# THE DAEDALUS PROJECT

Inside Out

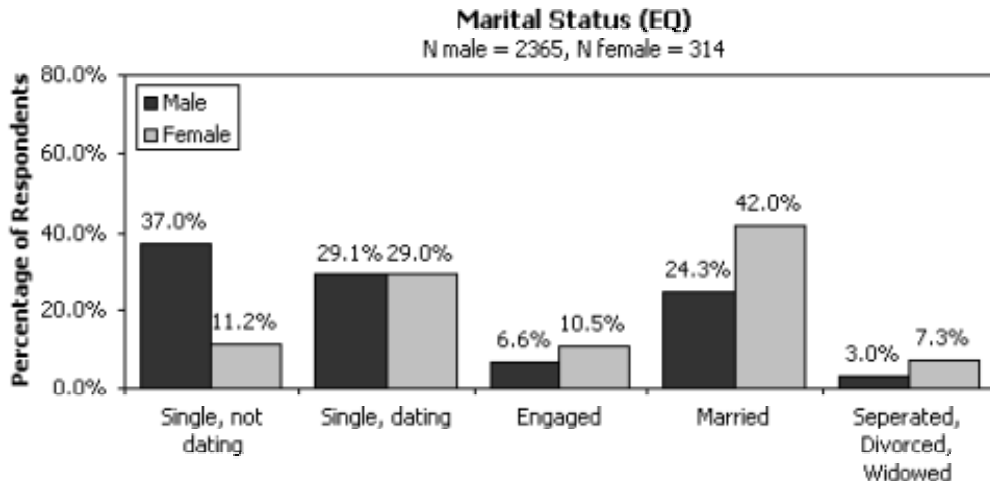### Do people make friends and fall in love in a different way in MMORPGs?

We are on the cusp of a new generation where parents telling their children about the circumstances of how they met will not revolve around college parties, chance encounters at a coffee shop or business conferences. Instead, they will tell their children how they met each other while battling gnolls in subterranean caverns or slaying the undead in forgotten crypts while pretending to be warriors or clerics. Of course, this could have happened in the MUD days, but it is the success of MMORPGs that have suddenly increased the number of romantic relationships that began this way. Survey data collected from players of EverQuest (EQ), Dark Age of Camelot (DAOC), and Ultima Online (UO) show that romantic relationships that began in MMORPGs are not particularly rare.

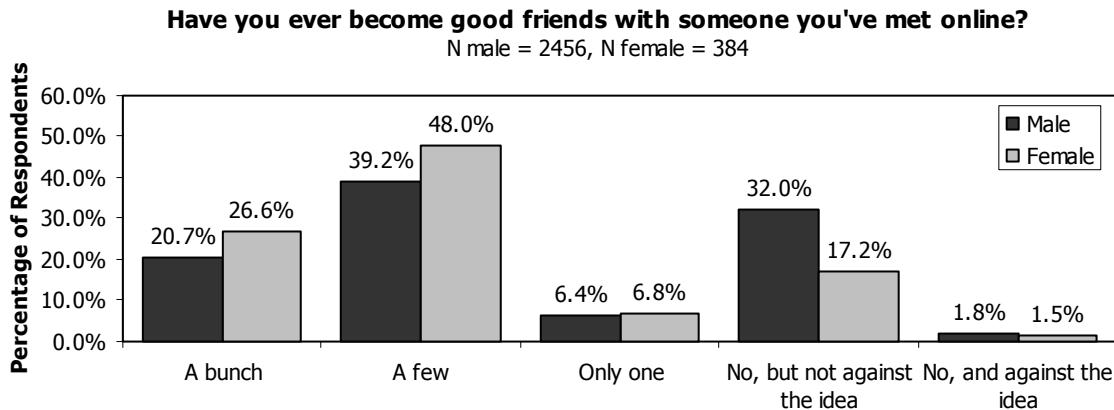**I have physically dated someone who
I first met in the game**
N male = 2760, N female = 406
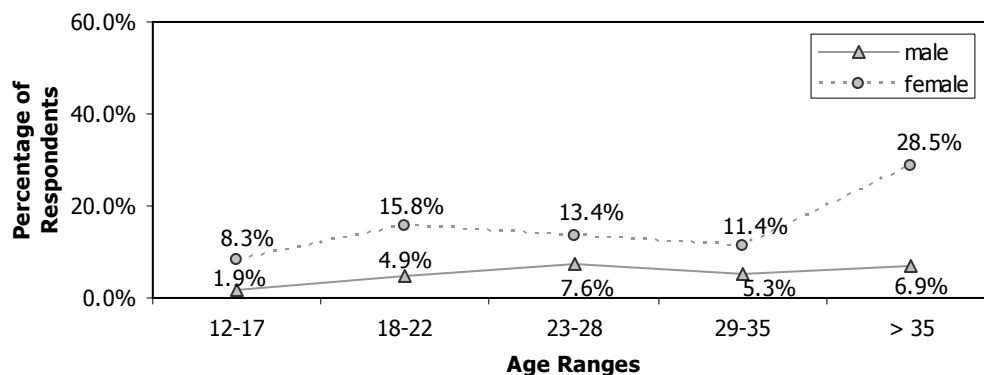
This is especially true given that 2 out of 3 MMORPG players are already romantically involved (dating, engaged or married). In other words, only 33% of players are available for a romantic relationship to begin with.

1

Marital Status (EQ)

N male = 2365, N female = 314

Percentage of Respondents

|	Single, not dating	Single, dating	Engaged	Married	Seperated, Divorced, Widowed
Male	37.0%	29.1%	6.6%	24.3%	3.0%
Female	11.2%	29.0%	10.5%	42.0%	7.3%

But the prevalence of very close friendships, as opposed to romantic relationships, that develop online is also very striking. Most MMORPG players have become good friends with someone they met in the game.

Have you ever become good friends with someone you've met online?

N male = 2456, N female = 384

Percentage of Respondents

	A bunch	A few	Only one	No, but not against the idea	No, and against the idea
Male	20.7%	39.2%	6.4%	32.0%	1.8%
Female	26.6%	48.0%	6.8%	17.2%	1.5%

And many of these players feel that they would consider their online friends to be comparable or better than their real life friends.

Some of my friends in the game are comparable to or better than my real-life friends.

N male = 2760, N female = 406
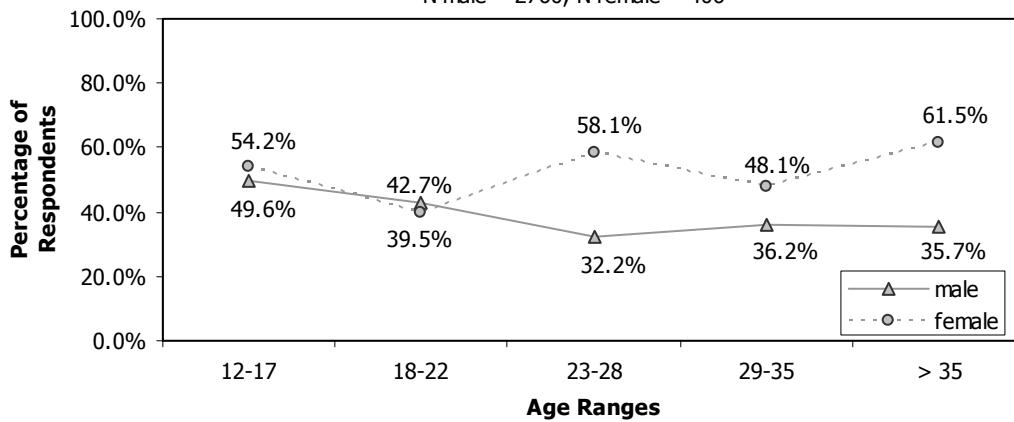
About 3-4 years back, the prevailing talk-show wisdom was that people who fell in love online were socially maladjusted and had deep-seated psychological issues. This view still lingers, but the prevalence of both platonic and romantic relationships that occur online force us to ask whether it is not something about these environments and the mechanics of the communication, rather than something about the people, that change the way that relationships form. Could it be that people become friends and fall in love in a different way in an MMORPG?

Sharing Secrets

Part of what we mean when we say so-and-so is a good friend is that we know a lot about them, and not just that we have a good sense of their personality and how they might react in a certain situation, but that we know revealing personal details about them that very few other people know. The process of mutual self-disclosure in a normal real-life relationship is like a dance, with a lot of expected reciprocations and rules. If you tell someone about your childhood traumas on the first date, they may not return your phone calls for a second date. If someone shares an intimate secret, and you don't reciprocate, they might feel slighted. But ultimately, it is this dance of give-and-take that builds the foundation for a close relationship – whether platonic or romantic.

While it may come to a surprise to some people, there is a good deal of evidence that people are more revealing about themselves and more forth-coming with intimate details when communicating over a textual, computer-mediated channel. This was first

observed by clinical psychologists who began using computers where new patients would type in their answers to some screening questions. What these clinical psychologists found was that patients using the computers were much more forthcoming than new patients who were asked those same questions face-to-face. In other words, even though the patients knew that the clinician would read or hear their answers, they would be more revealing when answering in a typed channel as opposed to in a face-to-face situation.

One reason why this occurs is that when you're typing to a computer, you don't worry about how you look, what you're wearing, or whether you're smiling at the right time. A lot of this self-consciousness is irrelevant when typing on a computer, and all this energy is instead channeled to the message itself, which typically becomes more detailed. In the case of an MMORPG, the ability to be in the safety and comfort of your own home while typing relieves some of the tension of saying something intimate. Also, oftentimes in a face-to-face conversation, we censor ourselves because of what we perceive to be a subtle frown or a slightly raised eyebrow on the other person's face. We don't want to elaborate on something if the other person isn't interested. Many of these gestures and cues are absent online, and this allows us to finish our original thought more often – the unchanged, uncensored version of what we wanted to say. And we also have anecdotal and survey data that supports that a high level of personal self-disclosure occurs in MMORPGs.

