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What I won't do in pixels: Examining the limits of taboo violation in MMORPGs

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This paper examined the emotional impact that engaging in or witnessing *Symbolic Taboo Activities* (STAs), as represented in MMORPGs (massively multiplayer online role-playing game), such as killing, torture and rape, has on adults. We focused our study on two games: World of Warcraft and Sociolotron. The study employed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which was chosen because of its emphasis on 'lived experienced' and how participants make sense of their experiences. Five participants, all over the age of 18 years, were interviewed via Instant Messenger, four of which were men. Most of our participants felt they could easily separate gamespace from the real world; however, when asked to examine specific actions in-depth we found this was not the case for all STAs. Activities that did not have a sanctioned equivalence (e.g., rape) was found by most to be more difficult to separate, especially emotionally. However, this was not the case for all participants. The findings suggest that not all individuals can psychological cope with engaging in and/or witnessing certain STAs in MMORPGs. The results, we believe are important for game designers, censoring bodies of video games and psychologists.

Keywords: MMORPGs, videogames, taboos, world of warcraft, sociolotron,
psychological harm, violent video games

What I won't do in pixels: Examining the limits of taboo violation in MMORPGs

1. Introduction

Psychological research into videogames has focused mostly on the relationship between gaming and aggression, online identities, and the social and addictive nature of these spaces. However, psychologists have spent little time examining whether there are certain aspects of a game (including how it looks, the rules of the game, and what behaviours ought to be constrained or allowed in the game) or certain role playing behaviours or interactions that are deemed inappropriate or upsetting for players. For example, are some killings too graphic? Is it ok to engage in sexual talk or erotic activities in these games and, if so, what are the accepted limits of these activities? Is cannibalism a psychologically healthy fantasy to engage in within a game? How does it feel to play out rape in a game? In this study, we were interested in the emotional impact that engaging in or witnessing *Symbolic Taboo Activities* (STAs), as represented in MMORPGs (massively multiplayer online role-playing game), such as killing, torture and rape, has or might have on the individual adult. Research of this kind, we believe, will assist organisations involved in the censoring and rating of games, psychologists (both researchers and therapists), game designers, as well as the individuals who opt to play these games.

1.1. *Symbolic taboo activities in games*

Numerous video games include representations of activities that are taboo, criminal or immoral to engage in offline. Many games, for instance, contain graphical representations of violence, where individuals maim and kill (e.g., *Left 4 Dead 2*; *Kill*

Zone 2; Soldier of Fortune 2), and in a growing number murder, mutilate and even torture (*Reservoir Dogs*). In some games these acts are an integral part of the plotline and gameplay (*Manhunt 2, Postal 2, MadWorld*). In a few cases, it is even possible to witness the cannibalisation of victims. The *Resident Evil* series, *Evil Dead*, and *F.E.A.R.* all feature cannibalism, although more in the form of a threat to the player than something he/she engages in. It is rarely the case, however, that characters engage in acts of rape or incest. Exceptions to this are *Phantasmagoria* (rape is possible), *The House of the Dead: Overkill* (in which incest is implied by an action), and *No More Heroes* (where it is a feature of the game narrative, but not interaction). Rape is a key feature within *Battle Raper* (defeated female opponents can be raped and sexually assaulted); and in *RapeLay* the entire gameplay centres on hunting down and raping a mother and her virgin daughters, although it is also possible to rape other women.

In MMORPGs, players take on the role of a fictional character, typically in a fantasy world, and have agency over many of their character's actions. MMORPGs differ from single player games in that many people are logged onto the game at the same time and opponents and team players include both computer generated and characters controlled by real people. The worlds created in these games continue to evolve even when the player is absent from the game – examples include *EverQuest*, *World of Warcraft*, *Final Fantasy XI* and, more recently, *Warhammer*. The popularity of these games continues to grow. More recently, the nature of this interaction with some MMORPGs has become more 'adult' based. *Age of Conan*, *Warhammer, 2 Moons*, and *Requiem: Bloodymare*, for example, provide increased opportunities for extreme violence and more graphic depictions of violent outcomes. Continuing the adult theme, *Sociolotron* promotes itself as a world with different values and rules in

which you are allowed to explore your 'darker side'. Sex, both consensual and non-consensual, is permitted and graphically represented, as is politically incorrect behaviour, including blasphemy and all forms of discrimination. The general philosophy of the game seems to be that if you are given the freedom to express yourself within this space then you should allow others to do the same. Exempt from this freedom, however, is any form of simulated paedophilia. It is explicitly stated on the game's homepage that this is unacceptable (a point we shall return to). Similarly, in *Pangaea*, a game originating in Korea, sex is either a main feature of the gameplay, or appears indirectly in gambling and fantasy battle options – female warriors lose their clothes when hurt or wounded, for example, becoming fully naked when killed. Continuing the cybersex theme is *3 Feel* – launched as the first English adult MMORPG.

