

Me, My Avatar and I: Massive Multiplayer Online Games and College Student Well-Being

CCAPS Newsletter
June 2007



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By Linda R. Young, Ph.D.
Seattle University

"I used to be very quiet and withdrawn. In school, I was extremely insecure about myself and my abilities. After picking up World of Warcraft in ninth grade, I developed the extroverted side of myself and became way more outgoing... Now I'm the one who's drawing out the quiet ones, because I still know how it felt to be that shy. I am also much more confident in my own intelligence and abilities."

-16 year-old girl, from N. Yee, [online gaming research, 2006](#)

 [What is this?](#)



Sixty-five percent of college students were regular or occasional players of video, computer or online games by 2003 (Jones, 2003). The popularity of massive multi-player online role-playing games (MMORPGs) such as *World of Warcraft* continues to grow, with the number of games online doubling every 18 months (Castronova, 2006). Are these games harmful? Beneficial? Benign? In this article, I will offer an introduction to the world of MMORPGs and how they may be influencing our students' personal growth and well-being.

What are Massive Multi-Player Online Role-Playing Games?

MMORPGs are computer games in which many thousands of players may participate simultaneously from around the world, in virtual environments that endure and change whether an individual player is signed on or not. For the player, the vast communal environments of MMORPGs make them psychologically and socially very different from games played alone or with a partner on consoles such as Sony X-Box, PlayStation or Nintendo Wii. I have chosen to focus on MMORPGs because I believe they have been given a bad rap, often lumped together with less social games. Anecdotally, I've heard psychologists and counselors dismiss them as a waste of time at best, and a serious addiction threat at worst. I have even heard Multiple User Domains (MUDs) like MMORPGs referred to as "Multiple Undergraduate Destroyers".

In the MMORPG, each player chooses a fictional character, or “avatar”, whose appearance and activities he or she controls. Most MMORPGS are progressive, meaning that characters advance their skills through levels or get closer to goals through “quests”. Often players join “guilds” or “clans” of other players with whom they play frequently and form social networks. Guild members can take on roles such as becoming leaders, protectors or healers of other guild members. Players often build social relationships with others inside and outside the game via chats, community forums and real life events. Players can also spend real money on game coins and various items to help them get ahead. Virtual economies have become enormous and complex, mimicking real life economies. MMORPGs first made their mark with Ultima Online, created in 1997, followed by Everquest in 1999.

Some MMORPG’s are not based on competition and advancement, but are simply alternative worlds in which players control the appearance and actions of their avatars, which can be customized to look much like users in real life, embody their ideal selves, or represent fantasy creatures. In the game, avatars work, play, buy, design and sell property, have sex, sustain friendships, go to church, shop and just about anything else one does in real life.

These non-competitive games are even more appealing to females than males, whereas competitive fantasy games are overwhelmingly preferred by males. Some examples of popular non-competitive MMORPGs are *Second Life*, *There*, and *The Sims Online*. Real businesses, concerts, university classes and news programs have been sprouting up in SecondLife at breakneck pace this year, and there is an educational community forum in which college instructors, administrators and counselors have begun to congregate. For a glimpse of the fascinating possibilities of the new virtual world see Second Life video at <http://youtube.com/watch?v=b72CvvMuD6Q>



Then view how Ohio University is using SecondLife at <http://youtube.com/watch?v=aFuNFRie8wA&mode=related&search=>

How Popular are MMORPG’s?

- MMORPGs are a billion dollar per year industry in the U.S (Harding-Rolls, 2007).
- World of Warcraft, has 8.5 million members worldwide (Blizzard Entertainment, 3/7/07) and Second Life almost 7.5 million members. (<http://www.secondlifeinsider.com/2007/06/19/today-in-second-life-monday-18-june-2007/>)
- \$1.8 billion real dollars were traded in virtual items worldwide last year (New York Times Magazine, 6/17/07, p.38).

