

Exploring the Edge of Good Taste: Playful Misconduct in Social Games

Extended Abstract

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1 Introduction

As gaming returns to its roots as a highly social pastime, there is a profound difference in the social aspect of play in this highly connected world when compared to that of 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 wildly different cultures, values and social mores.

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 [5].

Other Internet users are essentially anonymous, which adds a volatile catalyst into an already 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 [1,2]

2 Playful Misconduct

This study identifies and explores the common themes of “playful misconduct” in online games. We define playful misconduct as an activity where players deliberately push the boundaries of socially acceptable behaviour for the sake of amusement. This can be through challenging accepted social norms, or by misusing the rules or structure of a game for playful means. We show real examples of this behaviour in popular online games and identify the grey area between harmony and abuse in which this style of play exists.

It is perhaps best to describe this form of play in what it *isn't*. Most importantly, playful misconduct is not abuse – Unfortunately even games are not able to prevent genuine antisocial behaviour such as scamming, stalking and spamming. It is also not about following the rules; it 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 may otherwise be a repetitive experience.

Finally, playful misconduct is not about *griefing*, which is mischief specifically designed to cause offence for anyone who happens to stumble across the activity [4] – 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.

Themes of Misconduct

If the ideology of playful misconduct had a symbol, it would surely be a crudely drawn penis. The use of the phallus in humour¹ is as old as culture itself [7] and even in these “enlightened” times it is seen as something “naughty” and along with scatological themes it is still a hugely popular topic for jokes and pranks [12,16].

It is no wonder, then, that this familiar form makes its way into the gaming world as a common theme of mischief. Since the cultural associations with the taboo as the subject for schoolboy graffiti arguably make it only very mildly offensive, it is the perfect example of “pushing the boundaries of acceptability.” Its appearance in a game is unexpected, immediately recognizable and harmless.

Our study looks at several examples of playful misconduct in large, commercial social games. In our research we found the themes of sex and toilet humour to be pervasive no matter the platform, style of game and average age of players.

Perhaps the most famous recent example of playful misconduct is the phenomenon of “Sporn” [17]. A portmanteau of *Spore* and *Porn*; this activity centred on creating amusingly shaped characters using the creation tool supplied with the game [14].

¹ “When in doubt, go for the dick joke” – Robin Williams
(<http://www.filmbug.com/db/361/quotes>)



Figure 1 - "Sporn" as playful misconduct

What made the above activity particularly interesting was that the game used player created creatures to populate the randomly generated alien worlds of other players. Therefore, due to this system, new, unaware players may have ended up exploring brave new worlds filled with dancing, singing penises.

The intent in the case of Sporn is unlikely to be malicious – the creators never know that their creations will appear in other worlds, and even if they did they have no control over who it would appear to and in what context. The creature creator itself is not capable of making hugely detailed creatures, and everything is built with cartoon-like limbs and googly eyes, so it is hard to think any creation is capable of causing offence – especially once they start waddling around the screen to cheery tribal music.

As it happened, after a huge influx of penis creatures during the first weeks of launch, the publishers (Electronic Arts) started moderating the creatures before they were accepted into the “Sporepedia”², eliminating anything that appeared to be “obscene”. It is an open question whether that was the right move given the enthusiasm and creative talent of the player-base.

Policing Mischief

We discuss the options for policing content in an online game while allowing for this emergent style of play, balancing a fine line between social progressiveness and zero tolerance. Since mischief is a “naughty” activity, there is a danger that official support would make it no longer a desirable play style, or perhaps even prompt players to explore past the edges of taste and cause real offence in order to establish exactly where the line is between abuse and misconduct.

² <http://eu.spore.com/sporepedia/>

3 Identity and Misconduct

Playful misconduct first became apparent to the authors during a previous experiment in social gaming. While studying the play styles and social behaviours of a group of players in our online game *Familiars*³, we discovered that a handful of players would act in an unusual way, posting images that pushed the boundaries of good taste and generally getting up to mischief [9].

Familiars is an asynchronous social game built around the concept of collection (for more detail see [10]). Players adopt virtual creatures (“Familiars”) and give them arbitrary tasks to complete with the aid of the community. Other players locate familiars by geographic search and can choose to help with a task by providing text and photographs as content.

Players are ranked against one another based on their social status, and can view their standing at any time. Social effectiveness is provided via social network analysis measures of reciprocity (proportion of interactions that have been reciprocated) and centrality (number of distinct players connected to).

In an effort to study how social interaction changes when the game is built on an existing social network, another version of the game, this time called *Magpies*⁴, was released using the Facebook platform. The crucial difference between these games is in the framing. Whereas in *Familiars*, interactions were conducted via the proxy of the eponymous creatures, *Magpies* is directly linked to your Facebook identity and any interaction is explicitly performed by the player, without a proxy in the form of an avatar such as a familiar.

Despite having a much larger player-base than *Familiars*, we show that the incidence of playful misconduct was significantly lower. We suggest that the combination of embodiment (it is the players interacting, instead of the familiars acting as proxies) and lack of anonymity of players in *Magpies* is the major factor in the lack of mischievous behaviour. When players are directly and personally accountable for their own actions within the social network of the game, they choose not to risk the chance of social stigma from their real peers due to their mischief in a game.

4 Misconduct as a Play Style

We raise the argument that playful misconduct is a valuable play style in its own right, and that since its existence cannot be ignored, it should be embraced as part of the nature of online gaming.

In our research we have found that forcing players to be linked to real identities (therefore being culpable for their actions) greatly reduces the ability of the players to

³ <http://www.familiars.eu>

⁴ <http://apps.facebook.com/magpiemagpie>

engage in mischievous play. We argue that this is not a good thing and that allowing players greater freedom to play and experiment with the very rules of the game gives greater possibilities than a zero tolerance approach to misbehaviour.

We discuss how mischief sits uneasily on the borders the concept of the “Magic Circle” of play [8,13] and is simply another perversion of the rules that bind social games. Just like the misappropriation of vehicles in Halo for impromptu races [11] or the explosion of Machinima [3] and any number of other forms of emergent and experimental play, the possibility for misconduct is an important aspect of online games and it should be considered as a valid activity in its own right, rather than as an a form of abuse, or an accidental by-product of too much in-game freedom.

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