1.2. Video games and aggressive behaviour

Given the amount of violence and adult content in video games, there has been a growing concern in society regarding which of these games children ought to have access to. With regards to psychological research, the main focus has been on whether playing these games causes children to become more aggressive (Buchman & Funk, 1996; Funk, 1993). In a review of the literature, Anderson et al. (2003) found that many studies reported a number of short-term effects of playing video games, such as the increased likelihood of physically and verbally aggressive behaviour, and increased aggressive thoughts and emotions. Sherry's (2001) meta-analysis likewise found that games have some kind of effect on aggression; however, the effect is smaller than that produced by watching television. Moreover, the treatment time in the studies she considered varied from 5 to 75 minutes, making it difficult to

determine precisely how long the effect actually lasts. Few studies have focused on online games. Williams and Skoric's (2005) longitudinal study of MMO (Massively Multiplayer Online) players found no evidence for the claim that online violent games cause substantial increases in real-world aggression; neither did playing online violent games result in more accepting beliefs about violent behaviours. However, Ivory and Kalyanaraman (2007) found that the more immersed an individual was in a game the greater their physiological and self-reported levels of arousal, and aggression. Similarly, Polman, de Castro and van Aken (2008) found that actively engaging in a violent video game produced higher levels of aggression than passively watching the same game (in boys but not girls). Interestingly, Konijn and Bushman (2007) found that boys who felt more immersed in the game, and identified more with the protagonist, exhibited more aggressive behaviour. In summary, then, it appears that games, including online video games, can lead to a small increase in aggressive behaviour in some individuals.

1.3. Possible psychological impact of violating offline taboos in gamespace

Whilst a comprehensive understanding of the degree to which violent games breed violence is of course important research that ought to be undertaken, it is not our main concern in this study. We were instead concerned with whether engaging in or witnessing 'Symbolic Taboo Activities' (STAs) in MMORPGs has a negative psychological impact on gamers.

In previous work it has been theorised that engaging in STAs in gamespace might elicit disgust or distress emotional responses possibility unanticipated by the player (Young & Whitty, in press). This theory is based on previous work on disgust. Damasio's (1994) *somatic marker hypothesis*, for instance, contends that our visceral

response to certain events is automated through habituation. So much so that merely *thinking* about similar events can trigger a physiological response. Similarly, Fitzgerald et al. (2004) argue that the excitation of neural pathways underlying our response to disgust-eliciting objects/events can occur even in the absence of external triggers. Therefore, if the mere thought of taboos is sufficient to elicit deep disgust, then it seems reasonable to conjecture that any *virtual* display of taboos will likewise elicit a visceral response. Moreover, if such responses are elicited, is the gamer able to cope, psychologically, with engaging in or witnessing such activities?

In order to cope psychologically with engaging in activities such as killing, torture and rape in gamespace, it might be necessary to make a clear distinction between gamespace and ordinary life. Whitty and Carr (2006) have argued that:

the fundamental essence of play is the freedom, the license to create and be set apart from ordinary life. Yet, on the other hand, for this to be accomplished, constraint is required in the form of rules and other factors related to space and time. Thus, in an interesting twist of logic, freedom is created only through constraint. (p. 58)

With respect to cyberspace, Whitty and her colleague (2003, Whitty & Carr, 2006) have argued that it is very difficult to completely separate the realm of cyberspace and the offline world. Turkle (1995) has also made this argument with respect to MUDS (a similar space to MMORPGs but in text only) “the computer can be similarly experienced as an object on the border between self and not-self ... People are able to see themselves in the computer. The machine can seem a second self” (p. 30).

Engaging in play can be liberating and conducive to the development of the self as well as psychological growth; however, it can also be debilitating, especially when play aligns itself too closely with reality (Whitty & Carr, 2006). According to

previous psychologists, it is therefore important to understand the emotional responses and meanings that are imported into the realm of play. With respect to our study, MMORPGs can appear like a completely different reality, with characters that did not exist in the real world (e.g., goblins and wizards); however, not all games do. Moreover, MMORPGS involve individuals playing against other real individuals. Therefore, we are interested in whether people respond differently to actions that appear fantastical versus games that mimic closely the real world and whether this varies depending on whether the action is played out against the computer compared to a 'real person' operating the character. We also wish to examine whether it is easier to separate some gamespaces from the real world compared with others, and whether this separation assists in coping with the STAs gamers engage in or witness in play, or whether it is even necessary to make a clear distinction between gamespace and ordinary life.

It may well be that some actions are easier to deal with in gamespace compared to others. For example, Young and Whitty (in press) have pointed out that some taboo activities in the real world are sanctioned. Killing, for example, can occur in legitimate or illegitimate ways. A *sanctioned equivalent* of killing is state authorised execution, or the death of combatants during a war. Torture, they point out, has been justified in the past by legitimate authorities (Soldz, 2008), and in some cases still is; or at least its legitimate use is debated (in the ticking bomb scenario, for example; see Brecher, 2007). The unofficial 'Law of the Sea', they state, maintains that cannibalism is acceptable, or is at least tolerated, when one's life depends on it and the victim is already dead, or was selected through the mutually agreed drawing of lots. However, they contend that it is difficult to think of a sanctioned equivalent in

the case of rape or necrophilia, or of cases in which one's life might depend on an act of incest or bestiality.

