONTEXT

- *VANGUARD: SAGA OF HEROES* QUEST "SAVING SILVERLAKE"
 - 1) STEAL **SOUL RENDER** DEVICE FROM BADDIES
 - 2) USE IT TO BREAK THE **MAGICAL HOLD** THE BADDIES HAVE ON THE LOCAL FARMERS
 - BUT OH DEAR, IT TURNS THE FARMERS INTO **ZOMBIES!**
 - 3) COLLECT **DUST** FROM KILLING NETHERBEASTS
 - 4) USE DUST TO LURE ZOMBIE FARMERS TO **MILL**
 - 5) KILL FARMERS/ZOMBIES AND **GRIND** THEM UP IN THE MILL TO MAKE **HAMBURGERS**
- THIS IS A QUEST PLAYED FOR **LAUGHS...**

EXCUSES

- SOME PLAYERS WILL CHEERFULLY USE THEIR "IT'S JUST A GAME" ARGUMENT TO ASSERT THERE'S **NOTHING** THEY WOULDN'T DO FOR XP!
- SO ... THEY'D DO <THEIR MOST ABHORRENT IDEA OF SEXUAL ASSAULT> TO A REPRESENTATION OF <THE DEITY THEY WORSHIP>?
- **EVERYONE** HAS **SOMETHING** THAT WILL SHOCK THEM OUT OF THEIR IMMERSION
- WHEN YOU EXIT THE **FRAME** OF THE MAGIC CIRCLE, YOU EXIT THE **GAME**

CONCLUSION

- PEOPLE PLAY MMOS WITHIN A MORAL FRAMEWORK **PRIMARYLY** SET BY THE DESIGNER
- PLAYERS ARE GIVEN A SENSE OF WHAT THIS **IS** BEFORE THEY START TO PLAY
 - SO IF YOU DON'T LIKE IT, **DON'T PLAY**
- MOST MORAL DILEMMAS OCCUR **WITHIN** THIS FRAMEWORK
- HOWEVER, A FEW MORAL DILEMMAS OCCUR **OUTSIDE** OF THIS FRAMEWORK

IMPLICATIONS

- WHEN SOMETHING HAPPENS OUTSIDE OF THE MORAL FRAMEWORK, THE DESIGNER HAS TO **INDICATE** THAT THIS IS **DELIBERATE**
 - SO PLAYERS **NOTICE** IT
 - SO PLAYERS KNOW IT WAS FOR AN ARTISTIC OR POLITICAL **PURPOSE**
- IF THIS **DOESN'T** HAPPEN, THEN IT SUGGESTS THE DESIGNERS **DON'T** THINK IT FELL OUTSIDE THEIR MORAL FRAMEWORK
 - “BLIZZARD DOESN'T THINK TORTURE IS A BIG DEAL”

BREAKING BOUNDARIES

- WHEN YOU'RE **SHOCKED** OUT OF THE CONTEXT, YOU NO LONGER **FRAME** THINGS WITHIN THAT CONTEXT
- DESIGNERS **MUST** CONVEY THESE MORAL BOUNDARIES TO **PLAYERS** OR IT'S **UNFAIR**
 - PEOPLE AREN'T PLAYING WHAT THEY **THINK** THEY'RE PLAYING
- THERE IS **ALWAYS** SOME POINT AT WHICH REALITY INTRUDES AND "IT'S JUST A GAME" **BREAKS DOWN**
- "IT'S ALL FUN AND GAMES UNTIL SOMEONE LOSES AN **EYE**. THEN, IT'S JUST **FUN**"
 - WEDNESDAY ADDAMS