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The High-End Game

The high-end game is its own culture that most of us never have the chance to participate in. I think most casual players (and me included) conceive of high-end guilds as consisting of dedicated players who simply have more time to play. They are successful because they are willing to spend double or triple the amount of time that we spend. What follows is a perspective of the high-end culture from an insider who has led a high-end guild for about 3-4 years. The material presented is not meant as a description of all high-end guilds or the only way to succeed as a high-end guild, but rather as an example of how one high-end guild is structured and the experiences of their leader. What emerges from the interviews is a sense that the high-end game has its own culture that isn't merely quantitatively different from casual play. It's not simply that high-end guild members play more than casual guild members, but rather that they conceive of the game in an entirely different way.

All names given in this article have been altered to protect the identities of those involved. Talon has been the leader of a high-end guild for the past 3-4 years. The guild began in EverQuest and although it was not one of the earliest guilds to have formed on the server, it gained power quickly and was consistently the first guild on the server to kill many of the major named mobs after Shadows of Luclin was released (e.g., Tunare, Arch Lich, Avatar of War, High Priest of Ssra). Recently, they were the first to kill Ragnaros on their server in World of Warcraft. On that same day, Talon graduated with a master's degree in telecommunication management.

It's Not About Hours Played

My first conversation with Talon happened over AIM as he was sitting in front of 3 computers - one of them was logged on to WoW in Azshara waiting for Azuregos to spawn. I later found out that he was defending his master's thesis the next morning. That naturally led me to ask him how many hours he and his guild members put in each week. Talon's response was surprising.

People playing LOTS are no good. Super hardcore people are useless. What happens is they play loads and loads, then they gain lots of items. Then within 8-16 months, they take a look in the mirror and don't like what they see (someone who hasn't left the house for those months) and then they quit. They just plain vanish with all the gear they got.

In fact, Talon specifically tries to avoid recruiting hard-core players for that specific reason. These “burn-out” personalities in fact are looked upon as wasted investments and to be avoided at all costs.

So we’re actually very suspicious of people that play too much. Stable people who play enough are the best. It’s the best from a purely selfish point of view too - no wasted loot. We had such crash and burn people go through us, fleeing from state to state when debtors were catching up (we lost one hardcore because he had to flee the cops ... I mean come on).

For Talon, the key was finding people with stable lives and careers but who could “play enough”.

Discipline

Talon isolated discipline as the most important factor in the success of a high-end guild. As he put it,

If I said something, people needed to do it instantly and they did. You never argued, especially on raids. Like I said, the organization was military style. To be successful you have to be organized.

I pushed Talon on whether he perceived the guild structure as largely dictatorial. He reframed the issue in an interesting way.

Yes and no. We did vote on everything. Loot distribution was communistic really. Points were [given] for time spent but the guild leader got same amount of points per time as the newest recruit. So dictatorial like, say, a US military unit in a war, cut off from communications. If shit hits the fan, yes, they WILL follow the commands of the captain, but mostly because they know that if they don’t act in a cohesive fashion, they will lose. In other words, the power is given democratically, but wielded in a dictatorial way.

A Common Goal

Talon noted that having a common goal was also crucial to the success of the guild. When I asked him what that common goal was, his answer was simple - “To be the best”. And here, what Talon meant was distinctively different from the achievement-oriented motivations I was used to.

I mean to be realistic I’m a nobody in the greater scheme of things. No matter how good gear I have, people still won’t know. If I paint out some magelo or whatever, it’s meaningless really, but what people DO know are the guilds - “oh shit, the guild that first killed Ragnaros / Onyxia / Quarm / whatever”.

And this was the common goal - not “to be the best” per se, but “to be part of the best”. And in fact, individuality is subservient to this overriding goal. When Talon first mentioned that “sharing accounts is the norm”, I was intrigued. He then explained that it “allows for flexibility in time”. I was still confused and it was only when this practice of sharing accounts was framed under the notion of a common goal that it made sense to me.

They do not mind at all playing other characters. Their own character is nearly meaningless.

Talon and his guild members all shared in the common goal of advancing the interests of the guild. All individual interests were subservient to this goal. This was what made account sharing the norm. A character was merely the means to advance the interests of the guild. The primary attachment was not to the character you played, but to the guild you are a part of.

The Tension of Gender

Early on in our email exchange, I sensed that Talon did not favor female members. At first, I felt that this was perhaps due to the clash between the militaristic demands of the guild and the more relationship-oriented play-style of female gamers. When I asked Talon about this, he had an interesting explanation.

Coming from a VERY equal society and a family with a really strong mother in it, I found the whole situation with women strange. Well, women seem to like attachment more in the online environment and for all intents and purposes, an uber guild resembles military more than anything else.

Now there's a reason why military doesn't like relationships in it. The same reason applies to militaristic uberguilds - the suspicions of favouritism etc., not to mention women practically always aim for the top. This is not a critique as such. I mean it's quite understandable. In a healthy guild, the most charismatic, outgoing and smart people are leaders. I sure as hell would prefer them.

