Mosaic

Stories of Digital Lives and Identities

Presented by Nicholas Yee

contact@nickyee.com

www.nickyee.com

Introduction

It's easy to think of the worlds created by MMORPGs as independent entities, far removed and isolated from the real, tangible world. You hear the phrase "It's just a game" both from the insiders and the outsiders. There are players who use the phrase to assert that the game is benign and a new technological past-time. And there are outsiders who use the phrase to question why people would do silly things, such as get married or sell virtual items, in a make-believe world.

But you also hear the phrase "It's not just a game". When outsiders utter this phrase, it is almost always in association with a negative real-life situation – marital infidelity, suicide, familial irresponsibility, depression and so on. These outsiders argue that some of the blame should be placed on these games. On the other hand, there are players who also say this phrase. These are the individuals who believe that the worlds created by MMORPGs are not independent of the real world. In one way or another, their virtual lives have affected their real lives for better or worse.

And in telling their stories, these players answer the critiques of the other insiders and outsiders. To the players who say that MMORPGs are simple past-times, they show them that your virtual life is not always independent of your real life. To the outsiders who think it's plain silliness, they sweep away the superficial interactions to reveal the deeper meaning of what appears trivial. And

1

to the outsiders who want to condemn these games, they tell some happy endings that the media will never care to sensationalize because nothing tragic happened.

What follows is an interweaving of stories submitted by MMORPG players. In each story, a player describes how their virtual lives and identities have altered their real lives and identities for better or for worse. And by telling their own personal experiences candidly without being polarized into superficial stances of black or white, these players hint at the true complexity of virtual worlds.

Methodology

Links to the online questionnaire were publicized at well-known websites that catered to MMORPG players, such as the Lore, Stratics, and IGN Vault networks, over the period of 5/17/02 to 5/30/02. Players of EverQuest, Dark Age of Camelot, Ultima Online, Acheron's Call, and Anarchy Online were asked to participate. A total of 3407 responses were collected. Of these, 1990 were EQ players, 572 were DAOC players, 603 were UO players, 134 were AC players, and 107 were AO players.

These stories were solicited using a fairly open-ended question: "Tell me about a memorable experience you've had in the game. This experience might be good or bad, moving or infuriating, or it made you realize something important. It might have to do with someone you met in the game, or a particular interaction with an individual, or an unforgettable experience in a group, or even someone you play the game with in real-life."

These stories are presented verbatim except for minor spelling corrections.

Because of the low response rate of AC and AO players, their responses were excluded in the data used to plot the Gender / Age Range charts presented below. In addition, responses from DAOC and UO players were weighted to reflect the known proportion of current subscribers – around 400k for EQ, and around 200k for DAOC and UO. This was to prevent the data from EQ players to heavily skew the outcome because the proportion of EQ respondents was much higher than the known proportion.

Adolescent Identity – Assembling the Self

Adolescence is a tough time for many teenagers as they try to form a sense of self-identity while carefully treading the thin line between peer acceptance and ostracism. Many teenagers are forced to answer complex questions to which there are oftentimes no good answers. MMORPGs

can provide a safe space for teenagers to try out different identities and personalities without the risk of serious repercussions.

> *I'm a deeply upset adolescent, struggling with my parents, my friends, my sexuality, and my education - none of these mesh well together, mind you. I'm comfortable with many of these things in an oblique way, particularly I acknowledge and accept my individual sexuality, but I find myself set aside from my peers. I'm certainly not the most popular, but I find a wedge being driven between me and those around me because I can't share how I feel about the same sex, nor the opposite sex, without feeling further ostracized. So I've taken to an online persona in the game known as Asheron's Call where I can pursue that issue and speak with people in a much more anonymous, comfortable setting. I have built friendships with several of my guild/allegiance members, and have been able to express my sorrows and dilemmas to them without fear of lasting judgment, and where they can do the same. I use the game as an escape from real life, but also as a form of peer/societal therapy, enabling me to work through my problems, albeit temporarily, and help others to correct their own. I can't offer many particular instances, but I find myself at peace when I'm in a disconnected world where my inadequacies and depressive tendencies can be suppressed, or completely lifted from me for a few hours.*
>
> *I find myself much more satisfied venting my stress through repeated slashes of an imaginary sword on an imaginary creature and having someone there to listen without the face-to-face, truly personal connection other mediums of therapy offer. Plus it costs a lot less per month. And while this does certainly sound like a narcotic, I would rather be dependent on a game world than on a more damaging physical drug that wouldn't offer the same connection with others (hopefully!) nor the *true* tranquility I find, as opposed to an artificial hallucination as a result of some recreational pharmaceutical.* [m, 17, AC]

As this young player points out, the peer group is both the problem and what aggravates it because the individual has no one to talk to. On the other hand, the game can offer solace and support because it gives this player someone to talk to in a safe space. The allusions to game dependency are troubling, and yet spending more time with the peer group might be more problematic as the player implies towards the end. But the theme of having someone to talk to is expressed by other teenagers.

