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BY NICK YEE

[\(\[HTTP://WWW.NICKYEE.COM/DAEDALUS\]\(http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus\)\)](http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus)

Superstitions

I made a short, speculative post on MMO superstitions on the Terra Nova blog a while back when I first began to think about the idea. This article is a more elaborate exploration drawing on a survey asking players to describe superstitions they have seen in an MMO. But I want to begin with the most interesting comment made on the Terra Nova blog post which was posted by Heather Sinclair, a member of the Dungeon and Dragons Online development team:

From beta all the way through months into launch players were CONVINCED that if you used the diplomacy skill on a chest it would improve the loot you got. This was SO widespread that you literally could not get in a pick up group without them querying about the diplomacy skills of the party and someone forcing everyone to wait while the highest diplomacy skill player cringed before the chest sufficiently. No matter how many times we posted on the forums that this was a myth and it doesn't do anything, they kept doing it. It got so bad our community relations manager even put it in his sig. Finally we made chests an invalid target for the diplomacy skill, then players whined that all the points they put into diplomacy were worthless because we "nerfed" the skill!

We've had similar problems with some of our boss encounters, for example, on my first dragon raid, I was regaled with a long list of things I MUST NOT DO or else the raid would be wiped. Not one of them was valid, but they were incredibly detailed and equally silly. (Things like you can't switch weapons, press hotkeys, cast spells, attack anything but a single leg of the dragon, that sort of thing). It was pointless to argue about, they wouldn't accept the fact that their rules were really all superstitions.

B.F. Skinner is well-known for his theory of behavioral conditioning, but one of his quirkiest studies involved inducing superstition in pigeons (1948). 8 pigeons were placed in a

reinforcement contraption (i.e., Skinner Box) and were given a food pellet every 15 seconds no matter what they did. After several days, each pigeon had fixated on a particular superstitious behavior. One pigeon danced counter-clockwise, another two developed a left-to-right head-swinging motion, another attacked an invisible object in the top right corner of the cage, and so forth. This phenomenon has also been replicated among high-school students (Bruner & Revuski, 1961). And given that MMOs are a kind of Skinner Box that offer some random rewards (e.g., rare drops), it's not surprising that superstitious behaviors emerge in MMOs as well.

I want to make clear that I am using the word "superstition" in the context of MMOs without reference to spirits or religion in the way "superstitious" sometimes implies when used in everyday language. Specifically, I'm using the word "superstition" to refer to repeated behaviors driven by strong beliefs that doing X (or not doing X) will cause Y even though there is no good evidence that this is the case, or despite countering evidence. Superstition falls along a spectrum of related phenomena, such as urban legends and speculation. What differentiates superstition from these other two terms is that urban legends are typically stories which have no repeated behavioral component and speculation usually forms the basis for somewhat systematic testing. Of course, the distinctions among all these terms are not clear cut.

In this particular survey, about 380 MMO players described one or more superstitions they had seen in an MMO. As I read through the player-submitted superstitions, I was struck by several things, and I will list some of these here to help frame the phenomena we're looking at and the stories that follow:

- 1) Other people's superstitions always seem crazier. When reading through the superstitions, I felt more sympathetic towards ones in games I've played and more likely to laugh at superstitions in games I haven't played. But, of course, most of the superstitions are incredibly similar across games and I think reading superstitions from other games will help us think more seriously about the ones in the games we do play.
- 2) Some people argue that all MMO superstitions must be false because it's just easier for developers to use a random number generator throughout, but it's also true that it takes just several lines of code to increase the chances of all rare drops on Tuesdays. And while it is impossible to prove that gods or spirits exist in the real world, there actually is an omnipotent, omniscient god in MMOs (known as the game developer) who can and does mess with the rules. In other words, there is no logical reason why a four-leaf clover would bring you good luck in real life, but this is plausible and easy to implement in an

MMO. So ironically, there is a better basis in believing in an MMO superstition than a real life superstition.

- 3) A corollary of #2 is that we may never know whether a particular superstition is actually true or false because: a) most of the scenarios occur with sufficiently low frequencies (i.e., rare mob drops) that they are hard to sample for testing, b) we will never have access to the actual code base in most cases, and c) even if we did, weird features do arise from complex code that developers never put in explicitly but nevertheless might exist. However, while some of these superstitions may be true, it is likely that most of them are in fact false.

But enough of my thoughts. Let's turn to the superstitions that players have seen in the games they play.

Instance Seeding

Most superstitions players described involved low-chance or high-risk events. For example, a low-chance event may be a rare loot drop. In World of Warcraft, there is a pervasive superstition that the loot table in high-level instances is determined by the first member of the group who steps foot inside the instance.

There is a widely held belief that instances are 'seeded' despite lack of evidence and even a direct denial from Blizzard. Seeded refers to the person who starts the group or raid, and it is believed that the class of that person directly impact what class specific loot will drop. I.E. if a warrior starts the MC raid invites, more druid and warlock gear will drop. If a priest starts the invites, more warrior and mage loot will drop, etc. [WoW, M, 33]

I can think of a popular superstition. When raiding under a specific Master Looter, certain types of loot will drop. When under a different Master Looter, different types of loot will drop. Blizzard consistently states that loot drops are completely random. Yet, a lot of people don't believe this because some items drop over and over when under one Master Looter and different items would drop over and over when under a different Master Looter. [WoW, M, 34]

While a superstition involving a common scenario may be easily disproved by testing, one reason why superstitions involving uncommon scenarios sustain themselves is because "it can't hurt" to

try it. And if you only get to run a high-level instance once each week, then why not try something out that only takes 30 seconds?

Generally the experimentation is harmless enough that it is at least permitted by skeptics of the theory. [WoW, M, 24]

Some People Are Luckier

One interesting variation of the instance seeder superstition claims that certain characters are luckier or have better loot tables.

We have a particular guildmate that insists then when he enters the dungeon instance first, that better loot will tend to drop. Granted, when he has entered first, we've received some very nice, even legendary items in World of Warcraft, but to think he's somehow affecting the loot table by being the first to enter is a bit much. [WoW, M, 30]

The belief that certain classes seed certain loot in PvE instances within World of Warcraft and that certain players are 'lucky' seeders in terms of an increased high-level loot drop rate. Sometimes, raids have been held up until these lucky seeders or a member of a certain class arrives at the instance entrance. [WoW, F, 33]

Silliest is that a particular person provides some sort of luck to getting loot - that one person is responsible for the 'seed' being good or bad. [WoW, F, 49]

What fascinates me here is that certain characters come to be seen as being inherently lucky or unlucky (even divine or cursed), analogous to how certain people in life are sometimes perceived to have divine or miraculous powers.

Lucky Charms

There is also a pervasive item-based superstition regarding drop rates across many MMOs and this is the belief that having certain objects in your inventory will improve the drop rate of rare items. The specific item changes from game to game, but takes the same general form.

In World of Warcraft there are 2 items that are said to bring luck to the owner. These are the 'Rabbit's foot' and the 'Lucky charm'. These items drop off common mobs around the world. There is a group of players that strongly believes that carrying around one or more

of these items increase your luck in loot drops. People often use specific events and strokes of luck to prove that they 'work'. I myself don't believe it has any effect at all but still have a 'Rabbit's foot' in my inventory because you never know ... [WoW, M, 41]

That carrying or owning items whose names implied good luck (Fortune Egg, Millionaire's desk, 4 Leaf Mandragora Bud) would increase drop rates despite no evidence to prove this. I'll admit to doing it myself! [FFXI, F, 25]

In Anarchy Online, some people believed that wearing certain gear was the way to gain certain drops and would spend hours farming gear so that they could farm other gear. [AO, M, 33]

Carrying around in inventory bag a Talisman believing it will bring good luck. [EQ, F, 52]

And again, here we see the interesting behavior where players may not themselves "believe" in the superstition, but they do it anyways because the behavior requires little effort in comparison with the potential gains.

