Self and selfishness in online social play

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ABSTRACT

In this essay, I argue that human play is fundamentally selfish. Characteristics of individual and selfish play are observed and described within pve and pvp contexts of the MMORPG *City of Heroes/Villains* (Cryptic Studios). Analysis of player behaviors demonstrates the degree to which groups within MMORPGs attempt to restrict and transform individual and selfish play. In general, social play within MMORPGs tends to reduce the diversity of individual play; this undermines the ability of oppositional play to explore and value game components and processes. Conclusions recommend conceptualizing online social play as a form of social control.

Author Keywords

Solo play, individual play, grief play, social play, play theory, MMORPG

INTRODUCTION

Is human play fundamentally a group-based activity?

Much current research on online play begs this question, preferring to examine the mechanics and outcomes of social play within MMO's – particularly within the now ubiquitous *World of Warcraft (WoW)* – as though cooperative social play were a definitive component of human play. [11, 16]

> The sociologically-anthropologically oriented tradition of MMORPG and its social aspects is usually related to themes that can be located in what Hakken (1999) calls the microsocial level… These studies widely assume that MMORPGs are social spaces…as a corollary this tradition usually takes for granted the nature of the individual player as a social being. [12]

WoW -- as an exemplar of online games -- offers numerous examples of social play (which usually simply means playing with others), yet this play might be attributed to either a game design that forces grouping in order to accomplish game goals or what appears to be a common player tendency to establish social relationships without regard to any particular game context or goal.

In this latter tendency, players of online games might be considered similar to users of *MySpace* or *FaceBook* or other more generic communications software, where outside-game relationships dominate and motivate in-game behaviors. Yet games are a special sort of software, and play is a special sort of behavior; and, in many instances, neither is explained well with reference to desires for or benefits of group play. Indeed, in *WoW*, despite the emphasis on social play, most players play most often alone. [7]

Here, in order to better understand the fundamentals of social play and to better understand the relationship between group and individual play, I would like to examine common characteristics of online social play contexts – particularly those distinguished by cooperative and competitive behaviors. These two contexts are widely (by players and by designers) represented as *player vs. environment* (pve) and *player vs. player* (pvp). While these categories are not mutually exclusive, the analysis here will look at them in the following rough configuration.
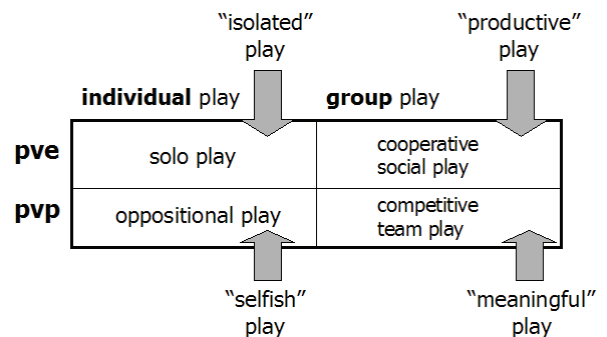

Figure 1: Contexts of group and individual play.

THE STATUS QUO

Player vs. player combat is often described and treated pejoratively within persistent online communities – i. e., as

"griefing" [3, 4]; community-based analysis then reproduces these values by emphasizing the negative qualities of competitive play and, simultaneously, the positive qualities of cooperative play – e. g., its "productiveness" – as does this review of Taylor's [16] study of *EverQuest* players.

> In short, MMOGs have served as avant-garde prototypes for the online social spaces more and more of us are electing to inhabit, and players are the first to understand how integrating with a computer world allows us to subject our social lives to the same efficiencies that govern our work time and make it seem rational and productive. [5]

This position eventually results in a theoretical denigration of more disruptive and competitive play, and distinguishes cooperative play as a more natural and proper extension of individual play   Yet, in this assumption there is a disregard -- or, perhaps more harmfully, a misrepresentation -- of the degree to which competitive play tends to appear and re-appear in a variety of game contexts, regardless of designer intent.

If we position competitive play – among individuals and groups -- as a systematic and fundamental feature of play, then similar formal properties can be observed within cooperative play. And either behavior – cooperative or competitive -- can be explained in terms of the systemic manner in which it explores, manipulates, and, over time, transforms the game system.

