

# Apathetic Villagers and the Trolls Who Love Them

## Player Amorality in Online Multiplayer Games

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### ABSTRACT

Players are sometimes understood to hold an ‘amoral’ stance in games, morally disengaging from game content and in-game player behaviours because ‘it’s just a game’. This amorality is often seen as problematic and in need of refuting or amendment, particularly if we wish to encourage more ethical play online. However, few studies have approached a theory of player amorality from the player’s perspective in multiplayer games. This study aims to address this gap by conducting 20 in-depth interviews with a wide range of multiplayer game-players, exploring players’ ethical views towards problematic or disruptive in-game behaviours. Preliminary results show that while players do exhibit a certain amorality regarding in-game actions, players express, justify and explain this amorality in a variety of considered ways that go beyond notions of ‘it’s just a game’ and the ‘sociopathic griefer’, and step outside the framework of moral disengagement. This paper puts forward a preliminary framework of player amorality termed ‘Apathetic Villager Theory’, encapsulated by six key attitudes/themes that highlight the nuances involved in the (un)ethical standpoints of a range of players. It is hoped that this framework will be useful in approaching and responding to player amorality in a way that gives due recognition of the various voices and understandings involved in multiplayer digital gameplay.

### CCS CONCEPTS

• Human-centered computing → HCI theory, concepts and models • Applied computing → Computers in other domains → Personal computers and PC applications → Computer games

### KEYWORDS

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Player Ethics, Amorality, Multiplayer Games, Griefing, Trolling

### ACM Reference format:

Lucy Sparrow, Martin Gibbs, and Michael Arnold. 2019. Apathetic Villagers and the Trolls Who Love Them: Player Amorality in Online Multiplayer Games. In *Proceedings of OZCHI'19*. ACM, Fremantle, WA, Australia, 5 pages. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3369457.3369514>

## 1 Introduction

Griefing, which has been defined as the act of intentionally disrupting gameplay for one’s own enjoyment [6], is fairly commonplace in many multiplayer games and online social platforms [6, 13, 31]. Grieferers are sometimes understood as a certain ‘type’ of player [30]—the “sociopaths of the virtual world” [17]. There are many ways that players can exhibit what is known as ‘toxic behaviour’ in games [23], regardless of whether these actions strictly count as griefing [5], such as by scamming other players [27], cheating [12], engaging in abusive chat [23], or displaying “bad manners” (BM) [2].

A connection can be drawn between the high incidence of these sorts of behaviours and player amorality—studies have shown that players sometimes consider their in-game actions not to count morally because it’s ‘just a game’ [14, 19, 25], particularly due to the digital and playful context. Yet many lament griefing, trolling, and otherwise disruptive or problematic in-game behaviours, and the amoral stance has been formally argued against by a number of philosophers [18, 29, 32]. At the same time, there have been calls for players to be more critical and ethical in their play. It has been argued that players must strive to be “full, mature, ethical beings” and that developers have a responsibility to facilitate players’ (ethical) values [35]. However, although steps have been taken by some developers to reduce unethical in-game behaviours [33], these behaviours nevertheless persist [3].

One of the reasons for this persistence may be that the task of encouraging ‘good’ play while reducing ‘bad’ play is not as straightforward as it seems. Indeed, the ethics of in-game interactions between human players remain contested and unclear [16, 20]. Context is often important in deciding which actions are ethical and which are not [18, 28, 37], and actions that we may take for granted as unethical (such as cheating [12] or

betrayal and treachery [8]) may not always be deemed as such by players themselves.

This presents an issue for game developers and HCI researchers interested in ethics in digital games. How should we respond to disruptive or problematic in-game behaviours in a fair and justifiable way when the ethics of these spaces are contextual and contested? And how are we best to untangle the many voices involved establishing, maintaining and challenging unethical behaviours in digital games?

