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A Perspective on Computer Games

Because video games were born out of communication mediums (TV's, computers), they have been mainly examined as media artifacts rather than construed as extensions of games and past-times. The lens that has been focused on video games is mainly derived from the "media effects" tradition – an attempt to examine the consequences of exposure to different kinds of media. The carryover from that perspective is quite palpable – the incessant suggestion that video games can't be good, and that the more of it you're exposed to, the worse off you must be (essentially a parallel of critiques of watching TV). While this framework has mainly been used to vilify violent video games, its basic conclusions seem to have spilled into video games in general and helped ferment general paranoia about video gaming – that they are pointless at best and might actually be highly addictive and dangerous. After all, media has to have an "effect" on you, right?

But in reality, video gaming is much more like a hobby or past-time than passive exposure to media, and the critiques along the lines of addictiveness seem misplaced when we consider our cultural attitudes towards other past-times and hobbies. We seldom ask avid book readers how often they stay up late at night just to finish a chapter from their favorite author. We don't ask avid mountain climbers how distracted they are while working because they are thinking of their next climb, or whether their spouses feel neglected when they go mountain climbing. We also don't ask aspiring writers or actors how often their art consumes the rest of their lives. In fact, it's perceived as noble to be consumed by artistic endeavors.

Games have always been human constructs. The goal of any game has always been a seemingly meaningful task in a scaffolding of arbitrary rules. To a Martian, it may be incredibly difficult to understand the point of football (or golf) or why so many people are emotionally invested in how a ball is tossed on a field, or why any sentient beings would reward tossing balls on fields. When we take a step back, it seems odd that the very people who find so much value in one game deny any value to other kind of games considering that all games at an abstract level are goals defined in the context of arbitrary rules.

Non-gamers scoff at the joy derived from looting a rare item or when a dragon raid succeeds. They wonder how so much happiness can be derived from something that is not real. The answer is that it's an exact parallel of any other game. After all, achievement is entirely defined by the rules scaffolding. Getting a paper published in a peer-reviewed journal is as much a game as defeating Vox in EverQuest. It's about a set of rules that were defined by us, not some universal guideline for achievement. The universe could not care any less about what we do.

A colleague once critiqued MMORPGs this way – “Why don’t I just give you a black box with a crank? Every once in a while, you get a piece of candy. That’s what an MMORPG is, right?” Of course, this focuses on the grind and doesn’t take into account the social interactions of the environment, but even if we conceded that point, there’s a problem with that analogy. The problem is that that’s a good description of almost anything in life. When you take away the specifics, even something like trying to get a paper published in a peer-reviewed journal is like that black box.

Many of the frustrations associated with talking about video games to non-gamers stem from two incorrect categorizations. Either they lump video games with media artifacts rather than past-times, or they see video games as games but forget that much of life is a game as well. For some reason, popular culture would like us to think about video games as a very different beast from what it is. Many people talk about video games without noting its striking parallels to other activities we deem worthy and wholesome. Many would have us think that video games can never be taken seriously. The reality is that when you take a step back, most of life is a game.

Why Do You Play?

The subtlety in the answers to this seemingly straight-forward question is quite fascinating even after 4 years of exploring the reasons why people play MMORPGs. One player likens it to explaining the meaning of life:

That question is about as difficult to answer as ask for the meaning of life :) Not sure why I 'still' play. Everyday I log on and find something new to complain about or not like, or bump into someone who rubs me the wrong way...funny how an online environment can be similar to reality in that sense? For me personally, I do enjoy the fantasy about it all, being something your not even in the imaginary sense. It also provides an easy way for me to keep in touch with several real life friends I've made over the years who have moved to new geographic locations. The same applies for family, I have a brother who plays and this is the only way we can 'spend time together' with a country between us. [EQ, M, 28]

But his answer also quickly exposes the interweaving of underlying motivations, dodging the categorization and assessment schemes that people like Bartle and me have tried to create. On an aggregate level, the general categorization of why people play seems to be quite robust and can roughly be described as: 1) achievement, 2) socialization, 3) immersion, 4) vent/escape, 5) competition. On an individual level, however, the answers are quite provocative and resist easy categorization.

