

On the Edge of Good Taste: Playful Misconduct and Mischief in Online Games

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Abstract

Playing online games is a social pastime, one in which today's players can share their gaming experiences with millions of strangers from all over the world. In this melting pot, people with different cultural and social values are brought together in an environment where normal social rules may be fuzzy and not clearly defined. In this environment, some players are compelled to push the boundaries of what is considered acceptable, and explore exactly at what point behaviour becomes anti-social. In this chapter, we introduce the concept of "Playful Misconduct" as a gentle form of mischief that purposefully exposes unwitting players to unexpected social situations. We present several examples from popular online games to help illustrate and understand the phenomenon, and argue that games should be designed to preserve and encourage play at this tender edge between social order and chaos.

Introduction [Heading 1]

There is a profound difference in the type of social play observed in highly connected online digital games compared to that which occurs in games that use cardboard and counters. Where once we were limited to playing with local friends, family and acquaintances, we are now able to share experiences with millions of strangers with different cultures, values and social norms. This collision of languages, cultures and beliefs has made the social Internet something of a contemporary "Wild West". The inhabitants have had to adapt to the different expectations and beliefs of their peers and come to a shaky but mutual understanding of what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour (Healy 1996). In online games, there exists an *edge of good taste*, between expected and inappropriate play within this social environment. As with everything in games, this edge is a source of fun for many players, who tease and play with the expectations of others on this border of acceptability.

Internet users are essentially anonymous, which adds a volatile catalyst into an unstable mix. It is trivial for someone to generate a new "identity" online, burst into a message board or other community and cause great upset and strife before disappearing into the ether. As long as no laws are broken, the victims of the attack are left alone in the debris with no recourse. Such antisocial behaviour is hardly defensible

in either the on- or offline worlds. However in a gaming environment, the social rules of engagement are different – the expectations of what is acceptable behaviour in a game are different, and even the players’ understanding of how games are *fun* diverge wildly (e.g. Bartle 1996, 2003; Bateman and Boon 2006).

In this chapter we explore the themes of “playful misconduct” at the edge of social acceptability in games from a games studies perspective. Using examples from several types of game with an online (and therefore social) aspect, we describe how playful misconduct is universal within online games and falls within one of three themes. We propose that playful misconduct is a valid form of play within the fuzzy edge between socially expected and socially harmful play. Since it is almost inevitable to appear in any “live” online game, we argue that it should be catered for during the design process and considered as an important aspect of any in-game social environment.

The Social Contract [Heading 2]

In the social world of board games, wooden and cardboard pieces are often used for the physical representation of the game, but usually the game itself is played in the minds of the players. Specifically, the players maintain the game state through applying the rules and exceptions, and keeping score. Magerkurth *et al.* (2004) describe this part of a game as the “Social Domain”, which not only includes management of the game state, but also other social information such as alliances, diplomacy and trust. Since the cardboard cannot enforce complex rules on its own, the players are expected to enter into a “social contract” while playing. This contract ensures the game state is managed correctly, but that all players are given a fair chance to enjoy the game. Binmore (1999) takes the example of Chess – “It is actually within our power to move a bishop like a knight... But rational folk choose not to cheat.”

Similarly, it is also possible for a player to operate quite within the confines of the game rules, but to the detriment of the enjoyment experienced by co-players. For example, in the political board game *Junta*, players manage the governance of a small fictional South American country. In this game, when rival players reach an impasse in their negotiations, there is a mechanic that allows for a military coup. The coup procedure is long and complicated, and is usually reserved for extreme situations. However, it is within the rules that *any* player may call for a coup at almost any time. It is therefore possible for one player to call for a coup again and again, which forces the other players into a complex and long resolution phase. Repeated coups can extend the game to interminable levels and ruin the enjoyment for the other players. Although it is within the rules that this is acceptable play, it is against the unspoken *social contract*.

The social contract includes many such assumed rules that make the game experience better for everyone. An important one is that players are expected to try their best to win. Since the strategies employed by players within a game typically rely on rational play, unexpected random or irrational play by other players without purpose can cause great frustration. Woods (2009) describes this aspect of board games as “schizophrenic”, in that players are obligated to play together but still strive to win.

