

Metamorphosis of the Player:

The Gaming Community and You

Over the last decade video games have expanded past home consoles - like the PlayStation and XBOX - to computers. Though many games are available on PC the most expansive and well known genre is the Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game (MMORPG). Within MMORPGs players create their own avatar, fight monsters, craft armor and weapons, and many other things. Even though there are mainly solo player based activities, players stay true to the genre and enjoy community based interactions the most. Though many of these interactions are harmless, mundane, and unintelligible they can affect players in many different ways. People forget many times that whom they are speaking to are other humans with emotions, not programs. This can cause people to start to acting differently and these changes can traverse into the off line world. Though many people see their actions in each world as unrelated, the online interactions can many times be the reason for changes. When people enter an online game community, they will be changed when they come out of it.

I. Introduction to MMORPGs

MMORPGs are a very unique genre of game which are highly advanced versions of text-based Multi-User Domains (MUDs). MMORPGs are 2D or 3D games with expansive, ever-changing worlds inhabited by players' avatars (In game representations). These avatars are very customizable and sometimes resemble the player very closely. Within the worlds players also interact with Non-player characters (NPCs) for actions as simple as buying and selling to more advanced uses like fighting alongside them. Best described by William et Al. (2007), "The most typical activity in MMOs involves a player trying to advance their avatar from an initial level of

relative powerlessness to more advanced levels imbued with superhuman abilities and skills” (429). This is the best descriptor for MMORPGs where players follow the seemingly endless cycle of fighting monsters, leveling up, getting better equipment, simply to fight more monsters, to level up, etc. Though this seems mind numbing to many, it is seen as an enjoyable thing to do for many gamers. Advancement is done through questing and of course hunting, both of which are made to be easier through working in a group. Once players do reach the maximum level they are incentivized to keep playing through what is known as “end game.” Tasks in end game are normally very complex and need to be tackled in groups from as small as 10 people to as large as 60 people. To reach this point people need to be able to trust others thus many people they play with in end game are people they have known from either early game or just a long period of time.

To meet people and simply for resting many MMORPGs have social hubs. These are a tad different from the normal towns and hunting grounds. Social hubs connect all channels of a game so every player in the area is together. There are no monsters excluding events, mainly during holiday times when giant Santas are a common theme. These hubs are used by guilds for recruiting, players searching for opponents, players looking for group members for questing, and many more social things. These social hubs would be comparable to coffee shops and bars. Along with places to communicate there are different ways to communicate. Many games offer quick chat commands alongside in game text chat. Some games go as far as to include voice chat systems. Due to most people playing multiple games some external voice chat systems are better because they sync players who are friends in other games. These programs are growing more popular as people are finding it easier to speak to others and it creates a more concrete and realistic relationships. As people meet others in throughout the game they grow and change and how this affects them in their life can be quite significant. Whether someone is changes their behavior or personality or starts playing in a manner that affects their health, people can change in the real world due to their habits in online game communities.

II. Effects of Community on Behavior

A. Positives

Many people who play games know that they have anonymity. “On the Internet, nobody knows you’re a dog” is a famous New Yorker cartoon that shows this fact at it’s finest. For the dog, it is not discriminated against or forced to follow it’s norms. Likewise, people use the anonymity they get to act differently than what they would normally do towards others. This allows people to cross the boundaries of age, gender, and race and they can act as they want towards whomever they want. There are no cues like in social settings causing people to stay within their typical behavior. “It is the very lack of cues that enables teenagers and elders, housewives and construction workers, rich and poor, and countless other less likely offline interactions to “talk” with one another online” (Williams et al., 2007, 428). As people interact with others without considering what their social rank may be or what authority they may hold, their behavior towards others changes in reality. This can cause players’ behavior to change in good ways as well as bad ways.

As people interact in games their behavior can change for the better. Something that is good in many aspects is people’s ability to bridge the social gaps between age, gender, and race that are prevalent in reality. This can be due to interactions they had within the game but the games themselves weigh in on this many times. Many games have a multitude of races for players to choose from. For example, TERA is an MMORPG with a total of seven different races for players to decide which they would like to be recognized as. These races cause different reactions between different players. But most players simply see them as an in-game choice and act the same towards everyone. This mentality many times traverses into the real world without players

realizing it. “Not only do players act openly towards other players, they act differently as a whole depending on how they have made their avatar look. In the case of attractiveness, studies have shown that attractive individuals are perceived to possess a constellation of positive traits that they are more extraverted, friendlier, and so forth” (Ducheneaut et al., 2009, 16). With the ability to make their avatars how they want, people can bring forth positive traits and behaviors that they may not have known were within them or simply ones they kept inside. This is only the race aspect, for age it is even simpler. Most MMORPGs do not have a way to represent age thus people see others as an age that they can interact with or perceive as easier to talk to. Gender is an aspect that remains relatively the same, people are just slightly more desensitized. For many gamers, the online world and the off line world are vastly different so they act different feeling there will be no consequences.