I'm not sure why I am such close friends with my EQ buddies. I do know that my EQ relationships are better than most of my relationships in RL. I think this is because when you are talking with someone on-line it's easier to talk about certain things since you don't have to look at a person face to face. [m, 15]

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

N male = 2760, N female = 406
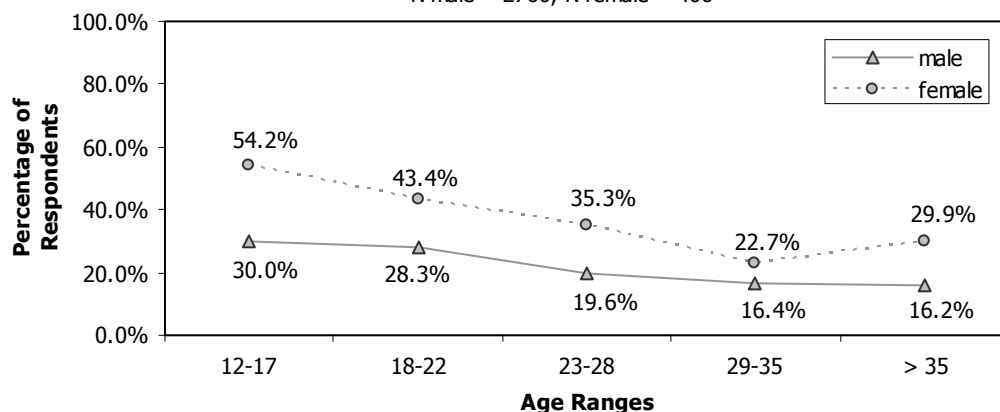
Being able to talk to someone about a problem that is bothering you can often bring some relief. The problem is that this is not always possible in the real world. The anonymity of online environments makes it easier for a lot of people to share their personal issues, because oftentimes the very people they might turn to in real life are part of the issue itself. Another reason why the anonymity helps is because it removes any fear of repercussions. A teenager who is unsure of his sexuality is highly unlikely to share this information with his friends and family. A husband who is experiencing difficulty with his spouse might be able to talk about the problem with an online friend without fear of aggravating the problem in real life.

I would say its easier to open up to a person whom you are only writing to and never have to face in RL, I can discuss issues with some of them without worrying that that they will tell my other friends about it. [f, 19]

It's easier to communicate without getting uneasy about the usual "is he going to tell anyone what I'm saying?" thing [m, 15]

This dance of sharing secrets and intimate details occurs very slowly in real life because usually we only feel comfortable saying these things behind closed doors or when we are alone with the other person, and only after knowing them for a long time. In the MMORPG world, this dance happens much sooner because there are far fewer consequences and the environment facilitates this kind of intimate disclosure. In other words, this foundation of a good relationship is far easier to reach in an MMORPG than in real life because of the textual communication and the anonymity.

Of course, this is not to say that everyone who plays an MMOPRG will share their personal lives with their fellow players, but in general, people are more likely to disclose personal information online than in real life for the reasons mentioned. But apart from being more likely to share intimate issues and problems with other players, there are other reasons why relationships in MMORPGs begin and develop differently.

Crises, Trust and Bonding

Every MMORPG player can recall a high-adrenaline battle or surviving a fight with a handful of HP left. If an MMORPG can guarantee anything, it can guarantee that you'll be

faced with many sudden high-stress situations where the group or your hunting partner needs to make very decisive actions. Maybe the cleric is low on mana when the room suddenly respawns, or you fall off a bridge in a dungeon and end up in the corner of a room full of purple-cons. These kinds of situations force the group to work together or perish. They force players to depend on each other, to trust each other and to work together as a team. These experiences are often very salient trust-building exercises for all the players involved.

Because most MMORPG players spend a significant portion of their free time playing the game, they become very emotionally invested to their characters and what happens to them. Most players are very serious as to what happens to their character, and this heightens the intensity of these high-stress situations. This pairing of emotional investment and frequency of trust-building situations in MMORPGs facilitate the "jump-starting" of solid bonds between players.

To succeed in EQ you need to form relationships with people you can trust. The game does a wonderful job of forcing people in this situation. RL rarely offers this opportunity as technological advances mean we have little reliance on others and individuals are rarely thrown into life-or-death situations. [m, 29]

Moreover, stressful situations in MMORPGs seem to bring out the best and worst of individuals. Most MMORPG players can recall experiences where another player displayed a remarkable degree of honor, altruism, self-sacrifice, betrayal or cowardice. This is not to say that players who act honorably in MMORPGs are honorable in real life, but because most players assume that other players are as emotionally invested as they are, they tend to feel that these honorable or cowardly actions give a glimpse into how this other person might be in the real world. In a sense, all of us would like to put our friends into simulated crises to see whether they would stand by us in a time of need. We would all like to know which of our friends we can count on. Unfortunately, we usually don't find out the answer until that time of need arrives. Friendships in MMORPGs go through this process almost in reverse. Instead of making friends and then slowly finding out whether they can really be trusted, MMORPG players are making friends with people who have demonstrated that they can be trusted because of their actions under spontaneous crises that required difficult decisions.

In EQ, we engage in difficult, sometimes dangerous and often life-threatening struggles. Even though it isn't RL - you learn a lot about the character of the person playing the game. Some are selfish and greedy in EQ and you figure they are similar in RL - others are eager to help and think of others over themselves - and I have found them to be the same in RL. The difference in between these friendships and RL is the ability to watch someone in action before allowing them into your life. Also, the fact that we are all unable to see out real faces prior to becoming friends - we can't prejudge someone on the basis of their looks. [f, 45]

They are able to prove themselves as trustworthy, or intelligent in the game environment … which I find to be just as taxing and valid as RL at times. [m, 26]

Compatibility

One reason why many people are uncomfortable with meeting people online is because, at first glance, it feels like finding a needle in a farmhouse of haystacks. The chances of finding someone you could get along with just feel very remote. They then project this attitude and conclude that the likelihood of other people finding compatible romantic partners is also very low. But the opposite might be true in MMORPGs. MMORPG players who are employed tend to work in the IT industry (36% of employed EQ players, N=1099), and most MMORPG players have previous experience with table-top RPGs (68% of EQ, DAOC, UO, AC, and AO combined, N=3415). IT workers are usually very analytical and rational people; RPG players are usually imaginative and idiosyncratic. Both tend to be non-conformist.

In other words, people who play MMORPGs are probably similar in more ways than not. When you think about, an MMORPG is a highly specific kind of entertainment. People who like first-person shooters are probably not the kind of people who like MMORPGs. By the same token, people who play MMORPGs and enjoy the slow level advancement, character development, and simulated battles while immersed within a fantastical medieval world probably share other attitudes and interests. The MMORPG effectively attracts people with similar interests and attitudes while at the same time filtering out the people who do not share these interests. What you end up with in an MMORPG is a pre-filtered group of people. This is why compatibility is more likely to occur.

We've discovered that we share many values and beliefs. These relationships are different from my RL relationships because it was much easier to open up to someone under the relative anonymity of online communication. [m, 26]

We have more in common then most my real life friends. [f, 33]

Meeting someone compatible in an MMORPG would only be a shot in the dark if you believed that MMORPG players are a representative sample of the general population, which is definitely not the case. Thus, another reason why good relationships are so common in MMORPGs is because players tend to be meeting people who are more compatible with them than a random person they meet in real life. It's like meeting someone on a message board about the French culinary arts during the late Renaissance. The interest is so focused and specific that other shared attitudes are highly likely.

Idealization

Even though an MMORPG already offers a higher chance of compatibility among players, there's something else that artificially boosts this sense of compatibility. The "Law of Attraction" in psychology states that people tend to like those with shared attitudes, values or beliefs. This is true as long as there aren't a lot of things they disagree on. The internet is very good at hiding differences because a lot of physical cues we use to judge others are missing – clothing, hair style, speech inflection, accent, age, appearance, expressions and gestures among others. A lot of times, we don't even consider approaching someone because of their hair style or the clothes they are wearing. But we don't see those things when we chat with someone online. And because those differences are hidden away, we focus on all the things we do agree on and the sense of compatibility is enhanced even though this would not have been the case if this meeting occurred in the real world. In other words, many relationships that would never have even begun in the real world have a far better chance of developing online. To some people, this is a good thing.

They are good friends due to the fact you must throw all prejudices away about looks, language impediments, color, race everything related to physically meeting a person. This is similar to RL friends I believe. In RL a close friend is one who you have looked past all that stuff previously mention and you like the person inside. [m, 28]

This heightened sense of compatibility is especially important in the development of romantic relationships. Romance usually begins with an idealization of the other person where they gain god-like features and abilities, where they become flawless and perfect in every way. The textual communication in MMORPGs almost encourages people to fill in the blanks. It lets people idealize as much as possible while hiding the flaws as much as possible. These idealizations are reinforced by the game metaphors themselves – knights in shining armor, clerics with glowing aura. Thus, these metaphors also encourage projecting a superhuman idealization upon another player apart from the underlying inflated sense of compatibility. As one player puts it:

The MMORPG relationship is inexplicably more romantic, more epic, more dramatic... [f, 16]

A Relationship in Reverse

One way to think about MMORPG relationships is that they happen almost in reverse of how a RL relationship would occur. All the things that typically take a long time to know about someone in a RL relationship usually happen very early and very quickly. For example, it takes a long time before two people in real life, whether they are dating or just friends, to share secrets with each other. We know that the opposite is true online. We know that many MMORPG players have shared secrets with their online friends that they haven't told their real life friends.