TWO CONTEXTS OF SOCIAL PLAY

"Player vs. environment" describes the original and individual play of those single-player games that have been, within the past decade, transformed into today's MMORPGs. Almost twenty years of *Ultima* single-player games, for instance, preceded the release of *Ultima Online* in 1997. By the time *EverQuest* appeared (in 1999), the computer RPG genre had solidified into a set of design characteristics that could be traced back to early *Dungeons & Dragons* rules sets (1974) and the manipulation of figurines and models within fantasy wargame derivatives such as *Warhammer* (1987).

The RPG genre is now marked by two basic components of play: 1) the creation of a character governed by pre-existing rules, and 2) the interactions of that character within a shared rules set. A simplified, linguistic-based model of this process might, for instance, represent a role-playing game as a language system. Playable characters are then subsets of this rules-based system: grammatically correct sentences.   Players are given templates for character structures similar to the basic templates governing sentence structures: a character-creation *syntax*.

Within the original *AD&D* (1987) game system, for instance, this syntax consisted of seven "basic characteristics" – strength, intelligence, wisdom, dexterity, constitution, charisma, and comeliness -- and all properly

constructed characters (well-formed sentences) assigned a bounded value to each of these characteristics.   The resulting character array   – similar to semantic values chosen during sentence construction – varied slightly from player to player. And, as a result, each properly constructed character occupied a unique position within the game's multidimensional array of all possible characters. Game play subsequently determined the contextual value of each character in comparison with (or in opposition to) other game characters (or alternative arrays).
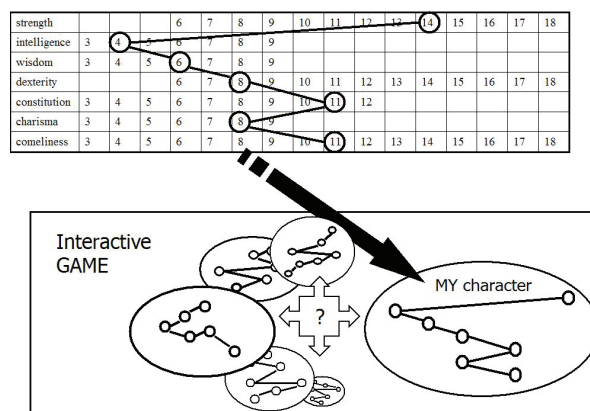

Figure 2: RPG character "arrays."

Role-play remains novel and engaging only to the extent it explores these character relationships – or character *oppositions*.   And, in computer games, it is largely immaterial as to whether these relationships involve other players. More important, perhaps, is that players assume that they do.

During much of the early history of computer role-playing games, players played these games in relative social isolation, reacting only to the intricacies of the game system and the variety of character potentials embedded in that system. This sort of play came to be recognized as "player vs. environment" and implied an oppositional relationship between game player and game software, with software playing the role of (an imagined) human opponent. While originating in an individual play context, "player vs. environment" play now also includes groups of players engaged in similar and cooperative attempts to achieve the same game goals.

All pve play, however, whether practiced by individuals or groups, remains a meaning-making process that determines values (meanings) for all game elements, but most particularly for player-controlled characters; to this end, this process requires an active series of character oppositions during play. The collective history of these oppositions is then used to contextualize each individual character within an increasingly ordered set of values. These values are continuously weighed and refined with reference to the consequences of in-game character interactions, yet they can at times – i. e., in narratives overlaying game play –

include values imported and imposed on characters from external sources. That is, players may assign a low value to a certain character based on game play but nevertheless highly value that same characters for its "aesthetic" value – i. e., as a "concept" character.

In most cases, however, character values correlate closely with in-game performances, establishing a hierarchy of characters that does not differ greatly from one player to the next. Because this meaning-making process closely parallels the establishment of social hierarchies outside game play, pve play is formally similar to what appears to be a natural human process of exploring and valuing social relationships. In pve play, however, this process of assigning contextual values can take place without, strictly speaking, any human contact.

As technology increasingly has allowed simultaneous and participatory play, the oppositional relationships explored during pve have become increasingly dependent on other players' presence and choices. Initially, and in parallel with board and card games – and most sports – these oppositional relationships result in markedly *competitive* play. The inclination to design for this tendency was obvious even in early single-player games, where the mechanics of keeping score – or, for instance, hot-seat implementations of turn-based formats -- allowed players to value their characters and performances in comparison with the characters and performances of other players.

