

# The Basic Principles of Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games in Relation to Philosophy

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## Abstract

The aim of this article is to uncover the relationships between philosophy and Massively Multiplayer Online Role-playing Games (hereinafter MMORPG) and their discussion fora; i.e. the relevance of existential and analytical philosophy to the virtual world of MMORPGs. Content analysis of writings by famous philosophers was employed as a reliable method for gathering relevant data, as it was for collecting useful information from MMORPG discussion fora. The author assumes that MMORPGs originated as a response to the super-technical and increasingly technocratic western world from which players want to escape in order to find a simpler and more challenging, yet virtual world.

**Keywords:** globalisation, chaos, MMORPG, discussion fora, existential philosophy, analytical philosophy.

## Introduction

This article focuses on bringing to light the relationships between classical ontology and analytical philosophy and the virtual world of MMORPGs and their associated discussion fora. To put it more precisely, its key goal is to uncover in which way and to what extent the theories and thoughts of ontological and analytical philosophers apply to the virtual world of MMORPGs. The main theories and ideas of selected philosophers are explored throughout the text.

Challenging questions arise within this context: To what extent do MMORPGs affect the normal life of their players? To what extent does the behaviour of players of MMORPGs correspond to their behaviour as humans in the real world or, alternatively, how does language affect the behaviour of players of MMORPGs?

People of 21st century are often concerned about the modern world being too perplexing, chaotic and unclear. They are under the impression that they cannot keep up

with its rapidly increasing pace, or even that there is no place for them in this merciless and aggressive environment, which often needs only the most predatory and efficient ones. When experiencing these sickening feelings, people face fundamental existential questions which, until recently, lay hidden under the cover of a comfortable, consumer lifestyle. Subject to their life experience, more sensitive individuals will often ask themselves about the meaning of life and their unique role in this world.

## **Methods and Data**

Content analysis of writings by famous philosophers was used as the principal method for retrieving comprehensive data. The philosophers were chosen on the basis of their association with existential and analytical philosophy. The gathered information mainly concerned philosophical issues regarding questions of human existence and language as a means of social interaction; issues which reflect life in the virtual world of MMORPGs and their associated discussion fora, and which therefore stand in stark contrast to the real world. In other words, it deals with the pursuit of the meaning of life in MMORPGs and its virtual discussions and how this is reflected in the local language.

Furthermore, the research is based on the concepts indicated in the keywords and an analysis of articles by selected philosophers drawn from Scopus.com. Content analysis of MMORPG discussion fora was used as a method for identifying language particularities in MMORPG virtual discussions.

The ideas and thoughts of the selected philosophers were subsequently compared and contrasted with the principles, philosophy, behaviour and language of MMORPG players, who are at the same time participants in the associated virtual discussions.

## **Phenomenon of 21st century**

Posing these crucial questions undoubtedly results from an often negative attitude towards worldwide globalisation, which is one of the main characteristics of postmodern society. As a matter of fact, globalisation, combined with incredibly rapid technological development, has greatly affected people's public and private lives (Mezřický 2003); class and social differences have been narrowing (Daneš 2009) which results in the achievement of partial uniformity within society, whereby each individual becomes replaceable and thus loses their unique value.

In parallel with above-mentioned ontological issues, a special kind of internet game, known as Massively Multiplayer Online Role-playing Game (MMORPG), has come into existence. These games enable individuals to escape from the absurd and apparently meaningless real world into a seemingly meaningful and much more attractive virtual environment. The question is whether it is a coincidence that these games, which offer a simpler, safer and more attractive kind of self-realisation than the real world, entered the market at the same time when life speed is increasing, there is information chaos and universal values are being compromised (Aidnik 2017).

