

A MODEL FOR ETHICAL DECISIONMAKING IN MMOs

Democracy has arrived!

A Model for Ethical Decision Making of Players in MMOs

Patrick Prax and Mikael Laaksoharju

Uppsala University

Authors Note

Patrick Prax, Uppsala University, Department of Informatics and Media, Box 513,
75120 Uppsala, Sweden, Patrick.Prax@im.uu.se

Mikael Laaksoharju, Uppsala University, Department of Information Technology, Box
337, 75105 Uppsala, Sweden, Mikael.Laaksoharju@it.uu.se

Abstract

In digital games and virtual worlds, like in other digital media, the structure of the medium, its code, influences the emerging interaction and culture. A deliberate modification of this code to facilitate democratic decision making might thus lead to more meaningful interaction in games. If we see virtual worlds as learning environments this might even help players to understand and question real-world power structures. A way to modify the code of a virtual world is by extending its interface with an add-on that interacts with the application programming interface of the game. In this paper we present the design vision and theoretical framework of a digital tool for ethical decision making that will be implemented in the virtual world World of Warcraft. Its purpose will be to supply players with means to modify the power structure built into the code of this virtual world and to support more ethical and democratic decision making in the game.

Keywords: Code, Democratization, ethical decision making, MMORPG, Add-on, User interface modification, game design,

Introduction

Interaction in and with digital media is governed by their code. This means that communication with others over digital media is only possible when the code permits it and that organizations, power structures and decision-making processes have to follow the a priori plan of the creator of the digital medium (Lessig, 2006). This is particularly visible in virtual worlds (hereafter VWs) in which groups are bound to follow the social architecture implemented into the code of the game. Williams (2006, p.666) argues that “[...] issues of code and interface are paramount, as it is software that enables, and often prevents, certain kinds of interactions between certain kinds of participants.” In a VW for instance, the restrictions limit the ways that users/players can organize a group (clan, guild, party...) within it. He suggests studying online game architectures in order to understand the impact of different kinds of games and to be able to generalize findings from the analyses of individual titles. He links social online games to civic activism and points out that future research might allow conclusions about what attributes of games can lead to which civic and social outcomes (Williams 2006, p.668). The structure of leadership and power that is coded into a game, influences the emerging culture and patterns of socializing in the game. Consequently, this would change if the existing model were replaced.

World of Warcraft¹ (Blizzard, 2004) (hereafter WoW) is one example of a VW. It features an open Application Programming Interface (hereafter API), which means that third-party software, scripts coded in the language LUA, can access and manipulate information in the game to visualize it in sophisticated ways or offer additional functionality to players. These pieces of software are called add-ons and their use is widespread in WoW. Many of the interface elements that are now a part of the standard interface of WoW actually originated as

¹ WoW is a good example here for several reasons. First of all it is the VW and MMORPG that has been most successful VW in the western world. It peaked at about 13 million players and is now serving about 11 million paying subscribers worldwide. Second, WoW has made the genre of MMORPGs popular and successful in the western market and, in a way, created the standard against which other similar games have to be measured.

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add-ons that got popular because of their utility. Blizzard, the company behind WoW, has continuously been adding functionality from add-ons to new releases of the basic interface, thus showing that they are both welcoming and taking advantage of user participation in their game development (Prax, 2012). Following Williams' suggestion for further research, this paper will present the design vision and theoretical framework of a digital tool for ethical decision making that will be implemented into the interface of WoW. Its purpose will be to supply players with means to modify the power structure built into the code of the VW and support more ethical and democratic decision making. We argue that a democratization of in-game organizations would constitute a meaningful change of the properties of the game medium.

When we use the expression "meaningful" here, we are considering not only the intrinsic value of game play, which often is assumed to be enjoyment, but also values intrinsic to human beings in social settings. Games, especially VWs, function as educational tools, where not only cognitive skills like problem solving, situation awareness and scientific thinking, can be developed but also important social skills (Thomas, & Brown, 2009; Williams, 2006; Steinkuehler, & Duncan, 2008; Squire & Steinkuehler, 2006).

This, we argue, will give players an opportunity to reflect on issues of power not only in the game but also in broader societal contexts. Below we will detail how we want to make use of the WoW API to change the decision-making procedures in the game.

