Play and Punishment: The Sad and Curious Case of Twixt

As an academic field of study, sociology turns largely on a single question: How do social groups create and maintain social order? Conventionally, structural-functionalist models, from Auguste Comte forward, have assigned the construction of social order and the maintenance of social norms to mass society as a whole, particularly to the mass communication functions of mass society.

There remains great controversy, however, over the details of this social ordering process. *Social conflict* theorists have understood social order as an imposition on human desires and needs, exemplified by the dystopic predictions of the Frankfurt school (Adorno, 1991; Marcuse 1964). *Social evolutionists* have posited the inevitability of increasingly larger social organizations governed by natural law. *Social constructionist* theorists (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Erikson, 2002) have emphasized the variability of individual behavior within dynamic social contexts and refocused concern from the essentials to the pragmatics of social structures and structurings.

Yet, while each of these different models of social organization assigns different values to social rules and order, all assume these rules and order a necessary component of increasingly larger and more complex organizations. One of the great difficulties in selecting among these models, then, lies in determining exactly what the rules of social order *are*. Particularly in the case of large organizations, social rules are more often assumed than empirically verified, and, when close scrutiny and detailed measurements are attempted, these find a great deal of subjectivity in the individual interpretation and enactment of supposedly commonly held values and beliefs.

In order to rescue sociology as a positivist enterprise, it is useful to assume social rules exist more influentially as cognitive constructs than as material characteristics of the social environment. A corollary then assumes some mechanism by which individual members of society activate these constructs in promotion of social order and well-being – particularly where that well-being is detrimental and/or inhibitory to the individuals involved. Or, in short, why should one sacrifice herself for the good of the whole? Frequently, the answer to this question refers to a common set of cognitive mechanisms – e. g., *rationality* -- according to which individual members of a society are inclined to act predictably and, wherever necessary for species survival, altruistically. These individually determined but socially beneficial actions are then manifest within large social organizations structures as "natural" or system laws.

In 1967, Harold Garfinkel published *Studies in Ethnomethodology*, in which he presented and popularized "Garfinkeling" as a means of documenting the methods by which individuals create and sustain social order. Professor Garfinkel and his students performed a series of "breaching experiments" in which conventional social norms were breached and the consequences of those breachings were examined in order to better understand the mechanisms by which social order was re-constituted (Garfinkel, 1967).

The purpose of the original Garfinkeling studies was to investigate assumptions in prevailing sociological theory -- largely structural functionalist models (e. g., social action theory, see Parsons (1937)) -- that maintained social groups operated according to pre-existing, universal norms. These norms were assumed to be formed, by and large, through individual and rational decision-making.[1]

In contrast, Garfinkel found social decision-making more immediate, interactive, and, importantly, fragile in the constitution and adoption of social

rules. These social rules were then "rational" only to the extent they were subsequently examined in the context of scientific inquiry.

> …scientific rationalities, in fact, occur as stable properties of actions and as sanctionable ideals only in the case of actions governed by the attitude of scientific theorizing. By contrast, actions governed by the attitude of daily life are marked by the specific absence of these rationalities either as stable properties or as sanctionable ideals. Garfinkel, 1967, p. 270

The branch of sociology that Garfinkel came to be associated with, ethnomethodology, was founded on this realization: that social rules and order cannot be confirmed in any real or objective sense by either a member of that order or, equally importantly, by the scientists who would, in retrospect, attempt to study and confirm them. Subsequently, ethnomethodologists have found a great deal of diversity in prevailing social rules, which are more likely to be binding in their operational procedures than in any material relevancies they bring to real-world contexts beyond their own.

However, functionalists did not really assume less diversity than did constructivists among social rules, but only that some minority of this diversity would prove fruitful or functional in a majority of real-world contexts. This functionality would then cause – again, by "natural" or system law -- certain rules of social order to be more widely and commonly held. Thus, the characteristic assumption of the constructivist is not simply that social diversity is more common than predicted but that, more significantly, *social diversity and rules determine their own valuations*. It is this latter assumption that most clearly distinguishes between the functionalist and the constructivist and, by extension, between a naturalist approach and a more hermeneutical and humanistic approach to the study of social groups and social order.

In an unbound social system in which social measurements are necessarily recursive, reflexive, and/or self-directed, it is at least reasonable to assume that the problem constructivist ethnomethodologists, such as Garfinkel, find with functionalist theory are problems of measurement rather than substance. For instance, what if the rules governing behavior in large organizations *are* objective and measurable and, most importantly, uniform? While this is not necessarily a natural state, it is a common state in online role-playing games, which are constructed as rules-bound systems and, as such, represent organizations in which the sort of social system reifications posed by Parsons and other functionalists are, at least in part, justified.

