
Exploring Mischief and Mayhem in Social Computing or: How we Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Trolls

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Abstract

In this paper, we explore the role of mischief as borderline socially acceptable behaviour within social computing applications. Mischievous activity pushes the boundaries of the implicit social contract present in all online social systems, and, we argue, is of vital importance understanding online social interactions. Using examples from games and other applications, we explore mischief as an act of appropriation, which reinterprets mechanics defined by developers in unexpected and sometimes upsetting ways. Although frequently interpreted as negative and anti-social behaviour, we argue that mischief serves a vital social role, and find surprising richness in the chaos.

Keywords

Mischief; social computing; appropriation; social design; social architecture; games.

Introduction

When participating in any social space, online or otherwise, we enter into an unspoken social contract that describes the expected behaviour within that particular context [5]. The nature of this contract is implicit, and all members of the community are expected to abide by it for the benefit of everyone [28, 5]. By presuming, for example, that everyone tells the truth, we dispense with the need for complex negotiation of rules before engaging in a dialogue.

In emergent online communities, the negotiation of social contracts is somewhat more complex. Each individual brings with them cultural baggage and expectations from their real-world contexts. These expectations meet in a strange new context where the very tools of communication may take on unfamiliar new forms. Although social cultures and norms are developed, they are in a constant state of flux and renegotiation, as both the membership of the community, and the very nature of the tools of communication, change over time. As such, notions of what makes some behaviours acceptable and others unacceptable are rarely firmly established.

Game studies, as a field of inquiry, has a long history of discussion around the nature of the social contract of play as being in direct conflict with the stated purpose of overtly competitive games. The unspoken agreement about acceptable behaviour within the special social environment of games is a constituent part of the so-called "Magic Circle" [18,29] that surrounds play. This social agreement is part of the "Lusory Attitude" [29,18] that players are required to maintain for the benefit of the game. This attitude is of paramount

importance for a game to function– Huizinga directly equates it with "the sacred emotion of the sacramental act"[18; p36].

Although Huizinga's work has been dominantly used in the field of games studies, the original text applies the "lusory attitude" to all aspects of life and culture. In order to exist peacefully in a society, one must follow and observe the social rules for every given context. For example, by following local customs when visiting new places. This attitude is particularly relevant to online communities where the participants may be from wildly different backgrounds and cultures and need to co-exist in a mutually supportive way.

Importantly, the underlying mechanics of the online social system have profound effects on the development of the social contract between users, since these mechanics are the tools through which communication is enabled. This is not limited to traditional dialogue, as each new mechanic of social interaction (e.g. gifting, trading, fighting) enables different forms of communication.

The effect of these mechanics on communication within online social systems is most readily visible in the play of online games, since these games are often explicitly designed around requirements of social communication such as competition and cooperation. However, in every context the mechanics of communication have a major influence on the emergent social contract. For example, the 160 character limit on mobile SMS (text messages) forces a brevity which led to the emergence of "txtspk" as a standard mode of communication [34], that was socially acceptable (and often expected) within that context.

Breaking the Social Contract

Since the rules within social contracts of online systems are often implicit, expectations can change from person to person, and often there are conflicts between different expectations that require negotiation. The social contract exists to support the efficient operation of community, but as with any rule-system there are naturally those that transgress these informal rules either purposefully or not.

Griefers, Trolls and other hateful creatures

It is perhaps inevitable that social systems will have those users for whom the intent *is* harm. These users take pleasure in causing upset and negative responses in fellow users. In online games, the activities of “griefing” and “trolling” are that of disrupting the play and enjoyment of others, where the exact nature of this disruption depends on context.

Rough, antagonising play does not necessarily break the social contract between users, so long as those users accept that this type of behaviour is within the boundaries of what is expected (For example, the online community “4chan” is notoriously daunting [3]). In contrast, those seen as “violators”[14] intentionally break the social rules, whatever those entail, in order to upset others. In the early days of massively multiplayer games, Dibbell famously reported on the social fallout after a virtual rape [8]. This profound breach of the social contract of this particular game as a primarily social activity, combined with the perpetrator’s complete lack of remorse, shook the foundations of the community and highlights the vulnerable nature of the social contract.

