Dual Wielding Morality: World of Warcraft and the Ethics of Ganking

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Gank, verb: To kill a player or players by means that puts them at a substantial disadvantage (e.g. by attacking with a larger group of players or with a significantly more powerful player). Derived from the term "gang killed."[1]

Introduction

Sometime in the spring of 2006, World of Warcraft players in a guild called Serenity Now made game history by launching an ambush on players of the opposing faction in a high-level war zone.[2] Most if not all of the ambushed players were unaware, possibly unarmed, and died quickly. What made this event news-worthy was that the ambushed players were assembled for an in-game memorial service for a player named Fayejin who passed away IRL (in real life).[3] Serenity Now had ganked a funeral.

The story of SN created hundreds if not thousands of online responses, ranging from screaming contests to in-depth conversations over the ethical codes implemented in computer games.[4] Many WoW players and internet bloggers split into two opposing factions of their own over the topic; there were those who were appalled by the event and scorned SN for breaching a serious code of ethics and those who found the story entertaining, even if they did not necessarily praise SN for provoking such a confrontation. In defense of the latter camp, an online article points out by analogy, "You wouldn't hold a funeral on an active paintball field ... though if you did, guaranteed hilarity would ensue."[5] Others disagree, however, that the funeral goers bear the main responsibility for the event taking place and many more are adamant in their judgment that regardless of the funeral's appropriateness, the members of SN are still "gaping assholes."[6]

This paper will examine the ethical implications of SN's ganking, by focusing on the ethical status of ganking and other virtual actions both within MMOs (Massive Multiplayer Online Games) such as World of Warcraft, and within real life non virtual communities. I will first summarize WoW's official game policy surrounding ganking, and then use comments found in online discussions as a starting point to building a framework with which to view the debate constructively. This paper will aim for a descriptive analysis of people's reactions to

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[1] This definition is adapted from the article "gank" from urbandictionary.com. (The website contains expletives; in fact, assume that every referenced website does, unless otherwise noted.)

[2] Serenity Now made a youtube video, entitled "Serenity Now bombs a World of Warcraft funeral." See references for hyperlink.

[3] "IRL" and "RL" are commonly used acronyms within WoW.

[4] See references for a sampling of discussion threads.

[5] Popkin, Helen A.S. (website does not contain expletives.)

[6] "The Real and the Semi-Real" 1up.com.

SN, combined with a normative framework through which to think about their ethical judgments. While this project is not large enough in scope to immediately extrapolate to all computer games, the multiplayer element common to all MMOs and many other types of computer games makes it a possible springboard to further discussions concerning computer games and ethics. While most of the normative aspects in this paper draw from "common sense" ethics, the author also holds as an ethical presupposition that people have an ethical responsibility to others in their interactions with them.

Ganking and Griefing

Ganking has an opportunistic connotation to it. However, the system of gameplay in WoW—officially endorsed by the company Blizzard and its employees that monitor gameplay—allows ganking in some PvP (player versus player) situations to be a legitimate form of interaction. When players start the game, they must choose which type of realm to play in, each realm being an individual copy of the game world. PvE (player versus environment) realms have very few areas of forced PvP, so most of the time players may turn on or off the ability to attack and be attacked by other players. PvP realms, on the other hand, have many areas where players are automatically able to attack and be attacked. Since SN was playing on a PvP realm, the area where the funeral was held was open to attack; on a PvE realm, the funeral would have been invulnerable to such a ganking as SN committed.

The structure of WoW designates PvP areas as free-for-all zones; it does not offer lone players or low level players any inherent protection against larger groups or higher level players, except for the use of their own wits, strategy, and skill.[7] Blizzard states that players should expect to be ganked routinely while leveling their characters[8] and that ganking can be a "legitimate PvP tactic." [9]

However, some charge that SN was unethical in their attack, not because it was an instance of ganking, but because it was one of "griefing." [10] Griefing is any gameplay which impedes or disrupts the gameplay of others for sheer fun or for the spite of frustrating other players. It is a type of harassment that is common in online environments with an element of anonymity. However, in Blizzard's harassment policy section, the examples of harassment and griefing do not cover disrupting events organized by players,[11] which, combined with the company's largely hands-off approach for PvP realm disputes, leaves little room to doubt that SN adhered to the game's official rules and policies. Lastly, the fact that this story became so popular in WoW circles coupled with the absence of an official response from Blizzard communicates that Blizzard did not deem the funeral ganking a punishable offense in-game.

