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Death in Space and the Piracy Debate: Negotiating ethics and ontology in Entropia Universe

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Abstract:

Entropia Universe (EU) is a science-fiction themed, multiplayer, online game with a real-cash economy. This means that players can deposit and withdraw real money from the game, at a fixed exchange rate of $1USD to 10 Project Entropia Dollars (PED). The social world of Entropia is influenced by both the cash economy and the game platform. Game specific ontological and ethical systems emerge, in game, in response to these combined influences. As such, significant updates to the game platform can result in social disruption. This paper provides an ethnographic account of community responses to a 2011 update which introduced interplanetary space travel into the game. This update was significant because space was programmed to be a 'lootable' player versus player (PvP) zone – meaning that, in space, players could kill and plunder other players. Consequently, the profession of space-piracy emerged, prompting an ongoing community debate about the ethics of role-playing 'theft' within a virtual world where items cost real money. An examination of this debate reveals the processes of conflict and negotiation that virtual world communities go through when augmentations to a game's technological platform conflict with established social ontologies.

Introduction

The 'piracy debate' is an ongoing community dialogue about the ethics of role-playing acts of 'theft' in Entropia Universe (EU), an online game-world where virtual-items are worth actual money. The debate arose as a result of a 2011 game-update that shifted the structural parameters of game-play within certain areas of EU, thus destabilising established understandings of virtual space. The following examination of this debate explores the social and ontological influences of game mechanics on the formation of play culture in a virtual

game-world. It does so in two ways: firstly, by articulating how the relations of game-play enable participants to be conceived of as free agents capable of enacting moral choices; and, secondly by exploring how the attribution of monetary value to virtual items influences the development of ethical and ontological systems in virtual space. The resultant analysis reflects Olli Leino's (2012) articulation of Don Idhe's (1990) conception of "the computer game as a technological artefact which makes players responsible … for the freedom it endows them with" (Leino, 2012: 59); as players are held accountable for their actions, by both the game-system and the in-game community.

Methods

The article is based on data from a series of 20, 1-3 hour, semi-structured interviews with game participants and information gathered during a twelve month period of online participant observation. The interviews were conducted using either the game's private messaging (PM) function, Skype voice-chat, or email, and participants were recruited via a call for interviewees posted one of the game's forums, PlanetCalypsoForum.com. The forum post received 28 responses, 20 of which resulted in interviews. Participants length of time in-game varied from ten to two years, with the majority of participants (n12) joining the game between 2005 and 2007. The interviews were complemented by data generated through online fieldwork.

The online fieldwork consisted of three to sixteen hour sessions of participatory play, conducted three to four days per week, throughout 2012. During this time I took part in in-game events, interacted with other players, completed game 'missions' and pursued the in-game career of 'hunter'. The decision to use online-only methods was influenced by Hine's (2000) observation that ethnographers should attempt to create symmetrical power relations with users, by avoiding offline contact when this is not a norm of the community one is studying. Boellstorff (2008) argues that online communities develop their own socio-cultural and economic contexts, in interaction with 'real-world' socio-economic contexts, and that ethnographers should seek to understand virtual-world sociality in accordance with both the real and virtual-world socio-technical contexts within which it occurs. Understanding online cultures in context requires researchers to relinquish their a-priori assumptions about problems of authenticity online and attempt to engage with virtual worlds along the same lines as participants (Taylor, 1999).

Data generation and interpretation was situated within a phenomenological framework. This focused on qualitatively analysing the manner in which accounts of lived experiences revealed players' understandings of the nature of virtual being and their dispositions towards Entropia's real cash economy (RCE). The fieldwork and interviews involved reflexive processes of data generation, thematisation, interpretation, and corroboration (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce & Taylor, 2012). These processes began with the identification of higher order themes, such as 'impacts of the economy' or 'player versus player combat'; generated in response to observations made during game-play, through the critical analysis of forum posts, and during informal interactions with players. Themes were identified in areas where phenomena and interpretations of the game were echoed by multiple players and enacted, during play, in an apparently culturally significant manner (Boellstorff, et. al., 2012). Interpretations of events were then corroborated with players during formal and informal interview processes and significant themes were pursued in later interviews and interactions. The final collection of field-notes, interview transcripts, and chat-logs were then coded and organised into recurrent patterns of opinion, narrative, and practice. These patterns were then compared and contrasted to the cultural patterns identified in previous virtual world ethnographies, such as Edward Castronova's (2001) article "Virtual Worlds ", T.L. Taylor's (2006) monograph "Play between worlds", Tom Boellstorff's (2008) "Coming of age in second life", Celia Pearce's (2009) "Communities of play", and Bonnie Nardi's (2010) "My Life as a Night Elf Priest". The analysis was also informed by broader anthropological literature and phenomenological theories of

human-technology relations. The following article is based on a subset of this data that relates to the themes of space-piracy', 'attitudes towards the economy' and player versus player combat' in Entropia.

