

# A NON-CRIMINAL PIRATE IN ARCHEAGE: CREATING AMBIVALENCE IN THE TRIBE BY PLAYING OUTSIDE OF THE DETERMINED SOCIAL PRACTICES

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*Abstract:* The research was conducted in the world of ArcheAge MMORPG to explain why and how some players mimic pirates' behaviour in ArcheAge, and what their mimicking practices lead to. There was the investigation of the mechanics of social fields functioning in ArcheAge held, identification of the social practices of pirate faction in the social space of the game, identification of the typology of pirates, exploration of the ways of their interaction between each other, and the research of how the interaction between two categories of pirates' social practices affects the essence of piracy in ArcheAge.

Using such methods as digital ethnography, critical, comparison, content analysis, and a questionnaire it was concluded that players of the pirate faction can be divided into two categories: 'criminal' and 'non-criminal'. Playing in a tribal form of online community both types of pirates tend to mimicry. The process of mimicry leads to the hybridity of the pirate faction, and the emergence of an ambivalent faction image because of the combination in one image of two opposite characteristics of social practices in the space of ArcheAge. The research states the interdisciplinary nature of research in the field of game studies, and the importance of combinations of several points of view for studying video games to understand their natural multifaceted form.

*Keywords:* Mimicry, hybridity, ambivalence, determined social practices, MMORPG, criminal pirate, non-criminal pirate.



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Role-playing games are in one way or another created as prototypes of our real reality (RR). Hundreds of gamers can play, communicate and interact in different ways on one server in one social field. In games of this type, we can directly consider the formation and development of social relations, study the behavior of individuals or investigate the behavioral practices of one group of players.

The research was focused on the pirate faction in ArcheAge. To become part of this faction, the player must commit several crimes. It makes sense that pirates are what we might call "criminals". Meanwhile, there are players in the pirate faction who do not commit crimes regularly and, according to many characteristics described in the study, can get a "non-criminal" label. And here we are – in a situation where players go beyond the established unspoken rules and play outside the established „pirate” practices. The study uses the following concepts: mimicry, hybridity and ambivalence in an attempt to explain these practices of going beyond deterministic actions. Research has shown that the issue of pirate faction duality, which has expanded since the new exile system was introduced, significantly affects the long-standing perception of the pirate faction by other players. This change fundamentally rebuilds the social relations of the players within the framework of this video game and leads to the establishment of new orders, laws and principles of relations between representatives of different factions.

The study aimed to understand how pirates play in a certain social field, explain how and why some players imitate (mimic) pirates

in ArcheAge, and find out what their methods of imitation (mimicry) lead to. To answer the research question – how do “non-criminal” pirates create ambivalent social practices? – a combination of several methods was used. First of all, due to my gaming experience – 7 years in ArcheAge – digital ethnography was used. Further, a comparative analysis was carried out – a comparison of the original and pirate factions of ArcheAge and a comparison of „criminal” and „non-criminal” pirate practices. To answer questions about the reasons for joining the pirate community, it was necessary to conduct a survey which was held in an online questionnaire form. Then there were also some elements of observation, literature review and content analysis of game mechanics and dynamics.

To understand the pirate faction and its criminal roots, it is necessary to study the ArcheAge system, its mechanics and social structure, but this will take much more than a few pages, so here I will try to shorten the story and focus mainly on pirates and ambivalence of essence of this faction. The only important detail that I will not explain, but which the reader should know, is that the pirate faction is one of 3 factions and it is very important for the structure of the social world of ArcheAge and the functioning of social fields, building hierarchies. The other two factions are called Nuia and Haranya.