Theoretical Framework

Code as Law

To show the importance of the infrastructure, or architecture, of digital media for its social effects, it is useful to compare it to other structures in our society that are aiming at influencing emerging culture and behavior. A particularly fruitful comparison here is made by Lessig (2006), comparing digital code to law. The most central meaning of Lessig's

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comparison of code with law is that while both influence social interaction, culture, and society, there is one difference that sets them apart on a very principal level. Law, at least in democratic societies, is made by parliaments, by democratically elected representatives of the people that the law is governing. The legitimization of the power of law is thus that it springs from the will of the people themselves. Code, on the other hand, is created by the people or companies who created the medium/game. The only legitimization of code as a governing agency, is that the use of it is voluntary; users/players can choose not to use the medium or play the game and by using it they agree to the rule of code. However, there is another central difference between code and law. Lessig explains:

“the architecture of the Net—or its “code”—itself becomes a regulator. In this context, the rule applied to an individual does not find its force from the threat of consequences enforced by the law—fines, jail, or even shame. Instead, the rule is applied to an individual **through a kind of physics**. A locked door is not a command “do not enter” backed up with the threat of punishment by the state. A locked door is a physical constraint on the liberty of someone to enter some space.”(Lessig, 2006, p. 81-82, emphasis added)

In this way code is thus very different from law as it automatically enforces itself instead of motivating compliant behavior with threats of punishment. However, the difference goes even further. Code is the material with which digital media are built. That means that it is not something external to the medium that enforces limitations to a perceived freedom. Instead it is what dictates all possibilities for action and interaction. This is where Lessig’s example of a locked door stops working. Code does not lock a door that is there and that one could walk through. Code is not the lock. Code is the building that the door is or is not a part of. Instead of locking a door or threatening consequences for passing through, code simply does not have the door. This way of regulation is more persuasive and harder to reflect upon

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and criticize. Instead of asking for that door over there to be opened, a critique would have to analyze and understand the structure of the entire building to see the underlying rationale and then demand this structure or architecture to be changed.

To give another example, let us consider the biblical story of the Garden of Eden and the forbidden apple. Law threatens Eve and Adam with expulsion should they eat the apple. They can choose to break the law and do it anyways and then, if caught, suffer their punishment. They can demand an explanation of the rule or ask for it to be changed or they can leave the garden. Code, as Lessig describes it, would create a physical barrier protecting the apple. The apple would be impossible to pick. It would be possible for the first couple to reflect over it and demand changes. They could ask why there is a tree with a forbidden apple behind a barrier standing in the garden. However, this is not how code works. Rather, code would remove the tree or never create it in the first place. There would be no apple to desire. There would be no reason for Adam and Eve to even wonder what knowledge they might be excluded from. There would be no starting point for even imagining what could be different, for protest, or for change. Unlike in Lessig's example, code does not only impose "physical constraints" like a locked door but also mental constraints on what alternatives are possible to imagine and request.

Virtual world structure and effects

The structure of the digital medium influences the emerging interaction of the users and the design of the game promotes certain kinds of play. The interface and the rules of the game are part of its structure. This structure then influences the practices of the players "which come to define the social and cultural parameters of the worlds they inhabit." (Thomas & Brown, 2009, p. 40) Williams (2006) gives two examples for the structure of games:

"some games allow for chatting between all players, whereas others encourage it by virtue of the goals they set for players— some games are designed for

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both solo and group players, whereas others require group coordination for success.” (Williams, 2006, p.666)

The typical MMORPG (Massively Multi-Player Online Game) class setup with tanks, healers and damage dealers, all of whom need each other in order to play successfully, is another example, as is the requirement of about five players for a group and at least ten players for a raid group. These structures force people to socialize if they want to play high-level content. Williams’ example of allowing “chatting between all players” however can also show that the structure of the game alone does not determine the resulting practice. VWs are an example of malleable digital media because the entire world and the actual game play can be changed. “Both ‘on the Internet’ and ‘in cyberspace,’ technology constitutes the environment of the space, and it will give us **a much wider range of control over how interactions work in that space than in real space.**” (Lessig, 2006, p.15 emphasis added) Still, the control over interactions is not enough to determine the practice of the users. In WoW, a practice has developed where players use hard-to-spell names with added accents and special signs in order to make it hard for others to write to them without either being on their friends list or currently playing together (observation from own play experience). This practice intentionally subverts the design of the game, which is to encourage players to communicate with each other, with the result that a barrier for communication is created. The interaction of the structure of a game and the practice of the players in constituting the culture and society of the game is explained by Thomas and Brown (2009, p. 40):

The idea of the game as an institution can help us understand how it functions in a broader social context. Institutions provide structure and meaning to the game world and set the parameters for what is possible in the space. To that end institutions include things like the rules of the game (both **structured by**

the game dynamics and mechanics and created and enforced normatively

by players) and the challenges, quests, and spaces provided by developers,

(Thomas & Brown, 2009, p. 40, emphasis added)

Our add-on relates to this subversive practice in that it is intended to empower players to break loose from the prescribed power system that is coded into the game, thus intentionally altering the social setup in the game world. If players choose to use it, the add-on will enable a new practice where authority is distributed between players instead of being concentrated in one arbitrarily assigned leader.

