The Daedalus Project

Our Virtual Bodies, Ourselves?

What do our virtual bodies say about us? More importantly, are certain people more likely to choose a particular kind of body type in the virtual world? In this article, we'll take a look at character height, attractiveness, and body types.

Let's start with character height. It's probably not surprising that when people can choose their height that they choose to be a little taller than average. This was marginally more so for men than for women. In the survey, I also asked players to self-report their actual height. To minimize players actively thinking about these two issues together, the two questions were asked a couple of pages apart and in the demographics and character body type sections respectively. What was interesting was that character height and actual height were positively correlated (r = .10 for women and .15 for men). In other words, people who pick tall characters tend to be taller in real life as well. While it appears that most people prefer to have taller characters in virtual worlds, the data shows that virtual height tends to mirror actual height (rather than compensating for being short in real life).

Character Height Preference

Gender
- female
- male

Percentage axis: 40%, 30%, 20%, 10%

Height Preference:
- Much Shorter: 10% (female), 9% (male)
- Slightly Shorter: 17% (female), 10% (male)
- Average: 37% (female), 40% (male)
- Slightly Taller: 30% (female), 32% (male)
- Much Taller: 6% (female), 9% (male)
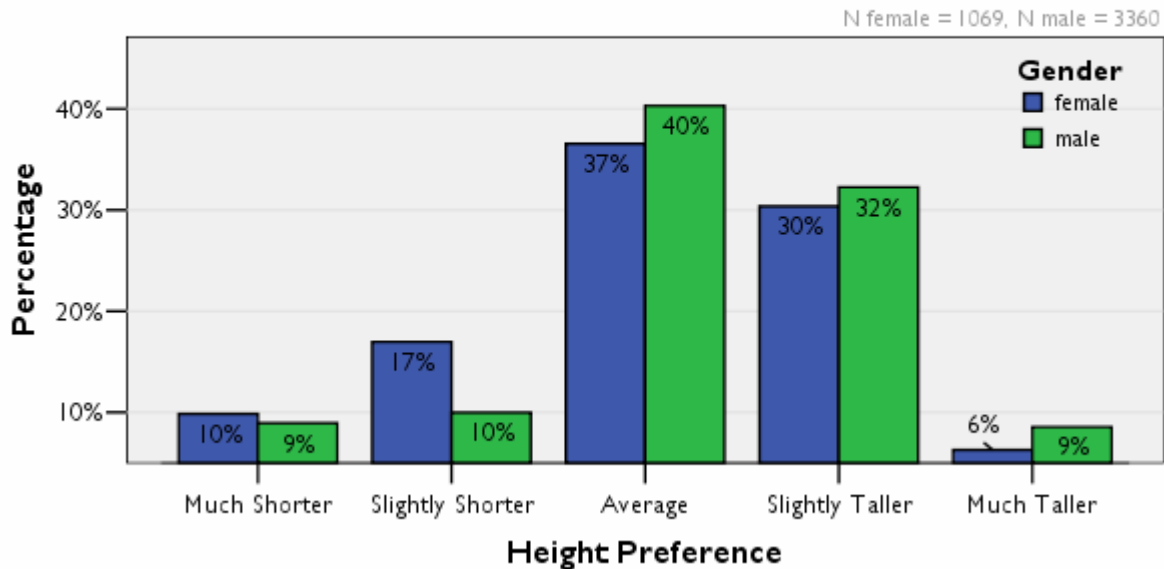
Next, we'll take a look at character attractiveness. Again, it makes sense that when given the choice, most people would prefer to be on the above average side in terms of attractiveness. There was a substantial gender difference though. Men were about equally split between the average and attractive choices, while women were twice as likely to prefer the attractive choice. This helps to partly explain an earlier data point on why women were more likely to pick Night Elves than men in World of Warcraft (http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/archives/001368.php). We'll delve into this issue more in the next section of data on specific body types.

Character Attractiveness Preference
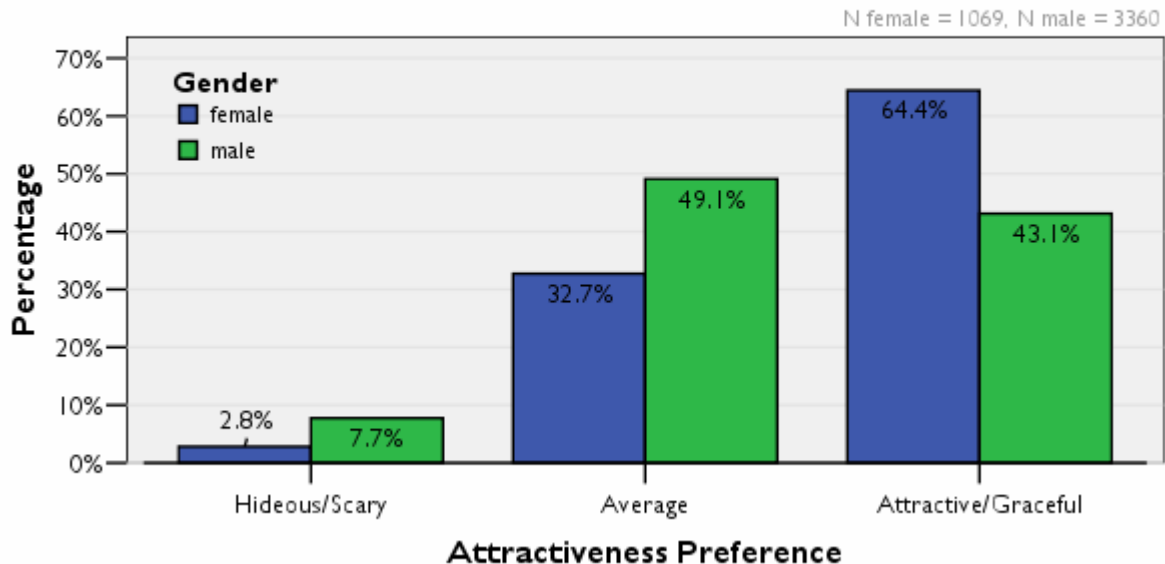
Let's turn to body types now. I tried to come up with the typical body archetypes used in fantasy MMOs that appear in most of the games out there right now. The following were the broad body types I asked respondents about:

1) Short, aged characters (e.g., Gnomes, Dwarves)
2) Small, cute characters (e.g., Tarutaru)
3) Dark, menacing characters (e.g., Orcs, Trolls)
4) Normal, human characters (e.g., Humans, Half-Elves)
5) Large, hulking characters (e.g., Galkans, Dranei)
6) Lithe, graceful characters (e.g., Elves)

I asked respondents to rate the appeal of each body type as well as pick the type that most appeals to them. The graph below shows the overall breakdown of preferred body type split by gender. When forced to make a choice, female players were about twice as likely as male players to pick graceful and cute characters (such as Elves), while male players were about twice as likely as female players to pick large, aged, and normal human characters.