Online role-playing games are rules-regulated according to hardware mechanics and software code. While Garfinkeling normally requires some sort of social rules-breaking (in order to clarify the rules of rules construction), a similar Garfinkeling procedure can be practiced within online games simply by adhering to the objective rules of the game – or, the letter of the law, as it were – in contexts where game rules are verifiably distinct from prevailing social orders and etiquettes. Massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) offer instances where this is case.

The Community

City of Heroes/Villains is one of many currently available online role-playing games with similar format and design. During *CoH/V* play, players choose and costume a superhero (or supervillain), which, over the course of play, improves in powers and abilities. Players use this character (or avatar or "toon") to interact with other players and accomplish increasingly complex tasks set for them by the game rules and system. *CoH/V* offers both *pve* (player vs. environment, or cooperative play) and *pvp* (player vs. player, or competitive play) activities, which, aside from their comic book templates, are virtually identical to

those found in other MMORPGs, e. g., completing missions, teaming with others, fighting and defeating ("arresting") opposing players, leveling up, and so forth.

CoH/V was originally published in 2004 by NCSoft and Cryptic Studies. Since that time, the game has seen several revisions (issues), adding content as well as tweaking and refining the game rules. In the latter half of 2006, issue 7 introduced a dedicated pvp zone designed for battle among the game's most advanced characters (levels 40 to 50), with heroes opposing villains in attempting to capture six of seven "pillboxes."

> ***Recluse's Victory*** (Levels 40-50, PVP, COV and COH) – *Recluse's Victory* represents the villains' assault on Paragon City™. Heroes and villains battle for control points, use heavy artillery to their advantage, and watch the zone change dynamically as a result of their efforts.
>
> The main Goal of Recluse's Victory is to secure the Temporal Anchors, aka the pillboxes. Pillboxes are cross-shaped platforms with a central open topped control area, with a turret on each of the 4 arms. In their neutral state, pillboxes boast a defense system of 4 boss ball turrets with amazing range, accuracy and firepower. In order to take over a pillbox all 4 turrets must be destroyed, which will enable the holographic control system to be clicked on. Once clicked on (a 5 second timer, interruptible) the temporal anchor will be set to your side, and the Pillbox and surroundings will change to either Hero or Villain under your feet. Remember that everyone knows what you just did, so expect company.
>
> Foss, 2006

At the time Recluse's Victory (RV) was introduced, I had been playing the game for almost two years – logging several thousand in-game hours -- with characters played both for leisure as well as for observation and analysis of the

CoH/V game-playing community (Myers, 2005; Myers, 2007). My primary character (or "main") in the *CoH/V* game world was *Twixt* -- a hero "scrapper" in the game's archetypal scheme – which was, largely due to that character's longevity and the arduous rites of passage associated with achieving an advanced level of play within any MMORPG, well known and well situated within the *CoH/V* community.

After RV and other pvp components were introduced to *CoH/V*, it became increasingly evident that these newly competitive play elements disrupted and, in that process, revealed and emphasized social norms and pressures. In a sense, by introducing player vs. player competition, the designers of *CoH/V* had Garfinkeled their game. I decided to further explore this disruption with Twixt.

Specifically, I conducted a series of breaching experiments with Twixt: Whenever Twixt was inside the RV zone, he played to win the zone – that is, Twixt abided entirely by the objective rules of the game, as set forth and confirmed by the *CoH/V* game developers and moderators, without reference to or concern with any social rules of conduct established by the game's players.[2] I hoped Twixt's actions would help clarify what was and was not considered acceptable competitive play in an otherwise cooperative play context. I did not expect anything like the severity -- or the ferocity -- of what occurred.

The Breachings

Player populations in *CoH/V* are divided across eleven USA servers, with roughly equal number of players on each. Twixt originally played on the Champion server, one of several USA west coast servers, with a mid-range population of players. After observing reactions to Twixt's behavior in RV on the Champion server over the course of several months (December 2006 – April 2007), I created a similar Twixt character on the Infinity server, with similar results during the spring and summer of 2007. Finally, after NCSoft instituted character transfers in late 2007, I transferred Twixt to the game's most populous

USA east coast server, Freedom, and again repeated Twixt's single-minded, win-the-zone-at-all-costs behavior inside Recluse's Victory (November 2007-March 2008). On each server, reactions to Twixt's behavior were strong, immediate, persistent over time, and, given small variations, extremely consistent.

While Twixt engaged in many activities inside RV that were deemed objectionable by the player community, there were three in particular that drew player wrath. These three involved behaviors normally governed by something other than the rules of the game.

The first set of Twixt's breaching behaviors involved pvp tactics within RV: "droning" and, closely related, "teleporting into non-player characters (npc's)."

Since RV is a two-faction (heroes vs. villains) game, there are safe areas within the zone where heroes and villains can enter and leave the zone without fear of being attacked. Protecting these safe areas ("bases") are security drones, which, without recourse, vaporize members of the opposing faction and transport them back to their own base on the opposite side of the zone map. There is no game-imposed penalty for getting droned, nor is any reward given to a player whose opponent gets droned.