However, early quantitative scoring and similar design overlays used for comparative analysis of *players* (rather than characters) were always external to game play. Within role-playing games, designers were able to create value determinations more integral to the RPG context: e. g., "permadeath."

While "death" is, of course, the most common result of a computer game player's inability to achieve game goals, this pseudo-death is entirely representational, and primarily serves as a way to limit extended play (in arcade games) and provide performance-related feedback. In action-based video games, for instance, players bounce back quickly from multiple deaths and, at the end of the game, are none the worse for wear. Within role-playing games, however, the creation of a character is a more involved and a more significant portion of the game experience than it is within action-arcade games – and designers extend this character creation process so that RPG characters change and "level up" over time.

The most repulsive portion of the penalty of permadeath is then that the dead character, if still valuable in some way, needs to be re-created ("re-rolled") from the beginning of the game. Aside from the great amount of time involved, this is an unacceptable consequence to most players for the very reasons mentioned above: enjoyable game play is a meaning-making process based on assigning values to oppositional relationships, including those relationships in which one game element or character is so highly valued

over some other that the lower value character can only "die" as a consequence of that opposition. But, if such death-causing relationships are just as likely, just as informative, and just as valuable (i. e., just as "meaningful") as any other, then assigning a particularly onerous consequence to this particular sort of relationship greatly increases the difficulty of determining the proper values for all possible relationships. Indeed, if enjoyable play requires (at least the expectation of) a full exploration of all potential character arrays, then permadeath is overly restrictive to this end. Permadeath therein becomes an incongruous RPG design feature that disrupts the normal and most enjoyable flow and consequences of play – within both cooperative and competitive RPG contexts.

Thus, even if we situate pve as a model of (primarily) cooperative play, and pvp as a model of (primarily) competitive play, similarities between the two remain striking. Both involve character creation according to a fixed (and often identical) set of rules. Both involve assigning values to characters based on their in-game relationships and the consequences of interactive play. And both likewise result in a (pseudo-)social hierarchy that arranges and values characters in a manner similar to those values and arrangements found in external social contexts. And both, for all the reasons above, abhor character permadeath.

Nevertheless, despite these similarities, players distinguish strongly (and emotionally) between these two contexts of play – most obviously in term of how closely character values represent self values. In general, pvp'ers tend to be much more concerned about the relationship between character and self than are pve'ers.

There are two common indications of this exaggerated identification of self with character among pvp players: the tone and topics of in-game communications among pvp'ers, and, related, the degree to which pvp'ers promote some form of in-game inequity aversion.

THE SEFLISHNESS OF PVP

One of the more obvious and distinguishing characteristics of pvp play -- particularly in comparison to pve play -- is the conversation (smack talk) among players.

In-game communication among pvp players – in comparison to pve-based communication -- tends to occur more often as a direct result of the consequences of play, is more predictable as to precisely when during play it will occur, and more often concerns the rules of player behavior when it does occur. In contrast, conversations among pve players commonly exist only as a (often distant) back channel to the more immediate in-game play experience.

City of Heroes and *City of Villains (CoH/V)* offer telling contexts for examining pvp player communications. While most games separate pve and pvp players and goals, *CoH/V* has created common areas ("zones") where pve and pvp players interact freely, each pursuing their own goals in a

shared environment where each can (and often do) interfere with the other. *CoH/V* also allows a wide range of options for player-to-player communications -- identical for pve and pvp players. And, like most currently popular online games, *CoH/V* communications are entirely textual, allowing histories of conversations to be collected and analyzed. Supplemental voice communication channels (e. g., Ventrillo, Teamspeak) are widely used within the game (and are practically a necessity for advanced, team-based pvp), but these channels are seldom used for communications between in-game opponents.

While game designers often reserve pvp contexts for their endgames (implying pve play somehow culminates in pvp play), *CoH/V* has designed pvp zones to serve beginning, intermediate, and advanced characters. The most advanced zone -- available only to the game's highest-level characters and, assumedly, its most experienced players -- is Recluse's Victory.

