GAMING SUBCULTURE, SOCIAL CONTROL AND VIRTUAL CRIMINALITY: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC ACCOUNT

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Abstract

In this study I use participant observation to examine the dynamics of formal and informal social control within an online game as they relate to the formation and control of deviant and criminal behaviors within this setting. This examination draws theoretically on the concepts of organic and mechanical solidarities, referencing various examples of social control constructs within the specific online setting, and drawing conclusions regarding on and offline subcultural structures and deviance more broadly. In the observed setting, a subgroup of players who regularly steal from other players serve to illustrate a preference for informal social control among deviant actors in virtual settings. Further findings suggest an interaction between formal and informal social control that results in a dynamic reciprocity between control mechanisms within subcultures both online and offline, and furthermore that these dynamics are especially important in the formation of deviance. Methodological and Theoretical implications are discussed, emphasizing the important opportunity for criminology to harness online settings as a site for studying crime and deviance.

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Introduction

From 2000 to 2011, according the estimates, the number of worldwide Internet users has climbed from three hundred sixty one million to over one two billion (Miniwatts Marketing Group, 2011). Regarding online gaming specifically, data from 2008 suggests that online game subscriptions totaled more than sixteen million at that time, up from just over one million in 2000 (Sterling, 2008). Many studies have taken advantage of this growing social sphere as a research context, exploring sociological concepts such as identity, culture, social networking, and deviance.

While a growing number of criminological inquiries have explored Internet (or cyber) crime as it relates to virtual worlds (see, e.g. Yar, 2006, Wall, 2007, Williams, 2006, McQuade, 2006, and McGuire, 2007), these works tend to define virtual in a broad sense as meaning online. Thus, relatively few criminological inquiries have provided critical and theoretical examinations of deviant behaviors within online games specifically. Fewer still have assessed the specific role of social control's role in defining in-game deviant and criminal behavior. More broadly speaking, criminology's study of gaming has traditionally focused on the relationship between exposure to and interaction with video game violence and "real" deviance and delinquency.

As such, this study seeks to partially fill a gap in the criminological literature by exploring the online game as a subculture in which social control helps define player typologies, many of which are analogous to offline criminal typologies. As such, this study attempts to achieve three goals: (1) contribute generally to subculture and social control theory; (2) apply these theories specifically to virtual interactions in order to better understand virtual deviance and criminality, developing a link between control, subculture and the construction of various typologies of thieves within the virtual world examined here (Ultima Online); (3) discuss the use of virtual worlds as a setting for testing social and criminological theory.

Traditional Studies of Gaming & Crime

In its contemporary form, there is little doubt that video and computer gaming is emerging as an important form of leisure. Nevertheless, many studies have focused primarily on the connection between video game playing and negative behaviors (Bryce & Rutter, 2003). As early as 1987, a study of British youths in custody compared delinquency between gamblers and video game players, finding that those in the self-identified gambler group had fewer problems than those in the video game playing group (Huff & Collinson, 1987). Contemporary studies continue to explore the alleged connection between simulated and real problem behavior (Anderson & Bushman 2001). A 2005 study of media exposure and violence suggests a link between aggressive and disruptive behaviors and exposure to both video games and television (Kronenberger & Mathews, 2005).

From the results of a controlled experimental design, Anderson and Murphy (2003) conclude that short-term violent video game exposure is positively correlated with levels of aggression and that in-game character sex may also be correlated with perceptions and instances of real violence. Both Anderson and Murphy (2003) and Kirsch (1998) provide evidence of a link

between an individual's extent of aggression an exposure to violence in video games. Kirsch (1998) suggests that playing violence video games may increase the tendency to perceive ambiguous conflicts as hostile. Similarly, Irwin and Gross (1995) provide evidence that children exhibit higher levels of interpersonal and object aggression while playing violent video games. Irwin and Gross (1995) also focus on aspects of aggression during and shortly following gaming sessions.

Competing evidence suggests that aggression is not the sole byproduct of gaming. A meta-analysis of the connection between exposure to video game violence and real aggression suggests that there is a lesser connection between gaming and violence in older adolescents and adults than in children (Bensley & Eenwyk, 2001). Cooper and Mackie (1986) also suggest that gender may be an important factor. In their study, male free time play proved to be less affected by video gaming than female free time play. Interestingly, there is also some evidence indicating that exposure to violent television programming is more strongly correlated with aggression than is video gaming (Sherry, 2001).

From "Game" to "Virtual World"

Despite a sociological focus on the potential negative impacts of gaming, there is some empirical support for a correlation between gaming and social risk taking and social adaptability (Boleskina 2000). Additionally, though indeed violence may be more prevalent in games than even researchers have realized (e.g. Thompson & Haninger, 2001), the overshadowed reality is that games may often symbolize cultural and social imperatives and facilitate interactive situations beyond those exclusively involving violence. Online gaming is certainly an example of a virtual space in which these cultural imperatives and interactive possibilities are played out. Prior to the Internet, social gaming took different forms. The arcade served (and still does serve) as a physical space where players must engage in face-to-face interaction. In 1984, Ellis provided evidence that youth deviance such as curfew violations was positively correlated with time spent in arcades. The Internet, however, offers a meeting place that is irrespective of time and space constraints.

Regarding online gaming specifically, Anderson et al. (2004) study one online gaming community to assess the demographic composition of players, subsequently discussing the meaning of in-game role-selection and self-investment in the game world. An important finding of their study is that adults reportedly appreciate the social aspects of the game experience more than adolescents, who indicate that game features and violence are more appealing aspects of the game.

Regardless of in-game preferences, there exists an undeniable potential for peer interaction and the development of subcultures in online games. Warr (2002) notes that technological advancement has allowed for the development of "virtual peer groups." Warr correctly suggests that "peers one meets in the virtual peer group are not always law–abiding or nonviolent" (Warr, 2002, p.87). Expanding beyond the concept of peer-groups, Yates and Littleton (1999) suggest that gaming indeed expands to the cultural level, forming gaming niches that represent a macro-gaming culture as well as numerous gaming subcultures.

