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Digital Literacy

MMORPG Addiction

Introduction / Abstract

Internet connectivity has had an enormous and irreversible impact on human society. More than simply a collection of interconnected computers or even interconnected human beings, the internet now has a wealth of content open for users to enjoy. From finding information on virtually any subject imaginable, shopping for clothing, electronics and even groceries from the comfort of home, to a repository of television broadcasts, movies, games, flash animations and more, the internet connects its users to all of that.

More importantly, it connects them to each other. It is obvious by now that the creation of the internet has allowed human beings to communicate with each other on a scale and scope never before imagined. Social networking services, blogs, forums and instant messaging clients are all examples of this new way of communicating. As an obvious extension of that, enormous leaps in technology have given us greatly increased connection speeds to the internet, and thus to one another. Even as pipelines widen and new methods of efficiently transmitting data are found, graphics, audio and programming languages are all evolving as well. For computer games, this means vivid imagery, spectacular sound quality and more advanced controls and design. Now gamers can stay

connected to online games with minimal connection issues, and the number of users that can be simultaneously connected has increased dramatically.

As a result, users may now engage in persistent online worlds in which they participate as a character of their choosing and play the role of that character; these games are called Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games or MMORPG's for short. MMORPG's allow users to participate in an online world that still exists while they are away from their computers, and saves the data so they can progress over time. Often, the games do not have a specified end point or conclusion, and combine the elements of monthly fees and supplemental content to keep players coming back. Gamers form communities in order to accomplish more difficult goals and interact with one another, and the idea of character progression is often a major focus for the player.

Some users, however, become mired in the interactive world of an MMORPG to the degree that they begin to neglect their 'real world' activities, responsibilities and obligations. In some cases, their sense of identity resonates more strongly with their character in the virtual world than with their personality in real life. In others, the lack of ending or closure in MMORPG's, combined with the lure of further progression in power and wealth, keep them playing in excessive or unhealthy amounts. It is not uncommon for players to spend hours per day in these online worlds, until their playtime eventually takes up days of time and then weeks, months and eventually, years. Since most MMORPGs keep track of time played, even relatively responsible, active players may spend several weeks' worth of hours grinding away in a virtual world.

However, there are those that go beyond this excessive playing into more debilitating and detrimental addictions, and sometimes lives are even lost in the process.

Though psychological and behavioral addictions are nothing new for the human race, the growing familiarity with online content and the rampant popularity of the MMORPG “World of Warcraft” by Blizzard Entertainment have the potential for this trend to continue unabated.

The focus of the paper centers largely on the reasons that this addiction exists, including information drawn from both the addict and the game developers. There are personal psychological reasons for addiction, as well as the innate addiction potential of a goal-driven social game. Attention has also been paid to the way that players form communities, the importance they place on their social group and social standing, and the way that identities are created and established online.

What is a MMORPG?

A MMORPG, already briefly described above, is a game genre characterized by large numbers of users online simultaneously, participating in a game run on servers owned by the game design company rather than servers run by players. The website Techweb describes it as “A role playing game on the computer played by many people. An MMORPG differs from a regular computer role playing game because its environment is perpetual. People log in, join the game, take on their role and leave whenever they wish, but the game continues.¹” Players choose to play the role of a character or ‘avatar’ they create, and by performing tasks, discovering new areas, crafting items like weapon and armor and slaying enemies, they gain experience. After obtaining a certain amount of experience, the character becomes more powerful and can move on to more content.

¹ <http://www.techweb.com/encyclopedia/defineterm.jhtml?term=MMORPG>

Characters are optimized through the use of equipment, so there is incentive to slay more powerful enemies for greater items, and so forth. Typically, in addition to paying the initial fee for the game, players pay a monthly fee in order to continue playing, which designers claim they use to offset the cost of keeping servers running and adding new content to the game. Unlike single-player games, or narratologist style story-driven games, MMORPGs rarely have an ending or conclusion, and new content is added to keep players interested, as the goal is not just to sell them the game but to keep them interested in playing every month.