Over-Enchanting

An interesting case study of a high-risk event is something known as over-enchanting, a crafting mechanic present in games such as Ragnarok Online, Ultima Online, and Lineage 2.

In Lineage II you are able to enchant items to get special effects and better stats. Enchanting to +3 is risk-free. However, at +4 and above the item has a chance of breaking, causing you to lose a lot of money. Many people have gone so far as to quit the game or reroll after blowing up their ultra-expensive gear. A very prevalent superstition is for people to take the item into a church when attempting to over-enchant it. Many people, if they were successful over-enchanting an item at a certain spot, will return to that spot every time they need to over-enchant. [Lineage 2, F, 24]

They also believe that doing the risky act (overenchanting) in a church improves their odds. [Lineage 2, M, 52]

In addition to standing in specific places, players described a wide variety of other superstitions related to over-enchanting. Some of these involve eating before enchanting.

In UO it has been stated many times by the Devs that 'eating' does nothing to enhance the characters abilities. Many players still choose to eat before they try to do some specific crafting where the risk of destroying an item for example is high. [UO, F, 45]

Others have more a more elaborate set of rituals.

Some go to only a particular NPC - some will not only upgrade at only a certain NPC, but also upgrade ONLY within a certain time period - some do it ONLY while standing on a 'lucky' spot yet others believe that the secret is to wait there patiently till someone comes in... then wait for him to fail... they believe that their attempt will be 100% successful if it follows on the heels of someone succeeding. I personally am guilty of a fairly weird ritual myself - I tend to strip off all equipment I am carrying and log off in between EVERY attempt to refine my gear. :) [Ragnarok Online, M, 29]

Many people I know have done many funny things to 'influence the Random Number Generator god', including but not limited to: 'Ritual dancing' (using a string of emotes prior to the act), crafting/upgrading during a predetermined magic-hour where a lot of successes occurred, or even saying some ritual phrase out loud (in real life). [RF Online, M, 21]

Crafting in FFXI

The most interesting superstitions related to crafting actually come from Final Fantasy XI, and it's because the developers have a history of messing with the players.

FFXI's crafting system was particularly ripe for superstitions, because the parts of the system that were verified were wacky enough that anything might have been true (for instance, day of the week definitely affected the rate of successes and high quality synths). [FFXI, F, 23]

Deliberately strange rules like this have spawned an entire legion of crafting superstitions in FFXI.

One of the most persistent superstitions (and for all I know, it might be true) was that facing in certain cardinal directions would affect how your crafting came out. It was the perfect superstition, because it took so little effort to follow that even if it wasn't true, you didn't lose anything by acting as if it was true. [FFXI, F, 23]

Whenever trying to make an item with a particular kind of Crystal, there were rumors that if your character was standing and facing, for example, Southeast with a Wind Crystal, they would be less likely to fail the synthesis and lose the crystal and items. I even once saw an entire investigative guide that said the directions to face were linked to the time of day in-game, and that each crystal had its own favored 'direction' depending on the time of day. [FFXI, F, 22]

Due to FFXI being incredibly coded for hidden effects, moon phase and basically anything that is mutable, there are a lot of these beliefs going around. For instance, I have never seen any proof that the Elemental Staves (there are 8, fire, earth, air, water, light, dark, lightning, and ice) will affect your craft outcome, however I tend to craft with the corresponding staff/crystal im using. There is also substantial (yet without seeing the *actual* code for the game I don't consider it fact) evidence pointing to which direction your facing has an effect on what your crafting. Some players are extraordinarily picky about the time/direction/day/moonphase that they craft certain (expensive) items, some aren't. [FFXI, M, 30]

As a side note, I've never been so relieved to not be playing an MMO where moonphases are involved. Just imagine the beliefs that might spring up in WoW if that were the case.

Spawning

Spawning as a game mechanic used to be a much bigger deal, such as in the original EverQuest. This is because some mobs would have spawn times of an hour or six hours in addition to having place-holder spawns. This helps to partly explain why there were many superstitions regarding spawning in EQ in a way that there aren't in a game like WoW where spawning is faster and less painful. One prevalent superstition was the existence of an "anti-spawn" radius.

In EverQuest, many players were under the impression that the respawn mechanic for monsters/NPCs took into account players' positions. So when people were fighting things in dungeons, they'd often leave whatever room they were in for a bit because they felt that the room wouldn't respawn while they were there. [EQ, M, 24]

It was widely believed that the game designers had implemented an 'anti-camp radius' around major spawns, such that the mobs would not spawn if people were within the radius. Of course, no one knew exactly what the extent of this radius was, so more risk-averse people would camp further and further from the spawn point in order to avoid the

radius. The developers at Verant found this so funny (there was no anti-camp radius) that they added as a comment during some loading screens 'Checking anti-camp radius' just to mess with these players. [Eve Online, M, 31]

Other superstitions involved cleaning up after yourself.

In Everquest it was a belief that you needed to loot all the corpses of everything in order for more mobs to spawn. This of course is untrue. The mobs spawn on a fairly precise timer and have nothing to do with crowding around the spawn area. [CoH, F, 37]

And of course, some people developed ritual dances for spawning. As you're reading these, please note the uncanny resemblance of this to Skinner's pigeons.

My favorite rituals would probably be the various 'spawn dances' in EQ. People were very superstitious about what caused mobs (NPCs) to respawn (moreso in the early days, but it did continue), and would concoct rituals--spawn dances--to encourage spawns. They varied wildly - some people had special gear sets they used, others had sets and sequences of movements and animations (via animated emotes, spellcasting, terrain), ways to move or not move (must stay sitting, still, as much as possible; or must move continually/every X seconds), etc. [WoW, M, 23]

Some players would sit and stand rapidly while strafing back and forth. Others would crouch and run in circles or figure-eight patterns. Jumping seemed also to be a common theme. Seeing a full group of six characters dancing in this manner shortly before a mob was to spawn was very funny. I think that it sometimes was done as a joke, but I knew some players who swore by its success. [EQ, M, 28]

Loaded Dice

Given the prevalence of random rolling systems in many MMOs, it makes sense that players might develop superstitions on what is ostensibly a random number generator. Of course, badly-implemented random number generators (or overly imaginative players) often give the impression of having patterns. One of the most popular superstitions is that you can get rid of your "bad rolls".

I've seen some people in games with loot systems that let you roll (mostly DAOC), they'd do a bunch of random rolls till they get a string of low rolls. This is of course in hopes they'll get a high roll on the important raid loot. [M, 21]

I've seen people roll their dice repeatedly when joining a raid, stopping just after a terrible roll because they were 'getting the bad rolls out'. They weren't kidding. [WoW, M, 31]

A variant of this is waiting till someone else makes a bad roll and then rolling yourself.

When /rolling random 0-100 numbers, if you waited until someone else rolled a low number before rolling your own, you would increase your chances of getting a higher number (variant of the gambler's fallacy). [WoW, M, 31]

Others prefer an order-based method of rolling.

There are a lot of people that have all kinds of theories on rolling random for group loot. Sometimes they want to be first to roll, sometimes second or last. It tends to get funny in groups when people try to roll at the same time since most of them won't say till afterwards that they are trying to roll in a particular order. [WoW, M, 22]

When an item drops, they roll first, or wait until last, or if they anticipate an upcoming item, they roll a few times randomly to 'get the bad rolls out'. (Which usually results in a high roll, which they worry they 'wasted'.) [WoW, M, 34]

Risks, Costs, and Persistence of Superstitions

It bears pointing out the conditions that encourage superstitions to develop and the irrational and social mechanisms that sustain them. As we've seen, superstitions are more likely to involve low-chance and high-risk events. In practice, they are partly sustained because the cost of a 30 second superstitious behavior is extremely low in comparison with a raid wipe (and the consequent regrouping time).