Twixt – and all characters in *CoH/V* – have access to (should they choose it) a "teleport-foe" power, which allows the character to transport an opponent (within some limited range) next to them. If the teleporting character is standing by a group of friendly non-player characters and transports an opponent to that spot, then the opponent is attacked by the non-player characters. If the teleporting character is standing by a drone and transports an opponent to that spot, then that opponent gets "droned" and is vaporized.

According to player custom and according to a long series of discussions on the *CoH/V* public online forums, droning and tp'ing into npcs were forbidden. But, from Twixt's point of view, droning and other sorts of aggressive teleporting were quite useful to delay or otherwise thwart villain intentions, particularly in

cases where the villain contingent out-numbered hero players within the zone. Therefore, Twixt used the teleport-foe tactic whenever necessary and available; and this single tactic was considered his most severe breach of social etiquette.

As a result of his teleporting tactics, Twixt was often "petitioned" by opponents with the intention of having him banned from the game. The game's petition process offered a useful mechanism for determining what was and was not an enforceable rule of the game versus merely a socially determined rule of conduct. Using obscene language in the game's broadcast channels, for instance, was clearly against the game's EULA and was both a petition-able and actionable offense, regardless of any individual player's desires or preferences. Droning, on the other hand, was equally clearly an acceptable tactic as determined both by the game design and as confirmed by lack of moderator intervention on any petitioner's behalf.

Nevertheless, droning remained widely denigrated as a "skill-less" tactic, ruining otherwise "fun" battles. In these valuations, one group of players (e. g., those without the teleport-foe power) were able to avoid being subject to (and thus having to defend against) the actions of another group of players, giving them significant competitive advantages within the zone. In fact, teleporting of all sorts decreased as a result of the negative social pressures exerted against droning. Twixt's particular set of powers, which depended heavily on variations of the teleportation power, proved quite effective in RV, yet, despite its effectiveness, remained heavily criticized and largely unused by other players.

The second widely objectionable set of behaviors revolved around Twixt's relentless opposition to hero-villain collusions.

Compared to other MMORPGs, at the time of Twixt's breaching experiments, *CoH/V* was a fairly mature game[3], with most players either long-term veterans or returnees from previous CoH/V play. The main pathway to success in *CoH/V* -- and, in fact, in all established MMORPGs -- is a rather dreary and, once successfully completed, very repetitive grind: defeating the game's

npc's over and over again. *CoH/V*'s most dedicated players had well-established routines for advancing their multiple characters (alternates or "alts") through the game's leveling process. In *CoH/V*, these routines consisted of "farming" certain missions and activities that were considered either particularly easy or particularly rewarding or, preferably, both.

RV offered a very rewarding environment for farming -- if characters could avoid becoming involved in pvp battles. Without conflict, characters could use the zone's "heavy's" -- large, powerful npc's designed to serve as player pets -- to kill opposing npc's and, in that process, gain large amounts of "influence," the game's version of money. Pvp battles interrupted this activity, however; so, often heroes and villains colluded within the zone to ignore the pillbox game entirely and use the zone for mutually beneficial farming. Playing solely by the rules of the game, Twixt refused to allow this to occur and attacked farming villains whenever it was advantageous to do so, despite their pleas to be left alone.

Similar hero-villain collusions also occurred during "fight club" competitions within the zone. These were friendly fights with passive spectators from both factions watching the event. Twixt again interrupted these friendly competitions whenever it was advantageous to do so, regardless of any protests or social rules governing otherwise.

While droning and tping into npcs were labeled as demonstrating a lack of fighting skill, interrupting hero-villain collusions was more often labeled simply rude. There was, in fact, a minority of players, both hero and villain, who supported Twixt in maintaining an appropriately belligerent attitude within RV.

The third set of behaviors that seemed most significantly a breach of existing social norms was Twixt's inability and, increasingly, unwillingness to team with other players.

While Twixt was able to effectively team with others just after the introduction of RV to the game, he gradually found himself ostracized from both teams and allies within his own faction. In fact, fairly often, players with multiple

accounts (controlling both heroes and villains) would invite Twixt into hero teams that were then used to aid surreptitious villain activities against him. This kind of collusion and increasingly hostile environment forced Twixt to operate largely independently and, over time, habitually refuse team invitations.

These three sets of behaviors – rigidly competitive pvp tactics (e. g., droning), steadfastly uncooperative social play outside the game context (e. g., refusing to cooperate with zone farmers), and steadfastly uncooperative social play within the game context (e. g., playing solo and refusing team invitations) – marked Twixt's play from the play of all others within RV.

There were some other players – not many – who, after observing Twixt's success in the zone, copied his tactics and attitude. But, in all cases, this copycat play had the support of some larger social group that also opposed, for various reasons, conventional and socially sanctioned behavior. Twixt was the only character I observed through a year-long period of play within RV who sustained his play without any accompanying social support.