Recluse's Victory (RV) contains a recurring mini-game, which involves capturing six out of seven "pillboxes," yet most players use the zone either for unrestricted pvp (in disregard of the zone's mini-game) or, alternatively, for pve advancement, as there are a number of in-game awards (e. g., badges) available for completing specific tasks inside RV. There are three other, similar zones in *CoH/V*, each most appropriate for a different level character; however, play in RV well represents play elsewhere. Also, based on observations of RV play on three different *CoH/V* servers, player behaviors and communications in RV are consistent across the game's (15) servers.

When pvp players communicate with their online opponents in *CoH/V*, that communication is quite patterned and plays a significant role in assigning character values. Aside from a certain amount of nervous banter and a brief feeling-out process, pvp players talk most often and predictably to their opponents just after they have been defeated and "die."

Because virtually all MMORPGs determine character oppositions -- and their consequences -- according to rules sets ("numbers") that are largely hidden from players, the quantitative meaning of individual combat remains uncertain, leading to necessarily qualitative and social interpretations of character values. It is vital, therefore, in order to maintain a positive character value, that players immediately – and publicly -- rationalize any indication of weakness or defeat. Winners of combat in *CoH/V* occasionally assert their superiority, but these are ritualized and generic comments (e. g., "pwnd!"), without reference to specific elements of game play. Combat losers, on the other hand, are much more likely (and much more quick) to point out any inequities that could be attributed to their loss: computer lag, the unfair use of inspirations (*CoH/V*'s version of power-ups), imbalanced game design, and so forth.

In these comments, pvp players wish to rationalize the immediate consequences of a *value-based* permadeath -- not death inside the RPG context *per se*, but rather death inside the contextualization process that determines character value and, in pvp, player status. Of course, upon multiple defeats (and accompanying multiple deaths) excuses and justifications fade, and the losing, poorly valued characters are retired as players take up some other. This is the same outcome of character valuations in pve, though that pve process is neither as emotional nor as self-referential as it is in pvp.

For, although pvp losers are most immediate in their attempt to manipulate the value assignation process, pvp winners tend to manipulate that process as well -- from a slightly different perspective. Losing players tend to isolate and criticize specific game elements; winning players tend to generalize their winning performances across broader contexts – often extending those values (through, for instance, online forums and message boards) into real-world contexts. These communications establish a common and shared set of values for the pvp community based on the notion of inequity aversion.

"Inequity aversion" promotes the assumption that the game is fair and that all players have equal opportunities – regardless of characters played – to "win." Any variation in winning outcomes is then attributed to that single aspect of play not controlled and determined by the game rules: the game players. This is, of course, a more popular assumption among consistent pvp winners than among consistent pvp losers. But the winning players, with higher status granted by their in-game winning characters, are normally louder, more long-lived, and more persuasive in their assertions.

With this principle of inequity aversion widely held, there are then two generic arguments presented at the end of any decisive pvp battle. The losers' argument goes something like, "You killed me in combat only because of game-related factor X." To which the winner replies: "Game-related factor X has little to no significance in the outcome of combat, since that outcome is much more dependent on player skill."

Neither of these positions is ever subsequently justified (though the attempt is often made), yet each continues to be supported and promoted by those whose self-valuations would most benefit from its adoption.

From the *CoH/V* chat log…

> **01-01-2007 10:48:26 Turbofan has defeated Wildstar.**
> 01-01-2007 10:49:04 {Broadcast}Valkara: bye bye wild
> 01-01-2007 10:49:05 {Broadcast}Valkara: hehe
> 01-01-2007 10:49:36 {Broadcast}Wildstar: I guess even u can get lucky once in awhile ;)
> 01-01-2007 10:49:54 {Broadcast}Turbofan: Not luck.... skill and tactics
>
> **01-14-2007 23:17:41 Vulgarity has defeated Cold Words.**
> 23:17:54 {Broadcast}Vulgarity: omg
> 23:17:59 {Broadcast}Soiled Rot: Mua ha ha ha!
> 23:18:00 {Broadcast}Cold Words: nice reds lol