> *I had a friend with me hunting at this village, and prior to that day he was just a friend, we had left an old guild and joined the same one, sticking together. It was 2 am at the time where I lived so I really had no one to talk to about my issues in real life, but*

I really needed to get them off my chest. So I spoke to my in-game friend for two hours straight, without killing a single mob the entire time, and I realized he and I were far more alike than I originally thought, and he helped me feel better about my issues. I'm pretty sure that he is a better friend than most of my real-life friends, by far. [m, 16, DAOC]

One might be inclined to doubt his judgment of the quality of this friendship, but it forces us to ask ourselves whether our friends are the people who we see and talk to on a day-to-day basis, or the ones who are there when we need someone to listen to us.

| Some of my friends in the game are comparable to or better than my real-life friends.			
	% Yes	% No	Total N
EQ	43.2%	56.8%	1982
DAOC	33.7%	66.3%	570
UO	43.8%	56.2%	600
AC	32.4%	67.7%	136
AO	36.5%	63.6%	107

Across 5 of the most popular MMORPGs, about 40% of respondents felt that some of their online friends are comparable to or better than their real-life friends. Female players above the age of 22 were more likely than male players from the same age ranges to feel this way.

Some of my friends in the game are comparable to or better than my real-life friends.
N male = 2760, N female = 406
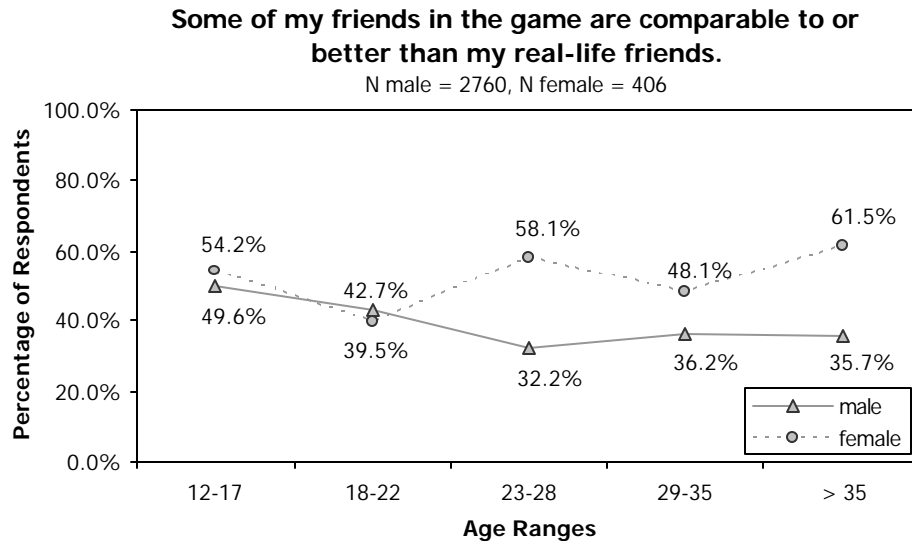
Virtual relationships confuse outsiders because they wonder how people can be friends with someone they have never seen, and perhaps one answer is that for a lot of people it's easier to talk about personal issues with someone you've never seen.

I have told personal issues or secrets to online friends which none of my real-life friends know.			
	% Yes	% No	Total N
EQ	25.3%	74.7%	1995
DAOC	17.4%	82.6%	574
UO	26.6%	73.4%	605
AC	16.3%	83.7%	135
AO	22.2%	77.8%	108

Around 15-25% of respondents from 5 popular MMORPGs have told personal issues or secrets to online friends which they did not tell real life friends. Female players of all ages were more likely to talk to their online friends about personal issues than male players.

I have told personal issues or secrets to online friends which none of my real-life friends know.

