

# The Daedalus Project

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## Yi-Shan-Guan

There's been a lot of talk about gold farmers and RMT (real money transfer) lately. The part that both fascinates and frustrates me is not the gold farming itself, but the stories we're telling about what's going on. We tell stories to make sense of the world. And these stories use shared experiences to make sense of novel events, but they inevitably emphasize certain elements while sidelining other equally meaningful elements. In this article, I want to describe the story that we usually tell and hear about gold farmers as well as re-readings and alternatives to that story. My goal is not to justify what gold farmers do, but rather to complicate the typical story we tell about gold farming.

### What's the Problem?

Gold farmers are typically seen as problematic for several reasons. The following player articulates the key problems using his own experiences in the game.

I have found that they will try to drive you out of the area either directly or indirectly by training monsters on you, or flagging themselves and trying to get you to click on them.

Farmers have a profound downward effect on a server economy by vastly increasing the supply of certain 'rare' items. They also prevent regular players from farming their own items/materials. They make it much harder to play the market ...anything you find, they have already found 10 of.

In short, I find farmers to be a very severe problem that really breaks immersion in the games, and I wish that game companies would take stronger actions on confirmed farmer accounts.

[WoW, M, 30]

Thus, gold farmers are perceived to create two main problems. First, they harass normal players. And secondly, they ruin the economy over time.

## If it ain't English, it's gotta be Chinese

While news articles that have dealt with gold farmers have implicated workers in Romania, Tijuana, and Indonesia (<http://www.1up.com/do/feature?cid=3141815>), the belief that the majority of, if not all, gold farmers are Chinese is quite pervasive. The stereotype surfaces in many forum posts. On the official forums for World of Warcraft this past summer, one thread was titled "Chinese people make me mad". Another thread countered with the title "Stop calling people Chinese farmers". Posts such as the following reflected the general sentiment:

Hmm every farmer who sells gold and such on my server are Chinese, not sure how to go about this but the market is incredibly huge for Asians and especially Chinese to farm gold in these types games for the so called real life job where they are paid 15 cents an hour to farm gold or somewhere around that.

They're all Chinese and they all farm. Case... freaking... closed

And even players who are hesitant at applying the racial stereotype are very aware of its existence.

Gold farming is prohibited on World of Warcraft, but it seems to be a phenomenon that many focus on lately. Most specifically, players in the US have begun to focus blame for gold farming on Chinese players. [WoW, M, 20]

Other players make the link more explicit with imagery (<http://goldfarmer.ytmnd.com/>). Of course, this stereotype holds not just for World of Warcraft but for other MMOs as well. For example, Constance Steinkuehler's presentation of Final Fantasy XI showed these same sentiments among FFXI players <http://website.education.wisc.edu/steinkuehler/papers/SteinkuehlerSoP2004.pdf>.

The extensive application of this stereotype becomes quite striking in certain cases. For example, the following French-Canadian player recounts an encounter in the game.

I'm French Canadian and it happen to me to answer in French to get rid of moron.

**So there is this guy:** "can I get gold, I will send it back to you by mail, I want to buy an epic"

**Me:** "pardon je ne parle pas anglais!"

**Him:** "WTF hey do you have GOLD"

**Me:** "Vraiment desole, je ne comprends pas!"

**Him:** "I'll report you, f\*\*\* farmer, china FARMER are the suckx!"

Other players explained their own perspectives in the following way.

Usually, they do not speak English though, and I have no knowledge of Chinese languages. And while I realize that I am stereotyping gold farmers as Chinese, it is borne out by my experiences with them. [WoW, M, 34]

I hate to stereotype all gold farmers as Chinese, but the ones I've run into really did seem like they weren't at all competent with the English language (though to be fair, that describes a fairly large chunk of the population, especially on the PvP servers). [WoW, M, 23]

### **The Pestilence Trope**

With the Chinese stereotype firmly in place, a familiar trope comes into play - the association between Asia and diseases. The Asian flu pandemic of 1957, and the more recent Asian bird flu crisis and SARS crisis all tie diseases to Asia repeatedly in a way that are seldom tied to Western countries and regions (except perhaps the British mad cow outbreaks). Margaret Cho highlights this trope with her parody of SARS:

I got back from Toronto, where they had a severe outbreak of SARS - you know, Severe Asian Racism Syndrome. I was in the airport and there were these big snowboarder guys and they had white masks around their necks, and as soon as they saw me, they put their masks on. So I just went "\*cough, cough, cough\* You wanna egg roll?" (from Margaret Cho, Revolution, 2003)

But this trope plays out on forums and player narratives as well. In the "Stop calling people Chinese farmers" thread, one reply stated:

I'll not only call them CHINESE FARMERS....I'll call them a disease that has inflicted this game.

Gold farmers are the rats of every game. They are everywhere and they multiply in a blink of an eye.

### **Extermination**

The pestilence trope then brings into forefront notions of eradication and extermination. Depending on the game and the game mechanics, this is typically a combination of systematic harassment and slaughter:

The only good kind of farmer is a dead one. [WoW, M, 38]

Yes. I enjoy killing gold farmers repeatedly. I play on PvP servers. [WoW, M, 26]

In Lineage 2 there were constantly Korea farmers and we hated them and killed them constantly. I can honestly say the way Korean players acted in that game was enough for myself and my guild to stereotype Korean teenagers, then hunt them down and kill them all. [WoW, M, 40]

In 2004, a fan video titled “Farm the Farmers Day” showed actual footage as players tracked down and massacred players they suspected to be adena farmers (see Constance’s paper for more on this).

### **Yi-Shan-Guan**

At this point, I want to briefly segue to a different story that paves the way for multiple re-readings of the typical story typically told about gold farmers.

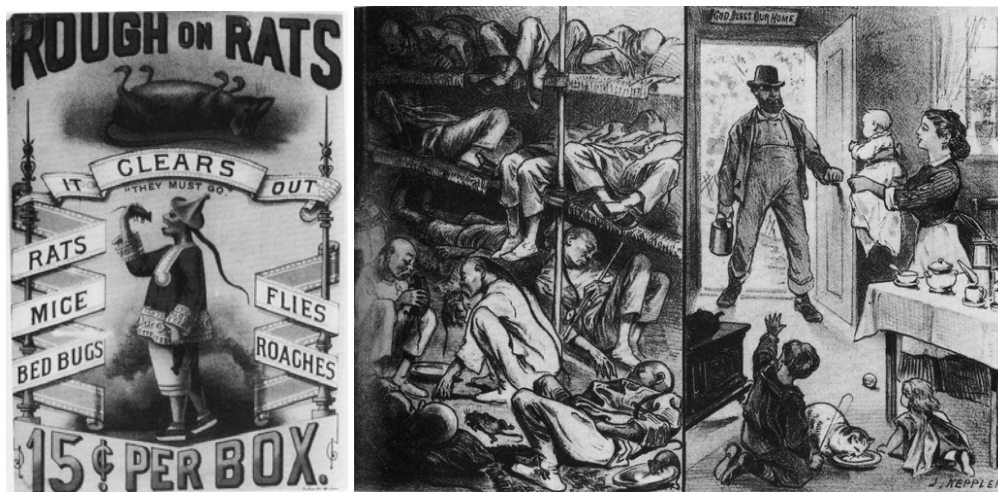
People came to become what they could not become elsewhere - heroes and millionaires. The early, undeveloped economy caused many inconveniences. Certain common tasks required a great deal of time to complete. Many Chinese workers took advantage of this entrepreneurial opportunity by providing a service that dramatically enhanced the quality of life. Providing this service was no trivial task, but involved tedious repetition, painstaking attention to detail, and often consumed most of their waking hours in a small room in front of the same machine. Nevertheless, their hard work did pay off. Some became wealthy and soon the Chinese referred to this place as the Gold Mountain. Yet their frugal industriousness incited others, particularly the Westerners who had arrived earlier. This triggered a period of systematic abuse and humiliation targeting the Chinese. Legal constraints were created in an attempt to put these Chinese workers out of work. Individual Chinese workers were harassed and sometimes physically assaulted. Mob lynching followed and massacres have been documented.

This story sounds incredibly familiar, but the year is 1870 and I am, of course, talking about the genesis of the Chinese laundry shops (“yi-shan-guan”) during and after the California Gold Rush. During the Gold Rush, dirty laundry was routinely shipped to Hong Kong (among other Asian cities) partly because laundry was seen as demeaning domestic work that burly bearded miners should not perform. The turn-around time for this process was 4 months. Immigrant Chinese workers took advantage of this opportunity. The Chinese laundry business, as it bloomed, was suddenly seen as a threat by Americans. Laws were enacted in 1870 that tried to cripple Chinese laundry businesses (as well as preventing the Chinese from gaining US citizenship - which effectively barred them from voting). Documented mob

lynching and pillaging of Chinatowns occurred in 1871 and 1877 (See “The Chinese in America” by Iris Chang, 2003, for more on this topic).