The article begins by examining how in-game systems of choice and socially defined notions of ethics enable players to be conceived of as moral agents. Throughout the article, 'ethics' are conceived of as evaluative systems of thought and action that are used to appraise actions in accordance with a set of culturally demarcated principles. The term 'moral' is used in a descriptive sense, in order to refer to participants' understandings of acceptable and unacceptable in-game behaviours; understandings that have been socially developed over the history of the game. After the examination of choice and in-game ethics, the article explores the impacts of Entropia's real cash economy (RCE) on game-play and sociality. This exploration is followed by an analysis of how systems of reputation and virtual ontologies emerge in EU as a combined result of both social interactions, the technological dynamics of game-play, and the RCE. The article finishes with an examination of community responses to the 2011 game-update, which introduced 'space-piracy' into EU. This examination aims to articulate how players have attempted to reconcile acts of space-piracy with pre-existing ethical and ontological systems. The analysis of space-piracy demonstrates how game cultures are created, augmented, and sustained through the interactions of players, with both the game system and each other (Coppock, 2012) and how changes to the game-code reverberate through the play-culture on an experiential level.

Entropia Universe

Entropia Universe (EU) is a multiplayer online role-playing game (MORPG) where players are cast as 'colonists' on a series of alien planets. The game was launched as "Project Entropia" by the Swedish software company MindArk in 2003 and is widely credited as being one of the first virtual worlds with a real-cash economy (RCE). The RCE means that players can deposit and withdraw funds from the game, at a fixed exchange rate of $1USD to 10 Project Entropia Dollars (PED). In 2011, interplanetary space travel was introduced into the game and debates regarding space-piracy began. Prior to this, game-play within Entropia centred on the original planet, Planet Calypso (Fig.1), and an adjacent asteroid and space station. The first additional planet, Rocktropia, was introduced in 2010 and the game now consists of five virtual planets; in addition to a vast expanse of space, which players need to traverse if they want to play on different planets.

The introduction of new planets and space travel vastly expanded the game-world of EU. However, space was programmed to be a "lootable PvP" (player versus player) zone. Lootable PvP zones are designated areas where player's avatars can engage in combat, kill other avatars, and plunder their corpses. Consequently, some players chose to specialise in space-combat, attacking travellers and looting their wares. The profession of space-piracy emerged and players found that they had to reconcile this new practice with established ethical and ontological systems.

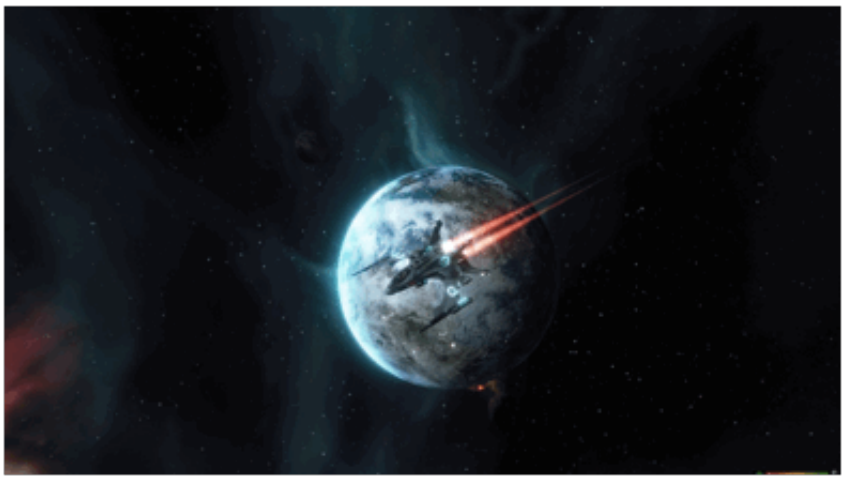

Fig 1. Planet Calypso as viewed from space.

The ship pictured is a Quad-Wing Interceptor, it is used for personal travel and space combat.

Screenshot courtesy of Stanley Miles Stardust. [1]

The piracy debate emerged almost as soon as the lootable PvP system was introduced into space in response to the potential for space-piracy, and it is often framed as an ethical debate. The practice of space-piracy did not fit well within the game community's pre-existing understandings of moral and immoral in-game behaviour. In addition, the emergence of actual acts of space-piracy prompted some community members to question the moral-character of those who chose to engage in this form of game-play. The notion that 'pirates can't be trusted' pervaded discussions on the game's forums and those that chose to engage in space-piracy were often chastised as thieves. Portions of the community were divided into those that accepted this new 'career' as part of the game context of EU and those that considered the acquisition of virtual items with actual monetary value, through simulated acts of plundering, immoral. These divisions occurred because space-piracy appeared to contradict predefined patterns of values regarding ethical game-play.