Based solely off of what means people use to communicate, text or voice chat, many more things can be derived. Through text chat people speak in a very short handed manner. Steinkuehler (2006) analyzed a phrase used by players when speaking to one another in Lineage - a decade old MMORPG that consists of mainly group activities - when working as a group for hunting. “afk g2g too ef ot regen no poms” was the phrase that was analyzed. For people who don’t play games this seems like a jumble of letters. The literal definition for these terms translates to something along the lines of “away from keys got to go to Elven Forest to regenerate no mana potions.” The fully translated phrase is, “Just a minute. I have to go to the Elven Forest to regenerate. I’m out of mana potions”(Steinkuehler, 2006, 42). This research shows how a simple phrase is simplified even further into shorter keystrokes for gamers so they can convey their plans and ideas quickly and easily yet still be understood no matter how intricate they may be. The point for how this traverses to the real world isn’t just how people start saying “BRB” and “LOL,” but that these phrases and they’re meanings are used to say more than simply what they mean. Saying you need to leave your friends to go do something and then coming back coordinates your activities. It causes your friends to maybe change up their plans a little to make

sure you are still part of them. These kinds of actions can be difficult for many introverts - who happen to be a large demographic of gamers - but through playing games they learn how and practice talking to others and sharing their plans and needs. Though many good behaviors do arise in players as they take part in online communities, some I could not get to, some bad behaviors can manifest.

B. Negatives

There are not many negative behaviors that manifest but that is not to say that everything that comes about is a good thing. Such as the case with anonymity, people do not know the authority or social rank of the people they meet on line. This desensitizes people in the real world and they act differently towards people of authority (ie. police officers, teachers, deans). It's not that people start disrespecting authority figures, rather they treat them like any other person without considering what they have the capability and rights to do. Another thing that is to notice is the fact of types of chat. People who exclusively use text chat options are more closed off than those who use voice chat. People who use voice chat are generally happier as well. Peoples' avatars also affect how they act negatively. "Individuals who are similar to us, whether in appearance or beliefs, are rated more positively, perceived as more attractive, and rated as more persuasive than individuals who are less similar to us" (Ducheneaut, 2009, 6). People may not be spoken to or find groups which make them feel unwanted or lonesome. According to Deucheneaut, people with shorter and more rounded avatars are also seen as unattractive compared to taller, skinnier ones. So if people feel like making their avatar into a near mirror image of themselves and then are unable to find a group, they may see their real self as an unwanted person. Though there are these negatives and though they are more severe than the positives, they are not as plentiful as the positives. Some of the negatives are also present in players prior to them joining MMORPGs.

But the change in behavior is not the only thing that arises in players, their personalities can also change.

III. Effects of Community on Personality

A. Positives

To understand how peoples' personalities change due to gaming, we must first see what some common personality traits are of those who decide to immerse themselves into these fantastical worlds. Yee (2006) said that motivations for people to start and continue playing games can be split into three overarching components: Achievement, Social, Immersion (773). The reason people play games is not a single component but rather (and more commonly) multiple reasons within the different components. The social component however is prevalent for the majority of players, they want to keep playing to meet and work with others. 51% of players (Williams, 2006, 659), play in group at least half the time. These players are more outgoing, less lonely, and have a stronger sense of community. If people begin being social in game, they start getting a more "positive" personality in real life. People who are social also begin trusting people of other age groups more. A very surprising result of being in an online community of an MMORPG is that players become more prone to going to real world activities. This is mainly in the life of students going to club meetings and workers going to staff events. An aspect of MMORPGs that isn't elaborated on very much is the RPG part, specifically how it affects players. Of a studied 2,145 players of the game *Everquest*, 24% always role-played, 47% roleplayed on some occasions, and 29% never role-played at all (Griffiths et al., 2003, 85). Other research shows that many communities end up following this 25/50/25 pattern. This role playing shows in the real world as how people act in social situations. About 25% mold to any situation any time, 50% when they

need to, and 25% do whatever they want. This seemed to be a correlation to the researchers but I feel it simply just an interesting fact.

As people join groups in games they begin to feel a commitment to these groups. This is especially true for guilds, large groups consisting of like minded players. 78% of players (Seay et al., 2004, 1423) are part of a guild that has 60-75 players. Being in such a guild causes people to commit to the guild and play with their guild mates. This commitment causes players to connect with their guild offline as well, expanding their real world communications to people they may have never met outside of MMORPGs. The ability to bond and bridge relationships with people being brought about from a game is a great trait to arise for people. As with behavioral changes however, not everything brought about within people is a good thing. People are prone to always bringing out the bad from something.