N male = 2760, N female = 406
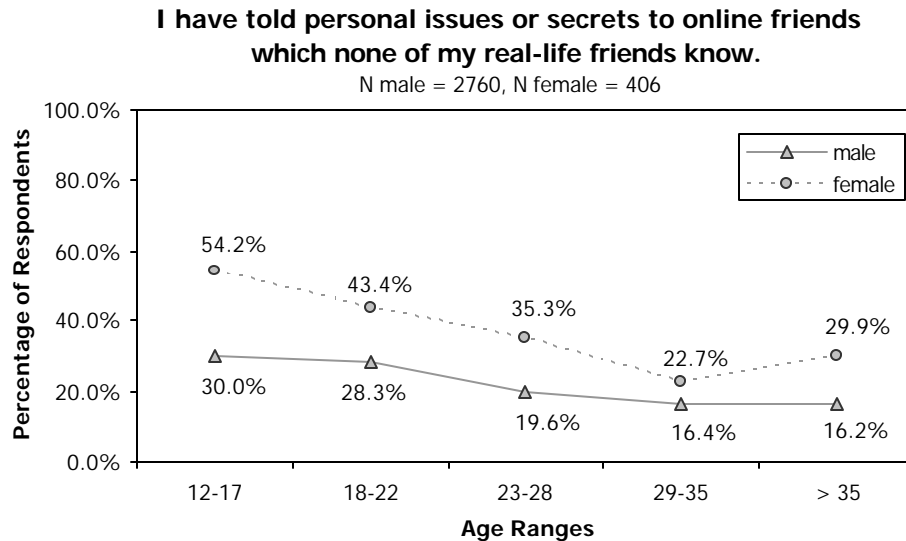
Of course, one of the fundamental assumptions that many insiders and most outsiders make is that an individual's real identity is his real-life identity, and this is another reason why virtual relationships trouble them – because it all seems so fake. But what if that assumption is false? What if some individuals are more comfortable expressing who they really are in a virtual space?

> *When I first started playing UO it was pretty different then it was now. I enjoyed it, as I still do, but in a different way. Me and my real life friend were playing as miners in a town called Minoc. A man came by and killed our packhorses just to be mean, and I chased after him, I chased him for nearly 5 minutes when he stopped and we fought. I got my ass virtually handed down to me. But he never came back again, which from what other miners told me he usually did. It's something that you always secretly wanted to do, you know, stick up for people, the little people. You can't just go up to your boss and tell him he's an ass in front of everyone and expect a normal day tomorrow, but in an MMORPG there is no reason not to. I felt good after doing this after I he killed me, because I at least tried to do something, which is not normally seen in my real life. People in game see a side of yourself that usually remains hidden, your inner self. I*

originally thought I was going to play a daring thief when I started ... who would of guessed I would turn out a craftsman and take up fishing. [m, 17, UO]

I am more of "who I really am" in the game than in real-life.			
	% Yes	% No	Total N
EQ	24.7%	75.3%	1992
DAOC	22.3%	77.7%	573
UO	27.5%	72.5%	603
AC	25.4%	74.6%	134
AO	25.0%	75.0%	108

About a quarter of respondents from 5 popular MMORPGs felt that they are more of "who they really are" in the game than in real life. Male and female players were not significantly different from each other in their response to this question.

I am more of "who I really am" in the game than in real-life.
N male = 2760, N female = 406
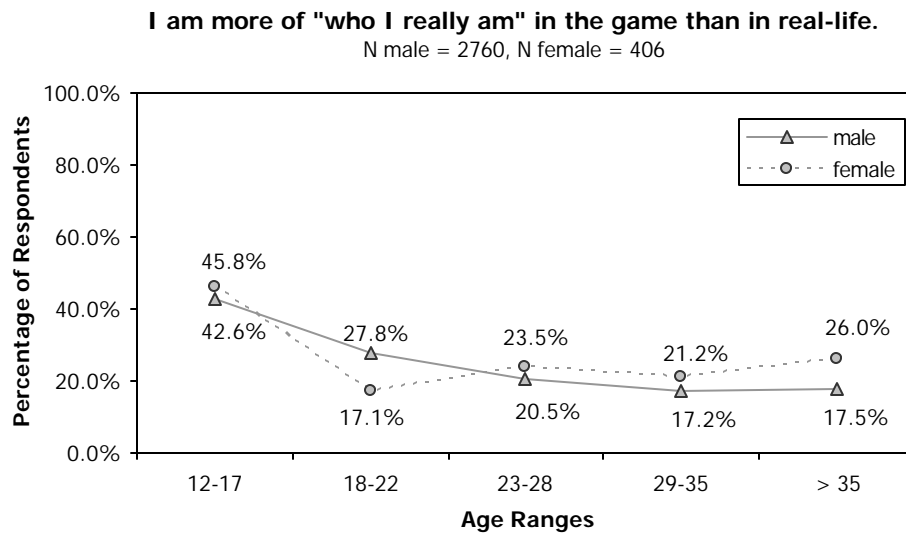
Growth and Transfer – Through the Looking Glass