### Historical Vermin and Extermination

And the tropes of pestilence and eradication are particularly chilling because there are historical parallels of this exact rhetoric against the Chinese. During the late 1800s, as Chinese immigrants were blamed for many problems ranging from unemployment to the economic depression itself, they were portrayed as vermin that lived on rats and thus were a sub-human race that should be exterminated to protect the American way of life.



And indeed, there are well-documented mob lynching and massacres of Chinese immigrants. These were particularly prevalent in the period known as the “Great Driving Out”.



Of course, the story of prejudice against the Chinese during the 1800s is far more complex and nuanced than stemming from just the laundry workers. And, of course, the parallel that I'm trying to draw isn't perfect. But the juxtaposition of this historical narrative with the much more recent narrative we typically tell about "Chinese" gold farmers reveals its disturbing metaphors and framings. The contemporary narrative starts to feel too much like the historical one - Chinese immigrant workers being harassed and murdered by Westerners who feel they alone can arbitrate what constitutes acceptable labor.

## **Double Standards**

But let's leave the historical parallel behind for now and focus more on gold farmers in MMOs. Because of the presumed nationality of gold farmers, some players use an interesting litmus test on probable farmers.

I've encountered a lot of 'probable' gold farmers in high level zones. I tried speaking to them asking them to stop, if they answered in Chinese, I harassed them by luring mobs to them to interrupt their game-play. If they speak English or any other non-Chinese language, I leave them alone.

In Felwood, there was this annoying level 60 rogue that was farming all the Jadedfire demons for felcloth. I asked her: 'Are you farming for felcloth?' and she responded with 4-5 chinese words. Since I was with my hunter, I aggroed about 3 other Jadedfire demons, ran up to her, used Feign Death and the 3 demons went up to her. [WoW, M, 24]

In other words, it is not the behavior per se that is the damning piece of evidence as to whether a player is a gold farmer, but rather, whether they are fluent in the English language. Other players are understandably troubled by this double standard.

I've never run into someone I assumed was a gold farmer, mostly because (unlike many people) I don't tend to assume that someone who doesn't speak English is automatically a gold farmer. I've seen people assume that because someone isn't a native English speaker and they see them playing for 8 hours straight they must be a gold farmer. Mind you, they know this person is playing there 8 hours straight why? Because they also are playing in the same general place for 8 hours straight. But because Player A used Chinese-inflected English ('No ABC ba') they must be a gold farmer, because apparently Asians don't play games for fun. [/sarcasm] [CoH, F, 36]

I really feel though that about half of the people that are accused of being farmers are just people who cannot speak English that well. [WoW, M, 27]

One player elaborates and points out that blame is always easier to place on “other people”.

There's also the racist aspect of the farmer thing, and that really bothers me. In general chat (visible to all players in a given area) there are regular Asian racial slurs, calling people Chinese gold farmers or straight up chinks or gooks, or making remarks about slant eyes. If you play a game for hours on end trying to achieve some goal and it's snatched out from under you it's a lot easier to assume the opportunity was stolen by someone with impure intentions rather than by someone like yourself. [WoW, M, 22]

### **Stay Out Of My Country**

Having players from other cultures in the same virtual environment might have been seen as a positive thing. After all, this is presumably why we have study abroad programs and why we attempt to teach foreign languages. In the discussion about gold farmers and language fluencies in MMOs however, responses on the official WoW forums suggest otherwise.

If you don't speak English, don't play on the US servers. Simple as that.

I still don't understand it, if you don't speak English and you are Chinese, why not play on a Chinese server?

Even in the most positive light, there is something xenophobic about these statements, but more importantly, it's hard to not interpret them as the digital variation of “go back to your own country”. And beneath all that is the eerie undertone of “this land belongs to us and we prefer to keep it that way” - a digital country club where language fluency is the membership fee. In other words, even in a land of Orcs and Night Elves, some people simply don't belong in Azeroth.

### **Rethinking Fluency**

The language fluency issue is also strange because many forum posts are dedicated to illustrating that players who do speak perfect English can also be just as annoying and infuriating in the game. For example, in a thread titled “Whats the STUPIDEST whisper u ever got” on the WoW forums, we can find many examples of these:

**Idiot:** Ok, summon Otherguy.

**Me:** Uh, I can't summon.

**Idiot:** You out of shards? We can get you more.

**Me:** No, I've never had shards. I'm not a warlock. Warlocks summon and use shards. Mages do not summon and do not use shards.

**Idiot:** OMFG learn to play ur class n00b!

**Me:** Seriously, mages CAN'T summon.

**Idiot:** OMFGLMAO mages can 2 summon. i've seen it. now summon Otherguy, b!@#\$.

**Me:** Not only is that uncalled for, but I've trained at least rank one in every ability. No summon.

**Idiot:** I can't believe this. Look, only reason ur here is cause we need the summon. Mages suxxor, so summon and we'll get on with it.

**Druid:** Hey priest make me water!

**Me:** ....

**Druid:** I SAID MAKE ME WATER!

**Me:** ... I hope you kidding...

**Druid:** WHY WOULD I KID WATER IS EXPENSIVE!

**Me:** ... I cant make water I don't have the ability..

**Druid:** OMFG YOU RETARD NUBSAUCE WHATS THE POINT OF A PRIEST IF YOU CANT MAKE WATER ITS YOUR CLASS ABILITY!

**Me:** I think you have me confused with some other class

**Druid:** NOEZ PREISTS CAN MAKE WATER!

**Me:** Are you by any chance mentally challenged?

**Druid:** WHY WOULD I BE YOUR THE ONE WHO DOSENT KNOW YOUR OWN CLASS

**Me:** Let me guess you a feral druid...

**Druid:** Yeah so what this tree pwns restoration suckzors!

**Me:** The 2nd grade called they need you back...

And several players described requests such as the following, all done in perfect English:

Standing in front of the bank in Iron Forge when a guy walks up and whispers: "Will you take your top off for me?"

Finally, I offer you this player's experience which I think hits at the heart of the issue of language fluency:

I don't believe I've interacted directly with a gold farmer. I've seen them in chat at times selling items, or asking for water... but that's about it. I mainly hear people yelling and complaining or insulting gold farmers with racist slurs. People seem very racist. This is much more obnoxious and intrusive. [WoW, F, 36]



But my point is that the language fluency issue is ironic given that players who do speak English can say far more offensive and annoying things.

## **Ni Hao**

Many players accuse gold farmers as being provocative and hostile, but let's turn the tables for a moment. On the thread I mentioned before, the one titled "Whats the STUPIDEST whisper u ever got", the first reply was very interesting. The poster wrote:

**[RandomPlayer] whispers:** Ni hao

Another poster pointed out the strange implication:

Why is this in itself stupid? Don't you say "Hi" 1st when you want to ask someone something?

Someone whispered that to me in SW once, and I replied. The guy was excited because he thought I could speak Chinese fluently. I apologized (in Chinese), saying my Chinese was horrible and couldn't understand what he said. He was pretty nice about it...

I feel kinda sorry for those Asians that can't speak English and are immediately labeled gold farmers, even though they may just be looking for a group or something

Other entries in this thread included attempts to communicate in English that were also branded as "stupid":

**Chinese farmer in WPL** "health++++"

**Me** "...., stupid Chinese farmers, you used that crap back in FFXI"

**Chinese farmer** "health+++++"

**me** "....."

**[Farmer] whispers:** would it be ok for you to do to order bread to me?

**To [Farmer]:** Sorry, I would, but I don't speak English.

In other words, asking for help can be seen as stupid if you speak the wrong language. But as we've now seen, suspected gold farmers are systematically sworn at, ignored, mocked, harassed, and slaughtered due to the wide-spread application of a particular stereotype. Is it any wonder players who are not fluent

in English may systematically become more and more hostile and afraid of English speaking players? And even though English speakers do solicit impossible or insulting requests, we do not have broad pestilence and extermination tropes associated with them (naturally). On the other hand, not being able to speak English is literally a life hazard in many MMOs.

## **Rethinking The Economy**

There is a common belief that gold farming ruins virtual economies over time. We saw this sentiment earlier in the article and it is a fairly widespread belief.