Political Dimension of Media Structure:

This infrastructure of media, the way in which they permit and forbid communication, “can be understood, in a sense, as frozen discourses that form avenues between social worlds and into arenas and larger structures” (Clarke & Star 2008, 113-115)” (Zabban, 2011). The structure of a medium is influenced by the discourse it is created in, reflects it and re-creates it through use. In the case of games this means that the “definition can here be joined to a world building perspective on play activities:

“ ‘games are semi bounded and socially legitimate domains of contrived contingency that generates interpretable outcomes’ (Malaby 2007). In these terms, games could be understood, in their ‘semi-bounded’ part, as ‘frozen discourse’ constituting some kind of infrastructure for playing practices. This infrastructure may then be seen as acting as structural conditions (Strauss 1993) in their ability to allow ‘socially legitimate domain of contrived contingencies’ and thus the negotiation of ‘interpretable outcomes’.” (Zabban, 2011)

In other words: the political and cultural discourse in which the game is created and that pervades the game world in its entirety in turn influences the social, cultural and playing

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practices that emerge from it. The discourse of game creation, like all cultural creation and creative industries, is heavily influenced by its economic model of production (Hesmondhalgh, 2007). This is but one example of an influence on a VW that would be worth reflecting about. The form of this “frozen discourse,” code, invites an understanding of it as something technical and neutral. This understanding however misses the point that while there is a political discourse embedded into technology it is also changeable. Lessig makes a political claim:

“all of us must learn at least enough to see that technology is plastic. It can be remade to do things differently. And that **if there is a mistake that we who know too little about technology should make, it is the mistake of imagining technology to be too plastic, rather than not plastic enough.** We should expect — and demand — that it can be made to reflect any set of values that we think important. The burden should be on the technologists to show us why that demand can’t be met.” (Lessig, 2006, p. 32, emphasis added)

In other words, he rejects any notion of technological necessities in structuring communication and media, and instead promotes a responsibility of media creators to construct media according to the values of the intended audience. In terms of VWs, online games and their power structures, this means that we can and should request games to be altered so that they reflect how we think power should be distributed in a society. This is not a claim that players’ behavior in VWs always mirrors their behavior in the physical world (Williams, 2010) but VWs are malleable digital media and “there is the capacity to make these worlds different” (Lessig, 2006, p. 15). This gives us a possibility to create an alternative to the existing power structure in the game, something which can be accomplished with an add-on.

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Add-ons have been discussed in connection to the political economy of digital games in two ways. Recent research has, on the one hand, understood them as free and immaterial labor that is commercially exploited by digital game companies (Postigo 2010; Kücklich 2005; Terranova 2000). Player-created content has become an important topic as “labour put into creating fan-made add-ons can have considerable value and scope” (Postigo 2007, p. 311) and add-ons have been a major source of interface innovation as they have been included into the standard interface of WoW (Prax, 2012). On the other hand, add-ons have been connected to intellectual property debates and issues of governance and virtual worlds (Burke 2010; Lastowka, 2010). Throughout the history of WoW add-ons, there have been conflicts of different kinds. An example is the 2006 disabling of conditions in macros, a tool used by a number of add-ons to partly automate play. “Blizzard felt these mods were changing the nature of the game by making it too easy” (Nardi and Kallinikos 2007, p. 15). This more dialectic development through conflict is explained by Kow and Nardi (2010b). They describe the conflict around Blizzard banning add-ons that requested donations in-game, thereby cutting an important source of revenue for developers of popular add-ons and simultaneously threatening the add-on development community with legal actions.

Add-ons as Social Actors

Add-ons have been described before as social actors, influencing play and social interaction in the game. The most notable accounts are Taylor’s analysis of damage meters as tools for co-surveillance (Taylor, 2006a), Chen’s description of add-ons as necessary for raiding (Chen, 2009), and Kow and Nardi’s papers on the add-on community and the way it influences play (Kow and Nardi, 2010; Nardi and Kallinikos, 2010). Taylor explains in a very accessible way why add-ons such as a damage meter are social actors that change the culture in the game (see also Taylor 2006b; Steinkuehler and Ducan 2008; Sherlock 2009; Gee 2003). The community that has emerged around the production of add-ons for WoW has created a

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number of websites dedicated to the topic. Most notable here are Wowinterface.com and Wowace.com (Kow and Nardi 2010a).