In his large-scale study of Massively Multiplayer Online Game (MMOG) players, Yee finds that the activity of “griefing” is a motivating factor for many players [39]. Griefing is the “Intentional harassment of other players... [it] utilizes aspects of the game structure or physics in unintended ways to cause distress for other players” [36]. This distress may not be direct such as continued harassment, but may involve a range of activities, including scamming, confidence tricks, identity deception and even theft [15,1]. Richard Bartle describes these sorts of behaviour as part of his “Killer” player type [2], for whom motivations include the need to dominate other players, and that this need is not always satisfied in a “nice” way (i.e. by fighting other killers): “Killers see virtual worlds as sport. This is of the huntin’, shootin’ and fishin’ kind”. These players may not even recognise the genuine emotional distress that grief may cause to others [7] - their defence is “it’s just a game” [2, p549]. Bakioglu highlights this aspect in the griefers of Second Life, and the effect of their activities on more serious users [1].

Griefing is predicated on the existence of play as a substrate beneath the social activity of a system (i.e. through using the mechanics of the game as tools to break the social contract), however, the activity of “Trolling” is purely within the social domain. “Trolls” are essentially those creatures that take pleasure in upsetting others. They are common in all online social systems, and have been since they emerged in the first semi-anonymous discussion boards. Generally, troll behaviour is about making other users angry or upset by provoking them online (e.g. taking intentionally contrary views and being deliberately inflammatory to get a response) [9].

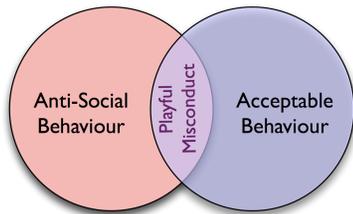


Figure 1 - Mischief between the socially normal and abnormal

Both griefers and trolls take their amusement from genuinely destructive and anti-social behaviours. The enjoyment relies on this – the activity wouldn't be fun if the victim didn't suffer somehow. In this way, they are genuinely sociopathic acts.

Although trolling has a long history as a sociopathic behaviour in pseudo-anonymous online systems (e.g. Usenet [11]), in recent years the popular definition has expanded to include more mischievous activities where the intent is not necessarily to cause distress¹. This distinction of intent is important, as it highlights a divide between sociopathic and playful behaviours.

Mischief at the Boundaries

The boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable social behaviour are not always clearly defined. There exists a fuzzy boundary where the nature of certain behaviour has not yet been established as acceptable or not in a given social context. Where participants within a social community feel sufficiently close, there seems to be a more open attitude towards playing with these boundaries of acceptability. In a study of families using a note-sharing system, Lindley et al [23] found that there was a strong undercurrent of teasing and gentle mischief between the users. This took the form of cheeky messages and insults that may be inappropriate outside the family context, but that the close social grouping permitted within their social contract. As the social norms emerge in online systems, this mischievous activity serves to explore and test the boundaries of acceptability within a new social environment.

¹ e.g. artoftrolling.com

There is a vital distinction between mischief and genuinely anti-social behaviour such as griefing or serious trolling. The key to mischief is the apparent attitude of playfulness – the mischievous user knows there are limits, and the *intent* is to do no harm [15]. The effect of this intent is clearly seen when understanding mischief as an act of performance.

Mischief as Performance

Many online social environments have very strict expectations of identity. For example, online games typically have strongly established back-stories, with complex mythologies, histories and aesthetics. Within this frame the users are introduced, and settle into roles according to the established order. In a high-fantasy game such as *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard) the warriors wear armour and the wizards cast spells, and such restrictions may reinforce such stereotypes by enforced adherence through the implemented game mechanics (e.g. Wizards may not wear armour; Male characters may not wear female clothing).