This study aims to approach some answers to these questions by focusing on players' understandings, attitudes and beliefs regarding unethical play in multiplayer digital games. Research looking at player ethics in multiplayer games is currently thin [9, 35], and more attention needs to be paid to how the players themselves understand and approach problematic in-game acts [12]. The "practices of play are complicated, messy, and polyphonic" [26], and if we are to make sense of player amorality without imposing our own ethical assumptions regarding which in-game behaviours are 'good' or 'bad', then we would do well to explore and discuss these issues in detail from the player's perspective.

The overarching research question of this exploratory study is thus: How do players understand and negotiate norms of (un)ethical behaviour in multiplayer games? In particular, what 'amoral' judgments and arguments are made as players understand, partake in, and respond to griefing, trolling, and other problematic or disruptive in-game behaviours?

In this paper, we present a framework called 'Apathetic Villager Theory' to describe player amorality based on the results of interviews with a range of multiplayer game players. Drawing from and expanding on a medieval fantasy literary trope, this framework tells a story of player amorality in which participants are analogous to an insular, apathetic group of villagers who consider themselves to be terrorized by a seemingly unstoppable force of trolls. In what follows, we discuss the implications of these results for game design and research regarding player amorality.

## 2 Method

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with 20 participants, generating a rich set of qualitative data in the form of interview transcripts and notes. After receiving ethical approval from the Human Ethics Advisory Group (HEAG) at the University of Melbourne, participants were recruited via advertisements around the university's campus and from the online gaming forum [www.theoldergamers.com](http://www.theoldergamers.com). The initial inclusion criteria were that participants had to be aged over 18 and play multiplayer games.

The final set of participants was decided through maximum variation sampling: First, a range of characteristics relevant to the study were identified, including hours played per week, how long they had been gaming, most-played genres, and platforms used to play games, as well as demographic information such as age, gender, and nationality. Then, the final sample was selected from the volunteer pool to provide as wide a range of these characteristics as possible.

The final sample consisted of 10 males, 9 females, and 1 non-binary individual. Nine nationalities were represented, with the largest number of participants reporting Australia as their nationality (7 participants in total). Others included China (3), Indonesia (2), Malaysia (2), Sri Lanka (1), Switzerland (1), Germany (1), New Zealand (1), Australia/Japan (1), and Australia/China (1). Ages ranged from 18–50 ( $M=29.7$ ,  $SD=8.95$ ); hours played per week ranged from 1–40 ( $M=13.5$ ,  $SD=11.46$ ); and years of playing multiplayer games ranged from 3–32 ( $M=13$ ,  $SD=7.84$ ). When asked if they consider themselves a 'gamer', 14 participants said 'Yes', 5 said 'Not Sure', and 1 said 'No' (note that people who play games do not necessarily identify with the 'gamer' label [34], and in this study all participants were nevertheless players of multiplayer games). Participants used a wide variety of platforms to play multiplayer games: PC/Mac was the most-used (17 participants), followed by smartphones and home consoles (10 participants each), portable consoles (5 participants), and tablets (2 participants). Participants also played a wide range of genres, with strategy (10), MMORPG (9), FPS (7), and battle royale (7) being the most reported (note that most participants reported using more than one platform and playing more than one genre).

Each interview was approximately 1 hour long and audio-recorded. Participants were first asked general questions about their gaming habits, perceptions and experiences related to ethics in games. In a method based broadly on moral foundations vignettes [11; see also 21], participants were then presented with four vignettes that each described a controversial scenario in a game, and participants' ethical judgments on these cases were explored. The vignettes in this study were written based on four controversial cases of play in gaming forums and the media that cover a range of acts, platforms and game genres: (1) in-game scamming in a massively multiplayer online roleplaying game (MMORPG) [27]; (2) group-based griefing of an in-game event on a social virtual platform [20, 24]; (3) 'virtual groping' in a virtual reality (VR) game [7, 36]; and (4) refusing to switch characters in a team-based FPS [15].

Thematic analysis of the interview transcripts using *NVivo* was chosen as the most suitable method for data analysis given the exploratory nature of the study. As data analysis was ongoing at the time of submitting this paper, the results discussed in the next section are preliminary: the discussion is based on the coding process so far, interview notes, and the primary researcher's impressions from the interviews.