From the very beginning of the project in 2012 and until 2019, by committing criminal acts such as PK (killing a player from a friendly faction) or stealing something, the player received so-called „crime points” for which they could go to court and then go to jail (ArcheAge has a justice system). At the moment when the player hits 3 000 infamy points, they are automatically excluded from the original faction and becomes a pirate. Thus, the pirates were exclusively criminal figures. The opinion is maintained at present, however, in the new patch in the fall of 2019 (Carendash), the ArcheAge social system has changed and as a result, the path to piracy has now moved into the “non-criminal” category, because players no longer need to commit crimes to join the pirate faction. Now the game has introduced a system of exiles, that is any player who has reached a certain level of equipment, knowing the language of another faction, can voluntarily leave their original faction and become a recruit of the pirate side. In general, such a system changed the meaning of pirates, the essence of this faction: newcomers to ArcheAge, who got acquainted with this game only after the launch of the exile system, see pirates in a completely different light than players who caught the old „criminal” way of becoming a pirate.

Over the past seven years, I have been a pirate several times. In the old system, I had to collect crime points, however, in my specialization – a healer – I could not kill strong players, and there were not enough weak ones in those locations where it was possible to kill at all. Therefore, my game mates often helped me – they provided their characters so that I could kill them and get the maximum number of crime

points, planted huge fields of clover (the cheapest seeds) so that I could steal them, and also get crime points. However, I consider the situation when the owner not only knows what is happening but also helps in this, my actions simply cannot be considered „criminal” by the owner. Our duets cannot be called a criminal conspiracy either. But here’s a dilemma: in the eyes of other players who are not aware of the situation, seeing me in the ranks of criminals, they immediately give me a criminal label too. Also, if I went to court in the process of collecting crime points, for the jury I would look like a completely immoral player and would receive the status of a criminal.

Under the new exiles system at the “documentary” level, pirates do not live up to their criminal status. That is, technically, becoming a pirate does not in any way speak of the player’s criminal activity. But the recognition of pirates as criminals still takes place. Of course, the word „pirate” is symbolic, literally, every person attaches a negative connotation to this word related to history, violation of law online, which is now also called piracy and I dare to suggest that popular culture plays an important role in this matter. The famous series of films „Pirates of the Caribbean” at one time attracted hundreds of thousands of viewers with the aesthetics of piracy, and history, so it would be irrational to deny the involvement of these movies in the formation of a definite opinion about the word „pirate”. Thus, I want to point out that the piracy label on ArcheAge players is filled with both romanticism about the pirate’s idle life and is characterized by criminal behavior that is not always really present in the pirate player’s practices. In support of the fact that the cult of piracy has its influence, I will simply call out an example: one of the respondents, when was asked about the reasons for becoming a pirate, answered with the phrase „Yohoho and a bottle of rum.” (Vasileuskaya, 2020).

Among ArcheAge players, there is a widespread opinion, unspoken perception and acceptance of pirates as strong opponents. The exile system has changed the process of joining the pirates – now the player needs to reach the set level of equipment and learn the language of another faction. Reaching this threshold is not difficult, capable players can become pirates within a month after the character creation. However, the importance here is played by the fact that there is a threshold for entering the faction, these restrictions have an impact on the perception of the pirate faction as a kind of VIP hangout. The subconscious acceptance of pirates as more powerful players is not limited to the threshold of entry, the pirates’ living conditions also play a role here. First of all, they are faced with the problem of earning – the methods of obtaining money as part of the pirate faction are complicated, and they require a lot of capital of various kinds (time, money savings, skills, knowledge, etc.). As a result of the research, I conclude that pirates are perceived as players with bigger economic capital than players of other factions, although in reality, this may not be the

case. Usually, from several disadvantages of the pirate side and the inconvenience of earning money, pirates are quite mature players with a high score for equipment and advanced combat skills. These indicators usually place pirates one level above the other two factions.

Another important aspect of piracy that affects the perception of these players as strong opponents is the small number of community members. With fewer players in the party, pirates have a much easier time controlling their raids on a small pirate-owned island, over time each pirate will recognize each other by name and build a kind of companionship that plays a significant role in organizing the raid. While they play together and participate in PvP and PvE content, pirates get involved in social relations, due to their small number, organize a strong tribal network (Vasileuskaya, 2018) and because of this factor, the pirates appear to the rest of the ArcheAge community as an elite army of trained fighters playing in a well-coordinated team. The status of the elite is also supported by the apparent economic capital of this group. Therefore pirates are again perceived as more authoritative besides the fact of owning large capitals of all kinds.