As I understand it, they ruin the economy of the game world so that everything gets more and more expensive over time. I'd probably inform a GM or do something to hinder their efforts myself. They are absolutely despicable. [FFXI, M, 24]

The problem is that the impact of these secondary markets on the in-game markets of MMOs is not well understood. Moreover, it is not clear that they would have the same impact across MMOs with different economic mechanics. Some players in fact argue that gold farming may have a positive effect on their game economies:

I have chatted with gold farmers, to the degree that such interaction was possible. Most that I have talked to have limited English proficiency. I have actually clashed more with ignorant people who continue to insist that gold farmers create inflation. Being an economics teacher, I assure you that inflation would exist with or without gold farmers. Inflation occurs because of cash/resource parity. Since gold farmers do not drastically increase the amount of gold available on the server, traditional inflation is not due to gold farming. On the other hand, gold farmers do increase the number of rare resources available on the server, so may in fact decrease the rate of cash inflation. [WoW, M, 24]

In Lineage 2 they are everywhere, and everyone knows who they are. Initially, players were very hostile and attempted to harass them in large groups. After a while, players have realized that they are in fact necessary for the in game economy to function properly and many of the farmers have become friendly with regular players. [L2, M, 22]

A recent discussion over at Terra Nova also highlights that classical definitions and measures of inflation and deflation may not make sense for talking about certain game economies:

([http://terranova.blogs.com/terra\\_nova/2005/08/deflation\\_in\\_wo.html](http://terranova.blogs.com/terra_nova/2005/08/deflation_in_wo.html)). Thus, it is oftentimes hard to tease out the impact of gold farming from the naturally-occurring process of inflation due to the never-ending

influx of normal gold. And there are reasons to believe that gold farming may in fact help stabilize some game economies.

### **Who's Out Of Sight?**

But our retellings so far of the gold farming narrative have left out two crucial players from the picture. The first are the gold buyers.

In my opinion, while I don't support gold farming, from what I understand... it's some job they've been hired to do. I can't blame them for taking a job that exists. I have more problems with people who BUY the gold, and basically support the 'industry.' And I am pretty sure the people who purchase gold or more likely Caucasian Americans, not Chinese. People should be complaining about the buyers, who keep the market going! [WoW, F, 36]

Like the historical parallel, what we really have is a service industry of immigrant Chinese workers being driven by a market composed almost entirely of Westerners. The secondary market cannot function without demand. And as the above player correctly points out, it is Westerners who drive the demand in the market. As one poster on a Final Fantasy XI forum mentions:

We could get rid of the problem if people would simply stop buying gil. We only have ourselves to blame.

Another group of Western players left out of the picture are the middlemen who buy gold from the gold farming operations and then resell it at a significant profit. Typically, it is on one of these portals where actual virtual currency is bought. As one forum poster put it bluntly:

IMO, China-based and other offshore gilsellers are small potatoes, the real scum suckers are IGE and that bastard whose made himself a millionaire doing this sh\*t not just on FFXI but on just about every MMORPG anywhere.

The actual gold farmers are the losers in this market in several regards. These workers are harassed as they try to accumulate gold and then are fleeced by the middlemen. IGE makes publicly available their buy and sell rates. To give you a sense of where most of the profits go, on WoW's Suramar server, they will buy 1000 gold for 25 USD. They sell that same 1000 gold for 66 USD. So for every dollar spent on buying virtual gold, only 37 cents of it goes to the actual gold farmers. The gold farming industry is not only driven by Western demand, but most of its profits in fact also go to Westerners.

## **A Valuable Service?**

Even as systematic harassment of gold farmers appears widespread, it is also clear that some players feel that gold farmers in fact are offering a valuable service.

In World of Warcraft, I bought a lot of arcanite bars off a gold farmer, and then re-sold them over the next few days at a nice profit. I have no problem with gold farmers; I'm a professional and work full time, so my time is valuable, and they are providing a service. I've bought a total of about 5000g in WoW from an online website. I initially thought it was uncommon for people do to this, but the practice is actually very widespread, although people don't seem to like to talk about it. [WoW, M, 32]

I have made it a habit of buying game-currency for real money, either from EBay or from [www.ige.com](http://www.ige.com) (IGE). The reason for this is that making money in the game is a very slow and tedious process, and in DAoC requires you to level up a crafter for the sole purpose of turning unusable loot into raw material, and then into trinkets that can be sold. I think the best part of the game (DAoC) is Realm vs. Realm, and I don't like to spend more time in PvE than I have to. I don't like farming much, and even though I leveled up a crafter to be my trinketer, I spend \$25 at IGE and can go back to enjoying the game (RvR, looking for the perfect item to buy, play with armor dyes etc) rather than spend countless hours 'working' (i.e. farming)... [DAOC, M, 29]

In a recent survey, 20% of respondents indicated that they have bought virtual gold online (<http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/archives/001469.php>). Thus, even though many players make use of this service, gold farmers remain a stigmatized group.

## **The Reality of Gold Farming**

Over the past 6 months, several reports of who these gold farmers are and what they do has emerged and the overall picture is quite consistent. Some of these reports rely on extensive conversations with actual gold farmers in the game. Others are based on documentation of actual gold farms in Asia and interviews with managers and workers.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/12/09/technology/09gaming.html>

[http://www.gameguidesonline.com/guides/articles/ggoarticleoctober05\\_01.asp](http://www.gameguidesonline.com/guides/articles/ggoarticleoctober05_01.asp)

<http://observer.guardian.co.uk/international/story/0,6903,1436411,00.html>

<http://www.1up.com/do/feature?cld=3141815>

<http://ffxi.allakhazam.com/forum.html?forum=10;mid=1104180287614253648>

The overall picture seems to be that many gold farms are based in China (although there are a few in other countries). Most of these workers are students in their late teens or early 20s. They work for a boss who owns the machines and software and need to accumulate virtual currency on a daily quota system. Sometimes, multiple workers share the same account and cannibalistic behavior emerges where one worker will sell the character's equipment to make the quota, thereby putting their "partner" at a disadvantage. While some use the term "sweatshop" to describe these gold farming operations, most of these establishments would probably be considered normal or well-furnished in local standards. Gold farming pays a livable wage. As the following manager implies, most other employment options for people who do gold farming involves hard labor.

We recruit through newspaper ads. They all know how to play online games, but they're not willing to do hard labor.

## **Harsh World**

Players who have interacted with gold farmers on a non-confrontational manner typically have very different views of gold farmers. Understanding why gold farmers do what they do changes how they interact with them.

In Lineage 2 I once had a dispute with a farmer over an area in a dungeon and we started talking. He told me he had to work 16 hours a day for little pay and if he didn't meet the set quota, he wouldn't get paid. So he offered me an amount of in-game currency, if I would leave. There I was, playing a MMO as an escapism, but there was no escape from the harsh reality. Its a sad world we live in. [WoW, M, 33]

I did the same, I was furious with the gil-sellers one day and decided to act friendly to get a admit from one that they sell gil, I pick one out randomly.. He replies to all my /tells right away, and very nicely. A few days of me talking to him, slowly working into getting him to admit, I realize how nice he is ... A man, 25 years old, he told me he was married and has a 7 year old daughter. He makes it by selling gil on FFXI, making just about no money in doing so, to feed his daughter and wife ... Think about that for a little bit before I say, I offered to help him camp the NM he camped everyday. I did get an admission out of him and brought up my menu to call a GM, but did I? No. I felt total sympathy for him and his co-workers and spared him. (Until later I found out someone ratted him out, causing him and his friends' accounts to get banned). For a small time, I used to get on FF solely just to talk to this man and see how he was doing, sometimes helping him from time to time. This may sound corny, being this is coming from a game, but this man made me

look a life in a totally different aspect. I don't know his status on what he is doing now, but for the sake of his wife and his daughter (hoping he'll someday read this), I wish you the best of luck, man. Take care.

One player ties together many of the threads in this article and helps reframe the reality of gold farming.

I meet and chat with gold farmers all the time -- Chinese gold farmers, that is. I'm Chinese, and I play a mage in World of Warcraft, so I'm often approached by gold farmers who ask me for bread and water. Generally they approach me with something along the lines of 'bread plz thx'. When I respond to them in Cantonese, many of them often engage in a friendly conversation with me.

Most of my friends in World of Warcraft are actually gold farmers. I don't help them in any way other than conjuring them free food, but I do choose to chat with them because I understand their situation and why they have their jobs. Some gold farmers actually don't mind their jobs because they hang around playing games for extensive periods of time. Some of them believe it's torturing having to 'camp' the same spots for long periods of time.

I don't mind much of the presence of gold farmers on my server, but there is a limit to the sympathy I give them. And that is, the kill-stealing and Mob-player-killing that some gold farmers take part in to keep player away. But, many players do the same thing against the gold farmers. One of my farmer friends I talk to is only hostile against American players because of the treatment and ridicule they receive from them. Another I spoke to said that they must kill-steal to meet their quota for their job. The next time a gold farmer steals a kill from someone, I believe that person should think about the farmer's situation before getting angry. [WoW, F, 18]

The theme of immigrant worker being harassed by Westerners who feel they own the land and can arbitrate what constitutes as acceptable labor is one that is hard to escape. Another player draws out why this is so frustrating for her.