Essentially, because of the Internet, youth (or any other persons) may participate in subcultures that they otherwise would not choose or to which they would lack access. This subcultural participation can take many forms. Although Warr (2002) refers to the virtual peer group with reference to potential deviance, broader possibilities for interactive effects are illustrated by a study of Japanese game players constituting "electronic friendships" – pairs or groups of peers sharing common bonds online (Colwell & Kato, 2003). It is of particular importance to the current study to identify where these friendships transition from groups of youth or adults sharing common interests to definable subcultures. In a general sense there may exist a "gaming culture," but the current research focuses specifically on a subculture of gamers, and at a more micro level, a subculture of deviant players within this group. The definitional requirements of a subcultures used to inform this perspective are drawn from Coleman et al.'s (1961) and Fine and Kleinman's (1979) assertions that subcultures require the presence and exchange of symbolic artifacts, behaviors and norms in socializing, teaching and reinforcing behaviors within a group. It is this framework that informs the current inquiry's setting.

The social aspects of online subcultures are indeed complex, and arguably distinct from offline subcultures in at least some ways. One specific aspect of the online subculture as it relates to peers and peer interaction is the presence or absence of trust in peers over the Internet. Online trust dynamics are characterized by Bierhoff and Vornefeld (2004) as trust in a "system" rather than necessarily in a person. In the current study, the thieves' guild, though housing admittedly deviant actors, represents what Cheshire and Cook (2004) refer to as an online "trust group." Of specific importance to the current setting are Deikmann and Wyder's (2003) argue that mutual trust is essential to online trading. In the current research setting, I observe that the "prisoners dilemma" represented by online trade is often played out in the online game.

Ultimately, as Denegri-Knott and Taylor (2005) suggest, a widely recognized definition of the online community has not yet emerged in the literature; therefore the labeling of certain online behaviors as "deviant" within the context of such a community (or subcultures, as I will argue in this case) proves a difficult task. However, their study – as well as a growing number of studies of online gaming criminality and deviance – does provide a precedent in the literature for the study of both macro and micro forces in constructing definitions of deviance in online social settings (see, e.g. Downing, 2009, 2010).

Lastly, of particular importance to the current study is the formation and role of social control in the virtual subculture. Wall and Williams (2007) present findings that suggest that the discourse of "community" is frequently used to regulate online group members' behavior. Similar to the findings of the current study, Wall & Williams (2007) also suggest that control mechanisms in Internet communities offer conflicting forces of influence over member behavior and collective development of behavioral norms, values, and codes.

The Current Research Setting

The assertion of this inquiry is that virtual world interactions can inform sociological, and specifically (I will suggest) criminological theory. As such, it is important that the virtual

world setting possess characteristics of—if not the offline world—a setting where social dynamics can and do play out in a way that allows for observation and meaningful analysis. Indeed, while throughout this paper I will often evoke the use of the term "virtual world" to describe the research setting, these games are generally referred to within the larger gaming community as MMORPGS, or massive multiplayer online role playing games. In an effort to clarify the research context, it is perhaps best to define this game type by deconstructing its acronym.

"Massive," firstly, refers to the size of the game world, which is large enough in scale to simulate a virtual (in this case fantasy) world; it secondly modifies the term "multiplayer," suggesting that numerous players will log into and interact in the game world. While it is possible for a player to log onto the game and "solo," or play alone, he or she is still connected through the Internet with other players who may interact freely with him, should their paths in the game cross. The "online" portion of the classification is rather self-explanatory and further emphasizes that the game is played with others online. Lastly, "role playing" is a specific gaming genre where players assume the role of a character and typically develop his or her attributes.

In the case of Ultima Online, role playing is both a general descriptor of the game type and a term used by players to describe acting out a character within the game (by using a medieval dialect, etc.). It should be noted that most players self reportedly do not role play by using this dialect.

This type of game typically lacks an end-point. While it may present participants with goals in the form of "quests" to defeat a certain enemy or obtain a certain item, the game studied here generally allows for and promotes player driven narratives. As such, they allow for a relatively large amount of freedom with respect to both player interaction and role assumptions. For this reason the online game is an ideal setting in which to study deviance and virtual criminality.

Method

The current study uses triangulated qualitative methods within an ethnographic framework. Past studies of social control have used interviews, observations, and triangulation through cross-checking criminal records, newspaper articles, and other sources (e.g. Hafley & Tewksbury, 1995; Morrill & McKee, 1993). Here I use a similar technique, using interviews and observations of actual participants triangulated with observations of web forum dialogue.

With respect to online participant observation, Williams (2007) notes that the researcher must remain reflexive and adaptive to rapidly changing settings, both regarding participants and the physical settings. I was able to achieve this adaptability as well as triangulate data sources by exploiting the natural design of the observed setting. More specifically, the game setting studied here is divided into multiple redundant environments called servers. When players log onto the game they must choose which server to play on, and they interact with other players on that specific server. The primary "production servers" offer two game-worlds between which players may travel; one is a protected setting in which players may only attack

with declaration and consensus, while the other allows for near complete freedom of behavior-choice. A production server offers only the latter of these contexts. Lastly, a "test server" offers both contexts but lacks formal social control to deter offensive or disruptive speech. During the course of data collection, I observed all three of these server types, providing comparison groups that better illuminate the emergent social control dynamics within the game.

One specific focus of this research is thieves within the game. Social control is especially pronounced around issues involving thieves and other deviant classes within the game. In this study, a thieves' guild serves as the primary unit of analysis. A guild is essentially an organized group of players who formally recognize their group-status and often complete tasks in the game together. Beyond this unit of analysis, a more macro unit is represented by the aforementioned server on which the observed thieves' guild is housed. By observing the thieves' guild directly, its housing server, and two other servers, I was able to more effectively capture a representative sample of the gaming population in general, thus increasing the internal validity of this study. Analyzed forum threads also helped to capture persons, behaviors, and opinions emergent outside of the researcher's frame of reference while ethnographically engaged in the game setting itself. In an effort to bolster the external validity of the findings offered here, I have also consulted forum dialogues concerning both the game in question as well as many other popular online games.