Part of what we're seeing seems to be a mirroring effect. Players seem to prefer avatars that reflect their own stereotypical gender traits. Female players prefer avatars that display feminine traits (e.g., grace) while male players prefer avatars that display masculine traits (e.g., strength and size). This doesn't quite explain the differences in the Aged, Dark, and Human types, but we'll continue look at other factors below.

Preferred Body Type
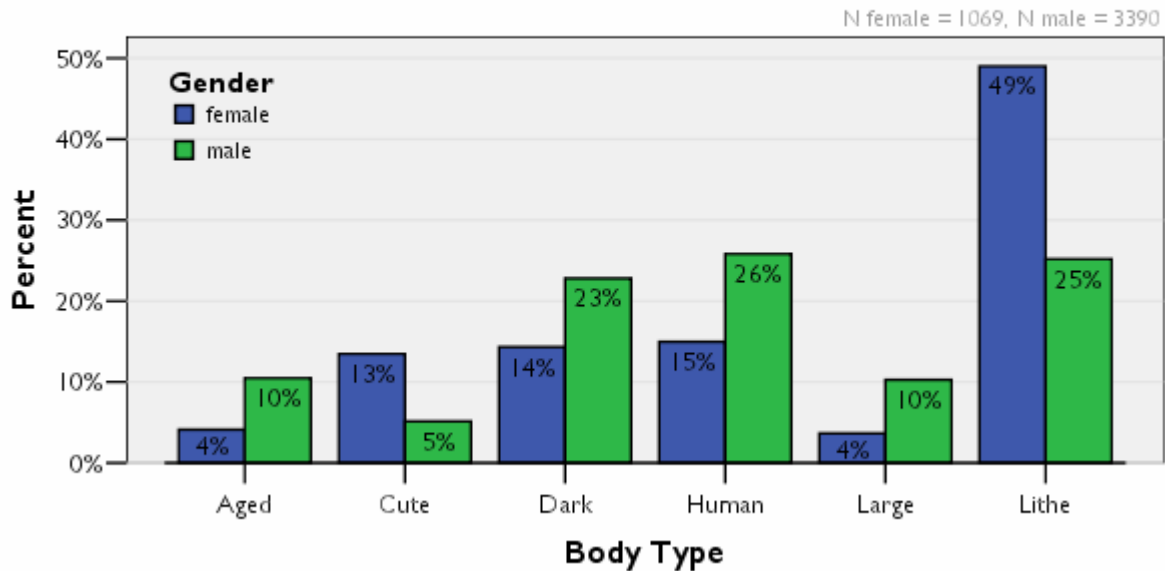
If we look at the individual ratings with age, we find that age is most related to the Dark and Aged types. Dark, menacing characters were more likely to be picked by younger players (r = -.15) and this is consistent with earlier data we've seen showing that younger players prefer the "evil" side when there is a good/evil split (http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/archives/001558.php). On the other hand, short, aged characters were more likely to be preferred by older players (r = .13). Like the finding with height and gender, it's interesting here that there is a mirroring effect as well; older players prefer older avatars.

Finally, we'll take a look at body type preference and the three main play motivations: achievement, social, and immersion. The graph below shows the average achievement scores for players who preferred each body type. Players who prefer Large and Dark characters are more achievement oriented than players who prefer Lithe and Cute characters. Mapped onto a game like World of Warcraft, this implies a lot about personality differences between Horde and Alliance players (i.e., Taurens and Orcs vs. Night Elves and Gnomes).

Achievement Scores by Body Type

N = 4429
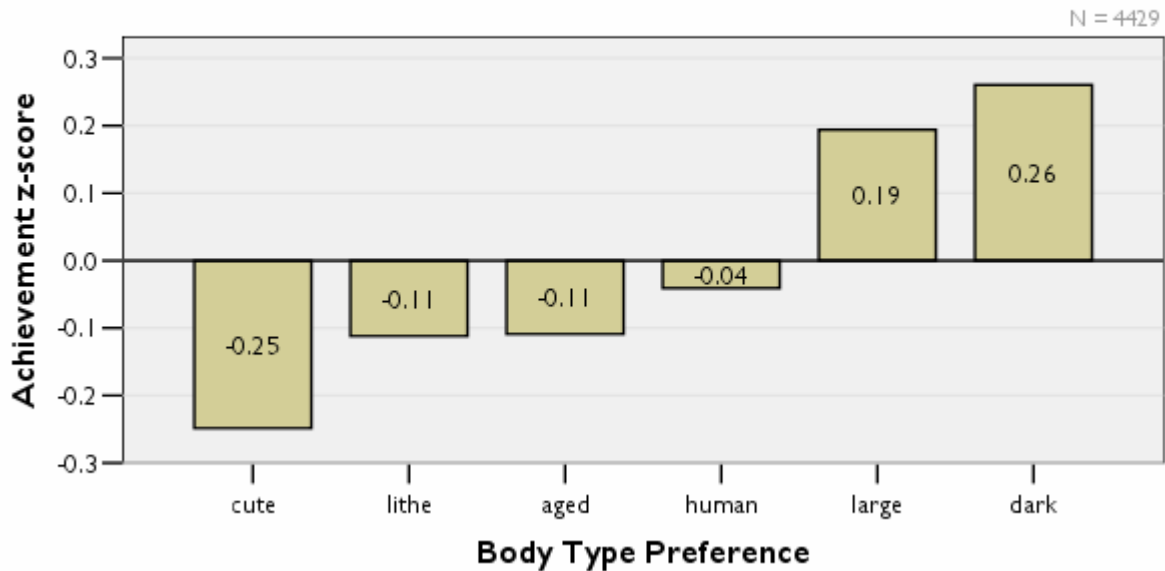

When we turn to the immersion scores, we see a flip in the body types. Players who prefer Cute and Lithe characters enjoy the exploration, role-playing, and customization offered in games, while players who prefer Large and Dark characters don't enjoy these activities as much. Again, the implications for Horde and Alliance factions are interesting.