So the reason why Talon is hesitant on recruiting female members is because it inevitably leads to romantic tension in the guild.

They start wanting "protection" from whoever they're with. So typical of me to get tells like "she thinks you're being mean, and I agree with her (yeah sure you do)". Just made me sigh every time. Frankly, I prefer people who don't do that. Male students are the best.

It's important to make clear that Talon isn't presenting a sexist position. It's not the case that women are inferior players or can't function in a militaristic guild, but that when you have men and women in the same guild certain interactions become highly likely. And that dynamic has as much to do with the men as it does with the women.

A Function of Age?

Throughout our interviews, Talon consistently preferred younger players over older players, and he made several comments that younger players led the most effective guilds. When I queried him, he gave the following reason.

The interesting difference between me and the original 35 year old guild leader was that he always spent hours upon hours talking with people. He always made a point of "understanding" people's issues. I, on the other hand, was usually extremely direct with people. If you were talking nonsense I just told it to you, and ended up saying that if they didn't like it, there was nothing forcing them to be in the guild... but that I had to focus on the guild, and couldn't afford to play shrink to their teenage/middle-aged angst.

Frankly the whole thing drove me a great deal to the right. Coddling people gets you nowhere, except having to coddle them even more. If you just tell them to figure things out for themselves and be honest with them, you are likely to get quite a bit further than you'd get with coddling.

Pretty much every older leader started playing shrink when they should have confined themselves to the role of the leader. People started demanding more and more of their time, while I always made it clear that if you wanted answers from me, you should probably ask yes/no questions.

So for Talon, successfully managing a guild meant successfully avoiding becoming everyone's personal shrink and encouraging members to take care of their own personal problems.

Criteria For Membership

And finally, I asked Talon about the criteria used for evaluating applicants. These criteria help frame and summarize the aspects of the high-end culture that Talon has described above.

1. Thick skin. There'll be a lot of harsh language thrown around, and critique will be honest and sometimes even excessive. If you can't take it, just go away already. Crying about criticism will be the fastest way to get voted out.

2. Attendance. If you aren't there, what use are you supposed to be?

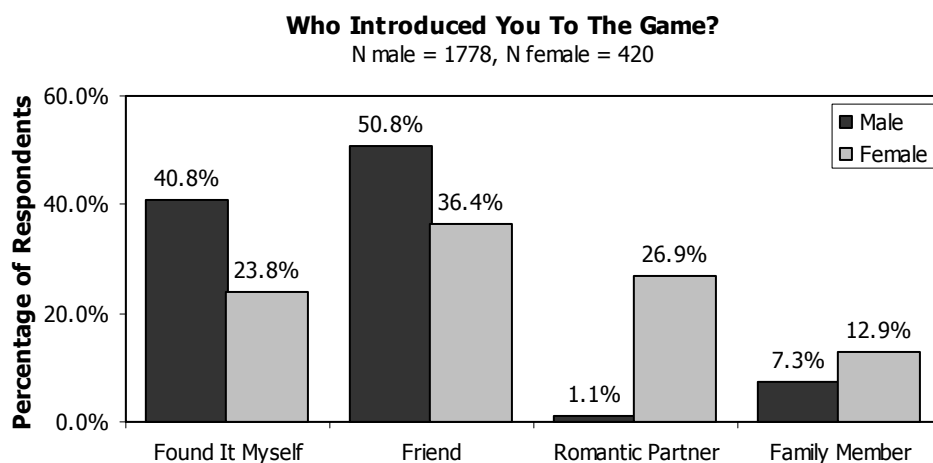
3. Attitude. If you can't adapt to the "guild comes first" thinking, you have a potential of ebbing, simply being less useful or theoretically even causing drama. This is basically a sliding scale from "extremely good" to "drama". This is often tested by having them take a lot mild abuse/neglect originally. We're not courting them, they are courting us, and they should be aware of this. If they stick to it for a month of being nearly ignored, they are the type of material we will like. Never giving up is the quality we find most appealing.

4. Skill. Usually people who fit the above criteria do pretty well here. Yet sometimes there are phenomenally skilled people who don't do that well in #2 and #3. For example right now we have one player who does really well in #1, #2 and #4, but has an attitude problem. This is sufficient for us to try to work on the attitude some, but our patience is not unlimited.

Talon's description of the culture of his guild show how the high-end game is not just about spending more hours in the game. It's about having a different conceptualization of what the game is altogether. The game is no longer about your character, or how good your character's gear is. It's not about how many hours you can jam in. In Talon's view, to succeed in the high-end game, the game has to cease to be about you.

Who Introduced You To The Game?

Men and women tend to be introduced to the game in very different ways. Men are more likely to have found the game by themselves or through a friend, whereas women are more likely to have found the game through their romantic partners or a family member.



The difference in being introduced by a romantic partner is quite striking (27% vs. 1%) and may in part explain why female gamers tend to be older than male gamers.