The Consequences

Prior to Twixt's breaching behavior in RV, his character had several, multi-year relationships with other *CoH/V* players; these relationships were, by and large, respectful, congenial, and enjoyable. Twixt had been invited and accepted into several player guilds during his career in the game, which waxed and waned with the coming and going of game players and game issues. At the time of the breaching incidents, his closest social affiliation was with members of a supergroup called "The Wolves of the Night," which was, at the time, one of the higher rated (i. e., more accomplished) supergroups on the Champion server.

During the first part of the pvp experiment, Twixt's success in disrupting villain activity in RV was admired, though somewhat begrudgingly, by his online

friends and acquaintances, who, when circumstances permitted, fought villains alongside him.

A factor which probably helped Twixt's early treatment in this regard was that as soon as his tactics became obvious, his actions became widely publicized on the game's public forums and, as a result, increasingly notorious. After trying and failing to convince Twixt to behave properly in the broadcast channels available within RV, players quickly took their pleas to the game's moderators (through petitions) and then, equally quickly, to the larger community of *CoH/V* players. As a result, Twixt became well known to friends and foes alike, and this minor level of celebrity was partially shared by those who associated with him.

The public messages that reacted negatively to Twixt's behavior during his initial period of play on each server were very similar. One of the more articulate (and less obscene) of these public messages is the one below, which appeared soon after Twixt had moved to the Freedom server.[4]

> #9954927 - Fri Jan 04 2008 04:56 PM
> ok seriously...where did this person come from. I know tp foe'ing into mobs is considered
> "legal" but this person is really getting out of hand. I can deal with his droning no
> problem, but now he's resorted to tp'ing into turrets and letting you get killed
> seriously...is there anything you can do about this particular individual.
> i mean it's pretty bad when his own faction hates him, but this guy has got to go.

As time went on and reprimands such as these had little effect, messages increasingly turned to various sorts of name-calling.

> #9957636 - Sat Jan 05 2008 06:11 AM
> awww twixt, had a go at him teh other day in rv after i couldnt take my team bein tp foe'd
> into a drone anymore, we all agreed he is a n00b LOL

> #9959052 - Sat Jan 05 2008 02:42 PM
> tp into mobs is a joke, into turrets can suck if your not ready, into heavies is game over,
> and into drones is just being a poor little loser.

Messages left in the game's synchronous, live chat channels were more direct and explicit.

> 11-18-2006 15:15:22 [Broadcast]Black Orchid: lol you griefing pussy
> 11-18-2006 15:15:26 [Broadcast]Black Orchid: can't kill me yourself
> 11-18-2006 15:15:28 [Broadcast]Black Orchid: hahaha
> 11-18-2006 15:15:31 [Broadcast]Black Orchid: you suck

These messages promoted a rationale for Twixt's behavior in which he was either too ignorant ("retarded"), too young (a "noob"), or too mean (a "griefer") to understand or obey prevailing social norms.

Occasionally – but only occasionally -- Twixt's behavior elicited support from other players, or, equally infrequently, consideration of the broader game context that allowed Twixt's behavior to be successful…

> 12-16-2006 21:21:10 [Broadcast]Hunter-Killer: sweet, twixt finnally lowered himaeld down to the tp drone, no respect at all, wtg my man, u are a major shitbird
> 12-16-2006 21:22:02 [Broadcast]Riot Lion: i think twixt is a cool guy myself
> 12-16-2006 21:22:41 [Broadcast]Hunter-Killer: to each his own lion, thats kool if u like him bro
> 12-16-2006 21:22:50 [Broadcast]Hunter-Killer: i still think hes a turd

> #8912596 - Thu Aug 09 2007 03:58 PM
> People dont like the way Twixt pvp's, some, including me thinks he is cowardly in his style. However, why make a big deal about someone doing something in a zone that is specifically designed for players to defeat other players?

One of the more common and consistent characterizations of Twixt involved denigrating his success within the zone as being accomplished without "skill."

> 11-14-2006 16:33:07 [Broadcast]ReDorthy: I have been hearing alot of bad stuff about twixt
> 11-14-2006 16:33:20 [Broadcast]ReDorthy: I mean alot

11-14-2006 16:33:21 [Broadcast]Twilight Of Darkness: kills people by tping people into mobs
11-14-2006 16:33:33 [Broadcast]Twilight Of Darkness: cheap fightign way
11-14-2006 16:33:34 [Broadcast]R O Y A L.: yea he has no skill

The inability of Twixt's opponents to acknowledge his success in zone play was probably, on one hand, motivated by having entirely different, more socially oriented game goals. However, the degree to which villain messages and in-game claims distorted and transformed Twixt's behavior was drastic. For instance, Twixt was able to win the zone (capture all six pillboxes for the heroes) literally hundreds of times during his year-long period of breaching play on three different servers. Twixt's opponents, during this same period, may have won the zone, in total, less than twenty times. Twixt was normally able to defeat, on average, ten to twenty villains a night, while villains seldom killed him more than once or twice during the same period of play -- and, more often, didn't kill him at all.

