Grieving and Griefing in Contested Zones: Negotiating Rules of Play in Massively Multiplayer Online Games

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Abstract

On March the 5th, 2006, around 5:30 p.m. members of the Horde on Illidan gathered together at the Frostfire Hot Springs in Winterspring at a memorial service for Fayejin, who suffered a stroke and passed away earlier in the week. As her avatar shone brightly by the shore of the lake and as mourners slowly filed past and paid their respects, a group of Alliance players led by members of the guild Serenity Now charged through the snow-clad forest, down to the shores of the small lake, and killed everybody.

While not necessarily common or frequent, the practice of holding weddings, funerals, birthdays, dance parties and the like in Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOG) are well known. The practices of 'griefing' – taking actions to deliberately frustrate, annoy or harm other players – in these online worlds are also well known. The above events that occurred in the MMOG, World of Warcraft, are noteworthy because members of Serenity Now made a video of the event and posted it online. Like much on the Internet the video has been posted and reposted, recycled and rehashed. The video can be found in dozens of locations, has been viewed millions of times, and has been discussed by tens of

thousands of people in various online forums. With each reposting, discussion and debate and controversy over the 'rights' and 'wrongs' of the actions depicted have emerged.

In this paper we follow the public debates that have raged across video hosting sites, bulletin boards, blogs and other online forums where the video has been posted and chart the terrain of the controversy surrounding it. Was Serenity Now in the wrong for crashing the funeral or were the organizers of the memorial in the wrong for holding the memorial in the first place? The legitimacy of certain activities within online spaces is also debated. Are memorial services legitimate activities for these online worlds? Does playing the game by the 'rules' and 'as intended' legitimize the actions of Serenity Now? As well as these ethical questions, aesthetical issues are also at stake. Is holding an online memorial service, or is crashing it, in bad taste?

We remain agnostic on who is right or wrong within the controversy. As has been noted in the classical sociology of Durkheim and others, deviant behaviour can perform useful societal functions by providing a vehicle for discussion and clarification of expected behaviour and we want to follow these discussions. We find, underpinning these discussions, uncertainties and ambivalence about the ontological status of online worlds like World of Warcraft: the relationship between online and offline life remains unclear; the solidity of the virtual, and fluidity of the real, uncertain. At stake is these debates is their status as games or as something consequential. Are they merely games apart from real life inside their 'magic circle' (Huizinga 1970) or have they become legitimate parts of everyday life? This will provide opportunity to reflect on emerging online memorial practices more generally.

References

[1] Huizinga, J. (1970). Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture. Temple Smith, London.