Immersion Scores by Body Type

N = 4429
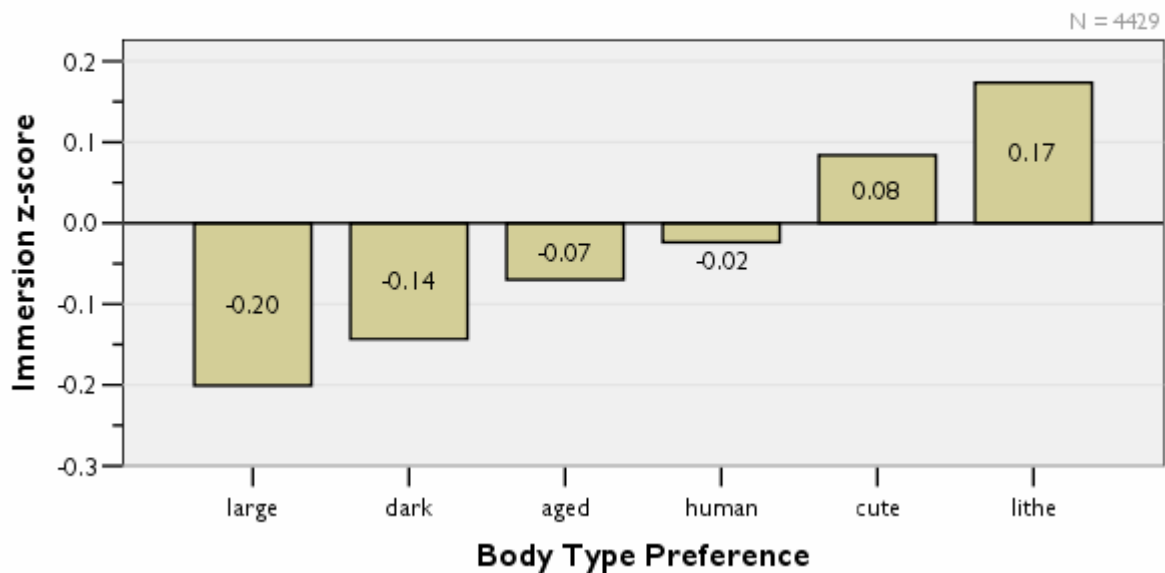
And the social scores mirror the immersion scores for the most part. Players who prefer Cute and Lithe characters are more interested in socializing than players who prefer Dark and Aged characters.

Social Scores by Body Type

N = 4429
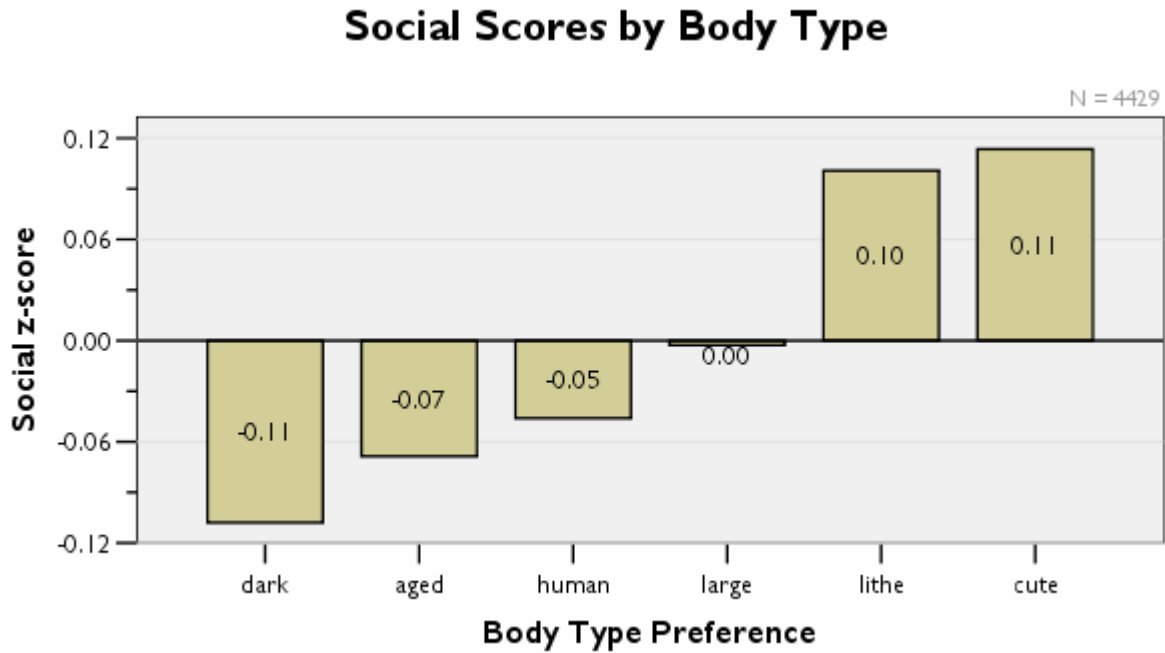
Overall the findings show two interesting things. First of all, while players prefer more idealized (i.e., taller and more attractive) characters, much of avatar choice seems to revolve around mirroring; taller people prefer taller avatars, older people prefer older avatars, male players prefer more masculine characters, and female players prefer more feminine characters.

And second, as we've seen before (http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/archives/001368.php), different personalities and motivations are drawn to different character types. In a game like World of Warcraft, the findings related to player motivations and body type may play out in unexpected ways in places such as battlegrounds where players from the different factions engage in PvP. Players on the Horde side may have an edge because the Horde side consists of more achievement-oriented players.

On Therapy and Dependency

In earlier data, we've seen how some players use MMOs as a therapeutic tool to cope with stress and emotional trauma. In a recent survey, I asked players to talk more about this intersection of online games and psychological stressors and whether MMOs helped or hurt them in dealing with the stressor. One thing that struck me was the variety of psychological stressors players described that MMOs provide an outlet for. These stressors ranged from chronic stress to physical disability and need for social support among others. While the narratives below show that MMOs can be therapeutic, they also show that using MMOs as coping mechanisms can lead to destructive vicious cycles. In this article, we'll take a closer look at this gray area between therapy and dependency.

Of course, the point isn't that MMO players in general have psychological problems and are all using MMOs as coping mechanisms, but this is an important area to look into because of the potential and positive and negative consequences.

Chronic Stress

Many players talked about how the MMO was a way of dealing with chronic stress from work and life. In many of their cases, the game seemed to function as a way of gaining a sense of peace at the end of the day to avoid being constantly overrun by stress.

Stress Reliever

> Logging into WoW at the end of the day is a great stress reliever, as it's one of the few times I'm not thinking (at all) about experiments, the future of my career, or anything like that. It allows me to relax, let things from the day go, and find a more healthy state of mind as the day ends. Also, although WoW gives me a list quests to do (sort of like work, in a way), I know I am in control of what I do, and I know that each task is, in the end, possible. Science just doesn't work that way. [WoW, F, 33]

> There was a time when finances were tight due to a change in employment; this created a lot of pressure and stress until things smoothed out again. Having the game to escape into when I came home in the evening was very therapeutic. [CoH, M, 39]

Important to Let Mind Rest

Other players built on the stress relief theme and emphasized the importance of not letting work take over your life by including some time for play.