'Sundering the Beast in UBRS causes him to AOE nonstop.' I mean, huh? Since when has Blizzard ever marked a single ability for this sort of arbitrary punishment? 'Hey kids, don't use curse of weakness on Gandling, because he starts teleporting people a ton faster...' But nobody wanted to try it out; I remember actually offering to pay people a gold each to let me try sundering (I was MT) and they refused; nobody wanted a wipe. When the alternative is a wipe, people are very pious when it comes to respecting these technological taboos. [WoW, M, 23]

Another mechanism is that we tend to remember confirming cases more than disconfirming cases. But typically, one confirming case is enough to create a new group of converts.

If it worked some of the time, it was enough for the group in question to continue to think that the process they were following was crucial to the success of whatever it was they were doing. [EQ2, M, 36]

Overall, I was most surprised by how widespread superstitions were across MMOs and how adamantly some players follow them. Of course, as I mentioned earlier, a few of these superstitions might in fact be true, but most are likely to be false. I'll close this exploration of superstitions with an anecdote that is a little more light-hearted.

In EQ1 people used to think that if you didn't stand on the top of Orc Hill, it would make the Orc Trainer spawn faster. This was a pretty silly thing, but it was a common thing to hear people say in game. The funniest part about it was when I went to the official SOE EQ Velious expansion party in Las Vegas, and there was a huge, slow moving line to get in, even for those of us who were pre-registered for the event. We were all standing in line in a hall of the hotel, and there was carpeting that was occasionally broken up by a small area of tile. At one point I said 'Hey, I heard if you don't step on the tiles, the line will move faster,' and a whole bunch of people in line busted up laughing. [EQ2, F, 42]

Appendix

There were a bunch of interesting submitted superstitions that didn't neatly fit into the narrative flow of the article, but I wanted to make sure that they were shared as well. Here they are.

Bovine Assault

Many years ago, in Asheron's Call, outside the city of Rithwic I came upon a new player that was standing around as a cow was beating the living crap out of him. I moved closer to save him, as he was taking no action to thwart the rampaging dairy cow. I drew my weapon and he called out, 'Please don't kill the cow!!!' Perplexed I stopped and he explained that he was deliberately letting the cow eat him without reprisal because he had heard that if a monster attacks you, it would 'raise your defense, and that's very important later in the game!' I didn't have the heart to tell him that it would literally take years of continuous bovine assault before it made a substantial difference. [ATITD, M, 34]

A Special, Happy Place

In EverQuest there were several folks in my guild who believed if their characters got drunk enough they would actually be teleported to a special location. I think this rumor started because somebody got so drunk they couldn't tell where they were walking (since being drunk warps the way the game draws the graphics) and got stuck in a weird place under Freeport or Qeynos. So these guys kept getting smashed on long camps to try and go to this 'special' location, which really screwed us one time when the MOB we wanted appeared but half of the group was too wasted to attack it. No matter how much others tried to convince them that there was no special place they never stopped believing it was true. [WoW, M, 36]

Paint Brush of Souls

There is an area deep in a temple in FFXI where you have to go through a ritualistic sort of procedure to open a secret door. First you have to acquire an item (the Paintbrush of Souls). This item gets taken to a particular room. Once in the room you have to 'talk' to a few objects in a certain order, then face your character at a blank canvas. The game tells you that your character starts to paint on the canvas, then puts a mark at the end of the line to let you know that you have to hit Enter to continue.

The trick to opening the door is you have to wait approximately thirty seconds before hitting Enter. You must give your character time to finish their painting. (The game gives no hints on your progress, nor when you are done. You just have to be patient, and wait a minimum of thirty seconds.) In FFXI, you can chat in real time in a variety of different ways. If you hit enter to send a chat message during the painting, it would abort the waiting period. I can't tell you how many times I had been in that area, where a raid leader would swear up and down that the **only** way to open the door is for **everyone** to be absolutely silent for two full minutes; if anybody typed anything at all, the door wouldn't open and it would be YOUR FAULT! [EO, M, 27]

Through the Looking Glass

In a recent survey, I asked players whether they had ever learned anything about themselves from their MMO experiences, or whether their experiences in an MMO had ever changed how they thought about themselves or their perspective of the world. About 400 MMO players responded to this particular question, revealing some interesting perspectives on what they have learned from their experiences in an MMO.

MMOs are interesting social spaces in several ways. First of all, there are almost no other social spaces in the physical world where people from such different demographic backgrounds and life experiences collaborate on a regular basis. The age range in most MMOs goes from 10 to 70. In a typical 5-person pick-up group, you may have a high-school student, a war veteran, a professional home-maker, a law professor, and a retired bank manager. In our education and work systems, we typically only get to talk and work with people who are incredibly similar to ourselves. This is actually seldom the case in MMOs. Another thing that bears pointing out that there are almost no social spaces in the physical world where teenagers routinely get to work with adults as equals. But not only does collaboration occur, teenagers routinely lead groups of adults, give them orders, and partly schedule their leisure time in MMOs. Learning how to work with and lead a diverse group of people is an important social skill, especially for teenagers.

Beyond the demographic landscape, MMOs also expose us to stressful group conflicts, leadership opportunities, and moral dilemmas, among other scenarios, that we may be less often exposed to in our day to day lives. Another interesting part of MMOs is the compressed time in several domains. While it may take decades to rise to the top of your profession in the real world, it is possible to reach max-level in some MMOs with just several months of casual playing. The rate at which guilds form, fragment, and dissolve may also allow some players to try out and understand how to lead and manage teams in ways that may take much much longer in an actual office. In short, MMOs may offer players experiences in roles and positions that they may not have access to in the physical world.

Leadership and Management

Of all the things that players mentioned, one came up over and over again. Of the 400 responses, and this includes players who said “no, didn’t learn anything”, about 44 specifically described how they had become better leaders or team managers from their MMO experiences. Many of these players also specifically mentioned how this has helped them tangibly in their work lives, in terms of promotions or better pay-scales.

The following responses are insightful because several players articulate the specific skills that they have become better at from their MMO experiences. Another important thing to note is that these responses aren't only coming from teenagers who have few leadership and management experiences from real life. Players from all over the age range noted this change. And finally, I want to point out that no examples were given in the original phrasing of the question. In other words, this isn't a case of respondents flocking to examples in the question stem.

Leading Raids in EQ gave me the courage to take up project manager duties in the real world. I would attack each project as if I needed a raid of people to take it down, and would put together good teams of people to get the job done. EverQuest is directly responsible for me getting promoted and a MUCH better pay scale. [EQ2, F, 44]

I've honestly learned to be a far better manager by helping run a WoW guild. I lead game development teams in real life. I stopped running my WoW guild because I realized I would come home from work, try to play, and end up doing the same thing I do all day. It was stressful. WoW has helped me get better at resolving disputes, improving individual team members' performance, dealing quickly and fairly with problem children and prima donnas, managing results / rewards expectations, and communicating more clearly and effectively. [WoW, F, 41]

The game environments helped me realize that the only thing preventing me from being a leader in real life was a lack of self-confidence. I didn't believe I was old enough, or good enough, or capable enough. MMOs got me over that stumbling block. These days I'm comfortable leading teams of any size, whether it's ten people or one hundred. I've taken small tech teams (just a few engineers) into contract jobs and produced excellent results; I've been a department chair (with dozens of staff) for a non-profit convention with over twenty thousand attendees. Doesn't matter what size the task is, doesn't matter what size the team - if I can lead, I'll do well, and that makes me very happy. I have MMOs to thank. I might not have developed this way otherwise. [EO, M, 27]

I had never really thought of myself as a leader, or someone who naturally takes charge. After pouring myself into being a WoW guild leader for almost 2 years, I find myself taking on the role of arbiter, overseer for projects, personal counselor, and friend to a lot of people whom I've never actually met. This has translated into my personal life a great deal, as I've gained the confidence to begin acting upon leadership impulses in my workplace which have recently led to a promotion to upper management. [Anon]

I learned that I can be a leader. When I started playing World of Warcraft I never expected to gain any sort of prestige in a guild. When I finished with the game I was a class leader in a top end raiding guild. Since being a class leader I have received two promotions at work, one to crew trainer and another to shift manager. This is significant for me because people had always told me I was too shy to be a leader and not a very good teacher. MMOs have taught me how to manage people and resolve conflicts as well as how to pass my own skills on to others. [EQ2, F, 20]

In addition to high-level leadership and management, a related skill that several players brought up was learning how to work with and understand other people in team scenarios.