The safe space offered by virtual worlds isn't only helpful to male teenagers experiencing identity issues. It is a space where even adults can grow from their experiences. For many players, being in a leadership role in the game has helped them gain confidence in real life.

Last year, I was elected as the leader of the guild I'm part of when our old leader (a good RL friend) left. At first, I was a bit concerned about my ability to organize 100 some people from all over the world, but, as it turned out, I learned that I was much more organized that I had thought I would be, and ... that I had an uncanny knack for diplomacy and leadership. The experience made me feel very empowered, and good about myself, and I've recently made the decision to pursue a career in design, something I've always wanted to do, but was afraid to, because I never though I'd measure up (I'm currently a marketing professional, and am pretty bored with it). It's

hard to describe very eloquently why EQ helped me feel like I could do it ... but it has. It's given me confidence in myself, and made me realize I make good decisions, and am pretty smart, and that gave me the push I needed to make a "scary" real life decision. Now that I'm pursuing a new career, I'm feeling MUCH happier in general with my life, even though I've not landed that job... yet. :) [f, 34, EQ]

I've never been one who is particularly comfortable with a leadership role in real life. In the game, friends and I left another guild that no longer suited us for various reasons and formed our own. I was approached by several of these friends to assume leadership of the guild and agreed, even though I was uncertain of my suitability. I've grown more accustomed now to directing various aspects of running the guild and providing a vision and leadership to the members. Follow-up and assertiveness now feel more natural to me even in real life. It has been an amazing opportunity to push myself beyond my boundaries and a rewarding experience. [f, 46, EQ]

As these two stories illustrate, the experiences in virtual worlds can transfer to real worlds in beneficial ways. These experiences can empower individuals in a way that might be difficult in achieve in real life, because oftentimes our real lives and peer group force personas upon us, and we become who we are expected or supposed to be instead of who we really are. The following player presents a more dramatic tale of how her virtual identity helped her overcome problems she had with her real life identity.

My online romantic relationships have been crucial to me. Before EQ I didn't used to like being a female. I am overweight some, and that helps to keep men away. :(But through the online relationships I have had, I have grown to like being female, and to even enjoy it.

I think just the fact that men find me attractive online that my brains and sense of humor add up to a person they want to know, has had a major effect on me, and given me more confidence with men. Playing EQ, folks tend to be more honest. So if I screw up in how I interact with someone, they are more likely to indicate they are pissed or whatever, than in RL.

I have learned how to flirt in EQ, by watching how other women do it, and imitating them. That is huge. Also, cybering in EQ I have been able to explore parts of my sexuality that I was afraid of, or are physically dangerous. With the safety of /q just two taps away, I can do that. Also cybering has made me more honest overall. It only works well if you are excruciatingly honest about your feelings every moment, both your sexual arousal feeling, and happy/sad kinds of feelings. That has spilled over into my RL

life, to great benefit. I am far more willing to be emotionally honest with people now than 3 years ago. [f, 42, EQ]

Playing with a Partner — Husband and Wife Dragon-Slaying Team

Experiences from virtual worlds do not only have an impact on individuals playing these games alone, but they can also affect the real lives of romantic partners playing together in positive ways. As one player puts it:

Not an experience but THE experience: My wife and I play EverQuest together, each playing a character on two separate accounts, but playing our characters together in the game. We both like the game because it embodies and teaches cooperation, mutual respect, helping others, working towards goals, taking risks, self sacrifice, and other good Real Life virtues in the context of the game. Also and as important we find it a very nice way to be together but as slightly different creatures in a different world and place. [m, 59, EQ]

MMORPGs can allow romantic partners to support each other in dangerous and stressful situations, and to help reinforce their trust in each other. It also creates complex dilemmas that both partners have to deal with, thereby forcing couples to discuss some tough issues, oftentimes with beneficial effects.