The Social Contract in Online Games [heading 2]

In online games, too, there is a social contract, but it can be argued that it is not as strict as that observed in board games. Firstly, the server is responsible for maintaining game state; so cheating is (ostensibly) impossible. Secondly, since the number of players is so large, the effect of any single player breaking the contract is usually not great. It is precisely this lack of strictness in the social contract between online game players that makes it possible for players to bend the rules and experiment with acceptability by engaging in anti-social acts in online games. If the behaviour of a fellow player is not to someone's liking, it is trivial for him or her to avoid it by leaving the area or using tools to hide it. The "cost" for the offended player is low and the perpetrators are not causing catastrophic damage to the game experiences of the others (as they perhaps would have in a board game). Since there is this leeway in the social contract regarding anti-social behaviour there is space for mischievous "playful misconduct" at the edge of social acceptability.

Playful Misconduct [Heading 1]

We define playful misconduct as an activity whereby players deliberately push the boundaries of socially acceptable behaviour for their own amusement. This can be through challenging accepted social norms, or by misusing the rules or structure of a game for playful means. It is perhaps most illustrative to describe this form of play in terms of what it is *not*. Most importantly, playful misconduct is not about following the rules, but it also is not intentionally abusive. Rather, the intent is specifically about subverting the rules of the game to cause surprising and often elaborate and wondrous experiences. By pushing the boundaries of what can be considered "good taste" in social games, the mischievous players add serendipitous flavour to what can otherwise be a repetitive experience.

Finally, playful misconduct is not about "griefing", which is mischief that is specifically designed to cause offence for anyone who happens to stumble across it (Dibbel 2008). Playful misconduct as we describe it may push the boundaries of taste, but the intention is always well meaning and never at the expense of others.

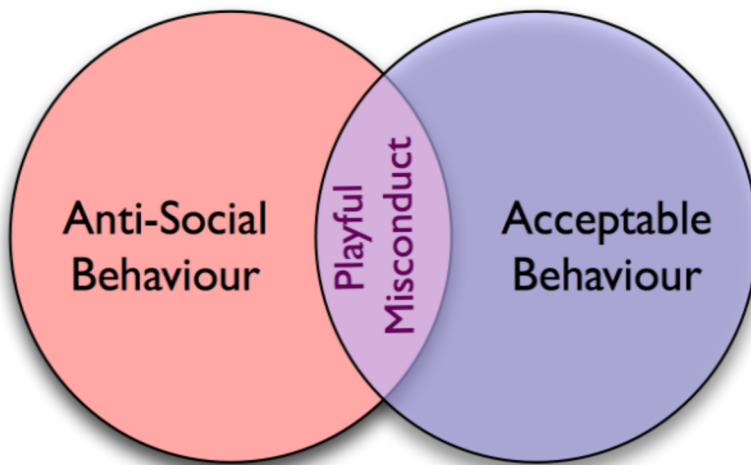


Figure 1 - Playful Misconduct between normal and abnormal play

In our explorations of playful misconduct, we identified three major themes within which the mischief occurs: *Performance*, where a player uses their avatar to confound expectations in order to elicit direct reaction from an audience of passers-by; *Serendipity*, when incidences of mischief leave traces in the digital world that can be stumbled upon by chance by others; and *Emergence*, where game rules are abused collectively by a group of players for a non-intended effect.

Performance [Heading 2]

Virtual worlds are usually built with a strongly established back-story, with complex mythologies, histories and aesthetics. Within this frame the players are introduced, and settle into roles according to the established order. In a high-fantasy game such as World of Warcraft the warriors wear armour and the wizards cast spells. To paraphrase Adams (1979), men are *real* men, women are *real* women, and small furry creatures from Alpha Centauri are *real* small furry creatures from Alpha Centauri. These strong identities are often enforced by game rules (e.g. Wizards may not wear armour; Male characters may not wear female clothing), which further guides players to follow the strict stereotypes in order to play more efficiently.