Videogames often involve killings against a more traditional 'enemy' (e.g., *Call of Duty*, *Modern Warfare* saga), or against hordes of fictional evil mutants, or alien or demonic beings (*Left 4 Dead 2*). In *World of Warcraft*, it is possible to cannibalise opponents, but this is carried out in order to re-energise one's life force. Such actions, Young and Whitty (in press) argue, fall within the remit of sanctioned equivalence, and therefore constitute an acceptable form of gameplay. Less clear, they suggest, is the justification for taking on the role of a contract killer (e.g., *Hitman*) or serial killer (*Postal 2*, *Manhunt 2*), irrespective of whether one's character is realistically depicted or presented in fantasy alien or demonic guise (*God of War*); which in turn suggests that activities that have no sanctioned equivalence in a game might be more distressing to play out. This study intends to examine the principle of sanctioned equivalence within MMORPGs to determine whether individuals are better able to cope with symbolic taboo activities that have 'real world' sanctioned equivalence.

1.4. Current study

This is an exploratory study that is interested in the psychological impact (and/or the perceived psychological impact) of engaging in or witnessing STAs in MMORPGs. Although it is important to examine the psychological impact of engaging in STAs on both children and adults, we have chosen to focus on an adult population in this study. Researchers in the past have been interested in adults and play and what aspects of play they can cope with psychologically (Whitty & Carr, 2006). Moreover, the majority of MMORPGs players are adults (e.g., Williams, Yee

& Caplan, 2008; Yee, 2006). In fact, in one of the most recent studies on MMORPGs, Williams et al. found, in a sample of 7000, less than seven percent were younger than 18 years of age. Therefore, we believe that an adult population is a valid starting point for such an investigation. We were interested in MMORPGs, rather than single player games (where the individual plays against a computer), because of the increased involvement within the game of other offline players, both as team members or opponents, and the impact this may have on decisions players make regarding how they play or experience the game.

2. Method

The study employed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which was chosen because of its emphasis on 'lived experienced' and how participants make sense of their experiences (Smith, 2004). IPA focuses on how individuals perceive their world and what that experience means for them. The main structure of the analysis using IPA is as follows: (1) the thorough re-reading of interview texts and making initial notes on the left-hand margin of the page; (2) the notation of the emerging themes in the right-hand margin of the page; (3) recognising how the themes cluster together; (4) the production of a table of themes which highlight both the sub-ordinate and emergent themes. Each of these stages requires working closely with the text to develop the themes that will extract the core meaning of the individual's experience. The process takes a hermeneutic approach and so requires continually returning to the data to ground the interpretation of the themes.

2.1. Materials

It was decided to recruit participants from two MMORPGs – *World of Warcraft* (WoW) and *Sociolotron*. WoW was chosen because of its popularity and game structure. Here, individuals can, and often do, engage in actions prohibited offline (e.g., stealing, torturing and killing). Moreover, the world is a fantasy world where most creatures do not exist in the ‘real world’. Sociolotron was chosen because it permits, and might even be said to encourage, individuals to engage virtually in many offline taboo activities (e.g., rape, and racist behaviour). The only restriction in this game, for legal reasons, is that players cannot role-play paedophilias. Although this game is not graphically sophisticated, the characters are human and the places within the game resemble real life much more than WoW does.

Given that we were conducting an exploratory study and making no attempt to generalise to MMORPG players we wanted to recruit participants from two very different games. WoW does not include STAs such as rape, nor does it encourage engaging in sexual behaviours. However, it does include killing, a form of cannibalism, torture and stealing. It is also not impossible for such players to imagine how they would experience engaging in other STAs, such as rape or paedophilia. In contrast, Sociolotron does focus on all forms of sex and STAs and this allowed us to ask people about their experiences in engaging in these forms of STAs. Our aim was to examine if some individuals do cope and enjoy engaging in STAs as well as for those who do not the reasons why and the potential psychological detrimental effects they felt that engaging in such STAs might have on them. Hence, we felt it important to include two very different games in order to gain greater insight into different types of individuals’ experiences of engaging in STAs.

We note that the two games involve engaging in different types of STAs. The players that choose not to or did not have the option of playing out certain STAs

could imagine what it might be like for them engaging in such activities and why they might choose to engage in or avoid such actions. It would of course be unethical for us to force our participants to play out activities that they elected to not play in their games or to request them to play a game with STAs that they did not feel comfortable playing.