Before my MMO experience I preferred to work alone, but the tasks I ended up doing in the game taught me that I can work in a team just as well and even take the lead when needed or asked for. One Guild Leader promoting me to Class Leader because of my knowledge about that class and the resulting duties during raids (telling people of my class what to do) showed me more of my abilities that no amount of group assignments in school had ever managed to do. [WoW, F, 32]

Things like running guilds, or being leadership in one, these things really clue me in to the dynamics of group interaction. I've frequently found myself drawing on my online experiences to get along better with people at work. [WoW, M, 27]

Gaining Confidence

Another theme that some players brought up was that their in-game interactions allowed them to work through some shyness issues they've had in face-to-face interactions. What is most striking in this first anecdote is that the MMO space removed barriers to self-growth present in this person's day-to-day life at school.

I used to be very quiet and withdrawn. In school, I was extremely insecure about myself and my abilities. After picking up WoW in ninth grade, I developed the extroverted side of myself and became way more outgoing and secure of myself. My sense of humor, which was typically kept within my own head, found its way out into jokes and a general sense of easy-going-ness. Now I'm the one who's drawing out the quiet ones, because I still know how it felt to be that shy. I am also much more confident in my own intelligence and abilities. Being in an environment where the playing field is completely level and it didn't

matter that I was only a young girl allowed me to find out that I really could succeed and that I really am competent. Being accepted by a group of my mental peers (college-aged guys) was a wonderful experience and let me see that I was only a 'social reject' within the confines of my high school, where social barriers and judgment had left me very lonely. It gave me the confidence that a typical teenage girl is in severe need of. [WoW, F, 16]

Of course, shyness is an issue that many people struggle with, and isn't a problem only teenagers have to work through.

in wow my character is very personable and outgoing. i will talk to anyone if they strike up a conversation with me and im not too busy (i have died many times from paying more attention to chat than what i am doing!) in real life i am very shy and its hard for me to get to know people. i guess what this has taught me is that i dont need to be afraid to be more outgoing in real life, i was never able to do that before. i think it has also made me be more daring, doing things i wouldnt normally do in real life, such as striking up conversations with strangers. [WoW, F, 28]

One thing that has changed about me through gaming is my newfound ability to say 'hello' to strangers. When I first started playing MMOs (SWG), I was as painfully shy in game as out. As I got more comfortable talking to people in game, I found that I was able to approach people in the real world. [EQ2, F, 34]

One of the processes that drive these increases in confidence, and hinted at by some of the narratives above, is that trying out more confident and sociable identities in an MMO allows them to experience what they didn't think they were capable of. This in turn encourages them to extend their new behavioral repertoire outside of the virtual setting. The following players make this point more explicitly.

It also gave me a lot of confidence - after all, if you can lead a 60-person complex raid, how hard can it be to organize a team meeting? :) This has led to me to take on more responsibility in the workplace and feel comfortable about handling it, as well as being far better able to deal with criticism or conflict (either as target or arbitrator). [WoW, F, 38]

I had to represent myself in court because I could not afford an attorney in a custody battle with my former spouse. He is quite aware that ordinarily I am a push-over in real life. In this situation I kept my pirate character in mind and imagined that I could stand my

ground as I do in the sword fights in the game. I was able to represent myself calmly, clearly and effectively, and the final result was the judge did not award custody to my former spouse and his wife. [WoW, F, 23]

Personal Growth

Apart from these two broad classes of skills that people mentioned, some players described stumbling-blocks in their personalities that their game experiences allowed them to move past. These are probably more accurately described as personal growth. This first anecdote is a good example.

I was raised to be self-sufficient. For instance, if I asked my Mom how to spell something, she would tell me to look it up in the dictionary. The message I got was that I shouldn't ever ask for help. When I started playing EQ, I quickly learned that I could be more effective if I had buffs from other players in the group, but I also found that it was really hard for me to ask for buffs, even from group members, because it went against my childhood 'programming' of not asking for help. In time, I learned that it was not only better for me, but better for the whole group if I just went ahead and asked for the buffs I needed anyway. It became much easier for me to ask for buffs, and I found this behavior spilling over into my real life as well. Now I find it much easier to ask for help in real life when I need it. It has without a doubt had a positive effect on my perspective of the world to know that it's perfectly okay to ask for help when I need it. [EQ2, F, 42]

Another kind of growth that several players mentioned was learning how to stay calm and not be bothered by the small stuff in life.

I used to think myself a fairly angry person, merely being killed in PvP in World of Warcraft would spark off angry insult-throwing tantrums from myself, even though the only person who would hear it would be me. I've realized how much of an angry person I am through this, and have been fighting to control it ever since I realized. If a rogue jumps me and beats the ever-living crap out of me without me being able to do anything, I try to shrug and tell myself it happens. If I die repeatedly in an encounter ... I just fight the urge to rage about it. I don't particularly want to be an angry person, especially in real life - it raises blood pressure and stress and tension levels. It makes you insult people for no good reason and gives you intent to cause the same anger (and depression really) in other people. It's nothing I want to be a part of, and playing World of Warcraft and

controlling these emotions has taught me some aspects of Anger Management, I find myself feeling less tense in real life now and I'm thankful for it. [WoW, M, 19]

I think the way in which I've grown the most through playing MMOs is that I no longer get as angry or offended easily by people with obviously stupid or bigoted viewpoints. I find myself seeing comments on the forums or in chat and just thinking, 'It's not worth it.' [WoW, M, 26]

These final two examples are interesting in that they show more clearly how an MMO can reveal an area for potential growth and facilitate that transition.

I am very ambitious in RL. When I was active in Star Wars Galaxies I suddenly realized that I spent all my in game time trying to improve my character. I was always grinding, earning money or questing. The things I really wanted to do like exploring or decorating my house were not high enough on my priority list. They seemed so futile in comparison to gaining another level. Even in a virtual world I wanted to be successful. This mirrored exactly the way I handle work/hobbies in my life. The game helped me to reflect myself. I was really amused when I found out that my toon was indeed a Mini Me. When I thought it through I changed my behavior. Instead of gaming I went shopping and finally found the time to decorate my apartment ... [GW, F, 27]

Often, during raids, I would make jokes in guild chat based on comments that were made on Ventrilo. In general, a lot of my energy was (I do this less now) focused on getting as many people to laugh at those jokes as possible. The downside of this was that very few people ever took me seriously. As a result, I actively decided to change the way I was perceived by others, and started focusing more on keeping the jokes in /whisper with a few friends. Combined with adding more serious commentary in guild chat and in our guild forums, I feel that more people take me seriously, which I prefer to being the 'class clown' who gets very little respect. [WoW, M, 20]

Revealing Aspects of the Self

Of course, it isn't the case that MMOs can solve everyone's personal stumbling-blocks. Indeed, many players noted that their MMO experiences helped reveal negative parts of themselves that they didn't really know about. Since awareness is necessary before change, I guess we could think of these as precursors to personal growth. For example, some players noted that they never realized how competitive they are.