To give an example of the importance of add-ons for game design and for the difficulty of raiding, Golub (2010) mentions the threat meter add-on 'Omen', which is mandatory for raiders in his guild. He explains how add-ons become a central aspect of play and how they make the game more manageable and 'reduce effort, make visible invisible parts of the game, aid players in coordinating with one another, and capture important aspects of a player's history of play' (Nardi and Kallinikos 2007: 9). In this environment, where the structure of the medium influences social outcomes and where add-ons can serve as an access point to alter the way the game is being played, the API of WoW offers the possibility to the players and third parties like us to influence the game as a medium and by that to become a social actor in the game.

The Current Structure of Leadership in WoW

Right now WoW, like many other MMORPGs, is using a model with one all-powerful leader for many in-game groups. The roles that exist are currently guild leader, group leader, and raid leader. This also means that, for better or worse, all decisions that have to do with for example removal and invitation of group members and sometimes also loot distribution have to be taken by the group leader. It is possible to delegate some of these tasks and appoint lower-level leaders but the main responsibility for decisions lies with the leader. However, having all this responsibility as a leader, with the possible stress and conflicts that it may cause, is only one side of the problem. It also means that a player is enjoying fairly unlimited power, purely with the legitimation of being the person who started the group. There is no democratic element in the decision making other than perhaps a mutiny, where the players leave the group and start a new one without the former leader, or at least with a different all-powerful leader. As mentioned above, the structure of the game is not determining play.

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Players can attempt to find ways out of this structure. Guilds can, for example, establish a council model where there are a number of players at the second-highest level of power who reign over and organize it together, while the formal one-person guild leadership is residing within an unused character. The existence of such alternative practices shows that some players reflect on and renegotiate the power structures in the game. It also shows that the power structure that is coded into the game is not determining the social outcome. Players can subvert the existing power structures. However, establishing something like this demands a conscious decision and requires “hacking,” or circumventing, the game design. It requires the leader of the guild to freely share her power. She could still betray the group and switch back to the unused formal guild leader and take back the full control by for example kicking the council members from the guild. The power structure does have an influence on culture by making one way more difficult to set up and maintain than another one. Establishing a different structure requires effort, mutual trust, and a deliberate decision by the players. In this situation our add-on will offer an easier way for players to modify the structure and support practices not explicitly intended by the game designers. By offering an alternative, it also points out that there is a possibility to make a decision here. The add-on can thus create opportunities for a more democratic dialogue.

ColLab

The online decision-making tool ColLab² has been developed as a platform for collaborative and democratic decision making. (Laaksoharju, 2012) The central idea of ColLab is that a tool for decision making should confront the users with the influences of their decision on all the stakeholders and their respective interests (Kavathatzopoulos, 2003). It requires the user to first gather data about the situation, i.e. all the stakeholders and their interests and connections to each other. All the stakeholders in a conflict have various

² You can find and use ColLab here: <http://interact.it.uu.se/collab>

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interests that are affecting the dynamics of it. Furthermore, they form relationships to each other that may create additional conflicts or increase the severity of the existing one. There can be tensions, rivalry, competition or any other shared conflict history influencing the current situation. Any decision in a conflict means great risk of hurting the interests of a part of the stakeholders. However, by viewing a possible decision from the point of view of every other group and with their, often very relatable and understandable interests in mind, the user will get help to counter her cognitive biases (Laaksoharju, 2010). By gaining an understanding of the social implications from one's own decisions, the user will be in a better position to fulfill Immanuel Kant's maxim to act so that the decisions one makes can be considered right, regardless of who makes them and who is subjected to them (Kant, 1785/2010). The tool thus gives support in determining the decision that is most consistent with one's own morality and is also developing awareness of moral problems and skills to deal with these.

ColLab is collaborative in that it allows multiple parties to edit a certain conflict setup by for example adding new stakeholders and interests; give suggestions for decisions; and participate in analyzing the consequences that these may have. All the edits are saved in a change log for transparency and to prevent sabotage and trolling.