Regarding sample size specifically, on the server in which the primary unit of analysis, the guild, was situated, roughly 1,681 other guilds also exist. The guild under examination represented 189 members at the time of this study. In an effort to protect the privacy of participants, identifying characteristics of guild members and other game players will remain undisclosed; however, the specific guild of inquiry represents a cross-section of age and gender, housing at least several dozen active players of each gender and of each age group (adult and youth).

My own in-game participation lasted several years, though data collection beyond observation occurred roughly three to four months during with play time averaging roughly two to three hours daily. Play time was distributed across the three chosen servers, with the majority of play time on the guild's home server. Additionally, I evaluated approximately 100 forum threads were evaluated, as well as open-ended surveys responded to by twelve players. These surveys inquired about motives for and methods of playing certain character roles in the game. In addition, I also conducted open-ended interviews out-of-game through the use of online chat. Dialogue, in-game observations and texts, interviews, and surveys offer cross-validation for the findings presented here.

Unfortunately, text-based (on or offline) research often lacks the luxury of access to vocal or physical cues. In the current study I attempted to overcome this shortcoming by observation of and participation with research participants over a lengthy duration. Prolonged exposure to participants enables a greater understanding of the personality traits of the participants and enables a limited amount of implied nonverbal meaning to be attributed to text comments. In addition, recorded voice chat reveals certain verbal nuances lost in text dialogue.

Given the desirability of becoming familiar with the research setting and participants, coupled with a need to be accepted in this setting in order to successfully study it, my initial strategy for entering the research field was to assume the role of a thief. This role was assumed with the aid of a field contact who served to initiate me into a guild housing a number of thieves. Entrance into this guild required me to agree to a certain guild code, as well as complete an interview with the contact person. My role became less participatory and less obtrusive, however, as the guild subsequently allowed me simply to observe, rather than engage in, activities. As data collection came to a close, since I was comfortable with the amount of data collected, my involvement allowed for more direct inquiry that would not hinder the integrity of the data already collected.

Field notes from the aforementioned auditory interaction were compiled and analyzed alongside saved texts transcripts from in-game dialogues. These data were organized and analyzed thematically and coded using domain frames generated inductively from field notes.

These methods are in many ways similar to a cross-qualitative approach often generally employed in social anthropology (e.g. Berg, 2004), wherein a conceptualization and coding form are generated from inductively examining field notes and data as they amass. Similar to what is the case in ethnography, these field notes provide contextual clarity and situate data into domains that provide a basis for analysis. Law agencies and court studies have also set a precedent for this methodology, combining the aforementioned natural experimental design with the analytical tools of interviews and field notes (e.g. Cook, 2006; Shafer & Mastrofski, 2005).

Findings

The discipline of criminology houses a number of social control theories, many of which consider micro-level interactions between, for example, parents and children (see, e.g. Hagan, 1989; Hirschi, 1969) and those that consider individual traits that may be influenced by parents, peers, or criminal justice actors (see, e.g. Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). Many of these theories also draw on concepts of formal and informal control mechanisms (e.g. Reckless' (1961) notion of inner and outer containments). The distinction between informal and formal social control is often synonymous with the divide between organic and mechanical structures – for example, the difference between household socialization and actions taken on behalf of the criminal justice system.

Because the primary goal of this analysis is to explore the relationship between formal and informal social controls' influence on deviant behavior, I have chosen to draw on a broader and more culturally focused concept of social control, specifically that proposed by Durkheim. Durkheim defines crime as those actions, or "breaks" from normative behavior, which offend societal sentiments or the "collective conscience" (Durkheim 1933). He suggests the a collective norm-system is pronounced on the grounds by which the collective conscience is strong and clearly defined. Durkheim notes that an organic division of labor stimulates co-operative approaches to social control, rather than repressive ones (Durkheim, 1933). In the broadest sense this co-operative (or organic) form of social control is less

formal; in the language of the social control literature, it can in fact be referred to as informal social control.

With regard to social control schematics within the virtual world studied here, division of classes and roles does not necessarily promote organic solidarity, suggesting that the distinction between informal and formal social control is complex and fluid. The following sections will first establish a working definition of social control, describing its emergent forms within the game, and then examine how social control leads to the development of diverse deviant typologies.

This examination also draws on Weber's (1947) notion that reproduction of values and norms depends on the nature of the separation between work and home. This separation reinforces Durkheim's distinction between formal and informal types of social control. In Weber's case, it is argued that a shift away from informal reproductive of culture within the home results in an increased formal reproduction in schools, corrections efforts, and other government spheres. This shift is similar to Durkheim's organic/mechanical distinction, and will also help inform the basis for the analysis of social control in the current setting.

The "Virtual" Social Contract

From my observations of the game world in study, I perceive that formal social control is essentially broken into two components: (1) a general contract or terms of service that players agree upon in order to play; and (2) an in-game policing component whereby employees of the games' manufacturer respond to calls and survey the gaming environment for breaches of the terms of service.

The terms of service function as a social contract, dictating to players what they can and cannot do with respect to the possibility of being banned from the gaming environment and in return offering players an assured level of equity and fairness. Many players express a belief that this contract is rigid and void of player input, representing an arbitrary set of rules that is inconsistently applied. One player asserts that " I have said this before. The creators of worlds get to define the rules. If we like not the rules perhaps we can create our own world?' While another suggests that 'unless [you] say the big bad N word, the GMs ignore the page."

Another player complains that "they wouldn't let me [the player] have Gangues Kahn [as a name], but there is a thief hiding at the IDOC [a collapsing house] with that name." In addition to conveying a perceived unfairness, the thief's defiance in this case represents a common thread that emerges, one that suggests players taking on deviant roles are more likely to bend and test formal social controls in general. The game creator's contractual requirement for game participants represents a more common conflict between user and creator with respect to ownership of virtual goods (Klang, 2004). This ownership conflict is evidenced by conflicts with formal social control constructs.

Indeed, players in this particular game show a strong sense of connectivity between "virtual" goods and real-world value. Many in-game items are sold via online auction sites for real-world currency and much of the efforts of the game's social contract at the most formal level

relate to the policing of real-world sale of fraudulent items within the game. According to a press release by the game publisher, and reinforced by some players, the removal of some one trillion fraudulent gold [the game's currency] from the game's economy equated (which at the time was valued at one million U.S. dollars). Therefore, while for some the social contract is merely a means of electronically signing a document, for others it represents a highly influential dynamic of social control that impacts both in-game and real-world situations.