My husband and I (we both play) have had significant opportunities to better understand each other and our real-life relationship through discussions involving EQ and our in-game friendships, roles, and actions. Sometimes this has been in the form of an argument but more often it is in the form of extensive discussions about how we believe things should be done in-game, what we want to do, how we want to handle certain situations that have or could arise. While there have been times when playing the game has led to conflict in our marriage, it has also strengthened it by giving us a shared pursuit outside of our daily life experiences. [f, 33, EQ]

But sometimes, these stressful situations actually create even more stress in real life. The following player relates her experience — a modern analogy of the old saying "you should never teach your spouse how to play golf".

My husband and brother started playing together when EverQuest first came out. About 6 months later I started to play, though since I was brand new, I did not play with

them, as they were in their 40s. I made my own circle of friends and playing partners. When I made it into my 30s my husband and brother (shaman/rogue) asked me to track for them as they were hunting rares in Traks Teeth. It was a dangerous area for me, a ranger in her mid 30s, and I had never hunted with them before, but I wasn't worried about dying, and I knew I could outrun most anything that might want to make mincemeat of me. They were not quite so confident of my abilities, however. There were a few dicey moments where my hit points dropped rather low. My husband was a nervous wreck watching me play, seeing my hit points drop, worrying that I would die. And since we play side by side I had to listen to his ranting and cursing, his 'suggestions' on my play style, and various other comments. I came to realize that day, that though we might be playing the same game, we would never be playing it together. Our real life marriage would not be able to stand the stress of him watching me be hurt or possibly die in game. [f, 43, EQ]

For other couples, the tension doesn't come from these "dicey moment", but instead, it comes from the interactions that the partner has with other people in the virtual world. As the following player illustrates however, these stressful situations can be blessings in disguise.

My husband and I originally shared one EQ account, but decided to upgrade to individual accounts, despite the costs involved. We rationalized it by agreeing that while we're playing EQ we're not spending money elsewhere! ;)

Initially, it didn't go so well - I was used to having 'my' friends around me and I was surprised to find how jealous I felt when he first started playing during 'my' time. My friends all accepted my husband immediately and loved having him around - if anything, that made me MORE irritated.

In addition, he'd be annoyed if he heard me typing and didn't see anything on the group or guild line: who was I talking to, and why did I feel the need to keep it private? This only went on for about a week before my husband and I sat down and actually discussed what it was that was annoying us. I explained that sometimes I'd be typing without him seeing everything because I have lots of friends and wasn't necessarily grouped with them - hence /tell was the only way to communicate. I told him he could look over my shoulder anytime he wanted as there was nothing 'private' going on.

He in turn agreed to let me sometimes group with my established friends without him being in the party, so I could get some Away Time.

Funnily enough, once we'd agreed to all this we actually ended up gravitating more and more to each other's company, and now if he's at work or I am (we work different shifts) the one at home really frets at the loss of the other. The game isn't quite

the same without them! Sure, I still like catching up with my friends, but I truly miss the companionship of my RL "Best Friend" - my husband.

EQ has - oddly enough - brought us closer together. Most people assume that playing an immersive game tends to reduce the quality of a relationship, but we find that a couple of hours whacking away at virtual critters, laughing at the silly situations and socializing with our online mates has had a totally positive outcome for us! [f, 28, EQ]

Addiction - The Dark Side

There is a dark side to MMORPGs that players are oftentimes unwilling to confront – the prevalence of addiction.

| I would consider myself addicted to the game.			
	% Yes	% No	Total N
EQ	45.2%	54.9%	1989
DAOC	36.5%	63.5%	572
UO	53.2%	46.8%	603
AC	40.4%	59.6%	136
AO	38.0%	62.0%	108

A significant number of respondents considered themselves to be addicted to the game. Female players below the age of 23 were more likely than male players of the same age range to consider themselves addicted to the game.