The MMORPGs also allow people to see how someone would react under a sudden high-stress situation, and how they treat you in a situation where you need their help or support. These situations are far rarer in real life. The environment also allows you to see how they interact with other people in a multitude of scenarios. A lot of times when we meet someone in real life or when we date them, we don't really get to see their other sides – especially how they treat other people.

In real life, we judge a person first by their physical appearance and then we get to know their character and values. In an MMORPG, the reverse is true. You get a sense of their values and character from the situations in the game. You hang out with them because you share a lot of common values or you like their personality. And then finally, you may

meet them in real life where you judge their physical appearance. As this player describes, her relationship happened "inside-out":

We got to know each other from 'the inside out' … meaning I got to know him on a deep personal level first without letting anything like physical appearance, etc get in the way. [f, 29]

Conclusion

Part of the concern over online relationships is that they are superficial because the premise of the game is to pretend to be someone else. How could you possibly know someone well in such an environment? The thing to remember is that people "pretend" all the time in real life. People wear "masks" in real life and "putting on a front" is something happens in the real world as well.

I believe that whether you've met someone on the computer or in RL you still only see what they want you to see either way. Everyone shows their best face to the world. The potential for someone turning out to be a jerk is same for RL or computer. And I'm good friends with my EQ friends for the same reasons I'm friends with my RL friends … they are fantastic people with great personalities and a sense of humor that meshes with my own. [f, 27]

In fact, a significant portion of MMORPG players feel that they can be more of who they really are in the virtual world.

I am more of "who I really am" in the game than in real-life.
N male = 2760, N female = 406
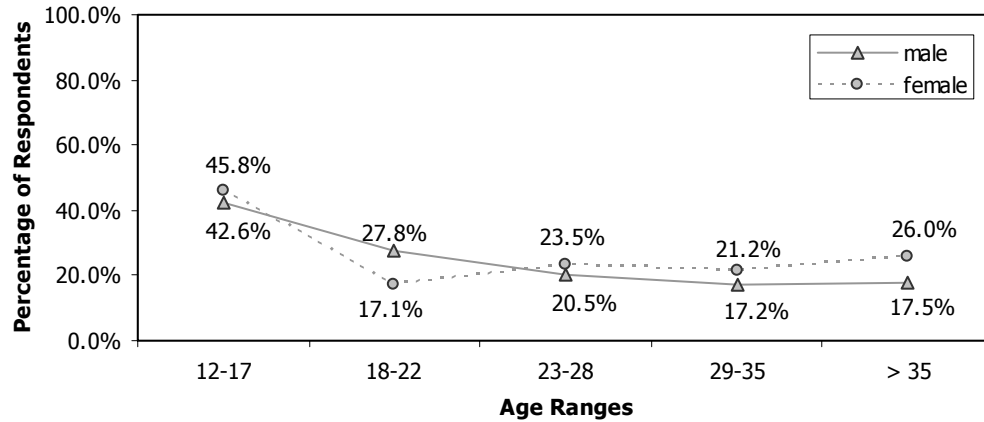
Other players feel that online relationships can be substantial because people are actually less superficial online. The removal of physical cues such as age, appearance, race and social class forces players to interact with each other with far fewer prejudices and stereotypes than they would in real life.

There is more a basis of knowing personality first... kind of a anti-judging the book by it's cover situation. For the most part, however, I don't see any difference between in-game vs. so-called "real life." If I've made friends with someone Out of Character while in-game... then that friendship is RL. Period. To think otherwise would be to believe there is such a thing as "Virtual Friends," and that, I don't believe in. [f, 29]

And as one player notes, the irony is that online relationships can turn out to be less superficial than real life relationships.

An EQ friendship is different from a RL friendship because people tend to open up more to others when in EQ, we get to know each other much more, we truly tell each other what we think/feel and you really create this amazing bond with one another. It's much less superficial than some RL friendships can be. [f, 15]

Finally, while many people are frightened by the prospect of encountering individuals with bad intentions in an online environment, those same individuals oftentimes underestimate the number of those same people they are encountering in real life. After all,

the "bad" people you meet in virtual worlds live in the real world. Prudence and cautiousness are things that people need to keep in mind in both the virtual and the real world. And considering the restricted range of things that other people can do to each other online when compared with the real world, it seems surprising how worried some people get over online relationships.

Some people are hesitant to use the words "romantic relationship" or "good friendship" to describe these online relationships, and by and large, they are correct in that these relationships begin and develop in an entirely different way than face-to-face relationships. But just because they happen differently, sometimes in reverse, doesn't mean they aren't just as real and valuable as face-to-face relationships. If what we mean by friendship or love is really getting to know someone well, then perhaps environments like an MMORPG do have something very important to offer.

Virtual "Achievements"?

Our cultural distinction between "work" and "play" traps us in what may be false dichotomies. We are so caught up in thinking that games are for fun that even when some of us toil away for hours in an MMORPG, even when we become extremely frustrated or angry with something in the game, we sometimes forget that "play" can become "work". As the following quotes taken from the "Why We Quit" (http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/archives/000342.php) collection of player narratives show, playing an MMORPG can become like having a second job.

> *It became a chore to play. I became defacto leader of a guild and it was too much. Being an officer was too much. Pleasing people did not interest me. I wanted to get away from real life and politics and social etiquette followed me in! [EQ, m, 20]*

> *I stopped playing because I just didn't want to commit to the crazy raid times (6+ hours in the evening?) and because I'd kind of stalled out on my interest in my main character. [EQ, f, 27]*

Rethinking MMORPGs as something not-quit-game yet not-quite-work frees us to ask a whole host of provoking questions. Could and should the virtual achievements that occur within an MMORPG world be taken seriously? Do these virtual achievements deserve recognition? And how do we compare virtual achievements with real-life achievements? This set of questions is all the more crucial to answer as new MMORPGs bring in more realistic political and economic elements.

Clearly not all virtual achievements are meaningful. Getting a character to level 40 or 50 is really only a matter of time investment and patience, as is the same for camping a rare drop in EverQuest. When an achievement revolves around pure time spent and involves no complex skill, it is hard to justify as a real achievement. But MMORPGs introduce a set of achievements that are based on the social nature of the world. Narratives in "The Rise and Fall of Guilds" (http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/archives/000468.php) highlight the complex management and leadership skills needed to sustain a large guild. From dealing with clique formation, preventing polarization in a guild argument, keeping the guild motivated or deflecting strong personalities, a good leader must understand and deal with these issues as they occur. As the narratives show, these are no trivial tasks.

We might also consider raid leaders who coordinate and then pull off a large scale raid successfully. Managing multiple groups with different tasks composed of disparate personalities while under unpredictable and stressful circumstances is a gargantuan challenge, especially when the only means of communication is a thin typed-chat channel. There are also the leadership challenges of sustaining group morale, having and holding firm to a vision, and dealing with discouraging players. And all this occurs in real-time, not some turn-based tactical game. The question is whether there are certain virtual achievements that we should take seriously. Could we imagine a time when putting "guild leader of a 120-member guild" on your college resume is taken seriously?

Some may argue that the problem is that not only are these virtual skills non-transferable to the real-world, but that they have no financial opportunities because they are part of a "game". But neither of these arguments holds any water.

We live in a culture that celebrates skilled performers in other "games" – activities that are based on arbitrary rules and typically used as entertainment. Take chess or tennis for example. Certainly an MMORPG has all the elements of chess or tennis – an arbitrary rule set, the need for strategic understanding at multiple depth levels, and a combination of training time as well as inherent talent. We recognize great chess-players and tennis-players, but for some the idea of recognizing a great guild or raid leader outside of an MMORPG feels awkward. But why should it? If it's only about the financial opportunities, is it so far-fetched to imagine future MMORPGs where players pay or compensate a good guild or raid leader to be part of a successful group – a virtual membership that parallels what real-world memberships do? But in fact, the financial opportunities are an effect of recognizing the achievement itself. If being a great guild leader involves the same types of symbolic challenges that a great chess or tennis player would face, then is that not something that deserves recognition?

We also have good evidence that the management and leadership skills we have mentioned can be learned in the virtual world and then be used in the real world. Data to support this can be found in the "Learning Leadership Skills" article (http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/archives/000338.php). Afterall, leadership is about leading other people, and the context or medium isn't the primary issue. An individual who

understands how to motivate, lead and manage individuals in a stressful, real-time context can probably do this in different scenarios.

We are now in a situation where we might be forced to compare virtual achievements with real-life achievements. If leading a large guild deserves recognition of some sort, then how does that compare with being an Eagle Scout in the real world or being elected school president? In a sense, the question may not be whether virtual achievements should be recognized now as much as whether this will be an inevitable phenomenon as virtual worlds become more complex and more people are involved with them. As people take virtual worlds and their own virtual identities more seriously, is it inevitable that our virtual achievements will be recognized? Could we imagine a future where we can accept both virtual and real-world achievements (or in fact realize that virtual achievements are real-world achievements)?

If we believe that virtual achievements are legitimate achievements, then we are left with a particularly disturbing question. If life is about finding happiness on an individual level and we accept that different people derive pleasure and satisfaction from different things - then what is our role with regards to individuals who are obsessed with these games but who are clearly making real achievements in the game? In fact, there is an X percentage of the population who can achieve more in the virtual world than in the real world because of their social, physical or psychological circumstances. If existential happiness and satisfaction is based on achievements, then this is to say there is some part of the population who can derive more happiness from the virtual world than from the real world. What then is our role in moderating obsessive game-play? Is it in our right to take away this source of happiness from an individual? Many of us believe that real-world achievements are more meaningful and gratifying than virtual achievements, but is this always true?

As these games become more realistic and more engaging, and it becomes more obvious that virtual achievements are on par and can be compared with real-world achievements, we are forced to answer tough questions that we never thought a "game" would force us to answer.