Application of Bourdieu's theories to the reality of ArcheAge – what exactly represents capital, habitus and social fields – showed that pirates are perceived as dominant forces, superior to other players in the social field of ArcheAge, and based on the theory of capital, the wealth status of the players, the study led to the conclusion, that the ArcheAge community, the players of other factions treat pirates as those who must act according to a certain pattern. It's the same with the pirates themselves, they play under the pressure of a widely entrenched notion of how pirates should behave. The society and popular culture of our modern world has established certain social practices that pirates must follow by the concept of who a character called a pirate is – a criminal.

Meanwhile, my own experience, along with the questionnaire, showed that pirates in ArcheAge have both types of practices: criminal and non-criminal. From the survey, a list of the most popular practices among pirates is compiled (Vasileuskaya, 2020):

1. PvP
2. Killing and stealing (PvP practices as well)
3. Farming mobs
4. Fishing
5. Raising sunken merchant schooners
5. Role-playing

According to Richard Bartle's player typology (Bartle, 1996), practices such as farming, fishing, and schooning in ArcheAge correspond to the „explorer” and „prosperous” types. Combining player types in one practice implies duality. This is the very beginning of ambivalence, although, it is not the privilege of pirates alone.

Based on what is written above, pirates do not differ from other players in their daily activities: they perform the same actions, and sometimes they pursue the same goals. However, „non-criminal” practices in the everyday play show that pirates can be different, like representatives of other factions. The same Nuian (players from the west side) or Haranian (from the east side) can be criminals, but do not go over to the side of piracy. Here is the injustice of the symbolic perception: pirates are mistaken for guilty criminals and the Haranian, for example, perceives simply as having violated the law but corrected (of course, until the next such violation), but pirates balance forces, help someone even if the character from a hostile faction (as shown by some of the answers in the questionnaire).

At the same time, pirates also participate in PvE content. This type of content is not only about the player’s struggle with the mobs that inhabit the world. The entire environment of the character in the world, that is, expeditions to high mountains, uninhabited islands and exploring nice views on numerous cliffs, also correspond to the type of PvE content. By consuming this content, pirates do the same actions as the Haranians and Nuians – they also cleanse the world of ArcheAge from filth, protect civilians on the continent and save nature. Here it becomes clear that, according to the lore of the game (ArcheAge Gamepedia, Lore), the pirates are the main characters, like other players of the faction. Even with the old system of criminal ways to become pirates, they remained saviors and protectors, and this ambivalence is already the privilege of the pirate faction exclusively.

Social practice patterns are determined by the rules of the game as well. Within the framework of the old system, it is already clear what force created the patterns of behavior, but the new system has some peculiarities. From the exiles, the current ArcheAge society expects aggressive behavior towards other factions, and this is due to the assumption of other players that the pirate will want not only to demonstrate his/her strength, which he/she has achieved, status, a new position but also to gain respect, some kind of recognition as an undoubtedly strong player, such a hardened wolf. At the same time, we must understand that the presence of a model of behavior cannot unambiguously determine this behavior. The questionnaire results are able to show that some pirates do not behave the way the gaming community offers. The pirates of ArcheAge are dual heroes of the universe of this MMORPG, the duality of which depends on the point of view of belonging to a pirate tribe.

With rare exceptions, all pirate players are perceived as criminals. Symbols of piracy, such as pirate flags and sails, costumes, hats, and a separate island reminiscent of the famous Tortuga – all influenced the definition of oneself in the new conditions of existence. When in each raid more than 40 people behave like sea robbers and get some satisfaction from these actions, I also wanted to experience those

emotions. The situation is very similar to the “word of mouth” marketing cascade model (Berger, 2013). As the number of people adopting this behavior increases, you will more and more want to behave in the same way. At the same time, all this pirate paraphernalia in itself exerted symbolic pressure on my personality.