Playing WoW has definitely made me recognize how sensitive I am to competition. I've always known I had a competitive streak, but after obsessing (even while lying in bed) over how to out-DPS the other warlock, or bitching for hours about someone insulting my playing ability in a battleground, that definitely made me realize that I am extremely prone to identifying my personal success, and my value as a person, with my achievements in a specific setting. [WoW, F, 25]

Others noticed how much they cared about other people's approval and their need for validation.

I learned from playing MMOs that I am very concerned about what people think of my performance. I worry sometimes in game about whether or not I am doing a good job, and if people think I am lacking in my class duties. I am 37 years old, but the game brings out these teenage thoughts in me of, 'I hope they like me' and, 'I hope I'm doing things correctly.' You know, I worry about proving myself. This is something I have felt more acutely in-game, but it has helped me to understand some of my behaviors and anxieties in RL. [EQ, F, 37]

I am always annoyed at the co-workers who are show-offs and like to talk about whatever bizarre thing they did with a network at home; these are, to me, nothing more than the fishing stories of the workplace. It was something of a surprise to me, then, to learn when helping a newbie guildmate complete some quests that I really enjoy that same sort of showboating in WoW. I love nothing more than to walk all over a ridiculously low-level quest while someone new to the game watches. I did not realize my ego was that important to me. [WoW, M, 32]

And finally, for others, the game revealed a dark side of themselves that worried them.

IRL, I pride myself on being ethical and honest. Imagine my surprise when I found myself ninja looting in Westfall! A group was fighting a bunch of Defias and I stepped in and looted an unguarded quest item; I was soloing, had been trying to complete the quest for some time, and knew I couldn't do it by myself, so acted impulsively. I realized later that due to the mechanics of the game, this probably wouldn't have prevented them from getting it also, but I was pretty disgusted with myself, and saw a side to my own character that was not so nice. [WoW, F, 53]

I found myself becoming so vindictive that it scares me. I find that I have an ugly monster in me. I definitely don't like this. I now play once again on the PvE server, partly to play with no worries of being ganked and partly to rein in the monster and be myself. [WoW, M, 34]

Global Perspective

One final category of comments that players made involved how their MMO experience helped broaden their perspective of the world. For some, interactions with players from different countries provided a more sober perspective of the US.

Back when I played EQ1 I transferred to a European server with my guild. Had to transfer back shortly after due to many 'muslim baby killer' and other such comments from the non-american players. This really hammered home how much the USA is disliked about the war we started. [CoH, M, 37]

I honestly thank the ability to understand current events a lot better thanks to Guild Wars, my good in game friend happens to be Muslim, and I (an American) don't get any interaction with Muslims outside the internet, and he has really helped me understand just how ... ignorant so many people are, and how powerfully destructive the media is. I've also met many British gamers, who have helped me understand that America isn't the center of the world. [GW, M, 15]

But overall, players commented on how their experiences helped them see the world from a more global, connected perspective.

Playing MMOs have help shaped, the once narrow view of the world I had. It's quite a different thing compared to simply reading up on a foreign country or culture, and being actually able to interact with them on a daily basis. Previously, I wasn't aware of the happenings outside of my region, but since I embarked on playing MMOs, I became more globally aware, and am able to draw comparisons between life here and there. [Lineage 2, M, 18]

During the time that I've played MMOs, I've met people from all over the world, and it has expanded my understanding of the world that we live in. I don't think quite as much 'locally' anymore, but now lean more towards a 'global' type of mindset. [Eve Online, F, 26]

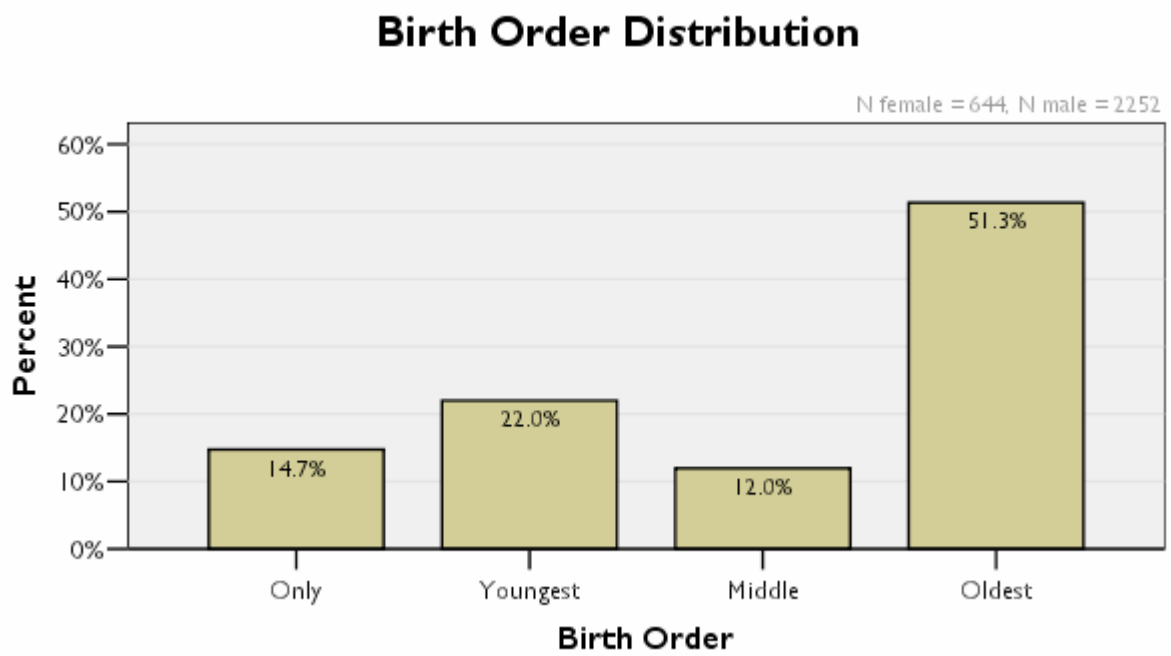
I realized how many great people there are all over the world and how many people you really can be compatible with... it's amazing to think how many people are out there all living their lives that you can talk to and get to know, that you never would have had the opportunity to before. [WoW, F, 27]

Ending Thoughts

I think these narratives are helpful in highlighting the porous boundary between virtual worlds and physical worlds. As many of these stories show, it just isn't fair to talk about MMOs as fantasy worlds that are somehow cut off from reality, nor is it fair to claim that MMOs only produce negative consequences. What happens in MMOs can lead to self-growth as well as promotions at work. Of course, this isn't to say that everyone who plays MMOs will derive positive consequences from it, but these narratives do hint at the fuller spectrum of what MMOs are and the interesting ways that virtual worlds cross over and tie into who we are and what we do in the physical world.