Imagining Future Worlds

Are MMO platforms only suited for games? As these virtual worlds become more complex, more realistic, and more pervasive, what might they become? This article explores non-game uses of MMO environments that are plausible and make sense.

Education

MMORPGs are designed with game mechanics that purposely encourage time investment as well as some level of emotional and social investment. Some MMORPG players are comfortable claiming that MMORPGs are inherently addictive. Currently, the reward cycles in the games shape the players to pursue arbitrary goals of camping and killing mobs, but what if we created goals with educational value? Can we not harness the game mechanics of MMORPGs to create pedagogical tools?

When I was attending Haverford College, a Quaker School (middle school) in the neighborhood used what is called a "Story Path Curriculum". The curriculum of a typical semester is embedded in an ongoing story-line set in a historically interesting period. For example, the students in the class are each assigned a character-role in a hypothetical late 19th-century iron-forging village in England. From baker to tax collector, from blacksmith to local pastor, they have a good variety of roles covered. For English class, they may be asked to write a creative piece of "a day in the life of …". For History class, they may be asked to research the common social or seasonal problems an iron-forging village faced. For Math class, they may be asked to determine the optimal proportion of crops to plant or to calculate the most profitable trade routes. For Art class, they may be asked to create a small-scale model of the village. For Social Studies, the students may have to decide how to deal with a local epidemic of scarlet fever.

Thus, instead of having disparate subjects that students may not find relevant in their lives, the point of a Story Path Curriculum is to create a fun and interesting hook to draw the students in and then embedding the traditional subjects in a relevant and memorable way. And of course, the Story Path Curriculum makes sense in a grander scale in an MMO environment where students from different schools and states or countries have their own village in a larger virtual country – each having influence on their microcosm while being part of an interconnected macrocosm. Elements of discovery and collaboration can be built

into the environment to encourage different forms of collaboration. For example, perhaps a new technology or crop variety can be found but requires multiple villages to pool their resources together. Students from different schools may have to coordinate and share their research in order to achieve these goals.

Learning should be fun and engaging, and an MMO paradigm can make sense. It provides an environment where different teachers can follow their own schedules and pedagogical goals. It also puts a twist on addiction. What do we say when our kids are addicted to learning?

Personality Assessment

The most currently-used personality assessment tools of our age are questionnaire-based inventory statements usually with 5 or 7 answer options. The statements are typically of the similar to the following:

- "I usually doubt others' intentions."
- "I make plans and stick to them."
- "I believe in the importance of art."

There are many problems that these kinds of assessments have to deal with. First of all, the point and social acceptability of the statements are usually very obvious, and it's easy for individuals to "cheat" on these assessments, especially when they are given in a job screening assessment where questions like the following are typically used:

- "I don't mind telling a lie if I know I can get away with it."
- "I take orders and follow them."

The other problem is that different people view the 5 or 7 point scale differently. The scales are usually labeled with "Strongly Agree" or "Strongly Disagree" as the extremes. Some people will never use the most extreme choices, while others use them liberally. In a large aggregated data set (on the order of 100 samples or more), these differences do not affect the outcome analyses much, but when comparing individual to individual, it's impossible to tell how much the response bias factored into the results. It's also not possible to just

mathematically scale the responses because some people do indeed feel more ambivalent about the statements.

In an MMO space, we can think about personality assessment in an entirely different way. We project our own personalities into anything we are emotionally and personally invested in. The reason we know that players project and express their personalities in the game is because we know how much most players care about their avatars, and the successes and failures they encounter in the game. And when we are personally invested in an activity, every decision we make in that space becomes personally revealing.

The MMO world also provides us with a way to directly access and store any relevant personality information. We are no longer in the realm of needing to ask people to rank how they feel about something. We can just measure it unobtrusively. And because we are the ones doing the measuring, we don't have the response bias to worry about. Consider the following kinds of data we could collect from current MMORPG players:

- Assertiveness: How often a player hedges what they say in group/public/private chat. A hedge is a use of a phrase that softens the objectiveness of the sentence, such as "I think", "What if", "IMHO", "Perhaps if we tried" …
- Gregariousness: We can measure the sum of all the players that have been in the same group as the player and then divide this by total hours played.
- Leadership: The weighted sum of all the times the player has been a group leader, a chat group leader, a guild leader etc.
- Close Bonds: The number of all private tells sent and received divided by total hours played.
- Extraversion/Adventurousness: A measure of how likely a player stays in the same zones as opposed to constantly being in different places. A measure of need for familiarity.
- Social Network: Calculating how many other people's buddy lists this player is on. Mapping whether this player is a hub or outlier. Could also do this the long way with private tells sent and received.
- There are also things we could measure that are not immediately clear what they imply, such as the proportion of gender-bended characters, whether the player typically creates "tall" or "small" avatars in games that allow more detailed customization, as well as race selection.

Of course one assumption we are making is that people behave and act as they really do behave and not some extended masquerade. But the thing is that we all wear masks in real life so we can fit in to our social context. In a sense, even though people may act differently in the virtual world than the real world, we have good reason to believe that how they act in the anonymous and safe space of virtual worlds is truer to who they are. In fact, people are more likely to masquerade in the real world where they are constantly judged by their family and peers.

Leadership Training

Anyone who has tried to lead a mid-level group in any MMORPG knows that this is not a trivial task. There are many problems that the group leader has to face. Among these are outlining a clear vision and goal, getting the members to commit to this goal, understanding member capabilities and delegating appropriate roles, dealing with discouraging and inappropriate behaviors, resolving tension, motivating a group with low morale, and reacting to sudden crises among others. Performing these tasks well means both an expertise in the domain knowledge of these games (what different spells do, what the strength and weakness of each class is) and in the general knowledge of leadership and small-group management. While the domain knowledge is non-transferable to the real world, it is clear that leadership skills can transfer both ways. After all, leadership is dealing with people, with all their individual idiosyncrasies, motivations and needs, in both the real and virtual world.

For a newcomer to an existing group, the rules and strategies to slowly gain the trust of the group's members and become the tacit leader are the same for both an EQ hunting group as they are for a real world group. Experienced leaders know that the person who has the highest official title is not always the one who ends up having the most say in a decision-making process. In fact, all the lessons of Machiavelli or Sun Tzu can be applied, learned, or perfected in an MMORPG, especially when we talk about guild leaders or raid leaders.

What is clear is that it does take real leadership skill to lead any kind of group in an MMORPG because you are dealing with real people. The diversity of an MMORPG group is probably higher than that of a real world group if only because of the age range. And all the

human emotions and motivations are always there: greed, pride, altruism, shame, guilt, cowardice or brashness.

Now imagine how we could harness all this for leadership training. We could imagine asking individuals to perform these kinds of tasks:

- Join an existing group of at least 4 members. After gaining their trust and loyalty, persuade the group to hunt at a different spot.
- Start a group, and then get the group to a designated location deep within a level-appropriate dungeon to get a drop from a specific mob.
- The leader of a guild that is about to fracture over a long-standing issue has just stepped down from the position. Keep this leaderless guild together while keeping attrition to a minimum.
- Create a guild of at least 50 active members with a weekly attrition of not more than 5%.

These tasks would clearly need to be embedded into a reading or lecture course on leadership techniques and strategies to be effective. But the MMORPG tasks allow individuals to apply, learn and reinforce a variety of leadership skills. Leadership is one of those skills that is more about experience than about theory, and the MMORPG space is well-suited to this kind of training.

Narratives: Romances That Began In A Far-Away Land

How are romances that began online similar to and different from romances that began in real-life? Narratives from players who began a romantic relationship online talk about their experiences. Below, several players offer their stories of how they met their real life romantic partners online and how the relationship progressed.

In fact I 'met' my current boyfriend in EQ. It was the silliest thing really. Boy this was when EQ was first started and the Bertox server was still young before our first server split. I was playing my first character the famous Bard of Freeport, Markie. I had gotten lost and wandered into the Oasis of Marr barely alive. There this handsome wood elf druid comes along to 'save' me. Being an outgoing bard character I thanked him and we chatted a few moments while we rested. I made it out of the Oasis and back to my group to hunt bandits again in North Ro. Over time we chatted it up as players since we seem to be playing at the same times. I am such the role-player I am always playing Markie so it never hard to find me when I am online. He, however, has quite a few characters since he finds he can't make up his mind which suits him. But he starts to play one of Markie's weaknesses. Paladins!! Well Markie is being courted by several paladins in-game. None of which I find that worthy since I don't 'know' them. I start hearing 'grumbles' from my real life boyfriend at the time about all of this 'interest' in me. Bah! I tell him they are only interested in Markie and I prove it! I ask my new friend what he thinks and he agrees he would be honored to 'court' Markie. So we exchange emails and become friends. My boyfriend insists he 'likes' me. I even ask him straight out and he tells me no problem, in game only. I think that it was the first time in my life I ever got the chance to really become good friends with some one without all the sexual tension and oh what do I wear and how do I look getting in the way? I think meeting on line was both easier and harder. We never planned this whole thing at all. I found that more and more my friend on line was the person who understood and was the person who talked to me. My role-playing being in love with his character and playing and chatting with him most every night kinda set us up to 'find each other'. We found we had much in common and we even lived in the same friggin' STATE. It was friggin weird. And we both found that our real life relationships were in the toilet because they were not what we wanted. And one day I just confessed I needed to break up with my boyfriend and he was in shock

when I told him he was the reason why. After that things were kinda weird we kept playing but we didn't get round to meeting in person for about 4 months. Yeah we were both shy. But since then we have been together and happy ever since. That was almost 4 years ago. Who ever knew I owe my happiness in love to in part to a game? [F, 32]

When I first started playing EQ, it was to have some fun once a week with some coworkers. When they quit playing, I'd already made some 'friends' that I enjoyed grouping with, so I kept playing. At the time, I was single and had no intention of ever changing that. One of the people I met in game was going through a divorce. I've been moral support for guys going through their divorces before, and wound up doing it again (I seem to be a sympathetic person and easy to talk to). Through our many conversations (online, through IM, email, and phone), I reconsidered my hardline stance against remarriage. In the meantime, I had gotten married online to someone (see question below for the explanation) that I never considered a potential RL love interest. He was much younger than I was, and lived on the other side of the country. However, he had asked me out to visit, and as he was acting jealous of my friendship with the person getting the divorce, I decided to go ahead and meet him, so that he would understand how silly it was for him to care about who I might get involved with IRL. Well, it didn't turn out that way. He moved here about 2 months after we met, proposed a few months later, we found out shortly thereafter that I had gotten pregnant (around the time he proposed!), and now we're married with an 11-month-old baby, and so far, still very happy. [EQ, F, 39]

Many players comment on how the relationship seemed to develop "inside-out" – how all the first impression elements you would judge a person on and react to do not occur until you get to know a person's values and character.