For example, consider the diversity of how players socialize in MMORPGs through the following narratives. There are players who use the environment as a chat-room with dynamic backdrops:

I started playing after watching my young sons play - i never had never been interested in computer/video/nintendo/online etc. games but felt that i needed to watch to make sure it was suitable for them. After many weeks of questioning and watching i found myself interested in the interactions between people in the game, it was totally absorbing!!!! The fact that i was able to immerse myself in the game and relate to other people or just listen in to the 'chatter' was

appealing. I enjoy being a healer and like to help people and are often disappointed if I'm too slow in helping even if people haven't asked, I'm quite happy to watch while someone battles and then heal them once they are finished and then just keep going with what i am doing in the game. I will happily risk my character to save another's character. [DAOC, F, 34]

What keeps me coming back to MMORPGs, and any RPG in general, is the social aspect. I've been playing RPG's of various kinds for over 15 years, and it's the only 'hobby' that I have maintained that long. The reason is the people. When I log on to EverQuest the first thing I do is say 'hi' to my guild, then I hit my 'friends' list and say 'hi' to them. Often times I will sit and chat with people and never get anything accomplished in-game. And I never feel like I wasted my time. I would have stopped playing long ago if it wasn't for the other people that play. [EQ, M, 30]

One step away from the players who enjoy the chatter are the players who enjoy making good friends in the environment. For them, a large reason why they play is to sustain their social network:

Overall, I think it's the friendships that I've forged that keep me returning to Norrath time and again. It's rewarding to log on and be greeted by the same quirky, fun-loving friends I've spent the past two years learning and growing with, both in-game and personally. [EQ, F, 37]

For awhile I kept playing because I enjoyed exploring the high level zones and seeing new things. The gods and other creatures looked amazing and the scenery was really beautiful. Now I have seen mostly everything and I continue to play for lack of anything else to do and mainly log on to chat with the good friends that I have made. Raiding with my guild is pretty fun, we just recently made it to Plane of Time - only one other guild on the server has made it there so far. It's new and exciting but raiding gets old sometimes, so mainly just to talk with my friends. [EQ, F, 18]

I just recently started playing again after 2 years away. I started playing again simply because I missed the people that were my friends. I enjoy being able to chat away while healing my group and meeting new people. [EQ, M, 30]

Whereas for others, the focus of socialization is less on the chatter and more on group loyalty and affiliation. Notice how for some players this creates a two-edged sword – the burden of responsibilities that come with the satisfaction of feeling valued, or in the case of the third narrative – the way socialization transitions into group achievements.

My guild and my friends. I am an officer in my guild, with a lot of responsibilities (head of recruiting, raid organization, healer organization) and my loyalty to the guild and my friends in it keeps me playing. Experience camping got dull a very long time ago (I've been playing for over 4 years), but my friends keep me coming back. When I don't attend a raid because of some RL commitment, illness, or some other reason, I often feel guilty that I'm letting my guild down. [EQ, F, 31]

I play for friends. I have made many friends in EQ - and have carried those friends threw to other games. If it wasn't for my friends in EQ I would have cancelled my subscription a year ago. Having a family like guild has been important to me, and in turn I stick around to help them out.

Friends can make you feel needed, and that feel is what keeps me in game, cause I am then useful. [SWG, M, 26]

The friendships are the force that keeps me coming back. The guild keeps me playing. In order to be able to play with my friends, I have to keep up with equipment and raid points. This is not my favorite part of the game anymore; and if it were not for the people and the fun we have as a group, I would most likely stop playing, or at least, stop playing as much. The most appealing part of the game now is the people and the teamwork we display. Our guild, though decent sized, is rather small for a raid-guild. We simply do not usually have the numbers on to 'zerg' a mob or zone. But we make up for that in teamwork and skill, and some of us prefer the game when there is an element of 'will we be able to do this with only xx people?' The fact that we as a small group can take on and defeat encounters that other guilds or groups need (or just take along) nearly twice as many is a great feeling. [EQ, F, 43]

For other players, rather than focusing on making new friends in the environment, socialization means sustaining connections with friends and family through the virtual environment:

My family just moved out to west coast and I still live in the Midwest so my brother and I frequently play together as a way to stay connected. We are constantly chatting about what is happening in life and it's a fantastic way to stay close. We both find the game interesting and fun and can usually be found spending time together in the 'virtual world' when we both have a few extra hours. [SWG, M, 24]