At this juncture, the two opposing arguments mentioned in the introduction return to the forefront. Those who side with SN's actions argue that Blizzard's tacit acceptance of ganking is proof that objectively SN did nothing wrong—after all, WoW is only a game and

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[7] Towns where NPCs are found offer protection in the form of guards, but the point remains that the majority of an area where a player must quest offers them no further protection against PvP combat.

[8] "Surviving PvP" www.worldofwarcraft.com

[9] "Player vs Player Server Policy" us.blizzard.com/support

[10] "Griefing" is often called "trolling," although the words diverge in meaning, trolling being more associated with written words and verbal speech, whereas griefing is more associated with actions.

[11] "Harassment Overview" us.blizzard.com/support

no game rules were broken. While Blizzard itself promotes this "it's just a game"[12] attitude to some degree, it also acknowledges the enforcement of ethical codes by players in addition to the game's official policy. It warns WoW players that, "...constantly harassing and killing players over and over, ... may hurt your reputation among the players on the realm. Opposing faction players may band together and hunt you down with extreme prejudice."[13] Furthermore, the official in-game tips that Blizzard offers include ones regarding ethical, or at least polite, behavior.[14] For these reasons, one cannot use the official rules of the game to write off all charges that players have broken an relevant ethical code.

On this point, those who think SN did breach a code of ethics have a stronger grounding for their argument. However, some turn more of their attention to the game itself instead of the players. They argue that the silence of Blizzard is evidence that the company encourages or allows unethical behavior to persist in WoW. One blogger observes that SN's ganking "...was mean spirited but so are PVP servers."[15] However, despite what Blizzard's own responsibility may be in the matter, it does not negate SN's personal responsibility for their own actions, unless one wishes to put forth a theory in which players' wills are compromised by the act of sitting down at a keyboard or picking up a game controller.

 As Miguel Sicart addresses in his work *The Ethics of Computer Games,* "A player is responsible for her acts in a game, for the way she behaves and for what she makes of a game."[16] Sicart, however, would qualify based on his application of virtue ethics that the degree to which game designers allow players to create their own ethical values affects how responsible players are. This is not to dismiss the possibility that a game's structure can affect the degree to which a player is blameworthy for certain actions taken in an MMO; it is only to say that, no matter how suggestive or manipulative or unethical a game's design is, unless it fully overrides a person's own will, it will not completely free that person from of ethical responsibility. In order to discuss the case of SN in a way that can make sense of the conversations had about the event, the presupposition of basic moral freedom is necessary.

I will point out that there are other factors that change the degree to which one holds someone personally responsible for upholding an ethical code in a computer game. Players hold other players to different ethical standards based on factors such as perceived age, language fluency, and game experience. For instance, if a player engaging in ganking turns out to be a very young child, the conditions under which one brands them a "jerk" changes. One would also expect a teenage or adult player to know more of the game's etiquette in regards to taking turns and not engaging a large group of enemies before checking with the rest of one's group. However, if a player is only ten years old, or is new to the game, or has never been in a certain kind of group before, many players will show more leniency towards impolite behavior. As for SN, nothing in the online reports suggest that the majority of the guild's members were anything other than teenage to adult players who were well versed in the game's world and rules. Therefore, I will focus the next section on the personal

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[12] "Surviving PvP" www.worldofwarcraft.com
[13] Ibid.
[14] During loading screens, three of the randomly generated tips are: "Being polite while in a group with others will get you invited back!"; "It is considered polite to talk to someone before inviting them into a group, or opening a trade window"; and "When interacting with other players a little kindness goes a long way!" listed on wowwiki.com. See references for hyperlink.
[15] "Funeral Ambushed." Page 10. Comment #97 by: Thelorax. April 13, 2006.
[16] Sicart p185.

responsibility of SN members in regards to their involvement in ganking Fayejin's in-game funeral.

Dual Wielding Moral Agencies:

The question remains, what kinds of ethical statements can one make about the members of SN in reference to their actions on that fateful spring day? Are they scorn-worthy or free of substantial blame? If the punitive aspect of these questions are distracting, one could ask instead, is it morally okay to gank an in-game memorial service in WoW, or is that something one should not do?