23:18:10 {Broadcast}Cold Words: soiled get out of here
23:18:31 {Broadcast}Vulgarity: LOL!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
23:18:37 {Broadcast}Ascendette: What happened?
23:18:39 {Broadcast}Cold Words: reds ftw?
23:18:40 {Broadcast}Vulgarity: OMG you just got owned in two hits
23:18:47 {Broadcast}Cold Words: OMG WANT TO ARENA ME?
23:18:47 {Broadcast}Vulgarity: you aint on my level man
23:18:51 {Broadcast}Vulgarity: sure
23:18:52 {Broadcast}Cursed Wing: thats what reds do
23:18:59 {Broadcast}Cold Words: ill ai u
23:19:14 {Broadcast}Vulgarity: Cold you got owned man

These same arguments and comments seldom appear during pve play. Pve players are much more willing to allow others to "win" by whatever means (equitable or inequitable) -- insofar as that winning does not affect their own self-valuations. This results in pve character value hierarchies being slightly different (i. e., more idiosyncratic) than those constructed solely with reference to pvp play. Of the two, pvp value determinations become, over time, more accurate and more indicative of underlying game rules and mechanics.

Realizing this, and assuming that an important systemic function of play is to explore the mechanics of the game (or any similarly complex system), then pvp play – players put into direct and immediate opposition with one another – provides a quicker, more accurate, and more definitive set of in-game character values than does pve play. This determination process is simultaneously a source of satisfaction for individual players and a genuine boon for game designers – as an aid in discovering bugs, learning of unintended consequence of complicated rules sets, and so forth.

If indeed the values determined and meanings made during pvp play offer a more complete and thorough analysis of the game system than do the values and meanings resulting from pve play, it would seem to follow that pve play can be reasonably conceptualized as a distorted and/or incomplete version of pvp play – and, further, that much of those supposedly dysfunctional intrinsic motivations associated with strongly individual, competitive, and grief-related play in fact produce positive (and otherwise unachievable) consequences when viewed within the context of the larger game system.

This is perhaps the most compelling reason to assume that play of opposition is a fundamental and default condition of human play -- not because players desire it more often (they probably do not), but because it has as an important adaptive function for larger systems.

However, prioritizing oppositional play over cooperative play (or 'contextual" play – see Myers [8]) does not entirely clarify the relationship between the two. It remains unclear as to whether competition among groups or competition among individuals is more common and critical to an understanding of competitive play. For, again, just as pve

and cooperative social play are championed within their supportive player communities, there are similarly linked assumptions prioritizing *team*-based pvp among online game designers. In *CoH/V*, for instance, the game's designers explicitly recommend players pursue team-based combat, and admit that their design efforts are devoted to this end.

> Yes, there are "unbalanced" things in PvP right now… Please report glaring unbalances here in this thread, so Geko, Statesman, and the rest of us can get an idea what they are. One on One matches are less useful to us, because there is a LOT of Rock, Paper, Sissors, Spock, Lizard when it's just 1v1. Some builds are incredibly tough versus other builds, but are paper mache' versus yet others. 2v2 and bigger matches give us a better idea where true balance issues lie.

Positron, Cryptic Studios Game Designer
#2489535 – Tue Mar 22 2005 10:48 PM
City of Heroes Community Forums.

Despite such caveats, however, *CoH/V* players seek and prefer 1v1 battles -- both inside the game's shared pvp zones and within the privacy of the game's "arena," where duels can be arranged between individuals and among groups.

In *CoH/V*, two common events highlight the contrast between widespread player desire for individual combat and those social rules and design features that motivate group-oriented and/or team-based combat. The first of these is "Fight Club," a pseudo-competitive pvp event arranged and governed by pve players; the second consists of team-based pvp competitions held on the *CoH/V* "test" server, which hosts cross-server rivalries between established pvp guilds (or, within *CoH/V*'s comic-book-based terminology, pvp "supergroups").

FIGHT CLUB

"Fight club" activities are ostensibly based on the movie (*Fight Club*, Fincher, 1999) of the same name. Participating players congregate in one of the game's open pvp zones and agree to cease all zone hostilities so that one or more (usually no more than three paired contestants at a time) can stage 1v1 fights without interruption. These ritualized battles are conducted according to strict rules of conduct enforced by all players in attendance. These rules are quite restrictive in comparison to those allowed by the *CoH/V* designers.