I play MMORPGs with my husband as a source of entertainment. Overall it can be a cheaper form of entertainment where you can spend quite a bit of time with a significant other. To play well you end up developing more ways of communicating. While my husband and I were separated we still played our first graphic MMORPG EQ but switched servers and only duo'd with each other giving us time to talk. Since we were not in same room we actually communicated with each other better at that time. It alone didn't help our marriage but was definitely one of the contributing factors in helping us communicate and get through our problems much easier and without anyone else's involvement. [DAOC, F, 31]

I use the game as a way to spend time with family and friends while I am away from home at college etc. Almost my whole family plays so it can be a good way to get together and catch up. It's also a way for me to de-stress. [EQ, M, 21]

And finally, for players who have physical handicaps, the environment provides them with the socialization that is difficult for them to find in real life:

Several years ago (Dec of 1997) I was working as a nurse on the graveyard shift at a local hospital. While repositioning a patient, I seriously injured my back (L4-5 disk). I've been disabled and unable to work since then. MMORPGs have allowed me to interact with people and feel more whole/able. I've come to enjoy spending time with people my own age and people of very different ages (both younger and older). Folks who are friendly and helpful, polite and worth

getting to know seem to be in most games. With online gaming I can meet people and have something of a social life even while isolated and pretty debilitated in 'real life'. [SWG, F, 46]

I have always enjoyed video and computer games. This was a whole new experience for me, being able to play real time with other humans. I am disabled and mostly housebound so EQ gives me a great social outlet; I can talk and joke with others without having to leave home LOL. I keep playing as I advance in levels, etc there are always new goals to reach. But the most appealing thing to me is not what level I am, or what level mob I can kill - but the interaction with other people. [EQ, F, 59]

Another common motivation is achieving goals within the environment. As the following players explain, the reason why this is so appealing is because there is a constant sense of becoming stronger, more competent, more skilled, and there are so many ways the environment offers players to advance.

I play for the interaction with others as well as for the constant improvement of myself and others. What is appealing to me is that you CAN keep on playing; there is almost always something else you can do. When you finish one thing, there is always another thing, another obstacle to pass. [EQ, M, 16]

The reason I play is that there is so much to do. You can lvl your character and when you get bored, you can craft. Or you can choose another job class. Get bored with that, you can fish, mine, log ... etc. And the thing that gets the most is the scope of the game. How large the world is and the detail of everything. [FFXI, M, 23]

I like the whole progression, advancement thing ... gradually getting better and better as a player, being able to handle situations that previously I wouldn't have been able to. [EQ, M, 48]

Another player articulates precisely why this is so seductive in MMORPGs:

For the entire first 20 years of our life, we're taught that if 'you put the work in, you'll get the reward'. And it does happen that way -- If we study for school, we get good grades, or do well on tests. If we practice hard, we make the soccer team or the band. If we make the effort to learn or do certain things, we get the next girl scout or boy scout badge. Same goes for college. There is a very clear cause and effect relationship in many of the things we do in our young life. Then ... we graduate from college or grad school, and find ourselves out in the 'real world'. Suddenly, effort and determination are only part of the equation that leads to reward, because now the world isn't as insulated as it was before, or as predictable. Your responsibilities go beyond simply trying to improve yourself, and luck and circumstance play a role in the course your life takes. Sometimes, you try very little, or put in little effort, but you're at the right place at the right time and reap big rewards. Sometimes you work so hard you want to scream, and it seems no one notices, and you don't feel at all fulfilled. The element of measurable and certain reward disappears to an extent, and for some people (like me) attaining personal goals I set for myself in a game like EQ allows me to enjoy some measure of accomplishment, some level of control, and the personal satisfaction that comes with it on a weekly basis. [EQ, F, 35]

But another seduction of achievement in these environments is that it gives players a sense of empowerment that for some players is much harder to derive from real life:

First off, I am handicapped, and thus don't make real life friends easily. However, in EQ the 'playing field' for social interaction is leveled. I can act and say what I really feel like saying without the pressure I normally feel when around others. No longer am I just another 19 year old in college with an average future. Through sweat and blood I can become someone who wields great power, who has earned the respect of his fellows, and whose actions have a true impact on what goes on in the 'game'. I guess when it comes down to it, I feel as if I have accomplished more through my actions in EQ than I will ever have the opportunity to do in real life (sad but true). [EQ, M, 19]

