

**MORE THAN JUST A GAME:
COMMUNICATION AND COMMUNITY IN MMORPGS**

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INTRODUCTION

As the clock strikes seven, forty of the most celebrated heroes of the Alliance gather in the great city of Ironforge. Among them are humans and dwarves, elves and gnomes. They are sturdy warriors and cunning thieves, wily magicians and skillful healers. The name of the greatest of these healers resounds in the minds and hearts of all who rely on him: Delirium. At least, that is his name in the computer-generated virtual world of Azeroth. In real life, he is Joshua, a 29 year old engineer living in a quiet neighborhood of Boston, Massachusetts. Every evening, Joshua returns home after work and, instead of going out with friends, he flicks on his computer and plays the massively multiplayer online role playing game (MMORPG) *World of Warcraft* for at least four hours.

At first glance, Joshua may seem like the stereotypical gamer: solitary and antisocial, choosing to waste his time on a video game instead of interacting with others. However, the truth is that gamers are not being antisocial when they play MMORPGs; rather, MMORPGs are important because they actually facilitate lively social interaction. MMORPG's are not just games. Massively multi-player role playing games are a unique medium of communication that fosters the development of real, meaningful relationships and strong communities. To the players of MMORPGs, these games provide a new way to connect to and interact with others.

BACKGROUND

Players began to interact through online role playing games in 1979, when Richard Bartle and Roy Trubshaw developed the first text-based multi-user dungeons (Barnes 94). These multi-user dungeons (MUDs) originated from the



tabletop fantasy role-playing game *Dungeons and Dragons* and allowed multiple users to log on as characters and

Figure 1. Screenshot. *Burning MUD*.

<<http://www.burningmud.org/index.html>>.

The virtual worlds of early multi-user dungeons were created entirely through rich textual descriptions.

explore a series of “rooms” and “objects” (Schaap 17). In Figure 1, for example, the Swedish *Burning MUD* displays the location of “Southwest Northeast Fountain Square,” followed by available exits to other rooms, a description of a computer-generated guide, and the name of another player.

Burning MUD is still running today, but as internet and computer technology advanced through the 1980’s, online role-playing games evolved from text-based MUDs to graphical and auditory worlds. In 1991, the first graphical MMORPG *Neverwinter Nights* was released, followed by *The Shadow of Yserbius* in 1992. However, *Ultima Online*, released in 1997, is considered the first modern MMORPG and is credited with popularizing the genre. *EverQuest* and *Acheron’s Call*, both released in 1999, completed what is considered the “big three” of the 1990s. From these roots, the demand for MMORPGs continued to grow exponentially, and in recent years, a flurry of new games has flooded the market (Woodcock).

Modern MMORPGs are now at the forefront of graphic technology, providing rich, immersive worlds that can now support up to thousands of players at time (EverQuest). These three-dimensional, seamless, and photorealistic worlds often take hours to traverse and are “persistent”: each virtual world exists even when a user is not playing, changing by itself and

constantly influenced by other users (Castronova 7). In these worlds, players complete quests and kill enemies to gain levels, equipment, and power. While 85% of MMORPGs remain Tolkien-style high-fantasy games such as *EverQuest II* or *World of Warcraft*, the genre has expanded to include science fiction games such as *Star Wars Galaxies*, combat simulation

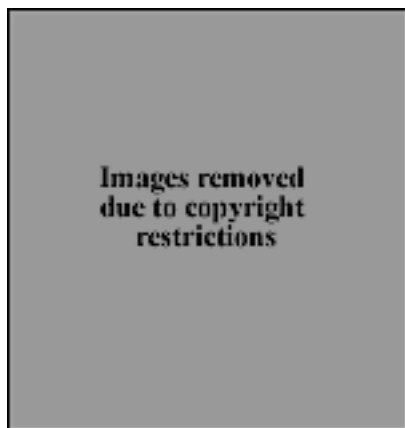


Figure 2. Screenshot. *World of Warcraft*. <<http://wow.erhohung.net/gallery/World-of-Warcraft>>.

The detailed, immersive graphics of *World of Warcraft* are a large factor in the game’s unparalleled success, pitting the game against other forms of electronic entertainment such as television.

games such as *World War II Online*, and even contemporary lifestyle games such as *The Sims Online* (Woodcock).