The interaction between real-world commerce and in-game commerce is so important to players and developers alike that one developer commented on his decision to ban a number of players with the following: '[This] is a GAME, not a freakin' business, and while we don't ban players for selling things for cash, we're not going to look very kindly on those who harm the game in doing so.' He goes on to justify his outlook, suggesting that 'If any of this sounds harsh, well, I suppose it is. I love this game, and I really don't like people who try to do it harm.'
As these remarks convey, game masters are not the only persons responsible for enforcing formal social control. Extremely deviant players or groups of players sometimes force action at a higher level. An interesting example of a deviant player's behavior altering formal social control was shared by a current thief in the game:

> The GMs [game masters] said he generated more GM complaints than any other player at the time (around 100 calls a week, I think). He never cheated, never verbally harassed anyone, and followed all of the rules. However, because of the brutal and heartless nature of how thoroughly he won, about a dozen people a week would quit because of him. His influence made it all the way up above the GMs authority and someone at [the publishing company] made a "business decision" and banned his account on the basis that he was a "Problem Player" and that a single player's account wasn't worth 20 per week.

This player represents a "problem player" or, in the eyes of some fellow players and formal administrators of the game, a delinquent "other." The aforementioned quotation illustrates the formal reaction to this type of player, but informal dynamics also emerge as important to managing and controlling such players.

Informal Social Control

While I observed formal social control in the current setting as pronounced primarily by the two structures discussed above, in-game informal social control spans a much vaster spectrum of types and agencies of implementation. At the macro level, I found institutions of informal social control to be organic, mechanical, or a hybrid of the two. More specifically, my observations suggest that within the game, macro-informal controls align more closely with formal control objectives while micro-informal controls serve individualized group or subcultural needs. This interaction is illustrated below.

For many players, a lack of formal control lies at the heart of the interactive nature of the gaming subculture. One player had this to say:

…what is the point of playing without the danger from other players, the risk, the challenge, the forced player interaction, etc., that [a server] offers. Otherwise, it's a one-player game.

Thus, one of the primary roles of informal social control, as well as the roles of individuals and their respective subcultural involvement, is to manage conflict. Wall and Williams (2007) attribute informal social control to a community discourse, whereby individual accountability is promoted through group assessment of individual membership and behavior. In the current study the conflict management schematic operates within layers of community (or here I suggest subcultures) but also forms a complex relationship between player typology and macro/micro social control constructs.

Organic Informal Social Control

Whereas formal policing agents and contractual policies form a generally mechanical formal control mechanism, informal social control allows for individual and sub-group reaction to formally and informally define deviance.

I observed an example of this difference in the dialogue of player merchants, debating the possibility of individually responding to the influx of illegal items within the game. Within this particular online game, it is possible for players to buy and sell in-game items through a system of automated vendors whose prices are set by the players themselves. Many players rent vendors in shops owned by wealthier players. In response to an influx of illegally-created in-game items, formal sanctions imposed bans on those who create the items, whereas shop owners establish an informal policy of boycotting the stocking and sale of such items. As a result, one player poses the question:

> I was wondering how the players… feel about all the illegal items that are being created and sold on venders… and do shop owners have a responsibility to monitor what is being sold out of their shops?

Expressing a general consensus, a fellow shop owner responds: 'I think that sounds like a good policy, I really think shop owners need to be more aggressive on the selling of illegal items from their shops.'

This is an important example of the presence of informal social control mechanisms within a non-deviant realm of the gaming environment. As another example, "bank sitters" [players who spend most of their time at the in-game banks] will often police the open-air market, calling out players who attempt to sell items for prices that are considered high or unreasonable.

The selling of items for unreasonable prices is an example of a norm violation that constitutes deviance but does so in a distinctly different fashion than theft or murder of another player. I observed that offenses such as selling items at high prices or dealing in suspect merchandise were often considered more serious than virtually physically harming another player's character. In both cases the responses tended to be informal in nature. Specifically, context-

sensitive individual reactions constituting an organic and more flexible informal social control scheme tend to resemble the verbal attacks that occur during player combat interactions.

An example of a more formalized combat interaction mechanism is found within a common guild policy deeming attack of fellow guild members as dishonorable. In my observations, at one point this policy was violated, prompting the victim to voice concern and ask for help, to which a fellow guild member remarked: 'I'm not his mommy, I can't tell him wut [what] to do sir.'

While this non-response is an option for players within a more flexible scheme of informal social control, certain cultural codes of conduct react to deviance more severely. For example, the immediate killing of a player's character who has been recently revived after a previous character death is referred to as 'rez killing.' This type of killing is perceived as dishonorable, and the victor is often shamed and his or her legitimacy called into question. Interestingly, this cultural disposition represents a more widely observable phenomenon pronounced within many subcultures of violence and deviance. In particular, violent street culture places great emphasis on respect-maintenance, particularly with regard to the handling of oneself in violent conflict (e.g. Anderson, 1999; Baron & Forde, 2001; Jacobs, 2004).

Within the studied gaming environment, cultural codes of conduct represent a hybrid of organic and mechanical social control schemes. While behavioral codification does occur, it is frequently breached, and sanctions vary depending on the parties involved. For example, warring guilds commonly attempt to disparage and shame one another, claiming dishonorable tactics are used by the opposing members, whereas individuals outside of these contexts tend to react in a less organized and more sporadic manner.

Ultimately, codes within the gaming subculture may offer insight into informal social control dynamics in a broader context. Thus, it may be the concepts of masculinity, respect, and honor transcend social setting and context, producing similar results with respect to conduct codes and cultural imperatives. Both within and outside of the gaming environment, these imperatives encourage informal social control at the micro and group level. Furthermore, a schematic of varied collective efficacy is represented at the subcultural level by the choice of players and persons to either dismiss deviant behavior on behalf of formal control mechanisms, or conversely to engage in informal control because of a lack of trust or belief in formal agencies of control. Evidence of the strength of these cultural imperatives can be witnessed in the concept of "player justice," the notion that players – rather than game administrators or an artificial intelligence control-system – should right wrongs. Essentially, player justice equates to the criminological notion of self-help justice.