> Ultimately, I've decided it's not healthy for me to work that much—I need to relax and get let my mind rest (if I constantly think about the presentation, I won't be fresh to think of new ideas). That's why I play WoW. On nights where I know I'll have lots of guild members to chat with—that's when I know I'm going to have fun joking with friends and trying new content. I'm not escaping from my problems; I'm moderating my effectiveness by implementing strategic breaks in my work schedule. [WoW, F, 22]

Distracted Rumination

Other players used MMOs as a stepping-stone in dealing with and resolving a stressful problem. Thus, the MMO wasn't a way of simply leaving stress behind, but it played a role in helping to work out a problem. For many players, the MMO did this by allowing the problem to be mulled over in the back of the head without being overwhelming. Here are some examples of this "divide and conquer" approach:

> It provided a way to divide my attention so that I could engage with the game while another, less communicative aspect could chew on what was bothering it. Ultimately, the space provided in that exercise catalyzed some insight and paved the way for change. [WoW, F, 51]

> It was an area where I could concentrate on the mechanics of the game and my relation to the game (it was mostly a solo-based MMO) gave me some space to deal with the issues I was dealing with. [WoW, M, 28]

Depression and Emotional Trauma

For others players, the game was an escape from more severe emotional stress typically stemming from traumatic events. The word "pain" was typically used in these narratives.

Emotional Sedative

For players in this situation, the game provided a temporary escape from this emotional pain that was becoming unbearable.

Divorce, troubles with my children, friends and parents. Sometimes I found myself really alone and with a lot pain. The best escape or refuge i found at this time was to go into the game to play and forget all that real life and pain. [Vanguard, M, 43]

Played a lot when my mother was diagnosed and shortly thereafter died of pancreatic cancer; the game was a way to escape from a harsh reality [WoW, M, 26]

Dull the Pain to Heal

One related thread of responses emphasized that the emotional sedation was helpful in allowing the trauma to be worked out slowly rather than being overwhelmed.

The first time I played one (Star Wars Galaxies), I was coping with being sexually assaulted. I wasn't working and couldn't sleep much. My personal life was totally off track and I felt helpless to improve it. It was easier to just play and I think it helped me get some temporal distance from the events so as to be ready to move on with life. [F, 30]

I had a really horrible break up with a long term boyfriend and focusing on in-game objectives prolonged the healing process but also seemed to dull the hurt and let understanding seep in as opposed to being overwhelmed with grief. All-in-all, I believe WoW to have ultimately helped me get through the hardest time I've ever experienced. [WoW, F, 26]

Work Satisfaction

Other players used MMOs as a way to cope with dissatisfaction with their work and careers. For them, the problem wasn't stress but the sense that their jobs or lives weren't fulfilling.

Sense of Progress

For players who felt themselves to be at a standstill, the MMO provided a predictable sense of progress.

In the past, I have used the game as a proxy for achievement and accomplishment when I felt myself to be at a stagnant point in my life. For example, if I feel aimless in my career, I play WoW for its clear-cut, achievable goals (ie. getting loot, reaching a new level.) I have felt this to be very beneficial. Though I could see how it might become a substitute for real life for some people, I've used it as a way to get past those 'humps' where I don't feel satisfied. It gives me a sense of forward progress. [WoW, F, 23]

Working away several thousand dollars of debt away, for example, takes a long time, and it's hard to feel like one is making progress when one has rent and etc. to pay as well every month. By contrast, WoW seems engineered to make the player feel as though he/she is making 'progress', which makes me feel almost like my time is less 'wasted' because at least I made progress in the game, even when I'm not making a lot of progress in my personal life. [WoW, M, 23]

Control, Competence, and Status

The lack of control, competence, and social status that some players felt were alleviated when they logged on to an online game.

I use Guild Wars (GW) as a way to escape the stressors of life. There is more control in game. It is much easier, in most cases, to set a goal and achieve it in game. [GW, M, 25]

I hated my job and was constantly dwelling on several disappointments and poor choices I had made. Suddenly I found a world that allowed me far more control than I had in the real one, as well as a place where I could be admired and respected for my skills. I latched onto it strongly. [WoW, M, 36]

During a period of about a year where I was working at a job and role where my work was not particularly engaging, the MMO served as my means to exercise my brain, problem solve and more importantly work with others on problems. In the workplace, I was essentially working alone on most tasks, and have very little background or expertise in the domain I was working in. In the MMO (Wow), it was the reverse, as I frequently grouped with others, socialized and solved challenging in game problems. My game play during this period was very high, often playing late into the evenings, doing dungeon runs, raids; I was essentially filling a void that my job was leaving me with everyday. [WoW, M, 31]

A Sense of Purpose

And finally, some players used MMOs to gain a sense of meaning because they found their lives to be boring and unengaging.

This is a regular state of life for me. I am a worrier, a mother, a full time worker, a wife ... and I suffer from depression, for which I am being treated. I feel my regular life is very boring ... as is my work. WoW lets me feel as if I am doing something interesting. [WoW, F, 31]

I began playing because I had hours of free time, even with a full time job and a family, and I was bored and depressed. It really did make life more exciting and interesting at a time when I was feeling very disappointed in life, and gave me something to look forward to each day and especially on weekends. [LOTR, F, 50]

Social Support

In addition to using MMOs as a coping mechanism regarding emotional stress and work dissatisfaction, players described using online games to derive social support in a variety of ways.

Emotional Support

In the most straight-forward examples, some players noted that friends they had in the game provided emotional support in times of need.

The people I met in game became an important support group for me (my only support group) - whether I talked to them about my issues or not. I don't know how I would have made it through that tough time without them. [WoW, F, 21]

Once after an extremely painful breakup. It helped because the friends I had made online were more caring than most of the people I had called friends in real life, who blew me off. [Eve Online, M, 22]

Easier to Talk to People

Others described how talking to people online was different to talking to people face-to-face and the relative anonymity made it easier to talk about difficult issues. The first narrative is interesting in that the practice of talking about these emotional issues online made it easier subsequently to talk about it face-to-face.

When I went through a depression it was a relief to have the online friends to chat with. For some reason it was easier to break the ice talking about difficult issues with online friends before talking

with friends irl. Once I had been warming up talking with online friends it was easier taking the step talking to irl friends. [WoW, M, 25]

There is something about online friends that let you break through walls you normally put up with real life friends. You can be you without judgment and they give you advice the same way. Online people don't have to care about protecting your feelings as much so they give you the benefit of saying exactly what they think without regard to how it affects your relationship (as much). [WoW, F, 26]

Alternate Social Network

Some players noted that it wasn't simply that they didn't have friends in real life, but that certain constraints made it difficult to tap their existing social network for emotional support. For them, the MMO provided an alternate social network that better fit their needs.