The extremists on both sides of the argument misconceive how actions in an MMO relate to actions in one's non-virtual life. Those who wish to release SN of all blame assert that since WoW is "only a game," only the official rules of the game matter ethically. By their account, if people get upset over an infraction of RL ethics, they are misapplying their moral outrage. What they fail to consider though, is that MMOs exist within the space of one's non virtual life; they do not exist enclosed within the virtual space they depict. Therefore, one's in-game actions are also out of game actions, whether they translate into clicking one's mouse or pounding on one's keyboard. MMO players may forget that when they step inside their technologically advanced and stunningly rendered magic circle,[17] they have not actually left the real world behind; they are still sitting at their computer, which is firmly planted within their non virtual communities.[18]

This does not of course mean that all ethical judgments and actions translate literally from an MMO back to RL. For instance, as most if not all players are fully aware of, when a player kills a creature or kisses another avatar, they have not killed or kissed an actual, physical being. With these actions, one is wielding a single moral agency; their action only has significant moral weight within a single sphere of influence—that of the MMO. While killing and kissing things in WoW are subject to the official and unofficial ethical codes of gameplay, their analogs of clicking one's mouse and typing on one's keyboard do not have any serious ethical implications.[19]

There are other types of actions, however, in which players necessarily "dual wield" their moral agencies—meaning, they necessarily wield both at the same time. When one tells a joke to or berates another player, one has conversed with or berated a physical person as well as a game avatar, in a way that killing, kissing, or turning that avatar into a sheep does not have a likewise analog. To show how subtle this boundary line can be, I will use the example of kissing. As mentioned above, kissing is an action that a player within an MMO single wields. However, if that player is joking with another player by kissing their avatar, or harassing them, their action becomes one which is dual wielded. They have not kissed the actual person, but they have actually told a joke to them or harassed them.

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[17] This concept developed out of Johan Huizinga's work, notably in *Homo Ludens*.
[18] Jesper Juul also explores the concept of video games being both real and unreal in his work "Half Real," but he focuses on contrasting the fictional content of a game with its real rule structure. While he acknowledges in his introduction that players "actually interact" in games (1), he does not discuss the ethical reality of those interactions.
[19] Massimo Maietti discusses in the essay "Player in Fabula" how the fictional and role playing elements of computer games prohibit the possibility of morality translating literally from real life to such games.

There may also be actions within MMOs whose dual wielded status is a lot less clear than the ones I have mentioned above. For instance, a player who acts disrespectfully or maliciously or mercilessly towards NPCs (non player characters) has not interacted with actual beings, but it is not immediately apparent that such a person's habitual actions have no ethical implications beyond the MMO itself. Therefore, it would be hasty to assert that dual wielded actions translate literally from their MMO status to their status in the non virtual world. However, I can assert that, when a player performs an action within an MMO that affects another player, it is clearly an example of dual wielding one's moral agencies. Of course, this statement itself needs a qualification. If a player tells a joke to an avatar whose own player is away from their computer at the moment, then the original player did not in fact tell a joke to an actual person. So, insofar as one may assume that actual people are currently in control of their avatars, then my previous statement about dual and single wielding moral agencies holds.[20]

The statement that a person can simultaneously affect two different communities raises the question of whether they might affect three, or four, or five. In truth, this is the case with many of our actions. A doctor, for instance, who recommends a medical treatment to a close friend is operating at least within the ethical communities of 1) the personal relationship with the friend 2) the ethical standards of the medical profession and 3) the legal boundaries of their nation. In many of our daily actions, our different ethical communities overlap to create a unified notion of a single ethical society, so we do not always feel the need to parse and examine each community on its own. Sometimes we do, though, whether it be pondering how friends will view one's action versus how one's family will, or deciding whether breaking a minor law has ethical ramifications in other spheres of one's life.

To consider the ethical implications of SN's actions, the key number is two. One could break WoW into more numerous, multi-leveled communities, such as all WoW players, PvP server members, RPers,[21] guild mates, etc. I include all these facets under a single community, though, since it is the whole WoW community who is affected by the discussion of SN's ganking, even if some of those players are not on the same server. All WoW servers deal with the same issues of ganking and griefing, and so those issues will have very similar moral implications across servers. Non WoW-players in the blogosphere and within the MMO community have also participated in the discussion concerning SN's ganking, but since they are not also actively engaged in creating and defining ethical standards within WoW as only players can do, I exclude them from the virtual community of WoW; they at best indirectly affect players' thoughts and actions.

Again, I could add another layer and say that SN were also acting as denizens of the internet in general, but I do not find including such a community pertinent to the discussion since most of its focus is on the difference between acceptable behavior in a combative, fantasy MMO versus in a non-virtual, public community. This discussion could be expanded to cover the disjunction between people's action within personal, non virtual communities and anonymous, virtual ones such as the internet, but it would become a whole other discussion at that point. Thus I stick by the statmente that SN were *dual* wielding their moral agencies,

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[20] Along this topic, a webcomic, "Dark Legacy Comics", frequently explores the disjunction between how players interact with WoW NPCs as game constructs, and the ethical implications were NPCs actual sentient beings. See Comics #127, 151, 164-5, 196, and 198.