Mechanical Informal Social Control

In contrast to the often unpredictable forms of organic informal social control that I observed within the gaming subculture are those more clearly codified and less flexible forms of mechanical informal social control. These types of social control become increasingly pronounced as the solidarity of groups becomes more defined. For example, many players "hunt" creatures within the game together but are not formally declared as a group or guild.

Here I observe and argue that mechanical informal social control represents social control that is non-institutional but nevertheless formalized within the context of the social networks administering it. In this respect there is an important overlap between formal and informal social control, whereby to the extent that subcultural and peer-group codes of conduct are internalized by members, they become examples of formal social control.

On several occasions I joined the aforementioned hunting parties and witnessed informal etiquette expressed through recognized codes of conduct. Hunters frequently take turns defeating creatures, many times without a spoken agreement. On some occasions a spoken agreement will be reached prior to the hunting session. This type of social control represents a codified yet flexible approach, whereas guild structures are less flexible and more rigid.

A number of these codes were expressed in the guild I joined. One code divides players into categories based on their skill levels and willingness to live by the code of player versus player combat. The guild refers to these particular players as "roughnecks" and requires them to follow a certain code that forbids cowardly behavior. While these roughnecks are required to make certain sacrifices, they are also rewarded when "rolling for scrolls." The term "rolling for scrolls" refers to the rolling of virtual dice in order to determine the recipients of special scrolls within the game that help characters develop their abilities. In the particular guild I joined, this process was highly formalized and the roughnecks were rewarded by receiving a roll for all scrolls, whereas other members could only roll for certain scrolls.

While these types of sessions are structured formally, I observed substantial confusion and resistance to the regulations surrounding them. During one such session, a member of the guild inquires regarding the value of a scroll and is reprimanded: 'It doesn't matter how much it's worth… if you're worried about how much it's worth you shouldn't be rolling on it because people can use it on their characters.'

This reaction exemplifies the inherent group-centric nature of the more mechanical informal social control found within the game's guilds. Sacrificing one's own profits or best interest for the group emerges as a common theme, reflective of the previously discussed social contract principle. One member questions the reasoning behind the roughneck scroll rolling rules: 'Well if they're getting the benefit of extra rolls there must be a rough reason in that group. What is it?' This prompts the response: 'Well they take the scrolls and sell them and put them back into the guild.'

Not all group level informal social control within the game is completely mechanical. It is important to discuss that at a macro-communal level, informal social control becomes more diffuse; it still expresses codes of conduct but enforces them less rigidly and with far less organization than at the small group level found within the individual guild. The clearest example of this type of informal social control is observed in the armor return policy adhered to by a number of guilds. The policy is described by the specific guild of which I became a member as the following:

> We attempt to return ALL armor. If for some reason you are unable to return it at the time it is dropped make note of the players name and Guild tag then give the armor to [one of the guild leaders]. They will make sure the armor is returned to its owner.

On numerous occasions I was reminded of this policy, especially since I advertised that I would be playing as a thief character. My guild initiation interview required that I agree to follow this policy before joining the guild, though it was expressed that certain exceptions are made for thieves, specifically for the thief who served as my initial field contact with the guild. This flexibility demonstrates that while informal social control at the group and subcultural level is relatively more structured and mechanical, it is still open to some variation.

The figure below depicts the relationship between formal and informal social control mechanisms within the observed game, as well as these mechanisms' relationship with forms of solidarity as defined by Durkheim. For example, readers will note that micro-level informal social controls take both mechanical and organic forms, suggesting a hybrid of rigidity and flexibility within in-game subcultures. This mixture is discussed in more detail in the sections below.

Readers will also note the directional arrows between control types. These arrows convey interaction between control types. Thus, for example, micro-level informal social controls draw on strictly formal (and mechanical) control mechanisms (e.g. hardcoded game designs and end-user agreements) but are observed to have a manifest impact on these same formal mechanisms.
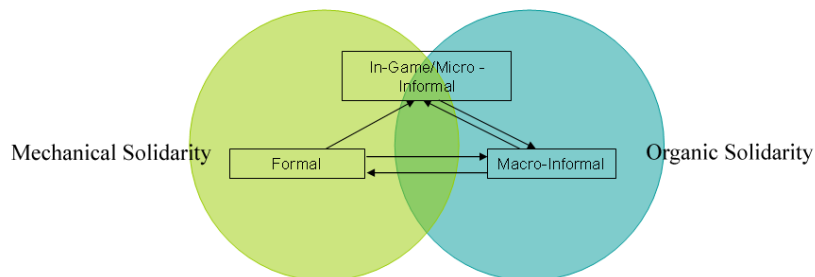

Figure 1.   Social Solidarity and Social Control Types

The Code

Cohen (1955) suggests that subcultures negotiate codes of behavior that allow members to obtain status and social currency within the group. This code also draws on and helps to interpret external societal norms, in some cases transforming them or rebelling against them, as in retreatist subcultures (see Cloward and Ohlin, 1960). A number of recent "street ethnographies" have drawn on the notion of subculture and social control to explore the relationship between negotiated cultural codes and delinquent behavior. Elija Anderson's (1999) *Code of the Street* presents a particularly relevant account of subcultural codes of behavior. While the current setting obviously differs from what Anderson refers to as the "street," it nevertheless bears similarities to Anderson's setting with respect to the social dynamics operating within the subculture discussed herein.

Specifically, not unlike the behavioral code presented by Anderson (1999), I observed the emergence and acting on of informal control measures depended on the perceived fairness or justness of a law, creed, or code. While Anderson observes this reaction primarily in connection with formal mechanisms of control, I observe the most pronounced example of this conflict within the thief subculture itself. Within this subculture there exists a literal and written "thieves' code." This code represents the aforementioned overlap between formal and informal social control. While many thieves adhere to and internalize the mandates of the code, others dismiss it as optional.