I think its strange how people get so upset about credit farmers in SWG. What is more interesting to me is the fact that they are more upset about the negative effects it has on their game, rather than the poor, dollar an hour people in a basement doing the farming in some foreign country just to get by. Just seems very hypocritical, so it's hard for me to have any strong feelings about it. [SWG, F, 21]

Let me end this section with a narrative that hints at the many ambiguities in the interactions between these foreign workers and the "native" players.

This one time I was in the Ironforge Auction House and a gold farmer came up to me and asked me if I wanted to buy some gold. I played along with him for a while. I asked him why he became a gold farmer and he basically said he was a high schooler who needed to make some money. I told him I wanted to buy 1000 gold from him and he said I had to pay (like \$20 or something) before he would give it to me. I told him I wanted proof he had the gold before I paid anything. He said to wait a minute and then he ran to the mail box and came back and opened a trade window. He put 1000 gold in it. I told him that he has to click trade before it shows up and he said no you didn't, that I would steal his gold. I told him it was added in the last patch, and to try it with 1 gold if he didn't believe me. So he put 1g in and clicked trade. I took his one gold and left. I think they ruin the economy of the game. [WoW, M, 22]

## **Equal Treatment**

The most interesting narratives I received were ones where players had befriended these foreign players in spite of the language barrier. In many of these cases, Western and Eastern players had learned to work together to their mutual benefit. For example, in World of Warcraft, a few instance raids now accept known gold farmers given the right looting arrangement (master loot and then random roll) because some gold farmers are recognized as decent players of their class.

Yes, I came across one gold farmer while running an instance within World of Warcraft. I speak a little Chinese, so I was able to communicate and confirm that he was at least Chinese-speaking. He was quite comical, a little dwarf rogue, and he spent the entire time in the instance running from chest to chest, triggering traps that could have been avoided in order to loot the treasure.

Everyone else in our party kept yelling at him, and I told him politely two or three times to stop. Honestly, it didn't bother me. In fact it was amusing to me to be walking along the streets of Stratholme, and suddenly see a fat little dwarf run across the screen, trying to escape death-by-leeches, which had been triggered from the last chest he attempted to open. We talked the entire time we were in the instance, and I had to explain several of my English words to him. I even went as far to ask him if he had friends, and he said they were working on other servers.

He then told me about the exchange rate of gold to currency, and how our server's rate was somewhere around .23 currency for 10 gold. I was more fascinated by him than upset, and I think our friendly interaction led to a smoother instance run.

What flattered me most was that he even gave me a greater mana potion that he stole from one of his looted chests. Granted, they don't sell for nearly as much as the major mana potions, but they do sell reasonably well. I was touched, really. Here was a guy that played a game in order to purchase food for himself, and he was offering to give me something that could contribute to his paycheck. I added him to my friends list because I was curious to know more about him, but I never saw him again. [WoW, F, 21]

Others have found out that it is possible to work with instead of against the gold farmers.

I was trying to level in a popular leveling spot but this area was filled with gold farmers because the monsters dropped a lot of adena (the currency), were easy to kill and had a chance to drop valuable items which could be sold for quite a lot of adena. It was difficult to level and there was one farmer in particular who always tried to steal my monsters and made it even more challenging for me to level.

I was frustrated and threw out a few Chinese swears I knew because I was taking a Chinese class at school. I got a few private messages from some farmers nearby in Chinese and I couldn't understand any of it but then one guy started talking to me in bad English. I found out that he was taking English in China and we made our best attempt to communicate with each other. The farmer would stick by me and help me out which lead to the other farmers ignoring me and eventually leaving me alone. [WoW, M, 17]

One time I teamed up with a Horde side gold farmer to kill out 4 Alliance gold farmers that were trying to kill steal us. He tried speaking to me in Chinese, and obviously I know nothing of that, so I was like yeah sure, and he would respond with exclamations etc., as if he thought I actually understood him. We ended up killing the Alliance farmers enough that they left and we were left with the camp. After this incident, that particular farmer was always courteous with me, splitting the spawns with me instead of trying to kill them all. [WoW, M, 18]

### **Friends Don't Let Friends Buy Gold**

It is unfortunate that gold farmers are the most visible tip of a much larger iceberg - consisting of buyers as well as middlemen. As we've seen, most of the profit from gold farming does not go to the actual gold farmers. However, they bear the brunt of daily harassment and slaughter. One player had a more progressive perspective on curbing gold farming.



Whenever a friend/guild-member is considering buying gold, I encourage them not to, saying 'friends don't let friends buy gold.'

Currently, MMOs do not allow players to police and govern themselves in a practical way regarding gold farming, but imagine if this was possible. If it is true that most players are against the practice, then by giving them a practical means to detect these transactions, self-regulation might emerge. For example, if a character's financial transaction history is made public, then it becomes possible for that character's friends or guildmates to detect gold buying behavior. Very few characters would have good reason to get a sudden 300 gold increase from the mail. The problem right now is that gold buying is invisible and thus these players have no accountability. But once that behavior is made public, then accountability emerges. Other players will question that sudden windfall in the mail. Guild members and friends will exert a social pressure where it was impossible to exert before.

If we are indeed serious about dampening the gold market, the best solution isn't tormenting the suppliers, it is in curbing the demand itself. Currently, there are no social disincentives to avoid buying gold because that behavior is entirely hidden. Developers can reveal that behavior and create accountability by showing what is already tracked by the server. Why insist on tormenting foreign workers when Western players are equally culpable?

### **Hearthglen - A Short Story**

My goal here wasn't to justify gold farming. It is true that some gold farmers employ a range of cutthroat and deplorable tactics to drive normal players from certain areas in MMOs. On the other hand, the typical racialized story that is told about pestilence and extermination is quite chilling and leaves out important aspects of what's going on. The racialized story is a very comfortable one for us to tell because it frames us as the victims, as the arbitrators of justice, and as the unquestioned owners of the land. It is a story that sustains our privileged status. But gold farming isn't simply about foreign workers who harass Western players and deserve to be killed. My goal here was to show that it's a little more complicated than that.

Let me end with a story of my own. Recently in WoW, I ran into an Undead Mage in Hearthglen who frost-AE farmed the non-elites (literally 10-12 at a time). As a frost mage myself (on the Alliance side), I attempted the same trick. The first time I tried, the Undead Mage pulled elites into my Blizzard range in an attempt to kill me. I escaped. The second time I tried, a stealthed Undead Rogue turned his PvP flag on as he walked into my Blizzard, thus setting off my PvP flag. Another Undead Rogue then backstabbed me. Using a variety of ice blocks, blinks, and ice barriers, I somehow managed to survive that as well.

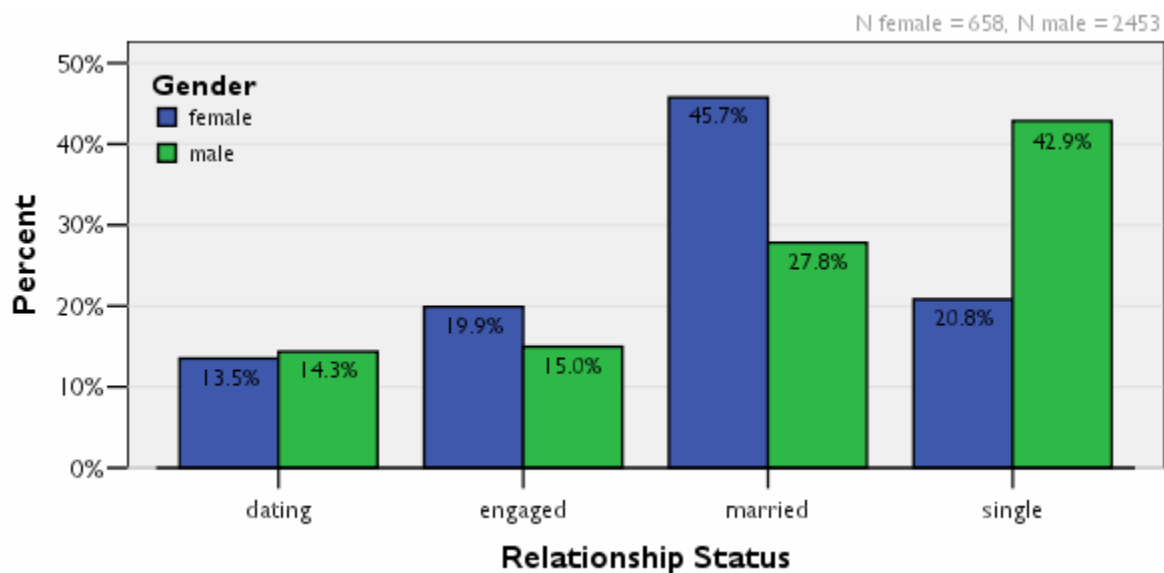
As I recovered and pondered how to exact revenge against these 3 gold farmers, I realized that in my mind I had instinctively cast them as Chinese gold farmers. And in return, they had probably instinctively cast me as the white leisure player. And in this mesh of historical and contemporary racial narratives where we all suddenly seemed to be playing out our expected racial roles, I found myself pondering what it really meant to be Chinese-American ... because somehow, in this land of Elves and Orcs, I suddenly felt more Chinese than I usually do in the real world.