We decided to interview participants using an Instant Messenger (IM) programme. Steiger and Goritz's (2006) study on instant messaging as a method for interviewing found IM to be a feasible and in many ways a superior method to other methods of data collection. They state, that:

the risk of receiving false data in IM interviews is small. Not only is the quality of the obtainable data satisfying but also the contact rate, response rate, and retention rate....Also, there is the advantage of the presence of human intelligence during the interview. However, these benefits come at the cost of more time effort. (p. 558)

For our study, IM also seemed appropriate given that our sample were internet savvy and claimed to be regular users of IM.

A semi-structured interview was created for the study. Participants were asked to discuss in-depth about how they experienced the game and how this compared to their 'real world' experiences. They were asked about the types of STAs they had played, witnessed, or would be prepared to play in the game and how they felt about engaging in these activities. Moreover, they were asked if they believed their experience would be different if the game appeared more lifelike (e.g., improvement in graphics) and, if so, how. Participants were also asked about any moral codes they had imported into the game, and whether engaging in STAs had altered their 'real world' moral codes.

2.2. Procedure

Prior to commencing the study ethics clearance was gained from the university's ethics committee. The participants were recruited from the official game forums for individuals 18 years and older. After gaining permission from the moderators of the site, information about the study, and an invitation for inviting participants to contact the research assistant, were placed on the online chat forum dedicated to 'general discussion'. This was carried out on both WoW and Sociolotron chat room forums. Each of the posts asked the gamers to email the research assistant if they wished to partake in the investigation. In each case, the posts were specifically designed to adhere to the forum guidelines and regulations.

When an interested gamer contacted the research assistant, the assistant then engaged in an email exchange providing the participant with further information about the study. If the participant agreed to be interviewed, they were sent an information sheet and a consent form via email to sign and return to the research assistant. Notably, the email exchange provided an opportunity to build up a rapport prior to the IM interview. It was entirely possible that participants played more than one MMORPG; however, we asked them to focus in the interview on either WoW or Sociolotron. Participants were then given the opportunity to decide which IM programme they preferred to use and a time was agreed for the interview. Interview duration ranged from 1-3 hours.

2.3. Participants

A total of 5 participants were recruited (3 from WoW and 2 from Sociolotron). The sample size is in keeping with the ideographic nature of IPA (Smith, 2004). The

participants consisted of 4 males and 1 female (who played Sociolotron). They all resided in the UK. The participants' ages ranged from 19-41 years, with a mean of 30.80 years ($SD= 10.54$). All WoW players had been playing for 4 years and the Sociolotron 2 years (which notably has been as long as this game has been in existence at the time). Participant 5 claimed to have been involved in the design of Sociolotron. Average hours of playing the game per week ranged from 19-35 hours, with a mean of 25.60 hours ($SD=6.50$). Participants' details can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1

Description of participants

Participant	Game	Age	Sex	Years playing	Average hours per week
1	WoW	19	M	4	26
2	WoW	32	M	4	19
3	Wow	21	M	4	20
4	Sociolotron	41	F	2	35
5	Sociolotron	41	M	2	28

3. Results

Seven superordinate themes emerged through analysis of the data. These themes and their emergent themes are summarised in Table 2. They are described in more detail below, together with quotes to illustrate these themes. Given that the interviews were using an IM programme, the quotes we have provided here are verbatim.

Table 2

Table of superordinate and emergent themes

Superordinate theme	Emergent theme
1. Separating gamespace from the real world	<p>Different experience to other spaces</p> <p>The unrealistic appearance of the game</p> <p>Could separate even if it looked more realistic</p> <p>Just a game/play/escape</p> <p>Anonymity provides opportunities to be more playful</p>
2. Sanctioned equivalence	<p>Self-defence</p> <p>Baddies versus goodies</p> <p>Cannibalism</p> <p>Torture</p> <p>Bondage</p>
3. Can't separate all symbolic taboos	<p>Problems with activities when there is no sanctioned equivalence (e.g., ganking; rape)</p> <p>Some taboos are worse than others</p> <p>Even if game looks unreal</p>
4. Taboos ought to be	But, game needs more than offline equivalent taboos

permissible in the game	in order to be interesting
	But don't want to witness it themselves
	But still personally affects them
	Do not think less of people who participate in these taboos
5. Having real players impacts on game play	Concern for children (e.g., children)
	Gaming moral code
	Lack of concern – even if suspect negative affect
	Cheating as in any other sport
	Symbolic depraved actions (e.g., tea bagging)
6. Emotions experienced from engaging in symbolic taboo activities	Enjoyment (e.g., killing, provoking reactions)
	Anger
	Shame
7. Comparing real self with game self	Similarities between self and online character
	Differences between self and online character
	Deliberately separates self from character
	Real world morality remains the same
	Change to offline self (e.g., sexuality)

Theme 1: Separating gamespace from the real world

The superordinate themes focused on participants' ability to separate gamespace from the real world. Reasons given (emergent themes) for why they were very capable of separating the spaces included: 'Different experience to other spaces'; 'The unrealistic appearance of the game'; 'Could separate even if it looked more realistic'; 'Just a game/play/escape'; and 'Anonymity provides opportunities to be more playful'.