Other players are motivated neither by other people nor the goals, but by the environment itself. What appeals to them is that you can step out of the real world and not have to deal with real-life issues for a few hours:

I just like the alter-reality. I was lucky to find a group of people (my guild mates and a few others), with whom I get along and can have amusing conversations. I find EverQuest to be a good way to relax and shed the daily troubles for a few hours. Honestly, I find this alter-world to be like a mind massage that lets me get back into the heat of real life struggle with rejuvenated energies. [EQ, M, 34]

I play Anarchy Online & EverQuest because it's an escape from the real world. No one complains about jobs or other meaningless things. It's a great stress reducer. I like that I can be someone else for a couple hours. [AO, F, 28]

I play the game because it is fun for me to play. When I get home from work or school, and I'm particularly stressed about something, it is fun for me to just jump on the computer and jump into EverQuest. It is a great stress reliever for me. The only real reason I keep playing is because I have a couple close friends that I can talk to a lot via EverQuest. I also am able to keep in touch with my brother through the game. The game itself, honestly, has gotten a little boring now, so I really cannot wait until World of Warcraft or EverQuest 2 comes out. [EQ, M, 17]

I enjoy playing the games because it is the perfect way to escape the mundane of everyday life. I find it exciting to become something that you aren't and live and experience a second life full of adventure and intrigue that I can be shared with many other people. [SWG, M, 22]

Other players are motivated by other people, but in a competitive sense:

I play the game for the challenge. In my opinion, it is far more challenging and fun to play with or against other people. In a video game, you can easily figure out the reactions of the program. With people, however, you can only be 40% sure of what they are going to do. The most appealing thing about the game is the challenge. I enjoy being challenged. I enjoy being beaten. I enjoy the twists and turns that are thrown at me. [SWG, M, 18]

For DAOC, the dynamic interplay of realm war and keep takes keeps me involved. I'm not so interested in victory; in fact, some of my most memorable moments revolve around heroic actions in defeat (I stood off 16 Midgarders alone for two whole minutes - they could hardly land a hit or a spell on me - and that allowed my group to escape.) Facing live opponents is far more interesting than facing a more predictable AI. [DAOC, M, 42]

There were many responses that wouldn't easily fit in one of the well-defined categories. For example, several players didn't focus on what motivated them to play the game, but instead compared it with other forms of entertainment available to them.

There's also the factor that I often find myself with nothing better to do; I get home from work about 1am, and of course my family is asleep. I'm typically wide awake, so playing EverQuest gives me a way to wind down, and it's a hell of a lot more entertaining than the crap they show on television after 1am... [EQ, M, 32]

Gaming is an interactive time sink. I don't find television entertaining, I can seek out things I find entertaining in the game world. The most appealing aspect of gaming is getting together with friends to explore and garner items. [DAOC, M, 29]

That's an easy answer. I have too much time on my hands. Day to day most single people get bored and end up spending hours in front of the Television. Sure they mow the lawn, clean the house, do laundry and then watch TV. I don't enjoy that or going out to clubs or sitting on the beach, they all lack appeal, so I play EverQuest, it surely beats watching paint dry. [EQ, M, 30]

Perhaps the most interesting answer submitted was the following entrepreneurial motivation – clearly a subset of the achievement motivation, but so novel that it deserved a separate mention.

Currently, I am trying to establish a working corporation within the economic boundaries of the virtual world. Primarily, to learn more about how real world social theories play out in a virtual economy. Secondly, to become rich and famous (in game). Finally, I'm trying to in some way effect the way MMORPGs are designed and played. This process is incredibly time consuming and assures that I will continue to log on daily to manage inventories and make sales. The most appealing aspect of the game is the open-ended player driven economy. Players in general seem to be stuck in a certain paradigm of how things are supposed to work. The idea of a corporate entity issuing stock and offering franchises and employment strikes them as odd. I'm not sure if this is because no one has done it before, or if it is too much reality in a game. At any rate, I appreciate that the limitations are more organic rather than being imposed by the game design. [SWG, M, 30]

A New Game Model: Bots, Nurturance and Solving the Grind

It's kind of ironic that EverQuest has just celebrated its 5th birthday, still going strong, and one might have imagined 5 years ago that we would have much better MMORPGs by now, but we don't. Almost every game that has come out since EQ has been an EQ-clone. Actually, what's more ironic is that EQ2's biggest competitor will be EQ itself. Notable exceptions (A Tale in the Desert, Sims Online) have struggled to gain a sizeable player base. In a way, everyone is waiting for something innovative to come along, but it's not clear whether anyone knows what that is.