Game-play, culture, morality, and choice

Cultural groups tend to exhibit characteristic configurations of values and acts that transgress these value configurations are generally labeled as "deviant " (Benedict, 1955). Similar processes occur within MORPG sub-cultures. Long-term virtual world participants construct a powerful sense of 'communal identity' (Pearce, 2009: 63), derived from co-existence in the game-world and collective interpretations of the game-space. And this 'communal identity' includes configurations of values and normative principles that delineate socially acceptable in-game behaviors. Within EU, systems of ethics are derived from interpretations of the game's terms of use (ToU) and the end user license agreement (EULA) in addition to liberal-capitalist notions of ownership and property rights, influenced by the game's real cash economy. For example, the ToU and EULA forbid the exploitation of 'bugs' (software defects) and the acquisition of goods via such exploits is not only against the rules, but also generally considered 'wrong'. Legitimate ownership is perceived to be derived from the reciprocal exchange of either labour (in the form of game-play), or money, for goods. And, acts that contravene this social-principle of legitimate acquisition (even if they are not explicitly against the rules) are not usually considered acceptable forms of play. However, cultures are not static and collective conceptions of 'right' and 'wrong' can shift in reaction to changes in a group's material circumstances. Updates to a game's programming can result in alterations to the experienced 'materiality' of the game-world and, subsequently, necessitate cultural or ideological shifts. Players then have to come to terms with the changes and attempt to integrate them into pre-existing understandings of ethical game-play choices.

The development of socially complex virtual world communities, with idiosyncratic ethical systems, is predicated on the availability of choices within a game program. In order to be considered free agents, capable of acting morally or immorally, players must be able to choose from a range of actions within the virtual world:"… if users … have no choice but to behave morally they are not free agents, and it is an accepted truth in moral philosophy that moral acting presupposes free agency" (Brey, 1999: 10). The agency of actors in Entropia is inevitably constrained by the game's rules and programming. Yet, despite the seemingly deterministic nature of game code, there remains a wealth of potential actions available to participants.

Players' decisions regarding in-game actions are actualised in game-play; a process of dynamic engagement with the game program, delimited by the game's rules and actualised through the "relationship that comes into being when the player interacts with these rules " (Jørgensen, 2008). Virtual worlds are "sites of culture constituted through computer languages, shaped by menus, commands, and windows" (Boellstorff, 2008: 231), where code, enacted in game-structure, plays a formative role in shaping social relations and cultural norms (Taylor, 2004; Jakobsson & Pargman, 2005). Thus, "*gameplay* is not a feature designed into the game alone" (Jørgensen, 2008, n.p.), but an emergent process of interaction and negotiation between the player and the game system. Entropia is an open-world game, meaning that players have a broad range of choices regarding in-game actions and careers. Consequently, people engage with EU in a multitude of ways, although many focus on three major in-game careers, hunting, mining, and production. And, within Entropia, one of the defining features of game-play, the game system, and game-culture is the real cash economy (RCE).

"Money makes the world go round"

The RCE has a formative influence on both game-play and sociality in EU. All in-game items have monetary value. So a primary aim, for the vast majority of players, is the minimisation of costs/deposits and the maximisation of profits and potential monetary withdrawals. Most players generate revenue either through the sale of 'loot' acquired from hunting creatures, mining for resources, or crafting goods, or through the provision of paid services, like healing services or taxi services. However, those that can raise the requisite capital may invest in high-end items or real-estate, earning profits through trade or tax from the use of their land. Some players even use Entropia as their main source of income and the sums of money changing hands within the game can be extreme. Items can cost anything from a couple of cents to tens of thousands of dollars and for the majority of players the RCE is what prompted them to join EU in the first place:

> " The appeal is the link with real cash. It makes it more than a game. It reaches deeper parts of a person's mind/psyche I think, makes the whole experience in game more "real", but real is not the right word, more … something 🙂 "

(Luke, personal communication, April, 22, 2012)

The RCE means that there is an increased level of risk associated with actions in EU and this increased risk differentiates game-play in Entropia from other MORPGs. The stakes are potentially higher than in other games, because unconsidered actions can result in monetary losses. Mistakes are experienced particularly acutely and this often results in rather conservative styles of play. Some players even keep extensive game-play logs; recording their actions, costs, profits, and losses, and adjusting their future game-play accordingly. The RCE also influences people's engagement with Entropia in a manner that destabilises simple dichotomous conceptions work and play.