Through dialogue with numerous thieves, I learned that this code was developed by early thieves within the subculture, who have in many cases become legendary. The thieves' code, as it was posted on the thief web forum, included this suggested sanction for those breeching the code: 'Any thief that violates these sacred rules forfeits their right to be covered by these rules and becomes KOS/SOS [kill on sight/steal on sight] to all of our brethren.'
Some of the most notable components of the code include:

> Thou shalt not steal from or loot fellow thieves.
> Thou shalt not purposely reveal fellow thieves.
> Thou shalt not identify disguised thieves.
> Thou shalt not kill fellow thieves.
> Thou shalt not follow fellow thieves around telling people that they are thieves.
> Thou shalt offer aid and comfort to fellow thieves when possible.
> Thou shalt not call thy self a thief if thou hast not stolen from thine fellow player.
> Thou shalt not steal from crates or from [dungeons].

Perceptions of this code reveal the flexible degree of informal social control within this particular deviant subculture. While many profess by the code and vow never to break it, others contend that it is either outdated or too restrictive.

> You're joking...right? Not steal from thieves? That would be the bomb...Be able to steal from someone that KNOWS what your doing and STILL can't keep ya from it... You would HAVE to be good to do that... Or else they are a poor thief to begin with.

> …Thats about like saying that anyone with swordsmanship isn't a REAL warrior if he doesn't dress in green. To make a point... a "REAL" thief is ANYONE that steals, period...end of conversation.

To understand the nature of informal social control within the thief subculture, it is necessary to consider the positive and negative reactions to not only formal social control measures but also those measures codified at an informal level. It is evident that these codes, and the responses to them situate a cultural imperative that both serves as a form of informal social control and reacts to various other informal and formal controls. The result of this interaction is a complex typological system of deviant roles that emphasize the cultural importance of social control's influence on deviance and criminal formation.

Social Control and Deviant Typologies

Criminal and deviant subcultures share the potential to operate social control over their members with a resultant effect of role stratification. Becker (1995) shows that this stratification appears in marihuana-using subcultures as a result of social controls, producing identified and recognized "types" of users. Anderson (1999) emphasizes the general power of a cultural paradigm in influencing the behavior of its members. In both capacities it is undeniable that informal social control within the observed thief subculture is well-pronounced, though unlike Anderson's (1999) code of the street, its expressed code is highly contested. As a result of this perceptual code-flexibility, as well as the impact of formal social control, I observe the development of numerous thief typologies.

There is much debate within the thief subculture regarding these types. Three elements lie at the heart of this debate. In a general sense, players' motives for playing deviant characters reveal something about the connection between "real" and in-game behavioral motives and social control dynamics.

One of the most distinct contrasts emerging from a typological consideration of the thief player is the role of profit in motivating theft. I observe that thieves following the code tend to be less concerned with this dynamic of thief-play, evoking the "spirit" of the profession rather than the exclusive pursuit of profit:

> Playing a thief has always been about the chase, never about making a profit from the loot. Sure making some gold from a theft was an added benefit, but never the reason for the theft in the first place.

Other players are more explicit in their contention that playing a thief involves assuming a thief's identity, not just reaping profit.

> The Code is about roleplaying. The majority of the folks on this board are trying to have fun by playing a character, not by filling up a box with make-believe gold. If you can't have fun playing a thief as a character, that's fine. Play him as a mule. But there's certainly no need to be offended that some people feel that honor among thieves should be a priority. Personally, I like the idea, and I'm going to try to adhere to it.

Thieves motivated by the desire to assume a role attractive to them or to belong to a subculture bound by an honor code lie in contrast to those motivated by profit, among whom many express a ready willingness to breach informal codes in favor of profit. Reacting to thieves professing the code, one profit-motivated thief justifies his play-style:

> Let's see... what's a thief do... Oh that's right... He steals other people stuff... And does he then give it back? No... Does he give it to his friends? Possibly... But not often... So what DOES a thief do with his loot? He either sells it or keeps it for himself... In short.. he makes money with it. So.. I suggest you get another profession since it's obvious you don't even know what a thief IS...much less how to use him properly.

The line between profit-motivated and honor-bound thieves is seemingly a clear one, but it also lays the foundation for a broad typological structure outlined in the diagram below.
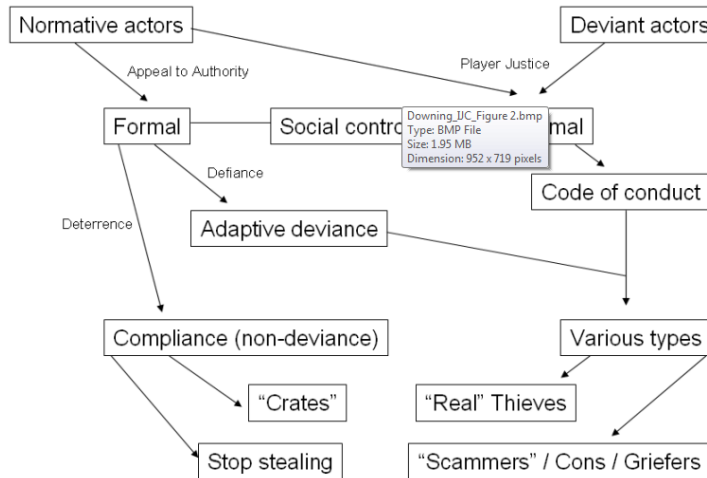

Figure 2.   Social Control Interactions

The specific dynamics of these interactions and their resultant typological structures are discussed in more detail below.

The Adaptive Thief

The adaptive thief is one who reacts to tightening formal social controls through innovation (see Merton, 1938). The game subculture I observe here has undergone a rich evolution of formal social control and today boasts far more rules and regulations than it once did. The game was originally intended to allow players to exert complete and ultimate control over their game-world; however, it has evolved into a virtual world that restricts complete freedom, especially regarding deviance within the game.

The clearest summation of this evolution is evident in the actual game-mechanic of stealing. Where once players could freely "click" their mouse on any character in any game area and steal from that character, there are now only certain areas where this can occur. In addition, all items within the game were once free to be stolen, whereas now a concept of "item insurance" protects certain items from being stolen. These game mechanics represent formal social control at the most mechanical level, and they are also met with the most resistance from thieves and other deviant players. One thief expressed his commonly-shared ill sentiments toward this evolution:

> All the other MMOs [massive multiplayer online] are for carebears and don't allow you to steal their precious items… unfortunately [this game] adopted this strategy long ago also although its not to quite the same extreme.