As the visual worlds of MMORPGs became more and more immersive, monthly subscriptions required to play the games (shown in Figure 3) skyrocketed from about 1



million in 2002 to 5 million in 2005 (Woodcock 1). Contrary to common myth, these subscribers are not all adolescent boys; MMORPGs are becoming a widespread cultural phenomenon.

According to Stanford

Figure 3. Woodcock, Bruce. <<http://www.mmogchart.com>>. There are currently five million MMORPG subscribers in the world, and that population is doubling every two years.

University graduate student Nicholas Yee, who has been surveying online players since 1999, MMORPG gamers range from young children to retired grandparents, with an average age of 27 and including about 15% women (Lamb). Millions of players are devoting both their time and money to MMORPGs instead of other forms of entertainment. Yee found that players spent an average of 22 hours a week playing MMORPG games, with 8% playing more than 40 hours a week. MMORPGs play a large part of these players' lives.

But what makes MMORPGs so attractive to such a diverse population? MMORPGs offer a unique game experience that facilitates socialization and fosters the formation of close relationships and communities. Full-time Stanford undergraduate and avid *World of Warcraft* player Struan "Arianne" Brinkers explains: "What keeps me coming back is the people I've and the friends that I now have in-game that extend beyond the game." Yee calls this interaction with other players the "socialization aspect" of MMORPGs, and separates the appeals of MMORPGs into achievement, immersion, and socialization. However, social

interaction is the differentiating factor between MMORPGs and conventional single-player games. According to Aaron Delwiche, an assistant professor of communication at Trinity University in San Antonio, this social interaction is the most essential appeal of MMORPGs and is “vital for enjoyment” (Delwiche). This dynamic social experience is created by three fundamental features of virtual worlds: player avatars, collaborative action, and personal communication.

A VIRTUAL EMBODIMENT

When entering a virtual world, users log in as individual graphical characters, or “avatars,” which are unique and permanent: they have a temporal history in the game, saved between sessions and slowly developing over time. Unlike a character in a conventional video game, there is a high degree of personalization available for an avatar on an MMORPG. Isaiah “Ike,” another active player of *World of Warcraft*, is particularly passionate about the fact that he can make and name his own character, and that “he is not pre-programmed.” Instead, a player personalizes the character that will represent him or her, deciding on the character’s race, gender, and details of appearance such as skin color, hair, and even facial markings. These characters also take on specific roles with specialized skills. For instance, in *World of Warcraft*, one can play as a warrior, paladin, hunter, rogue, mage, warlock, shaman, or priest. With this character, the superficial goal of the game is usually to explore and complete quests to increase the level and power of the character. Because of the time and emotion that they invest in their characters, players form strong attachments to their avatars. Avatars become a reflection of a player’s identity and embody the player in the virtual world.



Figure 4. Screenshot. *World of Warcraft*.

A player’s personal avatar is fully customized in appearances and skills.

The personalization available in the appearance and skills of an avatar allow players to transcend societal barriers and define their own identity. Real life factors such as appearance and social status become unimportant online. Instead, as video game theorist Miroslav Filiciak observes, “a dozen or so mouse clicks is enough to adapt one’s self to [one’s] expectations” (Filiciak 90). Players have control over who they choose to be and how they present themselves to others. By designing their own avatars, players “have an opportunity to painlessly manipulate [their] identity” (Filiciak 90). Critics of MMORPGs argue that this ability to play another identity impedes open communication because players may misrepresent themselves online, but Nicholas Yee explains that the ability to play another identity actually “allows many individuals to shed the guises they wear in real life and become more of who they really are.” Communicating through online identities does not lead players to misrepresent themselves. Instead, many individuals feel that they are more of their real selves as avatars online, free from the constraints of society (Yee). Thus, the virtual identity becomes part of a player’s self-identity, and is “perhaps the one [identity] in which the user realizes himself in the most complete way because of the lack of limitations existing in the real world” (Filiciak 92). Players in MMORPGs are able to present their real selves to while communicating with others, interacting openly and paving the way to close relationships.

