The Daedalus Project

Most Memorable Experiences

What kinds of experiences do players find the most memorable in an MMO? What is it that brings back the most salient memories once the game experience itself has past and the dust settles? In this article, we'll take a look through what players described to be their most memorable MMO experiences. As we will see, these experiences are almost always social experiences. Even in the cases where achievement is a strong component of the experience, it is the social aspect of achievement that players emphasize.

Achievements

Goal-oriented or achievement-oriented experiences were the primary category that most of the narratives fell under.

Team Achievements

Within this category, most players described an achievement in a social context. The "against all odds" scenario was one that was recounted by players across a wide variety of games.

> While playing EverQuest (the original) my constant group had just moved into a new territory. We were engaged in fighting some regular mobs when suddenly the baddest mob in that territory attacked us. Now we had already been killed once or twice by that mob, so our natural reaction was to run. But, one of our members had been rooted in the previous engagement. I was the tank, so I engaged to give time to my companion for the root to break. My group returned and we fought the baddest mob in the region and beat it. My heart still picks up a beat when I remember that fight. [WoW, M, 45]

> After playing WoW for about a year, my friends and I joined up with another small guild and headed into The Core. We all worked hard as hell to succeed, and put in many hours out of game in order to advance the group in MC. On about our sixth attempt on Lucifron we killed him. I've

never felt so elated. I've competed on sports teams, worked hard academically, and played many another video game, but I've never felt so elated, such a sense of accomplishment. [WoW, M, 20]

My most memorable experience is with my guild, Team Spirit, in The Saga of Ryzom. We trekked across the World of Ryzom to reach an Outpost War. We were helping to defend the outpost from it's attackers and there were supposedly many people going to the war. Upon arriving at the outpost we found that many who had pledge their support to the defense of the outpost had not arrived. We were 30 minutes into a two hour battle and the outpost was almost lost. We fought long and hard and coordinated our healing and attacks and manage to barely pull off a victory. It was a great experience having entered into a battle where all hope was lost and pull out a victory. It felt like we were the cavalry from the old westerns that arrives just in the nick of time! [Saga of Ryzom, M, 40]

PvP Achievements

Sometimes, events are memorable not because of collaboration, but because of competition. Several players brought up their PvP experiences, but there were far fewer of these in comparison with memories of team achievements. Of course, as we see in the third narrative, collaboration and competition can occur at the same time.

I was playing as my rogue in World of Warcraft, and had just spirit rezzed, and as such was incapable of putting up a fight. A horde warlock killed me in this weakened state, and I swore revenge. I got back to my corpse, and rezzed, with the warlock nearby. I snuck up to him and sapped him. When that wore off, I sapped him again. When that wore off, he tried to aoe fear, but I wasn't next to him, and then I sapped him again. I spent 10 minutes avoiding his aoes and detection attempts, using every ability I had to keep the warlock completely incapacitated, and to prevent him from running. At the end of those 10 minutes, no longer having res sickness, I massacred him, spat on his corpse, and left. [WoW, M, 22]

The first online MMORPG I played (Last Kingdom) as soon as I was high enough to be pk'd by another player I was, over and over again day in and day out, to the point to where IMO it was probably considered grief play but I didn't know that there was a such thing at the time since I was new to the world of MMORPG's. Any how I hated it so much that I found a secluded place and I literally power leveled myself up past the griefers level so that he was no longer able to kill me, then not to my surprise when I ran past him he tried his hand at his old pk trick again and much to his surprise I was able to turn around and swat him with my sword and actually killed him in return for all the pk'ing he had done to me in the past. It was very enjoyable to finally get revenge. [WoW, F, 30]

This was in DAoC, before the ruin that was Tales of Atlantis. I had finally made it to lvl50 with my scout (my friends had achieved lvl 50 on different days within two weeks) and got my epic gear and enchants. So we went out to hunt other factions. What I got myself into was a war! I did not expect this; a raid on Midgard soil was going on and friendly forces had captured a castle. We joined them and for the next 3 hours we were fighting back and forth between two rival castles, ours and theirs. In the end, some allies that were more experienced in realm vs. realm joined us, organized us and built siege machines. That final launch and capture of the enemy castle is burned in my memory and serves to this day as what a PvP should be; frantic, massive, tactical, and cooperative. [WoW, M, 30]

Solitary Achievements

This is not to say that no players listed solitary achievements as being very memorable, but these were very rare.

I believe my sweetest memory was completing the Coldain Prayer Shawl in EverQuest. This quest took me nearly 18 months to complete and consumed probably 75% of my total assets in EverQuest, perhaps more. [WoW, M, 35]

[The experiences] involve a particularly difficult feat that I pulled off with my character (i.e. one time I was able to defeat two level 60 players in a Battleground by myself at the same time, another time I was able to solo most of the 'Onyxia Quest Chain' in BRD, etc.) - these experiences always give a sense of triumph over insurmountable odds. [WoW, M, 30]

The Trek

While most of the achievements listed so far revolve around combat and killing mobs, there was one particular non-combat achievement that several players described. This involved the long cross-continent run that many EQ players did. The scenario is worth documenting because it doesn't primarily involve killing mobs or gaining quest items and because players who described it did so in great detail (which is impressive given how long it has been since they did the run). It also highlights how pervasively dangerous the world of EQ was compared with some of the more recent MMOs, and how that constant danger helped many relationships to form. Also worth pointing out is that no other trek in any other game was mentioned in the player responses. Due to the length of these narratives, I'm only going to present one.

Back when I first started playing EverQuest, I really wanted to play a barbarian shaman, but my friend had just bought the game and made a high elf paladin. Geographically, the two races

couldn't have started much further apart. Seeing as I had a bit more experience with the game, though, I volunteered to make the very long, dangerous run from Halas (the barbarian starting city) to Felwithe, the high elves' starting city.

When you died, you went back to your bind point. At the time, the only classes that could cast the bind spell were, if I remember correctly, mages and wizards. And EverQuest was very mercenary in its day; if you wanted a bind, you had to pay someone, and while it wasn't exactly millions of platinum, even a single bind was way beyond the financial means of a newbie. Plus (again, if I remember correctly), you could only bind in city zones. Further complicating matters was that players always moved slower than mobs, and mobs never gave up the chase (unless you zoned). Given my low level and the speed of most mobs, basically, during this run (two hours, I think), if I aggroed anything, and wasn't either near one of a few guard posts or a zone line, I was dead.

So, I printed out some maps from EQatlas, and planned out the trip. I still remember it. Start in Halas, go south through the mountains into Blackburrow (a lowbie dungeon), then to the Qeynos hills, which would be the easiest part of the trip. From Qeynos Hills, you had to go to West Karana, an absolutely massive zone (the largest in the game, at the time), trying to keep an eye out for the werewolf spawn at the zone line that would be instant death (as would most of the mobs during this trip). Then, after getting across West Karana, North Karana, the most dangerous overland area I'd be going through. The griffons there were fast and tough enough to wipe out the guards, if they attacked it. From North Karana, I'd go to East Karana, a still dangerous (but substantially less so) area, up to High Hold Pass, a quasi-dungeon crawling with orcs and gnolls. Thankfully, it was usually so heavily camped that getting through wouldn't be much of a problem. From there, I had to travel through Kithicor Forest, a lowbie area by day that spawned with some of the nastiest undead in the game at night, and they didn't necessarily despawn at daybreak. So, my plan was to hug the northern zone wall the whole way through, and hope for the best. From Kithicor, I'd go to the Western Commonlands, a not-so-dangerous area. The mobs there could still kill me, but at least not as fast, and because the zone had a wizard spire, it was always full of high-level characters. I could probably get some help. Then, I'd go to the Eastern Commonlands, a lowbie zone that would be pretty easy to get across, then to Freeport, and - hopefully - a bind. From Freeport, I'd get on the boat to the Butcherblock mountains, an area roughly equivelent to the Western Commonlands, then to Greater Faydark, a lowbie area, and finally, Felwithe. Quite a trip.

To improve my chance of surviving, I found a few other lowbies that wanted to make the trip. I figured we'd caravan it. If we got aggroed, at least some of us would make it. And it worked, for a while. Somewhere in West Karana, we got aggroed, I believe it was by a lion, and it wiped out the

whole group except for two of us. The other that survived, a higher-level wizard, managed to use Gate and teleport back to hit bindpoint. I was left running. But, just before the mob could catch be, something nuked it, and nuked it HARD. I looked around and saw a level 50 druid named Shider (who had presumably just blasted the crap out of that lion with Starfire). Shider asked me if I needed any help, and I told him I was trying to make the run to Felwithe to meet a friend. He buffed me, and just said to follow. Long story short, he made the trip for me; teleporting us both to the druid ring closest, then running us back, with Spirit of the Wolf (a run speed buff far more significant than anything WoW's got). He even took me right up to the gates of Freeport, and got a Bind for me. I said thanks, and he disappeared.