Rather than acknowledge these successes, Twixt's opponents refused to admit they occurred: Whenever Twixt pointed to the objective results of his play, he was ridiculed and ignored. At one point, in fact, toward the end of breaching play on the Freedom server, Twixt posted verbatim transcripts of the game's online combat log as a confirming account of what had occurred during RV play. This post drew severe criticism – most harshly from those players listed in the log as defeated by Twixt; several denied their defeats outright, others attributed their defeats to more devious or pitiable causes (including a rather long and detailed post drawing parallels between Twixt's behavior and Asperger's syndrome.)

Much of this critical reaction to Twixt's play can be considered a sort of play itself. And, indeed, I originally interpreted most of the responses to Twixt's breaching play as a form of trash talk, common in many competitive sports. However, there were several incidents that forced a re-evaluation of the context

and the seriousness of player reactions to Twixt. The first of these was the rather sudden and unexpected expulsion of Twixt from his Champion-based supergroup.

The event marked the beginning of Twixt's forced isolation from Champion community in February of 2007, about three months after Twixt had begun social breaching play inside RV. After droning one of the more respected members of the Wolves supergroup (playing on a villain alt), Twixt received this curt, private communication from Hellms, the group's leader:

> 03-21-2007 22:32:25 [Tell]Hellms: you're banned from the wolves, you really pissed him off
> 03-21-2007 22:33:05 [Tell]-->Hellms: hoho, sorry
> 03-21-2007 22:35:43 [Tell]Hellms: yea real bad too twixt, he doens't care about the mob or the debt the drones is bs

And that was it. The subsequent lack of reconciliation from any of Twixt's previous long-time acquaintances within the Wolves seemed to indicate a culmination of that group's increasingly hostile and previously repressed feelings towards Twixt and his play.

There were also, during this same period on the Champion server, and, subsequently, on other servers, an increasing number of messages with more serious tones and emphases.

> 05-01-2007 20:26:43 [Tell]Syphris: if you kill me one more time I will come and kill you for real and I am not kidding
> *
> 02-01-2008 11:46:48 [Tell]Gutcheck: thanks for ruining the game for me really.

Throughout the duration of his breaching play, Twixt endured threats of computer sabotage, real-life violence, and a variety of less speculative (and more achievable) in-game harassments and abuses. This pattern of escalating feelings and emotions was repeated very similarly on each of the three servers Twixt visited.

Because of the intensity of these private messages and because of his opponents' frequent supra-game tactics of unmercifully spamming Twixt's private message channels, it was often necessary for Twixt to turn off the game's communications functions entirely. Without doing so, he simply would not have been able to play the game. This effectively prevented Twixt from re-establishing social communications, even if he had wished to do so.

During the period in which Twixt moved from the Champion server to the Infinity server and, eventually, to the Freedom server, his notoriety as a player increased, and the negative reactions to his behavior were increasingly justified and reinforced through stereotypical characterizations of his play. These characterizations were repeated in lengthy public forum discussions in which Twixt as a game-player – and as a person -- was denigrated and marginalized.

Surprisingly, considering Twixt's single-minded behavior within RV, few of these discussions, whether in public or private, acknowledged Twixt's allegiance to the game's rules of play. While in the beginning, Twixt played by these rules in silence, as time went by, Twixt became increasingly verbal in an attempt to explain his goals and motivations. Without exception, however, the rules of the game, while not alien to Twixt's opponents, were deemed irrelevant in judging Twixt's behavior.

> 02-13-2008 22:57:44 [Broadcast]Twixt: yay heroes
> 02-13-2008 22:57:48 [Broadcast]Twixt: go go good team
> 02-13-2008 22:57:52 [Broadcast]Twixt: vills lose again
> 02-13-2008 22:57:54 [Broadcast]Teh'Bus: ....
> 02-13-2008 22:57:59 [Broadcast]DjNubCookie: rofl
> 02-13-2008 22:58:03 [Broadcast]Teh'Bus: man
> 02-13-2008 22:58:05 [Broadcast]Teh'Bus: dude
> 02-13-2008 22:58:05 [Broadcast]DjNubCookie: who the fuck cares about that shit?
> 02-13-2008 22:58:19 [Broadcast]Teh'Bus: exactly
> 02-13-2008 22:58:26 [Broadcast]Teh'Bus: it means nothing here

One of the least confrontational and, correspondingly, most informative messages summarizing the attitudes other players adopted toward Twixt's play was this one, submitted late in Twixt's career:

#10338978 - Thu Mar 06 2008 09:01 AM

…Twixt seems totally unable to comprehend other players as real people, and plays his own solipsistic game deliberately making others miserable.