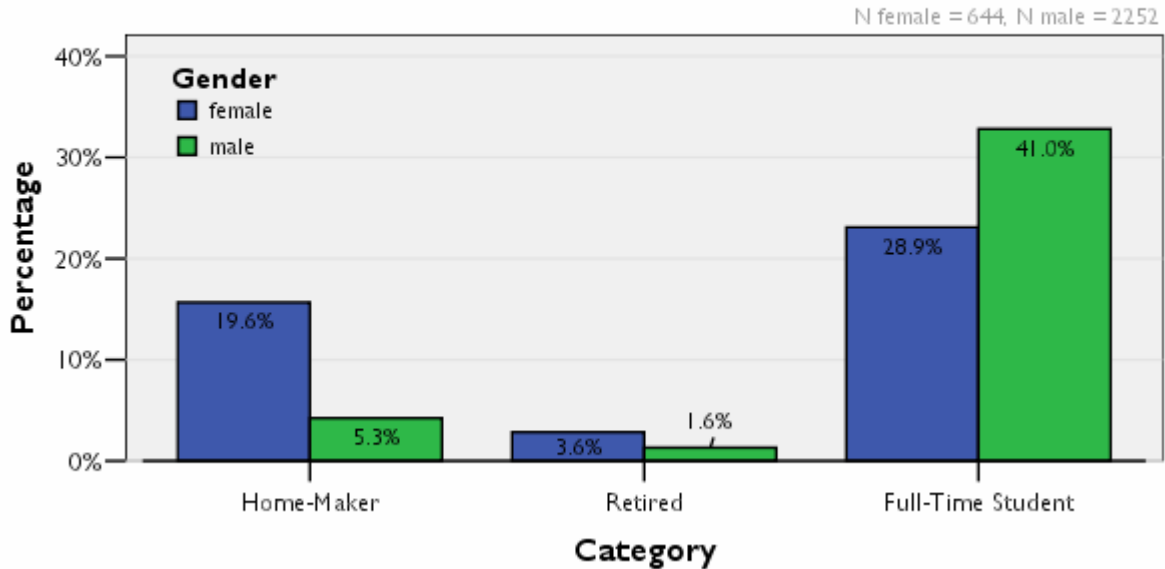
Additional Player Demographics

We've covered the basic demographics before - age, gender, hours played per week (which really haven't changed much over time btw), so here we'll look at other player demographics. I've never really asked about birth order before and the results were somewhat surprising. MMO players seem to be more likely to be the eldest in the family than would be expected from chance alone. This may be a confound with something else that I'm not thinking of, but I'm not sure what it might be. Post a comment if you have a guess why this might be.



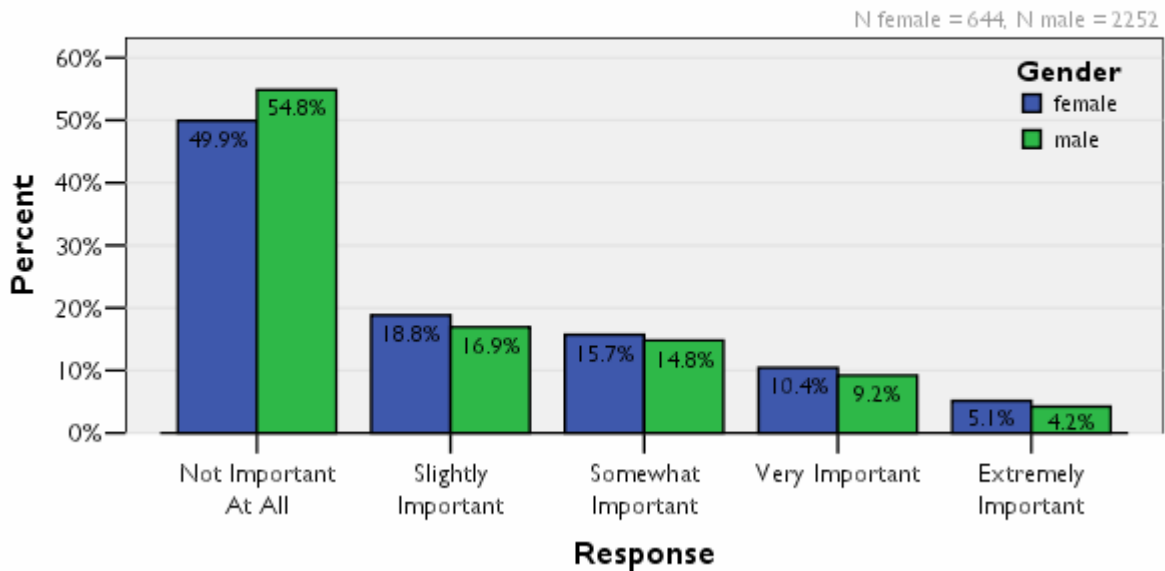
I also asked players whether they were full-time students, full-time home-makers, or retired. Given that the average female MMO player is slightly older than the average male MMO player, the difference in the full-time student category makes sense. The data also showed that about 20% of female players and 5% of male players were full-time home-makers.

Students, Retirees, Home-Makers



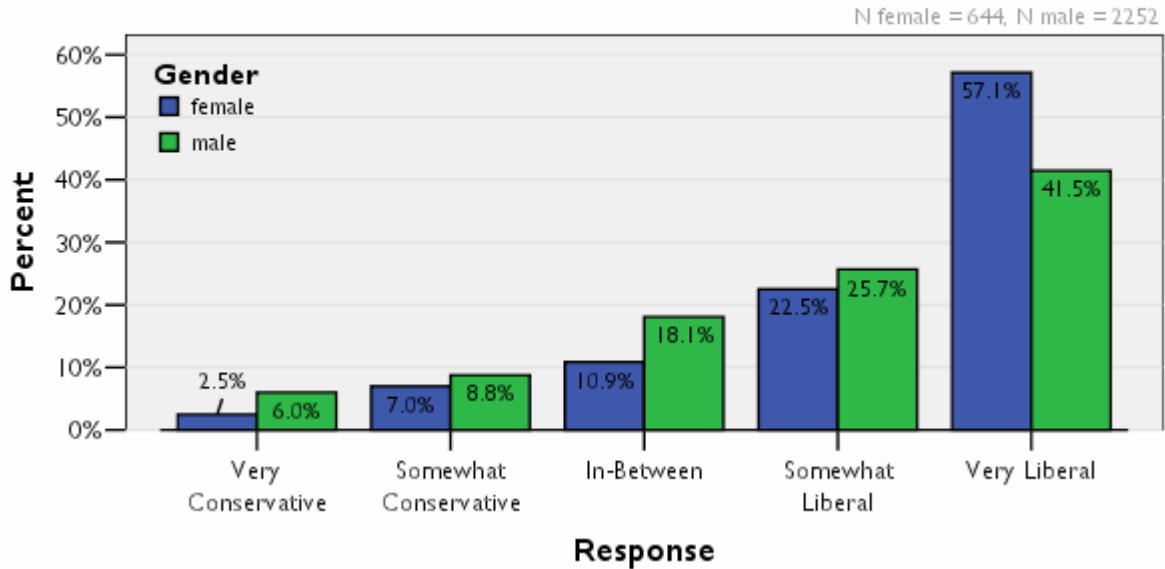
I also looked into attitudes towards religion and social issues. As the graphs show below, religion tends to be fairly unimportant in the lives of most MMO players.

How Important is Religion in Your Life?



This trend is also reflected in the question about political leaning. Players were asked where they typically stood in terms of social issues, such as abortion, gay rights, and stem cell research. Most MMO players tended to be liberal-leaning, with female players describing themselves as more liberal than male players.