Due to the number of players online at the same time, there is a lot of interpersonal communication between avatars, and players find themselves teaming up with others to accomplish shared goals, or attacking others for personal gain. MMORPG's, like most online games, allow users to communicate through text chat, and some also communicate through third party voice chat clients such as Ventrilo. Thus a social aspect of the game begins to take hold, as friendships and rivalries are formed, grudges are held and players get a feel for the game and each other. As a result, the game comprises of a miniature society, organized and perpetuated by players who may not know each other through any other means, and yet feel a strong bond through shared experience and their communication with others. Players not only learn who is skilled or unskilled at the game, they are free to discuss their personal lives and interests with one another, and may bond in this way as well. Game companies acknowledge and accommodate the need for social interaction within these games, and even offer

incentives for players to get their friends to play, such as greater travel speed and faster progression.²

The end result is that these factors combine into a very alluring siren of a game. The game Everquest, launched by Verant Interactive in 1999, was once the most anticipated online PC game in existence. It launched with over 10,000 active subscribers and sold over 225,000 in the first six months with over 150,000 active subscribers³. More than nine expansion packs were released for the game, which still runs today⁴, though it is no longer the dominant force on the market. That spot is now held by the aforementioned World of Warcraft, which boasts over ten million users (10,000,000) as of January 2008⁵. It is difficult to calculate the exact income, since data on what payment plans are used and how the payments are handled internationally are private, but even if one assumes that all players take the discounted 6-month subscription fee of \$12.99 per month, that is still a profit of nearly \$130 million every month. Thirteen MMORPGs are currently listed as breaking through 200,000 users.⁶ It is clear and self-evident that players enjoy these games, and they are obviously quite lucrative for game companies as well.

The key concept that must be understood here are primarily that the games are much more social than typical video games or computer games. Players are encouraged to form communities, because some content is unbeatable or unreachable without cooperation. The game world continues to exist even when the player exits the game, and may change dramatically before the player re-enters, as the players friends may

² <http://us.blizzard.com/support/article.xml?articleId=20588>

³ <http://www.gamershell.com/infosheets/219023.html>

⁴ <http://everquest.station.sony.com/>

⁵ http://www.gamasutra.com/php-bin/news_index.php?story=17062

⁶ <http://www.mmogchart.com/Chart1.html>

progress further without him or her, new areas may be opened up, land and enemies may be conquered or wealth and items may be stolen. Finally, the games cost a regular fee to continue playing, and players typically pay for a month, three months, or six months at a time, and the game's content must entice them to continue playing and thus continue paying, or the game fails.

On Video Game Addiction and Online Addiction

Though the issues of video game addiction and online addiction are too broad and varied to be covered comprehensively, they are important because they both relate to MMORPG addiction. The response to the concept of video game addiction has been mixed, as the American Psychological Association does not currently include it in their Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, although they will consider it for the 2012 edition.⁷ Thus, video game addiction is not technically considered a mental condition in America. On the other hand, the Chinese government launched a nationwide campaign to treat internet addiction, seemingly by any means necessary; counseling, drugs, hypnosis and even shock treatment are used in an attempt to cure patients⁸. Regardless of whether it is recognized or not, Terri Wells brings up that MMORPG addiction shares similarities to other addictions: "Researchers at the Charite University Medicin Berlin, in Germany, say that those who play games excessively share important reactions with drug addicts. One of these is "drug memory." A person addicted to crack will be tempted to abuse the drug when they are presented with certain "trigger"

⁷ <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2007/06/070625133354.htm>

⁸ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/02/21/AR2007022102094.html>

associations – if they enter a building in which they have frequently used the drug, for example.”⁹