When I was in high school I was being raised in a very restrictive religious cult and afraid to tell my parents I was bisexual. I used to cry myself to sleep every night and engage in cutting behavior and a lot of withdrawal from my family. Since I was not allowed to have friends outside the religion and I could not trust those who were cult members I felt very much alone. By playing an MMO I found friends I could confide in who helped me and putting on my headset I could forget of where I was in my life. It made me even more driven to succeed in the game and I met friends who I still keep in touch with. It didn't help me solve my problems but it did help me cope until I was in a better situation to make changes in my life. [WoW, F, 21]

I have many good friends, but they live all over the world and it's hard to keep in touch. Part of my depression stemmed from having no good friends who I could be in consistent *regular* contact with, so I spent most of my days somewhat lonely, and at a loss how to start over making new friends. Gaming provided me with a more stable and satisfying social life. I ended up making many good friends and becoming a well-loved officer in a fun guild. [WoW, F, 33]

"Poor Dear"

Several respondents provided an interesting variant of using MMOs as alternate social networks. In these examples, the respondent has an existing social network they are able to tap into for emotional support, but it is that very support that they feel traps them in their grief by constantly reminding them of the traumatic event. Having a social network in an MMO allowed them to put the trauma behind them.

Several years ago I lost my husband and my daughter in an auto accident, leaving me the only survivor of my family. The constantly changing world of the MMO and the comings and goings of real live people provided something I needed at the time -- a whole world that I was part of, yet no one there knew of my pain. I could interact with real people and not have the pressure of being 'that poor woman who lost her family', which I hadn't realized was weighing so heavily on me in real life, and which well-meaning friends tended to put on me. [DAoC, F, 48]

When my father was released from prison (after being in since 1986) and tried to make contact with me, I started playing WoW more often than usual. I think, apart from playing too much, Warcraft helped to even out the stress in my life for that period of time. None of my guild mates knew of my problems, and therefore didn't ask me about them (whereas my RL friends would, naturally), which meant I wasn't being constantly reminded of the RL issues at hand. [WoW, F, 21]

Social Anxiety

And finally, some players used the MMO to cope with social anxiety problems. The MMO allowed them to interact with others at the pace and intensity that they were comfortable with.

I've also struggled with shyness for many years, and have used games as a way to hide from my social problems, which are bad enough to be paralyzing. I'm still shy in the game sometimes, and often have trouble finding groups. However, overall, I think I'm less shy now than I was before I started playing. I've definitely noticed a change in my behavior in the real world, and close friends (in real life) have noticed this change also. I'm a lot more likely to put myself and my opinions out there when I'm around other people, and with new people I've met in the past year, I've been a lot more outgoing. [WoW, F, 31]

I'm an extreme introvert (Asperger's Syndrome) and spending time with others irritates me. I play online games as entertainment that connects me with people 'a little' but not really connecting with people. Sociologists would probably say that this behaviour isn't psychologically sound, so in that sense feeding that would be hurting me more than trying to work out my so-called 'disorder' and socializing with people. [Guild Wars, M, 27]

I have been diagnosed with generalized anxiety disorder. When it was really bad, I liked playing games on line, because I could talk with people I didn't know. This was something I didn't dare in Real Life. It has helped me a bit to get my life going because people listened to me and supported me. [WoW, F, 21]

Physical Challenges

The final category of problems that players described using MMOs as a coping mechanism for revolved around physical challenges.

Distraction from Physical Pain

Some players mentioned playing MMOs as an effective alternative to taking painkillers to manage chronic pain or pain resulting from a recent injury.

> I suffer chronic back pains, and an MMO can help take my thoughts away from that. [CoH, M, 40]

> Both my wrists are injured, and the MMO setting helps me ignore the pain without using painkillers. [WoW, F, 36]

> Dealing with surgery and the loss of a whole year athletically was a pretty tough thing for me to take. It was right around then that Guild Wars first came out. Ultimately, I became a better Guild Wars player but a worse person. It effectively made me forget about my injury and enjoy my three months without much pain. Though in hindsight, I wish i had not played nearly as much as i did and it took quite some time to rebound back into sports. [GW, M, 18]

Physical Handicaps

And for others, MMOs provide a way to cope with the social and emotional effects of being physically handicapped.

> I suppose that one of the reasons I enjoy playing is that, unlike in RL (disabled and a wheelchair user), there are no physical barriers in the game. I can go where I want and do what I want without suffering for it (with the exception of making my painful hands and wrists worse through playing for too long). Also, other players don't know that I'm disabled unless I choose to tell them, so there's none of the awkwardness of RL; most people are invariably unsure how to interact with someone in a wheelchair … still! [WoW, F, 50]

> Well, I'm ill and disabled and I can't work. I have plenty of free time on my hands and MMOs have helped me spend that time online where no one can see my state and where I get to be at the same level as everyone else for once. It reinforces my self-esteem since I'm a good gamer ... I think. I tend to be more vocal and outgoing online than in real life. People get to know me better

online than in real life because in real life they would probably just ignore me like they do now. I get to have some social contacts online because I don't get to have colleagues or friends in real life. [GW, F, 32]

The Empowering Reality

When asked whether the MMO ultimately helped or hurt them in dealing with their problems, players talked about both positive and negative outcomes. On the positive side, players who were experiencing depression described how the online environment reminded them of the things they could achieve in the physical world.

> As strange as it may sound, learning to play and enjoy life in an MMO helped me regain my life outside the MMO world -- not by substituting one fake world for a more painful real world, but by providing me with a much-needed detached environment to revitalize my own personal traits and strengths without the stress of being watched and analyzed constantly by well-meaning friends. [DAoC, F, 48]

> I began playing because I had hours of free time, even with a full time job and a family, and I was bored and depressed. Three years later, I had recovered a sense of myself and my potential, and had a more compatible relationship and an extremely satisfying job. And as my real life began to rival my online life, EverQuest began to fade away. It really did make life more exciting and interesting at a time when I was feeling very disappointed in life, and gave me something to look forward to each day and especially on weekends. [LoTR, F, 50]

And some players even described how the online game was helpful even when they their depression made them suicidal.

> The people I met in game became an important support group for me (my only support group) - whether I talked to them about my issues or not. I don't know how I would have made it through that tough time without them, since I had constantly thought about suicide before I had been playing an mmo. [WoW, F, 21]

> I was literally going to commit suicide - I had an idea, a method, and had planned it all out (I had recently been hit with the country western song trifecta of house burning down, dogs dying in the fire, and my mom's death shortly after). A friend invited me to try Everquest 2. I became engaged with it - every day I woke up wanting to see what would happen next. I made friends that I cared about, and began to form a community. Little by little, I started to see how what was going on

virtually could also go on in my RL, and I began to venture forth there, too. Being involved in adventures and leveling LITERALLY saved my life. [WoW, F, 33]

The Vicious Cycle

On the other hand, the opposite can also occur. Using the game environment as a coping mechanism can lead to ignoring the source problems and causing them to worsen over time. This in turn leads to a further dependence on the game as a coping mechanism.