[21] RPers (roleplayers) are players who like to play games almost entirely in character. In WoW, they have their own PvE and PvP servers.

and that the two communities connected to those agencies are one's real life, non-virtual community and one's community within WoW.

If one uses this framework of dual-wielding moral agencies, the source of much of the frustration expressed in the online discussions of SN becomes apparent. One finds participants in these discussions oblivious to or aware of the fact that SN was affecting two different communities with their ganking—communities that hold their members to different ethical codes.

For instance, some commenters declare that WoW is "only a game" and that, morally speaking, ""WoW is a place where we shake off our worldly limits, and jump headfirst into fantasy. ... [there] is no right or wrong."[22] These commenters are ignoring the fact that when a gamer jumps head first into WoW, they have not left RL completely behind. Wherever real people are involved, real ethical concerns will follow. On the other side of the spectrum, some commenters argue that the ethics of RL apply just as strongly within MMOs. They argue that, "If you're a jerk in an anonymous, punishment-free game, that doesn't make you some kind of nihilistic revolutionary testing the philosophical limits of on-line spaces. It means you're a jerk..."[23] This attitude is echoed in many comments, that regardless of the game's rules, the PvP system's structure, or the naiveté or entitlement of the funeral goers, SN are still jerks because their ganking was a jerky thing to do, regardless of whether it was to an actual or virtual funeral.

In the middle are the commenters who recognize both the disjunct and the overlap between MMOs like WoW and real life. They point out that, "The game is not real life in as much as buying things in game doesn't buy them in real life and you're not really killing wee beasties when you click your mouse button. That's kind of a given," [24] but that still, "It is not just a game. It is an MMO... there are real people involved, and thus it goes beyond the simple rules that Bliz[zard] put in place."[25] As mentioned earlier, it is not a given that every action played out within an MMO is going to carry analogous ethical implications with it into the real world, but interactions with other players are actions in which one necessarily dual wields one's moral agencies, because it is affecting people both inside and outside of the computer game.

I wish to now focus on the participants who, as mentioned above, wish to call SN "jerks" and be done with the issue. As many commenters point out, if they were arguing about people disrupting an actual funeral or memorial service, it would be a decently clear-cut ethical case. It is disrespectful to disrupt funerals and to inhibit people from expressing personal grief.[26]

However, one of the sticking points in the discussion is over whether Fayejin's in-game funeral held the same status as a real life, actual funeral. One commenter posed this question by asking, "What is the meaning of an in-game funeral? Is it a regular funeral that is hijacking the MMORPG[27] infrastructure ...? Or is it genuinely in-game? Is having a funeral one of the things you can do *in* World of Warcraft, just like you can have a conversation or

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[22] "Funeral Ambushed" page 10. Comment #100 by: NocturneNight. April 17, 2006.
[23] "The Price of Serenity" Comment by: Affa. April 17, 2006.
[24] "Funeral Ambushed" page 6. Comment #53 by: Elly. April 11, 2006.
[25] "Funeral Ambushed" page 4. Comment #37 by: Degnar. April 10, 2006.
[26] Political funerals and such may prove to be a more nuanced case. Of course.
[27] MMORPG (Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game) and MMO are frequently used synonymously.

have a guild...?"[28] This commenter also makes the salient point that, "If the second, then it seems like one of the essential properties of a WoW funeral is that it can be attacked by the enemy faction."[29] Therefore, it is not a given that SN are automatically jerks for ganking Fayejin's funeral. In creating their ambush, they clearly dual wielded their moral agencies by simultaneously affecting dozens of players and actual people, but the specific ethical implications of their actions are not so clear cut.

To understand the status of Fayejin's funeral, one can use a less controversial topic to tease out the ethical distinctions in the matter. For instance, if two people are having a conversation while standing outside in public, on a sidewalk or in a park, a person who approaches those people and shoots them with a water gun, while not necessarily having committed a horrible, terrible breach in ethical code, has been somewhat disrespectful to them and their conversation. At the least, they have been rude. However, if two people are conversing about strategy during a water gun fight, again in a park, the same shooter blasting them away in the middle of their talk is not being disrespectful. In this case, the significance of the two people's conversation is encapsulated within the game, and so out of game the shooting has no significant moral relevance. This is a case of single wielding one's agency.

 On the other hand, if someone in a water gun fight receives a phone call that a relative is sick, and then holds a conversation with someone else in the middle of that game about driving down to the hospital, the water gun shooter, aware of the nature of their conversation, would actually be out of line in shooting water at them. Although their conversation is taking place in-game, it has a deep significance out of the game, and so the shooter would be dual wielding their moral agencies if they drenched the two other players with water at that moment. The shooter would be perfectly within game rules, but would have breached a serious notion of moral decency outside of the game.