<http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/archives/000194.php>

Given that people with stable romantic partners tend to be older, the age difference may be driven by this difference in how men and women are introduced to the game. This also goes along with the finding that female gamers tend to play with a romantic partner.

Problematic Usage

There are several reasons why I prefer not to use the word “addiction”. One reason is that the word has gained a lot of baggage. It’s flung around by sensationalist media to portray MMOs in a particular light. But it’s also used casually by gamers as a way of saying how good a game is. Another reason is that as soon as we use the word addiction, some people will argue that addiction can only occur where there is a physical substance causing a physiological response of dependence and withdrawal. Using the word addiction mires us in a debate of reconciling physical addiction theories with non-physical addiction theories.

In other words, people constantly debate whether someone can be addicted to video games, but in the same way that no one will argue that some people eat unhealthy, no one will argue that some people spend too much time playing video games. And of course, this isn’t a notion of a threshold of hours played just as some people can eat as much as they want and never gain weight. It’s about how your time spent playing video games impacts the rest of your life. Some people - like college students on vacation or retirees - have all the time in the world to play. Their game-play largely doesn’t impact their real life obligations or relationships. Problematic usage is more about how your game-play begins to negatively impact your obligations and responsibilities.

And while there's a lot of work that deals with defining and trying to measure this problematic usage, there isn't very much work on explaining what it is about video games and the people who play them that leads to problematic usage. After all, it doesn't happen to everyone. In fact, I know a lot of people in real life who think MMORPGs are the most boring video games out there. And that means that whatever is causing problematic usage can't be entirely about these games. Because if that were the case, then either everyone or no one would exhibit problematic usage. In other words, it's got to be something about the people playing them as well.

There's another stumbling block when people talk about online gaming addiction. It makes it easy to believe that there's just one kind of addiction - that there's a certain way that causes it to happen and that once it happens all the addicts are alike. And that you can avoid addiction if you follow these steps, or that you can resolve your addiction by following these guidelines. This is part of the problem with using the framework of physical addiction because physical addictions have well-known physical causes. It encourages us to think and talk about video games "addiction" in a certain way. But given the variation in why people play MMORPGs, it's not clear at all that there's just one underlying reason for problematic usage.

The survey data presented here sheds light on these two questions: 1) What about MMORPGs and their players lead to problematic usage? and 2) Is there a dominant pathway to problematic usage? And I have another trick up my sleeve. I can answer these two questions without ever having to categorize players as problematic users or not. Here's what I did. I drew from existing measures of online problematic usage that centered on dependence, withdrawal and negative impact on real life obligations and relationships. The survey items used were:

- Do you spend more time than you think you should playing the game?
- How difficult would it be for you to limit your playing time?
- How agitated do you get if the servers go down unexpectedly?
- How often do your friends or family members complain about your game play behavior?
- Has your work/school performance suffered because of your game play?
- How much of your happiness in life currently is derived from playing the game?
- Have your personal relationships suffered because of your game-play?

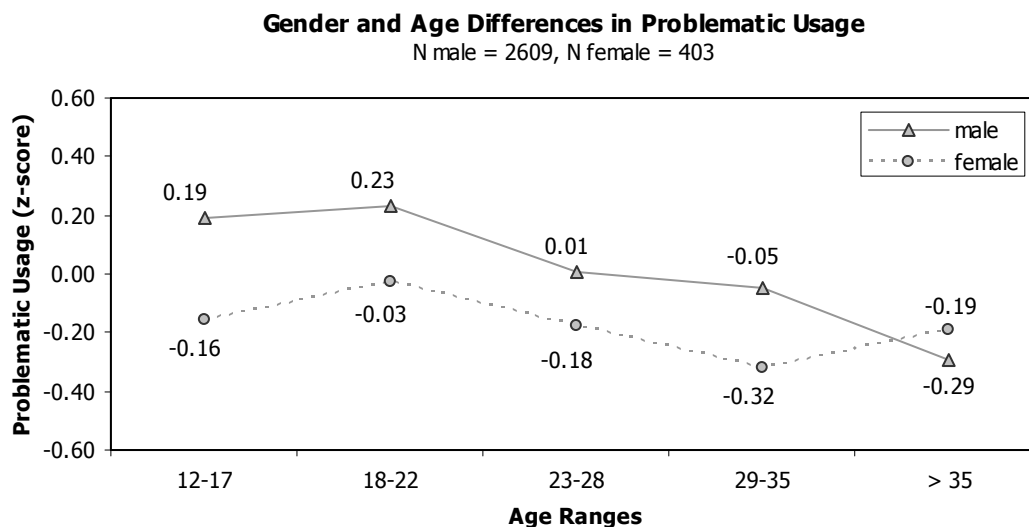
A factor analysis showed that all these items loaded onto a single factor implying that they are measuring the same underlying construct. A problematic usage score was calculated for every respondent based on a weighted sum of their responses to the items. I then ran a multiple regression with the motivation components (<http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/archives/001298.php>), gender, age and hours played per week as the predictors. The multiple regression was significant at $p < .001$ with an adjusted R-square of .33 (a good model with strong predictors). The best predictor of problematic usage was the escapism subcomponent (Beta = .31, $p < .001$), followed by hours played per week (Beta = .27, $p < .001$) and then the advancement subcomponent (Beta = .18, $p < .001$).