## **The key principles of MMORPGs**

MMORPGs devised a certain social structure within which an individual may use their skills and which modern society lacks (IBID 2017). To put it in a nutshell, the individual feels a burning need to belong somewhere, namely among likeminded people that share the same interests, goals and beliefs; whereby the essential need for a certain homogeneity is satisfied (Daneš 2009). According to Bauman (Bauman 2000), a community created on this basis should fulfil three main requirements. Firstly, the future goals or beliefs of the community must be achievable even today; secondly, that desirable goals, attitudes or interests must last into the future; thirdly, that the benefits from already achieved goals must apply to the future as they do to today (Aidnik 2017). All of these require security, steadfastness and permanency, aspects that the virtual world of MMORPGs clearly fulfils.

With respect to traditional cosmology, it could be said that MMORPGs satisfy the human need for natural order in the world, order which cherishes permanent, unshakeable and long-standing values, even though these may sometimes differ. With regards to the origin of MMORPGs, the value of the player-created avatar is calculated on the basis of their equipment, arms and, last but not least, the ability to kill enemies. However, according to Bauman (Bauman 2000), the above-mentioned qualities are in contrast to the condition of the modern world whose values are mostly ephemeral (fleeting, transitory); the author characterises the modern age as 'liquid' and 'light' and attributes to it expressions concerning liquid flow, e.g. dripping, flooding, splashing, spraying, oozing, etc.

In such a steady and well-built virtual world, a player of a particular MMORPG creates their avatar, which represents them throughout the entire game. Therefore, with respect to ontology, a new living being is introduced to the imaginary world. Furthermore, the games take place in real time; day and night regularly alternate and all local events go round in regular cycles.

## **MMORPGs and time**

The concept of time in MMORPGs is also remarkable from other ontological points of view. For example, according to Heidegger (1953), time-awareness is an essential quality of human existence. A human being is not born independent of time, i.e. passive and immortal, but acquires important skills in a lifetime, adopts certain attitudes towards the environment, forms and changes their opinions and convictions and therefore secures the continuity of their existence (Röck 2018). Although MMORPGs take place in real time, a so-called 'Real Time Game', players do not feel any significant time limitation. The time awareness and therefore mortality are only seemingly fact. On the basis of Bauman (Bauman 2000), it could be said that time and death are only episodic qualities in MMORPGs (Aidnik 2017). For example, if a player's avatar dies, or otherwise fails when undertaking a task, they can do the failed mission again. This right to episodicity is a cardinal principle of such games, but is in major conflict with Heidegger's concept of an individual being of a certain time. Since players do not have to

take great care of their avatars – they may be easily deleted or replaced by others - they come into conflict with Heidegger's understanding of the time continuum according to which the autonomous existence of the individual ultimately depends on their finality (Röck 2018). Strictly speaking, in situations where an individual can create an endless number of avatars at any time, the natural time continuum necessary for the fully-fledged existence of an individual is disrupted.

The individual as a fully-fledged being is associated with another of Heidegger's concepts – alienation (Hervás 2018). This means that even though a player has created a lot of avatars and plays with only one, the others still exist, alienated from the time continuum because they do not serve the purpose of their being. On the other hand, none of the avatars are subject to a natural death, even if a player does not use them for a long time, i.e. they are alienated from their own death(s) (Röck 2018). In this way, the virtual being is subject to delay and loses its finality (Röck 2018), i.e. its mortality depends on other, external factors (technical conditions, etc.) which are only loosely related to philosophy.