Although avatars are graphical representations of players in the game, players also project themselves into their avatars. This “first-hand participation” (Newman 142-143) phenomenon means that players do not see their characters as simply tools for action (Rehak 106). Instead, players see their avatars as online embodiments; they describe their experiences as avatars in the first person, even though the game is played in third person (Filiciak 90). The avatar’s behavior “is tied to the player’s through an interface... its literal motion, as well as its figurative triumphs and defeats, results from the player’s actions” (Rehak 106). Because players design and directly control the avatar, they feel that they are truly physically embodied in the virtual world – a virtual world that includes other players. In an article about virtual identity, University of California professor of English Marguerite Waller writes,

“Computer avatars... make interaction with other users and with the electronic environment more intuitive” (Waller 184). The physical embodiment of avatars is unavailable through other mediums of communication, and provides a closeness and sense of personal presence when interacting with others.

A SHARED PLAYGROUND

As avatars, players are able to actively engage with others in the virtual game-world. Joshua explains that there is a high level of interaction in MMORPGs: “You’re not just talking to somebody.” Instead of simply speaking, players in MMORPGs actually do things together. The structure of the game itself provides a world in which one can have shared, bonding experiences.

The game-play component of MMORPGs actively encourages players to meet and play together. Characters in MMORPGs specialize in a wide range of roles and skills, which forces players to be co-dependent and work together in both combat and non-combat situations. In *World of Warcraft*, for example, crafting professions such as blacksmithing require trade goods from miners and enchanters. Thus, as game designer Derek Sanderson emphasizes, cooperative play happens because the game creates opportunities for teamwork and rewards positive social behavior (Sanderson 21). Many challenges in the game can only be solved in a balanced and organized group, especially at higher levels. When the same task can be done individually, it is usually much more difficult and time-consuming (Sanderson 26). Thus, as Delwiche writes, “The game’s point structure rewards collective action” (Delwiche 6-7). By providing easy ways to find groups and



Figure 5. Screenshot. *World of Warcraft*.

<<http://www.gameamp.com>>.

Ironforge, shown here, is a large Alliance city in *World of Warcraft*. Opportunities for trade and benefits such as increased health regeneration draw players to cities.

nodes such as cities for players to congregate in (see Figure 5), MMORPGs further encourage such social interaction. Consequently, the game becomes a space to “not only spend time together but to work on something in common” (Yee). As a medium of communication, MMORPGs not only encourage players to meet and work collaboratively on a common interest, but allows the creation of

memories and experiences that bring them together.

MMORPGs also promote bonding because of the high frequency with which crises in the virtual worlds, and hence tests of trust and altruism, occur. Virtual worlds are extremely dangerous: the game is engineered so that players are often placed in stressful life-or-death situations where only close-knit teamwork is effective. These extreme tests of loyalty are rare in real life, but in the game, they provide chances for teammates and friends to prove themselves, often bringing out the best and worst qualities in individuals. In a crisis, a rogue may be required to sacrifice himself to save the life of a more important group member like the healer, who can resurrect other team members. On the other hand, a single player panicking and running in the face of danger can attract additional enemies, spelling instant death for the group. Some argue that risking one’s life in an MMORPG is meaningless, but players actually invest a large amount of time and emotion in their characters. Players are often elated when a character acquires a rare weapon or overcomes a challenging obstacle (Brinkers). Alternatively, players are reluctant to have their characters die (Fine 4) and take it very seriously when their characters are treated badly. The death of a character is a very real sacrifice: lost items and

experience points can mean the waste of weeks of game-play. Because the emotions evoked in-game by the possibility of death are similar to those felt in the real world, Yee compares bonding in dangerous MMORPG worlds to the deep bonding that occurs between war veterans, saying that the “frequency of trust-building situations in MMORPGs facilitate the jump-starting of solid bonds between players.” Indeed, when asked about the close friends he has met online, Brinkers stated emphatically that though he may not have met them face to face, “they’ve definitely proved themselves to be honest, trustworthy, caring people.” In real-life, people make friends first and then slowly discover, through times of need, which friends can be trusted to be loyal. However, the process of building trust in MMORPGs occurs “inside-out”: the game allows opportunities for friendships to begin with demonstrations of trustworthiness.