A few weeks later, I was around level 25-30, and … came across a ranger camping the ruins. We chatted a bit, I'd buff him up for the tougher fights, and over a few days, we kept bumping into each other and talking some more. Eventually, he asked me to join his guild. They were called the Freeport Tavern Drunks, so I accepted out of curiosity. After saying my hellos, I did a /who guild, and ... Shider! Over time, I found out Shider was played by a woman named Bobbie, who was a graphic arts student from Ohio. Not that anyone knew at the time, but she was dating (actually, not online) another guildmate. Eventually, I met her boyfriend, Jim (also from Ohio), and he and I got to be pretty good friends. These days, none of us play EverQuest anymore, but Jim and I talk online most days of the week, and I still talk to Bobbie on a somewhat infrequent basis. I generally don't make friends online, but Jim and Bobbie have been the exception. They're the only 'online' friends I've ever made. [WoW, M, 25]

Relationships

The second most common category that narratives fell under revolved around specific relationships or memorable interactions with another person.

Random Acts of Kindness

As we saw towards the end of the narrative in the last section, random acts of kindness can make a huge impact. Indeed, many players described unexpected acts of generosity as their most memorable experience.

A good experience I once had was when I was on a low level alt and someone I was friends with on another character (who had no idea it was me) walked up to me and gave me a rare item saying "Here, this'll help you get started? I gave her a bunch of potions on my main in thanks and she never figured out why, but when she did that it just made me really happy. A random act of kindness to someone whom she thought she didn't know and would never see again. [WoW, F, 17]

I was running the Stratholme instance with a pick-up group. A very rare epic quality gun dropped. No one in the group needed it and everyone "greed" rolled for it, as it was Bind on equip. I won and was very surprised. Elated, I linked it into guild chat to brag about what I had won. At that time this item was the best hunter gun on the server and worth about 3-400+g on the auction house. My guild master at that time (a hunter and great and fun friend!) was very clearly very jealous. Though it was clear he wanted the item he did not say anything about it. He congratulated me said it would make me some good gold, and he log off very shortly after. I spent a few hours thinking about what to do with the gun - sell on AH or give to my hunter friend? Eventually I decided to wrap it up in wrapping paper and sent it to him in the game mail. I logged off not log after for the weekend and forgot about it all together. The next day (Sat) at 3pm there was a knock on my door. I opened it to find my online friend (the hunter) and his wife holding several bottles of wine and a huge cake. He was grinning ear to ear and had been so happy with what he'd found in the post they had got my address from another friend and driven 115 miles to come thank me. We had a great laugh about it all, had a little impromptu party and ending up sitting up to 3am talking about WoW and our experiences. It was great fun and a fabulous feeling to have been able to make someone happy with something that I had obtained luckily but with such little effort. [WoW, M, 33]

Romantic Relationships

Some players described how they met their romantic partner in an MMO. The latter two narratives really hit on the sheer "totally random" nature of how these relationships start in MMOs.

A friend and I used to spend many hours talking online - we'd take our characters somewhere scenic - Feralas (lush forests and waterfalls), the Barrens (high hilltops and great views), the roof of the Orgrimmar auction house, and sit and have hours long conversations. One of our favorite places to talk was the hill just outside of the Crossroads. If you look to the east you can just see the town and the smoke from the inn. To the north you can see the low trees and the open plains. It's quiet and out of the way. We'd often talk about guild issues there or discuss personal problems, sometimes just enjoy the scenery and some peace and quiet. Over time, it became apparent that he and I were developing a relationship. One day (November 21st to be precise!) he took me up to that hill and we stood there for a while, and that one place is where he asked me to go out with him. That was nine months ago and we've met in person and still have an amazing relationship. We don't go to the Barrens as often as we used to, but out of everything that's happened to me in almost 2 years of playing? That was absolutely the most memorable! [WoW, F, 30]

My most memorable experience was the night my girlfriend and I really hit it off on WoW. She was fishing right next to me in Dustwallow by the crash site and I just struck up a conversation with her. The next thing you know we were running around, killin' mobs together, and quoting Shakespeare! We've since moved in together, are totally and utterly and completely twitterpated, and haven't looked back. Out of 8M people who play WoW and 2M of them assumed to be Chinese gold farmers it never ceases to amaze me how I met the love of my life on the Gurubashi server at 3am PST. I'm the luckiest guy in the world. [WoW, M, 26]

So I was pissed off that I somehow made a healer as my first main character on City of Villains. I was 3/4 dead looking at my screen where I was about level 22 or 26 …debating on deleting my character and making something where every ass on the game would refrain from saying, 'Heal More' or 'Heal Me'. So … Yea! I got sick of that shit hella fast. Anyways ... I'm sittin lookin at my screen HATING my character, when I get an ingame Private Message, from some Guy named Omega Man. Hmm, says he is lookin for a healer. Now I at this point am sick to death of healing whole teams ... so I replied, Can I just heal you? He said, 'yeap' and ummm ... July 22nd 2006 we got married in real life. [CoH, F, 30]

Friendships

For other players, the friendships they forged in the game were their most memorable experiences.

Shortly after starting the game, I ended up in Darkshore. I have no luck with directions IRL and that translated perfectly well into game as well. I asked once in the general channel if anyone was willing to help someone hopelessly lost finish a quest. A guy responded and we teamed up. He had 2 characters in party, and I'd come to find out later he had and maintained 2 accounts! He helped me finish my quest (he had a warrior and a priest) and we went on to team up through the remainder of the night. The next day when I came on, he invited me to group again. This happened day after day and soon we were inseparable. He had more free time then I did and would hold off leveling so that we could all be at the same place at the same time. We hit 60 together, were in the same guilds together, and explored end game content together. Our professions were complementary and we had 300 in each on our various alts. About 3 months ago he was shipped off to Iraq with no net access or phone access ... It's hard to lose contact with someone you talked with daily to someone you can't see at all. I think losing that connection with him for now is one of the hardest things about this game for me. The people make the game. How else can someone you could have never met in RL (He lived in FL and keeps to himself a lot, I'm very outgoing and talkative. He would have never approached me!) make such an impact in your life? [WoW, F, 27]

I have formed, over a period of two years, several very intimate friendships with people whom I will never meet, whose real names I will probably never know. We discuss in the most affectionate ways our deepest feelings, fears, experiences, children, books, sexual lives - in various degrees of depth. These relationships will NEVER be consummated by real life meetings. [CoH, F, 51]

One of the most memorable was when I was playing EQ, I had a cleric and she was working on the cleric epic, I posted that I needed help and I had a full raid force show up to help me, they were all friends that I had helped and made all the way thru game and they cared enough to come and help me out. It was the most amazing thing to me that people thought so much of me and how I was that so many would show up to help me. [WoW, F, 31]

Death

Narratives related to death were much less common than the two main categories mentioned, but involved interesting aspects of the game in their own right and were brought up by players.

The Memorable Wipe

As Leeroy Jenkins has demonstrated, sometimes an unexpected wipe can be memorable. Pets were common culprits of these experiences.

Another incident that I witnessed over the other half's shoulder was one player's mechanical yeti taking offence at The Baron harming its owner and going to say hello before the group was anywhere near ready. Cue a very small furry animal tanking a very large undead bloke on a horse, a lot of 'WTF' on Skype and another, inevitable, wipe. This has now passed into Guild legend and created a new verb 'to yeti' that is widely used. [WoW, M, 29]

Just last night I was raiding Maraudon with four others and I forgot to dismiss my Imp before we jumped down a cliff and sadly my Imp ran around the long way and pulled about 15 mobs and I quickly Soul Stoned the priest and just waited to die, and for some reason I didn't and all the mobs just ran away from me and I was standing alone over everyone's body. I said 'Why am I still alive' and everyone was just completely dumbfounded. I emoted Maullynt laughs at all of you. He is God. About two seconds later I saw the mobs running back along the cliff towards me and shortly thereafter died. It turns out someone ran away and all the mobs were aggro'd on him leaving me alone. It was one of the funniest moments I have experienced in WoW. [WoW, M, 18]

Guild Death

A few players talked about how their guilds ended.

The one that immediately comes to mind is the ending of my old EverQuest guild. The guild had been floundering for some time and rather than withering away to nothing we decided to disband the guild ourselves and have a little memorial service. All the remaining members met outside of Freeport. Our guild leader made a speech and there was some storytelling of our more memorable exploits. After the disbanding, we had a little bit of friendly PvP in the Freeport Arena then went our separate ways. [WoW, M, 35]

Role-Played Funeral

One poignant narrative described how a role-played funeral took on a great deal of meaning for those who attended due to its proximity to 9/11.

This happened on a text-based game with a player base of over 300 or so people (FiranMux). On it, my character's brother, played by a serviceman overseas, was poisoned by the enemies of the main race. The character was, like his counterpart, a soldier and a heroic type. This happened sometime in September 2001, after the Tower attacks. His character's funeral turned out to be an outpouring of real grief translated into character views. People were commenting OOC that they were crying RL and finding ways to put their deepest held views and emotions into words for the sake of the catharsis onscreen. His IC death became a way for a lot of strangers to express their hate, hope, love, fear, grief, sorrow, and regret through a fictitious character and thus get it off of their real soul. [WoW, F, 26]

RL Death of Player

And finally, some players talked about the RL death of a player they knew.