In reaction to this modification, the adaptive thief has evolved with a strategy of innovation. My interactions with and observations of thieves within the game reveal different variations of the adaptive thief.

One variation of the adaptive thief involves "scrolls," a special item gained through the completion of what players refer to as "spawns." These spawns are essentially areas within the game that present players with the challenge of defeating a certain number of artificially-controlled creatures. Scrolls are one of the few items in the game that cannot be insured and are thus freely at risk of being stolen and a lucrative target for thieves. Certain thieves, referred to as "spawn thieves," specialize in staking out spawns and then stealing scrolls from those who receive them. In one instance I observed fellow guild members actively altering their strategies to avoid a spawn thief. Spawn thieves typically employ extra mechanisms to pursue their targets.

I also observed a second variation of the adaptive thief. This type of thief is referred to as an "IDOC" thief. "IDOC" is an acronym for "in danger of collapsing" and refers to players' in-game homes that are on the verge of being removed from the gaming-world. Once the homes have been removed, a number of items "fall" onto the ground and are free to be collected by waiting players. IDOC thieves specialize in "camping" these houses, waiting for them to collapse. Some thieves simply collect items from the ground while others attempt to steal them from those who have collected them. These areas were frequently visited by the guild of which I had become a member.

Ultimately, both the IDOC and the spawn thief represent adaptations to formal and informal social control measures. Both types require innovation and demonstrate a particular pride in their achievements. However, I also observed that these thieves assumed a lower profile due to the stealth required for success. Players acting out this type of thief frequently cited tightened formal social controls as their motive.

The "Con" Thief

Similar to the adaptive thief is the con-thief. This type of thief does not actually use game mechanics to steal from other players; instead, he or she exploits the trust of other players in order to trick them into either giving away items or exchanging them under false pretenses. "You'd be surprised what you can get people to do just by talking to them," remarked one such con-thief.

One con-thief with whom I developed a particularly close relationship justified his actions by citing the unfair treatment inflicted by formal social control agents, as well as the game's evolution toward an overly restrictive formal system that has arguably crippled the "legitimate" thief. While some thieves professing the code portray a belief that con-thieves are not real thieves, others disagree:

> I've been reading nothing but bad posts about thieves on here, and I'm sick of hearing everyone complaining. I have techniques, without using bugs or exploits, of actually stealing items and making millions. Keep in mind, it DOES follow the "thief code", but it's a little different than most methods of stealing.

Even some who are not con-thieves express admiration for the tactics and success levels of the con-thief: "I have always admired the people who would con people in game, but could never bring myself to go there."

Despite some degree of admiration for the con-thief, a number of fellow thieves admitted that they could not morally cope with that style of play:

> Yes, I can imagine the techniques, they are the "conning" thieving style. Nothing wrong with it, but it's not my style, since I do not like that kind of game very much. I am a shadow-thief and that's the way I enjoy to steal.

Acknowledging the success of con-thieves, one player contends: "Oh I know that, but there are a few lines I won't cross."

Cohen (1955) might describe these type of deviants as members of retreatist subcultures, preferring "conning" others as a means by which to get their kicks while avoiding direct confrontation and using their cunning rather than brute force. This description, however, would fail to capture the realities I observed in this setting. In and out of the game, con-thieves, while often cunning, where also often faced with issues of guilt and other side effects of the "reality" of their behavior much more than other types of thieves.

Indeed, since con-thieves often steal high-value items, the victims' reactions can be quite intense. During my interaction with one con-thief, I on several occasions directly or indirectly observed victims plead for the return their items; these pleas sometimes extended beyond the game environment itself, with players communicating through various online messaging services. One con-thief justified his continued theft by recalling an incident in which he returned a stolen item in reaction to a victim's plea:

> I used to have morals too when I was stealing…but the last time I let morals get in the way of a steal was whenever I stole a guy's 120 stealth [a valuable scroll], back when it was worth something. He seriously seemed like he was crying irl [in real life], and I felt bad, so I gave it back. The second I gave it back to him, he says "HAHA THANKS DUMB*SS!" and recalls [leaves]. Ever since then I've refused to return items or let emotions get in the way of stealing.

Hardening oneself against emotions emerges as an integral part of the con-thief's development.

The "Real" Thief

Where the con-thief and adaptive thief have innovated in the face of formal social control, the "real thief" has bound him or herself closely to an informal code of conduct. This thieves' code is more important to the self-proclaimed "real" thief than is profit or resistance to changing formal control. Ironically, these thieves lie in contrast to con-thieves because of

their unwillingness to deceive their victims. Instead they prefer to use game mechanisms, however limited they may be:

> A good thief need not be dishonest. Take what you want, when you want, and offer no apologies. Scamming someone isn't about out-maneuvering someone - where your skill beats their skill. It's just taking someone's trust and screwing them.

> I'll steal anything from anybody, except guild mates. I won't scam or run a con.

I observed that sneakiness is an admired trait among real thieves and one that they often evoke to differentiate themselves from other types of thieves. On thief remarks, 'Technically, thieves and assassins should both be sneaky, they just have different objectives, otherwise they're just a murderer.'

In addition to differences in response to social control and tactical choices, real thieves also adhere closely to the concept of informal group solidarity. An example of this solidarity arose during my research when a particular thieves' guild utilized an interesting initiation method:

> Being a pinky is a week long trial period where you [a player's character] MUST wear a pink robe throughout the duration. Any guild member is free to KOS [kill on sight] you any time they please. And any guild member is required to KOS you if you are not wearing the pink robe. It's like hell week.

This initiation phase demonstrates a strong level of informal social control among self-proclaiming true thieves. Additionally, in concert with the thieves' code, it illustrates an alternative reaction to tightening formal social control—one that results in increased within-group social control in both the mechanical and organic senses. While some thieves question the code and its relationship to playing this type of character in a "pure" or "real" fashion, I observed one variation of the thief considered by nearly all of the observed thieves as inferior. This thief is referred to as a "crate."