## 3 Results and Discussion

### 3.1 Apathetic Villager Theory

Participants held widely varying views and beliefs regarding the ethics of different behaviours in games. It is important to note that many participants, in contradiction to the notion that players are largely amoral, felt that a great variety of behaviours were unethical in games, particularly related to sexual and verbal harassment. However, many participants also did express what could be interpreted as an amoral stance, justifying and permitting many sorts of unethical behaviours in games, and these attitudes

will be the focus of this discussion. This amorality was complex and had a number of attitudes and themes behind it. We group these attitudes and themes into what we call 'Apathetic Villager Theory', which paints a picture of amoral players as Villagers whose homes are attacked nightly by Trolls from the nearby forest. These attacks occur so often that the Villagers largely come to accept their fate, to expect their torment, and even to take a certain pride in their suffering. Rather than fighting the Trolls, the Villagers respond largely apathetically, retreating into their homes with a sense that nothing can be done. However, there is a twist to this somewhat unfortunate tale—the Villagers might not be so different from the Trolls they consider their enemies after all. We will discuss six key manifestations of this theory below (reactive morality, village reputation, masochism and *schadenfreude*, response paradox, threat threshold, and dark mirror) and discuss some implications of these attitudes throughout.

**3.1.1 Reactive Morality.** There was a common view among participants that griefers and unethical players—the 'Trolls' in this Apathetic Villager scenario—are incredibly pervasive and unstoppable, and both players and developers are ultimately helpless in dealing with them. Many participants felt that even if developers find a way to curb some pressing unethical behaviour, unsavoury players will find a loophole. There was little sense of being able to truly control or pre-empt 'bad behaviour' in games. As Vera (21, F) noted in the interviews, "there's not much you can actually do about it." In other words, the Trolls have the power, and the Villagers can only wait and *react* to them.

The Villagers exhibit a form of amorality that points to a potentially serious issue in digital games: that is, a lack of faith in the game system and community to respond to bad behaviour in a meaningful way. Following Sicart, this suggests players need more opportunities to exercise their moral capacities [35], and there is room for developers to establish a stronger trust relationship with players. In particular, developers may consider communicating their efforts to reduce harmful player behaviours in their games more clearly (particularly when they do so successfully).

**3.1.2 Village Reputation.** Expectations played a significant role in the amoral attitudes of the participants in this study. In particular, various forms of abusive chat and grieving were considered part and parcel of the gaming experience. Despite expressing some regret at the high incidence of disruptive and harmful behaviours in games, some participants were defensive of the status quo. There was a sense that players should expect to be trolled or grieved—as Scott (20, M) said, "If [a game is] online, you can expect people are going to swear, people are going to be racist, ... people are going to kill you." For some participants, new players have a responsibility to 'do the research' to set their expectations appropriately before entering into a game by making use of paratexts such as game-related websites, videos and forums. For Scott, "there [is] plenty of help around, plenty of tips, plenty of players to tell you, plenty of subreddits to explain everything". As such, if a player goes in "blindly" and gets scammed or grieved, then "that is on [them]". In this sense, participants expressed a certain disregard and even contempt at times for new players who

stumble into a game and complain about being grieved. In other words, the Villagers see their settlement as having a certain reputation, and new visitors would be wise to learn this before entering it.

Here, we can see how player amorality forms a significant part of the enculturation of players and the social norms that form in and across games. There is a certain protectiveness of gaming culture and identity among some players, and there is a pride in coming to learn, accept, and cope with gaming spaces that to a great extent permit unethical behaviours. In other words, participants who were highly invested in a game could still hold apparently amoral views. For these players, it is not 'just a game'—it is a complex social setting with its own norms and expectations that are nevertheless strongly tied to amoral attitudes.