At this point we should be careful to define what we mean by ethical decision making as the word "ethical", just as the word "moral", for some people has come to bear a fundamentally different meaning than what we intend here. To be absolutely clear about what we mean, we make a strong claim: For some action to be considered as moral it is not enough that it is in accordance with moral rules. Even a computer, which cannot be regarded as a moral agent, can follow rules blindly. What constitutes morality is a developed, reflective and autonomous attitude toward moral systems. Philosophers throughout the ages have been concerned with this troubling distinction. Aristotle (350 B.C.E/2009) called the maturity that

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is required to be truly moral for *phronesis*, i.e., practical wisdom. Kant (1785/2010) called it just autonomy, thus also revealing the notion of that word to include will and deliberation. It is sometimes necessary to make a distinction between *moral* and *ethical*, yet this distinction is not always clear-cut and we will here refrain from delving into details. When we write ethical decision making, we mean decision making that is considering and respecting the system of human values that are at stake in the decision. We refrain from making a judgment about whether a decision is morally “good” or “bad” since that would necessitate a dogmatic moral standard, i.e. rules, which would not be consistent with the definition of morality that was sketched above. What is “good” we leave up to each individual to discover in the process of analysis and this is dependent on what values are considered. This may seem relativistic and gives no guarantees that everyone will agree on the morality of some decision. However, societies comprise mechanisms to define and communicate moral values between its members. This means that you could only care about actions and result. Then the only way to determine what is morally “good” is to resort to prior agreements on proper behavior. We prefer to consider ethics as live and emergent from its context, rather than eternally given by some authority. We therefore refrain from fixating proper value judgments and only focus on supporting and visualizing the deliberation process (Laaksoharju, 2010).

To support the idea that games can have an impact on thinking also outside of the game, we can turn to the seminal work of Jean Piaget. In *The Moral Judgment of the Child* (1932), he arrived at conclusions about how morality is learnt by observing the attitude that children of different ages have toward the rules of a popular marble game. The premise for this is that ethical systems essentially are rules and the attitude toward such rules constitutes the essence of morality. Consequently the children's attitude toward the marble game is dependent on their moral maturity. “[...W]e are in the presence of rules which have been elaborated by the children alone. It is of no moment whether these games strike us as ‘moral’

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or not in their contents" (Piaget 1932, p. 2).

What was significant for Piaget was the relation between children's actions and their consciousness of those actions. He noticed that children pass over stages of attitude toward the rules of the game. From infancy to teen they develop by first learning, memorizing and obeying the rules mechanically, then for a while these are considered to be divine and eternally valid. Finally the children arrive at a point when they realize that the rules are purposeful for the enjoyment of the game and consequently should also be malleable. This final stage, to realize the malleability of rules, is reached only by reflecting on the purpose of the rules, which means the same mental disposition that is promoted with ColLab and encouraged by Lessig. Piaget studied children but Kavathatzopoulos and Rigas (2006) have shown that the same theory applies also to adults. People who hold high positions in organizations, who can be assumed to have reflected over and trained decision making under uncertainty, show a more holistic and investigative attitude toward moral rules than the reference group who showed more dogmatism and authority obedience.

Lawrence Kohlberg (1985) brought the theories of Piaget to practice and took part in funding schools where students created and managed their own rules in democratic processes. However, there is a fundamental difference between Piaget's and Kohlberg's approaches. While Piaget merely studied the attitude toward moral rules, in order to determine the children's development, Kohlberg worked from an assumption of what a morally developed individual is. For Piaget the mental processes, revealed by reasons given for certain conduct, were the important aspects, whereas for Kohlberg the reached conclusions were most significant. With our approach we follow Piaget by not assessing moral worth by the particular conclusions that are the outcome from using a decision making tool but rather by focusing on *how* decisions are being made. ColLab is formative, as it directs what aspects to consider, i.e. interests and values of involved stakeholders, but not normative as it does not

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determine what conclusions are correct. The tool is thus theoretically founded in moral psychology and philosophical ethics and will serve as a facilitator of discussions around fairness, utility and other ethical issues. As such it is implicitly a facilitator of democratic, i.e., participatory and inclusive, dialogue (Kavathatzopoulos, 2010).