Not that I think I know what the next big thing is, but the following is an idea that came to me after several weeks of playing Ragnarok Online. I'd like to briefly describe several interesting features of RO before moving on to describing my idea (impatient readers can skip ahead).

RO caught my attention because it uses 2D anime-styled characters instead of 3D pseudo-realistic characters. It overlays the character sprites on top of the 3D environment pretty convincingly. One benefit of this is that you don't walk into the city and lag at 1 fps (like in SWG). There are several unique game mechanic features in RO:

Transformations – There is something seductive about identity transformation on a very primal level. We are fascinated by metaphors of cocoons and butterflies, gray cygnets that become white swans, beasts that turn into princes. Of all the MMORPGs I have played (EQ, DAOC, SWG, RO), RO alone captures the seduction of transformation. Change is gradual in games like EQ and SWG, whereas in RO, you literally change appearances, abilities, and suddenly gain about 30-50% more hit and spell points twice in the course of the character's career (in the addition to the gradual improvements). The visual transformation paired with the sudden access to several lines of new skills is powerfully motivating.

Repeated Cycles of Rewards – Instead of having a linear level treadmill, RO does something very clever. You have a base level and a job level which advance independently. When you change jobs (from Mage to Wizard for example), your new job level goes back to 1 and suddenly you can make job levels very quickly again (allows acquiring new skill points). The rewards cycles in these games are based on well-known behavioral conditioning principles. It entices you with instantaneous gratifications up front, and slowly eases you onto a treadmill that takes longer and longer before you get a food pellet ... I mean level. So in RO, just when leveling gets slow, you get to experience the instantaneous gratification all over again. Just when you might have gotten bored of the treadmill, it becomes rewarding again.

There are two interesting sociological features of the game which I'm not sure are good or bad:

"Race"-less – There is only one race, which for all intense purposes might be called "anime".

Gender Enforced – Your characters can only be the gender you put down when you registered for the account. So you can't gender-bend.

Botting

Now here's the feature of the game I found most fascinating. RO has incredibly poor network security, which makes it very easy for players to download and use bots (AI scripts that pretend to be the game client and literally do the work for the player). Botting is actually a well-known problem in the game, with several maps known to be infested with bots. Bot scripts are fairly sophisticated. Users can control:

- which map the bot should travel to and stay on (given any starting location in the world)
- what monsters on the map should be attacked
- what loot should be picked up (to save encumbrance)
- switching to different weapons when fighting different monsters
- resting when HP/SP is low
- using certain spells, abilities or items given a complex set of conditions
- teleporting to a random spot when a crisis occurs (ie. mobbed)
- heading back to town to store loot when encumbrance max is reached
- avoid kill-stealing or loot-stealing from other players
- auto-responding to chat and PM's based on key words (ie. They can pass the Turing Test sometimes)
- disconnecting if a GM is spotted

Botting is perceived as a bad thing by Gravity (who owns the game) and by most players (because bad bots will kill-steal you), but in a weird way, bots fulfill a critical function in RO's twisted rare-item economy. Many highly-demanded items (ores, cards, slotted items) have very low drop rates to the point where if bots were not around to harvest them, many of these items would be several times more costly and difficult to buy.

Here's the aspect of botting that intrigues me. Sophisticated botters could script a tank bot (knight/assassin) for leveling a new mage, or script a buff bot (priest) for leveling a new melee character. One could imagine the AI becoming smart enough such that you could script both and let both run at the same time. Or what if you could script your own dungeon-crawling group? A collaborative botting model introduces several new themes:

Character –vs- Entourage: The focus on individuality can be seen in video games. Most games have you controlling one character at a time, or as an overseeing god-like power. What if you controlled interacting characters instead of single characters in MMORPGs?