I play on a non-PvP server. I am part of a large guild that I have been with for almost a year. It's large, but in guild chat we talk a lot and I have gotten to know a number of people quite well. Most recently I was online and we were talking in guild about some topic, maybe it was the war. I got a tell from one of the players about something I said, and boom ... we ended up talking for 8 hours straight. I have always respected this person and thought he was an intelligent, sensitive man, but after this night, I realized the depth of his personality. Well, as I'm sure

you can imagine, we talked again the night after and after and after ... after 2 weeks we met and hit it off in RL ... really well. We are dating now, and he means a lot to me. It was weird, I was talking to a friend about it ... We got to know each other from 'the inside out' … meaning I got to know him on a deep personal level first without letting anything like physical appearance, etc get in the way. [EQ, F, 29]

We were in the same guild and about the same level and began hunting together regularly becoming friends in the process. Gradually we began talking about RL things and getting to know each other better and began talking outside the game using instant messengers. Getting to know him in game over a period of a couple years made transitioning to talking in RL so much easier, and we always had a lot to talk about. When I left that game for another and he stayed, we continued talking in RL and eventually added phone calls to the instant messengers. We live on opposite coasts so meeting took some planning but we did finally meet about 3 years or so after we met in game and had a great weekend becoming friends in person as well as online. We plan to meet again in a couple months for the second time. Meeting in person added a whole separate level to the friendship, it was a nervous time though, because we both worried that we would not click the way we had online. Meeting online first helps in several ways but creates its own problems as well. You may have much more to talk about with shared experiences from the game and such, but pictures and phone calls cannot substitute for seeing each others eyes and watching them smile when they see you. Meeting online was very different from say meeting someone at work or the mall. We were already friends, had much in common and had spent hours and hours talking about everything under the sun. We knew the person behind the pixels and liked them, Meeting face to face just opened another level to the relationship. It was very hard however to not have expectations for the first meeting, but I believe that is true for any 'first' such as a first date no matter how you meet. I suppose the biggest difference between this online beginning and other relationships is that we took our time, becoming good friends first and talking about everything. Learning to like and trust each other in game/online before actually meeting, in my mind, made everything much easier when we did finally meet face to face. This relationship has lasted almost 4 years now, who knows where it will end... that's half the fun of life. Maybe

25 years from now I will be saying ' yes honey I really did meet your Grandpa fighting giants!' [DAOC, F, 43]

Other players go on to talk about how the virtual environment allows you to get to know a person better because of the safe space it creates and because it gets rid of prejudicial first impressions and thus we get to know a person for who they really are.

I am currently engaged to a man I met in EQ. It started when my guildmaster asked his troll warrior to join us in a group. We hit it off right away and were friends for about six months when we realized we had much in common. We decided to meet in real life about six months after we met in game. This relationship was different from other relationships I've had in that it was based on similarities in values and ethics as we discussed first online, then by phone, rather than by a physical attraction. Meeting them in an MMORPG environment made it easier to get to know him. [EQ, F, 51]

I am engaged to marry a man that I met in EQ. We have spent sufficient time together RL to know this is the right decision for us, even though we have lived our lives on opposite sides of the planet (US and Australia). Having each been married before, and being older (I'm 41, he's 32) we believe that this relationship will succeed, although the absence of the 'traditional path to marriage' has created unique challenges and stresses for us. We are both fortunate to have a great deal of relevant education (both have degrees in psychology) and a great deal of personal insight to sustain us -- this would be infinitely harder without either. I definitely came to know my fiancé more as a person, and he me, in EQ than we would likely have in RL (assuming that we'd even stumbled on each other despite living 10,000 miles apart). Indeed, RL biases would have likely caused both of us to ignore the other had we just encountered each other -- this is sadly the way the world works with people of different ages, races and religions. The virtual world, in which all the stereotypes and prejudices were minimized because you have no idea how the other person looks or sounds for a long time, allowed those ingrained visual and auditory prejudices to take a back seat to real-time information processing about the other, our values, beliefs and feelings. I think that this mandatory filtering of conscious and unconscious 'attraction habits' or 'attraction stereotypes' played a great role in our romantic relationship beginning at all, even

though now it thrives only because we purposefully apply the same levels of disclosure, candor and intimacy when we are together that we first became comfortable with while faceless and nameless in EQ. Unlike many 'traditional couples' the only way to make a relationship survive without face-to-face, day-to-day interaction is *constant* communication and, assuming that neither party to the relationship is engaged in deception, that constant communication actually gives you a leg-up on many couples who marry in haste and repent in leisure. If a virtual couple with a RL relationship don't talk, and share, and deepen your intimacy through words there is nothing else to fall back on, unlike many RL based couples who are ill-suited but hide their problems through sex, drugs, avoidance, large crowds and other tools to avoid genuine intimacy -- especially the downside of it -- that romance tends to encourage. By the time he and I finally met face to face, 3 years ago now, we each felt like we'd known each other all our lives. Still didn't stop us from being giddy though =) [EQ, F, 41]

And finally, a more elaborate account of several online romances by a female player highlight how these relationships, when you read them for what they are, seem to parallel and resonate with how relationships begin and end in real life - that there is nothing strange or novel about them after all.

I have been in several romantic relationships with people met in EQ. The first was early on, when I had just been playing for a few months. I'll call him 'D'. I met D when he was hunting with a friend and they invited me to join them since they needed a healer. We all had a lot of fun so we started grouping together on a regular basis. I became friends with both of them, and eventually some of their other friends, but D and I especially enjoyed spending time together.

Our characters started flirting and taking an overt interest in one another, and pretty soon people viewed us as something equivalent to a dating couple. After two months or so, he asked if I'd be interested in talking on the phone. We did, and really enjoyed it, so we started talking on a regular basis and exchanged pictures by email. After another month or so, D's character proposed to mine, and they had an in game wedding.

Another month or so after that, he came into town on business and we met in person. We met at a neutral place (restaurant) and my Mom came along, because otherwise she would have been home tearing her hair out with worry. But he was exactly who he'd claimed to be, just a normal guy. It was a little awkward at first, knowing this person's personality so well but being a complete stranger to them physically.

For the first day it kind of felt like a first date, with nervous giggles every time our hands brushed together, that sort of thing. But by the second day most of the weirdness had worn off and it mostly felt like we'd been dating for at least a few weeks. A couple months later he had another trip into town on business and stayed for another weekend. There was no weirdness that time; it was as if we'd been together since our characters started 'dating'.

He had a couple of layovers in town for 1-2 hours at a time after that, so I just went and met him at the airport to sit and talk. (This was long before 9/11 so I could meet him at the gate.) A few months later I flew 2000 miles to spend a week with him at his place. At that point I was considering moving out there, as he had much more tying him to where he was than I did and I thought I would enjoy that part of the country. It'd be an adventure even if things didn't work out.

But before it got that far, things started going downhill anyway. It was a long, drawn-out, confusing sort of break-up, but I honestly think he just lost interest and didn't know how to tell me. It took a long time to get over that, because of the messy ending. He stopped playing by the end, which was really just as well. My character stopped wearing the wedding ring eventually, but she still has it in the bank, almost three years later.

After that there was a string of some pretty foolish romantic relationships. I swapped pictures with a number of folks, some of whom were truly just friends both between us and between our characters. There was one guildmate that I had known almost from the beginning but didn't get close to until after things ended with D, we'll call him J. J had had a longstanding crush on the friend who got me into EQ, even though she was in a committed relationship and had no romantic

interest in him. He and I started spending more time together, and soon he was obsessing over me as much as he had obsessed over my friend.

I was not really interested in another relationship, still recovering from D, but I enjoyed his company and was flattered by the attention, although I never lied to him about how I felt. Still selfish, I know. J and I had low level alts that we sometimes played together, and behaved as if they were married although we'd never had an in game wedding for them. (Yes yes I know I know.) After several months of this J took an interest in one of several new members to the guild. Knowing full well how foolish I was being, I still got jealous and resentful and went to some effort to keep J's attention.

His new object of affection was eating up his attentions, though, and pulling all the right strings, so it wasn't very successful. I made myself back off a bit, but we still talked a lot. J had always teasingly pestered me about coming to visit him, but a couple months after he took an interest in the other guildmate I realized I had a good chunk of vacation time stored up again and thought it might be fun to go visit. (Yes I know!)

He lives in a major metropolis that I've always wanted to see, and I knew that even as 'just friends' we'd still have a great time. So I went, and really we did have a great time. Some things happened that shouldn't have, but nothing worth agonizing over. I knew in the back of my mind that this was never going to lead to anything long-term, so I can't say I was very surprised when I came back home and he returned to showering affection on my guildmate. It hurt, but given the fun we had while I was there and all the sights I got to see and the things I learned about men (ugh), I don't regret it.