In other words, the people who are most likely to exhibit problematic usage are those who are purposefully using the online environment to escape their real life problems. They are playing to avoid thinking about their real life concerns. Another set of people who are likely to exhibit problematic usage are those who are driven to advance and achieve within the game. They are hooked on the rewards cycle,

accumulating resources, currency and rare items. We know that these are not the same group of people because the two motivations are largely uncorrelated ($r = .13$).

With regards to the two questions we had, the data suggests that there are two pathways that are highly correlated with problematic usage - escapism and achievement. The escapism component is more about the mindset of the people playing, while the achievement component is both about the goal-driven nature of the player as well as the rewards mechanisms provided by the game. In either case, the data suggests that models of problematic usage need to consider both internal and external factors, but also that they need to take account of the different reasons players exhibit problematic usage. There is no single thing about MMORPGs that causes problematic usage and knowing this helps us develop different ways to help people who are exhibiting problematic usage.

Gender and age differences were also analyzed. Male players were significantly more likely to exhibit problematic usage than female players. Players between the ages of 18-22 are the ones most likely to exhibit problematic usage.



The Problems of Loot

Loot is a constant source of tension both for players from the same guild on a raid as well as for pick-up groups. Here are stories from players that illustrate the varied ways in which loot can cause problems in the game.

In most loot drops, players use an automated random number generator provided by the game to decide who receives the drop. The problem is in deciding who gets to make a roll. After all, not everyone can use the drop. The story below illustrates an even stickier point. What if the some players can “make better use” of an item?

The closest I've come to real 'loot drama' is when a couple of my guildies and I (they a Shaman and a Warrior, I a Priest) all rolled on a particularly sweet mace from one instance. Initially, the

other two objected to my rolling; after all, I mostly do the healing rather than melee, so they thought that they could put it to better use. I pointed out that, when I either run out of mana or am soloing with no one to keep the mobs off me, I need a good melee weapon as a backup. While it's true that my melee DPS is less critical than theirs, it's still important; furthermore, both of them can wield other, better weapons, whereas I'm stuck with maces, staves, and daggers. I won the item, by the way. [WoW, M, 23]

In WoW, the Enchanting profession creates a unique problem which the following player describes well. What happens if the drop isn't going to be equipped?

In World of Warcraft, there's a crafting profession called Enchanting. Whereas other professions require gathering resources like metal or plants or leather, Enchanting 'disenchants' found items into elemental parts, and uses those parts to imbue other items with better powers. The better the disenchanted item, the better the elemental parts they receive. I've been in 'roll if you can use it' groups with Enchanters, and often they will roll for everything, including items not usable by their class, arguing that they can disenchant those items for their crafting profession. This can cause some hard feelings when the Mage Enchanter keeps winning two-handed axes and mail armor that could be well used by other characters in the group. If asked, some Enchanters will agree to only roll on class usable items, but some will get obstinate and claim they have the right to roll on everything. I tend to either boot that player if I'm leading the group, or leave the group myself in those cases. [WoW, M, 21]

Loot problems intensify in guilds because of the sustained nature of the transactions. The following story from Anarchy Online is a common scenario where one player feels he deserves more in the face of what the guild policy states.

My Anarchy Online guild got into the habit of raiding 'Pocket Bosses' when the Shadowlands expansion came along. Bosses were spawned if you found their 'pattern', which were made up of multiple components and took several players to assemble. However, it was often one person who would find the individual pieces through hours of single-minded hunting. Being highly ranked in the guild, I wrote a cursory loot policy on our forums, encouraging the distribution of loot in the most equal way possible, giving priority to those who would benefit the most from a drop. Feedback was encouraging, and I cheerily anticipated our first Pocket Boss raid; patterns on this occasion were being supplied by a single dedicated player, Bas.

Upon distributing the first of the raid's drops, my initial enthusiasm quickly melted away when Bas became noticeably upset with the looting policy. Pocket Boss loot sold for very appreciable sums of credits, and Bas wanted more than a few of the drops in return for his hard work. This idea was at odds with the loot policy that had been discussed, and our gathering immediately became uncomfortably tense. I hurriedly attempted to reach a compromise, but something had broken between us. For the rest of the evening, Bas would grudgingly and hesitantly voice his desired portion after several requests, and I would attempt to distribute the remaining loot to those who could use them. The guild eventually created a more polished plan that incorporated what had been learned, but the tension between Bas, and I, the creator of the original draft, never fully eased. This event showed me that loot problems are inevitable- I encouraged feedback for the

loot policy before the raid, but many did not respond. Dilemmas like these will always be with us, so I've become more tolerant towards such events, and try to sooth them when they do arise. [AO, M, 18]

The issue of seniority also emerges in more long-standing guilds.