Persistent Characters: Interestingly, the only thing not persistent about persistent worlds are the characters that inhabit it. Your character is gone when you log off. So much for persistence. Bots allow characters to be persistent, in fact making the world more persistent.

Removing the Grind: The key feature of bottled characters is that it takes the grind away from players while still engaging the player in the rewards cycle. The appeal moves to more of a nurturance model. You water your plant occasionally, and it keeps getting bigger. You don't need to keep watering and fertilizing your plant. That would be annoying. It allows the player to jump in the game when the game is actually interesting and lets the AI take over the grind.

But let's take one step back and imagine what the game would actually look like.

It Takes a Village: Let's say players start with a town with one or two characters at their control. These novice characters have the potential to level into a set of higher professions following RO's model. The only difference would be that there would be more crafting professions that were more sensible (don't require fighting to become a blacksmith or an alchemist). The goal of the game is to grow a large collaborative network of characters that complement each other and help the town grow.

Characters: Like in SWG, different characters complement each other well and need to work together to achieve larger goals. The difference here is that the player has to choose how to optimize his town according to his liking. Maybe he wants a more militaristic town that can take over other towns, or maybe he wants to be the merchant hub, or maybe the magic research hub.

Advancement: Apart from normal character leveling, we have two other ways of granting advancement to players. We can give them more novice characters to grow and we can give them more advanced botting scripts.

Control of Characters: Players can control the characters directly, but as they advance in the game, they gain AI scripts that allow them to automate their characters. Perhaps we would also build in several different areas of scripts such that certain players might choose to build great fighter bots while others build great harvesting/crafting bots. But in either case, players can choose to gain control of a character they want to play with.

Collaborative Botting: The complementary nature of character skills forces players to script collaborative bots that work together by themselves. In fact, this is where the real game is – how to optimize and get bots to do what you want by themselves. Players would create tank/healer pairs for hunting groups, harvester/bodyguard pairs for harvesting missions, and an elaborate production chain for mass-producing certain goods (for example, clay => bricks => wall enforcement, or ogre blood => red gems => spell research).

Focus on Strategy Not Grind: The semi-automation allows players to truly focus on the overall strategy of how they want their towns to develop as their village grows to about 20-30 bottable characters.

The Multiplayer Part: Different players collaborate or compete at a larger level now – two villages fighting over the same set of limited resources, or a fighter town that feeds resources into the manufacturing town and getting weapons in return. Diplomacy between multiple players becomes more complex and interesting.

A Battle Scene: Instead of controlling one character, imagine a player who is working with two other players to raid an orc city. They each have about 10 characters. One town will supply close-ranged fighters, while another will supply healers and mages, and the third will supply archers and fast cavalry. Many characters could be scripted to do basic tasks – like healing specific fighters, giving them priority over archers. We could also imagine a semi-automated group. The fighter town might have 8 bots that attack what 2 key characters attack – controlled by the player.

While You Sleep: In fact, the game makes it such that your village is working day and night even as you sleep or are at work. Your town is a living, breathing entity that persists in the world – harvesting raw

resources, manufacturing enforcements and weaponry, battling hostile invaders, all according to your plan. You could set alarms to alert you to anomalies if certain strange conditions appear – healing potions running out very quickly.

The Nurturance Model: There's something appealing about watching and being a part of a character's growth – watching them grow from fledglings into masters of their disciplines, but that aspect is actually independent of the grind itself to a large degree. People get attached to plants and animals even though they grow and go about their existence when you're not around them. Current game models try to get you bound to the grind (because the grind is what levels you up and grows your character), but that model severely cripples casual players. A nurturance model gives advantage to those who are clever, shrewd and are able to set up strong alliances, and not to someone willing to hack the same mob hour after hour, day after day. It hooks the player on the character itself rather than the grind process.

Potential problems and answers:

Run-away inflation? With a bottled economy, there is the danger of out-of-control inflation. This can be controlled by having a closed player economy where players are not selling large amounts of unwanted goods to NPC merchants. Because everyone has access to automated harvesting, there isn't a problem like in RO where some players have a lot more than others unfairly.

What about Socializing? This appears to be a very logistical and calculating game that at first glance seems devoid of socialization elements. But there is a lot going on at the inter-village level between players. We could also imagine many variations of non-combat oriented goals – a fashion tailoring village that produces unique clothing, an alchemy town that researches and sells high level spells, a ranger village where players can buy tamed horses for cavalry or exotic animals as pets, or towns where festivals are held.