I started playing WoW in a rough time in my life. I neglected pretty much everything in real life. There were days where I wouldn't even leave my room except to use the bathroom and get something to eat. I would play from waking until I was passing out in front of the keyboard. Real life sucked, but man I was having a blast in the game and it just made me forget about everything wrong in real life. At its worst, I went almost a week without even speaking to one of my room mates ...and things started to sour on that front. We got into arguments, and we couldn't pay any bills. I had to move home for the first time since I started college. [WoW, M, 25]

I hated my job and was constantly dwelling on several disappointments and poor choices I had made. Suddenly I found a world that allowed me far more control than I had in the real one, as well as a place where I could be admired and respected for my skills. I latched onto it strongly. Of course, the real world kept moving, and my wife began feeling more and more neglected. I ignored her attempts to pull me out of the game, and so she grew more and more distant, eventually having an affair which I was blissfully ignorant of for some time. Once the truth came out there was a truly horrible period of time, almost a year, where our home was more or less the site of a Cold War, with both of us staying together only for the sake of our children. I sank even deeper into the game to try and block out the misery of my real life. [WoW, M, 36]

My parents divorced, and although I was under the impression it wouldn't really affect me ... well, after playing the game every waking moment, not pursuing work or school, staying awake playing for 48 hours at a time or worse, it was certainly hurting my situation more than helping. I was very irritable, I would snap at my mother and younger sister, especially if the divorce or my father were brought up. I became quite simply very, very, mean-spirited. Eventually, after about 6 or so months of this every single day, I realized I had lost almost 40 pounds from starving myself and my condition slowly worsened. My immune system was completely shot. I had grown so ill that a week later I came down with tonsillitis as well as strep throat. [WoW, F, 18]

Is the Gaming Problem just a Symptom?

Some of the narratives we've seen show how the gaming problem emerges as a coping mechanism in the midst of existing social or emotional stresses. For example, on the previous page, we saw the young woman who used the game to avoid the reality of her parents' divorce. Or consider the following example.

> I'm having trouble with school - not because of grades, but because of my parents. They're pressuring me to do well in school because of the high tuition. They're having trouble affording it, and constantly tell me that it's up to me to do well so we might get more financial aid next year. I get it. I understand the situation we're in. But they're not helping me by constantly telling me the same thing over and over again. In fact, they're making it worse. I'm put under stress to try and do well, but it's not working. Then one day I got an e-mail invite to be a Closed Beta Tester for the MMO 'Secret of the Solstice.' I was intrigued by the whole 'Closed Beta' thing before - I'd never heard of it. I was a 'newbie' to the whole MMO scene. Almost instantly I downloaded the client, and started playing. I was hooked. I was in a world where I could be anyone. I didn't have to work to please someone, I didn't have certain standards to meet. I could just be who I wanted to be, doing what I wanted to do. I ended up playing every night, and on weekends for hours. [Secret of the Solstice, F, 14]

It's easy to take the most overt symptom and identify it as the primary problem, but this would lead us to the overly simplistic solution that taking away the game solves the problem. And as many Marriage and Family Therapists know, the parents who bring their child in for a problem may be unknowingly playing a part in sustaining that very problem themselves. Behavioral dependencies are seldom simple problems; more often than not, they involve underlying problems sustained by the social dynamics surrounding an individual.

Of course, this isn't to say that gaming problems only emerge when there are existing psychological stressors, but the research in this area does suggest that psychological stressors are a strong indicator of whether someone develops a gaming problem or not. Nevertheless, game mechanics that reinforce particular game-play motivations (e.g., reward cycles) are definitely a part of this process too.

The narratives we've seen also suggest other ways in which the gaming intersects with therapy. It is possible that therapists could actively leverage the online environment as exercises for certain social anxieties or teamwork skills. This is something that seems like it could fit as part of a cognitive behavioral therapy approach. More importantly, the narratives show that getting gamers to talk about their motivations for playing can help identify underlying causes of problematic gaming. Knowing how the gamer is using the online environment as a coping mechanism might help shed light on the larger problems an individual is dealing with.

Reflections From Gamers

I'll close with a collection of varied perspectives from respondents on this gray area between coping, therapy, and dependency.

> As long as the player remembers that a game is a game, and not an alternative to their present lives, then they will be alright. It can be dangerous when one forgets this, because ultimately I do not believe games are real. They are data stored on servers, data that could be easily erased if the company wished it. Our lives are so much more valuable than that. [WoW, M, 19]

> Over the summer, I played what for me was way too much. I knew I shouldn't play as much as I did--and at the end of most days I regretted it. I learned a valuable lesson from that though--the game is enjoyable when I control how I interact with it, not when it controls me. [WoW, F, 22]

> MMO's aren't the problem, they are just a way for people with other real life problems to escape and forget about them. My advice is to make sure you're happy and content with where you are in life before you touch an MMO. [WoW, M, 25]

> I finally figured out that trying to compete to impress a bunch of anonymous strangers online is ridiculous if it means hurting the ones I love. MMOs now are only a form of entertainment for me, one of many, and not my refuge from reality. [WoW, M, 36]

> There is a fine line between relaxing with a little gaming, and submersing yourself in a game in order to ignore something that shouldn't be ignored. I don't think this is unique to MMOGs. Some people use alcohol, for others its drugs, or gambling, or sports, or some other activity. It's a human problem, not a specific activity/technology problem. [Eve Online, M, 34]

> Did the game contribute to the problem? No. 60 hours a week sitting in front of a computer contributed to the problem, but I could have done that watching DVDs, playing electronic bridge or laying on the couch watching TV. [WoW, F, 51]

> Doing something pleasurable when you are feeling down is one way of coping. Of course, it never solves the problems. Of course, it's not meant to solve the problem. Neither does eating a bar of chocolate. But when there's no fun to be had in the real world, sometimes, there is fun to be had in the virtual world. [Guild Wars, M, 29]

Role Reversals

In past survey results, we've seen that many MMO players play with people they know face-to-face (friends, romantic partners, family members, etc.). And we've also seen hints that role-reversals can occur. For example, a father may be a member of a guild where his son is the leader. In this article, we'll take a look at whether and how MMO role-reversals impact existing relationships.