> People are spectating at FC. One of them is your bounty. Walk up to them. Ask: "Hey, you are my bounty, can I just get the kill?" They often say, "Sure" because they can just come right back.

If they say "No", then CHALLENGE THEM to a FC match. If they say "No" to that, then:

        A) Suck up
        B) Keep asking them
        C) Explain to them

DO NOT ATTACK WITHOUT THEIR PERMISSION. In other areas, feel free to attack them. Not in FC. Just not there. Simple as that.

SilentSpy
#5136417 - Wed Mar 29 2006 02:47 PM
City of Heroes Community Forums.

Within Fight Club, players must stand and fight, not use their travel powers to gain a tactical advantage, accept no aid from team members or allies, refrain from using inspirations, and so forth. These limitations necessarily distort the outcome of oppositions within Fight Club, but Fight Club members are not particularly concerned with learning game rules. While some designate Fight Club as a means to acquire skills and knowledge that can later be put to use in broader pvp contexts (e. g., as a sort of "pvp lite"), this designation seems primarily rhetorical and used only to justify the substitution of social rules for game rules. Fight Club is more obviously an end onto itself.

The most violent, no-holds-barred oppositions occur during Fight Club only when some out-of-group player interrupts the proceedings. When this happens, the otherwise voyeuristic Fight Club audience attacks the offending character mercilessly and en masse.

Fight Club stands as a minimalist form of pvp, where novel value determinations are of less consequence than cooperative relationships. Ultimately, Fight Club activities function precisely the opposite of individual pvp play: rather than increasing knowledge of system mechanics, these activities support and maintain the status quo of existing player groups. And, because the motivations of Fight Club members and individual pvp players are so fundamentally different, these two remain in constant conflict within the *CoH/V*'s shared pvp/pve zones

TEST SERVER COMPETITIONS

The most avid and (self-designated) "hardcore" *CoH/V* pvp players frequent the game's single "test" server – where multiple copies of player characters can be made, killed, and discarded without penalty to the original copy. There is little to no zone pvp on the test server; almost all pvp play is arena-based, where matches are regarded as more significant (more value-laden) than those on the live servers.

These matches are billed as events where the "best meet the best" and often draw a crowd of spectators, largely composed of other pvp'ers. Unlike the pve-based Fight Club, the rules within the test server matches are pretty much anything goes, with limits determined only by the game software. Outright exploits and system hacks are frowned upon, however, and the most appropriate rules of engagement often become controversial during prolonged competitions. Nevertheless, unusual ways to apply game rules are prized and admired.

As is the case with Fight Club, test server battles are commonly 1v1: *mano a mano*. This is at least partially due to the relative ease of arranging 1v1 matches when compared to the advanced logistics required to pull off an 8v8 team match. However, 1v1 competitions are also very appealing as the most direct method of valuing player characters. Comparing characters along a single-dimensional variable, according to simple binary oppositions (who can deal more damage, who can move faster, who can heal more often, x > y, etc.) is, after all, relatively straight-forward when compared to trying to determine what action(s) or which character(s) are most critical to winning (or losing) inside the chaos of a rapidly fluctuating 8v8 team battle.

Yet, despite player inclinations to seek definitive character values through individual combat, *CoH/V* pvp players do not significantly value the outcome of 1v1 matches. With *CoH/V* game designers admitting imbalances in 1v1 competitions, players are forced to turn to team-based competitions to verify and validate in-game claims of character value and, related, player status. To this end, organized groups of pvp players – each dominant on one of the game's live servers – challenge each other to team matches (normally 8v8) on the test server.

The desire for these competitions is widespread across the game's multiple servers and, for that reason, cross-server competitiveness seems another example – like Fight Club – of naturally emergent behavior. Players practice long and hard for these events; they promote them enthusiastically on the game's public forums; and the pvp player community puts great value in their outcomes. However, these team-based test-server matches only very rarely take place.

While pvp players consistently profess a desire for competitive balance, they display a great reluctance to place themselves (or their characters) at any significant risk within a heavily value-laden and widely attended public event.