The most memorable events, sadly, would be those that involved the death of fellow friends and companions. I've known several people who have died, way before their time. Most were through terminal illnesses. For these people, I believe the MMO environment allowed them to do things they could not do in the real world, due to the illnesses. The social environment was definitely a positive influence, and they got to know many people they might have never otherwise known. After these people passed away, the closest of close friends lived their character(s) on to get them to the highest level, in honor of their late friend. [Guild Wars, M, 24]

At one point a man whose screenname was Ry became a member of my (former) guild. Through time, I got to know him as a very amiable fellow. He was a 58 year old man from Canada (I can't remember which province). He was one of the most generous and helpful people I had even met on any online environment. He was also one of the most entertaining people to talk to over

Ventrilo during downtime. Not to mention the huge moral boosts he constantly gave the guild as a whole. He came to be known as 'guild grandpa'. The dark side to this is that he had previously had 4 or 5 pulmonary embolisms. Well, one day when I was playing an alt with him on his main farming me a few pieces of gear from a lower instance, he complained of a sudden pain when he went to pick up his mail. As it turns out, he had another embolism, and another guildie who was online with us actually called his family for him and got him some assistance. A few months later he told everyone what had exactly happened, and that he had basically been given 6 months to live. Ry passed away just under a month ago. It was personally astounding to me how profoundly the death of a man I have never met (or even been in the same country as) could devastate me as much as it did. He passed peacefully in the presence of his entire family, ending his life with smiles and jokes, as was always his nature. He had asked his son to update everyone online about his condition and how he was doing. Despite all that he was going through, he was thinking about his friends he made online to the end. RIP Ry. [WoW, M, 21]

Miscellaneous

Finally, there are two small categories that player narratives fell under.

Meeting Guild IRL

We've seen mentions of guilds already in the two previous sections, but several players mentioned meeting their guild members in RL as their most memorable experience.

> I have been in the guild for many years and in March of this year, a group of us decided that we should have a guild get-together. So we settled on the Anime Expo convention in Los Angeles. We all shared two rooms though one of them was for sleeping purposes only. It's interesting meeting the group of people that are usually found on guild chat and Ventrillo. We came from all over. A few of us were local to California but we did have a few Canadians and one person all the way from the UK. Getting to see the different faces and bodies and relating them to their respective voices was interesting too. Most of us have seen each other's pictures so there were not too many surprises (though people found me short!). [Ragnarok Online, M, 20]

> One of the most memorable experiences in my MMO career has to be the first IRL party in my guild. Being in charge of the planning and meeting everyone face to face - most of them for the first time ever - was a very special and positive experience. We have had similar parties since, but the first one will always be the one I will remember as the most memorable as that took the guild to a whole new level. [WoW, M, 29]

The Initial Euphoria

And finally, a small handful of players described the euphoria they felt when they first get into a game - the sense of stepping foot in a whole new world.

> Someone in my guild's forums has posted a link to a tribute to the *old* days of EverQuest. This was in EQ's 5th year, a bit before I quit EverQuest (1) and went to EQ2. Watching the tribute brought on a strong feeling of bittersweet nostalgia. Back in 'the day' EverQuest was sort of enchanting. It was my first real MMO. For a while everything about it was simply so wondrous. And then you learn the game mechanics and over time, you're disenchanted. Everyone is. But remembering those days of old (in the tribute and such -- which featured real game graphics/screens and a bittersweet melody), when the game felt so alive... it was a wave of emotion stronger than most any I've ever felt. [EQ2, M, 18]

> After playing MMOs for about 4 years, it gets harder to pull out one time that sticks out among others. So instead of picking a specific moment, I instead pick the first few weeks I played WoW and also the first few weeks I played EverQuest Online Adventures (The MMO version of EverQuest for the PlaySation2 Console). This part of the game is my favorite. Everything is new, everything is different, everybody is new (yay for the newbie zone). I still remember my first friend, Elvennoir, my second friend Jaira, and what I had for dinner the first day I got to play EverQuest Online Adventures at my own house. [WoW, M, 17]

> I think to me that first experience of leaving the Human newbie area of Northshire Abbey for the first time and going down the road to Goldshire and feeling this sense of wonder for the wide virtual world ahead of me just overwhelmed me with this sense of awe at this living breathing 3D environment. [WoW, F, 30]

As MMO players know from their experiences, gaming is much more than just about killing things. The narratives in this article highlight the social nature of play and the variety of relationships that cross over the boundary between the virtual and physical worlds.

Player Life-Cycle

In a recent open-ended set of questions, I asked players whether their motivations for playing MMOs had changed over time. Initially, I was interested in seeing whether certain motivations tended to lead into others as a player spent more time in a particular game. For example, do achievement-oriented players become more and more competitive as they get tired of PvE elements and turn towards PvP?

As I started going through the player narratives, it became clear that many players do go through changes in why they play over time, but that it was more complicated than simply one motivation turning into another. For example, the following are very typical of the "play trajectories" that respondents described:

> In the beginning, I was excited to discover new things and was mostly playing solo and loving it. Later I was more drawn to instances and having a fun guild. Now I have come to a point where what I want is to be in a 'serious' guild in order to do high end instances and raids, as well as hone my PvP skills and participate in PvP competitively. [WoW, M, 25]

> I first started playing WoW because my husband wanted me to try it out. To my surprise, I actually liked it. I quickly learned that I was very good at making money and I really liked loot. I also started out as a solo player. Now we play together and are always grouped. I used to never do dungeons and now we have a group that does one every Friday night. [WoW, F, 30]

These narratives often blurred the boundaries between well-defined motivation categories, yet at the same time, it was clear that a general trajectory among players was being hinted at. Moreover, there were several points in this trajectory that many players described in very similar ways. Thus, it made sense to abandon framing what was happening as motivation changes and to think about the narratives more broadly as player lifecycles or play trajectories.

In the following pages, I'll lay out what the full trajectory looks like, from entry to burnout and possible return. It's important though to realize that many of the linkages of the trajectory are dependent on the game and how easy it is for players to move through different parts of the trajectory. And of course, many players drop out of a game without going through the entire trajectory because there wasn't enough to keep them going.

Entry	Practice	Mastery	Burnout	Recovery
Newcomer Euphoria	Ramping Up / Progression	Staying for Friends / Casual Guilds	Grind Burnout	End-Game Casual
Playing with Someone	Solo to Group	High-End Content / Serious Guilds	Social / Raiding Burnout	
		Social / Community Leadership	Restarts	
		PvP / Competition	Nothing Left to Do	

The Entry Stage

Newcomer Euphoria

There are two main entry clusters. The first cluster is the typical new-comer who generally describes their game-play in terms of unlimited potential and the euphoria of being in a whole new world. Oftentimes, elements of advancement and exploration are repeated throughout their descriptions, but in general these early play styles tend to be undifferentiated and more driven by novelty rather than a focus on achievement (for example).

> Originally, the motivation for playing the game spawned from the novelty factor and sheer size of the world to explore ... something new around every corner ... new discoveries, new races or classes to try out, new quests / zones / instances ... [WoW, M, 31]

> When I started playing (this was my first MMORPG by the way), I was content to run around questing with my little pink-haired gnome mage. I though she was so cute, and collecting those 8 boar ribs and 4 bear pelts was so much fun! [WoW, F, 25]

> What has always drawn me to video games has been the prospect of entering an entirely new universe. I've always loved figuring out the new battle system, trekking across the new landscape, or taking part in some new story. [WoW, F, 17]

Playing with a Friend/Partner

The second main entry cluster revolves around playing the game to be with a friend or a romantic partner. Players in this category typically state that being with their friend/partner, rather than playing the game itself, is their primary motivation. More often than not, this changes as they experience more of the game.

My initial motivation in buying the game and playing it was to spend time with real life friends who had become obsessed with World of Warcraft. We used to chat online every night and they all disappeared into the game. Buying it myself was the only way I could talk to them online! [WoW, F, 37]

I started playing WoW mostly as a chance to reconnect with college gaming friends of mine, since we were all in the military and separated over great distances. [WoW, M, 29]

I started to play World of Warcraft because my boyfriend got me a Beta account and got me interested in it. We were searching for an activity we could do together over the internet since we have to overcome a large distance and don't see another often in real time due to this. We got my brother and a friend of us interested in the game as well and played together since that time. So the main motivation at the beginning was to do something together, spend time with another and have fun. [WoW, F, 23]

The Practice Stage

Ramping Up / Progress
The initial exploration and discovery stage helps players learn the ropes of the game. As they explore more and more of the world (in terms of both geography and mechanics), they start seeing and understanding the boundaries of the game. These boundaries also highlight the game's mechanics and many players then drift into progression-oriented game-play. Either they realize that they need to advance to explore further or progression makes more sense now that the boundaries have been made clear.

The initial reason for playing is the same: exploration. I want to see new landscapes, new monsters, new characters and new challenges. As play continues the main goal becomes achievement: how much gold can I acquire, what's the best gear and how do I get it or can I defeat the toughest boss in the dungeon? [WoW, M, 36]

When I fist start an MMO I find that I will play because you get to discover new things. After that it is more striving for better stats. [GW, M, 16]

In the beginning it was just for fun, but now it's is more because I want to progress, wanna be the best in in the class, be able to make the best items, be highest lvl. In others words I guess it's that I want the other people to look up at me like that guy is good. [M, 19]

Joining Groups and Guilds

Typically, at this stage, players start to understand the value of grouping up with others. Whereas many players tend to favor solo play early on, they come to see that being in a group or a guild is either valuable or necessary due to a variety of game mechanics.