The Adaptation of ColLab to WoW

ColLab offers the means to create a graphic representation of a conflict and the involved stakeholders, a matrix over stakeholder relations, and an overview showing how a particular solution of the conflict would affect each stakeholder. However, as an online tool it is not directly accessible from inside WoW. In order to facilitate the accessibility needed to make it work seamlessly without interrupting play for too long (or longer than a normal discussion in the chat would take), not to require people leaving the game and opening ColLab in their browser, and not to break immersion more than necessary, ColLab needs to be available from inside the game. The API in WoW makes it possible for us to incorporate it directly into the interface of WoW as an add-on. The technical basis of add-ons is different from web-based application, which requires some changes. Furthermore, the time available to perform an analysis is assumed to be much more limited. Players do not wish to interrupt the flow of the game to perform a deep analysis so the ambition of ColLab to facilitate an exhaustive analysis has to be streamlined into something that can be accomplished in just a few minutes. In case of a problem, a player should be able to open a "conflict", describe the conflict and the stakeholders and broadcast it to the other group members. These also need the add-on in order to be able to see and interact with the analysis and when they receive the invitation to it, they can edit it and in the end vote for a certain solution (see Figure 1). The first change from the web-based version of ColLab is to scale it down to only one of the views. In the former, the stakeholder network and the decision consequences are in different views, which would be problematic for an add-on and exceed what we expect to be necessary

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for the game context. It is also in conflict with the goal of being quick to use. The solution is to merge the decision evaluation view with the view where one enters stakeholders and interests.

The second change, based on the specifics of the game API, is to include the functionality of automatically detecting the names of party, raid or guild members and adding them to the list of stakeholders. The API provides this information, which makes it easy to have all the names of the raid members already in the tool when opening it. This leads to the third change, which is to introduce a number of preset conflict setups that the add-on would automatically fill with the names of the respective players in the chosen group. The preset conflicts are an option that players can use to speed up the creation of a conflict. They have been created based on Author 1's personal experience from playing the game and should reflect a broad range of common setups of conflicts in WoW. These include any kind of loot drama, discussions about player performance, tactics to use, people fighting or treating each other disrespectfully, humiliating or intimidating people and so on. The other players will then have the possibility to give their input to the situation as stated by the conflict opener.

Finally, the players will be asked to make a decision by a voting procedure, which is also a deviation from the more extensive version. Also this design choice is motivated by efficiency of use. The ambition to stimulate reflection would be better served by letting the players debate over solutions instead of voting for one, but that would mean a more prolonged procedure. Even with the voting, which reduces ambiguity on expense of nuances, the add-on enforces a solution-oriented analysis where focus is put on different optional decisions and how these affect the involved stakeholders, i.e. players and guilds in the case of WoW.

There are three options for the result of the vote: 1) The result is sent to the leader who can then decide to follow it or not. 2) The result is broadcasted, and the leader can then decide to follow it or to publicly disregard the group's opinion. 3) The add-on enforces the

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decision of the group; the add-on on the group leader's computer will do what the outcome of the vote is, in effect disempowering the leader.

The third option would have been preferred if the ambition was to reduce the risk for making conflicts even worse. However, due to technical limitations built into the API this is not possible.³ Here we meet the boundary for how the creator of WoW, Blizzard, allows players to influence the game. However, it is not clear whether this boundary has been implemented to limit player influence on the design of the game.

³ With the first expansion pack, Blizzard implemented a rule that add-ons can no longer execute tasks without the players input. This was implemented to stop add-ons from playing the game for the player and broke functionalities of add-ons that could run an avatar from one city to another, pick the perfect heal spell level to fit the amount of life lost by the target, and in other ways direct the execution of a command by themselves.