It is precisely these strong stereotypes and established social norms that create opportunities for playful misconduct by players who wish to challenge the status quo. For example, players may subvert these highly established roles in order to stand out as being defined by character rather than by type. Consider encountering a wizard that refuses to believe in magic, a blind rogue, or a strictly pacifist warrior. The stronger such stereotypes are enforced by the game design, the more rare any divergence becomes, as a mischievous player must work particularly hard to overcome the barriers to expressing individuality. For example, a transvestite character may be prevented by the game from wearing clothes intended for the other gender, but may still be able to assemble an outfit that gives the correct impression by using particular combinations of “valid” clothes.

No matter how strict the game stereotypes, there is room for misconduct through performance. Wright et al (2002) describe such performances in online FPS (First Person Shooter) games, where there is an extremely limited scope for players to challenge stereotypes. In this strict environment players simply used the simplest tools available - changing their names and “spray tags” to provoke other players.

In these cases, the misconduct is about challenging the social norms in the game and creating an exhibitionist performance for the benefit of others. It is an interactive experience intended to elicit reactions such as surprise, confusion and amusement created by an abuse of the game rules.

Serendipity [Heading 2]

Many games allow players to alter the game world in some way – games like Star Wars Galaxies, Habbo Hotel and others allow players to own spaces within the game worlds that can be decorated at will, and usually remain persistent, so strangers can see the creations even while the creator is offline. With the opportunity to leave effects on the game world that remain for some time, there is also an opportunity for serendipitous playful misconduct. Mischievous players can create surprising and unique experiences for other players to stumble upon in normal play. The creator may never even experience the reaction of the “victims”.

The online social game Farm Town is one of a range of popular farming themed games found on Facebook. In these games, players own a farm, and must maintain both the business and the finer details of arable and pastoral farming. This includes buying land and animal feed, planting crops and harvesting them for profit when the time is right. The player has complete control over where fields, buildings and pastures are placed within this virtual space. The location of crops has no direct impact on the player’s ability to be a successful farmer (e.g. crops are no less likely to produce a harvest if very far away from the farm buildings) so this control has no direct in-game impact.

With the provided tools (planting and building) some players have used their farms as a canvas for creativity. By careful placement and selection of crop types, players can create imaginative and detailed artworks to surprise and confound visitors to their farm. Such players have even created communities to share their creations born out of bending the rules of the game¹.



Figure 2 - Creative mischief in Farm Town

A vivid example of serendipitous mischief appeared shortly after the release of Maxis' Spore. In this game, players can use powerful tools to design creatures out of huge selections of body parts (arms, legs, horns, eyes, mouths, etc). Although not directly multiplayer, Spore connected players together by sharing their creature creations. As players explore their own worlds, the other inhabitants are computer-controlled versions of the alien creations of other randomly selected Spore players.

This automatic sharing created the perfect opportunity for mischief in the generation of *Sporn*. Using the powerful creature creation tools, players created humorous creatures that were caricatures of a certain part of the male anatomy (Wortham 2008). Since the worlds of other players may pick up these creatures from the Internet automatically, players may have ended up unwittingly exploring brave new worlds filled with dancing, singing penises.



Figure 3 - "Sporn" in the wild

Similarly, in *Little Big Planet*, a game where players can create their own levels, players spend considerable amounts of time learning to use the powerful tools and physics to create animated levels based on cartoon sexual imagery (Krahulik & Holkins, 2008).

The use of crudely drawn penises in humour is as old as culture itself (Henderson 1991) and, yet, even in these "enlightened" times it is seen as something "naughty." Along with scatological themes it is still a hugely popular topic for jokes and pranks (e.g. Praeger 2007; Weaver 2009). It is no wonder, then, that this familiar form makes its way into the gaming world as a common theme of mischief. The Western cultural associations with the male genitals are typically as a merely mildly offensive and "naughty" subject reserved for childish pranks and schoolboy graffiti, it is therefore the perfect example of "pushing the edges of acceptability." Its appearance in a game such as *Spore* is unexpected, immediately recognizable and harmless.

In *Second Life*, although perhaps not strictly a game, one user pushed the boundaries of taste spectacularly with the creation of a new fashion item:

"Tiny, adorable baby unicorns that you can hold and cuddle... but they come with a price - You can only get them by having sex with an adult unicorn" (Tenshi 2007)

In order to collect a free pet baby unicorn, players (of either gender, since "unicorn seed is magical") would first have to submit to engaging in graphic intercourse (including appropriate animations and sound effects) with an adult unicorn that had been painstakingly designed and programmed by the author for this specific purpose.