Political Leaning



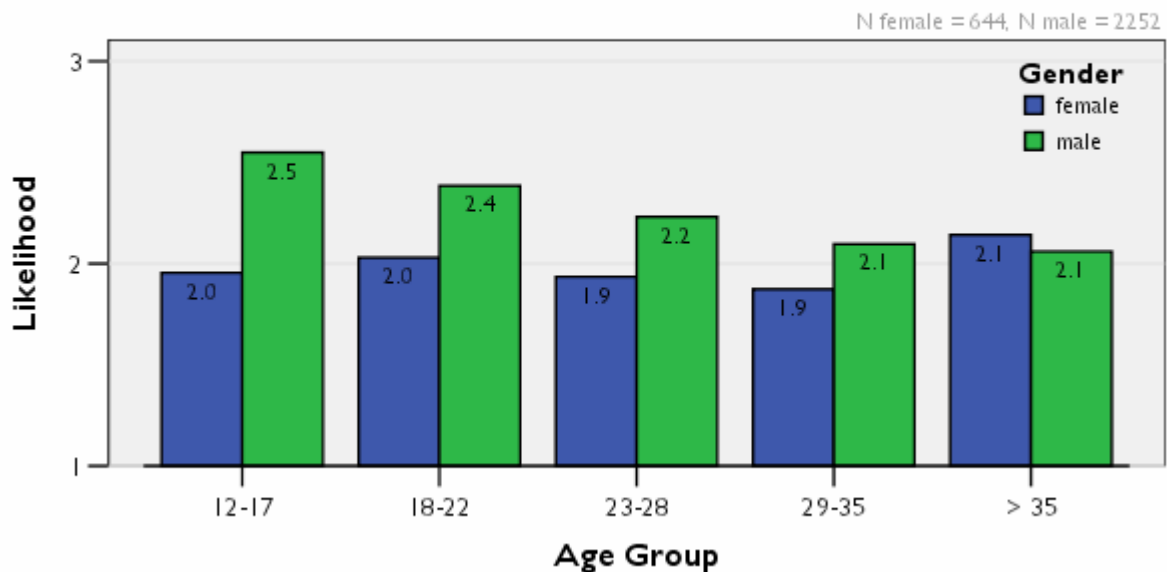
I also tried to see whether either of these two questions was related to class choice among World of Warcraft players. Differences only involved one particular class - Paladins. And while the difference was significant, it was also very small. Players who preferred to play Paladins in WoW tended to be more conservative and religion tended to play a bigger role in their lives. Again, I want to emphasize that this was a significant, but small, difference.

Likelihood of Quitting

We've looked at player fatigue and likelihood of quitting before. In this article, we'll drill down a bit more and look at which demographic and play factors are most likely to drive quitting. These differences would also hint at how a game population changes as a game matures, in terms of which kinds of player are most likely to stay in or leave the population.

One stable finding we've seen before is that female players are less likely to quit an MMO. In the question below, players were asked to rate the likelihood that they would quit in the next 3 months on a 5-point scale (1 = Very Unlikely, 5 = Very Likely). The graph also shows an age trend. Older players are less likely to quit compared with younger players. Or more accurately, male players are less likely to quit as they get older. Female players across all age groups are just as likely to quit. Once past the age of 35, male and female players seem to have converged on the same likelihood of quitting.

How Likely Will You Quit in Next 3 Months?



A multiple regression would let us tease apart the relative importance of these demographic factors (i.e., age, gender, hours played per week) as well as include motivations of play factors (i.e., achievement, social, and immersion) on the likelihood of quitting. The model emerged showed that the relative importance of the factors goes like this:

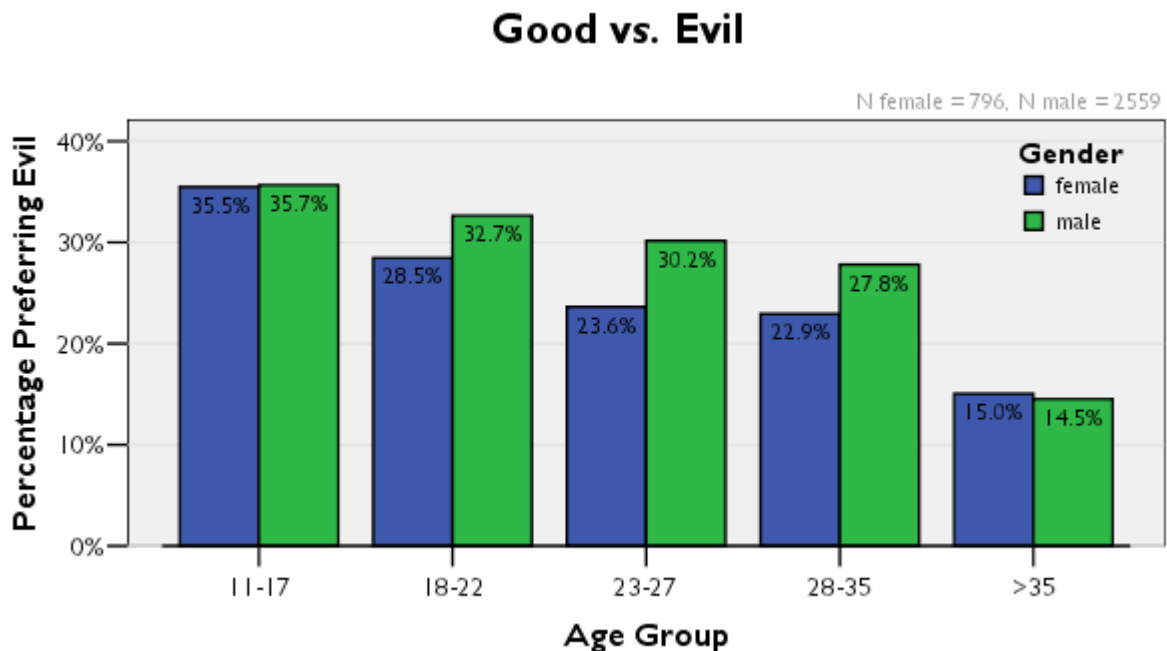
- 1) **Hours** ($b = -.17$): Not surprisingly, the more a player currently plays, the less likely they will quit.
- 2) **Social Motivation** ($b = -.10$): What was surprising was how much the social motivations were related to likelihood of quitting. The more a player enjoyed socializing in an MMO, the less likely they will quit the game.
- 3) **Age** ($b = -.08$): Age comes next. As we've seen, older players are less likely to quit.
- 4) **Achievement Motivation** ($b = .06$): The result here is unintuitive at first. The more a player is achievement-oriented, the more likely they will quit the game. This may be due to grinding and "burning-out" factors, or that players who are goal-driven lose interest in the game once they reach their goals or if they perceive their goals to be not worth the effort.
- 5) **Gender** ($b = .03$): The somewhat striking gender difference in the graph above actually isn't a good predictor of whether a player will quit compared with the other factors listed here.
- 6) **Immersion Motivation** ($b = .008$): And finally, how much a player enjoys role-playing or exploration has no impact on their likelihood of quitting.

This set of factors implies that as a game matures, and assuming that there isn't a large constant influx of new players, the maturing player base will tend to be more socially-oriented, older, and less achievement-oriented. It'll be interesting to see this in an actual game with longitudinal data.

The Demographics of Game Choices

Many MMOs allow players to choose sides or affinities. Sometimes, like in City of Heroes/Villains, players can choose between a clearly good or evil side. In other games, like World of Warcraft, the good/evil divide is a little less clear cut. Of course, these choices don't always revolve around good and evil. For example, they may involve choosing a race, or choosing between technology and nature. Here I'll present some data on different hypothetical choices that a game may ask a player to make when creating a character or during character development. What we'll see over and over again is that whenever a game asks players to make a choice, players seldom evenly distribute themselves. Instead, other factors, such as age, tend to be correlated with those choices. This in turn creates demographic differences between sides/affinities in games.