However, Heidegger and Karl Jaspers, found a comprehensive solution to the issue of alienation in the depth and intensity of the experience of extreme and critical situations, which convey to us the genuine and true essence of our existence (Vlasova 2017). The aforementioned authors refer to this state as an experience of fear, anxiety and fight or, in contrast, happiness, wonderment and surprise. The suggested solution also applies to the virtual world of MMORPGs, where individual players also feel the need to experience critical situations in their lives (Jaspers 2012). However, the imaginary MMORPG world does not usually provide this opportunity for several reasons. Firstly, avatars are artificial creatures that have only external characteristics such as gender, hair and skin colour, features, clothes, etc., whilst their internal characteristics solely depends on the will of the particular player; intense emotions such as anger, happiness, doubt, sadness, etc. can only be expressed through a limited range of emoticons. The second issue is the conflict between the environment in which the avatar is situated and the player's real space. As a matter of fact, neither of these places instigates a perilous (Vlasova 2017) or extreme situation that could be considered acutely stimulating. After all, the virtual world of MMORPGs is not a real one. Even the most alarming situations can be successfully dealt with by clicking on the mouse or hitting the keyboard. On the other hand, the feeling of supposed security and safety behind the computer screen and in the comfort of ones home, which implies real space, rarely provides powerful stimuli for instigating dangerous and/or escalated extreme situations, which is absolutely vital for confirming our own existence.

### **Extreme virtual experiences**

The demand for escalated extreme situations was satisfied with the introduction of discussion fora and game chats, where an individual can utilise their skills via contact with other participants, i.e. real beings linked in a virtual, yet, to some extent, real space.

However, crucial issues of communication come to the fore. By and large, discussion fora and game chats are established on the basis of different principles than face-to-face communication. One of them, as mentioned by Bauman, is episodicity, or ephemerality (Aidnik 2017). That is to say that with one click of the mouse a dialogue can be stopped, scathing comments deleted, or a discussion skipped without gaining a deeper insight into the topic. Bauman (2000) likens this situation to two neighbours incoherently shouting at each other over a fence without touching on the subject. As a result, they only try to draw attention to themselves. All the same, trying to come up with appealing and catchy utterances that differ from the rest poses a complicated problem. As a consequence, those communicating with one another fall back on aggressive attitudes and opinions that draw attention to their comments. Nevertheless, these irreverent attitudes are necessarily subjectivised in order to be able to put up with the other communicator's hostile attitudes, irrespective of whether they have anything in common with the objective truth.

### **Objective and subjective truth**

At this point, it is important to examine the issues according to a branch of philosophy called Positivism. In a similar manner, the contentious issue of MMORPG discussion fora may be regarded as an arena where "fights" for the objective truth, i. e. facts, take place.

Positivism, and in particular neo-positivism, tries to determine objective observable facts. Within this context, participants of MMORPG discussion fora strive to reveal the objective truth in relation to a specific game situation. However, this relentless pursuit is bound to fail due to the enormity of the natural system of these virtual public discussions. The well-known sociologist, Miroslav Disman, claims that uncovering the objective truth with regards to a certain reality is not possible for a human being due to the vastness of the natural systems in which the concerned subject finds themselves (Disman 1991). The author notes that, irrespective of the technological development of modern society and the players' reluctance to tell the truth, the principle of incomplete knowledge is absolute. Furthermore, absolute truth is subject to stochastic (probability) analysis (IBID 1991), so that it is an individual themselves who decides which alternative is so important to be considered the truth.

### **Language as an indicator of the truth**

Nonetheless, a skilled worker armed with relevant facts is of critical importance even in the virtual world of MMORPG public discussions. The key requirement is to either use reliable indicators that suggest the extent of the validity of the utterance, or which at least approximate the truth acknowledged by a specific individual. Within this context, it is language itself that is regarded as the most valuable indicator.

In fact, according to some distinguished philosophers, careful language analysis may indicate whether a specific utterance makes sense. In addition, some of them state that classical philosophy precisely concerns the in-depth analysis of language and the

application of scientific methodology (Blecha 2002). Such philosophers include the likes of Rudolf Carnap, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Willard Van Orman Quine and Richard Rorty.

In his works, the former carried out an analysis of syntax, which he called logical syntax (Koscholke 2017). That is to say that he did not consider the semantics of the utterance, but only its formal ordering, on the basis of which he assigned it its meaningfulness. With respect to Chomsky's transformational grammar, the surface structure would be the most important one (Yang et al. 2017) since its grammatical accuracy, alternatively inaccuracy, would affect the entire depth of the structure of the utterance (Tuboly 2018).