In 2006, *World of Warcraft* saw an explosion in serendipitous mischief through the macabre act of "corpse graffiti" (Schramm 2006). In this game, a deceased avatar's corpse remains in the location it died until it is resurrected. If the player chooses not to resurrect his or her avatar, the corpse remains visible in the game world for everyone to see. This led to players to devise elaborate deaths for their avatars that would leave the

corpses in humorous positions, or using collections of corpses to spell out words for other players to encounter.



Figure 4 - Corpse in WoW placed to look like a handstandⁱⁱ

The key aspect of serendipitous mischief is that the creator may never get to witness the reaction that their play creates. Unlike performance mischief, where there is direct reward for the player in terms of being witness to the responses to their actions, serendipitous mischief is almost a magnanimous act that is performed for the benefit of the entire game community.

Emergence [Heading 2]

Salen and Zimmerman (2004) describe the idea of *emergence* in games; where players use the system of rules that operate the game as a platform, on which to develop new meta-level games with their own socially enforced rules. The concept of Emergence can be observed in terms of playful misconduct, where players twist game rules to introduce new social practices that may not fit the overarching fiction implemented by the developers.

A prime example of emergent playful misconduct can be seen in Ultima Online. This title was a major instalment in the long running Ultima franchise, a fantasy world of swords and magic, with a very strongly established fiction. As a MMORPG it had a stronger focus on character development and role-playing than contemporary games such as Everquest and World of Warcraft. In particular, Ultima Online had no class system –

players were free to develop their character's skills in any way they saw fit. Until 2005ⁱⁱⁱ, however, players were only allowed to create human characters. As Traditional tabletop role-playing games such as Dungeons & Dragons have had a long history of allowing players to create non-human characters; the role-playing Ultima Online players sought ways to exploit the game rules to be able to add this functionality. This was seen most impressively with players who wished to play the role of orc characters. In order to do so, players created characters with orcish sounding names and wore drably coloured leather armour and masks or cowls in an attempt to give their characters a similar appearance to actual non-player orcs in the game. The players formed guilds^{iv} and existed within the game as outwardly orc characters, in spite of the game itself that treated them as humans.



Figure 5 - Player controlled Orcs in Ultima Online

To further compound the difficulty of playing an Orc, in the world of Ultima Online there are several fixed forts that are occupied by non-player orcs. Naturally, the players (as orcs) wished to use these forts for their own purposes. However, because the game recognised the player orcs as human characters, the native orcs attacked them on sight. Orc players generated a fictional back-story as drunk or squabbling Orcs in order to explain this NPC behaviour, and trapped them out of harm's way. These players go to extreme lengths to maintain their fiction as orc characters, despite the game acting as a system working against them in so many ways.

A second form of emergent mischief evolved on the European Ultima Online servers – a game called “Bagball” (Chew 2002). Bagball is an organised team game that is based on soccer, played in the game world, where two teams compete to score goals by passing a ball amongst each other. There is a fixed pitch, with a certain length, but most interesting is the “ball”. The ball is actually a bag filled with heavy lumber. The mechanics of the bagball game are made possible due to limitations implemented in the game, where a character can only carry so much weight before becoming over-

encumbered. Practically, a character can only move a few steps while holding the bag before they have to drop it. Once it is dropped, it is free for another player to pick up. Like soccer, players travel up and down the pitch trying to pass the bag between friendly players and avoiding interception by opponents.

The game of bagball evolved into an organised sport, with rules, referees, supporters and even leagues and tournaments. All this within a game structure (and a game fiction) that does not support this sort of activity. Bagball became such a popular pastime for UO players, that the developers added official arenas to the virtual world to better support the game-within-a-game (UO.com 2003).



Figure 6 - Officially created Bagball arena

The emergence of games-within-games can be seen widely in different titles, but can only sometimes be described as a form of playful misconduct. According to our definition, the activity has to be on the edge of social acceptability and challenge established norms. So, a group of guilds in World of Warcraft having self-organised competitions and battles can be considered emergent play, but since this activity fits within the social norms and fiction of the game world it may not be considered misconduct.