## Playing with Someone (Part 2)

In the last issue, we saw that many players play with someone they know in RL on a regular basis - whether this is a family member, a romantic partner, or a friend

(<http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/archives/001468.php>). There's a related issue that we couldn't tease out from that last dataset. Specifically, it would help to know how many MMO players are in romantic relationships to begin with, and of those, how many are playing with their romantic partners. In a sense, this is the inverse of the question that was addressed in the previous article. It also helps us make more sense of the percentage of players who play with a romantic partner. For example, we know that about 25% of players play with a romantic partner. But of all the players who have romantic partners to begin with, do a low or high percentage of them actually play with their romantic partner? And we could ask the same question for parents who play with their children. For both these questions, we need to know the base rates for players who have romantic partners or children.

These are the questions that a newer dataset has addressed. About 80% of female players and 60% of male players are in a romantic relationship. On a tangential note, this gives rise to an interesting "singles" imbalance. If we assume an 85:15 gender ratio and the noted singles rate, then for every single woman in an MMO, there are 10 single men.

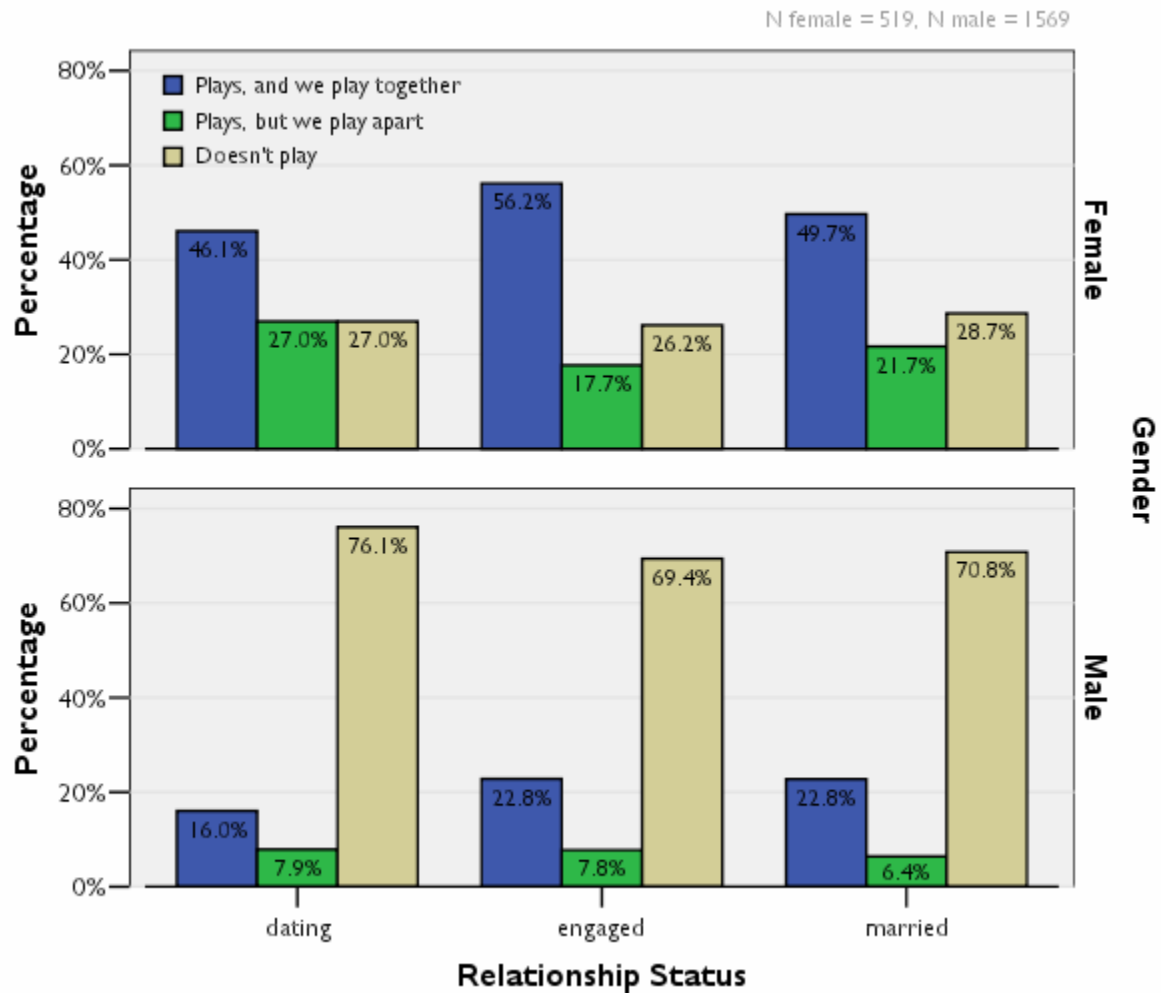


Respondents were then asked whether their romantic partner plays the MMO they do, and if so, whether they usually play together or separately. Of the female players who are in a romantic relationship, about 50% of their romantic partners play with them on a regular basis. Of the male players who are in a romantic relationship, only about 20% of their romantic partners play with them on a regular basis. The most striking difference is that the romantic partners of female players are about three times more likely to play the MMO they play than the romantic partners of male players.

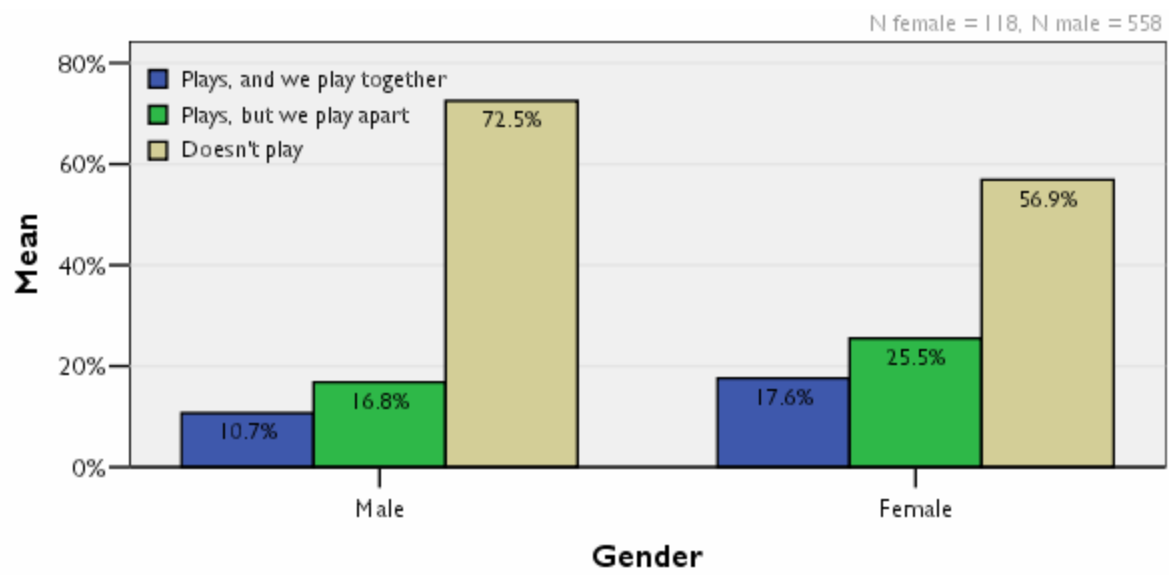
A large part of what we're seeing here is probably the "introduction" effect

(<http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/archives/001335.php>). Because a much higher percentage of female

players are introduced to the game via their romantic partner, this increases the likelihood that a female player is playing with their romantic partner. The overall story is that not only are female players more likely to be in romantic relationships to begin with, but they're very likely to be playing with their romantic partner.