> I used to play to occupy my time; I mostly solo'd and didn't care about being part of a group. Now I like to be a cog in a bigger machine and help a group achieve goals. [EQ, F, 60]

> I started to play the game and quickly became involved in leveling my character up as soon as possible, getting the best items and gear which was possible. When I approached the end game content and was nearing a point where it was very difficult to progress any further, I realised that joining a guild was the only way forward. To my surprise, but ultimate joy - I realise that the REAL game in warcraft for me was the social interaction and friendships I made, the teamwork - the camaraderie. I became less and less interested in progressing my character further and instead started enjoying the social dynamics of the game. [WoW, M, 27]

> When I started playing, I was only interested in exploring, figuring out how things worked. I hardly ever talked to anyone. Over time I started to talk to people around me, until eventually I did little *besides* talking to people, running a tavern nearly day-to-day for several months. [PlaneShift, M, 26]

The Mastery Stage

Staying for Friends / Casual Guilds

A variety of things can happen after the initial taste of the treadmill. More often than not, this stage in of game-play provides a comfortable landing spot. Many players start getting tired of the leveling grind but have established stable friendships which become the focus of their game-play. In other words, these players are mainly staying in the game for other players. This was the most common ending point in players' narratives.

> I ended up playing WoW for nearly 3 years straight, not because of constant new content, but because I formed relationships with my guild-mates that I valued enough to keep logging on every day. [WoW, F, 17]

> However, I realized I was going back for the friends I had made ... As part of an adult casual gamers guild, I found myself in a similar place in life as my guild mates with regard to work, marriage, kids, etc ... and continuing with the game for the social aspects as well. [WoW, M, 31]

I now play because of the social aspect. The guild I ended up in led to these changes, as I play with a couple real life friends. Over time I developed some very close relationships with people in my guild and my motivations for playing have now remained very constant. [WoW, F, 24]

The whole reason I continued to play, even after my good friend went on to other games, was probably the fact that I spent so much time playing it already and also the friendships I made. [Ragnarok Online, F, 16]

High-End Content / Raiding Guilds

Players who love the experience of leveling and progression may find it natural to pursue the next step up via a serious raiding guild. It is typically via the raiding experience that players begin to gain access to more exclusive content or gear. High-end gear is now within reach. Thus, status and prestige elements start becoming more important. And even players in casual guilds may find themselves engaging in more and more complex raiding activities due to the progression of the guild or more serious players in the guild.

I was a fairly casual player for quite some time, until I discovered raiding. I became extremely passionate and competitive about raiding. I would tell myself it was just because I wanted to see the content ... but if I'm going to be honest, it was more for the feeling of importance that I was getting from the game, from being in a leadership position, from being in a top guild. I was addicted to that feeling. [WoW, F, 26]

I would say I'm a fairly hardcore raider (4-6 nights a week) and I'm not sure how I made that huge leap as when I was leveling up for the first time I found the thought of doing the same place more than a couple of times in hope that an item would drop to be absurd. [WoW, M, 18]

WoW's initial appeal was the 'new game', and small groups (with friends). As we have all progressed through WoW, our focus has shifted back to endgame content (and the challenges of organizing larger groups of people for raids, etc). [WoW, M, 32]

Later I was more drawn to instances and having a fun guild. Now I have come to a point where what I want is to be in a 'serious' guild in order to do high end instances and raids. [WoW, M, 25]

Social Leadership

For others, the knowledge and social connections they have in the game encourage them to take on roles that impact or guide their guild or community. Like the players who are in casual guilds, these players

enjoy the socializing, but they see that they themselves can play a role in shaping the social interactions in the game.

> In City of Heroes there's a few guilds which exist solely for altruistic purposes, helping other players with regular transportation needs and generally as guides/helpers when asked, and I'm the founder, perhaps leader emeritus of one of the most well known. I never could have foreseen doing that, it just sort of happened gradually, and I do enjoy it. [CoH, M, 34]

> Initially I liked to play because I liked interacting with other people to achieve common goals, and I really liked chatting with people and getting to know them. Later on, I started a Guild geared more towards the lower end players so that they had a place where they could learn, etc. So a big part of my enjoyment in game is helping people out, showing them how to do things, etc. [EQ, F, 37]

> I'm more social than before, and have taken up leadership positions in my guild, though I'm not the biggest power - I prefer to be the Emminence Gris, the elder statesman, the cooler head, the arbiter and peace-maker, rather than the actual person in charge. My leadership position isn't based upon my playing ability (which is, frankly, pretty damn good), but upon the way I act as glue in the guild, holding things together. I like that, rather a lot. [GW, M, 43]

> At first it was just to play a game, meet new people, and learn more about myself. Now my motivations have changed a lot, as I am a two-time guild leader. I have realized thru kalonline, that I am an idealist, and will stick to my core values of honor, kindness and integrity. Those 3 words that are the purpose of any guild I lead. That is my motivation, to not only be an example of honor, but to be a good man, friend, father figure to others, so that they have a model of what kind of person they can be. [KalonOnline, M, 44]

PvP / Competition

And finally, while many low-level characters are afraid of PvP, a moderate degree of game mastery lowers the threshold for engaging in PvP. While many players expressed their own surprise at enjoying PvP, they tended to agree that PvP offered the excitement of a human opponent once the PvE grind lost its thrill. In many games, PvP also tends to be the only thing left for players who have reached the level cap but aren't in a raiding guild.

> I would never have considered PvP, but adding the unpredictability of another human to the mix adds thrills and high tense moments. [WoW, M, 45]

When I first started playing Everquest II shortly after it came out (and World of Warcraft only recently), my main motivation for advancement was experiencing new content -- exploration, questing. Now I have high level characters in both games, and my main motivation has shifted to the 'new end game', PvP. [EQ2, M, 29]

PvP has been my greatest surprise. By far my preferred style of multi-player action is co-operative play against a computer opponent, but I've learned to appreciate the adrenaline rush associated with playing against a human opponent, perhaps because every situation is difficult to grasp, and unpredictable compared to encounters with scripted resistance. [WoW, M, 21]

The Burnout Stage

Grind Burnout

Whether for solo players or players in guilds, the gear-drop or XP grind oftentimes stops being fun. In many cases, it takes players a while to realize that the grinding is no longer enjoyable. They suddenly sit back and ask themselves, "oh - what's the point?"

After a few months at 60, frustrated with running Strat and Scholo over and over again, I was starting to lose interest in the game. [WoW, F, 37]

After getting a character to maximum level, I realized it was just a grind and promptly lost interest. [WoW, M, 30]

Whenever we were online we did dungeon runs, sometimes spending whole Sundays redoing dungeons to get the set pieces. There wasn't any fun involved anymore. [WoW, F, 23]

Social Obligations Burnout

Players in more serious guilds also burnout, but this tends to be from the social obligations and work-like consequences of raiding. What used to be fun with a group of friends has become a logistical nightmare fraught with stress and anxiety.

But by the time I was 50, the game was too focused on the 'grind' to 60- the game required 20-40 players in raids- and the elitism, and classism of the players, just made it no fun. You could not achieve anything without massive support of some player group- and if you were in such a group (guild etc) - they expected the game to be a full time job. It was a burnout. [WoW, M, 53]

The game has lost most of its luster and adventure because I only log on to raid now. I miss the 'good old days' of exploring and knowing every quest. Back then I felt as though I was personally improving myself through solo quests and group quests. It feels more like a job now that almost all I do in the game is raid. Any non-raid time is spent in mandatory quests to gain access to raid encounters. I feel like I am a couple expansions behind now. I get frustrated at the game a lot more. [EQ, F, 26]

When we became the max level, we participated in raids and joined a high end guild. The game became a job. It lost that feeling we originally played for - the raw fun, questing and exploring new areas, advancing characters. We noticed the game wasn't about that any more. It was only fueled by greedy intentions guild members possessed. [WoW, M, 18]

Restarts

Some players try to get around the high-level grind by re-rolling a new character as soon as they hit max-level. They want to feel the sense of progress and exploration again, and the closest thing they can do is to create a new character.

In fact, when whatever character I'm playing gets to the level cap, I abandon it and start a new one. Raiding for loot just seems sterile and pointless to me. I just enjoy developing a character and exploring its world. [WoW, F, 50]

Although it has been boring, I've tried to satisfy my need for something new by creating alts, but in the end, the thrill of discovery has gone. [WoW, F, 17]

Now I've played through all the missions at least 3 or 4 times with multiple alts, I've set myself different goals. To finish (get to level 50) with one of each archetype, even the ones I don't like playing. [CoH, M, 37]

Nothing Left to Do

And finally, a very few players make it through all the grinding and much of the raiding, but then find that there isn't anything left in the game to do and they have no desire to re-roll.

The same cities seem so different from the first time you go through them to the hundredth time you ran through it. Now, that I have reached the level cap on two characters at the time being its quite different. Now everything is the same, boring and dull. As I'm finishing up most of my quest and have two epic flying mounts already I am running out of things to do when no one wants to

instance. Basically its log on, do something hopefully for a while then raid. Basically I just ran out of places to explore and things to do. [GW, M, 18]

The Recovery Stage

End-Game Casual
For players who burned out on the grind or the raiding, some are able to find a more casual re-entry into the game. Knowing the situations and guilds that tend to make the game more work than fun, they consciously steer clear of them and make sure that the time they spend in the game is enjoyable rather than stressful.