D, a long term player and prominent land owner who earns his living through investments in EU, offered the following insights into notions of work and play in Entropia:

> “ It’s officially work. Officially it’s my full time job now, and it’s been that way for a few years, but in practice it’s very much a combination of both of them [work and play], even though I don’t actually get involved in the professions inside the world that much these days. I’ll do a bit of hunting, now and then, and I’m a really crap miner still and the manufacturing, well there’s not much I need to make to use myself, but I make stuff for other people now and then. So I do play the game element a bit. I get involved in the events most of the time … and even though I don’t really do *much* in a game sense, it’s still very much a source of enjoyment and entertainment. ”

(D, personal communication, April, 23, 2012)

The game element of EU is not eclipsed by the RCE, even for those who use Entropia as their primary source of income, but it does have a major influence on how people engage with this virtual space. In-game actions and decisions are evaluated in accordance with their potential to generate profit or loss. And, the investment of time, labour, and money, in conjunction with the RCE, means that in-game wealth is equivalent to actual wealth. The investment of money and labour are understood as legitimising player’s ‘ownership’ of virtual items and the ‘morality’ of in-game actions is evaluated in accordance with notions of ethical behaviour derived from this understanding of ownership. Consequently, there is a general disdain for ‘begging’, ‘scamming’ (deceiving other players for monetary gain), and the exploitation of either the game system, or other players, for monetary gains. Such acts contradict notions of ‘fair play’, based on understandings of ownership as something that is derived from reciprocal exchange.

The RCE also means that misplaced trust in EU can be costly. And, the game’s relatively small community means that news of discrepancies spreads quickly:

> “ … it’s a small community, you know. If you do something in the game you can count on a lot of other people hearing about it. Your reputation can mean a great deal in the game … [and] because it is a RCE I think trust is really important … ”

(F., personal communication, Dec., 14, 2012)

The decisions people make in-game delimit their range of future choices. Not just in terms of game-play, but also in terms of their in-game reputation. Relative anonymity, combined with the RCE, heightens the risks associated with game-play in EU and risk is an influential factor in the development of trust relationships in online environments (Corritore, Kracher & Weidenbeck, 2003). Collective notions of ethical game-play provide a system against which others’ actions can be evaluated and a basis for the attribution of a positive or negative reputation. “[R]eputation systems may reduce … perceived risk[s]” (Corritore et al., 2003: 752) and the problem of trust, in this RCE virtual world, has resulted in the development of a complex reputation-based stratification within the EU community.

In online worlds, the actualisation of game-play, in the dynamic relationship between player and game-system, is an inherently social process which incorporates an encounter with the ‘online other’ (Salazar, 2004: 12). Players’ in-game actions are often public, in the sense that they may involve or be witnessed by others and resultant public perceptions of one’s avatar may influence the future choices available to a player. EU provides participants with enough

agency and social interaction to enable the development of systems of ethical norms through "processes of social negotiation and dialogue " (Brey, 1999: 10). And, while possible choices are delimited by the game's rules, the range of potential actions is broad enough that players can be held accountable for their choices, not only in terms of future game-play (Leino, 2012), but also in terms of reputation. Game-play is "constituted in the relationship between the player and the game [program]" (Leino, 2012: 59). However, it is the encounter with the online other that renders a player's actions socially meaningful. And, the degree to which a player chooses to adhere to, or subvert, collective understandings of ethical game-play are a deciding factor when it comes to the attribution of a positive or negative reputation.

Reputation and virtual things

Reputation is significant in EU because a poor reputation can have serious impacts on a player's in-game experiences and potentially also their finances. A negative reputation can result in a player's services or trade goods being avoided, they may be ostracised by certain portions of the community, or targeted in player versus player (PvP) combat areas. For example, when a player who had previously been accused of 'scamming' appeared at a collaborative hunting event, in a PvP zone, other players were quick to offer a bounty for anyone who shot and killed him. This did not directly cost him anything, but it meant that he was unable to freely participate in, or profit from, the event. Conversely, the active cultivation of a positive reputation can result in increased in-game opportunities, as F., a player with a particularly positive reputation, articulated:

> "When I put a bid on an auction, a lot of people they won't bid against me. I've had people call me up and go "hey, I see you're bidding on this apartment, is this something you really want, because if so I'm just not going to bid against you". So there are benefits [to having a positive reputation] in that regard … people get to know [you] … and then when I'm out here buying ores, or wools, or what-have-you, they want to sell to me. People like to sell to people that they know"

(F, personal communication, December 14, 2012)

In relation to the emergence of space-piracy, the attribution of negative reputation has been somewhat ambiguous. For some, even the association with known space-pirates is enough to assign someone a negative reputation and prompt avoidance of their goods or services. Others apply a clear delineation between space-piracy in the context of PvP space and players' non-combat related activities, arguing that actions that take place in PvP zones should not impact perceptions of players outside of designated combat areas. The ambiguity surrounding space-piracy occurred because the augmentation to the game, that the 2011 space update initiated, appeared to contradict pre-existing understandings of ownership based on conventions of reciprocal exchange.

The 2011 space update shifted certain structural parameters of the game through the introduction of new areas and potential actions. In terms of game culture, game content is "a moderating variable" (Malliet, 2007, n.p). "Small changes in the code of a game can generate intense controversy among the players" (Castronova, 2003, n.p.) and alterations to game-play may necessitate shifts in game culture. Games are "creative objects that can generate ethical experiences in their users" (Sicart, 2010: 2). So, updates that result in social disruption can prompt a reordering of participants' understandings of ethical play. The space update changed the structural parameters of EU and in certain contexts it prompted players to re-evaluate their understandings of the relationship between the RCE, the game's structure, ethical behaviour, and virtual items.