These strong stereotypes and established social norms create opportunities for mischief by players who wish to challenge the status quo. For example, players may subvert these highly established roles in order to stand out as being defined by their character rather than by their stereotype. Consider encountering a wizard that refuses to believe in magic, a blind rogue, or a strictly pacifist warrior. The stronger such stereotypes are enforced by the game design, the more rare any divergence becomes, as a mischievous player must work particularly hard to overcome the barriers to expressing individuality. For example, a transvestite character may be prevented by the game from wearing clothes intended for the other gender, but may still be

able to assemble an outfit that gives the correct impression by using particular combinations of procedurally “valid” clothes.

No matter how strict the stereotypes, there is room for misconduct through performance. Wright et al [38] describe such performances in online FPS (First Person Shooter) games, where there is limited scope for players to challenge stereotypes. In this strict environment players simply used the simplest tools available - changing their names and “spray tags” to provoke other players. In these cases, the misconduct is about challenging the social norms in the game, taking the social roles of an “exhibitionist” [14] and creating a performance for the benefit of others. It is an interactive experience intended to elicit reactions such as surprise, confusion and amusement created by an abuse of the game rules.

Of course, mischievous performance is not solely found the domain of games. Although the creative tools and fictions found in games do allow this behaviour to flourish, non-game social systems are also no stranger to mischief.

Twitter, for example, has a relaxed approach to identity (compared to Facebook and Google+ at least [16]) that has made it a rich ground for performance mischief through impersonation and satire. Accounts such as “Fake Steve Jobs”² and “Brian Cocks”³ poke fun at their public figure namesakes through exploiting the mechanics offered to them by Twitter as a system.

² <http://twitter.com/#!/FSJ>

³ http://twitter.com/#!/Prof_BrianCocks



CHinoSaurus Rex @_CHINOSAUR

22 Sep

HEARTENED TO SEE A WHOLE BUNCH OF JURASSIC ERA WORK ON BATTERY LEVEL INDICATORS AND FITTS LAW EXPERIMENTS IN MY HACKED #CHI2012 DROPBOX.



SottedReviewer Sotted Reviewer

AFTER FINISHING #CSCW2012 REVIEWS, I RE-READ MY SUBMISSIONS TO REMIND MYSELF HOW I WRITE SO MUCH GODDAMN BETTER THAN THE REST OF YOU PROLES.

Figure 2 - Mischievous academics use Twitter to challenge community norms through playful interventions

Even the normally staid community of academics are not strangers to mischief⁴. In an example of what we refer to as the Cleveland Steamer process, it is not uncommon for mischievous conference participants to subvert Twitter and other social tools to interrupt the shared dialogue around the events. Fake accounts lampoon well known personalities within the field (in HCI, Bill Buxton, Ed Chi and Cliff Lampe are popular targets), and novelty accounts satirise the community practises and norms around the conference in general (e.g. Figure 2). This is arguably all part of the negotiation of new social norms in a culture, now Twitter has created additional avenues of communication that complement the conference experience. In a community where attribution is paramount to discussions, the exploration of anonymous contributions is an important part in the evolution of the wider culture.

Mischief for Serendipity

Many systems allow users to alter virtual spaces in some way. Games like *Star Wars Galaxies* (Sony Online Entertainment), *Habbo Hotel* (Sulake Corp) and others allow players to own spaces within the game worlds that can be decorated at will, and usually remain persistent, so strangers can see the creations even

⁴ e.g. phdchallenge.org



Figure 3 - Mischievous creations in the games Spore and LittleBIGPlanet

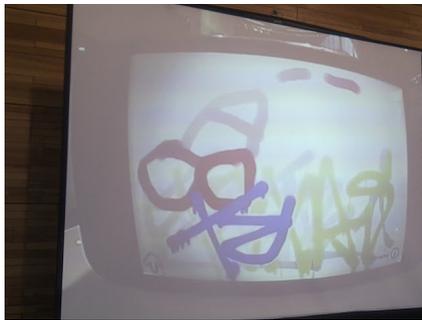


Figure 4 - A bystander draws a crude penis on an interactive art display at the ACM CHI 2011 Conference [31].

while the creator is offline. With the opportunity to leave effects on the game world that remain for some time, there is also an opportunity for serendipitous playful mischief. Mischievous players can create surprising and unique experiences for other players to stumble upon in normal play. The creator may never even experience the reaction of the “victims”.