I would consider myself addicted to the game.
N male = 2760, N female = 406
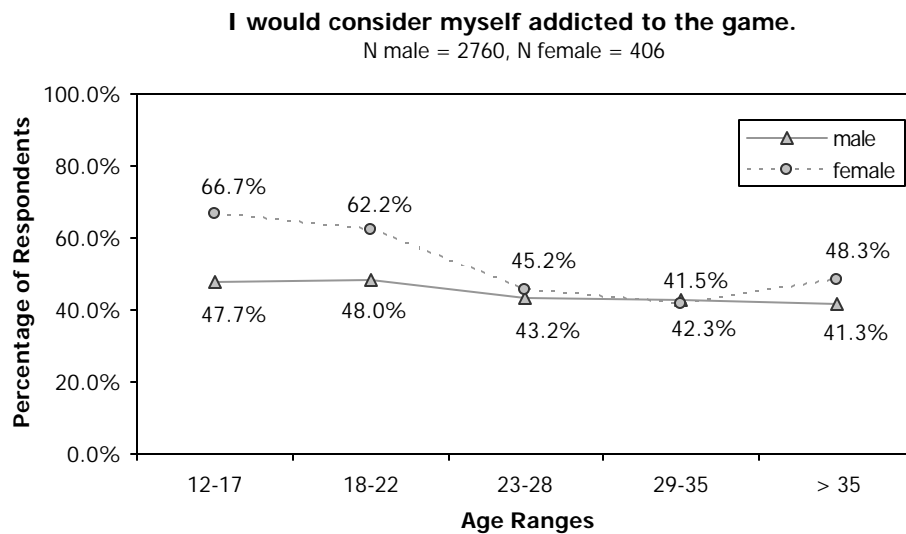
The effect of addiction can also be felt by the number of players who have tried to quit but were unsuccessful.

10

I have tried to quit the game but was unsuccessful.			
	% Yes	% No	Total N
EQ	12.2%	87.8%	1994
DAOC	7.9%	92.1%	570
UO	21.1%	78.9%	603
AC	10.4%	89.6%	135
AO	9.3%	90.7%	108

About 10% of EQ and DAOC players, and about 20% of UO players, have tried to quit but were unsuccessful. It is unclear whether the rate of failure decreases with age because older players are more successful when they try to quit, or because they are less likely to try to quit to begin with. The former is probably the correct interpretation.

I have tried to quit the game but was unsuccessful.
N male = 2760, N female = 406
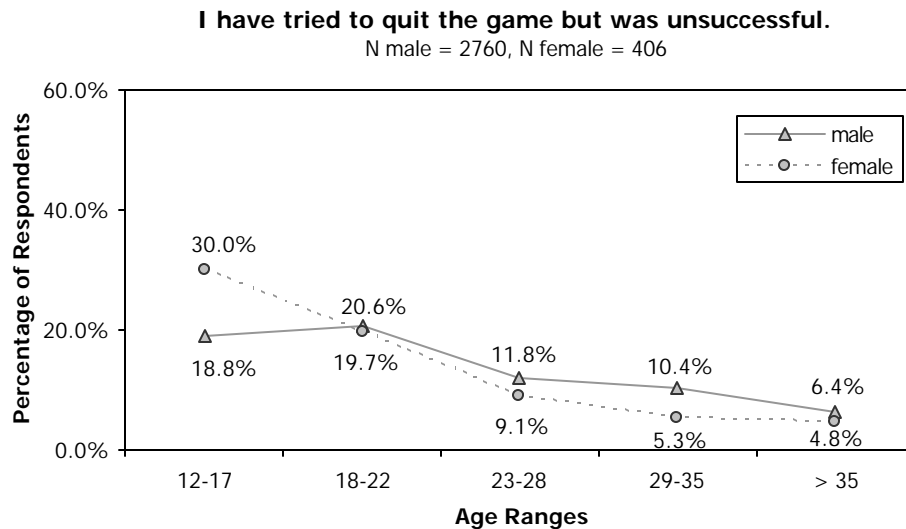
Some players brush this issue aside and trivialize it, arguing that gaming addiction cannot be as serious as substance addiction. Some players deny their own addiction by claiming "it's just a game", but stories such as the following force both players and observers to rethink the seriousness of gaming addiction.

I could take a guess that I was playing about 90+ hours a week. I was living in San Fran at that time. EBay was paying our rent (for my boyfriend and I). We had closeted ourselves inside our 1 bedroom apartment for days at a time. We went out only to buy food and cigarettes. I called my family on the east coast maybe once a month, he called his maybe once every 2 weeks. Food consisted of fast food or anything hand held or anything that could be cooked in under 20 minutes. We literally saw no one but each other for months at a time, we didn't bother with friends or cultivating friendships.