In accordance with Brey's (2003) application of Searle's (1995) notion of "institutional facts "to virtual world items, virtual goods within Entropia can be described as "requisite objects", or genuine ontological reproductions with actual-world significance. The status "requisite object" arises from the collective attribution of a function to an item; a function that item that could not perform purely by virtue of its physical constitution (Brey, 2003; Searle, 1995). Within virtual worlds, the attribution of functions to items occurs as a combined result of programming and social consensus regarding an item's relative in-game significance. Within most online games, virtual items attain actual-world significance as a result of the time and emotional investment that players put into acquiring them (Brey, 2003; Strikwerda, 2012). Within Entropia, the significance of virtual items is experienced as particularly acute due to the additional assignment of monetary value.

The constitutive rule, whereby items equal PED which equal dollars within the context of Entropia Universe, is part of the "institutional reality" of this particular game-world. An institutional reality "consists of entities (objects, events, etc.) like money [and] contracts … that are constituted in part through collective agreements" (Brey, 2005: 269). A game-world can be understood as a collective agreement between players and a software company. The software company creates the structural parameters of the game-world. And, by choosing to take part in the game, players are implicitly agreeing to these parameters. The above stated constitutive rule is written into the EU's programming and through participation (in game-play, investment, and trade) players acknowledge the monetary value of virtual items. One consequence of this aspect of EU's 'institutional reality' is the widespread consensus that items within EU are imbued with economic significance and count as items which can be stolen; and ordinarily, the theft of these items should count as theft in both online and offline realms. However, as Litska Strikwerda (2012) states, in her analysis of court cases resulting from the theft of virtual items in the games *Habbo* and *Runescape*, the theft of virtual items is only considered to be the ontological equivalent of offline theft when it involves actions that are not part of the 'institutional reality', or consensually agreed upon rules, of the game-world.

The acquisition of items through account hacking or 'scamming' is not condoned by EU's ToU or the in-game community. And therefore, items acquired by these means are generally considered to have been 'stolen'. The intense security systems within EU means that account hacking is not a common problem. However, "scamming " does occasionally occur. 'Scams' executed via means that contravene the game's rules are not part of the 'institutional reality' of EU and players that are caught committing such acts may experience consequences, such as account suspensions or bans. In this sense the game's ToU function as 'laws'. And, for the most part, these edicts align with player's understandings of legitimate acquisition, as something that is derived from the voluntary transactional exchange of labour, money, and goods. Yet, in some cases a player's actions may subvert community understandings of legitimate acquisition, but not explicitly break the game's rules. In such cases players' actions are evaluated in accordance with notions of ethical game-play (based on understandings of ownership rights as derived from reciprocal exchange) and they are held accountable, by the community, in terms of reputation. However, the introduction of PvP in space destabilised these pre-existing assumptions regarding the ontological status of virtual objects and the ethics of acquisition.

The Piracy Debate

Initially, travel between planets in Entropia took place via a temporary teleportation system, which was due to be removed as soon as the new space travel scheme was completed. This teleportation system was costly, in terms of PEDs. However, it did not threaten existing assumptions regarding the ontological status of virtual world items, or the systems of ethics used to evaluate in-game actions. The finalisation of lootable PvP space, in 2011, changed the practice of space travel in EU. Players now had to fly from planet to planet in spaceships and they could engage other players in combat, whilst in space. The rules of 'lootable PvP' meant

that taking another's goods was now part of the institutional reality of this particular area of Entropia. And as a result, players found they had to adjust existing social ontologies and notions of ethical game-play in order to incorporate this new institutional reality.

The early stages of the piracy debate involved accusations of 'theft' and discussion about whether simulated acts of space-piracy in a RCE game were acceptable, or the moral equivalent of offline larceny. As such, space-piracy forced players to confront already blurred distinctions between the fiction of the game-world and the experiential realities of time, labour, and monetary investment. Players that made the choice to become space-pirates were conceived of as having made a moral choice. Yet, the evaluation of acts of space-piracy in accordance with established ethical principles of ownership, were rendered problematic; as the acquisition of items in a non-transactional manner, from players that may not want to explicitly engage in combat, was now condoned by the game's programming.

It is important to note that PvP combat and lootable PvP zones were nothing new in Entropia. However, these pre-existing combat areas never prompted the same degree of conflict as lootable PvP in space, primarily because these areas were easily avoidable for those who did not want to engage in combat and due to pre-existing normative principles regarding the boundaries of acceptable behaviour in planetary PvP zones. For example, it is considered fairly rude to shoot someone without provocation in a non-lootable PvP zone, or lock inexperienced players into lootable PvP areas. Acts, such as killing in non-lootable PvP zones, are acknowledged as inevitable consequences of the game's system, but not necessarily embraced as good-mannered game-play. PvP in space was slightly different, as players who wanted to travel to other planets could not avoid the lootable PvP zone. Travel between planets is not strictly necessary. You can play on a single planet and some players circumvented the problem of PvP space by simply avoiding space travel altogether. Others, however, saw PvP space as creating an unacceptable level of risk that restricted their ability to freely traverse the game-world. This augmentation to the game's system also opened up the new PvP career of space-piracy.