The string of foolish, short relationships continued, but none with anyone I actually met in person. Some of them wanted to, including one from overseas who talked about flying here, but at least I had enough sense not to let that happen. Then this past fall another serious relationship appeared rather suddenly. We'll call him Y. I had known Y almost from the beginning of my EQ days, and considered him one of my closest friends in game. He had been in beta testing with the friends who got me started in EQ, and was even closer to them.

He was married when we met though, and had played with his wife for the first couple years. They had separated maybe eight months prior to the start of our relationship, in a very messy and painful breakup. His wife had all but stopped playing, at least on any characters that I and my friends knew, but I had no particular ill will towards her. I had met Y already, at the RL graduation of the friends who got me playing, when he and his then-wife came.

It was the first time they had met any of us, but a great time was had by all. So anyway, having once already met Y and having spent tons and tons of time together in game, having supported each other through our various heartbreaks (he helped me cope with the difficulties of D and J, and I spent a lot of time helping him deal with the departure of his wife), when he suddenly started talking about how I should visit. This idea sounded great immediately because Y lives in what is by far the most appealing part of the country to me. I was a little hesitant though, as I'd always had something of a crush on Y, although I think I'd done a good job of keeping it nothing more than that, given that the man was married and then going through the trauma of a failed marriage. I never even let myself consider anything serious with him to that point, but was afraid that being there with him, all lonely and vulnerable, might present some problems.

So I was sort of pushing the idea around on my plate without actually taking a bite until he rather suddenly confessed that he had begun thinking of me as more than a friend. That was a shock and a half. After literally years of having a hopeless crush, knowing deep down it could never ever happen, suddenly it was happening. Foolish optimist that I am, I ignored the voice whispering 'rebound' and went for it. Having known each other for so long, we immediately launched into a serious relationship. We made the plans for my trip out there.

My Mom bought me a new set of luggage as an early birthday present to take on my trip. (She's come a long way since D!) I rambled on endlessly about him at work, plastered his picture on the desktop of all the various computers I use, and idly surfed through job openings in his area. The only thing that worried me is it all seemed too good to be true, too absolutely perfect, things that good simply don't happen to me. I told him so, told him all about my misgivings and worries and

28

everything, but he was the picture of confidence, reassuring me endlessly of his affection and happy anticipation. We talked as if marriage were a foregone conclusion and everything up until that point just a pleasant formality.

We talked several times a day (very much long distance) but didn't spend as much time together as we'd have liked, due to his irregular work schedule. But we did sling plenty of sappy emails back and forth. Then...*sigh*...a couple weeks before the trip, he started acting just a little distant. He talked about being busy with work, and did hold a very responsible position at his job, so I didn't think much of it. But sure enough, literally a few days before the trip, I dragged out of him that he no longer felt so much in love any more.

He'd been planning on letting me come and hoping that'd rekindle things (selfish son-of-unwed-parents) but thankfully I had the sense to be doubtful, and my Mom and my friends had the sense to talk me the rest of the way out of it. That one hurt, hurt worse than D or J combined ever had. Y had been a friend for so long, I trusted him implicitly. We had been through so much together over the years, I just couldn't conceive of him hurting me that much. I now know never to trust *any* man that much, online or otherwise, at least not without a very real ring on my ring finger.

I spent the weekend on the couch, alternately sleeping and crying, and then took a couple days off work to continue sleeping and crying. Of course life goes on, his picture was stripped off all my desktops an all reminders removed from sight. It was a week before I could unpack my bags though (they were ready to go a week before my flight).

For a while after that trauma I wanted nothing to do with men, of course. It was a few months before it dawned on me that one of the friends I'd been spending a lot of time with seemed to be a little more attentive and interested than usual in a friend. We'll call him R. I had met R about a year earlier, shortly after he started playing. We were in different guilds but our guilds do a lot of things together, so we ran into each other a lot and found it natural enough to start hanging out on our own, inviting each other to come when our groups needed more people or when we

were soloing and wanted some company. He'd been a very good friend to me through all the stuff with Y, willing either to listen quietly or distract me, as needed.

We spent every possible spare moment together, and I started having feelings for him. After a couple months of worrying about ruining our friendship and making a fool of myself, I decided I couldn't possibly look a bigger fool than I did after Y, and R's a sweet and strong enough person to handle any temporary discomfort if he wasn't feeling as I suspected, so I told him how I felt. Turns out I (and the friends I'd had watching for signs of interest in him) were right, he did feel the same.

He'd never been in a serious relationship before, online or otherwise, so we started out taking it slow and so far it seems to have gone well. We talk on the phone maybe once a week or so, email a couple times a week, and have our own private chat channel in game at all times, so we are in constant touch whenever we're both online. It's almost like having him sitting there next to me...almost. He's scheduled to visit here in four weeks, and assuming that goes well will be applying to grad school at the big university in town. :)

I was worried about what would happen if he came here and we promptly broke up, but badgered him with what if's until satisfied that he feels here is as good as anywhere for grad school and wouldn't feel compelled to immediately move back if things go sour. He has a strong network of friends and is close to his family, so I think he'd be okay. I'm still nervous, but he's worth the risk.

I went into all that detail in an attempt to illustrate the fact that none of these relationships differs much from RL relationships, except for the geographical distance and resulting dependence on technology for staying in touch and eventual need for relocation by one party or the other. Those are the only hardships I see at all.

The jerky behavior I endured (and selfish, foolish behavior I committed) has nothing to do with having met online and everything to do with human nature. I haven't been in any long term RL relationships for comparison, but I've been in plenty of short ones and seen friends go through all sorts of long and short ones. I

see no difference between those and mine that started online, except for the hardships imposed by distance.

And the benefits go a long way towards outweighing the hardships. Relationships online pretty much all start with friendships, because that's all you have to go on for attraction. Everyone's a hottie, and a fake computer animation at that, so there really isn't any chasing of people based purely on appearance. It's very easy to spot the ones who are only after the 'rich and powerful', maybe because of the intensely social nature of game time. The game is all about interaction, so there's never an issue of where to go or what to do, or for that matter of personal safety while spending time together.

People sometimes say 'aren't you worried that he could turn out to be a murderer or something?' to which I reply 'so this guy I've talked to for hundreds, maybe even thousands, of hours over the course of a year, and about whom I have developed no criminal suspicions whatsoever, is still more dangerous in your eyes than in some random guy who sat down next to me in a bar ten minutes ago? I don't think so.'

Of course people can deceive others over long periods of time, but that's nothing new to online relationships. Heck my cousin married a guy that we all thought was great, they dated a long time and her family loved him. But on the flight to their honeymoon he started drinking and was a drunken abuser ever since. No one even dreamt him capable of such a thing. They're long since separated and have been fighting very nasty custody battles.

That kind of stuff happens just as much in RL, it just doesn't grab attention the way it does when people happened to meet online initially. I'm firmly convinced that if it weren't for the geographic problems and the resulting heartache, meeting online would be by far the best way to go. [EQ, F, 25]

Narratives: Frustration and Agony in MMORPGs

Even the most independent MMORPG player has to deal with the human element in these games. While fairly uncommon, every player has at one point or other been annoyed or angered by the selfish or malevolent actions of another player. The following are narratives from players who were asked to describe some of the most negative experiences they've had in the context of an MMORPG. These stories highlight the social nature of these games as well as how emotionally invested players become with their characters.

Some very common stories center about camp-stealing or KS'ing.

My RL nephew was helping me kill the Black Dire in Mistmoore for the shaman epic - results in the black fur boots, as well. We cleared to the wolves, and killed the 4 around the Black Dire. We then pulled the Black Dire and began working on it. At this time a group of players, all in one guild, came up and stopped a short distance away. They seemed to pause for a few seconds, as if talking, then ran up and proceeded to KS the epic mob from us. Then one of them sat down and logged off, and a shaman showed up with an almost identical name, same guild, and looted the epic piece. I was so angry I could not type in /say, and could barely type at all. I ended up apologizing to my nephew for burning his ears. [EQ, M, 53]

I remember long time ago, I was still considered a 'newbie' then, I came across a camp and as far as I could see no one was camping it, I /ooc a few times to make sure and after a few minutes I then /ooc for group members, it must have been about 5 minutes till I got a full group together, when up came running two peeps claiming that this was their camp and I should get lost. After a lot of verbal abuse and my guild coming to back me up ... I found I was actually crying (RL) I couldn't believe that I let them affect me in that way... that it was just a game. I then realized that day, that it isn't 'JUST' a game and I never let anyone talk to me that way again!!! [EQ, F, 29]

Other players describe immature actions or behaviors that annoyed or angered them.

The ogre camp in west karana. I was with two guildies, very close friends. We got there to see two halflings pull the entire camp and run around like chickens with

their heads cut off. They yelled for help after they died: so-and-so's corpse yells for help, literally. So, we figured they were out of their league (they had not signaled for help at any time throughout the fight), and decided to camp the spot. Later they come back, and they get upset we were there. They start calling guildies. An obnoxious gnome arrives and starts telling us 'friend, that's not how the game is played,' etc. The halflings are screaming accusations that we 'let them die on purpose' at this point. More of this guild arrives. They are shouting throughout the zone, loudly proclaiming their bravado and tight-knittedness (a friend who had been in this guild later referred to them collectively as hyperactive children). Much more than 6 people are here by now, challenging our 3 man group for the spawn. We did offer to share it, but that was met with cries from the original halflings, declaring our evilness. Eventually the obnoxious gnome threatened they would KS everything we pulled if we didn't leave. So we pulled one more, which they failed to KS successfully (much to our amusement), pretended we got something and rolled on it, then left to cries of 'run like the cowards you are' from Mr Gnome, just as their guild leader arrived after much shouting and cavorting across the zone. God damn it, I should have /reported his quip about ksing everything. It would have been too easy, but we didn't. Nothing would have given me more pleasure than to see a GM arrive and blow them all to smitherines. I'll never forget their guildname, either. It was extremely stupid. Of course, the guild is dead and buried now, but that's little consolation. I just know they're all still out there... [EQ, M ,19]

We had a group of 5 in one of the Gnoll dungeons. A caster (I believe it was a wizard) asked if he could join us. Since we were full & he was a good 10 levels higher then us we politely declined. He then complained for a bit & went invisible. We forgot about him & proceeded to start fighting. We ended up having a large number of adds & most of us we very close to dying so we were running for the zone line. I was a couple steps from the zone when the wizard decided to cast an area effect spell & kill almost all of us. It was a extremely rude & childish thing to do just because we wouldn't let him group with us. Then there are the times when you're about to kill something much higher then you when someone comes along & kills it in the middle of the fight. That's always frustrates me, all that work for nothing. [EQ, F, 27]

But for some players, the event that was most agonizing occurred in the context of a group or a guild. In other words, the pain was inflicted not by a stranger but by an acquaintance.