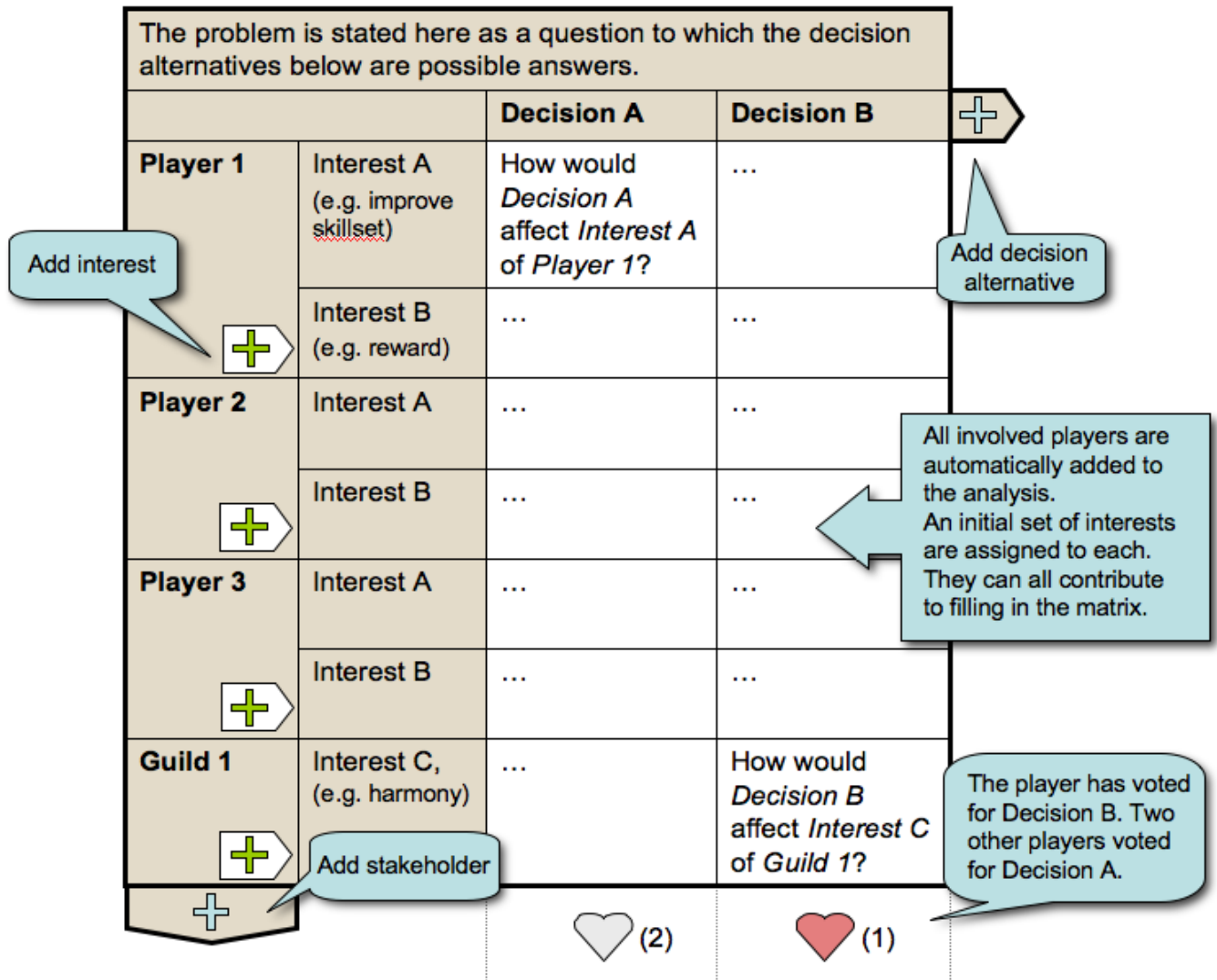


Figure 1: The structure of the add-on interface.

An Alternative Model for Democratic Decision Making

In a presentation at the Game Developers Conference, Richard Bartle, one of the creators of MUD, explains the motives behind his choice of levels for characters in a VW. He states that he and Roy Trubshaw chose levels for a political reason. They had experienced exclusion and stigmatization in their lives due to their dialect in English, which conveyed their working class heritage. They used levels in their game in order to make sure that everybody started at the same place with the same conditions, as a contrast to physical world

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with all its privileges and handicaps. The status and the level of a player should only depend on his actions inside the game.

Bartle goes on to explain that when he works as a consultant for game companies, the game designers he meets are not aware of the implications of a level system. It has simply become the established way of doing things in MMORPGs and VW games, even though the levels often are not even very relevant to the game or the power of the avatar. In a similar way the persistence of hierarchical leadership structures might not be anything that game designers really have reflected on. An advantage with a single leader in any group is that the power situation is rather clear and that there always is somebody who has the power to make a decision. There is a low risk for stalemates in discussions or conflicts that require handling, which might very well arise when using a voting process. Other procedural questions, like who is empowered to choose the options that will be voted on, can also be neglected with this model. It puts playability and clarity over fairness and participation. This is a challenge that our tool will have to face, to both offer this platform for democratic decision-making and to function quickly and unambiguously during play. We do not think that we neglect the game designers' intentions on how a group should be lead, but, in contrast, we attempt to deal with a complex problem in the design of social interaction in virtual environments. However, even if our add-on will not have the power to execute its decision, it will change the structure of the game by increasing the visibility of the moral choice for both the player and co-players. It will become apparent to players if their leader acted against the will of the majority of the group. Another effect will be that it will make the default structure that is coded into WoW visible by creating an alternative to it. The add-on emphasizes the social consequences for behavior within the multiplayer aspect of the game. Players will be empowered to apply social pressure on the leader. The add-on will not enforce the group's will automatically but if the existing leadership structure is only an unconscious reproduction of the frozen discourse of

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MMORPGs, then presenting a working alternative could change game design practice and lead to a democratic decision making system that can actually enforce a majority vote.