**3.1.3 Masochism and Schadenfreude.** It was observed that for many participants, some disruptive actions in games (although regarded as wrong, harmful and understandably upsetting), were an important and valuable part of the gaming experience. Some participants felt that games should not be taken so seriously lest they lose their fun, others felt that surprising and transgressive forms of play are what makes playing games (thankfully) different to real life, and a couple of participants felt that such actions add nuance and interest to the game experience and provide emergent narratives to share with others later. Peter (25, M), for instance, argued that an act like in-game scamming "makes the game more believable, more engaging, and makes [the] user want to spend more time in the game." In this sense, many participants were willing to accept harmful behaviours in the name of maintaining a playful atmosphere, or because on some level, such actions are ultimately pleasurable and served a playful purpose.

At the same time, many participants thought that some of the vignettes described were amusing, and exhibited a certain *schadenfreude* in imagining others being harmed in some sense through the behaviours described. Reading the provided vignettes would often elicit laughter, even among participants who expressed that the actions they were reading were wrong. Despite their torment, some Villagers take pleasure in Troll attacks, either through watching their neighbours suffer, or sometimes even when they suffer themselves.

These findings correspond to the observations of other scholars that despite being harmful in some sense, some unethical behaviours can even contribute to the shared value, fun and freedom of the game for some players [8, 9, 18]. Importantly, when prompted to share more about their amusement, participants were often well-reasoned and thoughtful. The apparently amoral amusement and sense of fun that some players derive from unethical behaviours in games is not simply an unreasoned, 'sociopathic' joy—it can also take the form of a considered attitude that places an emphasis on the value of play above other considerations (such as not harming others).

**3.1.4 Response Paradox.** Although many participants considered various in-game actions to be ethically wrong and sometimes on par with their 'real-world' counterparts, they still thought that such transgressions should only be dealt with, if at all, within the game itself and within the gaming community. The Villagers were highly insular in this regard—there was a great deal of suspicion

and concern that sources outside the village could police their activities. Many participants were keen to stick to in-game response mechanisms such as reporting, blocking and banning. This is highlighted in a quote from Lisa (31, F): “If you have wars in the virtual world, you can solve them in the virtual world. Don't channel it in into the real world.” In this sense, these players still drew a kind of ‘ethical magic circle’ around digital games, and exhibited a selective amorality that focuses more on the response to the act rather than the act itself.

**3.1.5 Threat Threshold.** Actions that were not seen as part of the play experience—particularly those that threatened a player’s out-of-game identity and which they had no control over—were often seen as more wrong and needing to be dealt with than other in-game acts. For instance, hacking another player’s account and stealing in-game items was often seen as a profound violation, while in-game scamming where a player tricks another into giving away their in-game items was far more permissible—even when real-world money was involved.

However, participants differed in their opinions on which actions were truly threatening or harmful. In other words, the ‘threat threshold’ varied between players. Of particular note was an observed gender divide in relation to the vignette describing unwanted sexual interactions in VR. For many female and/or older participants, unwanted sexual gestures in a VR game were seen as more harmful, threatening and akin to sexual harassment than for some male participants, particularly among female participants who had experienced more threatening behaviours both within games (such as cyber-stalking and harassment) and outside of games. Bella (50, F) expressed this viewpoint clearly: “[VR groping] is harassment and assault, but it's assault of a virtual body rather than a physical body.” For many male participants like Owen (24, M), however, this was more of a “grey area”: “I don't think that I would feel personally attacked or offended by it. . . . It's really hard, just because on the one hand, yes, it is kind of your movements . . . but on the other hand, it's really not your body. You really don't look like that and you don't feel anything.” In other words, while many Villagers see Trolls as largely an unavoidable nuisance, the Trolls could cross a line and become truly threatening—but where this line falls varies across groups of Villagers.

This demonstrates that player amorality has its limits, and it is important to identify where those limits might start being breached for certain groups of players—particularly those who do not fit into the stereotype of a ‘typical gamer’ (i.e. young, male, experienced players) and may represent lesser-heard minority voices in digital gaming. In terms of game design and education, there is room to increase player awareness of how these ‘bottom lines’ can shift for players in different games, social settings and platforms. This is perhaps especially the case for virtual reality games, which offer players a more realistic and immersive experience [36].