> I'm currently back in a casual guild, with friends, and perfectly content to be there. I don't seek the same kind of personal validation that I had been, I simply enjoy the time I spend playing - and the game is back to being simply a part of my life, not consuming it. [WoW, F, 26]

> I still enjoy PvP but now I approach it with a more laid-back attitude. I don't care to have all the best gear as I've accepted the fact that I don't want to put that much time or effort into the game. In doing so, I enjoy the entire game more. [WoW, M, 30]

> I totally quit for about 2 months -- the guild took a big loss as other people left as well -- and I have recently started playing again on average 1-2 hours a night just to socialize/quest/BG with the few friends still on-line and see a bit of the expanding content. I no longer feel the need to have epic gear, or be extremely competitive, and have no desire to be in a leadership role. [WoW, M, 25]

> I was in a raiding guild, but felt it was so overly serious. Finally, I've joined a guild that I am happy with. They are very tight-knit, have a lot of high level players, all are over 18, and everyone goes out of their way to help others. They also do some endgame, but have no DKP, and raiding is just not the be-all and end-all of their existence. They even have a joke rank called 'linktard'. [WoW, F, 44]

General Observations

As I mentioned earlier, the full trajectory isn't something that every player goes through. It's a rough map of the potential player lifecycle. Oftentimes, players drop out in earlier parts of the trajectory, and many players who burn out don't recover.

While the lifecycle stages seem to hint at certain well-known player motivations, this is not to say that player motivations are strictly defined by the stages. Instead, the most sensible way of thinking about this is that motivations interact with the stages. For example, an introvert at a party may appear more outgoing than an extravert in a classroom, but personality and situation are still independent concepts. In the same way, a player in the Mastery stage may appear more social than a player in the Practice stage even though their underlying motivations may be the same.

There were several other interesting trends.

Broadening Play Motivations

It was interesting to see over and over again how players began to enjoy play styles they weren't interested in when starting the game, whether this was players discovering the joy of PvP or getting into higher and higher level raids.

While we hear more and more often that it's other people that keep players in the game, it's also important to understand that those social groups also come to have a role in pushing players along the trajectory.

> I never thought I would belong to a guild, much less wind up being guild leader. I always said I didn't care about my epic; now I'm working on my 2.0. I never wanted to raid. Now I raid three days a week. I think it's because my friends in the game have all moved in that direction and I want to be with them. [EQ, F, 60]

Switching Gears

Of course, the trajectory differs by game depending on the game mechanics and in particular how easy it is for players to "switch gears". For example, if PvP is only available on a different server, then it's very difficult for a player to explore the competitive aspects of game-play, whereas designated PvP areas on an otherwise PvE server (such as in DAoC or WoW) provide an easy shift to PvP.
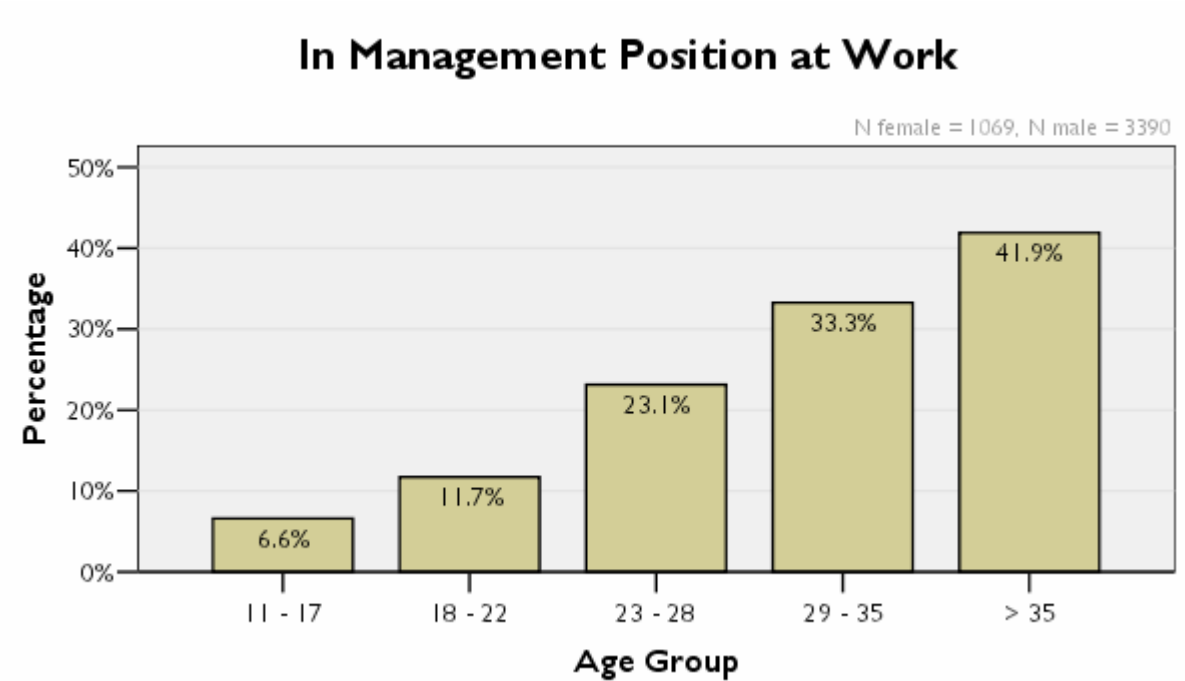
Landing Spot and the Slippery Slope to Burnout

There were two consistent patterns worth noting. One was the comfortable "landing spot" that the casual guilds provided for players who found the grind boring but had developed enough of a social network to maintain interest in logging in the game. Many players ended their narratives by describing that landing spot. They didn't see the need to grind endlessly and were perfectly happy where they were.

The second pattern was that players moving beyond that landing spot had either recently discovered serious raiding or guild leadership, or more commonly, were expressing the symptoms or past experience of burning out. This burn out seems almost inevitable as the rewards from high-end raiding (or leading a large guild) require a disproportionately higher amount of effort that isn't appealing to all but very serious players.
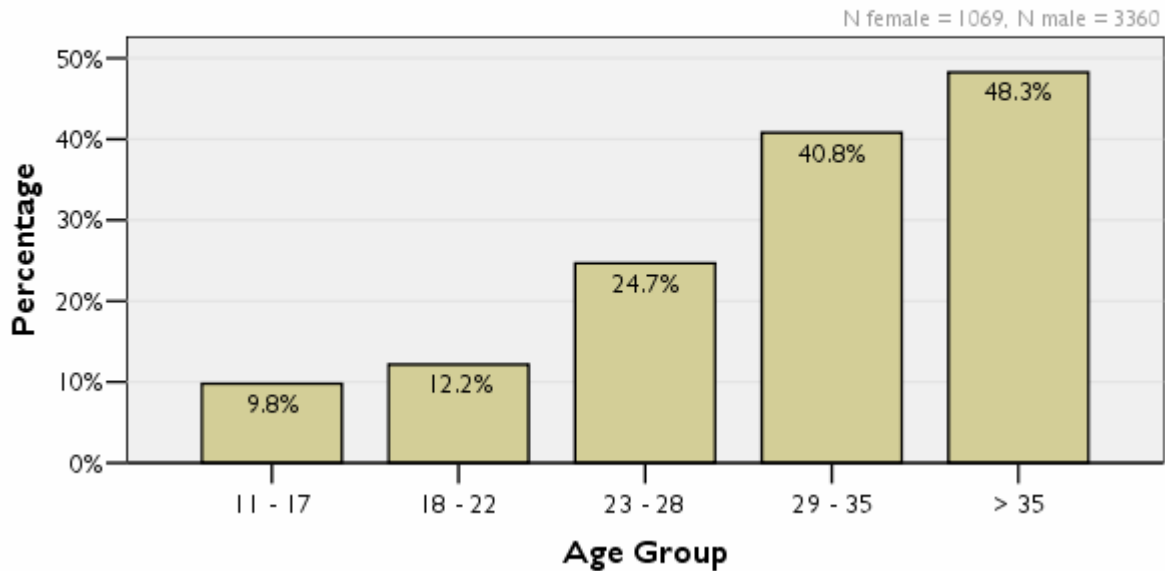
Status Reversal

For a while, I've been mentioning how MMOs are interesting social spaces in that a sufficiently mature teenager could lead a group of adults - something that social institutions in the "real world" don't usually allow. A broader theme here is the reversal of status as people enter into MMOs. One interesting hypothesis is that people, particularly teenagers who may feel disempowered in the physical world, may be more tempted to strive for positions of power and authority in a virtual world where there is a level playing field. One potential consequence of this is that players with high status or authority in MMOs may be disproportionately composed of younger players.

There's data from several areas to support this claim. First of all, it's no surprise that older players are more likely to have management or leadership roles in the physical world.

