

Playing Nice: Social and Ethical Reasoning Across In- and Out-of-Game Contexts

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Abstract: This study examines whether adolescent videogame players maintain the same values and ethical priorities in game spaces compared to their home lives. We presented a group of adolescent *World of Warcraft* players, a MMO game in which the participants play together to accomplish shared goals, with ethics-based scenarios to determine whether there is a difference in their values in game play compared to out-of-game. Our results indicate that adolescent players are more willing to abdicate control to authority in the context of the game, whereas they are more assertive about their personal rights in a home-based context.

Online Game Play and Social Interaction

In MMO games, participants inhabit a designed, virtual world that contains both non-player characters created by the game designers and avatars controlled by other players. This creates a *mangle of play*, which Steinkuehler describes as the mangling of designer and player intentions (2006). Thus, much of the climate and culture of each of these games is shaped by the people who inhabit the world. Additionally, players may join with other groups of players to form alliances where they work collaboratively on tasks that are too difficult for any individual player. These groups, called guilds, often develop and negotiate their own group rules, which members of the guild must adhere to in order to participate. The culture of guild groups is participatory (Jenkins, 2006) and multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1999) are valued in these spaces, coalescing into a group-wide collective intelligence (Levy, 1999).

We are particularly interested in adolescents and how the social interaction that players experience through online play in these games shapes how they develop ethical and social reasoning skills. Though research has shown that these spaces teem with ethical norms where guidelines of behavior are emergent (Taylor, 2006) and are determined by the affinity group, we know little about how adolescents think and reason about ethical issues as they engage in online play. Participation in social games means negotiating between game rules and norms from other contexts including home and school. How is teenagers' reasoning about such issues similar or different across the two contexts? Does context matter in teenagers' ethical decision-making?

Study Overview

This paper details a pilot study examining whether teen players of *WoW*, maintain the same values and ethical priorities in the context of the game as they do in their home lives. Our study seeks to better understand how adolescents think about ethical concerns in terms of competing priorities, including duty to authority, personal rights, promises, and personal relationships. We presented 14 participants with two separate scenarios, one about a home-based context and the other about a game-based context, and then examined their responses on a set of questions to infer their ethical values across the two contexts. One scenario, the out-of-game scenario, was adapted from a standardized scenario used on the Defining Issues Test, Version 2 (DIT2) measure of developmental ethics (Rest, 1979; Rest, Navaez, Thoma, & Bebeau, 1999) derived from Kohlberg's approach to morality (Kohlberg, 1976; Colby et al., 1987). The other scenario, the in-game scenario, we crafted to be structurally similar to the first but contextualized within the game world. Quantitative and qualitative analyses of their responses reveal differences in ethical reasoning across the two contexts.

Methods

The Casual Learning Lab

This study was conducted as part of a larger, two-year line of inquiry exploring the impact of a game-based casual learning lab on adolescent boys' literacy and learning. All participants were male and between the ages of 13 to 18, coming from both urban and rural communities. The goal of the afterschool program was to leverage the boys' existing interest in videogames to strengthen their

interest in literacy as a tool for problem solving, researching online information resources, and synthesizing in-game and out-of-game information.

The Social-Ethical Reasoning Study

The questionnaire form, adapted from the standardized work on developmental ethics (Kohlberg, 1976; Colby et al., 1987) for each scenario was based on the DIT2 measure (Rest, 1979; Rest, Naveez, Thoma, & Bebeau, 1999) and designed to elicit information about participants' priorities regarding the ethical situations presented. Each item on the questionnaire asked participants to rank the relative importance of one of several competing interests in the scenario on a standard 5-point Likert scale and to give a short written explanation for each ranking. Questions for the two scenarios were parallel, allowing for comparison of relative rankings and rationale across the two contexts. The qualitative data, derived from the written explanations that the participants provided about their rankings, was coded for relevance to four identified ethical issues likely to be encountered by youth on a daily basis: duty to authority, personal rights, promises, and personal relationships.

Results

Paired *t*-test comparisons revealed significant differences between the in- and out-of-game scenarios in terms of how the participants ranked the importance of authority and personal rights. Respecting the wishes of an authoritative figure was significantly more important to participants in the context of the game scenario ($M = 4.14$, $SD = 1.17$) compared to the real world scenario ($M = 2.36$, $SD = 1.01$), with $t(14) = 4.69$, $p = <.001$. Likewise, the issue of one's own personal rights was significantly less important to participants in the context of the game scenario ($M = 2.64$, $SD = 1.28$) than in the real world scenario ($M = 4.21$, $SD = 1.21$), with $t(14) = 2.96$, $p = .01$. Qualitative analysis of participants' written explanations corroborated the quantitative findings.

Discussion

Our findings suggest that, in the context of MMOs, adolescents have different priorities in reasoning through social ethical dilemmas than they do in real world scenarios. Specifically, in-game contexts, teenagers appear more willing to abdicate control to an authority and are less committed to declarations of personal rights. Together, these findings suggest a pattern in which it appears that individuals are more willing to suspend personal rights and follow, at least temporarily, a designated authority than they are in out-of-game scenarios. The pattern is evocative of Jenkins' (2006) work on participatory cultures and Levy's (1997) theory of collective intelligence in that the suspension of individual rights in exchange for participation in the group collective, guided by the authority of an individual or goal or the group itself, is indeed a prerequisite of sorts to collective social movements. Such findings make sense: MMOs like *WoW* are based on a group mechanic in which individual players join collaborative groups of various sizes and agree to play by certain rules and norms.

Jenkins (2006) notes that feelings of empowerment among youth come from making meaningful decisions within a real civic context. We argue that one of the reasons why our participants showed a greater willingness to abdicate control and make sacrifices to individual achievement in favor of the best interests of the group is that in game contexts, players are active participants in the creation of group rules and norms. At home, parents are the authority figures and do not need to consult their teens about the household rules. The agency afforded to players in game contexts renders decisions meaningful and fosters critical ethical reasoning and reflection (Simkins & Steinkuehler, 2008). Having an active role in the negotiation of ethical norms would seem to support a willingness among adolescents to put the interests of the group ahead of individual rights and wishes.

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