**3.1.6 Dark Mirror.** Even though unethical players were often framed as the ‘other’, participants also spoke of their own engagement in activities that they and other players found ethically problematic, including team-killing and using bots to play the game for them. Most participants reported engaging in

what might be considered trolling or grieving behaviour at some point. Some participants justified these sorts of behaviours as being done in order to enact revenge (or justice) on other trolls [1], to make the game easier to play, or simply by accident because they were a new player and were unaware of the game mechanics and social norms. Jimmy (40, M) said, for instance, “I used to troll people myself but, I always had rules for me personally. . . . If someone’s being rude and loud and obnoxious and then you troll them, I think that’s fair game. . . . it was pretty funny sometimes, if someone started running their mouth, just to mess around with them in the game.” In this way, a ‘dark mirror’ can be held up to the participants in this study that reflects back their own disruptive tendencies—unethical behaviours in games are not necessarily enacted by an ‘other’, a certain ‘type’ of unethical player, but are embedded in how many participants play the game. It seems that the Villagers are in fact not so different from the Trolls themselves, and each of them plays a sometimes unacknowledged role in contributing to the Troll-filled world that they have come to expect.

## 3.2 Implications and Further Considerations

Apathetic Villager Theory paints a picture of player amorality as a set of attitudes akin to a fictitious, insular, despondent, curiously-proud group of Villagers terrorized by Trolls. In turn, this theory sheds some light on the complex attitudes behind the apparent amorality of multiplayer digital game players, suggesting the need to look beyond the ‘it’s just a game’ characterization of amorality and the notion of the ‘sociopathic griefer’. Furthermore, this theory provides an alternative preliminary framework for understanding player ethics that can exist alongside theories of moral disengagement. It has been suggested that players often practice moral disengagement by employing certain “cognitive operations” that allow them to justify, rationalize or downplay ethically problematic behaviours in violent single-player games [4, 22] and multiplayer survival games [9] in order to continue enjoying the game. The results of this study do not necessarily refute this, but they do suggest that there is more to this story: in some cases where multiplayer game players appear to be morally disengaging or justifying their behaviours in retrospect, they may actually be navigating and even creating notions of ‘wrong’ or ‘right’ in these ethically ambiguous digital game spaces—a reflection of what has been termed the ‘demarcation problem’ [10]. Players in different contexts may truly understand and experience what appear to be unethical behaviours as ultimately unproblematic, valuable, culturally-embedded, necessary, or even ethical. Player amorality is thus a complex and multifaceted stance that is under constant (re)negotiation. Amoral attitudes are not simply an attempt at preventing moral concerns from getting in the way of having a good time, but are intertwined with ongoing processes of ethical negotiation in ludic digital spaces rather than distanced from them.

As efforts to actively tackle harmful behaviours in multiplayer games continue to develop, there may be a benefit from taking this more nuanced understanding of player amorality into account, particularly if we wish to understand any resistance to

taking certain harmful in-game behaviours seriously. Further work in this area may therefore consider the ways in which the attitudes encapsulated by Apathetic Villager Theory interact with specific game design techniques and in particular games. As this study is fundamentally qualitative, exploratory, and aims to give voice to participants, the sample is rich but small—as such, it may be of interest to expand on and adapt these considerations to larger-scale quantitative works and questionnaires as well.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We extend our gratitude to the participants of this study for their candid, good-humoured and thoughtful considerations in the interviews. Thanks also goes to the anonymous reviewers of the first draft of this paper for their helpful and encouraging comments. This research is supported by the Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship.

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**Title:**

Apathetic villagers and the trolls who love them: Player amorality in online multiplayer games

**Date:**

2019-12-02

**Citation:**

Sparrow, L., Gibbs, M. & Arnold, M. (2019). Apathetic villagers and the trolls who love them: Player amorality in online multiplayer games. OZCHI'19: Proceedings of the 31st Australian Conference on Human-Computer-Interaction, pp.447-451. ACM.  
<https://doi.org/10.1145/3369457.3369514>.

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