… From his posts and RV broadcasts/actions, it's very clear that there really is something wrong with him that shouldn't be made fun of or laughed about. He writes in the exact same way as my paranoid schizophrenic uncle, going on and on about everything solely from his point of view, as if he is taking to himself while peppering his paragraphs with consistent typos and unecessarily long words.

His motive has remained unchanged ever since Issue 7 - he plays this game because he believes it is his sole (and very serious) repsonsibility to maintain Hero supremacy in RV. He fights to win the zone and ruin every villains' day. It's almost like he's an NPC, and if you consider him in that light everything makes a lot more sense.

I truly believe he simply does not understand the feelings that lay behind people shouting and screaming at him in RV, and just continues to soldier on with his mission, wondering why the other Heroes aren't helping him rid RV of the bad guys with a sincerity that can almost make you sympathise with him.

Eventually, because of the recalcitrance of Twixt's opponents, it became increasingly difficult to interpret embedded player social rules, orders, and behaviors within RV as anything other than a means of repressing individual play and players such as Twixt. From Twixt's point of view, playing by the rules of the game, winning the RV zone competitions, only increased the obstacles he faced and the insults he received. In fact, after Twixt had become sufficiently well known, the consensual goal within RV was, for extended periods of play, simply to "kill" Twixt.

11-18-2006 00:13:40 [Broadcast]Knarnita: everyone kill twixt all hes doing is being a puss and tping people into groups
*
03-01-2007 23:08:57 [Broadcast]IDEA: I wont be happy untill i kill twixt
*

03-22-2007 22:57:55 [Broadcast]Punch Drunk Love: go kill twixt

*

05-16-2007 14:53:34 [Broadcast]Wind envoy: kill Twixt

*

05-26-2007 22:32:27 [Broadcast].HALLOWEEN KNIGHT: Kill Twixt once for me, dudes.

*

08-03-2007 23:37:48 [Broadcast]IDEA: hey im trying to kill twixt here!

*

09-08-2007 21:12:40 [Broadcast]Inner Focus: Come on villians get him kill Twixt

*

11-19-2007 19:37:08 [Broadcast]KiIIer Bee: any other heros want confuse>? to kill twixt lol

*

12-17-2007 20:37:18 [Broadcast]Sanki's Girl: someone confuse me so i can kill twixt mr limp Dic

*

12-18-2007 16:20:36 [Broadcast]Dont Touch Me: can any villian plz fukin kill twixt

*

12-28-2007 11:52:07 [Broadcast]I've Got A Glass Jaw: heh, i sacrificed myself to try to kill twixt, i feel accomplished

Established player groups within RV were also quick to communicate their opinions of Twixt to other players. These communications bordered on coercion, applying the same tactics against potential Twixt allies as against Twixt himself: ridicule and the threat (or actuality) of social ostracism.

01-10-2007 17:42:56 [Broadcast]ArcOver: Amaizing. Veil Disco is working with Twixt!
01-10-2007 17:43:51 [Broadcast]ArcOver: Veil Disco, yes or no, are you working with Twixt?
01-10-2007 17:44:01 [Broadcast]Veil Disco: no

*

01-02-2008 11:38:26 [Broadcast]Mr MentaIity: Yeshua...yur a good PvPer no doubt....got nothing against u   but of all people....please don't help Twixt

*

01-28-2008 21:20:58 [Broadcast]Cryo Burn: heroes help twixt ??? lulz, who would disrespect them and their family enough to do that lol

These social pressures had strong effects on play within RV. Players who played similarly to Twixt (made frequent use of the teleportation power, for instance) became subject to the same harsh treatment as Twixt. As a result, these players either altered their behavior or left RV entirely. This diminished the number and variety of characters and strategies players used within the RV and, correspondingly, diminished the opportunity and likelihood of either new toons or tactics emerging to challenge those of the zone's most dominant and vocal players.

The Implications

There is a great deal of literature on the nature and treatment of deviant behavior (Goode, 2008). Equally relevant here, however, are those studies in cultural psychology noting similarities among how members of a dominant culture represent non-members. These representations use precisely the same tactics – predominantly inferences of inferiority (immaturity, ignorance) – that were used in *CoH/V* to label and typecast Twixt. A well known example in this regard, as noted in Cole (1996), are those characteristics 19th century Europeans attached to the native cultures of their foreign conquests, e. g. "an inability to control the emotions, animistic thinking, [and an] inability to reason out cause or plan for the future" (p. 16).