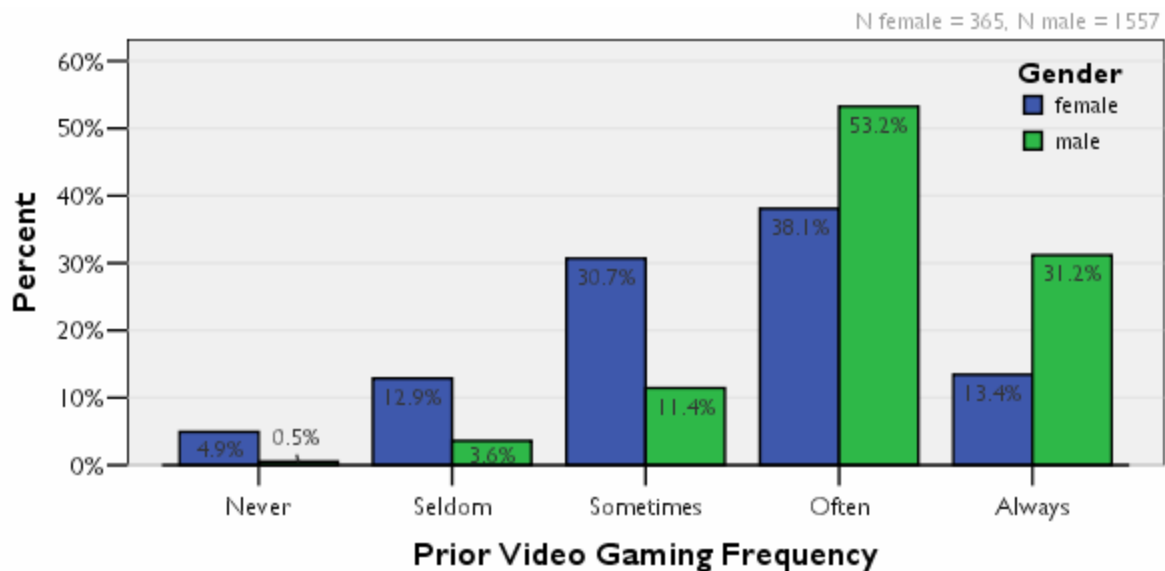
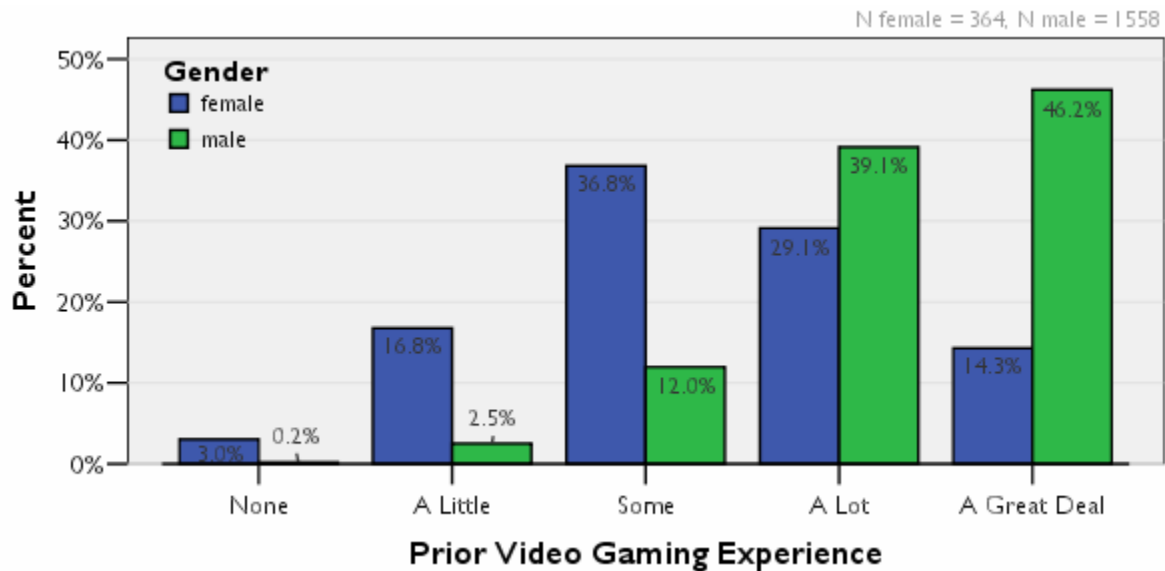
The differences for players who play with their children was less pronounced. About 28% of female players and 20% of male players have at least one child. Of the male players who have children, about 11% play the game with them. For the female players, this was about 18%. It's interesting to note that the children of female players are more likely to be playing an MMO. I don't have a good explanation for this though. Any thoughts?



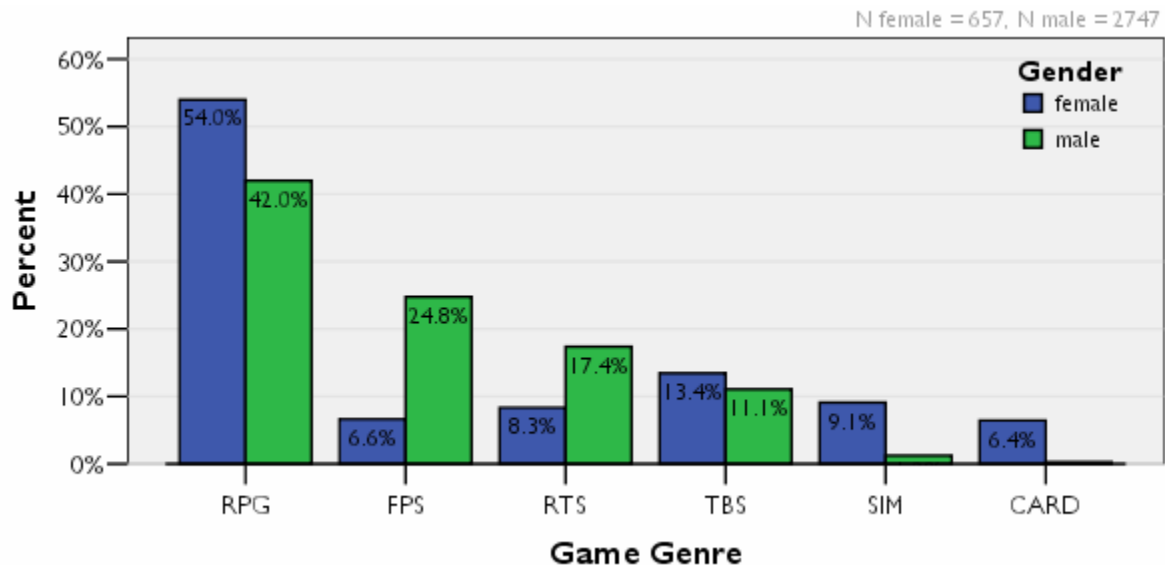
## Prior Gaming Experiences

For how many MMO players is their current MMO their first real video gaming experience, or is it more likely the case that MMO players have extensive prior experiences with video games? Players were asked about their prior experiences with other genres of video games as well as how often they played video games before their current MMO.

There were sharp gender differences with responses to both questions. Male players are more likely to have been avid gamers prior to their current MMO, while female players are more likely to have had less prior experience with video games in general.

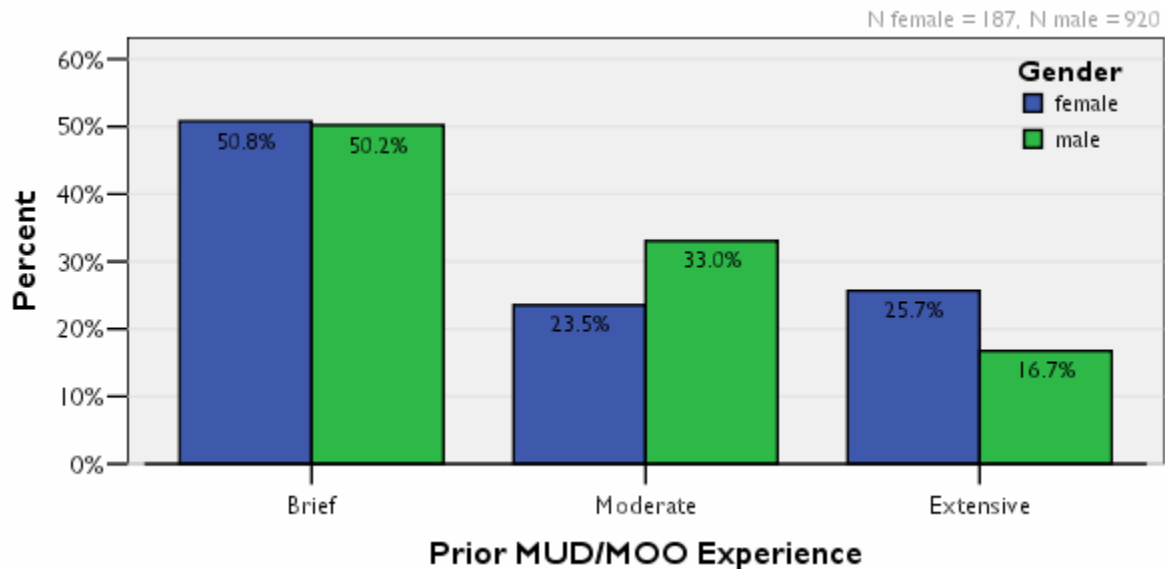


When asked to indicate their favorite gaming genre prior to playing MMOs, most players choose role-playing games (RPG), first-person shooters (FPS), and real-time strategy games (RTS). Male players were more likely to prefer FPS and RTS gamers, while female players were more likely to prefer RPG, city building simulations (SIM) and card or parlor games (CARD). In the graph below, the response options for driving and flight simulations, adventure games, and puzzle games received few responses and are omitted for clarity.