According to the performance-based criteria of pvp play, the more advanced competitive context on the test server would seem a natural progression of oppositional play. However, team-based pvp play is fraught with so many variables that many times outcomes (i. e., character values) are determined by circumstances beyond any individual player's control or knowledge – including, for instance, important differences in connect/lag times, software bugs, improperly balanced character features, or the random slip of a finger or two. Because of the inability of players to determine definitive cause-effect relationships within large-scale team battles, winning teams are reluctant to grant repeat matches – in fear, for instance, that their luck might change the second time around. Losing teams are likewise reluctant to grant repeat matches -- in fear, for instance, that

there are no available solutions to whatever (largely unknown) problems plagued them the first time around.

Test server team matches are then balanced and "equitable" only with difficulty and only on the head of pin. Reasons for winning and losing remain indefinite, yet the penalties for losing quickly become a graduated form of permadeath: lower character value, lower player status, and unease and threats of desertion within the ranks of the losers.

All long-lived and self-sustaining CoH/V pvp groups have a very rigidly structured hierarchy that shelters players from defeat and, simultaneously, promotes positive character value determinations more often in unbalanced (local server) contests than in supposedly more balanced and competitive (test server) contests. Arranging "important" team matches on the test server becomes a long and increasingly drawn-out political process closely resembling Fight Club; there is an increased emphasis on setting the rules of engagement in order to mitigate the consequences of losing and, in parallel, there is a de-emphasis on exploring existing game rules through active and repetitive game play.

> …You macro using bastards want to talk {censored} about beating us in practice?!?! Hahaha Is that the same practice I have fraps of your whole team doing the running man into a patch of trees because your macro targeted our guy hiding in the glitch? The same video of our kin defender doing the dance emote on the dock in the lake while you hunted down 2 players hiding the entire match? OMG WE CAN'T FIND THEM!?!?! WHAT DO WE DO!!! Ooooooh those practices. I have alot of respect for alot of your players in HVND, but when you are admitting you don't want to do more than 8 because people bring different builds and crossbuffing is too hard...you're a fricken joke. I can't speak for all of Lions Den, but I don't even want to fight your little secret society {censored}. No obsrevers, no this map or that map, no crossbuffing, you sound like a bunch of pansies...
>
> **Mikey_Tyse**
> #7537153 - Tue Jan 30 2007 10:11 PM
> *City of Heroes Community Forums*

Because these test-sever pvp *groups* come to function so similarly to FC *groups* – diminishing the frequency and variation of oppositional play – it would seem reasonable to characterize *individual* pvp play as more fundamental and more valuable to system design and evolution than more systematically restrained and group-oriented pvp play.

IS GROUP-BASED ACTIVITY A DEFINITIVE COMPONENT OF HUMAN PLAY?

Detailed observation of two well-defined contexts of online social play – pvp and pve – within the shared game space of *CoH/V* offers several possible explanations of the relationship between individual play (particularly individual pvp play) and social or group play (particularly group pve play).

The first explanation – or hope -- might be that these contexts of play could co-exist, separate but equal; but this is immediately contradicted by widespread and ongoing conflicts between pve and pvp players. There are clearly different goals and values associated with pve and pvp play, despite these two sharing the same game space, rules, and, in many cases, players. One or another, it seems, needs to be assigned precedence in practice and in theory.

Another explanation, then, the most positive and the most conventional, prioritizes social and cooperative play (primarily within pve contexts) as a more advanced and mature form of what is initially individual, oppositional, and selfish play. This explanation would eventually subsume all oppositional and individual play within those cooperative groups and game designs that create and maintain social order. It would likewise promote and prioritize teamwork, group coordination, and individual sacrifice ("there is no 'I' in TEAM") over self-reliance, independence, and self-interest.

An immediate difficulty with this second position, however, is that the value determinations available through supposedly more "mature" and "advanced" forms of play are often less accurate (and, correspondingly, less satisfying to players and less useful to designers) than those resulting from more "primitive" forms of play. Further, attempting to guide and control oppositional play through social institutions and mechanisms simply doesn't work very well. Self-motivated and solo play is quite common at all levels of online RPG play, from beginning to advanced, in both pve and pvp contexts. And individual and oppositional play most often occurs without regard to rules or designs that attempt to limit or channel its effects; individual play appears, for want of a better word, incorrigible.