A vivid example of serendipitous mischief appeared shortly after the 2008 release of *Spore* (Maxis). In this game, players can use powerful tools to design creatures out of huge selections of body parts (arms, legs, horns, eyes, mouths, etc). Although not directly multiplayer, *Spore* connected players together by sharing their creature creations. As players explore their own worlds, the other inhabitants are computer-controlled versions of the alien creations of other randomly selected *Spore* players.

This automatic sharing created the perfect opportunity for mischief in the generation of “Sporn”. Using the creature creation tools, players created humorous creatures that were caricatures of a certain part of the male anatomy [37]. Since the worlds of other players may pick up these creatures from the Internet automatically, players may have ended up unwittingly exploring brave new worlds filled with dancing, singing penises. Similarly, in *LittleBIGPlanet* (Sony), a game where players can create their own levels, players spend considerable amounts of time learning to use the powerful tools and physics to create animated levels based on crude sexual imagery (figure 3).

The use of crudely drawn penises in humour is as old as culture itself [17] and, yet, even in these enlightened times it is seen as something “naughty”. Along with

scatological themes, it is still a hugely popular topic for jokes and pranks [27]. It is no wonder, then, that this familiar form makes its way into the digital world as a common theme of mischief (even serious academic contexts are not exempt, as figure 4 illustrates). The Western cultural associations with the male genitals are typically as a merely mildly offensive and “naughty” subject reserved for childish pranks and schoolboy graffiti, it is therefore the perfect example of “pushing the edges of acceptability”. Its appearance in a social game such as *Spore* is unexpected, immediately recognizable and ultimately harmless.

In *Second Life*, one user pushed the boundaries of taste spectacularly with the creation of a new fashion item:

Tiny, adorable baby unicorns that you can hold and cuddle... but they come with a price - You can only get them by having sex with an adult unicorn

- Reporter “Tenshi” [33]

In order to collect a free pet baby unicorn, players (of either gender, since “unicorn seed is magical”) would first have to submit to engaging in graphic intercourse (including appropriate animations and sound effects) with an adult unicorn that had been carefully designed and programmed for this specific purpose.

The key aspect of serendipitous mischief is that the creator may never get to witness the reaction that their play creates. As Bakioglu highlights [1], *Second Life* is a popular target for anti-social griefing, but the environment is also rich with these examples of more positive experimentation with (rather than destruction of) social boundaries.

In normal social interactions online, individuals are bound by the social contract that dictates appropriate behaviour within the system. Through playful mischief, the contract is bent to create unusual and unexpected experiences that can enrich the social environment for everyone involved [21]. The uneasy balance between normality and mischief adds value, and is part of what makes online social interaction such an electrifying experience.

Mischief as Appropriation

Scholars have long recognised how the process of user appropriation has significant power in adding value to tools and services [12,10,13]. Appropriation describes a process through which users subvert technologies and use them for purposes not intended by the designers [30]. Just as cloakroom tickets find new purpose in the organization of raffles [13], technologies can be appropriated for new uses in sometimes surprisingly different contexts. Eglash characterizes this repurposing as a move from the mode of consumption to a form of creativity [13]. In this way, they seize power over tools from the hands of their creators.

In the field of HCI, scholars and designers have discovered that appropriation and the associated empowerment of the users has a profoundly positive and desirable effect. Technologies are designed carefully to support appropriation where possible [12, 20], such as giving users extensive tools to support customisation and tweaking [35].

Social Appropriation

Appropriation is not limited to the use of old tools as new ones for purposes of increased personal efficiency or effectiveness, but may also be used to enhance

inter-personal communication. We argue that mischief in online social communities is an example of the social appropriation of those tools specifically for communicative purposes.