Participant 1 described the experience as magical and unlike anything he had experienced previously. All five participants discussed how the game appeared very unrealistic, which allowed for a psychological split between gamespace and the real world. Games were described as looking cartoonish, just pixels, and actions, such as death, not resembling the same action offline.

It would certainly feel different if the game appeared more real, however, the game itself has always been quite cartoonish, graphics-wise. While the graphics aren't bad, I don't think there would be any danger of someone not being able to separate the game from reality (P1, L125)

in the end it's just a bunch of pixels with some text (P4, L705)

firstly, this isn't exactly a violent game - there's tiny splashes of blood, and the animations don't often show any physical contact between characters (P3, L100)

Although participants discussed in detail how the games did not resemble the real world in appearance, participants 3, 4 and 5 stated that they believed they would still easily be able to separate the spaces, even if the graphics did make the game appear more real.

I: what if the game looked more real - and I know you were involved with the beta version so you will have a good insight on this - would you still feel comfortable with rape?

P5: I have played other sex games such as Red Light and Second life which have more realistic graphics but personally it is still just pixels to me I have no real attachment to any of my characters which is why I was so "dangerous" in S [Sociolotron]. I didnt care if my characters got raped or killed, even perma death [when a character dies permanently] didnt bother me. (P5, L108)

Participants 1 and 5 discussed how the game for them was an escape and that the MMORPG was simply a game where they could act out behaviours they would never contemplate doing offline.

About the illegal activities - I would say it is just a game. There is no way I would kill someone in realy life, or even hit them with an axe. I guess being able to do things you can't do in real life is seen as an escape by many player...if you aren't very happy with your real life situation it is possible to turn on the game, put on some headphones and escape to a completely different world. (P1, L113)

P5: you do eat bodily fluids though, sperm and blood are used to make potions

I: do you feel ok with this?

P5: in the context of the game, yes

(P5, L238)

Participant 5 talked about some of the extreme actions he was able to act out in Sociolotron, especially with regards to role-playing. He suggests that he was able to do this because of the separation of his real self from the gaming character, as well as the anonymity afforded to him.

...he had so many women admirers in the game [referring to his character] it became ridiculous. Men hated him and chased him all over London trying to kill him, which was extremely funny. and as far as how it made me feel to be hated, dont forget, to me he was just pixels on the screen it wasnt personal, in fact people who roleplayed with my other characters would sound off about him to me without a clue that it was me who played him (P5, L101)

Theme 2: Sanctioned equivalence

Many of the symbolic taboo activities identified by the participants were of activities that under certain circumstances are deemed acceptable in the real world. The emergent themes for this superordinate theme included: 'Self-defence'; 'Baddies versus goodies'; 'Cannibalism'; 'Torture'; and 'Bondage'. World of Warcraft appears to have built into the game these sanctioned equivalent scenarios, such as the one described below:

There's one quest in which you have to give electric shocks to a non-player character for information, he asks you to stop and expresses quite a bit of

pain but you can continue until he tells you what you need to know, as well as carrying on after (P3, L254)

The 'baddies and goodies' emergent theme was perhaps more akin to what individuals might find acceptable in a movie rather than a replication of real life.

well in part of the game there is a place, a raid, that you go to as a group. there is an evil guy there that you hve to find and eventually kill, who has been torturing people (P1, L230)

Theme 3: Can't separate all symbolic taboos

Although all five participants felt that it was very easy to separate gamespace from the real world participants 2, 3 and 4 found some symbolic taboo activities difficult to engage in. The emergent themes for this superordinate theme were: 'Problems coping with activities when there is no sanctioned equivalence'; 'Some taboos are worse than others'; and 'Difficulties separating even if the game appears unreal'. The three activities that were identified as not having a sanctioned equivalence were ganking, rape, and paedophilia. Ganking is a term made up by gamers to explain when a group of characters gang up on one or more players that do not have a chance to defend themselves. Participant 4 discussed her upset about 'nice' people getting raped in Sociolotron. Her discourse sounds very similar to how individuals might talk about someone being raped offline, especially with regards to her emotional reaction.

wow

erm... I just typed out I would rape.....however

**wouldn't [correction to 'would' in previous sentence]*

if I caught a rapist I likely would

and likely use my sword to do it with (P4, L725)

P4: a 'nice' character being raped outside a bar by a demon with a weapon

I: ok

P4: nobody could do anything about it because of the game mechanics at the time that did get to me

I: I bet

P4: partly because there was nothing I could do to help I: partly because the girl didn't deserve that treatment

It made me feel sad (P4, L266)

Participant 3 makes an interesting distinction between rape and torture compared to cannibalism, suggesting that rape and torture are worse because they are more likely to occur in real life, whereas cannibalism is more likely to be an action in a horror film.