Asynchronous Communication: At first glance, it may seem problematic that so many of the other people you would need to talk to have a good chance of not being logged on at the same time as you. This problem is solved by asynchronous communications like an in-game email system or a real-world IM system.

Bots are Bad: Because of the way bots are currently used, players think they can only do bad things like kill-steal you. But in fact, benevolent botters in RO could choose to set their bot to run around and heal or bless the players on a certain map. Indeed, we could build in altruism as a way to level up certain skills – like for priests who need to make a pilgrimage to another village and carry out priestly duties. The metrics and advancement requirements of a game are what guide players to do what they do. Like "A Tale in the Desert" or "There.com", if you get cool skills from helping out newbies, then players will help out newbies. Altruism can in fact be engineered by the game mechanics.

So the question is: What's your gut-feeling about this game? Would you want to play it? Would you add or change anything about it?

Achievement and Frustration in MMORPGs

The rewards cycle and the well-textured layers of goals (hunting, crafting, questing) combine to create an environment where the seduction of self-achievement may grow very strong. The ability to become stronger, more competent, more skilled and more valued on a gradual but predictable basis can be intoxicating. Players were asked whether they derived a larger sense of achievement in the game or in their real lives. About 20% of players felt that they derived a larger sense of achievement in the game when compared with their real lives. While there were no gender differences ($p = .48$), age was mildly negatively correlated ($r = -.14$, $p < .001$) with feeling more achievement from the game. Users who felt a larger sense of achievement in the game spend significantly more time in the game than players who felt a larger sense of achievement in real life.

Do you derive a larger sense of self-achievement in the game or in your everyday life? (N = 2375)		
	Percent	Mean Hours Per Week
A lot more in everyday life	38.0%	16.2
A little more in everyday life	20.3%	20.1
About the same	21.1%	25.1
A little more in the game	13.5%	26.1
A lot more in the game	7.0%	35.8

On the other hand, these games don't make it easy to advance in the higher levels, and advancement is often a path of trials. Thus, players were also asked whether they encountered more frustration and annoyances in the game or in real life. Overall, 22% of players indicated that they encountered more frustrations and annoyances in the game than in real life. There were no gender ($p = .94$) or age differences ($r = -.07$). Users who encountered more frustrations in the game do not spend any more time in the game than users who encountered more frustrations in real life. The only good predictor seemed to be whether the player was motivated to play to distress from real life ($r = .17$, $p < .001$). This makes sense because it is the users who want to relax who would be most frustrated by the annoyances of the game.

Do you encounter more frustration and annoyances in the game or in your everyday life? (N = 2375)		
	Percent	Mean Hours Per Week
A lot more in everyday life	29.0%	21.2
A little more in everyday life	23.5%	21.0
About the same	24.5%	22.7
A little more in the game	16.1%	22.1
A lot more in the game	6.9%	20.1

Finally, the two measures were not correlated ($r = .00$, $p = .93$), implying that whether a player derives more or less achievement in the environment has no bearing on whether they encounter more or less frustrations in the game when compared with real life.

The Seduction of Achievement in MMORPGs

The fairy tales we grow up with and our schooling system hold a particular vision of how people are rewarded and how goals are achieved in life. Goals and rewards are well-defined – the prince has to slay the dragon to marry the princess, or you need to write the alphabets three times before you get a sticker. Moreover, you will reach the goal if you put in enough effort – princes always defeat the dragon, and you can always get that sticker if you finish your work.

After 6 years of fairy tales and then 16 years of school, we are then exposed to the real world. In the real world, goals are seldom well-defined, More importantly, the amount of effort you put into something isn't guaranteed to get you any closer to your goal. Sometimes, you put in very little effort and hit the jackpot. Other times, you work week after week to get an incredibly small payoff. One of the disillusion of being an adult is that the framework of goals and rewards we learned the first 22 years of our lives suddenly stops working.

Unlike single-player and limited multi-players games, MMORPGs offer social rewards and achievements. High-leveled characters have social prestige, are perceived as powerful, and are valuable members in their guilds. More importantly, these rewards follow the framework that we learned as children. Levels are clearly defined goals. When you are given a quest, they tell you exactly what you need to do. And when you've done what they want, you get the sticker ... I mean level.