This is a questionable practice for many, as shock treatment can have negative consequences for the recipient. Some may find it necessary, however, if the situation becomes dire enough. Citizens of South Korea have died after spending hours in a cramped position attributed to their online game addiction.¹⁰ Another died of exhaustion after playing the online game (but not MMORPG) “Starcraft”, also by Blizzard Entertainment for 50 hours straight.¹¹ Addicted players have also caused harm to others; gang violence has erupted in South Korea so often there is now a term for murdering a person because of an in-game event.¹² a 33-year old Russian man was brutally beaten and later succumbed to his injuries by a remorseless 22-year old student, who slew the man in revenge for his character’s in-game death¹³. So the issue of accepting the idea of online addiction or video game addiction is still unresolved on an international level, as well as in American specifically. In the meantime, support groups have sprung up for those who have not been able to shake their addiction.¹⁴

Reasons for Addiction

It would be impossible to point to one specific reason for MMORPG addiction, as it is much like any other psychological addiction in that it needs to be addressed to the

⁹ <http://www.devhardware.com/c/a/Opinions/Online-Gaming-Addiction-Myth-or-Reality/1/>

¹⁰ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/05/26/AR2006052601960.html>

¹¹ <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/article553840.ece>

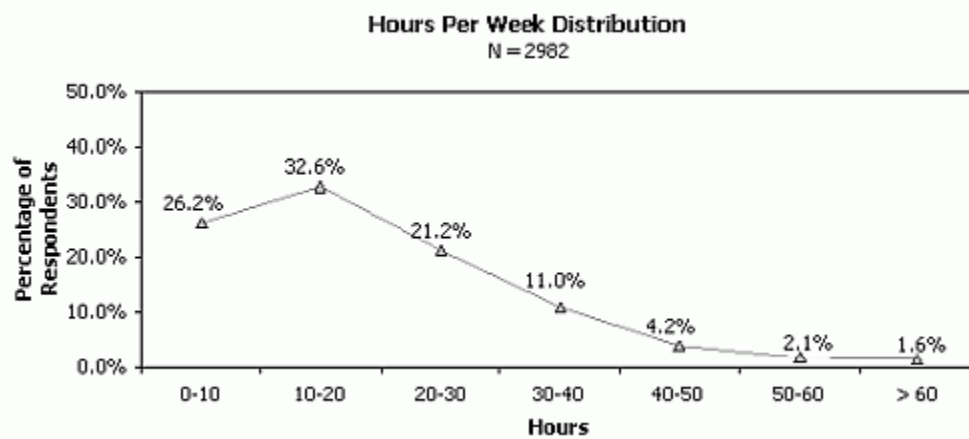
¹² http://www.time.com/time/interactive/entertainment/gangs_np.html

¹³ <http://www.russiatoday.ru/scitech/news/19777>

¹⁴ <http://www.netaddiction.com/>

individual's personal needs. The reasons could range from self-esteem issues to physical or social disabilities to identity crises. At the same time, MMORPG addiction can be categorized by the internal and external factors at work that create a situation in which a person becomes dependent on their online persona or the fantasy world that is created around it. It is important to note that socioeconomic factors do not seem to play a role. According to the 5-year 35,000 subject study Yee conducted:

Overall, 50% of MMORPG players are working full-time, while 22% are full-time students, and 12% are part-time students/workers. The following chart highlights how MMORPGs are a very unique environment, in that you would almost never, in real life, find high-school students, housewives, retirees and early adult professionals together in any sort of collaborative decision-making task.



And yet in MMORPGs, most ad-hoc combat or adventure groups are probably an interesting assortment of people from very different real-life roles and positions. The prevalence of MMORPG players who also full-time workers makes it even more striking, in terms of the time the average

player invests in the game. The average MMORPG player plays about 22 hours per week – a little over half a work week. About 61% of players have spent at least 10 hours continuously in an MMORPG (N = 3445). This finding is even more surprising given that there is no correlation between age and hours played per week ($r = -.04$). In other words, the appeal of MMORPGs is comparable for both a high-school student and middle-aged professionals.¹⁵