In Management Position at Work

N female = 1069, N male = 3390

Age Group	Percentage
11 - 17	6.6%
18 - 22	11.7%
23 - 28	23.1%
29 - 35	33.3%
> 35	41.9%

In Leadership Position at Work

N female = 1069, N male = 3360

What is surprising is that the reverse is true in the game. In MMOs, it is younger players who are more willing to take charge and take on leadership roles, whereas older players are more content to sit back and follow along.
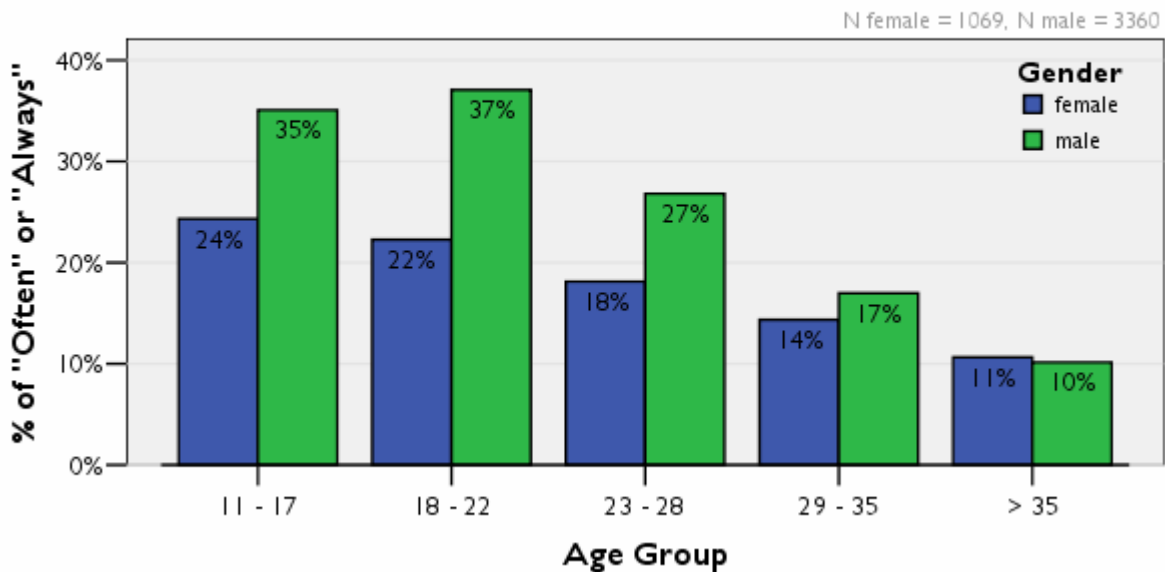
Take Charge in the Game?

N female = 1069, N male = 3390
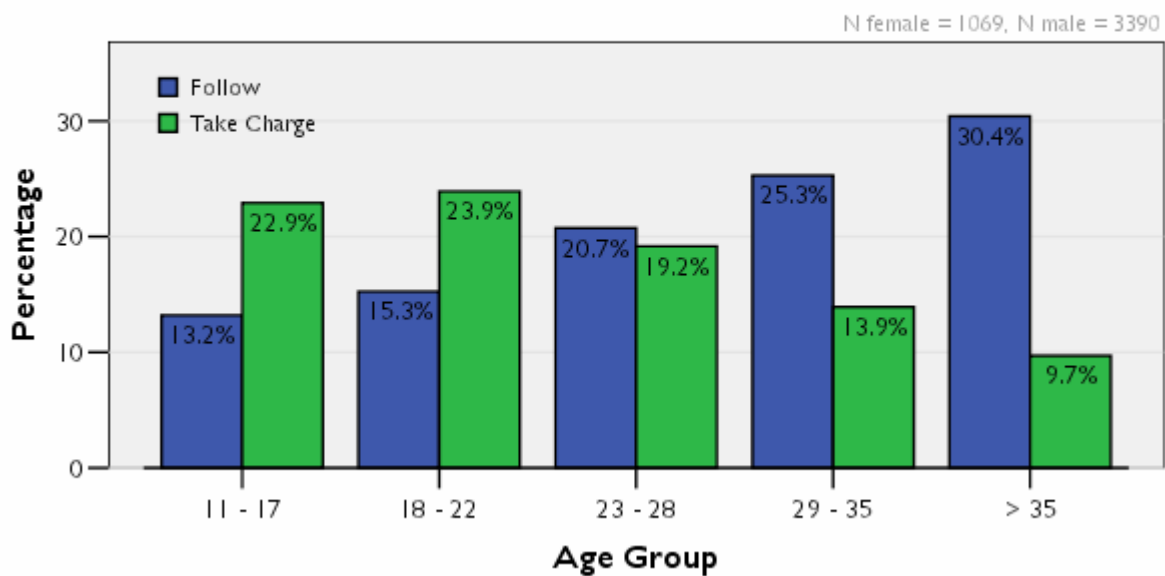
The same pattern is also true for desire for high status within the game. As we've seen elsewhere, younger players are likely to be achievement-oriented (http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/archives/001299.php). In a recent survey, I focused on issues related to the "hard-core player" mindset. For example, these included questions like:
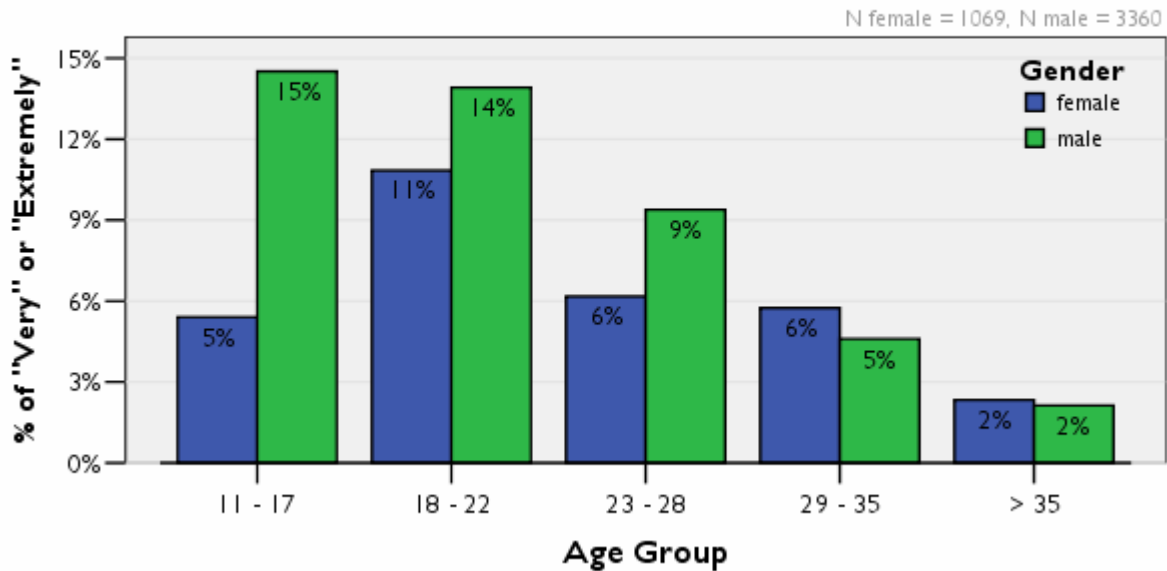
- How important is it for you to belong to a top-tier guild?
- How important is it for you be the first character (or guild) to access a high-end instance, defeat a boss, get an epic mount, or achieve other similar goals in the game?
- How often do you try to become one of the most powerful players in your class / profession?
- How important is it for you to have a high rank (PvP or other rankings)?
- Would you describe your game-play as serious or casual?

Across all these questions, younger players were more likely to desire high status. For example, with the questions related to being a powerful player in a class or early access to high-end content, the following graphs show the percentage of players by age group for whom these goals were very important.
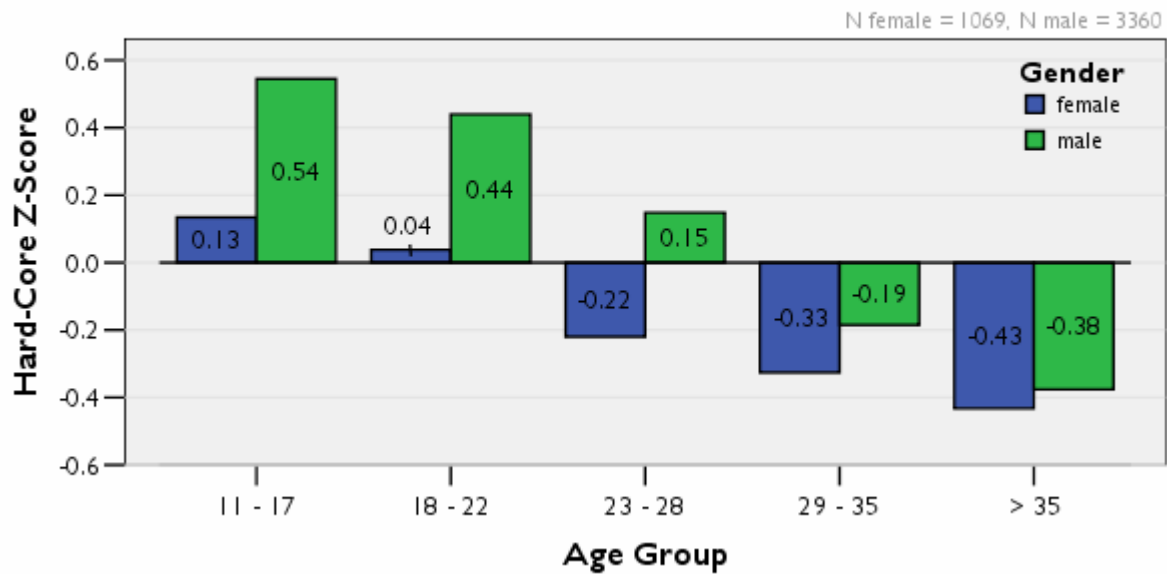

Desire to be Most Powerful Player in Class/Prof.