There was one time though where I did a raid and a rogue set item dropped. I was a level 58 rogue at the time playing WoW. The level cap is 60. It was a guild raid. There were 2 other rogues there who were eligible to roll on the item. Another rogue had won a blue item already. I rolled the highest out of us three but the other two rogues were level 60. I had just joined the guild a few days prior and many of the rogues were claiming seniority over such a drop. I didn't say anything and left it up to the guild leader to decide. After much talk on vent (or so I was told after by a friend of mine.) The guild leader decided I should receive the item. Apparently almost everyone except the guild leader was against me but the leader stuck to the rules and said until they established seniority loot rules he would have to go by the current rules they were using which was just a roll. Many of the rogues were angered by this decision because they had been in the guild for a couple months and all of a sudden I was in for a couple days and got an item they have been trying to get for a long while. [WoW, M, 16]

See also <http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/archives/000468.php?page=3> for other problems of loot distribution within guilds.

And perhaps the most amusing story of all. The loot problems that emerge when you play with your mother-in-law.

I often play (WoW) with a close RL friend of mine and we often share horror stories of groupings gone bad. He told me of a raid on the Scarlet Monastery--an instanced dungeon for middling high players. He was together with his fiancée and her parents, who all play the game, as well as a guild mate. Now, my friend is a paladin and uses melee weapons; his father-in-law-to-be is also a paladin. His intended's mother, however, is a hunter who uses primarily ranged weapons. Going through the instance, they were following the traditional and understood policy of taking turns looting (game-enforced) and rolling on green (magical) or better items.

One thing to understand is that my friend tends to be an honorable person, and perhaps a bit too giving for his own good. That said, one thing that will piss him off is for a person to roll on an item (bind-on-pickup in particular) that they can't use. That night, his fiancée's mother, the hunter, rolled on every single BoP melee weapon she could find, and won a good portion of them. Her reasoning was that since my friend already had a weapon (it was quite crappy) he couldn't possibly need any of those, while she, however, needed the money.

In the days afterwards, I got to listen to much ranting about that. My friend tried to state the problem politely to her, and his fiancée, who understood the problem, tried to talk to her mother, but she wouldn't listen. My friend (who was highest level and the party leader) could very well kick his future mother-in-law from the group but with some serious RL complications. So, he put up with it and grumbled for the next week and resolved to in the future not go on raids with her (he's

already broken this--he can't refuse when his girl asks him to join them). His fiancée talked to her mother about looting and apparently she seems to be a bit better, but I know that it is a source of stress for my friend. [anon]

Playing Together

A lot of MMO gamers play with someone they know in real life. For example, 60% of female gamers and 16% of male gamers play with a romantic partner. 40% of female gamers and 35% of male gamers play with a family member. As you can imagine, playing with someone you know can be both a good and bad thing. Here are stories that cover many different aspects of that game-play.

Enhances Game-Play

One dominant theme was that playing with someone you know in RL enhances game play. It simply makes the game more fun to know who you're playing with.

I regularly play online games with my husband. I find that playing with someone nearby (in voice range) is a great asset for online gaming. Knowing my husbands play style and him knowing mine, makes all the difference in our game enjoyment. We know what to expect from each other and rely on those things. Being able to play together keeps our relationship strong and playful, both in game and in real life. We always have something to talk about...the day to day RL grind and that ugly monster we had to deal with in game. =D [ATITD, F, 44]

Jason from New Orleans describes how his EQ experience was enhanced after his best friend started playing.

When my best RL friend started playing EQ, the game suddenly became a whole lot more enjoyable. We knew each other pretty well, so we already had a really trusting relationship. We really worked well, he as an ogre warrior, I as a dark-elven cleric. We played together all the time, though eventually he started to outlevel me. Since we saw each other all the time in real life, though, it wasn't a big deal. He would just make new a character, get them high enough level to group up with me again, outlevel me, and start all over again. We went through four characters like that, hehe. Warrior, rogue, druid, shadowknight... I remember grouping with all of them with my cleric, and it was always a lot of fun. I've had some good online friends in EQ, some of whom I still chat with, but grouping with my RL buddy was always the most fun I'd had in it. [EQ, M, 23]

Too Much Obligation

But it's not always fun to play with someone you have an existing relationship with. Several players commented on the intrusion of obligation and how playing a game can feel more like baby-sitting.

At first playing with people I knew in real life was fun, but it soon became an issue of me being the higher level player coming to the help of my friends. It grew to the point where I couldn't play my high level character half the time because I had to help them all the time. It even stressed the

friendship so much that I have very little contact with some of them, and absolutely no contact with others. [EQ, M, 25]

I briefly played with my little cousin in the beta for Lineage many years ago. It was terrible, because I always felt as if it were my duty to make sure he was always getting adena, and the right weapons, and the right spells, and on and on. I don't want to play games to just have another outlet for the responsibilities i have in real life with the same people. [CoH, M, 19]

Keeping in Touch - A Space to Work on Something Together

For many, the MMO provides a space to keep in touch with a friend or family member who lives somewhere else. The MMO space is distinctively different from email, IM or the phone because you can't collaborate and do things together in those mediums. What the MMO provides is a space to not only spend time together but to work on something in common.