As time ran, I began to mimic the overwhelming majority, the prevailing pattern of behavior, that is, imitating the essence of the pirate faction. Mimicry is the ability to adapt to a context that is initially considered hostile. To some extent, the pirate faction that formed the community seemed to me a hostile environment, because many of the day-to-day practices of pirates seemed to me completely opposite to my behavior, my usual view of the daily routine. Surrounded by pirates, it was still possible to somehow remain myself and during attacks and robberies just stay away, but in the open world, in personal meetings with representatives of other factions, I had to show my belonging to a notoriously strong faction, an elite of its kind. So I portrayed pirate behavior in order to influence, to form the necessary image, although I was not really a criminal player. As Homi Bhabha said, a colonized person always looks almost the same as a colonizer, but slightly different (Bhabha, 2004). In this situation, the hostile environment was a face-to-face meeting with a member of the hostile faction, and in order to protect myself, I had to adapt, which in this case meant imitating pirate practices.

The process of mimicry has undoubtedly led to a hybridization of the essence of ArcheAge piracy. Since its inception, the pirate faction has been a hybrid society. At the level of game mechanics, the pirate faction is a combination of two other factions – Nuia and Haranya. Accordingly, the language used in this community is heterogeneous, or rather, this community has two languages. If we looked at it from a program code perspective it would become very clear (Vasileuskaya, 2020).

By and large, the hybridity of the pirate faction is reflected in its very essence, because this society is not homogeneous in itself, it consists of representatives of two different, opposite factions. Following the game’s lore, representatives of different races worship different gods, with this status of pirates, these races are equalized, and thus the pantheon of gods for the pirate tribe increases. While this does not affect gameplay, at the historical level, for RPG geeks, this fact has the same significance as the hybridization of religious culture for researchers of postcolonial discourse.

The goals and values of the pirate tribe are hybrid. Everyone comes to the pirate island for their reasons, and goals and each player remains part of the tribe, thereby creating hybrid goals for the entire tribe. Following the same principle of adopting behavior, criminal players may unknowingly adopt a non-criminal approach to pirate practices, which can be described as hybrid pirate behavior. Mimicry of

a non-criminal player in a game on the side of a criminal group leads to some degree of hybridity. In essence, the characteristics of “criminal” and “non-criminal” are opposite to each other, which, as a result of hybridity, a combination of one player’s behavior, makes it possible to speak about the ambivalence of this player in the pirate community.

From the point of view of the pirates themselves, the duality of behavior lies in their attitude to a certain type of practice in certain situations. However, if you look at pirate behavior from the perspective of other factions, there is duality elsewhere. The factions that oppose the pirates are convinced of the pirates’ criminal nature, there is serious confidence that when they meet in the open world, pirates will attack first and try to somehow annoy, disturb or intimidate. However, pirates are inherently hybrid, and therefore the approach to situations depends on the specific conditions of these situations, if an attack by pirates is expected, and the pirates themselves decide to ignore their enemies, the behavior of the representatives of the pirate brotherhood will be ambivalent.

The goals and reasons for becoming a pirate also have distinctive hybridity due to the combination of two opposite conditions, which again leads to duality. So, one player, as can be seen from the answers to the questionnaire, went to the pirates with the aim of PvP and PvE activity, that is, with the desire to commit both criminal and non-criminal actions. Thus, the range of reasons for going over to the side of the pirate faction has duality.

The pirate is ambivalent regardless of a viewpoint. The ArcheAge video game allows absolutely any player to be ambivalent, to conduct both „criminal” and „non-criminal” activities in similar situations. PvE and PvP content is part of the game, with predetermined practical freedoms, players are allowed not only to kill enemy characters, but also to encroach on the lives of their allies, and so criminal actions have also become an integral part of the world. Figuratively speaking, the life of a pirate is two sides of a coin, two parts of one unity. On the one hand, there is PvP for entertainment, on the other hand, it is a forces balance, on the one hand, pirates do not allow other factions to calmly farm world bosses and take the biggest rewards for their kills, and on the other hand, pirates join other factions in alliances to overcome the greatest evil of this world. A hybrid of a criminal player and a hero is the essence of piracy in the ArcheAge universe.