Achievement in MMORPGs is seductive because the goals are well-defined, the journey is well-defined, and the rewards are social and persistent. Games in non-persistent worlds destroy the illusion of achievement when you quit the game – your "achievement" has suddenly vanished, gone unrecognized, and become inconsequential. In an MMORPG, you accumulate what you have achieved in a character that is a part of a community that recognizes your power and competence. Your efforts and achievements in MMORPGs gain a consequential realism that other games do not provide because they are persistent.

Unlike the real world where effort does not translate into achievement, MMORPGs offer an environment where you know exactly what your effort is going towards and a good sense of how far you are from your goals. Unlike the real world where connections, chance and family background are what mostly determine your success, anyone can become rich, powerful, and admired in an MMORPG if they put enough effort into it. In a strange way, The American Dream – the belief that anyone can become successful if they work hard enough – does exist, but it exists in worlds like Norrath and Camelot.

Ranking Motivations For Play

As another step in exploring and fleshing out a way to assess motivations for playing, users were asked to rank the following seven motivations in terms of their relative importance in why they play MMORPGs. These motivations were previously identified using rating and factor analysis techniques (<http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/archives/000555.php>). Respondents ranked these seven items using a PHP-driven script that functioned as a dynamic visual aid allowing respondents to sort and reorder the 7 items:

- 1) Immersed in Fantasy World / Role-Playing / Being Part of a Story
- 2) Getting to the Next Level / Becoming Powerful / Achieving Goals
- 3) Competing with Other Players / Dominating or Beating Other Players
- 4) Escaping from Real World / Venting / Relieving Stress
- 5) Analyzing Game Mechanics / Making or Analyzing Tables or Charts
- 6) Being part of a Large group or guild / Team or Group Achievements
- 7) Meaningful conversations / Making good friends / Social or Support Network

Top and Second Ranking (N = 2375)			
	Rank 1 %	Rank 2 %	Total %
Fantasy	25.6%	19.0%	44.6%
Vent	23.2%	17.6%	40.8%
Achieve	18.1%	18.9%	37.0%
Social	16.0%	19.2%	35.2%
Group	8.6%	14.6%	23.2%
Compete	5.0%	4.8%	9.7%
Analyze	3.6%	5.9%	9.5%

Note. Thus, the 25.6% means that 25.6% of respondents ranked the fantasy element as the most important element.

Bottom and Second to Last Ranking (N = 2375)			
	Rank 6 %	Rank 7 %	Total %
Achieve	8.5%	2.7%	11.2%
Fantasy	8.8%	5.6%	14.4%
Social	9.7%	5.5%	15.2%
Vent	10.1%	10.5%	20.6%
Group	16.6%	6.2%	22.7%
Analyze	23.9%	29.0%	52.9%
Compete	22.3%	40.6%	62.9%

The “Analyze” element echoes Bartle’s Explorer type – which has never seemed to resonate with data from players, and the ranking data suggests that even if it does exist that very few players would be Explorers. Note that the “Bartle Test” (not created by Bartle btw) forces respondents to make dichotomous choices, and every answer gives you a score on one of the 4 types. Therefore, that instrument might actually be creating player types rather than assessing them.

Player Fatigue

Player fatigue is the flip-side of attachment to the game. The following survey questions were used to explore player fatigue:

- 1) Are you bored with the game?
- 2) How likely are you to quit the game in the next month?

For both, the response choices were 5 fully-labeled points on a unipolar scale. The correlation between the two responses was .69 ($p < .001$). The two were summed to create a player fatigue index for each respondent. Male players ($M = 4.20$, $SD = 2.01$) scored significantly higher on this index than female players ($M = 3.60$, $SD = 1.85$), $t(2348) = 5.18$, $p < .001$. Younger players scored higher than older players ($r = -.14$, $p < .001$). In other words, younger and male players have faster life-cycles than older and female players.

Because female players tend to be older (<http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/archives/000194.php>) than male players, an ANCOVA was performed, controlling for age, to make sure that the age difference wasn't driving the gender difference. The ANCOVA showed that gender was significant independent of age, $F(1,2330) = 14.2$, $p < .001$.