Given the contextual constraints of the scenario, it's not surprising that the question elicited only a handful of respondents. 46 players described their role-reversal experiences. Most of these came from parent-child (17) and romantic partner (18) pairs. The remainder came from friends (5), siblings (4), and boss-employee pairs (2). Of the 46 players, 24 felt that the role-reversal did not change the existing relationship at all. Of the remaining 22 responses, half felt the role-reversal had a positive impact on the relationship while the other half felt it had a negative impact on the relationship.

Types of Role-Reversal

We'll start by going through some of the kinds of role reversals players described, and then we'll take a look at some of the consequences.

Power Reversal

Players referred to a variety of role-reversals. The most common scenario involved a reversal or change in a long-standing power/authority dynamic.

> I play with my father a lot. I'm a Guild Leader on the Tribunal Server and he's a member of my Guild, so our roles are somewhat reversed. We have a good time and what I've found is that he uses it as a way to support me. When things blow up within the Guild (and they do) he comes out in support of me. [EQ, F, 37]

> My boyfriend of 8 years have started a guild together. He is the guild master and I'm one of the officers. So that in game he outranks me but we are equal as partners. Sometimes this leads to clashes when we don't see eye to eye. However this has no impact on our relationship because we are used to having different opinions. [WoW, F, 25]

Knowledge Differential

Other times, the reversal involved knowledge and experience rather than a direct power relationship. This knowledge differential was more obvious to parent-child pairs.

> My son and husband are both much more experienced gamers and are both better at WoW, especially in PvP, than I am. They are also much more interested in stats and gear than I am. My son frequently gives me pointers and suggestions about how to improve my game play. It is somewhat of a reversal from our real life roles, but it isn't a problem and hasn't adversely affected our relationship. [WoW, F, 53]

Personality Flip

In some cases between romantic partners, a very noticeable personality flip occurred. For example, the less outgoing person would become more outgoing in the MMO. Thus, the more extraverted person in RL may find themselves being the more introverted person in an MMO, and vice versa.

> My husband and I play together, and it is a bit of a role reversal because he is usually the outgoing one. But in a lot of ways, I play more than he does and work harder at it. I am also much more outgoing in game than he is. Being in the form of a character helps me to drop my insecurities about myself. My husband has never been a 'group joiner' and that holds true in the game as well, so it is usually me bringing him to social situations, which never happens in RL. [WoW, F, 33]

Financial Differential

And finally, some players commented on a flip in financial resources.

> In real life, I make more money than my husband and he stays home....In Second Life, my husband is a very successful real estate agent (yes, he makes a lot of real life money there) and I shop and go dancing. I think that it has given him more confidence in himself and has helped improve his RL business in that way as well as make him feel like he is a more equal partner in our marriage. [Second Life, F, 39]

> My room mate and I play together. Usually in real life I am broke and she has money. In the game it is totally reversed. I usually have a lot of money and I am always loaning her money. [WoW, F, 29]

Positive Impacts

Let's turn now to how these role-reversals can affect existing relationships. We'll consider the positive impacts first.

Bonding

Some players talked about how the in-game experience led to a better relationship face-to-face, typically via the bonding experiences. While the first narrative below gives an example of how the role-reversal created a salient bonding experience, it's less clear in the second and third narrative whether the role-reversal itself contributed to the bonding above and beyond interacting in an MMO together.

> I have one more story - about the snow-covered mountains of AC (and I've still got the screen cap) - my son, in his avatar, standing over a resting me, in my avatar, while I rest. We'd been in heavy battle and we'd each stood guarding for respawns while the other laid down to rest, (remember AC had that feature). It has been a story my son and I still enjoy telling about the screen cap of the virtual 'child is father to the man' moment. I have to be honest and say it has always stirred a deep fatherly thing deep in my soul this image of us protecting each other on the side of that mountain. [LOTR, M, 56]

> I have played with employees, and they had different needs from the games than I did. Did it affect our relationship? In a way in that as fellow gamers we had a better relationship than others around me. We had a lot to talk about. We talked about the game and other things. It opened us up to a friendship that otherwise may not have been possible. [Eve Online, M, 45]

> The experience was generally positive (team or relationship building) and -so far- results in a much better real-life relationship. [WoW, M, 50]

Rebalancing of Power

In other cases, the role-reversal in the online environment helped to rebalance the power structure in the existing relationship in ways perceived as positive by the respondents.

> My two best friends play in the same guild as I do, and while they tend to be more active and the center of attention in the physical world, they are much more subdued in the gaming world. I am an officer and quite active on our guild forums and in chat, whereas they only post or speak occasionally and hold no 'rank' within the guild. This has led to me being the 'expert' on all things that are happening relative to our guild and in the game. As a result, we have had more of an

equalizing of power in the physical world between the three of us, in that my opinion on a major topic of discussion is now more respected and asked for than it was previously. [WoW, M, 25]

I started playing WoW before my older brother. He has always been the domineering one in our sibling way, he was always the boss whenever he deemed me worthy to play with. When I started playing WoW, and he got interested in it too, at first he was playing on my account and he had to ask me for permission before he could play and, occasionally, it was he who came to me for help in certain things. When he got his own account and transferred his character over, things started shifting back into old ways but, at least now, he's a lot more friendly about it. When we were really young, we did somewhat get along but he was 'boss' and, as we grew older, it developed into a true hate-love relationship where most of our time together was through screaming and yelling at each other ... Now, we're almost friends. [WoW, F, 24]

Negative Impacts

We'll now turn to how role-reversals can negatively impact existing relationships.

Emphasizes Personality Differences

For some players, the in-game role-reversals led to conflicts and arguments. In many of these cases, the conflicts seemed to stem from existing power struggles and personality differences that the role-reversal highlighted. In other words, one party wasn't willing to relinquish the power that the other party was trying to take on.

> I played Final Fantasy with a friend/boyfriend and he was guild leader & very much a strong leader in the game. In our relationship that was never really the case. I was usually 'in charge' in deciding what we did, where we ate, etc. I usually even drove him around in his car. It was hard for me to take his leadership in the game context and I resented it. It made things difficult IRL because I was bugged by him assuming a role that I was not used to. I think it bugged him too cuz I wouldn't submit to his authority and I think I made him look weaker to the other guild members. [F, 30]

> My husband and I play together. We do seem to reverse roles in MMOs. I tend to lead IRL and am kind and friendly. He tends to quietly follow my lead. However, in MMOs he usually is deciding what quest we are on and what's next, while I'm more interested in checking out some distant object. This does sometimes affect our relationship, mostly when he gets mad at me because I'm wandering off in game or stopping to fight everyone, while he just wants to get to

point A and collect B and take it to NPC C, without stopping. It is hard for me when this happens, because it is the reverse of our normal IRL relationship. [LOTR, F, 26]

A friend from the Dorm I lived in sophomore year in college played guild wars with me on occasion. In all other games that we played together, like Guitar Hero and Super Smash Bros. he was my obvious superior. He always won competitions and was the instructor and I was the student. However, in guild wars it was the opposite. I was immensely more knowledgeable in the game than him. Especially in competitive matters. It occasionally caused some abrasiveness in real life as he was not used to me taking the leadership and instructional role. [GW, M, 19]

New Power Spilled Over

Other players felt that the role-reversal in the game led to an adoption of an inappropriately condescending attitude face-to-face.