In the case of graffiti, the flat physical features of the modern urban landscape are appropriated by subcultures and used to support social activity. This communication is used to indicate territorial boundaries, such as those between gangs in Los Angeles [22], or ideological boundaries such as those indicated by murals in Belfast [32]. Modern street art appropriates the landscape for mass communication, broadcasting the message of the artist on the walls, trains and busses. Offline and online, there is a conflict between the intentions of the system designer/operator and those of the system user.

As with graffiti, the emergent social norms defined by a group of users in online systems can often be at odds with those designed and expected by the system designers. For example, the massively multiplayer online game *City of Heroes/Villains* (NCSoft) has an established narrative that promotes conflicts between the hero and villain players, and spaces to do so in PvP (player vs. player) areas within the game world. However, the established social norms of the players are that PvP zones became more social spaces where players from the different factions could interact peacefully. Players following the game narrative and attacking the enemies were deemed impolite and disrespectful [26], which directly undermines the wider fiction crafted by the designers.

Despite this conflict, the appropriation of the service to support new social environments can be mutually

beneficial - Perennial academic favourite *Second Life* (Linden Labs) is a virtual world made up of nothing but tools for creativity, which has been appropriated by diverse subcultures of sexual fetishists to serve as an online space for interaction [24]. Whether you are into BDSM or “furries”, there is a virtual “second” place where you are empowered to interact with like-minded people. Although perhaps not the intent of the original design, the process of appropriation to support specific sexual fetishes has created a novel and successful virtual world.

In this way, mischief supports the appropriation of the mechanics and spaces of social systems, by exploring the boundaries of acceptability and possibility within these new contexts. As a result, mechanics of systems can be taken and imbued with important social significance far removed from their original intention.

DISCUSSION

This paper has presented the idea of social mischief at the border of social acceptability within online social systems. Using examples from both games and online communities as a lens, we argue that mischief is an extremely important part of the activities of users of online social systems, as part of the exploration and renegotiation of the implicit social contract.

Mischief is presented as an act of appropriation, as users wrest control of tools from the designer and use them to create new, exciting and usually unexpected social experiences for the greater community, at the borders of social acceptability. In this way, users help forge functioning societies through constant experimentation.

Users of social computing systems have come to realise that they have different interpretations and expectations from online communities. In face-to-face situations, they can negotiate appropriate rules and boundaries for the benefit of a better social experience. Where social interaction is remote with sometimes-anonymous strangers, new issues of social boundaries arise as different users bring their clashing expectations to the shared experience.

This clash of expectations, and the effect on the cultures of the communities, is most clearly seen in the sociopathic acts of grieving and trolling, where anti-social players purposefully disrupt the experiences of others [1,9,7]. While this is an important phenomenon, in this paper we argue that mischief, as distinguished by a positive *intent* on the part of the perpetrator, also serves a vital role in the evolution and development of communities around social computing systems.

Positive forms of mischief have been identified in the form of performance, with the direct actions of a user behaving in a mischievous way in a social situation. It can also be serendipitous, leaving “traps” for others to encounter, and setting up odd and strange experiences, the reactions to which the creator may never experience.

The reason for highlighting mischief is that it appears to be a ubiquitous phenomenon among communities in social computing applications. While approaches to governance can be harsh or lenient, it appears that mischief will always emerge as a constant and indomitable aspect of any online society. Yee proposes that the social and cultural values of communities are shaped and formed by a “social architecture” [40]

inferred from the underlying rules of the system. Just as this application design informs social behaviours, it also informs social edges. While the carefully designed rules and interactions of a shared system may imply one set of behaviours, they also create opportunities for the rules to be gently bent and misused for fun in surprising and unpredictable ways.

The contribution of this paper is in highlighting mischief and playful appropriation of social computing as a positive effect that adds value to the experience of those systems, in opposition to the negative forms of appropriation by sociopathic griefers and trolls. We argue that, just as academics and design professionals embrace the idea of appropriation as a way to add value to practical uses of a service, we should also embrace the acts of social appropriation that create mischievous experiences at the boundaries of social acceptability as part of the constant renegotiation of social norms. We strongly believe that, along with the other appropriative acts of grieving and trolling, understanding the effect of mischief within online communities is just as important as understanding the conventional patterns of use.

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