I've played online with a few friends I've known in real life on many separate occasions, mostly in high school, when some fellow students and I would get together online after school. Most recently, I've been getting together in a MMORPG with a very close friend of mine who moved recently. It gives us an opportunity to still 'see' each other and be able to do things together, unlike just chatting (either on the phone or online) where we can't interact on the same level. Being able to 'see' one another and then go hunting or hang around town feels much closer to getting together in real life than talking on the phone or e-mailing one another does. [Realm Online, M, 23]

Ryan is a grad student in legal philosophy from Toronto. For him, playing an MMO with a good friend reminds him of them terrorizing IRC chat rooms together when they were young.

the playing experience was a lot more fun. my friend and i live far apart, so the ability to contribute to a 'project' together was a great way to reinforce our relationship. working together was easy and the play experience more fun because we both know what the other likes, finds amusing, etc. what did happen was that our real life relationship was strengthened somewhat because we had a shared experience. notably, the same used to happen to us when we were younger and would 'terrorize' IRC chat rooms. [Vendetta, M, 26]

I play MMO's with my fiancée. I'm a graduate student on the west coast, and he lives on the east coast. It's a way for us to do things together. In game, we were much the same as out of the game. I think it helped the relationship, because it was more 'personal' contact than through phone calls, email, or some sort of instant messaging program. [DAoC, F, 29]

Brought Us Closer

For others, the game-play strengthens existing bonds by providing another shared source of entertainment as well as ways for people to build trust through working together.

I play almost every day with my real life boyfriend (soon to be husband). We work very well together in game and it makes for a great playing experience. Knowing each other (as well as being in the same room together) makes it easier to play an MMO because you know how each other speaks, and this means less typing in game, which can slow you down sometimes. No in game experiences have changed our relationship, if anything we are closer because we share something together that we both enjoy. [UO, F, 22]

I play with my boyfriend. We 'dork out' together, side by side on our respective computers. Gaming is considered to be quality 'us' time. During game play, there's a lot of high emotions, yelling and screaming. But we value the game time because it brings us closer together. And it's a lot more fun if you can coordinate efforts verbally (instead of through the chat window). It's important for couples to have a common activity that they participate in on a regular basis. Our common interest is gaming. Actually, I don't think I would play if it weren't for him, but he plays regardless. [AO, F, 23]

I've played with a work colleague, that I sat beside most days and enjoyed that. Probably brought us closer together and we are good friends rather than colleagues now. Also played with my wife for a while, which was very enjoyable as I was partaking in something I enjoyed with the person I most wanted to be with. [EQ2, M, 39]

Highlights Existing Conflicts

But playing together means making decisions together and personality differences are magnified in MMO spaces because so much of the game play revolves around reacting to and acting upon something that happens. And playing with someone you know can become more of a struggle.

Gaming with my boyfriend in an MMO was a really enjoyable and enlightening experience. Knowing each other very well in real life made it easier in my opinion to play together. The two relationships were separate (real and virtual). I noticed many of the ways we're different when playing together. I for example love to help others and be part of a team, he'd rather just get xp and levels and items and very much enjoyed player killing and was usually rude or mean to others in the game. It was a different side of him I had never seen, he's very different online. He has quit playing and I continued, it sometimes puts a strain on our relationship, but usually we're fine. He plays other games now, even though we're gaming a lot we're always in the same room and talk and laugh a lot, and still love each other very much. [EQ, F, 20]

I currently play with an ex-colleague. My colleague and I lost contact with each other after I left my job because our lives had taken different directions. I started up an account on EverQuest II and called my colleague and told him about it. That day he signed up and now we play together almost every night and even talk on the phone again. I'd say we're as close now as we were when we were working together. Since he always needs to be the best at everything, playing with him can be difficult at times. He plays often and is motivated by gaining experience and levels. His goal is always to be the highest level character in the game. I like to play multiple characters and find enjoyment in doing quests, helping others, chatting, role-playing, etc. His character (he concentrates on one at a time) will surpass mine in levels and we end up splitting up in the game.

He doesn't care to slow down to wait for my character to catch up to his unless he needs my character to help his character with something. [EQ2, F, 28]

My boyfriend and I have played many MMORPGS together and, in my opinion, the experience is always a poor one. We each have different playing styles: I get frustrated by how he always wants to group with me (sometimes I like to play alone), and he gets annoyed when I recreate my character (which I tend to do frequently), causing him to lose an equal-leveled partner. [CoH, M, 22]

For others, the MMO space highlighted existing conflicts in a relationship in unexpected ways.