Importance of Early Access to High-End Content

Gender
- female
- male

% of "Very" or "Extremely"

Age Group	female	male
11 - 17	5%	15%
18 - 22	11%	14%
23 - 28	6%	9%
29 - 35	6%	5%
> 35	2%	2%

By aggregating the questions to create a composite score, the following graph shows the striking age difference in desire to be a hard-core player for both male and female players. The graph also shows that gender differences diminish with age.

Hard-Core Players Scale

Gender
- female
- male

Hard-Core Z-Score

Age Group	female	male
11 - 17	0.13	0.54
18 - 22	0.04	0.44
23 - 28	-0.22	0.15
29 - 35	-0.33	-0.19
> 35	-0.43	-0.38

As I mentioned at the beginning of the article, gaining status in a virtual world may be more appealing to younger players because of their relative lack of status in the physical world. Indeed, the following player articulates this point:

> I grew tired of hardcore gaming. I used to be the type that would want the best of everything and would work really hard to get it. I guess, by getting some self-esteem in real life, it wiped out the need to be the best at something in a game. [WoW, M, 21]

There are several interesting things about this set of findings. First of all, they suggest that younger players are disproportionately more likely to be in positions of power and authority in an MMO. Whereas high school and college students may be used to working for people in their 30s or older in the physical world, the reverse may be true in an MMO. Secondly, what makes this status reversal particularly intriguing is that it is largely made invisible in MMOs due to the use of avatars. On the other hand, the emergence of integrated VoIP tools may upset this hidden social dynamic. Can a player just as easily maintain a position of authority if they "sound young" on the microphone? And finally, this suggests that younger players may have a disproportionate influence on different aspects of the game. For example, as leaders in groups and guilds, they have the ability to shape the game experience for other players. Also, given that the casual-vs.-raiding tension often causes guilds to fragment, the stability of a guild may be largely influenced by the number of younger players in a guild. And finally, hard-core players being more vocal may mean that the opinions of younger players are more often taken into account when they post on forums.

Making Friends

Earlier findings had shown that men and women socialize about the same amount in MMOs - in terms of chatting and catching up with friends (http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/archives/001299.php). What is very different among men and women is what they want out of those relationships. Women are more likely to want to form relationships where they can discuss their RL personal issues and can count on those friends for support. Men, on the other hand, are less likely to use the MMO space to form a support network (or probably in general). The following data help contextualize these earlier findings.

For example, in terms of what players chat about, men and women are equally likely to chat about current events or game-related issues.
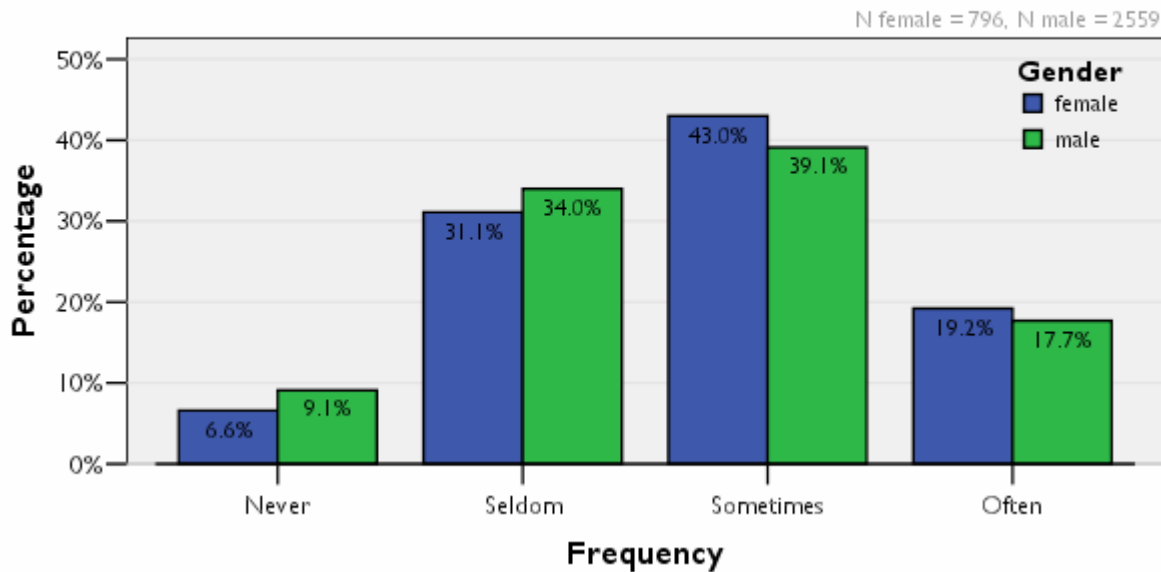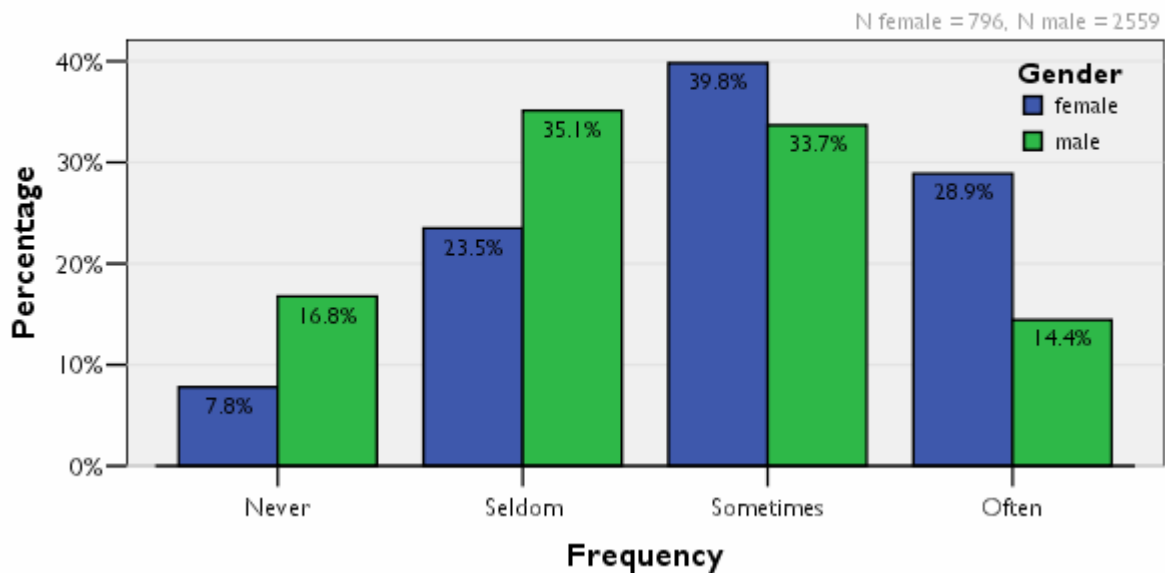
Chat about Game-Related Issues