A GLORIFIED CHAT ROOM

Another factor that contributes to the development of friendships is communication. In MMORPGs, players can communicate with each other through the many channels of speech or through pre-programmed emotive actions. For example, the “gossip” command allows a player to announce something to the entire world, while the “whisper” command can communicate a personal message to just one other player. In addition, non-verbal communication is available with “emote” commands, which allow players to interact using actions such as “glare” or “hug.” In Figure 6, the typed command “/laugh Atrine” displays the line “You laugh at Atrine,” and causes the avatar to audibly laugh. This text-based communication leads many players and academics such as Yee to conclude that MMORPGs are, fundamentally, glorified chat rooms (Lamb). Indeed,

MMORPGs share many of the same aspects of online communication that are prevalent in forums, chat rooms, and instant messaging.

An important aspect of online communication is the anonymous nature of the internet, which creates a sense of safety that might be lacking in face-to-face communication (Delwiche 13).

Anonymity removes the fear of repercussions, making the game world a place to try new things out, such as meeting a stranger and opening up to others. Thus, as psychologist Adam Joinson notes, behavior is more uninhibited online (Joinson 44-45). Isaiah explains, “You’re more likely to tell someone what you honestly think in a more anonymous place like this. You feel free to say things you wouldn’t say to somebody’s face.” People are more open online because they are no longer preoccupied with fears of evaluation: the normal rules and restraints of conversation no longer apply (Joinson 51). Moreover, when people have issues in real life, it could often be with the very people they would normally turn to. However, they are free to talk about the problems online “without fear of aggravating the problem” (Yee). Brinkers articulates, “If I’m having problems with real-life friends, I might tell my online friends.”

Reduced social cues also distinguish online communication from face-to-face communication. In the real world, social cues such as dress, posture, eye-contact, expression, and tone of voice situate communication in a clear context (Rheingold). Online, such cues are lost, resulting in a reduced awareness of the speakers and streamlined attention to the transmitted content (Joinson 49-50). Many players find this stripped down medium of social interaction to be easier to handle. Isaiah, for example, is “quicker to interrupt and provoke someone in a heated discussion or to talk something out with them a lot more comfortably” because he does not have to deal with eye contact.



Figure 6. Screenshot. *World of Warcraft*. The player interface of *World of Warcraft* includes a chat window in the lower left corner.

The uninhibited and simplistic nature of online discourse makes communication easier online, and leads to higher levels of personal disclosure. People are often surprised that strangers will disclose so much of themselves online, but many people find it easier to communicate their personal feelings in text-only correspondence (Barnes 102). As a result, “people are more likely to be honest and forth-coming on personal issues when asked over a computer-mediated communication channel as opposed to a face to face setting” (Yee). These “heightened levels of self-disclosure” mean that relationships develop differently and may become deeper sooner (Joinson 53-54). Thus, like building trust, online friendships also form “inside-out,” developing in the reverse process of real-life friendships. In real life, people initially judge others based on superficial qualities such as appearance or age before learning their thoughts and personalities. In MMORPGs, however, players brought together by trust subsequently form close relationships solely on the basis of intimate personal exchanges.

FRIENDS AND COMMUNITY

The avatar, gameplay, and chat aspects of MMORPGs create an environment for communication that is open, bonding, and intimate. According to virtual economist Edward Castronova, “these communications allow social interactions that are *not* a simulation of human interactions; they *are* human interactions, merely extended into a new forum” (14). As a measure of the results, players often forge online communities and relationships that can “absolutely be as meaningful as those in real life” (Yee).

Online relationships are generally looked upon with skepticism, but former *EverQuest* player Sanya “Tweety” Thomas notes in the movie *Avatars Offline* that MMORPG relationships are fundamentally no different from long-distance relationships: they are based on communication. However, MMORPGs offer more than traditional communication. In MMORPGs, there is shared interaction between players: just as people might spend time together in real life, going to events such as movies or baseball games, players spend time together as characters in the game (Brinkers). As a result of this available interaction, players in the MMORPGs quickly

form tight-knit groups of friends. When asked, most people will describe a friend as a person who is accepting, loyal, and easy to talk to. By these standards of friendships, real friendships are unquestionably cultivated by interaction in MMORPGs. To Brinkers, the friends that he meets online are just as important to him as the friends he meets in person. In fact, half of all MMORPG players surveyed consider their online friends to be as real as their friends outside of the game (Yee).