I play with my husband and many of my old high school friends often. My relationship with my husband has made it a lot easier to play together--we get along really well both in game and out of game. However, the game has brought out conflicts within my group of friends. The conflicts--mostly having to do with social class and monetary status--have continued into the game, amplified and reflected within the game. One member of our group of friends, for example, stumbled largely by luck into a high-end raiding guild that helped him get a lot of very nice loot. This became a real sore point for some of my friends, and it became clear that they had always seen this person as having unfair class advantages from his family all our lives. So I would say gaming didn't change our relationships at all (except make it possible to play together scattered all over the world), but it added a new, symbolic way for us to play out the psychological dramas always lurking in our real lives too. [EQ, F, 35]

It All Spills Over

Just as the good things carry over into real life, so do the bad things. It's hard to contain disagreements and fights that happen in the virtual space and keep them there.

Often my character would get more loot and/or responsibility than my husband during raids. This would cause a rift between us in real life. Also, I would often find myself getting on to my husband for not being very skillful. He would break me, run up on the puller etc. It would embarrass me in front of my guild mates...resulting in either me silently resenting him or me giving him a good tongue thrashing about not paying attention. [EQ, F, 27]

Tamara, an ESL teacher in Austria, ran a guild with her roommate and describes the good and bad sides of that.

In some respects playing with my roommate was excellent. We ran a guild and between us were able to talk about things inside and outside the game. Unfortunately the bad side was that disagreements didn't always end in the game, and often carried through to affect the atmosphere in the house. He would do some utterly stupid things sometimes, and I'm sure vice versa. [AO, F, 25]

For a few people, the conflicts that emerged from the game play had a significant negative impact on their RL relationship.

I started playing EQ in order to spend time with my then boyfriend (who I lived with) Initially, it was a good experience, but as time went on and my characters leveled faster than his, playing together was more irritating than anything else. He was intensely jealous that I excelled more than he in a game that he had been playing much longer. We had separate friends in EQ and he grew jealous of my online friends. Ultimately the game that I had started playing to spend time with him became a huge downfall in our relationship. He began to accuse me of spending more time with my EQ buddies than with him, that I cared more about them, etc.. [EQ, F, 29]

I had a real life friend playing on the same server as I did on EverQuest. It was neither good or bad, but we had a lot of arguments. He didn't know the game as well as I did, even though he started first, so he disagreed with me a lot. I also lend him money every so often, but he did not focus on repaying back to me. In a way, it loosened the relationship [DAoC, M, 18]

At first, my wife and I started to play SWG to do something together. Unfortunately we only opened one account, so she had a toon on one server and I had one on another, therefore this rarely happened. Furthermore, with her being more outgoing and social than I, she developed friendships more rapidly and was invited to do more interesting things, thus leveling her toon much faster than I did mine. This led to her getting more and more of the playtime, until I hardly played at all and she played VERY frequently. It has caused strain on our marriage and I have since developed a resentment for something I initially really enjoyed playing. [SWG, M, 34]

A co-worker of mine drew me in to playing Asheron's Call. Since we sat next to each other at work and both became intensely absorbed in the game rules, mechanics and adventures we actually spent a good portion of our work days discussing, creating charts, planning quests, and mapping out careers for the game. In-game we enjoyed a lot of teamwork, we pooled our resources together and both became experts on the game. His real life bipolar personality and high stress level drove him to take the game a little too seriously, and it carried over to our work environment, which turned very sour. Although he quit the game, I still had to deal with him at work and my only escape from him was when we were all laid off. This story is odd to me because normally you can just squelch a grief player in-game or move to a different server, but in this case the caustic 'virtual' personality plagued me in real life. [EQ2, M, 36]

What Do Your Virtual Actions Say About You?

Another kind of spillover that occurs doesn't derive from an existing personality difference that results in a conflict but sometimes players feel the game forces them to choose against people they know in real life. The problem is that your virtual decisions impact your real life.

"Witkin" is an IT director who works in the Nevada casino industry. He played EQ with a co-worker but decisions he made in EverQuest played out in the real world.

I was introduced to EverQuest by a co-worker. I was the Director of the department in which he worked, but we had become friends. I became very interested in EQ and took time outside of the

game to research quests, skills, and the like. After a few months my own knowledge of EQ was greater than that of my friend, and my main character had surpassed his highest level toon.

The EQ world can be social or solitary depending on how you choose to play, and I had developed an in-game reputation for being knowledgeable of my class, and a reliable player all around. That reputation resulted in my being invited to join a well-respected guild. This created tension in the real life relationship with my co-worker. I couldn't invite him to the guild, and while I liked him as a RL friend, I wasn't fond of his play style. Eventually we stopped hanging out much in RL, and he started alternate characters to avoid interacting with me in-game. There was a definite, tangible effect on my real life friendship with that person based on how we choose to play a video game. [EQ, M, 33]

2 of my friends where basically really sucky at playing games and thus I had them removed from the guild. This obviously caused some friction IRL but luckily not so much as our friendship ended. I used the analogy of 'Michael Jordan doesn't have all of his RL friends playing on the same team as them' to justify this. I guess it boils down to whether or not you think that a RL friendship is enough of a reason to make your OL gaming experience less fun that it could be. [WoW, M, 30]

A Stage For Resolution?