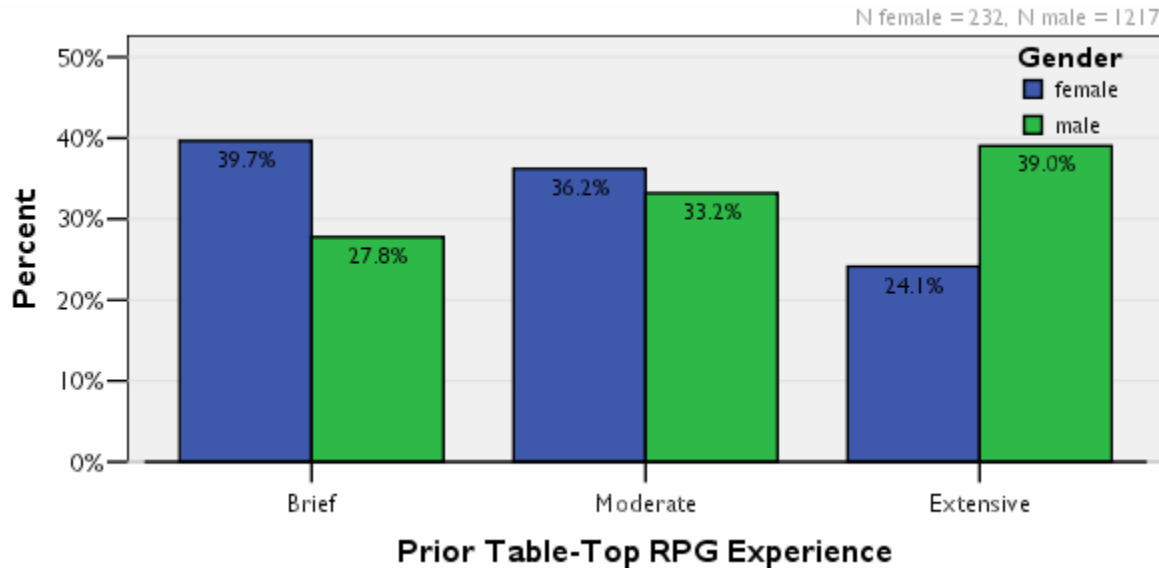


Respondents were also asked about their experiences with MUDs/MOOs as well as table-top role-playing games.

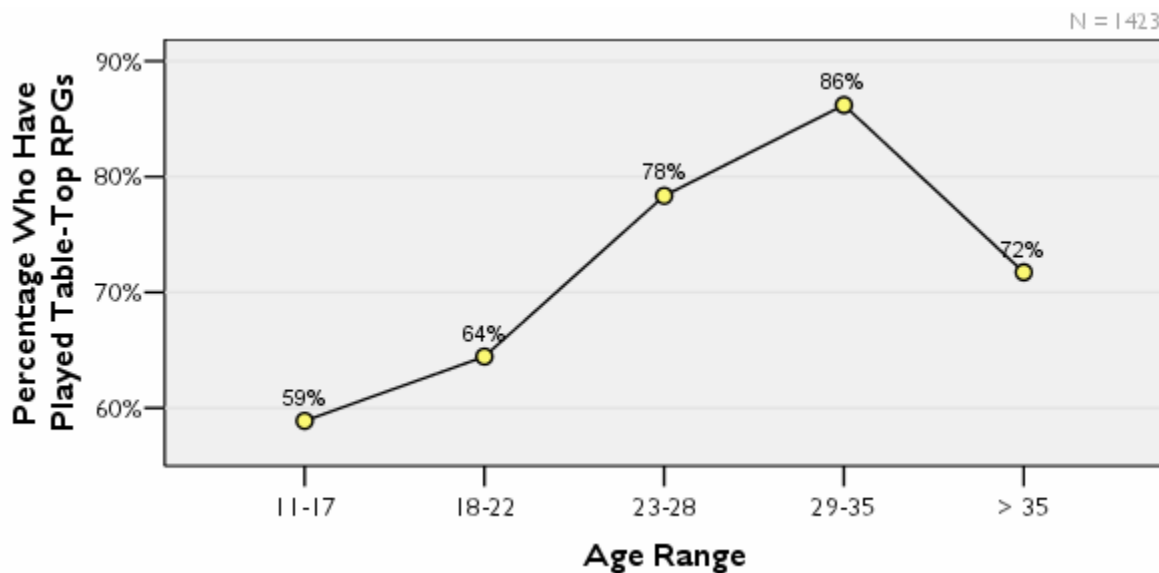
Of all respondents (N = 1911), 54% have had experiences with MUDs/MOOs. Among those who have had MUD/MOO experiences, most of those experiences were rated as brief. Female players were more likely to have had more extensive experiences with MUDs/MOOs.



With regards to table-top role-playing games, 75% of respondents replied that they have had experiences with them. Among those who have had experiences with table-top RPGs, male players were more likely to have had extensive experiences with table-top RPGs.



Experience with table-top RPGs is most likely among those who are currently between 29 - 35 of age - people who would have been teenagers in the 80s when D&D was popularized (and then demonized).



The overall pattern that emerges is that even though male players have slightly more experience with video gaming than female players, overall, current MMO players seem to have a fairly substantial background in games that were the predecessors of MMOs - i.e., table-top RPGs and MUDs/MOOs. In other words, it seems that MMOs were more of a logical next-step for many current MMO gamers than a truly new kind of activity.

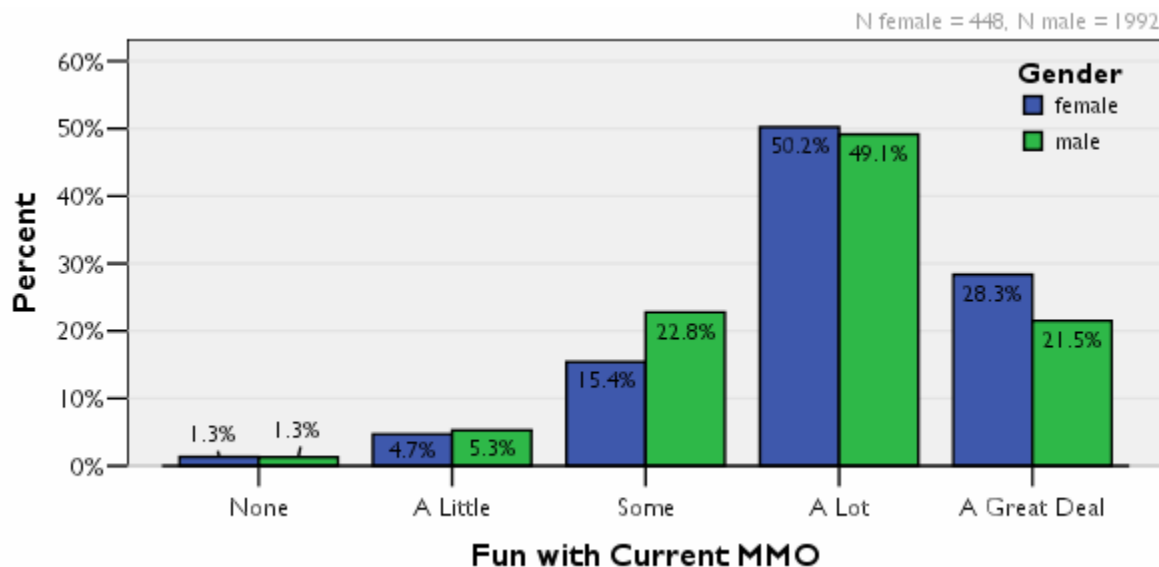


# Fun and Fatigue

How much fun are MMO players really having with their current game? And which players are the most likely to quit because they're bored? Four questions in a recent survey explored these issues:

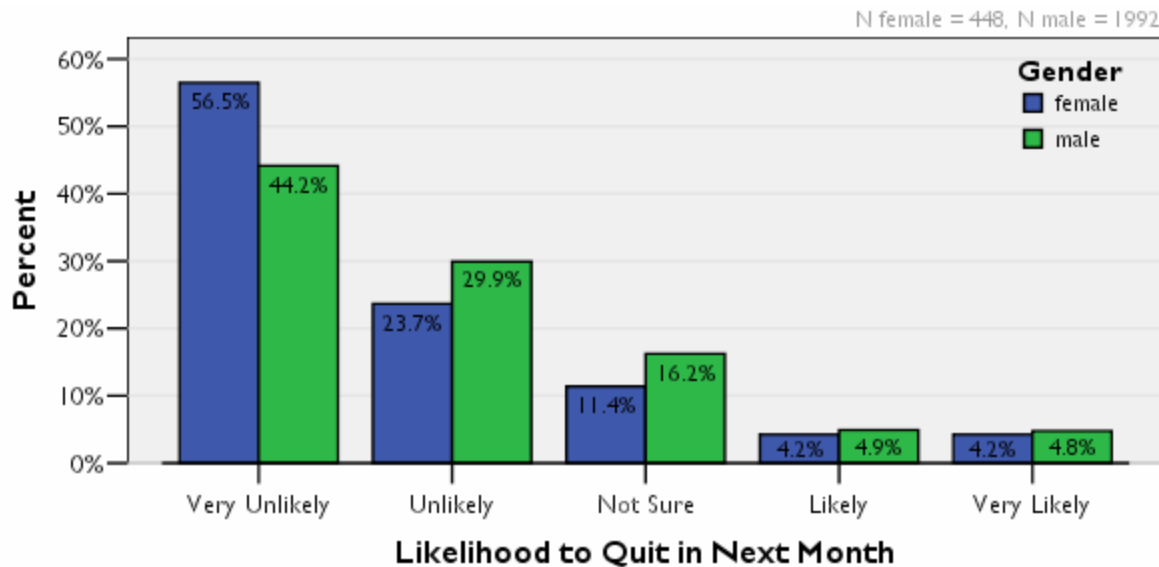
- How much fun are you having with your current MMO?
- How likely are you to quit in the next month?
- Would you sell your account for \$200?
- How excited are you about experiencing content (skills, spells, dungeons, etc.) you haven't seen yet?

With regards to the amount of fun with the current MMO, there were no age differences. Players of all ages were having comparable levels of self-reported fun. There was a mild gender differences. Female players reported having more fun overall than male players. A multiple regression with player motivations as predictors found a weak model ( $r$ -squared = .06) where the Socializing motivation emerged as the best predictor of current fun. The more a player chats and socializes in an MMO, the more likely they report having fun.



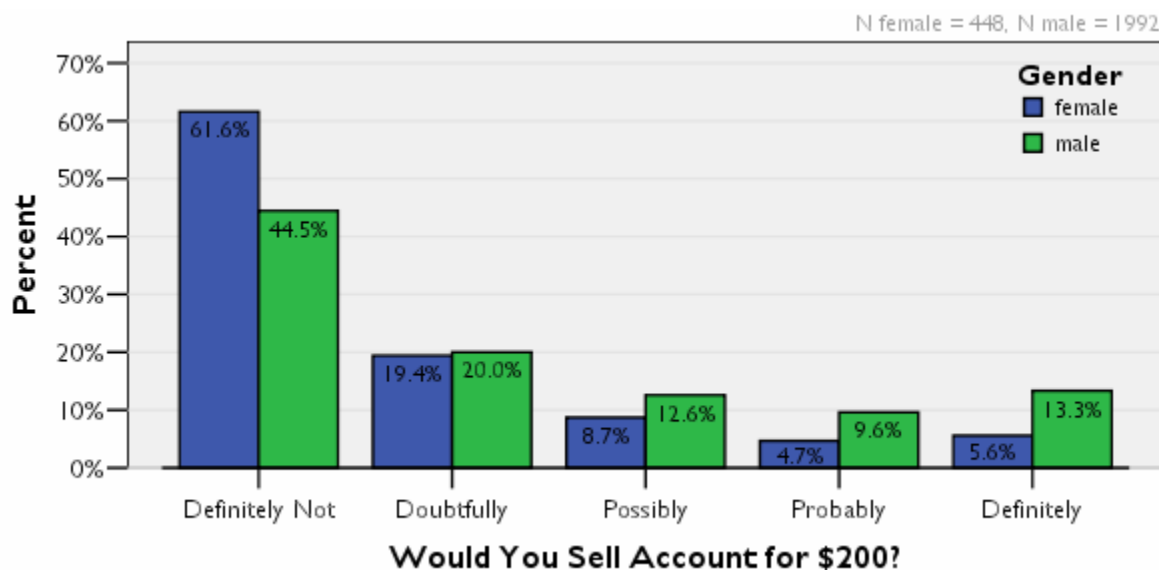
Female players reported a lower likelihood of quitting in the next month. There was also a mild age correlation. Younger players reported that they were more likely to quit ( $r = -.11$ ). An ANCOVA showed that the age and gender differences were significant independent of each other. In other words, it's not the case that the age difference is only driven by the gender difference, or vice versa.

A multiple regression with player motivations as predictors found a weak model ( $r$ -squared = .04) where again the Socializing motivation emerged as the strongest predictor. The more players chat and socialize, the lower their likelihood of quitting.



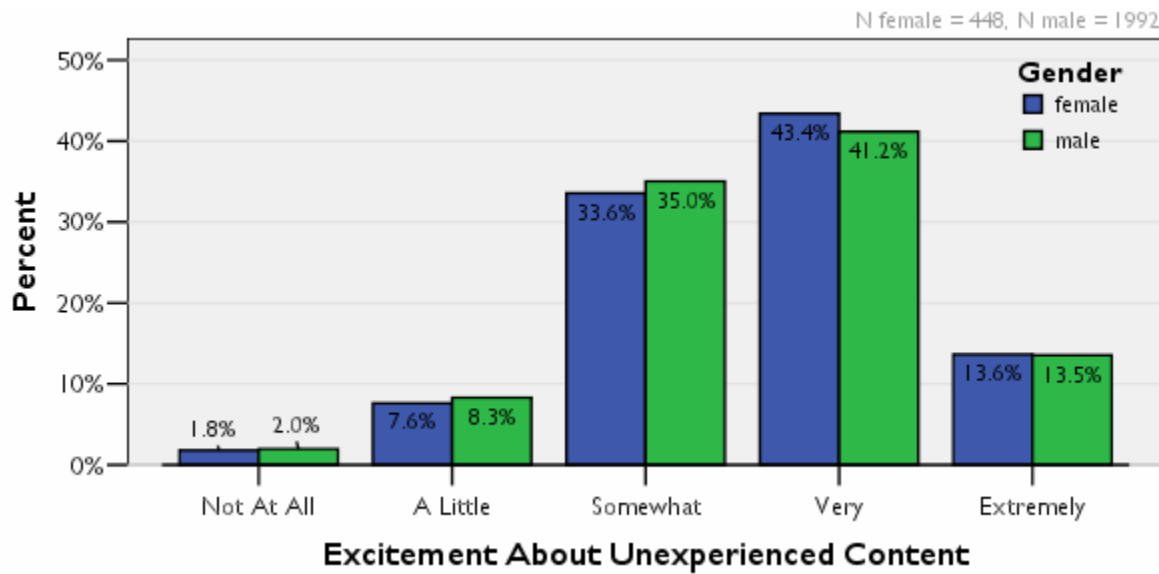
Male players are more willing to sell their accounts. There was also a moderate correlation with age. Younger players are more willing to sell their accounts ( $r = .20$ ). An ANCOVA showed that the age and gender differences were significant independent of each other. In other words, it's not the case that the age difference is only driven by the gender difference, or vice versa.

A multiple regression with player motivations as predictors found a weak model ( $r$ -squared = .09) where the Competition and Relationship motivations emerged as the strongest predictors. The more competitive a player is, the more likely they will sell their account. On the other hand, the more a player enjoys forming relationships in an MMO, the less likely they will sell their account.



Male and female players are equally excited about getting to content they haven't seen yet. There was a mild correlation with age. Younger players were slightly more likely to be excited about inexperienced content ( $r = -.11$ ). A multiple regression with player motivations as predictors found a weak model ( $r$ -

squared = .13) where the Discovery, Advancement and Socializing motivations emerged as the strongest predictors. The more a player enjoys exploration, socializing or leveling, the more excited they are about unexperienced content.



Fun/Fatigue Summary			
N = 1923			
	Gender	Age	Motivations
<b>Current Fun</b>	Slightly Higher Among Women	No Difference	Socializing +
<b>Likelihood of Quitting</b>	Slightly Lower Among Women	Younger Players More Likely To Quit	Socializing +
<b>Sell Account for \$200?</b>	Men More Likely To Sell	Younger Players More Likely To Sell	Competition + Relationship -
<b>Excitement for Unexperienced Content</b>	No Difference	Younger Players More Excited	Advancement + Discovery + Socializing +