Cooperative play and tightly knit groups of players may partially distort and sublimate the functions of self-oriented and oppositional play (e. g., in a Fight-Club-like setting), or social pressures and/or game designs may temporarily channel player self-interests and activities from direct and immediate oppositions (1v1 combat) to other, more complex methods of character value determination (e. g., team-based competitions on the *CoH/V* test server). In *CoH/V*, however, neither Fight Clubs nor test-server competitions eliminate the persistence of individual play, nor does either significantly alter the self-centered nature of individual play whenever and wherever it occurs.

A third explanation, then -- the most likely based on the observations here -- is that individual and competitive play is core and fundamental to an understanding of human play behavior – much more so than cooperative and social play. Or, in other words, human play, regardless of context or group, can be best explained and understood as originating within *individual* players – in and according to *self*. The

most important consequences of play of self however, are only apparent when viewed in the contexts of larger groups and systems – and, somewhat paradoxically, these larger groups and systems tend to negatively value the motivations and behaviors associated with individual play. It is not, however, either inconceivable or unprecedented that individual self-interests might be at the core of larger group and system functions, sustenance, and survivability.

In economics, for instance, John Nash came to a similar conclusion regarding the relationship between competitive and cooperative market behaviors. In economic game theory, the so-called "Nash Program" assumes all market-driven co-operative games can be reduced to a non-cooperative (competitive) form.

> …the most important new contribution of Nash (1951) …was his argument that this non-cooperative equilibrium concept … gives us a complete methodology for analyzing all games. [9]

Since Nash, other economic analyses (e. g., "behavioral finance" [13]) have emphasized the degree to which individual, self-determined, and often, as a result, non-rational behaviors explain market outcomes more accurately (and more realistically) than does an assumption of perfect rationality among players. [14]

Even among theorists – e. g., Piaget [10] -- more directly concerned with the social outcomes of play, there is the implicit assumption of individual and selfish origins of play within claims that initial manifestations of play are inappropriate and are only subsequently molded into more acceptable social behaviors.

> At a general level [Piaget] upheld a continuity between all three forms of social behaviour (motor, egocentric and cooperative)…
>
> > …one must be aware of laying down the law; for things are motor, egocentric, and social all at once….rules of cooperation are in some respects the outcome of rules of coercion and of motor rules (Piaget, 1932, pp. 81-2) [6]

Sutton-Smith [17], in his compendium of play theories (both animal and human), identifies "adaptive variability" as a consensual conceptualization of generic play functions. Like many others, Sutton-Smith assumes human play originates primarily within the biological history of our species and, therefore, displays more variation within socially determined game structures than within those individual cognitive structures that determine basic play functions.

Clearly, the popularity of social software and social games has been one of the major success stories in the gaming industry over the past decade, and *WoW* represents an undeniable high point in that trend. Yet, many characteristics of *WoW* -- and other similar online games -- seem in conflict with an individually located and biologically determined play. In particular, the persistence of online social communities – including those cultural assumptions, rules, and social pressures that sustain play through the indefinite extension of game form – seems counter to an otherwise and elsewhere fragile, fragmented, and fleeting human play.

In promoting group-oriented play behavior, MMO design and analysis tend to denigrate the persistent and incorrigible features of individual play. Indeed, in *CoH/V*, despite all their conflicts, pve and pvp players share the same joys and immediacies of individual play, before and beyond the influence of subsequent player groupings. These shared pleasures are found in common elements of the game that group and cultural analyses often take for granted: the embedded mechanics of the game interface, the analogical sensation of movement through three-dimensional space, and those private and idiosyncratic fantasies evoked during the game's initial character creation process.

Social play in MMORPGs would channel individual play into more "productive" forms that are stable, predictable, and comfortable, but also less diverse and less accurate in determining game values based on oppositional relationships. In this sense, currently popular MMORPGs, particularly those promoting cooperative play, operate most fundamentally as a means of social control – and this function must be weighed heavily against their more productive outcomes.

In order to develop a comprehensive theory of play, analysis of MMORPGs should more clearly delineate the role of individual play within game system design and evolution. To this end, social play will need to be re-conceptualized as an apparently derivative and potentially negative influence on the adaptive functions of individual and oppositional play.

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