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Udit Manocha
San Jose State University

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MMORPGs and Their Effect on Players

By Udit Manocha

May 22, 2017

The history of games dates back as far back as man. Whether it be for pure amusement, social interaction, initiation ceremony, or learning tool games have a substantial role in human culture. In the past half century a new type of game emerged: the video game which used computers and, later, consoles to create a new experience for gamers. During this time period, various video game genres appeared, one of which was the Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPG) genre. MMORPGs is a genre composed of two other genres: Massive Multiplayer Online (MMO) which are characterized by large number of players working together or against one another and Role Playing Game (RPG) where the player takes control of a game character. An MMORPG combines the characteristics of both into a virtual persistent world that continues to operate despite a player leaving the game temporarily. Over the past decade there has been a dramatic increase in MMORPG players, research into the effects of MMORPGs on the player's life, and the possible learning outcomes that can be developed using MMORPGs.

There is a common misconception that a majority of people hold: games are for children. While this may have been true at some point history, as in at one point the majority of video game players were of a younger population, that is certainly not the case anymore. World-wide the average age of a gamer is 35 years old with the average years played being 13 years (Lofgren). According to an article written by Colin Campbell for Polygon there are 155 million Americans who actively play videogames 26% of which are under the age of 18 and 27% are over 50 with the average age resting at 35 years old (Campbell). Clearly, a large majority of the modern gamers are not children individuals 18 years or older. In addition, the gaming industry

has been growing dramatically in the past decade. In the United States the top 100 video games reported a revenue of approximately \$23.5 billion in 2016 which was the largest in any country only being beat by China which reported \$24.2 billion (Lofgren).

There are several gaming genres currently on the market with MMORPGs being one of the most popular. Blizzard's *World of Warcraft*, one of the most, if not the most, well known MMORPGs, last reported an active subscription base of 5.5 million players in September of 2015 (Conditt). Other MMORPGs do not come close to the numbers reported by one of the genres longest standing game, however, the numbers are still significant. In 2016, Square Enix's Final Fantasy XIV reported 320,000 active players with 6 million accounts created while ArenaNet's Guild Wars 2 hit 7 million players boasting 460,000 active players before they converted their game to a free-to-play model (Ellie). As one can clearly see, MMORPGs have very large player bases, but even more interesting is not the what occurs in the game itself, but the the impact of MMORPGs outside of the virtual realm.

In most MMORPG's, players control an avatar, often time personally customized, and progress through the game by advancing the avatar's abilities and statistics. According to Anderson, many studies have shown that by creating an attachment between the player and the avatar is a key component to a player continuing to play the game. This is often done by using in-game goals, level progression, skill progression, and other such achievements tied directly to the avatar (Anderson). The relationship between the player and the avatar becomes far more personal when avatar customization is involved. According to CMC studies there are two relationships generally accepted: the avatar is a better but similar representation of the player or the avatar is a representation of the player. The significance of these relationships is that they are creating a bond between the player and the avatar. This creates a view that the characteristics and achievements of the avatar are now that of the player as well thus allowing

the player to enact a different self in a fantasy world. The development of these relationships are not purely based on the physical features of a player, but psychological factors as well. With the inclusion of both, the player forms a deeper bond with the avatar and bridging the two identities (Mancini). In essence, the avatar becomes an extension of the player themselves, thus creating a space where the player's real life faults do not apply, whether it be physical disabilities, or mental obstacles. This leads to an environment where the player in the real world would otherwise act, the most significant of which is socializing. A large portion of MMORPG's have events that allow or force players to group together and complete a task together creating an environment where players must work together to accomplish the common goal (Anderson). The social interaction involved in such tasks and many others in MMORPG's exceeds that of many other genres of games simply by the sheer number of interactions required during each event which can consist of one to a hundred players at any given time. The level of interaction only increases when the event revolves around players playing against other players, rather than computer generated avatars. As a result, players have shown increased social ability when placed in online environments while showing signs of other signs of growth.

One of the most apparent effects of MMORPGs is the level of comfort displayed by players in social situations while playing the online game. In a study done by Marcel Martoncik, the conclusion that WoW players experienced less loneliness and social anxiety than when compared to their lives in the normal life. In addition, those apart of communities (such as guilds) felt less lonely than those not in guild while verbal communication with other online furthered this feeling. One of the most significant reasonings for this is that playing in an MMORPG places an individual in a situation where everyone has at least a few common interests such as playing the very game they have met in. This creates a gateway of conversation for players allowing for personal relationships to form. As previously stated, due to

the nature of MMORPGs the avatar is a representation of the player's identity, and as such relationships through the avatar are also developed for the player as well creating a sense of belonging in the real world through the fantasy world. Even further, when a player joins a guild the perceived level of loneliness is lower in the online world when compared to that of the real world (Martoncik). Online communities such as guilds and clans fulfill the need to belong that many players. In addition, being a part of a community allow more opportunity to meet, converse, and interact with other players when compared to a player that has not joined a community (Martoncik). Social skills, although important, are not the only skills needed by players to develop as individuals.

A recent study identified some of the necessary skills needed to succeed in the current time period. The study found that skills such as creativity, decision making, collaboration, information literacy, personal and social responsibility, and citizenship are needed to be successful in the 21st century (Sourmelis). Sourmelis found that the studies that researched the development of the ability to learn showed that players often would use external sources such as wikis and forums in order to develop personal retainable knowledge. When MMORPGs were used in the learning environment in this context, the results were positive, showing students were able to find knowledge banks faster with a higher level of concentration (Sourmelis). When discussing development of second language learning, it is shown that players there were positive results in the development of reading, writing and listening skills while interacting with in-game content. The learning environment only improved when in a collaborative situation, the motivation to learn was increased. These collaborations also lead to the development of bonds and teamworks leading to the conclusion that MMORPG as a genre develop collaborative ability. This has lead to an even larger number of studies examining the MMORPG player's ability to live in the world. The studies on citizenship showed that WoW players had a higher

civic engagement in both the video game and in the real world with community leaders showing a higher chance of civic engagement than any of the other ranks. The civic duties were not limited to personal gain, but included the players developed a sense of civic duty to one another as well. Furthermore, players were found to that leadership that was cultivated within the MMORPG were similar to those found in real world businesses (Sourmelis). Lastly, the development of personal and social responsibility studies showed that players who played with people from real life found their relationships with the individuals deepening. In addition, the more engaged a player is in the game with events and or other social interaction, the further developed the player's social ability became (Sourmelis). The skill developments found in MMORPG players shows that the genre is impactful on an individual's personal development and can be used as a tool to develop further.

The rise in popularity of the MMORPG genre in the past two decades has opened up the idea that this genre may be one that can change how people develop themselves. MMORPGs is a video game genre that allows for players to extend their personalities and abilities into a world with a complete new set of rules. Many of the skill sets needed to be successful can and are practiced in MMORPG games, as such there is a possibility to turn this into a valuable tool. This tool could allow players to further develop their identities while removing physical and mental obstacles that hinder their improvement in the real world. Whether the outcome will be positive or negative has yet to be determined, however, current studies show that there may be a positive effect of MMORPGs in the learning atmosphere.

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