After months of camping a particular spawn in a tough zone, a small group of all guildmates invited me to hunt the SAME spawn with them, since they already had a druid I asked if I could hunt for the item with my Mage. It would be more helpful to us all, and they agreed I would roll on the item with my mage and they would hold the item so I could take the item on the druid. We hunted and hunted and sure enough the mob spawned, we pulled it and killed it. The item was visible, my goal was in sight. So we rolled, the necromancer, the cleric, the druid (who HAD one) and my mage. Turns out NO MATTER who won the cleric was going to get it, I got ONE chance out of four. I was SO mad I just could not group with them after that, I spent three weeks saving up to BUY the item as they were STILL hogging this spawn. After about two weeks I just could not stay in the guild much longer, the animosity was too much, I discussed it with an officer and the officer told me 'Druids just aren't important enough to get decent gear first'. I disguilded IMMEDIATELY especially since I had worked hard helping this guild's members get epic pieces. [EQ, F, 34]

I was an officer in a guild and we were small, we had just started raiding. We had a raiding task force that was designated to run the raids. These were officers that had agreed to run them. I was not one of these officers, I hated to lead raids. Well, one day I was helping one of these officers scout a location, thinking it was innocent and all I was doing was porting. The raid was the next day and when raid time rolled around, the officer was nowhere to be found. The guild leader told everyone that I was leading the raid and to send me all the tells and questions. This came out of nowhere and I was infuriated. I told him that I would not be leading, and he told me that I HAD to. I came to find out that this was arranged between the officer and the leader and that the other officer told the leader that I agreed to run the raid. What made it worse is that the leader was present for the raid and was sending me very angry tells asking why I hadn't been faster, why we weren't mobile, why was I being such a pain in the ass? I wanted to quit the game right then and there. I do not like being forced to do anything, and the loyalty I felt to the other 30 or so guild members there was a sticking point to do something I really had no idea or want to do. It was very stressful and even worse when we

wiped out because I took a wrong turn in the dungeon. I felt responsible and I had to deal with the crappy morale that ensued. [EQ, F, 25]

For other players, the insensitive nature of other players in a particular event was painful because it was associated with an attack on their self-worth both in the game and in real life.

My boyfriend and my two closest online friends and I were hunting giants in Rathe Mountains when a warrior asked if he and his partner could join us. We talked it over in group and decided that would be okay for a while, so our leader invited them into the group. I was playing my enchanter at the time, and his partner turned out to be an enchanter, a level higher than I was. I was medding up after buffing the group and switching my spells back to hunting/guarding spells, when the new enchanter started casting everything I had just cast, overwriting everything I had done, telling the group what to do and commenting on how they obviously hadn't had a chanter with them who knew how to take care of their group and they were lucky he was there, he'd make sure they didn't get into TOO much trouble. He started bossing them all around and trying to tell them what spells to cast and who to go where and telling me to just sit back and stay out of the way. I disbanded and headed for the zone, in tears of frustration. I had always felt that I had something to offer my group, that I could be an effective part of any group, as I had a variety of skills and spell lines and knew how to use all of them.

To be overwritten, pushed aside, and belittled was unbearable. The rest of my original group also disbanded and followed me, preferring to hunt with me elsewhere and ignore his Out Of Character berating our leaving them, but to this day I still doubt whether I really can, really do, contribute my group. I always have to try harder, do more, because so very little of what I do is really visible... unless you're standing in a crowd of mezzed mobs waiting their patient turns to die, what a chanter does is simply grease the skids, and that's so hard to see ... and so rarely appreciated. I had never doubted my usefulness, until then. And even now, knowing I can be overwritten and cast aside as negligible, leaves me uneasy. Knowing how cruel others can be in casting people aside as useless, negligible ... and how badly that hurts, though you can't see the tears ... has left me unwilling to tolerate people in my groups speaking badly to or about others. My groups all

operate on the Thumper Principle - 'if you can't say something nice, don't say nothing at all.' =) i keep hoping the concept is contagious. :-\ [EQ, f, 36]

My first and most beloved character is a paladin. Being who I am, I prefer to solo - a hard thing to do sometimes. Loving the game, I purchased a second computer and account to two box. I moved the cleric I had to second account and once she was high enough, the 'twins' soared to the high 40's easily. My guild is a small family guild of soloers. Some 10 or so characters were reaching the 50 mark at roughly the same time. The cleric was always in demand, sigh. I should have seen the problems coming. When cleric was 40 and pally 46 (estimate of level - can't remember exact details), our guild started having mini raids. These were 8 to 12 players strong, PoP had just been released and we needed practice grouping, working on tactics, using raid window, loot for armor upgrades, etc. My paladin showed up for a 45+ raid (cleric too low). She was the only tank option. We had a 55 shammy and 2 druids over 52 for healers.

I explained my tank strategy and the drawbacks of a paladin (takes longer to get aggro). I made a hotkey to call for assist. The shaman was pulling with slow so I asked the druids to root the mob near me to help me get aggro (and save shaman from needing more healing). Despite multiple pleas for them to wait, all would immediately jump the mob. Naturally, we could not keep the heals up and my paladin could not get aggro. Casters simply attract attention when they cast before the tank has time to hurt the mob. I had talked on guild forum about how hard it was for my paladin to get in groups. No one wanted a not good enough tank or inadequate healer (both were excuses given me by groups looking for members).

About 10 minutes into the raid, one of my guild mates said 'we need a real tank.' I held my breath. Not one of my mates backed me up. The guild leader (one of the druids) took maybe a minute to offer his 42 warrior. (this was a 45+ only raid, guildies who weren't high enough were turned down) 2 others said sure. I stated, one last time, that I could get and hold aggro if they would let me call for assist before attacking the mobs. Yet again, I was ignored. The tank was logged on and when he arrived, I told all goodnight and jogged back to a safe zone. I was crying too hard to play. My own guild didn't want me.

Now that time has passed, I realize that I was in a real life low spot but the betrayal still stings. See, despite their assurance that I play my paladin well ... when I show up with pally, they say 'but we really need a cleric.' It got worse the higher the cleric got. I finally moved my paladin to the higher fee server and have found welcome there. Now my problem is - I like the people in both guilds (old one cleric is still in and new one pally has joined). I feel some loyalty to the old guild but also a lot of who knows what to call this mass of negative feeling. Do I dare move cleric to Stormhammer? I enjoy playing her but now that the pally is welcomed, even requested - I'm gritting my teeth when I log onto my old server. If I move the cleric will the new guild prefer her more? (yes, clerics are in great demand on at least 4 servers, sigh, lol) [EQ, F, 41]

Narratives: Evasion or Therapy?

It is clear that an MMORPG is great for escapism – a fantastical land where the everyday clerk or secretary can be part of a group that slays dragons instead of shuffling paperwork. The following set of narratives explores how different players have used the MMORPG space as both evasion and therapy, and how the MMORPG space is both sheltering and cathartic.

We begin with players who use the MMORPG space to destress after a day of work.

I constantly use the game as an escape from work. Right now work sucks, but the market is so depressed I have been unable to locate anything else. So, I go home every Monday night to meet with the Undead Slayers(tm). We pick a nice undead zone and just beat them up (though sometimes they beat us up as well!). It is a great release and helps me make it through the rest of the work week. [EQ, M, 43]

In hindsight, I definitely used the game as an escape from my job as a medical resident. I spent all day dealing with things that, more often than not, got me depressed, and the last thing I wanted to do when I came home was to watch TV or sit around. The game was a good way to obliterate any thoughts about the day of work. However, I'm not sure it really helped me out. I guess it's hard to say. That time of my life was definitely the worst, and I didn't have much of a life outside of my job and playing EQ. On the bright side, that time passed quickly. However, when I started enjoying my other life again, I generally lost interest in the time investment that these games require, possibly because the escape part of it was not as necessary anymore. [EQ, M, 30]

I use online gaming as an escape from worklife. I work as a security guard and at times the annoyances that I have to put up with can sometimes be very bad. Since I have to spent the whole time being polite even though I want to reach across the desk and strangle someone who just can't understand that they are not the center of existence or worse yet when someone is on the phone and continues to tie up the lines even after they have gotten information or the information they have in not available. Thus going home and playing some game where I can run around and bash/fry creatures which I give pet names to while getting some reward (ie experience or gold) makes me feel a lot better. [DAOC, M , 33]

Other players use the MMORPG space as an escape from real-life burdens and problems. Oftentimes, it isn't clear whether this evasion helps or hinders them in real-life.