Lending some potential credibility to these characterizations has been the ambiguity of the relationship between claims of a particular culture's superiority (by members of that culture) and the "evidence" used to validate those claims. That is, success on the battlefield or in the marketplace (or, equally, in a game) might depend on a great number of variables, many beyond human control and understanding. Nevertheless, these isolated and random outcomes are then taken as indications of a particular culture's intellectual or moral superiority -- without any accompanying or subsequent tests of verification. Admittedly, such tests

would, under normal conditions, be difficult, if not impossible, to conduct. However, it is largely for this reason – the inability to verify claims of one culture in opposition to those of some other culture -- that social constructivists have recommended abandoning the more essentialist assumptions of functionalism and instead focusing on those methodologies by which individuals come to accept or reject their otherwise empirically arbitrary and objectively indeterminable social status, e. g. labeling theory (Becker, 1963).

Similarly, many studies of deviant behavior have assumed that the same social structures that react to and condemn deviant behaviors are those structures in which those behaviors originate and are best understood. These too are fundamentally constructivist assumptions implying a *relative* notion of deviance, in which deviant behavior is not necessarily a violation of anything absolute or essential.

Within *CoH/V* and other similar, socially oriented role-playing games, however, there are embedded rules for game play and in-game behavior determined entirely by the game design; these rules exist prior to and apart from those social rules that later emerge among players. Twixt's behavior within RV, for instance, was purposefully governed and guided by the rules of the game; and, most players' negative and critical reactions to Twixt's behavior were peripheral to and, in many cases. contrary to those same rules. In a sense – i. e., in the reification of game rules as "natural" law -- Twixt's behavior was non-deviant, conforming to an absolute and essential set of values.[5] In a similar sense, negative and critical reactions to Twixt's behavior can be seen as non-conforming and "deviant" in prioritizing a limited set of players' interests and concerns.[6]

Garfinkels' original breaching experiments -- and more recent ethnomethodological accounts of online societies (Taylor, 2006) -- have often focused on *how* individuals in unfamiliar social contexts learn, negotiate, or are taught prevailing social norms – and less often on what those social norms actually *are*. In the context of *CoH/V,* since Twixt's breaching behavior

referenced explicit game rules, there is a relative lack of ambiguity in making this determination.

In real-world environments, "natural" laws governing social relationships, if they exist at all, are part of the same social system in which they operate and, for that reason, are difficult to isolate, measure, and confirm. In Twixt's case, however, two unique sets of rules – one governing the game system, one governing the game society -- offered an opportunity to observe how social rules adapt to system rules (or, more speculatively, how social laws might *reproduce* natural laws.) And, the clearest answer, based on Twixt's experience, is that they don't. Rather, if game rules pose some threat to social order, these rules are simply ignored. And further, if some player -- like Twixt -- decides to explore those rules fully, then that player is shunned, silenced, and, if at all possible, expelled.

As a simulation of real-world society, virtual societies within online games suffer due to the bound and pre-determined nature of their system rules. However, as an experiment investigating the degree to which social orders are capable of revealing and unraveling broader system rules, online games such as CoH/V indicate that socially oriented group play, as a whole, is much more repressive and much less capable of exploring system potentials than individual and idiosyncratic play.[7,8]

Indeed, the strong, negative, and increasingly emotional reactions to Twixt's behavior were almost always focused on preserving beneficent social communities and friendships in blatant disregard of game rules. The most important negative consequence of Twixt's behavior in the eyes of other players, then, was not his failure to achieve game goals – Twixt's opponents "failed" this test more often than he did -- but his failure to garner and sustain social connections: the most repellant consequence of Twixt's behavior was that it made him *unlikable*.

12-16-2007 17:25:01 [Broadcast]Bound Imp: What is it with u TWIXT everyone hates u in real life too?!
*
01-05-2007 23:50:45 [Broadcast]G O R E: dude stfu now, nobody likes you, cause your no fun in pvp
*
01-28-2007 17:04:07 [Broadcast]Black Orchid: EVERYONE hates you
*
04-23-2007 18:52:14 [Broadcast]Knarnita: hey twixt does it suck when everyone hates u?
*
08-28-2007 21:46:35 [Broadcast]Granite's Energy: Twixt thats why no1 likes u
*
09-05-2007 17:19:03 [Broadcast]S H E L L.: all you do is tp and fear peopel dude EVERYONE HATES YOU lol
*
12-16-2007 22:57:11 [Tell]iN y0 eYe: damn dude everyone hates you lol
*
12-27-2007 22:29:44 [Broadcast]Relief: wow. everyone hates you twixty. that sucks man.
*
01-05-2008 21:38:43 [Broadcast]Brooklyn Frost: Twixt! Twixt! Did you see that post on the forums! About how everyone hates you!
*
02-11-2008 21:18:42 [Broadcast]TheDjQ: twit u can't get a team cuz every1 hates u
*
02-12-2008 23:44:45 [Broadcast]Button Man: stfu twixt everyone hates you
*
02-18-2008 01:14:36 [Broadcast]Mega Deth: twixt, you know NOBODY likes you

Remaining *likable* – socially connected -- within the *CoH/V* community meant playing the game according to values other than those made explicit by the game design and the game designers. Players could only learn these values – much like those affecting social activities in the real world -- by becoming (or already being) a member of the game's entrenched social order.