A particular phenomenon of communities in MMORPGs is the formation of guilds. These player organizations, which have been compared to clans or gangs, consist of tens to hundreds of players that work together and become very close-knit, both in the game and outside of the game (Jackobsson 8). There are generally two types of guilds: more casual family-oriented guilds, and raiding guilds that focus on challenging the most difficult parts of the game (Jackobsson 5). However, even high-end raiding guilds are very social. For example, the guild *Seditio* in *World of*

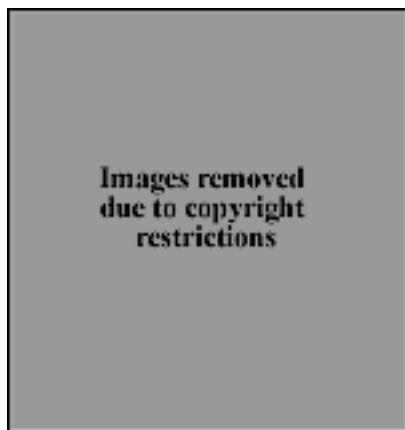


Figure 7. Screenshot. *World of Warcraft*. <<http://www.caelestis-guild.com>>

Caelestis is a raiding guild on the Daggertspine server of *World of Warcraft*. Membership in the guild is displayed by the “guild tag” under each character’s name.

Warcraft is a raiding guild that is still very family-oriented: according to Brinkers, “it is important that we’re all friends and that we can talk.” These guilds form on the basis of trust and responsibility, and are very cohesive.

According to the massively multiplayer design specialist Patricia Pizer, guilds established as early as 1995 still work together (Pizer 438).

Guilds that begin in one game often move into new games. For example, the prominent guild “Crimson Legion” from *Star Wars Galaxies* became the “Unholy Legion” in *World of*

Warcraft (Unholy). Guilds become so close that

they are essentially existing social networks that simply inhabit new game environments (Jackobsson 5).

The communities that players can find through MMORPGs are not at all separate from their real lives. Isaiah has met five or six of his guild members in

person; real-life player conventions have brought people together from all over the world. Players fall in love in virtual worlds and get married (*Avatars*). More importantly, though, players are genuinely concerned about each other. According to Pizer, “Funds have been raised in the real world to help out a guild member who’d had a terrible accident and was unable to pay the ensuing medical costs” (Pizer 438). Also, when players die in real life, their virtual communities often participate in memorial activities. Raph Koster, the creative lead of *Star Wars Galaxies*, details a case in *Avatars Offline* where a guild leader suddenly disappeared from a game for several months. When community members looked for her, the players discovered through a web-page that her parents put up that she had died in a car accident, and erected a virtual room with a tree where gifts could be left (*Avatars*). Because the people and emotions in these worlds are real, the virtual communities formed in MMORPGs translate into very real communities.

MORE THAN JUST A GAME

While multi-player games have all of the same aspects of online communication as chat rooms do, the MMORPGs are a drastically different medium because they provide a graphic avatar embodiment and a physically realistic world to interact in. The embodiment of a player as an avatar allows the player to interact with others as his or her real self, while self-association of players with avatars creates a sense of closeness and personal presence in the online interactions. The interactive virtual world allows players to work together and create shared experiences, while the tests and trials of the game engender trust and bonding between players. And underneath it all, the text-based, online communication allows players to exchange personal, intimate thoughts and feelings.

Joshua, or “Delirium,” has been married for three years, but his wife is in law school in California. His friends from the military are spread out across the country. For Joshua, *World of Warcraft* provides a much-needed outlet for communication, a place where he can meet and interact with others. Hence, as Patricia Pizer writes, “virtual worlds extend beyond what we have traditionally thought of as games” (432). MMORPGs create a unique environment for interpersonal interaction,

characterized by openness, intimacy, deep bonds and strong communities. In doing so, MMORPGs are important to players because they catalyze real relationships between real people. More significantly, though, MMORPGs are important in their own right: they are a new and unique medium for communication, changing the ways people interact with and relate to one another.

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