Player versus player combat has a long history in EU and the game career of 'PKer' (player killer) was already well established when space combat was introduced. Yet, this career never prompted as much controversy as space-piracy. The PvP zone is unavoidable when travelling through space. However, players were provided with the option of paying for relatively safe passage on large motherships (Fig.3). Nonetheless, some participants expressed resentment at having to pay for travel. And, several people argued that space-pirates were taking advantage of the necessity of travelling through lootable PvP, when moving between planets; whereas, PKers were generally restricted to competition with players that chose to enter combat zones. Others argued that piracy, as a style of game-play, subverted the otherwise voluntary and reciprocal nature of player-to-player exchanges in EU, because pirates provided nothing in return for the loot that they took.

Fig. 23: A Mothership.

The introduction of PvP in space was accompanied by the sale of a number of motherships. These ships are extremely large and capable of travelling at “warp speed “. They provide relatively safe passage for players, at a small cost, and are used to transport goods.

Screenshot courtesy of Akbar.

The RCE meant that players who fell victim to pirates, whilst carrying loot, suffered monetary losses as a consequence of the dispossession of in-game goods. These losses meant that, on a phenomenological level, players experienced acts of virtual piracy as theft. In conjunction with pre-existing notions of legitimate acquisition, this experience led some to question the moral character of those that chose to ‘play’ as space-pirates. Player’s evaluations of space-piracy support Taylor’s (2006) observation that “what happens in virtual worlds often is just as real, just as meaningful, to participants [as that which occurs offline].” (19). And, the ensuing debates concerning the morality of space-piracy reflected Brey’s (1999) argument concerning the morality of acts in virtual environments, in that:

> “ what may have to be re-established for the offended party is a basic trust that the desire to act immorally in virtual environments does not reflect a fundamental disrespect for the real life equivalents of the virtual beings or things that are harmed or desecrated in VR [virtual reality] ”

(Brey, 1999: 9)

Game design dictated that acts of space-piracy were possible. However, opinions about the legitimacy of this form of game-play were heavily influenced by the manner in which different players chose to engage with this particular virtual world.

Many who engaged in space-piracy considered themselves to be role-playing and did not view this form of game-play as a negative reflection of their actual-world character. They argued that, because Entropia is a fictional virtual environment, the equation of space-piracy with theft was as spurious as the equation of PK with murder. Space-pirates also argued that they were simply taking advantage of a style of game-play rendered legitimate by the game’s programming. This position reflects Gabrielle’s Coleman’s (2012) observations regarding ‘troll’ ethics where a moral distinction is drawn between acts that occur on the internet and ‘real life’ (122). This moral distinction is based on a spurious differentiation between the ‘real’ and virtual, which is problematised by both the experiential and economic realities of life in this virtual space.

Most players acknowledge the ontological hybridity of EU that results from the RCE and do not generally consider themselves to be role-playing. This disposition contributed to the idea that space-pirates’ in-game actions were, in some way, a manifestation of a dubious moral character. Which, in turn, resulted in the assumption that these ‘brigands’, and often by extension their associates, could not be trusted in any context. Conflict arose around questions about whether or not role-playing acts of space-piracy was immoral and these disagreements arose because the space update created a situation where the institutional reality of a particular section of the game-space contravened pre-existing notions of ‘ethical’ game-play and understandings of legitimate ownership.

The space update created a realm of dissonance where the institutional reality of the game-space appeared to simultaneously affirm the economic significance of virtual goods, whilst at the same time undermining this significance. The morality of space-piracy could not be evaluated in accordance with understandings of legitimate ownership, as something derived from reciprocal exchange or voluntary acts of combat (as in the case of planetary PvP), as these principles were undermined by the ‘rules’ of space. As a result, players either had to accept that the status of virtual items and systems of ethics could shift in accordance with the rules of a

particular in-game area, or reject the legitimacy of this augmentation to the game's structure. Ultimately, in order to remain in the game, players had to adapt. Consequently, people began to look to the game code as the ultimate arbitrator of 'right' and 'wrong' and the new rules began to take precedence over pre-existing social conventions when players were in space. This process of adaptation involved acknowledging the economic utility of PvP in space and the development of new principles for evaluating player behaviour.

Living with Space-pirates

Those who accepted space-piracy acknowledged that space constituted an area with distinct institutional reality (consensually agreed upon rules) separate from the broader game-world. This acknowledgment was aided by the fact that entry into space involved crossing a boundary. Upon entering space a dialogue box appears on the screen (Fig.4) informing players that they are about to enter a lootable PvP area. In order to enter space, players have to click "ok ", thus, acknowledging the rules of space by conceding to the possibility that others could potentially loot them if they are killed.