Lasting impressions

The most surprising result of Twixt's play within RV was not merely the severity of the online community's negative reactions to his behavior, but the degree to which game rules played such an insignificant role in those reactions. That is, the social order within *CoH/V* seemed to operate quite independently of game rules and almost solely for the sake of its own preservation. It did not seem within the purview of social orders and ordering within *CoH/V* to recognize (much less nurture) any sort of *rationality* – or, for that matter, any other supra-social mechanism that might have adjudicated Twixt's behavior on the basis of its ability to provide, over time, greater knowledge of the game system or, in a broader sense, what Sutton-Smith (2001) has called "the potentiation of adaptive variability" (p. 231).

> In looking for what is common to child and adult forms of play, to animal and human forms, to dreams, daydreams, play, game, sports and festivals, it is not hard to reach the conclusion that what they have in common, even cross culturally, is their amazing diversity and variability. The possibility then arises, that it is this variability that is central to the function of play throughout all species. (Sutton-Smith, 2001, p. 221)

The *CoH/V* online society, at least in the mature state of that society in which Twixt's breaching behavior took place,[9] had a decidedly chilling effect on this variability function. Given the adaptive value of individual play in exploring and revealing system characteristics, the social pressures against this sort of play in *CoH/V* seem drastically and overly harsh, even *unnatural*.

If either natural or system laws governing social order in the real world are in any way analogous to the game rules of the CoH/V virtual world, we can conclude that social orders *in general* are more likely to deny than reveal these laws. It is only through so-called aberrations or "deviant" behavior – in Twixt's case, *breaching* play -- that system rules, mechanics, and laws can be made

evident and applied most indiscriminately within an entrenched and self-sustaining social order.

Notes

1. See, for instance, the discussion of *rational choice theory* in Scott (2000).

2. For similar examples of breaching play in MMORPGs, compare Twixt's story to the saga of Adam Ant [http://www.game-master.net/pit/ubbthreads.php] in the early days of *Ultima Online* and to the adventures of Fansy the Famous Bard [http://www.notaddicted.com/fansythefamous.php] in *EverQuest 2*.

3. Based on an interview with Geoff Heath, NCSoft Europe CEO, "the average duration of a City of Heroes player is 17 months..." (videogaming247.com, February 14, 2008).

4. I have included three types of messages to document player reactions to Twixt's behavior. Inside RV, all players, heroes and villains, are able to type text messages that all can see in the game's *[Broadcast]* channel – and these messages are labeled as such. Also, within RV and elsewhere in the game, players can choose to send private messages to one another that can be read only by the sender and receiver. These messages are commonly called "tells" and are labeled as *[Tell]*. The third type of message appearing in this text is taken from the game's online public forums [https://boards.cityofheroes.com/ubbthreads.php]. Each of these messages is given a unique number and date, e. g. *#9957636 - Sat Jan 05 2008 06:11 AM*.

5. A similar player attitude is described in Sirlin (2006).

6. For further analysis of definitions of deviant behavior and, particularly, the effect of those definitions on our notion of human agency, see the interesting discussion in Piven (1981). Also, particularly as regards Twixt's own view of his behavior, see the distinctions made between primary and secondary deviance in Lemert (1951).

7. It is likely these social pressures are more effective in virtual contexts than in real-world contexts due to the relative inability of virtual contexts to impose *tests of fitness*. Natural environments tend to judge the functionality and efficacy of

rules and orders through, ultimately, physical tests of survival; in online MMORPG communities, group and individual survival is determined less by in-game achievements per se than by the number and utility of social connections that allow players to circumvent in-game tests and, correspondingly, in-game rules.

8. This includes so-called "grief" play, which is largely individually oriented. See Foo (2004) and Lin & Sun (2005).

9. Play in *CoH/V*, since its inception in 2004, has displayed at least three distinct stages. The first, most exploratory stage occurred immediately after the game's release, when all players, due to their inherent ignorance of game rules and methods of play, explored the game environment through a trial and error process very similar in appearance and function to that of Twixt's breaching play. Once a critical mass of successful game play and players (and information) had been achieved – regardless of whether that success was the result of analysis, effort, or luck – other, not-so-successful play and players began to ally with and mimic the more successful. Subsequently, once social groups had been established through such alliances, the game entered its third and current stage, dominated by entrenched groups of experienced players. During this latter stage -- in which Twixt began his breaching play -- there was no longer any pressing need to find or share game information with others. As a result, game information became devalued in favor of social information and orders. Perhaps it is only during this latter stage of mature online game play that Twixt's breaching play is most threatening and most likely to evoke such strong negative reactions as those observed in *CoH/V*.

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