Nevertheless, as far as the language of MMORPG discussion fora is concerned, it is a long way from being grammatically correct. To put it more precisely, it does not correspond to the morphological and syntactical rules of a particular language. For example, those communicating with one another tend to use contracted words or sentences, completely ignore punctuation and the appropriate use of capital letters or proper names. Furthermore, the participants improve their communications with the use of colourful emoticons which either enhance, or weaken the illocutionary force of the utterance. On the whole, the language in the virtual world of MMORPG discussion fora has fallen into a state of total chaos, which is in conflict with Carnap's requirements for logical syntax, and which requires systematic and detailed analysis.

Even so, this very specific and stylised language observes some unwritten grammatical rules. A failure to do so would make even partial understanding impossible. In truth, the language of MMORPG discussion fora adheres to a certain universal principle acquired by all participants. This fundamental principle underlies Chomsky's concept of universal grammar, which proclaims that a general linguistic knowledge is innate (Yang et al. 2017). It can be equally said that a certain disposition for such a specific and stylised language for the virtual world of MMORPG discussion fora is, at least partially, inborn.

Apart from this, there are also other, rather practical factors to take into consideration. For example, almost all MMORPGs are created in English; those communicating with one another must therefore have at least a rudimentary knowledge of this language. Furthermore, it is necessary to know the 'lore' (context) of the game, otherwise, even if an utterance complied with the rules of logical syntax and its meaningfulness was validated (Carnap introduces the term 'verifiability'), an individual who does not know the context would consider the statement meaningless.

Equally, it cannot be empirically proven that there is an innate universal grammar within such a stylised language as the jargon of MMORPG discussion fora. This language is simply too young and non-uniform to make such a bold empirical statement. This implies that a number of years will need to pass in order to determine whether the jargon survived within the rapidly changing world.

It goes without saying that the children and young people of today are inclined to understand this specific jargon more than the older generation. The reason is that the young people of today are literally overwhelmed by English from their childhood (Sádlo

2017). After all, it is the language on which most of the virtual public discussions are based. As a result, people commonly use English expressions which have become so familiar that their origin has been forgotten and they have been adopted in the Czech language accordingly, thereby becoming neologisms. That is not to say that a comprehensive understanding of this jargon is not as difficult for young people as it is for the older generation (Bley-Vroman 2018).

Likewise, a kind of partial bilingualism arises. That is to say those individuals may not be able to manage the grammatical system of the particular language, but they are able to subconsciously use a certain part of its lexicon within the proper context and without thinking about the translation into their mother tongue. Chomsky's concept of universal grammar plays a very important role in this.

As previously stated and supported by Carnap, some basic language rules must be observed, even on internet discussion fora. Without adherence to this principle, this virtual world would be thrown into utter chaos. That would result in its total disintegration. As a consequence, even though those communicating with one another in these fora only rarely follow the morphological-syntactic rules of the given language system, they are, in some way, able to **successfully communicate**.

### **Essential features of the language of MMORPG discussion fora**

In his work "Aspects of the Theory of Syntax", Noam Chomsky suggests four transformational phases necessary for the process of communication, namely lexical, syntactic, logical and phonetic (Yang et al. 2017). These phases will be discussed in reverse order, starting with phonetics.

Since the majority of communication on internet discussion fora is in the written form, the phonetic phase can be ruled out. On the other hand, the logical aspect is always present because most of the participants are familiar with the discussed topic, understand the context and accept its discourse. The syntactic and morphological aspects, as previously mentioned, are either neglected or ignored. However, the lexical phase is the cornerstone of communication on MMORPG discussion fora. That is to say that the language of these internet fora is solely built on the lexical aspects of language. The field of semantics, which assigns meaning to particular lexemes, is closely related to these lexical aspects.