But in the same way that the MMO space can magnify existing personality differences, they can provide the stage on which those RL tensions can be resolved because the roots of those tensions are clarified and laid out. The play space can become a space where RL tensions are “played” out and resolved.

Constance is a graduate student in theology from Wisconsin. Here she describes how playing together reshaped her relationship with a close friend.

I played the game with a romantic partner who has since become just a friend. In fact, we were romantically involved for only a short time, our friendship is more significant. We have played together now for 3-4 years. For the first couple of years (as both romantic partners and friends) we fought in-game CONSTANTLY, in a way that we did not fight in real life. It was so maddening.

He had played the game since creation date, I started two years in. He knew everything and he was very bossy and controlling and it made me insane. (Not to mention how many times he lead me to my death.) I would get more furious playing the game with him then I think I had ever gotten in real life. I am typically very mild, but he made me feel like a piece of luggage and I would get so mad that my eyes would water and I would have to log out. Often when I logged in I hoped he wasn't on.

I kept making chars and not giving the names to him. It baffled me. 'It's only a game,' I would tell myself. But I felt like a puppet. Or a disgruntled 50s housewife. I felt like I did not have a char, I was just an extension of his char. It speaks to the immersion level of the game, because I was truly upset on a personal-identity level. What is interesting, is that we don't fight at all anymore. We still fought for some time after ceasing to be romantically involved and only being friends, so I don't think that was it.

I honestly believe that we both changed in RL because of this experience. I learned not to get so upset if I'm not in complete control and don't always know everything about what is going on. And he learned how to be co-operative and not controlling, and how to communicate rather than dictate. Now there is no one I'd rather game with, and I don't have as much fun playing when he isn't on. I think the in-game arguing, though it never occurred to the same level outside of the game, was an intense version of something that existed in real life, but was not as clearly seen in real life. The game situation heightened tensions that were more muted in real life. Mild communication problems in real life became extreme in the game. [EQ, F, 34]

Roles and Windows

Oftentimes, the game space allows people we know to take on roles that differ from their roles in real life. Some players commented on how MMOs allowed them to see people they knew in a different light. The MMO experience allowed them to rethink the predefined roles they were used to seeing each other in.

I play with 3 other family members. It is a BLAST! The advantages in having all of us in the same room when we are all playing together are numerous. Outside of the game it is a fun topic of conversation and very much like having a hobby we all do together. It has also given me the opportunity to see my family members in different roles from those one usually sees around the dinner table. [EQ, F, 49]

In the real world my grandson is a fairly silent, somewhat withdrawn, boy who acts much younger than his 12 years; inside the game his characters are outgoing and verbose. In the real world he hides his intelligence and asserts that he is uninterested in most things most of the time; his ingame attitude is one of immense curiosity -- he's discovered things about some of the zones within hours of his first visit to them that some long time players don't know. In game he values loyalty and fair play very highly; out of game he seems unaware of the concepts. He regularly tries to help characters who are lower level than he is by communicating either out of character or using tells. e.g. he said to me during one game, 'you med for a while Nana' and went zipping off, up the hill and out of sight; on returning he explained that he'd seen another character that was 'green' going somewhere 'over his head'. [EQ, F, 58]

Brian is a system admin from Maryland who works on a military base. Here he first describes his surprise at his wife's more extraverted personality in the game and then how that allowed them to work on bringing that confidence into the real world.

I used to play online MMORPGs with my wife. I found that while she tended to be more restrained and submissive in real life, out in the virtual world she was a good deal more confident in herself and in what her character could do; it was as though all the concerns she had regarding her abilities in the real world were left behind and she was free to be more like her real self.

It's perhaps a little sad to admit, but prior to seeing her express those traits, I had considered her personality quite limited due to her shyness and lack of confidence. My role as a husband was

part equal and part superior; I made the decisions for our relationship, I decided what we would do for dinner, I took care of things and acted as much parent as spouse.

When I saw her start to show confidence in-game I started giving her real world reminders of her other personality. In retrospect I could have taken steps to build her confidence and help change her personality around without the game as a motivating factor and sandbox, but sadly I probably would not have tried -- it was knowing that she had the potential that in turn caused my change in approach.

She gained a lot of confidence in herself. Instead of being a quiet and uncertain woman, she now goes out with friends, enjoys karaoke, has worked a couple of jobs (previously she was afraid to go to interviews!). [FFXI, M, 25]

The MMO space can be many things for a relationship. It can create conflicts that spill over into the real world. It can become a stage where differences become magnified and conflicts escalate. It can be a window into parts of other people that we've never seen in real life. And most interesting of all, they can be catalysts of change by highlighting those differences and nuances in people who we already know and helping us think about them in entirely different ways.