To now move back to the status of Fayejin's funeral, one must consider additionally the charges over whether her in-game memorial was a legitimate or appropriate one. On the one hand, the WoW server the funeral took place in was a game space where players paid money to attack opponents for game rewards. On the other hand, the server is something of a public space with its ethical guidelines less than perfectly defined. If Fayejin's in-game funeral was a real life funeral interposed over the MMO game structure, then the ganking was an action between players and a real funeral, in which all ethical implications would be determined by rules governing people and funerals, qualified based on how the funeral's appropriateness or inappropriateness affects SN's responsibility towards it. However, if her funeral was an in-game funeral, it is then subject to the rules and structure of the game. Therefore, if Fayejin's funeral was a PvP in-game funeral, the actions by SN are between players and an entity of the game, which is subject to PvP rules, which admit that interaction is dangerous and combative.

 If we use the dual-wielding framework we see that the funeral is both in-game and out of game. If the funeral was a memorial service that existed both as a virtual and non-virtual entity. The organization and presentation of it existed within the WoW universe, but the grief expressed by the players during the funeral was real grief, and the gamers were actually saying goodbye to a friend through a social ceremony. Therefore, in a way both sides of the argument have defended valid points, although the ethical status of out of game actions carry

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[28] "The Price of Serenity" Comment by: Frank Lantz. April 15, 2006.
[29] They go on to add, "And, if so, it seems to me that this is kind of an *improvement* over real-world funerals. When was the last time you went to funeral where everyone died and lived to talk about it? (and talk and talk and talk...)"

a more significant weight since the stakes are so much higher when they affect one's actual person.

If one considers SN to be dual wielding their moral agencies, then one can watch the video of their ganking and recognize both the amusing irony of people ambushing a memorial service and quipping that the ex-player "loved snow…and fishing…and PvP"[30] and the sober reality that a group of people grieving for a lost friend had their mourning thrown in their face by a group of strangers with nothing better to do.[31]

Conclusion

Since MMOs have become so engrossing and visually captivating, they allow players a stunningly encapsulating magic circle to play in. However, by creating such a vibrant, virtual world, they can also obfuscate the fact that behind that veil of fantasy, one still resides within the real world. In some cases, this is not so easily forgotten. Some standards of politeness are still common sense in MMOs, such as saying please and thank you to strangers and knowing that bossing around other players will not always cause them to respond positively. However, other ethical standards can become lost in the semi-anonymous role play. If one interacts with a group of maximum level characters, it is easy to forget that one of them might be twelve years old, or not well versed with a specific aspect of the game, or recovering from a bad day, or a number of other factors that would temper one's ethical judgments about interactions with those players.

In the end, Fayejin's funeral and Serenity Now's ganking leaves one with an ironic and sober reflection about the ethical implications of interactions within MMOs and other multiplayer computer games. Insofar as a group of people disrupted an event by doing what they normally do in the area where that event took place, the humorous, light-hearted aspect of the ganking is apparent. However, the fact that actual people had a request to respect their grieving disregarded outweighs in significance the humorous aspect of this issue, unless one argues that humor here has a greater moral value than respecting the dignity of others' emotions. While I myself have wavered often on this anecdote, I can now firmly say that yes, this story is funny, but the members of SN are still jerks for what they did, and what they did is not an acceptable ethical interaction between people, even if it is within a computer game.

While this specific even surrounding Fayejin's funeral cannot immediately extrapolate its ethical implications to all of computer games, the fact that more and more video games are using the internet to become multiplayer games at least foretells that gamers will run into further ethical dilemmas along these lines. As the computer game development expands and enriches the magic circle for players, players (and philosophers) in turn will have to reflect on their moral obligations within that circle, even though computer games serve for many a form

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[30] "Serenity Now bombs a World of Warcraft funeral"

[31] One aspect I have not been able to significantly address in this paper is the role that anonymity plays in online interactions between people. For instance, many comments accept as common knowledge the formula that "person + internet = jerk" ("Funeral Ambush" Comment #91 by: Dark Knight, page 10); however, others assert that, since ganking and griefing and other "jerky" actions are not out of the ordinary, "I am not surprised, but I am disappointed" ("Funeral Ambushed" Comment #128 by: Wild Soul, page 13). While anonymity plays an important role in the descriptive and normative discussions surrounding the ethical standards of communities, it is beyond the scope of this paper to examine this aspect with the depth it deserves.

of escapism. Unfortunately, as long as we remain in interaction with other people, we never get to fully escape our status as moral beings.

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