i think you have an incredibly poor opinion of humanity if you think it's a trope of humanity is to rape and torture! no, what i meant was cannibalism is a common attribute of zombies from horror films and the like – it's what they tend to do, it's part of what makes them zombies. i don't think rape and torture are part of what makes us human! also, rape and torture are far.....more tangible, more immediate, more threatening. cannibalism is an exotic threat, something far removed from everyday life, hence it being far easier to include in a fantasy environment (P3, L330)

Participant 3 also comments that rape in a game would be unacceptable to him, unlike other taboo violations.

rape is a little different to bring into a fantasy world without still being somehow realistic the very idea is abhorrent (P3, L351)

Theme 4: Taboos ought to be permissible in the game

Participants 2, 3 and 4 discuss that, in principal, many symbolic taboos ought to be permissible in the game. They state this qualifying that these are just games and so individuals who want to engage in them ought to be permitted to do so. However, each said that despite being permissible that: 'The game needs more than offline equivalent taboos in order to be interesting'; 'They don't want to witness it themselves'; and 'They still personally affect them'. Participant 3 makes an interesting real world parallel to explain their belief that it should be permitted so long as they don't have to witness it:

Actually, i think that could make a lot of sense if some people could do it in a game form and not do it in the real world almost like methadone but i'd rather they had their own online world to do that in, so i'm not exposed to it! (P3, L461)

Moreover, participant 4 qualifies that they 'do not think any less of people who do participant in these taboos in gamespace'.

P4: yes, therefore I do know people who rape etc, and I don't think any less of them for it as such (P4, L909)

Theme 5: Having real players impacts on game play

We opted in this study to examine MMORPGs, rather than single player games, as we wanted to examine how it felt to engage in symbolic taboo activities in the presence as well as against others. As highlighted earlier, ganking, an activity carried out against real people in the game, was seen as unacceptable by our participants. For superordinate theme 5 the following emergent themes emerged: 'Concern for others (e.g., children)'; 'Gaming moral code'; 'Lack of concern for others'; 'cheating' and 'Symbolic depraved actions'. Participant 5 said that he felt strongly that children ought not to be allowed to play an adult MMORPG such as Sociolotron. Participant 2, who played the fantasy based MMORPG, World of Warcraft, discussed how the way he played the game was constrained because he was aware that some of the players were children.

You never know if it's a 12 year old kid behind the character, so I play honestly. (P2, L127)

When questioned, participants 1 and 2 discussed their gaming moral codes. They talked about the importance of being polite and respectful to others in the game.

Certainly, WoW requires a lot of interaction and communication - both valuable skills requiring a good moral backbone to work effectively. If someone said "Hey, nobhead, wanna heal me in that dungeon or are you chicken?" they wouldn't get many replies. (P2, L769)

Not all participants, however, said that it was important to be kind and respectful towards others – although they were still clearly aware of the presence of others. Participant 5 was interested in others' reactions towards his role playing, even if there were negative.

P5: yes thats fair, I was far more interested in how people reacted to various stimulae whether that was rape torture, of being killed. there was a wide

diversity of reactions from stunned silence to manic outbursts where they really believed it was happening to them. (P5, L153)

Participant 3 points out how cheating in World of Warcraft is equivalent to cheating in any sport. He also talked about a symbolic depravity activity, called 'tea bagging', which was invented by gamers in their role play to taunt other players.

a taunting practice some players do when defeating others - they 'teabag', which is rapidly making your character sit down and stand up on the other player's corpse's head, simulating, well...look it up ☺ (P3, L295)

Theme 6: Emotions experienced from engaging in symbolic taboo activities

Participants discussed a range of emotions from engaging in symbolic taboo activities. The emergent themes for this superordinate theme were: 'Enjoyment'; 'Anger'; and 'Shame'. Participant 1 talked about the enjoyment he experienced from watching a kill. Participant 5 (the Sociolotron players) discussed at length his enjoyment in engaging in taboo violations that provoked reactions from others.

other players react in various ways to your roleplay, I was a very good roleplayer and watching them get angry, frustrated or just downright rude was fascinating for me (P5, L46)

I: did you enjoy the fact that others were uncomfortable with homosexuality or incest?

P5: Ohhh yes ☺ (P5, L56)

Participant 1 talked about his anger with regards to witnessing torture in World of Warcraft. Whereas, Participant 3 discussed the anger he felt from the thought of including rape in the same game. Participant 4, who had originally engaged in rape

activities in Sociolotron, discussed her change of view on this and how witnessing it now does make her feel angry.

P4: first off a feeling of anger (P4, L126)

Furthermore, Participant 4 felt a real sense of shame from playing the game Sociolotron, stating that she wouldn't want her family to know that she played the game.

Theme 7: Comparing 'real self' with 'game self'

In order to learn more about how well participants could separate the real world from their gamespace we asked them how much of themselves they saw in their character. The emergent themes included: 'Similarities between self and online character'; 'Differences between self and online character'; 'Deliberately separates self from character'; 'Real world morality remains the same' and 'Change to offline self (e.g., sexuality)'.