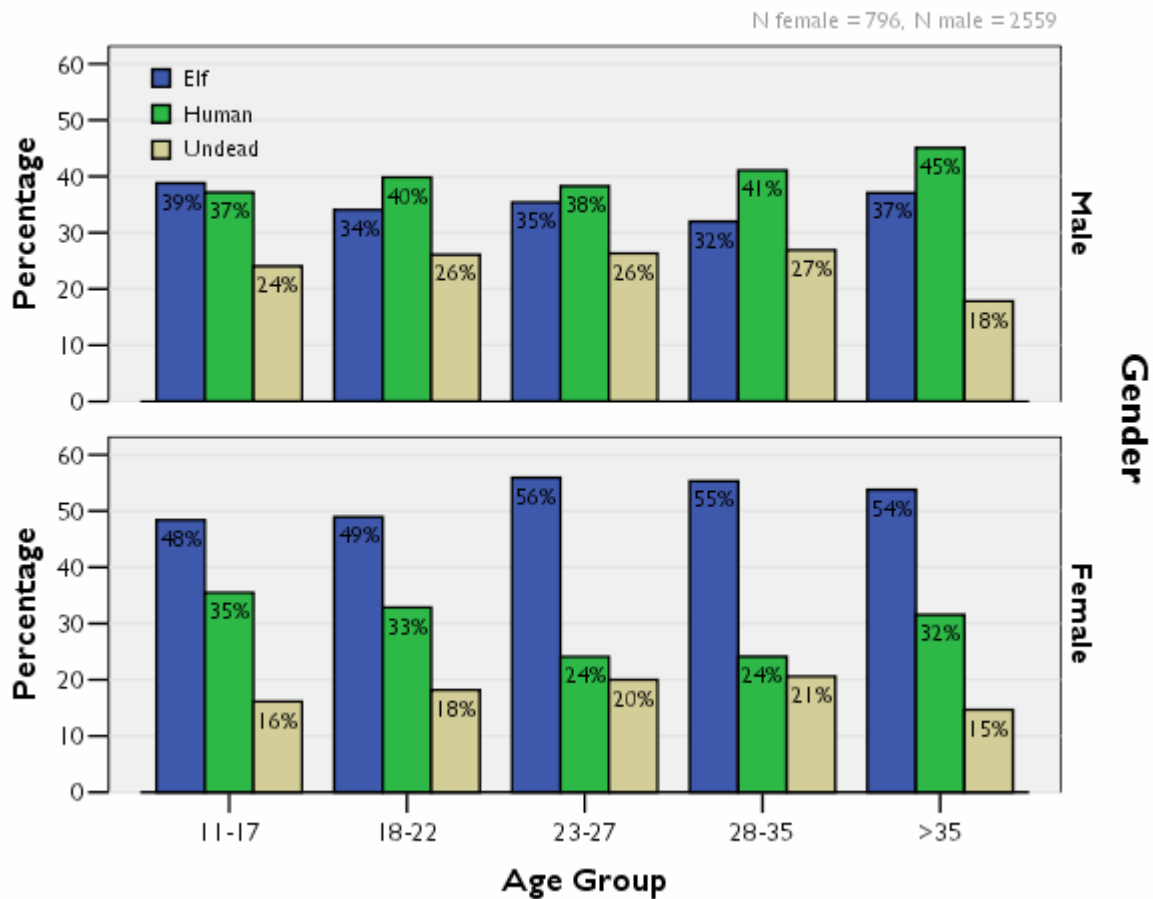
For example, let's start with the good and evil split. The graph below shows both an age and gender difference. Younger players prefer to be on the evil side, and this tendency decreases as age increases. There is also a relatively more mild gender difference in the mid-ranges where male players are more likely to be on the evil side than female players. What's interesting here is that the distribution roughly matches the 2:1 Alliance-to-Horde ratio in WoW.



Another choice that almost all MMOs ask players to make is to choose a race. To simplify matters, I choose 3 races - Elves, Humans, and Undead. Overall, there were almost no age differences,

and the only striking difference that emerged was that female players were more likely to prefer playing Elves whereas male players tended to be more evenly distributed.

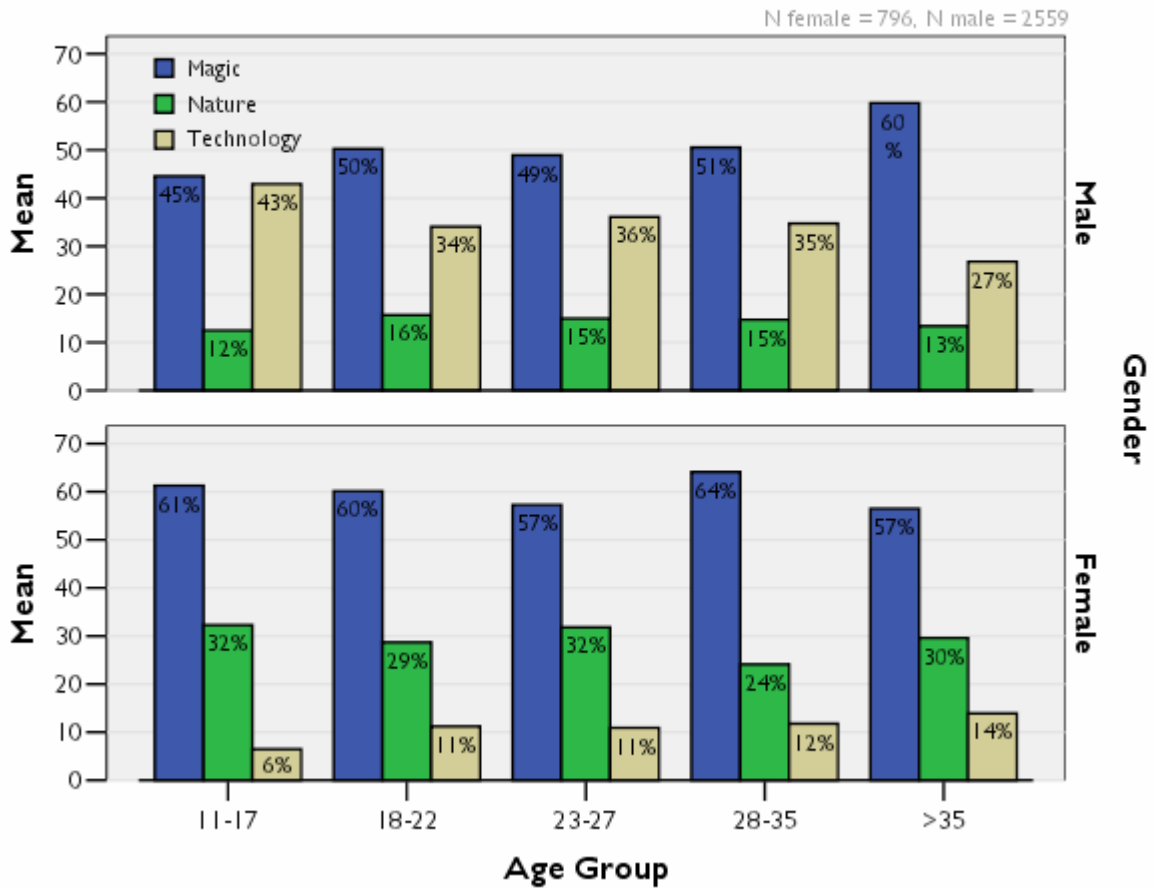
Choosing a Race



Another kind of choice that has less often been made explicit in MMOs is choosing a source of power. For example, a pet could be magic-based (e.g., elemental), nature-based (e.g., wolf), or technology-based (e.g., mechanical droid). Demographic differences with these three hypothetical choices were interesting.

Male players were about 3 to 4 times more likely to prefer a technology source than female players, and female players were about twice as likely to prefer a nature source as male players. Preference for a magical was roughly comparable between male and female players. There was also an interesting age trend among the male players. Preference for technological sources decreased as a function of age.

Choosing an Affinity



And finally, another functional divide in most MMOs is between dealing damage and healing damage. In this particular question, I focused on spell-casting and whether players would prefer a damage spell or a healing spell. Here, the gender difference is quite clear. Female players prefer healing spells over damage spells. There is also a mild age difference. Older players tend to prefer healing.

Damage vs. Healing Spell