Jeep Tag, as described by Parker (2008) is an emergent (or *expansive* in Parker's terminology) chase game played on the multiplayer mode of *Halo*, where one player (monitored by socially accepted rules) drives a tank around the level trying to run over other players for points. Jeep Tag is misconduct because it explicitly goes against the social rules of the game – strangers encountering the game randomly could be flummoxed by the apparent disregard for adherence to both the narrative of Halo and the established social rules of conduct in the multiplayer mode.

Design Reactions [Heading 1]

It is a safe assumption that some form of playful misconduct has been a feature of every multiplayer online game at one point or another. However, the official reaction of developers to the misconduct varies from game to game.

Developers and publishers have a real responsibility to ensure the enjoyment of their game by their players. So, when there is a threat to that enjoyment, it must be tackled in some form. If this is a mechanical threat (e.g., unbalance between character classes) there may be adjustments to calculations made behind the scenes of the game. If there are internal threats to the fun experienced by a sub-group of players (e.g. racism, sexism, homophobia), they need to be dealt with appropriately. For some games this includes a system of warnings leading to possible permanent ban, and for others it may mean mechanical changes to make particular behaviours less damaging.

Since the idea of playful misconduct is at the fuzzy border at the edge of what is socially acceptable, it can happen that misconduct is incorrectly treated as harmful behaviour (when by definition it is not) and policed somehow by the developers. This approach is arguably dangerous because playful misconduct can be considered just as valid as normal play, and, as shown in the examples above, create a richer more entertaining atmosphere for the game generally.

Some developers are extremely strict. For example, the children's online game portal Club Penguin allows users to communicate; however the developers are extremely serious about their child protection policies. Parents may select their children's communication be limited to an "Ultimate Safe Chat" mode (which is also mandatory on some servers), where players are unable to type messages to one another and instead must select from a limited selection of pre-defined expressions. Although protecting children on the service is a very important goal, such harsh measures may also prevent milder misconduct on the service.