The discourse of mimicry and hybridity is built around ambivalence as a phenomenon. Individuals, and in our case, players, getting into an unfriendly environment, begin to develop certain adaptation tactics and introduce certain practices arising from certain strategies of mimic behavior. As a result of this process, duality develops – two directions for the development of the player and his/her character: the original and some new, where some elements of identity are preserved, and something is replaced and modified. Thus, ambivalence



is characterized by the splitting of the player's personality, the coexistence of duality, and significant opposition to the essence of the game character.

Ambivalence is a big conflict that has always existed in video games in one form or another. The essentially controversial pirate community in the form of a tribe constantly fulfils its function of completing tasks, thereby moving towards its goals. Completing tasks, and achieving goals is the benefit that the community brings, that is, it fulfils its direct purpose. Reincarnation, the conversion of pirates from criminal to non-criminal, or vice versa, is necessary because the game prescribed some features to the pirates that other factions do not have. Thus, pirates become an inevitable evil, which, due to their ambivalence, can become the forces of the alliance of two factions in the struggle for a good cause. By their ambivalence, pirates are a necessary component of the social world, capable of creating practices of confrontation at certain times, and at other times of joint military action with support.

Video games make it possible to change the well-established principle of dividing into good and bad, noble and not. Thus, we can observe the change of eras of necromancy's hatred to reverence and veneration, as happened with the cult of witchcraft with the advent of the Harry Potter universe. J.K. Rowling's new wave of witches and sorcerers has influenced the condemnation of the practice of burning witches at bonfires, but now popular film and literary culture have been enriched with witches and sorcerers as protagonists. Note how this reflects the transition of pirates from their criminal to hybrid nature and the mercenary nature that appeared with the introduction of the new system of voluntary transition between factions. This example shows how great the influence of video games is on popular culture, on the formation of ideas about the main heroes and antagonists, good and bad. Ambivalence in video games represents another stage of in-game research development that cannot be neglected.

As a matter of practical relevance, this knowledge should influence game dev trends towards creating more and more immersive worlds. Undoubtedly, the current level of players' involvement is amazing. However, despite the freedom given to the player, coupled with every element of the thoughtful world, this is still far from the real possibilities, and thus far from the real dilemmas we face in reality. We are trying to teach tolerance young generation, and I see the powerful tool in the game dev's hands. The situation of meeting something far from being very obvious evil or clearest good can be practised in the alternative realities where the social practices are identical to the real world in their performance. Game developers can expand the boundaries in the freedom of choice for every player and bring up a place where none stays aside from being ambivalent. Thus such a project can become the most immersive world where every player can bring in their own, original personality and act outside of the determined

social practices, trying to go beyond the line. Leaving aside the fancy wording, I hope that by studying the research one can come up with an idea for a teaching project that can help all of us to understand and take for granted the ambivalence, the great balance, and the absence of separated good and evil.

At the same time, young game researchers must remember that there is always something they haven't yet taken into account when working on a game study case. New methods, different theories, new scientific fields – everything can find a place in your research. Keep that in mind and let your hypothesis evolve and strengthen. Last but not least: research real to implement in virtual. And by the end, I would also want to call out the possibility this research left aside – a study of a hybrid habitus and hybrid identity concepts with deep detailing of the virtual world and determining the point spaces where a hybrid essence of objects and concepts arises. I believe that this topic will find its continuation in great research.

#### List of abbreviations

MMORPG	Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing game
Mob	Mobile object, computer-controlled Non-Player Character
PK	Player killing “Bloodlust” mod
PvE	Player vs Environment content
PvP	Player vs Player content
RP	Role play

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