As a matter of fact, participants of MMORPG discussion fora often tend to link together lexemes without syntactic continuity, although with deep lexical-semantic interconnections. On the whole, although the communication on MMORPG discussion fora is not very cohesive (syntax), it is, for well-informed users, entirely coherent (semantics). It is therefore possible to state that the grammatical-lexical aspects of such stylised jargon is comprehensible for those acquainted with it.

### **Pragmatic aspect of the language**

A more contentious issue to that of the grammatical-lexical aspects of the language is that of the pragmatics thereof. This linguistic field explores the circumstances under which a particular utterance is made. In addition, it analyses the relationships between individual statements and constitutes an integral part of a discipline called semiotics (a study of language signs) (Gasparatou 2018). Gasparatou introduces the concept of speech acts and emphasizes their importance in every day communication. In relation to MMORPG discussion fora, indirect speech acts, i.e. questions or requests, play the most important role. The basic philosophy of these acts is actually very simple. An individual raises a question in order to get some advice. Subsequently, answers, which ideally initiate a lively discussion, follow.

However, a serious and reasoned discussion only rarely takes place in the virtual world of MMORPG discussion fora, whereby a total failure of speech acts poses one of the biggest problems not only to these internet fora, but also to internet communication in its entirety. As previously noted, it could be likened to neighbours incoherently shouting at each other over a fence (Bauman 2000). These acts of speech fail in all their basic components, i.e. in illocution, locution and perlocution (Chin 2018). While locution, which means the statement itself, is comprehensible to acquainted users despite its morphological-syntactic deficiency, illocution (the intention of the utterance) and perlocution (the effect of the utterance) often fail to serve their purpose. J. L. Austin, the person who came up with the concept of speech acts, claims that special circumstances dictate an appropriate verbal reaction (Gasparatou 2018). The following lines are given as an example of the conflict between illocution and perlocution. A. refers to a questioner and B. represents a respondent.

A. Is there anybody who would help me?

B. Sorry, but no.

The example illustrates not only a total failure of the basic principles on which speech is established, but also the disruption of the natural flow of communication.

### **Discussion fora in the language of post-modern**

The arguments outlined above correspond to the issue tackled by another analytical philosopher, Richard Rorty. He claims that not a single lexicon should be privileged. This implies that everyone has the right to use the vocabulary that satisfies their communicative needs (Rorty 1989). In his work 'Contingency, Irony and Solidarity', the author denies the existence of the only universal truth and declares that the truth comes into existence only through an individual human utterance (Bacon 2017), i.e. each individual sees the world "through their own eyes". This means that an individual is entitled to accept any truth which corresponds to their immediate needs. All the same, having said that, Rorty degrades the universal and objective truth to the personal level. By doing so, he subverts and corrupts the essentials of philosophy or, to put it precisely, ontology. As a matter of fact, if Rorty's claims about partial personal truths were real, the



basic concept of truth would lose its meaning since there can be only one truth. Apart from that, Rorty also failed to admit the truth with regards to those things that may be transformed into language signs (symbols), which is speech. As individuals significantly differ in life experience, attitudes, opinions and beliefs, and each has their idiolect, individual truths would have to vary in line with the number of human beings in the world. As a result, the world would slide into total chaos, which would mean the end of the world as we know it.

This growing trend may be best reflected on internet discussion fora. As a matter of fact, people literally shout their personal truths and beliefs at one another without considering the arguments of the other participants or empathising with their situation. Bauman calls these people 'flaneurs', i.e. people who "shout" their beliefs or opinions without setting off a factual reaction to a discussed topic. In fact, their only goal is to set other participants against one another, which usually results in ruining the discussed topic (Bauman 2006). In addition, Rorty's strongly pragmatic view of language and communication only helps to fervently support these flaneurs. It might also be one of the root causes for the chaos surrounding information dissemination and the sharing of half-truths in the modern age.