Internal Factors

My initial expectation was that the primary internal factors that come into play with MMORPG's are the desire for personal gain and achievement, the desire to socialize and the desire to escape. Yee's analysis of MMORPG motivation supports this as well:

The data implies that there are 3 specific playing behaviors that lead to heavy usage. First are players who are hooked on getting to the next level or better gear. Many of these players are probably actually hooked onto the behavioral conditioning of MMORPG design. Second, there are players who are deeply embedded into social networks in their community. They spend a lot of time in the game because this is where their friends are. And finally, there are players who spend time in the game to avoid dealing with issues in their real life. For some of them, the

¹⁵ http://m-plabs.com/mmogarticles/MMO_Player_Motivations.pdf pp 3-4

"push" of avoiding the real world may be stronger than the "pull" of entering a fantasy world.¹⁶

As one would expect, men responded more often that they play to win and conquer, while women often played for socialization, and both played for escapism and immersion. More interesting than that, is the fact that Yee's subjects primarily considered themselves addicts if they joined for escapism or achievement, rather than socialization. This means that even when social players were online as long as self-admitted "addicts", the social players did not perceive themselves as such.

It is also important to consider the value of the 'avatar' to the player. David Smahel's presentation brings up this relationship, and states that the avatar is self-made and thus in some ways unreal, yet it is a symbol of the player's identity and thus important to the player. Over 65% of his study subjects said they felt pride over their avatar, with almost 20% disagreeing. In contrast, only 13% say they are ashamed of their avatar, with over 73% disagreeing; however, it is vital to understand that players who felt more proud or ashamed of their avatar were more likely to be addicted. Over 45% of players in Smahel's study considered themselves addicted to MMORPGs, with no significant differences between men and women, no difference between those that are single and those in relationships, but a significant difference between single and married individuals – whether this answer changes due to internal or external factors is difficult to quantify though.¹⁷

External

¹⁶ http://m-plabs.com/mmogarticles/MMO_Player_Motivations.pdf pp 8

¹⁷ <http://ivdmr.fss.muni.cz/info/storage/smahel2008-EARA.pdf> pp 8, 10

Yee's study on the demographics of players and their reasons for playing shows a surprising discrepancy on outside influence for men vs. women: "About 16% of male players (n = 1589) and 60% of female players (n = 311) play with a romantic partner, while 26% of male players and 40% of female players play with a family member.¹⁸" So it would appear that external social factors are of special importance when dealing with female addicts, as their reason for playing more often involves people they know outside of the game. Having a partner or family member who plays the game is not as crucial for men.

Perhaps the most important external factor is the game itself, and the game creators efforts to make it especially enticing for players. World of Warcraft is clearly doing something right, as there are a multitude of MMORPGs that cannot touch even fractions of their subscriber base. This corresponds with Smahel's data as well, as World of Warcraft players had very high "addiction scores", fitting the criteria to be considered addictive.¹⁹ Whether the creation of an intentionally addictive game is morally just or not might be questionable, but their success is proof enough that gamers enjoy it. Still, it is important to realize that the internal factors mentioned above are triggered by the game's content – it is a design decision to never end the game, to keep players obsessed with forward progression, and to entice them to invite friends and family, which will ultimately keep them hooked for social reasons even if the others fail. They may not be accountable for the addictions that result, but they are at the very least enablers.

Conclusions

¹⁸ http://m-plabs.com/mmogarticles/MMO_Player_Motivations.pdf pp 4.

¹⁹ <http://ivdmr.fss.muni.cz/info/storage/smahel2008-EARA.pdf> pp 10

It is clear that there is strong potential for addiction among MMORPG players. Though a single reason cannot be rooted out, there are clear and present reasons for this addiction, both social and distinctly personal. It is a recent enough phenomenon that further study may be required before it can be officially diagnosed as a mental disorder, but the signs are clear: there are people out there who lose control of their lives to these games, and just like any other addiction, their chances are slim without help.

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