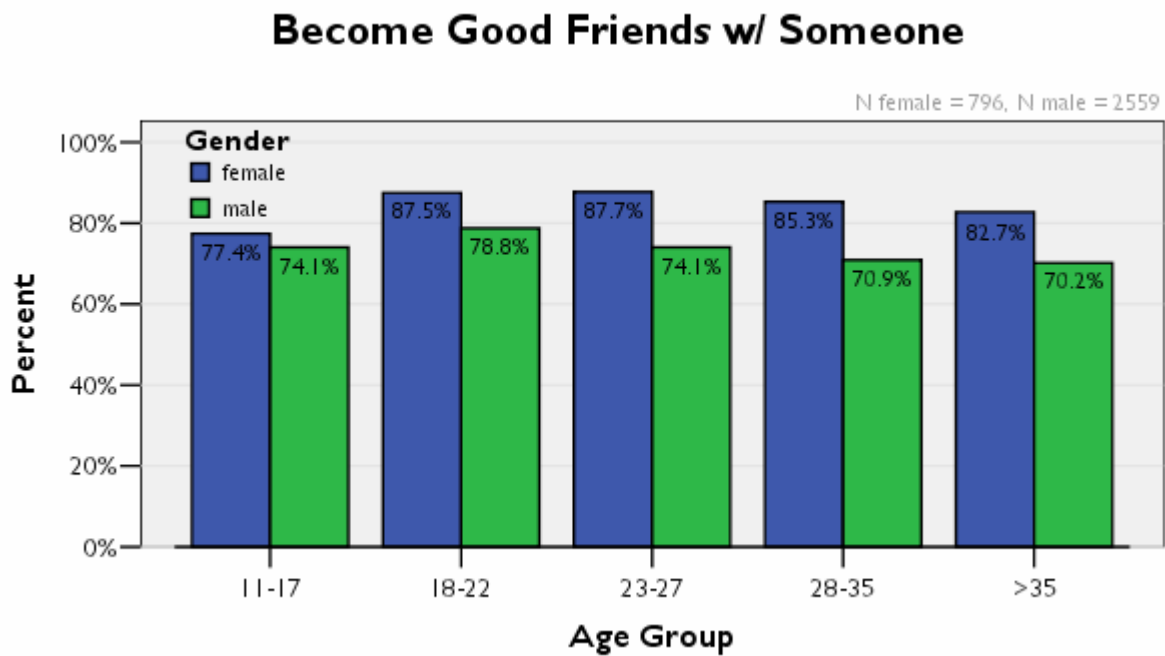N female = 796, N male = 2559

Gender
- female
- male
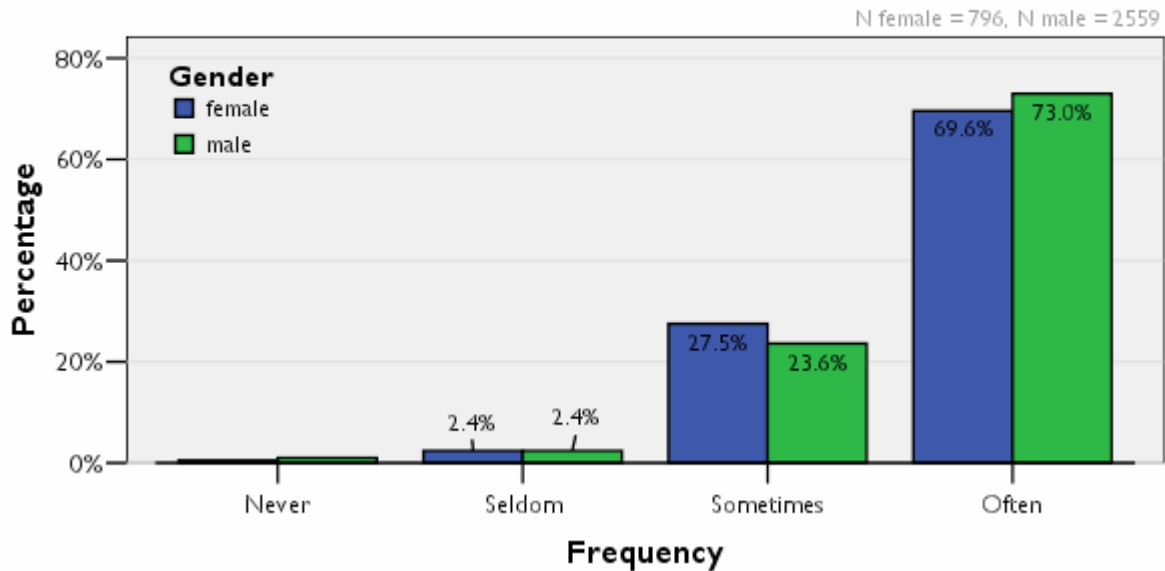
But when we turn to personal RL issues, we see a much bigger difference. Women are more likely to chat about their RL personal issues with their online friends than men are.

Chat About RL Personal Issues

N female = 796, N male = 2559
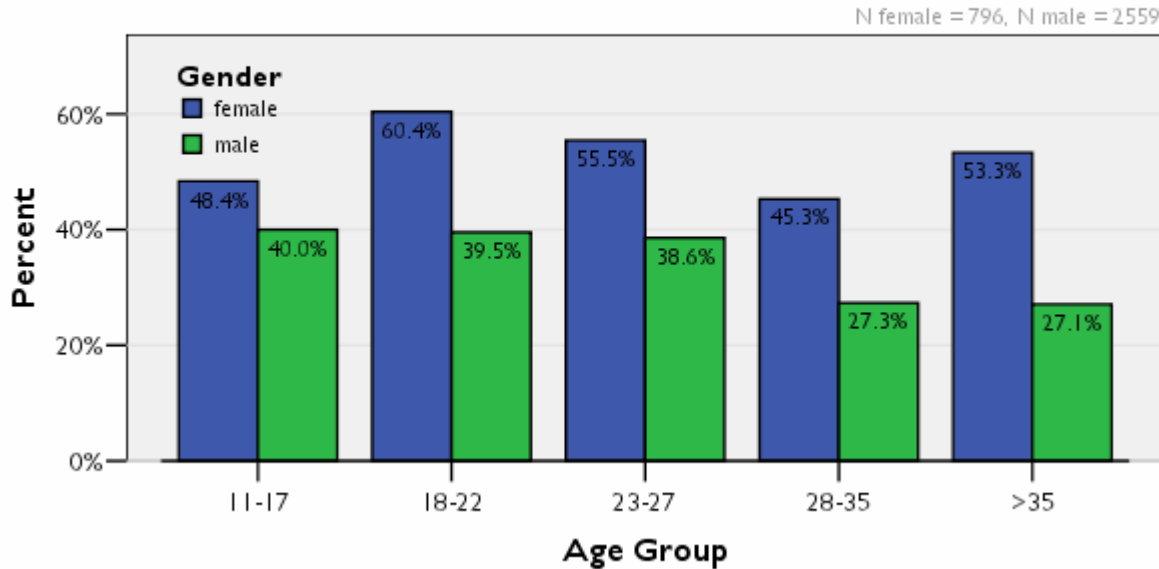
Gender
- female
- male

We see the same trend when we ask specifically about friendships that have formed with someone players met online. For example, when we ask players whether they have become good friends with

someone online, the gender difference is actually quite small. Most men and women have made good friends in an MMO.

Become Good Friends w/ Someone

N female = 796, N male = 2559

Gender
- female
- male

| Age Group	female	male
11-17	77.4%	74.1%
18-22	87.5%	78.8%
23-27	87.7%	74.1%
28-35	85.3%	70.9%
>35	82.7%	70.2%

Where they differ is how strong and personal those relationships get specifically in terms of how much transcends the physical-virtual boundary. In another question, I asked players whether they had ever told their online friends secrets or personal issues they had never told their friends in the physical world. Here we see that women are much more likely to share secrets with their friends than men are.

Shared Secret w/ Online Friend

N female = 796, N male = 2559

And thus, it is when we focus on the strength of relationships formed online where we see the largest gender differences. When we ask players whether their best friend is someone they met in an MMO, women are about 3 times as likely as men to say yes.

My Best Friend is Someone I Met in an MMO

N female = 796, N male = 2559
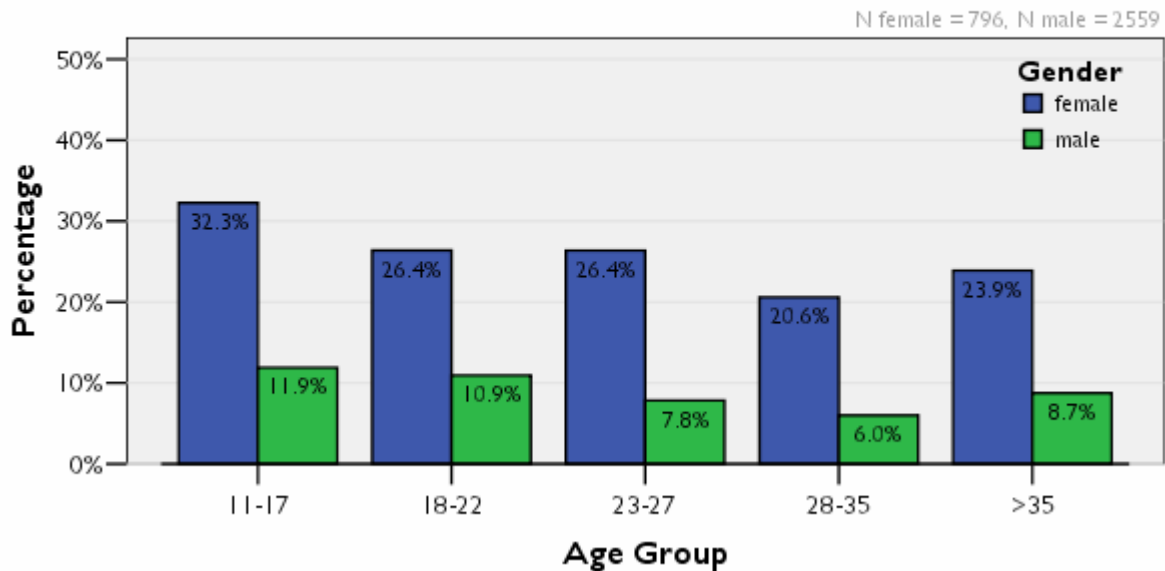
Thus, the story about gender and socializing is a bit more nuanced than simply that women like to socialize and men don't. In fact, both men and women seem to enjoy socializing - chatting and hanging out with friends. And both men and women often make good friends with others they meet online. Where

men and women do differ is the kind of relationship they want. It appears that men are more likely to draw harder boundaries between their physical and virtual spaces; men are less likely to talk about personal issues with friends they have met online. On the other hand, women see a softer boundary between the physical and virtual spaces and are more willing to share personal issues with friends they make online.