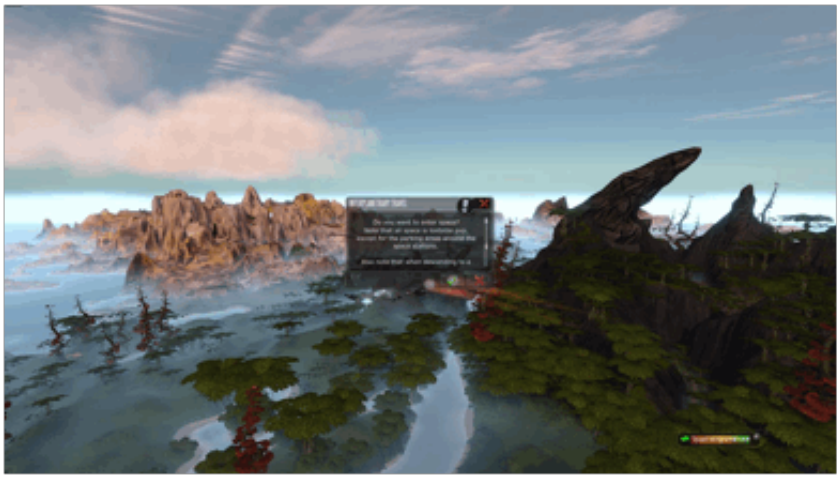

Fig.4 Interplanetary travel

When players fly to the edge of a planet's atmosphere a dialogue box appears on their screen informing them that they are about to enter a lootable PvP zone. Players must tick this box, conceding to the rules of lootable PvP, in order to enter space.

Author's screenshot.

Subsequent entry into space is accompanied by a shift in players' dispositions towards others. Other players become potential threats or targets, rather than benign co-participants or competitors, and this shift in attitude is reflected in players' actions:

> " I know players that are really lovely, nice people in real life, but in PvP suddenly they'd kill and rob you without mercy or remorse. The interesting thing is that, really I hate PvP, but in space I've caught myself suddenly hunting someone, wanting to shoot them … just because I had the power to do so. "

(CP, personal communication, April, 29, 2012)

Experience of space, as a phenomenologically distinct area, enabled players to view 'theft' in space as a simulation, rather than as a genuine ontological reproduction. It was still a bitter and costly experience for players when space-pirates shot them down and looted all their hard

earned goods; however, an acknowledgement of space-piracy, as a simulated act, allowed players to move on to an incorporation of this new game-context into their broader understandings of the economic realities of EU.

As previously mentioned, the space update was accompanied by the sale of a number of motherships, which ensured that players could enjoy (relatively) safe passage between planets, for a small fee. As a result, many have begun to acknowledge the economic utility of PvP space and space-piracy, as an aid to both the emergence of the space travel industry and the development of planetary economies. Recognition of the indirect economic utility of PvP in space has helped players reconcile acts of space-piracy with the conceptual realities of an RCE virtual environment, and the community in EU is now beginning to develop notions of ethical conduct in space.

During an interview, SBI, a prominent mothership owner, offered the following insights into the ethics of space-piracy in EU:

> “ I don’t mind pirates in general. I have an ambivalent opinion. On one hand they make space trading and transport profitable for me. Without pirates everyone would just fly and transport goods themselves and the business angle would disappear. On the other hand they wish to loot me and I need to make sure that does not happen. I don’t mind pirates in general though … [it’s] all part of game mechanics and for those who say piracy = RL [real life] theft I can only laugh. BUT I do despise those pirates (quite a few) who feel a need to brag and harass constantly, who deceive, etc. … Give me a good honest pirate who can kill his prey, loot, and then help repair the damaged ship and give a ped or oil for transport back ”

(SBI, personal communication, April 15, 2012)

SBI clearly accepts PvP in space as part of the new institutional reality of EU, which is hardly surprising given that as a mothership owner his business indirectly profits from the existence of space-pirates. However, he still makes a clear distinction between what he considers to be acceptable and unacceptable acts of space-piracy. SBI’s sentiments were later echoed by Annie, an interplanetary trader.

Like SBI, Annie embraced the introduction of new planets as an opportunity to expand her own virtual life. Although, she had a slightly different opinion about PvP in space:

> “ It sucks, lol, but then I understand it too. But I think there should be someway to just travel or at least if you’re shot down once they shouldn’t be able shoot you down again. They steal from you when you’re just trying to get from point A to point B and it’s really ANNOYING when they shoot you down time after time for no reason …
>
> No PvP wouldn’t work though as then hangar owners would be fucked and mothership owners too and since it’s so cheap today to use [mothership services] I dont get why people can’t plan ahead and just not take more [stuff into space] than they are prepared to loose.
> ”

(Annie, personal communication, May 19, 2012).