I had been involved with a man who had a dependency problem ... and life with him had become hard. He would disappear into his world of addiction and I into my world of EQ. I had tried for months to get him to seek help to no avail. He would become angry and say he had things under control so I just despaired and sank deeper into the game. I met friends, married one, we broke it off, I met another man … I think I did all these things because I was missing a lot in my RL relationship. One day I came home and found my RL man really high and out of it. I had to do something. I called a psychologist and we entered couples counseling. She sent him to detox and rehab. His life has changed ... and I am happier for it. My 'addiction' I am still working on. As far as helping the problem ... it's difficult to say. In the short term, sinking into EQ helped me get through the bad days. In the long term, I think EQ was detrimental to the situation because perhaps I would have gotten him help with the drug problem earlier. [EQ, F, 29]

I have, and it always comes back to bite you in the ass. Crass but true. Graduate apps. I didn't want to do them. You couldn't make me do them. I had such a huge mental block to filling them out that it would have been easier to cut off my arm. Needless to say I played a lot of EQ to null the apprehension when I should have reconciled my feelings and played for enjoyment. It wasn't the game that got in the way. I put the game in the way to block my responsibilities. [EQ, F, 33]

It helps me take my mind off of my depression. And my RL relationship, and family problems. I think it just put resolving the bigger problems of my repeated abuse on hold until I was mentally ready to do so, with the help of someone I actually met online at a message board for the game. But even now, I still use the game for an escape from the real world very often, mostly because the real world isn't a very great place to be, at least for me it isn't. [EQ, F, 17]

My entire life is a problem, and the game is an escape from life itself. When I log in to EQ my every problem is instantly forgotten. I am no longer a lowly teenager who doesn't go to school and has a piss-poor job. I am a respected and powerful

warrior. There is no father in the game that tells me how messy my room is. There is no mother in game that tells me what a scumbag I'm turning in to. It's just me surrounded by others like me, all with a common goal: just to play the game and get away from everything else. Well that's what I like to believe anyway. [EQ, M, 18]

I have been out of work for a year now. I have found EQ to be a good diversion from the daily stresses. It's nice to be able to see green fields and feel like a useful person when, in real life, it is cold and ugly (winter time) and no one wants to hire you. I think EQ has helped reduce stress but has not done anything to resolve the issue. I have, however, received job leads and resume help from people I have met in the game. [EQ, M, 32]

For some people, the game offers them social contact and support that they otherwise wouldn't have because of their real life situations.

I often use EverQuest as an escape tool - I am a stay-at-home mom, which is often incredibly mundane, repetitive, and frustrating. There are only so many times that I can change diapers, vacuum the floor, wash dishes, do laundry, and play peek-a-boo before I'm almost screaming for some intellectual stimulation and the opportunity to 'be someone else' for a while. It's just a great relief to get away from all that and for a while become an accomplished troubadour who leads a strong guild of roleplayers in a fantasy world, for a while. I've found that playing EverQuest to escape the boredom of daily life does not interfere, but rather gives me a much-needed break, and time for mature discussion and imagination. [EQ, F, 25]

Going into my final year of college I was forced by class scheduling to go to school at night. At the same time I was forced out of a job I had held for three years working nights and weekends. In this time I had the stress of school, a new job, and lack of contact with friends. The people I knew and trusted continued working nights and weekends. My time was spent working days and school at nights. I went from a working environment where I worked with like-minded people to an environment where my hobbies and interests were frowned upon. EQ provided accessible social contacts needed to get through stressful times. It helped alleviate

feelings of isolation and depression that might otherwise have broken my willpower to finish school. [EQ, M, 25]

Other players talk about how they are able to use the MMORPG space as therapy for a variety of social anxiety problems they are struggling with.

Social phobias. I am a hermit but also avoid social situation because of anxiety. EQ offers me a way to play a video game (mind numbing, etc) yet have some social contact at the level I chose. I can guild chat, hide in an unguilded alt, participate in tradeskill chat serverwide, etc. If all flops, I can switch servers and restart new alts and new friends. If I cannot give up my alt, I can pay to change her name and just not let on it is me - something I haven't tried, btw. Via online interactions, I have identified new issues, managed to work more on issues that I had gotten stuck on, etc in my talk therapy. Kudos to eq, lol. [EQ, F, 41]

Being a bookworm by nature and none too sociable as a kid, I was very bad at talking to people. Online however, was different. I could be totally anonymous, and I could actually think of what I was going to 'say' before I said it. I was actually a darn good writer, I just was no good at talking to people. UO and EQ helped me build up a relatively accurate model of social interaction and allowed me to become better in conversation, to the point where I was normal. [EQ, M, 20]

EverQuest has always been my escape from things like a job that I hated, times in life that I wasn't sure I would live through, etc. Once I moved to a new location to be with my husband, EverQuest became my life. I have Asperger's Syndrome, meaning among many things that I have great difficulty in social situations (to the point where I would rather be alone than make friends). My online world was mostly safe and I already had my quota of friends to keep my company. My husband's family no doubt wondered why I did not want to hang out with them, and I didn't want to kill time making small talk about other people's children. I'd rather be off adventuring with my friends in Norrath. There have been a few times that I have not been able to play EverQuest for one reason or another, and I hate those times. EQIM doesn't quite cut it. If I didn't have my guild message board I would be really lost, but thankfully most of my guildmates are all real-life friends and family that I have phone numbers for. However, when I can't play EQ, I still

41

wish I could escape into it... badly sometimes. I miss my friends. I have a difficult enough time with real life, about all I can do some days is play games and deal with the little bit of lifelikeness you can't help but come across in games. [EQ, F, 25]

A few players commented on how the MMORPG environment helped them deal with self-esteem issues, and how the game empowered them.

I have GAD (General Anxiety Disorder), OCD (Obsessive Compulsive Disorder), and depression diagnosed. This causes me a lot of trouble 95% of the time. I even had to go to an alternative school because I couldn't handle my other high school due to anxiety levels. Then, I was able to make it through one semester of college. But the second semester fell through. I had more classes that seemed to provoke anxiety, my OCD was getting out of control, which prevented me from going to classes, which in turn ate away at my grades, and everything except the sport I was involved in went on a steep decline. I had to withdraw from college (I plan on doing something online and such...I didn't drop out) and come home.

Still, I am plagued with anxiety since I'm home by myself all day. The game allowed me to be with people, even if we were, in reality, millions of miles away. It also took down my stress level, lessening the anxiety I felt while at home. I'm also a lone wolf sort of person ... a social outcast. I had never fit in before college, and was always being made fun of. I had little to no friends ... and through 12th grade, I had one best friend and two school friends whom I haven't seen or heard from since graduation in the summer of 2002. My best friends are all online friends and live in other states from me now. Playing the game allowed me to become an entirely different person ... it allowed me to start over. I'm not a social outcast in the game. I don't have a single enemy in the game, and I try to make friends with just about everyone (except the monsters). I'm accepted there, and since I get to participate in more conversational things in the game, it actually helped me to understand how I should behave with a group of people in real life. Things I should say, things I shouldn't say ... I'm still learning that.

My parents just got divorced after the process took two years to complete, and are now living in separate houses. They have a ton of arguments, still, which drives me

nuts. My father isn't the best of people, either. He's not understanding at all of my disabilities, and before they split apart, my mother was never home to talk to. I have a younger brother (by two years) that isn't going to school either because of depression, and I worry about him a lot of times as well. Playing the game enabled me to forget all my troubles in real life and become the character I created. I would rather spend my time in the game then in real life because of this.

So, once again, the game allows me to become someone else, make a clean start, and interact with others and be who I want to be. I can't protect all the people I want to protect in real life because of how far away we live from one another. But in the game, I can protect others. I can be strong, and I don't have to worry about a disability. I can also see my friends and make new ones. It's a good coping outlet for me while I try to get my life straightened out and put all the pieces back together. Because when I role-play my character, I don't have to worry about anything except for what I'm going to do next in the game. [Other, F, 19]

I did play Underlight for almost 5 years, at the end I pretty much burned out. I am glad what happened in the end for me to realize that I wasn't living a reality. I looked for a game for self esteem and self worth. Games sometimes become addictive not because they are great games, but because we go looking for something that is missing in our lives, because of a feeling that someone in this game is giving you. I feel that people that already have a addictive personality should really stay away from these games because once they suck you in its really hard to be sucked out until something bad happens in RL or in the game itself. I have cried, I have laughed, and I have loved in this game and I will tell you right now I think at that time of my life I just needed to go through it before I could face the world again. [Other, F, 36]

And finally, several players offered stories on how an MMORPG and the support they found there became their solace when they had to deal with real life emotional trauma.

I was playing EQ one night in June of 2000 when I got a call saying I needed to hurry up and get to the hospital because my daughter had been hit by a drunk driver. They said she was in very serious condition. My boyfriend and I immediately logged our characters and rushed out of the house. That night my daughter ended

up dying from her injuries. I at first blamed my playing EQ for her death. I couldn't believe that while my daughter was out with friends that I was involved in another world. After the tragedy I decided that I needed to take a break from EQ to get my priorities straight. My boyfriend posted on our guild website that we would be out of the game for awhile due to my daughter being killed. The support I received from the people in my guild was overwhelming. I couldn't believe that people I only knew from an online game were so supportive of my decision and my feelings. I took a break from EQ for about 2 months. I finally realized that my playing EQ was not the reason for her death. So I went back to playing because I missed all the people I played with regularly. I was still deeply depressed about losing my child, but when I was in EQ I felt so much better about myself and about life. All my friends were there to talk to me about how I was feeling and to offer me advice on things I could do. I eventually got over my depression thanks to the people in EQ. If it wasn't for them I probably would either be depressed still or laying dead in the ground. I really feel that the escape into EQ and all the good people I have met there was very helpful to me in dealing with this tragedy. I really have the members of Warriors of Wrath and Ittie Bittie Brigade to thank for this! [EQ, F, 35]

I started playing Everquest as an additional activity between myself and my boyfriend at the time. When we broke up, I spent more and more time playing Everquest to escape from the feelings the break up had left me with. I refused to interact with people on a personal level for a long time. I feel that Everquest helped me to get back to dealing with and caring about people. [EQ, F, 23]