We were kicked out of our apartment in January 2001, we fled back to the east coast, to our families. I left the dude within weeks of moving back east, losing my computer and all access to EverQuest. <poof> Having no crutch and no co-dependent in my life at that point, I actually attempted socializing again. I called old friends and

hung out with my family. So, I attempt to "normalize". Interacting with more than 1 person at a time was just impossible. I could not speak with more than 1 person at a time, if there were 2+ people in a room, I had to leave it. The noise.....living with other people, holy christ the noise, I felt as if I had just come out of a bubble after 12 months and my ears could suddenly clearly hear everything around me.

I found that I could no longer clearly express anger or emotional pain. Ever seen a toddler throw a temper tantrum? I had no self-worth, whatsoever. I was embarrassed and riddled with guilt that I had spent 12 months playing EQ and had cut myself off from the world for it. I still cannot manage my anger and the self-worth looks about like swiss cheese. I am violent when I am angry. VIOLENT. I was not like this before I invested a chunk of my life in this game.

Got a job, made some money, saved a lot of money. In May 2001, I bought a computer, bought EQ and started messing around with it again. I ran into an old EQ friend in game, the old camaraderie rekindled, he ended up on a plane and flew out to meet me in July 2001. In August, we married. I moved to Kansas to be with him and have not regretted anything for a second.

So what's going on with EQ? In July, I paid $50 to have my main character transferred to the server my husband and friends inhabit and as per "The Rules", I lost her gear in the transfer. I poked around at the game for a couple of months and just wasn't having any fun. I had little decent gear, so I felt like a retard. My character had been level 56 for a year at that point, so I was uncomfortable with that aspect of it also. The groove was just not there. I iced the account for a few months, just did not play at all. The game has always worked the same for me: shit starts happening when you find the groove. When you find old friends and start killing together, when you find a good, comfortable guild, when you start having FUN again, you've found the groove.

I went poking around for the groove in April 2002 and I freaking found it again. I can't escape the fun, it's lurking around every corner. I'm playing a whopping 10-20 hours a week, I am proud to report. The husband is the ONLY reason I do not play more than that. It is a battle of wills to fight off the groove. I just simply don't play, I turn my shoulder on it and wait for the weekend, but the urge is just freaking killer. I can't walk back into it and I know it.

I hope you're getting some real stuff, I hope to God you're getting more than standard fluffy responses. I don't know why I want people to understand the shadier side of this game, I certainly don't want MMORPGs banned or made the scapegoat for suicides. This is a real addiction and I could point at any number of people who are either dealing with the addiction first-hand or dealing with it as a loved-one. I have friends in this game who NEVER took a break, they've been playing this game for 2 and 3 years

12

straight. They come home from work and log on and play until 3am, wake up 3 hours later and go to work. I'm guilty of the same and I'd do it again if I gave myself the chance. [f, 25, EQ]

A male player describes a different kind of incident that made him realize how serious his addiction was.

It happened while playing the game EverQuest. I had been working over this one quest over the few weeks a lot, like many hours a day. When I had gathered the required ingredients for the item that I would need for the next stage (for those that have played EQ it was the shawl quest) I went to see the guy that gave out the quest. When I finally got there, I started putting those stuff into the trade window, (it was the last shawl quest, would've gotten me 7th shawl) and hit trade. Only thing I got was a reply from some other NPC that said like: "Thanks, though I don't have any use for these".

My first reaction was this weird feeling, I felt like empty like when someone dumps you or etc. I just stared at the screen my mouth open and couldn't realize what had happened. Soon I understood and petitioned as is the way in EQ when you need help, but the GMs refused to help me and that is when I got so mad I had never before been. All that time wasted and I would have to re-do the whole quest would I want the 7th shawl. I shut down the computer, stood up in the manner that my chair fell and walked over to my door and started hitting it in fury.

It had many holes after than and I had also scored few hits on the concrete wall next to it, I had to see a doctor for my hand and had it fixed. Few knuckles had splintered into pieces and they glued it up, was a month or so before I could use my right hand again. I realized then that how addictive this game can be and how much it has influence on our feelings, I'm sure nothing in real life could get me so angry as I was then, when I started counting the hours I've spent with it I made a decision that I will stop playing, and now as I write this, I no longer play EQ and though I still visit my old guilds message boards, check the latest news in EQ and feel tempted to start again, I am happy I quit, it's quite different out in the real life and much better than anything the game could offer. [m, 26, EQ]

Many players get defensive when outsiders make accusations against MMORPGs, and this is because many MMORPG players witnessed how D&D was unfairly blamed for Satanism, sexual perversions, insanity, witchcraft and murder among other things in the late 80's. But the reality is that gaming addiction is a very real issue that should be taken very seriously, and this issue alone makes it difficult to write MMORPGs off as "just a game".