Annie has also accepted PvP in space as part of the insitutional reality of EU, but that does not mean that she likes it, or that she does not feel robbed when space-pirates take her stuff. Also, like SBI, she is beginning to distinguish between what she sees as legitimate acts of combat in space and being repeatedly shot for no reason, which she sees as a form of harassment. She also acknowledges that, by entering space, players are implicitly agreeing to the lootable PvP rules of this particular game area and highlights players' capacity to reduce the risks associated with space travel, by limiting the goods that they take into space and using mothership services. However, like many, she does lament the fact that travel through PvP space is not optional in the same sense that entering PvP zones on planets is. Like SBI, Annie indirectly benefits from PvP in space, because the dangerous and costly nature of transporting goods through space means she can potentially gain a higher price for the virtual commodities she imports. In contrast, Era, a player who enters space simply to travel and play on different planets is emphatic in his equation of space-piracy with theft, arguing that:

> "It is no different than IRL [in real life]. The only exception here is that it's "legal" … but stealing is a crime and piracy is criminal behaviour"

(Era, personal communication, April 13, 2012)

Unlike SBI and Annie, Era prioritises the status of virtual items, as requisite objects with real monetary value, over the institutional reality of PvP in space. Consequently, Era considers space-piracy to be a genuine ontological reproduction of the act of theft; as opposed to a simulation, which is how SBI and Annie see it. He later acknowledged the positive economic impacts of PvP in space, mentioning the emergence of travel industries and interplanetary trade, but he continues to lament the conflict that this new system has caused and remains unwavering in his assertion that space-piracy is unethical.

These differing perspectives demonstrate that players are beginning to develop their own understandings of ethical conduct in space. Direct experience of the utility of PvP in space has helped players reconcile the practice of space-piracy with existing conceptions of virtual items as requisite objects and understandings of legitimate acquisition. And, the community in EU now generally acknowledges space-piracy as a (more or less) legitimate in-game career. Yet, this acknowledgment does not stop people holding space-pirates accountable for their actions, in terms of reputation, and through the evaluation of their conduct in accordance with emergent notions of ethical conduct in space.

Conclusion

The open world nature of EU enables players to be conceived of as free agents capable of enacting moral choices through game-play. These choices are evaluated in accordance with complex systems of reputation and communal ethics, which have developed in interaction with both the game rules and the RCE. The space update (and introduction of PvP in space) destabilised these pre-existing systems of ethics by undermining established notions of legitimate acquisition. The update also created a realm of dissonance because the institutional reality of the game-space appeared to simultaneously affirm the economic significance of virtual goods and undermine this significance by legitimising their acquisition in a non-transactional manner. The ensuing 'piracy debate' demonstrated how "ontological uncertainties reveal themselves in social interactions" (Brey, 2003: 281). On the one hand, there was relative consensus regarding the economic significance of items in Entropia. However, on the other hand there were ongoing debates regarding the question of whether or not the monetary value of items should take moral precedence over the rules of PvP space.

Some players still view acts of space-piracy as unethical ontological reproductions of larceny. However, others accept space as a discrete realm with distinct rules and apply a clear delineation between players' actions in PvP zones and non-PvP related activities.

Updates to MORPGs that augment game-play will inevitably prompt reactions from players. MORPG communities subsequently accept adaptations to game-play either because they acknowledge that software companies have the authority to make changes, or because they recognise the utility of the adaptations. In the case of PvP space, the introduction of the new system, via game programming alone, was not enough to prompt an acceptance of space-piracy as a legitimate form of game-play. The space-update initially resulted in conflict and this conflict is indicative of the social upheaval that updates to a virtual world's programming can cause; especially when changes conflict with pre-existing social systems, or undermine established understandings of the game-space. Virtual worlds are social worlds and an understanding of the subtle ways in which code shapes the social reality of a game may help virtual world producers minimise, or manage, the degree of disruption that updates may cause.

As the techno-material basis of systems acquisition in EU shifted, so too did player's evaluations of the methods of play that emerged in response to these shifts. An acceptance of space-piracy, as an inevitable consequence of the game's technological development, expanded the scope of play and created new opportunities for wealth creation in this virtual world. Consequently, the player base is now beginning to acknowledge the utility of applying different ethical standards to different socio-technical contexts. Also, the piracy debate demonstrates how game content acts as a moderating variable in the formation of sub-cultural systems of ethics within virtual worlds; not in a deterministic sense, but through complex processes of conflict, negotiation, and dialogue.

Notes

1 Mindark's legal notice http://legal.entropiauniverse.com/legal/legal_notice.xml states that: "The information and content on this Website, including but not limited to any software, text, images, sound, music and video ('Content'), may only be used for information purposes and you may only use the information for personal or non-commercial use. "

Permission has been obtained from the takers of the screen shots for these to be printed in this paper, provided that the rights of the screenshot owners are respected in any subsequent reprint, and they are used non-commercially. Permission has also been granted by Mindark.

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