B. Negatives

As people act differently in the game they act different in the real world. This means as people act aggressive they begin to be more aggressive when they leave their fantastical lives. Research conducted by Mehroof et al. (2010) shows that players are averagely aggressive. It also says that players either had or develop state anxiety through gaming in groups. These traits don't seem to help with what people refer to as gaming "addiction." "Trait and state anxiety were both significantly associated with online gaming addiction scores, suggesting that both internal and external anxiety factors encourage excessive online gaming" (Mehroof et al., 2010, 315). These negative personality traits are far beyond worse and more permanent than the positive traits that can appear in people. Another personality trait that arises in both social and asocial players is their lack of trust in other people. "Off-line, all players experienced drops in their ability to trust others to solve their problems. Only the social players experienced a drop in having someone to turn to

for off-line advice, and in trust of other racial groups. Both groups experienced drops in having someone to turn to for personal problems” (Williams, 2006, 660). Though this can be remedied by meeting people that are trusting/trustworthy there is another problem that arises. As people play they are more likely to group with like minded and similar people. If a player is not trustworthy and groups with more people like them, they will not grow and may become less trusting. A phenomenon that can occur while playing in an anonymous environment is toxic disinhibition - negative behaviors people would not normally show and negative actions people normally wouldn't do. As players allow themselves to act as they please in an online platform, the line can begin to blur and they may act this way in real interactions. This could cause people to accidentally yet openly be bigoted or simply rude without paying any mind to it. The personality traits and behaviors of people are not the only things that get affected by MMORPGs, their health can also be effected.

IV. Effects of Community on Health

A. Positives

Before delving into this one point must be made clear. Many people who play games are not the stereotypically fat. Most people who play games have a very normal BMI. Desai et al. (2010) did a study on high schoolers who played MMORPGs and how doing so affected their health.

Between both boys and girls only girls had a change in BMI and it was very small, BMI: 22.35 [4.44] for gamers, 21.94 [3.61] for non-gamers (Desai et al., 2010). Teenagers who played games also never smoked and had never used marijuana. This was directly correlated with how long they played and who they played with. Girls are also prone to playing fewer than seven hours per week. This may still seem like quite a bit to some people but when you consider hardcore gamers

and professional gamers, seven hours seems like nothing. There is also no change in any exercise that may have been present prior to playing games. Sadly this is where the majority of positive health benefits end. There are a few problems gaming does bring about in people, especially younger people.

B. Negatives

People who play MMORPGs are known for having positive reasons for starting (Yee, 2006, 773), but as people play they can become more prone to “overuse.” According to Ng et al. (2005), over 50% of players spend over 10 hours playing MMORPGs per week. 20% of these players spend over 40 hours per week within the virtual world. This is not to say that players become sick or gain weight, rather that they become “dependent” on the ability to escape into a fantasy world. These players stop being social in the real world using the logic that they already have friends and acquaintances elsewhere. “People may feel that their mind has merged with the mind of the online companion” (Suler, 2004, 323). This causes people to feel as the people they meet have a tangible presence within their lives. Though it is good to bond with others online, sacrificing real life interactions and relationships is dangerous. MMORPG players also have a tendency to play for eight hours continuously causing them to lose sleep (Suler, 2004, 323). Lack of sleep can cause many problems for the brain, especially in college students - the main demographic for MMORPGs. A large issue present mainly in females is that they begin getting in serious fights and are more prone to carry a weapon (Desai et al., 2010). This is just scary and perpetuates the “video games cause violence” issue. Not only is it frightening for people around these girls, but also for themselves. There are actually a few more health risks that come with gaming but the main thing is, all of them can be prevented or at least remedied. People are neurotic, that’s the biggest issue. They have a deep inferiority complex and for some reason, online communities

perpetuate it. Health is an issue that should always take first priority no matter what someone spends their time doing.

V. Conclusion

Whether it is behavioral changes, personality shifts, or health related alterations, gaming and its communities have a large influence on their players. People entering the game may have a predetermined idea of who they are, but the person who leaves the game is not the same one who entered. MMORPGs incentivize adventuring in groups and make it more rewarding than solo play. They create systems in which everyone is included, whether it is a small hunting party or a larger guild. The goal of most game developers is to include everyone. Though it is not their goal, these groups have a lasting effect on the players who inhabit them. Players themselves do not think much of the games they play, they see them as distant from their life. These games are much more than just games, they are another place for people where growth takes place, even if they don't know it. "Some are tempted to think of life in cyberspace as insignificant, as escape or meaningless diversion. It is not. Our experiences there are serious play. We belittle them at our risk" (Turkle, 1995, p. 268). MMORPGs and the communities within them are as real as the communities we have in our everyday lives. The sooner people accept that, the sooner players will realize it as well.

Resources

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