

Chapter 6

Social Interactions in Online Gaming

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ABSTRACT

This paper briefly overviews five studies examining massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs). The first study surveyed 540 gamers and showed that the social aspects of the game were the most important factor for many gamers. The second study explored the social interactions of 912 MMORPG players and showed they created strong friendships and emotional relationships. A third study examined the effect of online socializing in the lives of 119 online gamers. Significantly more male gamers than female gamers said that they found it easier to converse online than offline, and 57% of gamers had engaged in gender swapping. A fourth study surveyed 7,069 gamers and found that 12% of gamers fulfilled at least three diagnostic criteria of addiction. Finally, an interview study of 71 gamers explored attitudes, experiences, and feelings about online gaming. They provided detailed descriptions of personal problems that had arisen due to playing MMORPGs.

INTRODUCTION

Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) are fully developed multiplayer universes with an advanced and detailed visual and auditory world in which players create an individualistic character (Griffiths, Davies, & Chappell, 2004). This is the only setting where millions of users voluntarily immerse themselves in a graphical virtual environment and interact with each other through avatars on a daily basis (Yee, 2007). Research suggests that the game play within these virtual worlds is enhanced because players use them as traditional games as well as arenas in which to explore new relationships, new places and themselves (Krotoski, 2004). Despite the massive amounts of money spent on online gaming, very little research has been carried out regarding the positive social aspects of these games.

Much of the debate over the last 30 years has focused on the dangers of computer gaming in the adolescent population, including increased aggression and addiction. Research has also been carried out examining the potentially harmful effects playing computer games may have on social development, self-esteem, social inadequacy, and social anxiety. MMORPGs are very (virtually) socially interactive but little social interaction in the real world is needed when playing them as only one person can play them at any one time from a single computer, unlike some popular two-player console games such as *Mortal Kombat*.

Yee (2001, 2006, 2007) has carried out research into MMORPGs and notes that they allow new forms of social identity and social interaction. Yee's research has shown that MMORPGs appeal to adults and teenagers from a wide range of backgrounds, and they spend on average more than half a working week in these environments. In a study by Utz (2000), it was found that 77% of respondents reported that they had some sort of relation with other Multi-User Dungeon (MUD) Gamers. It has also been suggested that college students can develop compulsions to play MMORPGs leading

to social isolation, poor academic performance, and sleep deprivation. In 2004, a survey of over 54,000 American students found 11% of females and 20% of males said their recreational computer use had significantly hindered their performance at college and University (American College Health Association, 2005). Players can become fixated on their virtual characters, striving to obtain the best armour, experience and reputation in the game, ignoring the fact that their grades are dropping and their friends have drifted apart.

It is clear to see that computer games appear to play a role in the socialisation of heavy game players particularly for those who play MMORPGs. Krotoski (2004) maintains that MMORPGs encourage group interaction and involvement, flexibility and mastery, resulting in significant friendships and personal empowerment. It is important to realise that gaming has shown elements of being a compulsive behaviour, with players feeling addicted, experiencing a strong impulse to play the games and finding it hard to resist the games (Griffiths & Davies, 2005).

Positive social interaction is paramount in MMORPGs because they require a large number of players to cooperate together and work as a team at the same time. MMORPGs also have multiple tasks that require different characters with different skills in order to complete a challenge or quest. This teaches gamers to be dependent on one another that reinforce their relationships, providing a good understanding of teamwork. The purpose of the research here is to examine the social interactions that occur both within and outside of MMORPGs. The development of virtual friendships can be very enjoyable for gamers, and anecdotal evidence has suggested they sometimes develop into serious real-life friendships and relationships. Not only do MMORPGs facilitate formation of relationships, they are also windows into and catalysts in existing relationships.

To date, there has been relatively little research into massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs). This paper briefly overviews

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