Player Characteristics

- The average player is about 26 years old. Female players are typically older than male players, with 27% over age 35. 25% of males are between 18 & 22, while only 15% of females are in this age range. (Yee, 2006b). Yee also found that the average player is politically liberal, non-religious, keeps up with current events and is more often first-born than by chance. <http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/archives/001556.php>
- An exact read on how many hours a week gamers play is hard to capture since time online depends on the game and the sampling method. In Yee’s self-selected online sample, the average time was 22 hours/wk. In *Everquest’s* marketing material the median time was 20 hours. According to The Entertainment Software Association, in 2007, males played 7.6 hours per week on average, while females played 7.4 hours/wk. (retrieved from http://www.theesa.com/facts/gamer_data.php)
- 48% of online gamers are male & 42% female according to the Entertainment Software Association. But this also depends on the game. For competitive MMORPGs, the ratio is about 85% male and 15% female, and for non-competitive games about 60% female and 40% male.
- Players are ethnically diverse, but the largest percentage of players are in South Korea and China.



What's the Allure?

- **Mastery** – Clear rules are set for achievement of goals and there is concrete feedback on one's competitive status. Players can control the degree of challenge. For males, this is the most common motivation for playing (Yee, 2006a).
- **Socializing and Relationship Formation** – Males and females are just as likely to be social in online games but females are more likely to become involved in more intimate online relationships, and play with their real-life romantic partners (Yee, 2006a).
- **Escape, Immersion in Fantasy** - "For gamers, the thrill of the game is the virtual experience, the chance to escape reality and, to a degree, control their destiny. Gaming, whether online, mobile or console-based, lets players be a part of the storyline and live in an alternate reality. [...] It allows the player an experience that generates real emotions" (Bruce Friend, executive VP, OTX, retrieved from http://promomagazine.com/marketing_in_the_game/, May 12, 2007).
- **Instant gratification** - Stimulating entertainment is accessible twenty-four hours a day, is cheap or free, and endlessly varied.
- **Anonymity** – Players can conceal their true identities, although some reveal much personal information to others in-game.
- **Teamwork** - Players of competitive games must work together to advance well.
- **Honing Visual Processing Skills** – People who play video games process visual information faster and can monitor a larger field of vision more accurately. (Dingfelder, 2007)

All of these factors make a compelling case for MMORPG benefits. A few more testimonials from Yee's "Daedalus Project" illustrate the power of such highly social and diverse games:

"I had never really thought of myself as a leader, or someone who naturally takes charge. After pouring myself into being a WoW guild leader for almost 2 years, I find myself taking on the role of arbiter, overseer for projects, personal counselor, and friend to a lot of people whom I've never actually met. This has translated into my personal life a great deal, as I've gained the confidence to begin acting upon leadership impulses in my workplace

which have recently led to a promotion to upper management” – Anonymous



“I don't particularly want to be an angry person, especially in real life - it raises blood pressure and stress and tension levels. It makes you insult people for no good reason and gives you intent to cause the same anger (and depression really) in other people. It's nothing I want to be a part of, and playing World of Warcraft and controlling these emotions has taught me some aspects of Anger Management, I find myself feeling less tense in real life now and I'm thankful for it.” – 19 y.o. male

“I honestly think the ability to understand current events a lot better thanks to Guild Wars, my good in game friend happens to be Muslim, and I (an American) don't get any interaction with Muslims outside the internet, and he has really helped me understand just how ... ignorant so many people are, and how powerfully destructive the media is. I've also met many British gamers, who have helped me understand that America isn't the center of the world.” - 15 y.o male

What are the Risks?

Addiction?

Internet addictions have no classification (yet?) in the DSM IV – TR. There is some ongoing controversy about whether Internet Addiction, including online gaming, is a true addiction. See John Grohol's *Internet Addiction Guide* at <http://psychcentral.com/netaddiction/>, which makes the case against addiction. He views the Internet as a benign medium, and makes the point that we probably wouldn't get overly concerned about young adults who tune out the world to immerse themselves in books for many hours a week, but there is a stigma attached to gaming. If gaming does not involve harmful substances, or negative financial or biological consequences, Grohol suggests it is not a true addiction. If other life arenas do suffer from too much time spent in MMORPGs, Grohol suggests that compulsive use be treated with CBT, like other compulsive behaviors, and underlying issues be addressed that playing online is masking.