The "Crate"

Wall and Williams (2007) suggest that shaming may serve as a form of policing diverse Internet communities. Here I present findings that suggest shaming serves an important part in constructing role norms and expectations within deviant and criminal subcultures as well.
     Specifically, the "crate" both conforms to strict formal social control measures and violates the thief code. This type of player neither harms other players directly nor breaches any formal restrictions. The term "crate" refers to a thief who uses game mechanisms to steal items from boxes and other virtual containers within the game environment. This activity is considered particularly offensive to thieves because it conforms to the game mechanisms designed to deter thieves from stealing from other players. Theft from actual human-controlled characters was cited by most thieves as the defining characteristic of a thief, regardless of the type—one thief remarking 'like I say, stealing exclusively from crates is definitely a breach of the code and is as bad for thieves…," while another suggests that 'its

not about the money - never has been never will be. Go back and sit in Doom [the area designed for stealing from crates] with you're piles of gold because we really don't care.'

Despite a general disdain for crates within the thief subculture, some players justify this type of compliance as long as it does not serve as a player's exclusive play-style:

> But I see no harm in backing up your income from players with income from crates. The lockpick thief was quite a common template when I started [the game] and it seems a bit unfair to classify such thieves as rule breakers just because they empty boxes of at most 330gp [gold pieces].

Ultimately, the crate serves to illustrate the importance of informal social solidarity within the deviant subculture of thieves, producing a standard by which real (or "true") thieves delineate themselves from those who breach the informal code of conduct set forward.

> Actually, all you have to do is head to doom if you would like to see the transgressors of the code. Sure insurance has harmed our profession, but it is up to us, "true thieves" to stick around to let people know what "real" thieving is all about.

It is evident that shaming is used within the thief subculture to both label transgressors of "the code" as well as to construct a typological distinction between its members. More broadly speaking, this social process may be observed in offline criminal (sub)cultures where a code of respect is closely linked to behavioral expectations and norms (e.g. Anderson, 1999).

"Jackasses" and "Douche Bags"

Another type of character conforms neither to formal nor informal social control of any kind and is essentially concerned with personal profit and self-gratification, usually at the expense of other players. I observed that this type of player is disliked by both thieves and non-thieves alike, and on multiple occasions these players were referred to as "jackasses" or "douche bags." The common practice of these types of thieves is to "grief," or in other words to intentionally cause problems for other players. A number of these types of thieves were forthcoming about their motives and modes of behavior within the game:

> Most of us have griefed people to the point of them almost quitting.
> as for stealing, yea man...you're a thief. everything is fair game. I got my kicks off being an arse in general and griefing everyone that I could.

> I used to follow the thief code, back in the day when there where some decent thieves…

> …and as far as keeping it legal... I tried to exploit UO as much as possible, I made it a point to break the rules.

One thief remarks rather straightforwardly that 'I need to get back to ripping people off, it always made me happy.'

This type of thief essentially represents a pure violator of all social controls, conforming to no standard code of conduct and responding minimally to the threat of sanctions, either formal or informal. It is important to consider the implications of the motives and methods of this type of thief and the other types described, as they represent actual human behavior within a deviant subculture. How these behaviors and types of deviance react to and stem from social control constructs yields important insight regarding criminal and deviant subcultural interaction with social control more broadly speaking.

Discussion

My findings show that, within the specific subculture studied here, there is an intricate connection between social control and deviance. Additionally, this connection suggests several emergent phenomenon:

1. That gaming interactions have become increasingly complex and social, forming a true online society within which subcultures have emerged.
2. That within these online societies emerge and persist evolving social control mechanisms.
3. That these mechanisms interact at various levels within the larger game world, impacting subcultural formation as well as individual behavioral and belief structures.
4. That social control can emerge as both formal and informal through variance in individual or group perception and internalization of norms, values, and beliefs.
5. That both formal and informal social control constructs help to form deviant role choice and structure.
6. That distinct typologies of criminality can emerge and co-exist within this negotiated social control structure.

The importance of the interconnectedness of these phenomena is highlighted by the implications that they hold for the study of real-world deviance and criminality. The findings of this research suggest that the response of deviant actors and groups to formal and informal social control is intermediated by individual and group social control constructs and preferences. These preference structures vary due to group dynamics and the nature of deviance being committed, but this research observes that frequently, formal social control is a less effective deterrent than cultural boundaries and informal social control constructs.

These constructs also help form and are formed by various criminal typologies within the same subculture. In this case I have explored how these typologies compete for respect and help to negotiate the nature of in-group social control, as well as how the group should respond to external social-control. These processes can create factions but are also organic enough to allow specialization within the same criminal subculture. This is a significant departure from the system proposed by Cohen (1955), and even subsequent theoretical inquiries that have criticized Cohen's on the grounds that delinquent subculture members engage in various forms of crime, not just one particular type.

This study also reveals an important reality regarding social control in that the goal of such measures varies greatly depending on the beliefs and attitudes of its creators. This reality is exemplified by the thieves' code, as it represents both formal and informal social control that promotes deviance and deters macro-norm compliance. Essentially, deviant actors use social control to combat social control. This is consistent with other subcultural perspectives but it proposes that the adoption of new or imported forms of social-status acquisition in criminal subcultures may include the creation of social control mechanisms which legitimate and facilitate further criminality.

These social control dynamics are also often observed in other cultural and subcultural settings. In particular, strong formal social control resulting in strong reactive informal code within deviant subcultures is found outside of the gaming-sphere. This finding is consistent with Dunlap et al.'s 2005 findings that among marijuana using subcultures, there emerges a strong informal code of conduct.

There is also evidence that satisfaction with and perceived fairness of formal social control institutions help determine the nature of informal social control, both as it reinforces normative behavior and codifies deviant behavior (Silver & Miller, 2004). Ultimately, virtual worlds may serve as an appropriate and insightful context in which to observe and understand a quickly-growing venue for not only leisure but also many other forms of behavior and interaction. Classical sociological theory may serve as a solid foundation from which to build this understanding and pursue such inquiries, but researchers should continue to push toward contemporary adaptations of theory and practice that compare online and offline behavior and interaction.

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