Participants 1 and 2 identified some similarities.

Well gnomes in game are known for their engineering - they like things that go boom. the same could probably be said for me; i've always liked fireworks etc. (P1, L329)

It's weird, but even without role playing, you do end up inflicting a personality on your characters - to some degree. My mage seems clumsy - like me. (P2, L352)

Participants 2 and 5 believed they were nothing like their gaming characters.

The rogue seems sneaky and a bit of a loner, which isn't true of me. I like my alone time, sure, but I wouldn't say I was a loner. (P2, L353)

Participant 5 goes onto say how he deliberately ensures that his gaming character is very different to the person he is. Participant 3 does the same thing, emphasising his view that it is psychologically important to do so.

well i'm trying to delineate a difference between the player and the character they're playing as - my character, who is a female alien shaman, probably wouldn't torture. i haven't played cod [Call of Duty], so i don't know what the character you play as there is like, but i will say that i personally make a conscious separation between myself and my character, as i believe most stable individuals do. (P3, L280)

Participants 4 and 5 (the Sociolotron players), in their interviews, reflected on their real world morality, stating that playing the game did not alter their morality in any way.

I: would you say that playing this game has made you reconsider your sense of morality in the real world?

P5: not for me, I have my own real life code that I dont think will ever change. but inside the game If im playing Jack the ripper..then its his morals that i use (P5, L287)

Participant 4 is the only participant to discuss how playing the game altered her 'real self'. This was with regards to engaging in sexual activities with Sociolotron that she had not previously experienced in the real world.

P4: met someone fairly early on

I: ok

P4: hmmm ... trying to word this

I: right

P4: they showed me I had an interest in the same sex r/l [real life] it wasn't something I had ever considered

I: ok can you say more

P4: I don't mean I met her or anything like that she was over in the US

I: right ok

P4: we just talked a lot about all sorts of different things

I: and how did you feel?

P4: we had sex together as characters

I: right

P4: well, it was quite a bombshell

I: go on

P4: but she was right

I: so do you feel you found that out through the game?

P4: yes

I: go on

P4: so it did change me r/l [real life] well it is for me oops soory (P4, L560)

4. Discussion

This study examined the psychological impact (and/or the perceived psychological impact) of engaging in or witnessing STAs in MMORPGs. Using IPA as the methodology allowed for an intensive and detailed analysis of the gamers' accounts. Gamers were highly reflective on how they experienced the game and how it impacted their everyday lives. Employing IPA also allowed us to gain insights into the individuals' experiences of gaming. As our analysis elucidates, not everyone experienced playing MMORPGs in the same way. Some participants' experiences

were more positive than others and, importantly, our research demonstrates that there was no clear agreement on which aspects of the game individuals could or believed they would be able to cope with.

Many of our participants felt they could easily separate gamespace from the real world, and that playing the game provided them with some escape from ordinary life. They discussed how liberating this felt for them, which is in line with previous work that has argued that virtual worlds can be liberating for individuals (Whitty & Carr, 2006). Participants believed that the unrealistic look of the game (with respect to graphics in the case of Sociolotron and the characters and virtual world of WoW) assisted them in separating the two spaces. This might be important for game designers to consider, especially given that games are beginning to appear more lifelike and gaming narratives are increasingly based on real world events (e.g., Call of Duty, Modern Warfare saga). Some of our participants did, however, believe they would be able to separate the game from the real world even if the graphics were improved, and so it might be worthwhile examining similar research questions proposed here with individuals who play games that more closely resemble the real world.

Previous theorists are unconvinced by the notion that individuals can easily separate virtual reality and the real world (Turkle, 1995; Whitty, 2003; Whitty & Carr, 2006). They have insisted that individuals still import part of themselves into this space. Moreover, they believe that engaging in play in these spaces provokes real emotional responses. We also found this in our study. Participants reported an array of positive and negative emotions. Of particular interest were the emotions of shame and anger. Participants 3 and 4 felt anger at the thought of witnessing rape in the game. These same players talked about MMORPGs as just games, which they believed they

could easily separate from real life. Participant 4 felt shame at the thought of family members learning about her playing Sociolotron: much the same, perhaps, as some might feel about being caught out viewing pornography (Linton, 1979).

In addition to the 'real' emotions reported by our participants, we found that even the participants who felt they could separate the real world and gamespace note some important exceptions to this rule. Participant 2, for example, said he would engage in any STA within the game, because it is just a game; however, later he discussed how his game play is constrained because he is playing with children in the game. Participant 3 discussed in detail how easily he could separate gamespace and the real world, but when asked to consider enacting rape in gamespace he claimed he could not because this would still feel real to him. In fact, he said the very idea of it was abhorrent.