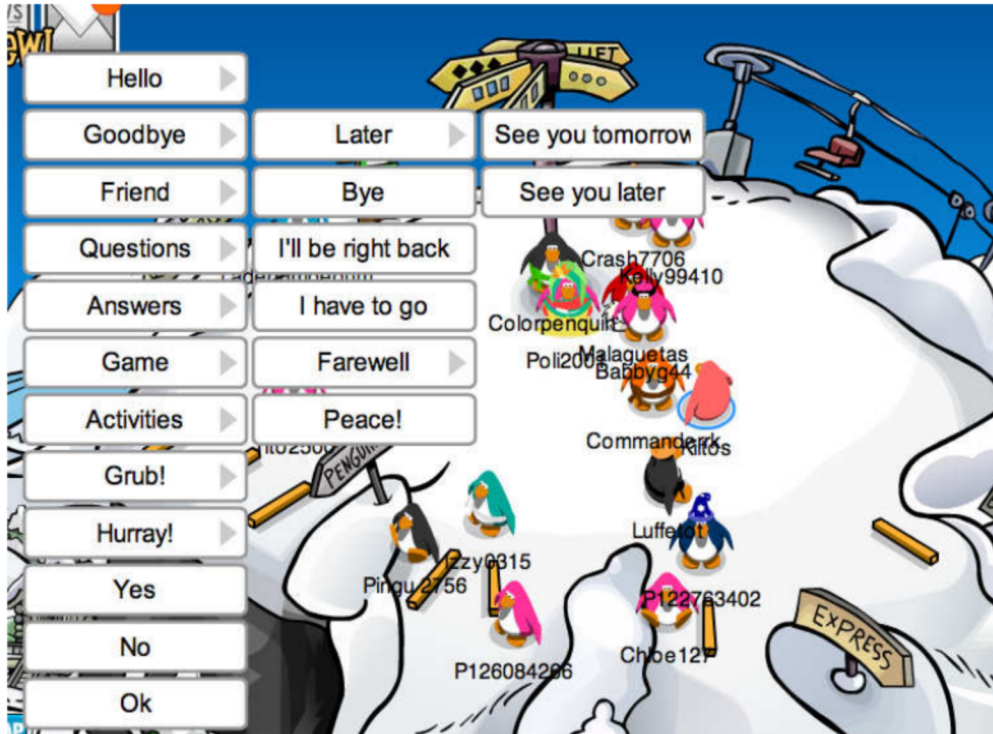


Figure 7 - Restricted Communication in Club Penguin

At the other end of the spectrum, CCP Games, the developers of the MMORPG space game *Eve Online*, take a uniquely laissez faire attitude to policing their players. In one famous example, a single player created an elaborate scam, whereby he gained the confidence of several rich corporations (player groups) within the game, under the pretence of clubbing together to buy a particularly high valued in-game item – the blueprints of a massive capital ship that would then be shared among the investors. At the last moment, the scammer known as “Cally” collected all the investment capital and disappeared. This act caused the virtual bankruptcy of an in-game bank and several of the investors, and caused genuine damage to the in-game economy by the removal of currency that is worth upwards of \$100,000 at the then market rate. (Stefanescu, 2006) The game has since become famous for its particularly cutthroat social environment, and has seen countless assassinations and vast convoluted confidence scams (e.g. Francis, 2005). In such an environment, where “anything goes”, playful misconduct is present and allowed to continue without restriction, but is somewhat overshadowed by the explicit acceptance of genuine sociopathic behaviour of the players by the game developers.

The topic of governance and policing player behaviour in online games is very complicated, and policies must be dependent on the style of game and the type of audience (e.g., *Eve Online* is obviously adult). It is a delicate balancing act between maintaining an atmosphere of freedom and preventing genuine harm (Humphreys, 2008). However, it is important to consider that social behaviour in games is not a “black and white” issue – playful misconduct, as behaviour that sits on the fuzzy edge of social acceptability, should ideally not be sacrificed as a cost of stopping genuinely harmful behaviours.

Discussion [Heading 1]

In this chapter, we have introduced the concept of “playful misconduct” as a positive behaviour that can be found in multiplayer online games. Playful misconduct is the intentional challenging of social norms through actions or nature that runs contrary to the general expectations of the rest of the game community.

We have highlighted three different categories that can be used to describe the different forms this misconduct may take. *Performance* misconduct involves the direct actions of a player behaving in a mischievous way – such as the example of the medieval warrior knight who refuses to wear clothes. *Serendipitous* misconduct involves leaving “traps” for other players to encounter, and setting up odd and strange experiences, the reactions to which the creator may never experience. Finally, *Emergent* misconduct is the formalisation of unusual play by a group of players within the game that runs counter to the established fiction of the game and the social expectations of the general player base.

The reason for highlighting playful misconduct is that it appears to be *universal* among online games. While approaches to governance can be harsh or lenient, it appears that playful misconduct will always emerge as a constant and indomitable aspect of any game society. Yee (2009) proposes that the social and cultural values of a game community are shaped and formed by a “social architecture” inferred from the game rules. We suggest that just as game design informs social behaviours, it also informs social *edges*. While the carefully designed rules of a virtual world may imply one set of behaviours, they also create opportunities for the rules to be bent and misused for fun in surprising and unpredictable ways.

Governance is an extremely important issue in games with online components; a game world, and therefore the online social environment facilitated by the game, is, in a sense, “owned,” and is under authoritarian rule by the business who maintains it. We argue that the policing of genuinely harmful behaviours by that business must be carried out with careful consideration towards these *valid* mischievous and playful activities, which can easily become victims of changes in game rules intended to stop inappropriate behaviour.

The field of Games Studies recognises that “social play” (Bateman & Boon, 2006; Salen & Zimmerman, 2004) or “people fun” (Lazzaro, 2004) is just one of several valid and normal way for players to be able to enjoy multiplayer games. However, as the range of different online gaming applications grows, it has become clear that the category of social play itself contains a wide range of different ways in which players play and have fun. It includes the spectrum of grieving, playful misconduct and peaceful cooperation and every shade of gray against the backdrop of an evolving social environment. It is imperative to study and understand the nature of playful social environments and their norms and values, not just for curiosity, but to better inform the design and maintenance of game societies in the future.

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