Headline Suicide – A Counter-Argument

Recently, the suicide of a 21 year old male player of EverQuest has led individuals to accuse EverQuest of causing this tragedy. Some people even want to claim that EverQuest can cause players to commit suicide in general. The following stories pose a very thought-provoking counter-argument.

Perhaps a most memorable experience for me is when a friend of mine was able to talk me out of suicide online/over the phone at once. I had known this user quite some time and she and I can talk about most anything. Recently I had a bad experience with my fiancé (no longer my fiancé or even friend). Instead of facing me personally or at the very least calling me, he had told me it was over and that I was basically a waste of time and space, over the game and e-mail. Though this friend was merely a guild-mate who I could talk to, it was her caring enough to spend time and talk me out of something I may have regret. To me, nothing could make a game more memorable, than to know that someone I barely knew saved my life. [m, 17, EQ]

A player in my guild and I once began to talk about personal matters because he was depressed. After much talking, it turns out he was on the verge of suicide, and was also very much like me (same interests, figure, etc). After talking he decided it would be better to continue living. [m, 14, EQ]

I remember a time when I was feeling exceptionally depressed. I was having thoughts of suicide and logged onto EQ. A friend I had known for some time in the game was on, and she could tell something was wrong. Her husband (also a friend) logged on and we talked for some time, which really helped me through a tough time. [anon, 34, EQ]

If MMORPGs allow players to be closer to their real selves and allow them to form close relationships with other players, then it's not surprising why they turn to online friends when they need someone to talk to. This is also because it is usually the real life peer group or family situation that is causing the stress. Instead of causing suicides, what if MMORPGs actually help prevent suicides in general by providing this safe space?

Conclusion

Suggesting that online friendships can be just as deep as real life friendships, or that these environments can help people grow, troubles a lot of people because they feel that nothing real or lasting can come out of a fantasy make-believe world. As many players point out however, behind the virtual avatars are real people, and that is why the interactions in virtual worlds are real.

> *I've been playing for over two and a half years. Like most people, I have found that you can make real friends in this game once you realize there's someone behind the toon. You look forward to seeing them every time you play; when they are gone, you feel the loss. The day our guild leader retired from EQ, we held a ceremony in her honor. As the MC of the ceremony, I was startled to realize I was crying real tears when we said goodbye. A year later, when a guild mate's RL partner died, we posthumously inducted his character into our guild as an honorary member. I MC'd that ceremony also, and that time the tears didn't surprise me. [f, 39, EQ]*

> *I am guild leader of a small to medium sized guild on EverQuest and the longstanding members of the guild are in some ways like a family, certainly nothing less than very good friends. So, there are close ties.*
>
> *Recently, I, in real life, have had a series of crises, financial and otherwise. Firstly, my roommates stopped paying their bills and then, without notice, moved out of the apartment, leaving me with over $2,000 of bills to pay. A couple of weeks later, I lost my job and a few weeks after that, my grandfather had an accident, and is still in the hospital because he has contracted numerous ailments just from being in a hospital environment. There is great concern on the part of his physicians that he will live through this experience.*
>
> *Not because I am guild leader, but just because I have become one of the guild "family" members, I have had more than one guild member offer to help me financially. One of the young members of my guild even offered to take money from his college savings to help me. I did not accept the offers, but just the fact that these individuals who only know me from the game have offered their support, say quite a lot of good things about people in this world.*
>
> *I am not the first person from this guild to experience this. Another member, who passed away shortly before my crises occurred, was ailing from a heart condition which prevented him from leading a normal life. These same guild members also offered him the same support, one of them sending this person's family money to help with bills, etc. These people had never met in person, but still, just as if they had known each other in*

real life for years, one helped the other and we all offered this person and his family our moral support.

I think this shows that there is more to a MMORPG than just the gaming part for some people. It is a way of making contact and friendships with other individuals worldwide, that would be pretty much impossible otherwise. [f, 40, EQ]

The main reason why the virtual lives and identities can affect the real lives and identities of MMORPG players is not because it creates a space that is isolated from the real world, but because it creates a safe space that allows real interactions and relationships. And when these environments have the ability to change a person's life for better or for worse, then to label MMORPGs as "just games" would be a denial of how MMORPGs are affecting the real lives of players, and a denial of the potential of these virtual worlds.