Here we want to use three examples to illustrate how the add-on is going to work. The first example is a discussion in a guild about its raid schedule. If there are parents among the members, they may want the raids to start later to be sure that the kids are already in bed while others who have to get up early for their work might want to start earlier. Here the add-on can serve to provide an overview over what different guild members want and how any decision would impact them. The members would have the possibility to propose compromises and ultimately to vote on a solution. For the second example we can think of a guild in which a number of members are in an emotional conflict with each other, something that is putting strain on the guild atmosphere. The add-on would here structure the conflict and help the arguing parties to understand each other's positions. It would also provide a way for other guild members that are disturbed by the conflict to push for and participate in a solution. If the fighting parties cannot find a solution, the add-on could make it possible to decide in a fair way about a solution, e.g. to kick one side of the conflict from the guild. All parties would have the opportunity to contribute to the discussion and the leaders of the guild could see how their members are feeling about the conflict in order to avoid a situation where they kick a player out and realize that others are following her, thus tearing the guild apart in the process. The third example is a dispute over loot in an ad-hoc raid group. Here players are not part of a durable group and are only banded together for this particular level. The add-on can be used to limit the power of the raid leader to abuse her power for loot distribution. For example, if the leader wants to give a dropped item to a guild member of his, who is also part of the raid, even though another player would also have a claim on the item, that player could open a conflict in the add-on, choose the pre-made "Loot Drama" conflict setup, quickly adapt it to the situation, and broadcast it. The other players could then modify it

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collaboratively (much like a Google document), add stakeholders and solutions, and finally vote for a solution. If this vote results in support for the player who did not get the item, then the raid leader has to choose to either follow the verdict of the group or to act against it openly, with the risk for players leaving the group.

The add-on will make it possible to discuss how decisions should be made and how power structures should be implemented into the game. It might not enable picking the apple from the tree, to return to the earlier used Garden of Eden example, but it will at the very least make it possible to see the tree and to then ask questions about why the apple is untouchable and if that should not be different.

Another advantage of an add-on like this is that it can be used for recording player behavior in conflict situations over a long period of time. Such a research direction has ethical and privacy implications that need to be sorted out first. It would require the participating players' consent for aggregating the information, but there is great potential for understanding not only the use of the particular add-on but also game play generally. This data could even be made public, which would make it possible to check the digital reputation and conflict history of a pick-up-group (pug) leader who just sent you an invite and thus be an efficient ethical leader status system.

Conclusion and Future Study

There are a number of possibilities for further research resulting directly from this project. Besides offering and testing a new framework for decision-making in virtual environments, which could be applicable in wider context than just VWs and online games, this project holds the possibility to collect data on what players in these spaces are having discussions and arguments about and how they are having them. Quantitative studies with users of the tool will make it possible to draw conclusions about what kind of effects power structures in games have on players.

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In order to be able to optimize the design of the add-on and to evaluate the reaction of the player, as well as the effect of the decision-making process, we will test the add-on with different and divergent groups of players. The users will fill in questionnaires about the add-on, focused on the way that the add-on has changed conflict resolution in the game. The authors will conduct in-depth interviews with a number of diverse players representing different play styles and approaches to get the most possible points of view on the add-on, and given that we get players' consent, we can collect data about the use of the add-on, focused on the number of conflicts resolved, the time each conflict took to resolve and the default conflicts that were used by the players.

Digital games are the medium in which many people make meaningful experiences. Virtual worlds are here especially important as a space to experience sociability and culture. With this project we aim to pave a way to change the design of these spaces in order to make the emerging societies in virtual spaces more democratic, aware of ethical problems in their decision making, and reflective of the architecture of power in digital media. Players could potentially take these lessons with them and apply them to politics and society in the physical world, thus increasing their capability to take responsibility for matters of society and to demand changes, participation, and power. Players might learn from their experience in the game that power structures are something that has a political agenda and that can be modified according to the people's moral values. We hope that instead of learning to accept the setup of society as unchangeable, players will learn to reflect on it, to doubt it, and to expect legitimization for it, should they find it undesirable. In times of global economic and political struggle, we hope that virtual worlds can be more than just an escape to a different space but instead an inspiration to societal change. This is our aim.

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