Having said that, it is not my belief that Carnap's logical syntax, which only considers empirically validated and grammatically correct utterances as meaningful, would defuse this alarmingly chaotic situation. By and large, analytical philosophers such as Carnap and Rorty represent two extreme perspectives regarding language and philosophy, which, in my opinion, have lost their meaning in the modern post-factual age. Accordingly, J. F. Lyotard, a philosopher and critic of the post-modern age, declared that people of the modern age no longer create speech combinations with the necessary stability (Lyotard 1984). Furthermore, the characteristics of those combinations which are produced are usually incommunicable (Irwin 2018).

The internet discussion fora of 21st century have therefore created individuals whom Emmanuel Lévinas, a French philosopher, refers to as sovereign subjects (Greenaway 2018). According to him, people who see the universal truth only in their own, highly subjectivised world are considered sovereign subjects. The author mostly deals with the issue of ethics and proclaims that effective communication between individuals is only possible in a face-to-face confrontation (Lévinas 1979). Furthermore, he declares that there is something unbreakable and invincible in the human face, i.e. something that denies any unsubstantiated claims against the absolute truth, which therefore renders the individual disarmed (Glass 2018). However, this direct encounter is not possible within the internet world. These arguments suggest that those individuals that engage in public internet discussions can never reach a general agreement because the basic components of responsible and good quality communication, such as face-to-face confrontation, have been removed.

## **Results**

As can be deduced from the positions set out in this article, the virtual world of MMORPGs has deep roots in basic ontological and analytical issues, which have been present throughout human existence.

MMORPGs and their discussion fora seem to be the logical outcome of a super-technological and technocratic western world.

As a result, players eagerly seek an escape from its frenetic pace and a means by which to relativise the archetypal values of the modern age. They do this in the virtual game environment, subject to a strict, but clearly defined order, which offers an attractive and tremendously varied world where everyone has equal chances to succeed.

Furthermore, the local language is very specific as far as its morphological-syntactic and lexical aspects are concerned.

These language particularities reflect a very non-standard behaviour and rules, which each participant must adhere to.

## **Discussion**

With respect to the results, the question arises whether the players and communicators are able to successfully adapt to the real world when taking into consideration the sharp differences with the virtual one. For example, with regards to language and grammar, players tend to neglect, or completely ignore grammatical structures, as well as the semantic and contextual rules of the language when they speak. This raises concerns about whether players “returning” from the virtual world are able to adapt to the language used in the normal world, or if they bring with them their distorted jargon, thereby wreaking even more havoc to the already poor levels of communication in today’s world.

By and large, it seems that players should heed the advice provided by the creators of one of the world’s most famous MMORPGs – World of Warcraft. They advise players to: bring your friends to World of Warcraft, but don’t forget to take them back as well, and enjoy all things in moderation, even World of Warcraft.

The following table summarises the basic philosophical concepts marked in bold throughout the text:

Tab. 1

<b>MMORPG virtual life</b>	<b>Human life</b>
Security	Insecurity
Episodicity	Long-standing values
Steadiness	Instability
Permanency	Ephemerity
Alienation	Fear, anxiety, fight
Alienation	Happiness, wonderment, surprise
Alienation	Face-to-face communication

Source: Author

The following table presents the suggested grammatical and lexical differences in language between the virtual world of MMORPGs and real human life:

Tab. 2

<b>MMORPG virtual life</b>	<b>Human life</b>
Individual truth	Universal truth
Failing illocution, locution and perlocution	Preserving illocution, locution and perlocution
Ignoring morphology	Heeding morphology
Ignoring syntax	Heeding syntax
Ignoring context	Heeding context
Ignoring logic	Heeding logic

Source: Author

## Conclusion

The phenomenon of MMORPGs and the associated internet discussion fora will surely survive the next few decades, unless its participants find a more appealing and meaningful world in which they feel valued and respected; compelling needs which the real modern world is failing to satisfy.

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