A somewhat opposing view is presented by Kimberly Young, the director for the Center for Internet Addiction Recovery at <http://www.netaddiction.com>. Young says “Like a drug, gamers who play almost every day, play for extended periods of time (over 4 hours), get restless or irritable if they can't play, and sacrifice other social activities just to game are showing signs of addiction.” Common warning signs include:

- A preoccupation with gaming
- Lying or hiding gaming use
- Disobedience at time limits
- Loss of interest in other activities
- Social withdrawal from family and friends
- Psychological withdrawal from the game

- Using gaming as an escape
- Continuing to game despite its consequences

Young's self-test at http://www.netaddiction.com/resources/online_trading.htm may be a useful tool for initially determining if and how online gaming may be interfering with a student's other life arenas in harmful ways.

Wan & Chiou's (2006) Taiwanese research noted a significant difference between addicted and non-addicted players, which can be useful to counselors. "Addicted" players were compelled to play to relieve dissatisfaction and "non-addicted" players reported playing primarily to pursue increased satisfaction. If the motivation to play is to escape one's life offline, other mental disorders such as depression, anxiety and relational problems, which preceded game immersion, may be the root problems that need to be addressed.

Delayed Developmental Tasks?

In a Taiwanese study, students who played more than ten hours per week were significantly more likely to have unsuccessful resolutions of Erickson's Identity and Intimacy tasks of young adulthood than those who played infrequently (Huang, 2006). The directionality of this finding is impossible to determine, but can also be considered when working with students with developmental delays.

Missing Real Life Social Cues and Increasing Compensatory Cues?

When people aren't face-to-face it's possible to lose accuracy of detection of non-verbal cues and engage in compensatory behaviors such as revealing more intimate details about their lives than they would face-to-face. This is why some suggest that online games, social networking sites and weblogs often reveal surprising levels of intimacy. In one of Yee's studies, he found that 43% of female and 28% of male 18-22 year-old gamers revealed personal issues or secrets to MMORPG friends that they had never told to real life friends (2006b). He also found that they reproduced non-verbal habits with avatars online that are common in real life. For example, male-male avatar conversational pairs used greater social distance than female-female avatar pairs.

How Can College Mental Health Practitioners Assess Risk and Leverage Benefits of MMORPGs?

1. During initial individual counseling assessments, routinely ask any students who are failing academically, having relationship issues or exhibiting any obsessive or compulsive symptoms about their online behavior. Find out how much time they spend online and what, specifically, they are doing on the Internet.
 - If a student presents with compulsive online gaming habits, find out (1) what he or she finds most exciting about the game itself (2), what he or she escapes feeling or thinking about during the time spent online. Offer Sirgy et al's *Measure of Internet Well-Being* (2006). It was designed to "identify all the perceived benefits and costs within salient life domains of college students".
 - Use what the student finds exciting to create CBT interventions that offer alternatives for gratifying the same needs offline in a more balanced way.
 - Use information about what the student is escaping through online play to treat underlying emotional and relational issues as you normally would.

2. Facilitate an online gaming forum for idea exchange with students, rather than focusing on risks and addiction, or assuming they need help. (This approach is likely to produce better attendance). Be open to learning more about the costs and benefits of gaming directly from them!
3. Read to get yourself up to speed. Some recommended books are below.
4. Try playing an MMORG yourself if you haven't already!

Recommended Books

Castronova, E (2007). *Exodus to the Virtual World: How Online Fun Is Changing Reality*. Pelgrave MacMillan

Castronova, E. (2006). *Synthetic Worlds: The Business and Culture of Online Games*. University of Chicago Press

Cooper, R., Spaight, T., & Dibbell, J. (2007). *Alter Ego: Avatars and their Creators*. London, U.K.: Chris Boot

Guest, T. (2007). *Second Lives: A Journey Through Virtual Worlds*. London, U.K.: Hutchinson

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