According to Kreitman (2006), emotional responses to fiction are only able to occur, and are therefore only able to bridge the gulf between fictional and real worlds if the novel characteristics and constructs applied to works of fiction are derived from actual experience. Fiction presents us with an "unreal entity with real characteristics" (p. 616). The commitment we demand of fictional objects is not, therefore, existential (we do not require that they actual exist); rather, we seek authenticity. Real world authenticity is measured by the number of *attributes* of a certain kind possessed by the object of fiction (see Young, 2010 for further details). Consequently, for Powers (2003), what the gamer is communicating, even through the *virtual* nature of his/her action, is "socially significant expression" (p. 193) that in the absence sanctioned equivalence (for example) may appear gratuitous.

Young and Whitty's (in press) principle of 'sanctioned equivalence' therefore provides some explanation for why certain aspects of the game were easier to separate

from the real world and real emotions. Their theory states that gamers should cope better with engaging in STAs that are deemed acceptable in the real world under certain circumstances (e.g., killing the enemy at war). WoW is constructed in such a way as to create two opposing sides (good and evil), where gamers decide which side they wish to belong to. This is quite similar, one might argue, to discourses about real wars and terrorism (e.g., Kellner, 2004) and how war is depicted in film. The participants in this study talked about acceptable STAs in the game, such as cannibalism (to restore the health of their character) and torture (when information was required), which arguably under similar circumstances in the real world would be acceptable. When there were no clear real world sanctioned equivalence, participants were more likely to have difficulty accepting activities in the game. This was especially the case for rape. Yet, in the case of Sociolotron, those opposed to rape nevertheless accepted its permissibility within the gameplay. Participant 4, for example, talked about how she initially coped well with rape in the game and still believes, in principle, that it should exist within the gameplay; but currently she feels that it is something she finds difficult to cope with and watching it makes her angry. Despite her feelings, Participant 4 went on to state that she did not think any less of those who engaged in rape in the game. Irrespective of personal opposition and unwillingness to engage in certain STAs, then, some players of Sociolotron (for example) nevertheless accept that such activity is a legitimate part of the game. However, such reluctance to take part was not the case for all participants. Participant 5 was very adamant about rape being something he felt very comfortable role-playing, and that it did not affect him outside of the game.

The extent to which gamers identify with their character might also give some insights into whether that individual can cope with engaging in STAs in the game.

Participant 5 was adamant about his ability to separate real world moral codes from the game as well as being nothing like his game character. Notably, he engaged in more STAs than any of the other participants (this included activities that had no sanctioned equivalence). In contrast, Participant 3 stated that he separated his real self from his gaming character and that it was important psychologically to do so. Nevertheless, we note, he still felt anger at the thought of engaging in symbolic rape in the game. And so, separation between one's gaming character and real self are possibly not enough.

Preliminary research conducted on the design of avatars and behaviour in MMORPGs might give further explanation. Pena, Hancock and Merola (2009), have suggested that in virtual settings white clothes should be chosen over black in order to increase cohesion and red to increase competition. It is noteworthy that in the film *Avatar* the avatars who were characterised as a peaceful species were all blue. While our research did not delve into the look of the participants' characters in the game, these early findings suggest that the look and choice of an avatar could play a role in the way an individual experiences MMORPGs. Perhaps it is not only the way the game looks, but also the colour and appearance of the gamer's avatar that alters an individual's experience. Future research on the experience of STAs in MMORPGs might consider this possibility.

With regards to transferability, we found that one of our participants learnt something new about herself from engaging in certain sexual activities in *Sociolotron* that she transferred to the real world; her discovery was learning that she is bisexual (an identity often stigmatised in Western society). Participant 4 described her new found identity in a positive way and something she wanted to share with the interviewer. Previously, it has been argued that cyberspace is potentially a safe space

to learn about and experience sexuality (Whitty, 2003, 2008). Perhaps engaging in this sexual play in Sociolotron freed up this gamer to other ways of being typically shunned in the real world. While we do not rule out that some of the behaviours learnt could be negative (e.g., aggression) our research found that positive aspects about oneself can be learnt in MMORPGs and transferred into the real world.

5. Conclusions

There are of course a number of limitations to this study that we need to recognise. The sample, we note, consisted of all *hard core* players. Homogeneous samples are ideal for IPA (Smith, 2004); however, as a consequence, we are left wondering whether individuals who are less frequent or novice players have similar experiences to our sample. More research is required to examine whether this is the case. We are also limited by our focus on just two MMORPGs. Future research might consider a range of MMORPGs, including games that focus on real historical events.

We have much yet to learn about how individuals cope with engaging in STAs in MMORPGs. Our research findings confirm that this is an important area of research to continue examining. Importantly, we found that not all individuals' experiences were the same. We recommend that future researchers also consider individual differences. Understanding how individuals experience STAs provides important information for game designers and those bodies responsible for rating and censoring games. Moreover, it is important for psychologists to learn more about how individuals transfer their experience in MMORPGs to the real world and whether they can psychologically cope with engaging in certain activities in MMORPGs.

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