The only thing I can think of was when I was playing WoW with my ex a couple of years time ago. He was very needy in real life and I was typically very independent. He was also a very arrogant guy and was used to people not being as knowledgeable as he was. Oddly enough, he'd met his match as far as IQ goes when he met me. I started WoW because I saw how much fun he had with it ... and I was a newbie and didn't know anything about it. Suddenly, rather than being intellectual equals and him being the needy one, the roles were reversed. I had no idea what was going on and needed him for pointers, and he found himself more knowledgeable than I in one arena. He prided himself on being in the best guild and one of the most powerful/experienced/best gear on the server. And he didn't want to play with me because I was a newbie and apparently my lack of experience was embarrassing. In real life, it caused our relationship to deteriorate because he started thinking he was better than me and deserved better. I started feeling unappreciated because he carried his 'superiority' from the game into real life and became distant. [Vanguard, F, 23]

I joined WoW to play with my best friend. He had been playing for 6 months and had a character I thought was established. By being at the right place with the right people at the right time, I became a founding guild officer. Later, my friend joined the guild. My guild seniority, as well as the advantages I had through character building advice from guild mates led to my adoption of a condescending attitude toward my comparably ineffective best friend. [WoW, M, 24]

Work and Play Don't Mix

We'll end with a narrative that has a mix of positive and negative impacts. This narrative is fascinating as it lies at the intersection of work and play, and in particular, possible consequences of playing games with your bosses.

> I have not played in MMOs where I have experienced this; however, that may be due to prior experiences in playing games (FPS) with my boss. In those games, I was responsible for organizing the 'play dates' and encouraging the team to get together. Initially, this was a fantastic way to showcase my leadership and organizational skills. My management promoted those skills as positive teambuilding and rewarded me sufficiently. However, as time wore on, the same manager was not able to continue improvement in the game, and lost interest as the other players became significantly better. When he stopped playing altogether, the expectations that I would set up the games became a liability in that I was spending 'too much time' with organization, and the impression that my manager had of me was that all I did was game. This was reflected in my work performance review for two years, even after we disbanded the group that was playing. Some of us have moved on to the MMO genre now -- but it is much more secretive. We have not invited management back for the same fears of making them feel inadequate or feeling like they need more of a leadership role. [WoW, M, 32]

One interesting theme that ran through many of the narratives is how the gaming environment highlighted the existing power structures in a relationship. It is of course in role-reversals where the power structures are upset that they become most salient and thus available for examination and reflection.

A lot of times, we talk about MMOs as places where we get to play with our own identities and learn about new roles, but these role-reversals suggest that MMOs can also be places where relationships "come into play".

Primary Motivations

In past data, I've tended to explore player motivations as a collection of components (http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/archives/001299.php). While that method of analysis made it easy to compare age and gender differences, one drawback was that it was difficult to compare one motivation against another. For example, overall, are certain motivations more popular than others?
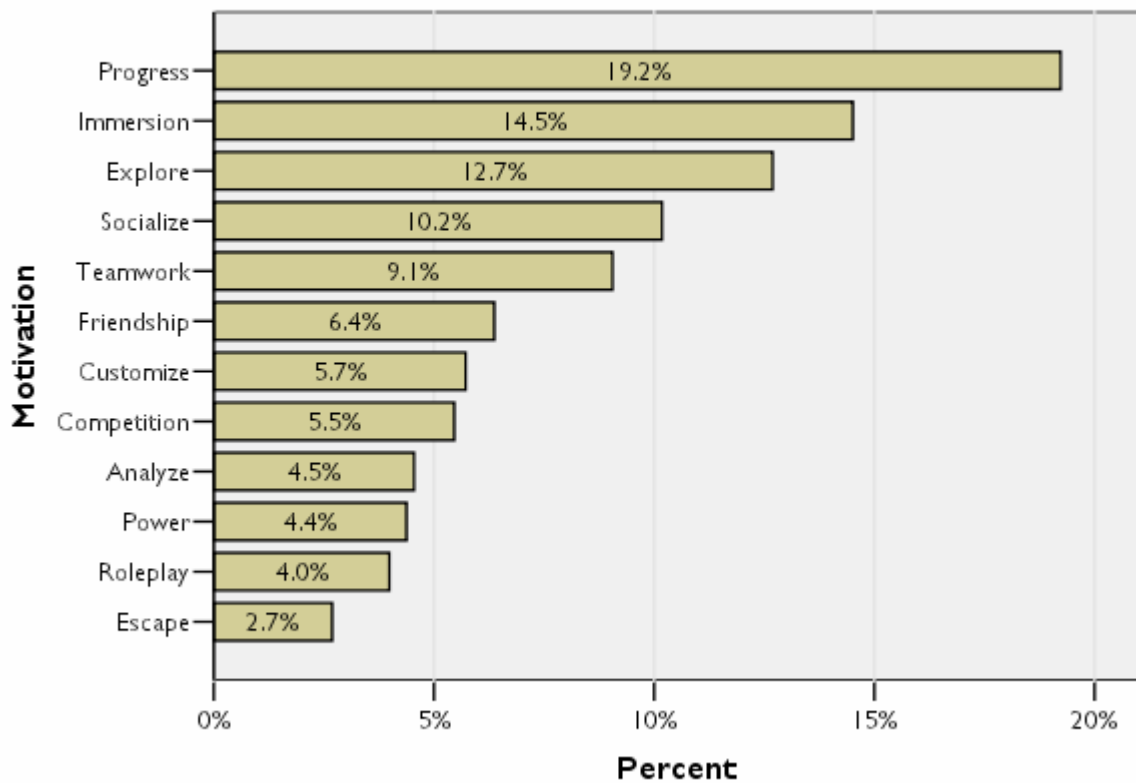
To get at this question, I asked players to read through a set of motivations and pick the one that was most important to them. The motivations were generated from earlier findings:

1) Achievement
   a. Becoming powerful
   b. Making progress
   c. Competing with others
   d. Analyzing game mechanics
2) Social
   a. Socializing with others
   b. Making good friends
   c. Working with others in a team
3) Immersion
   a. Exploring the world
   b. Role-playing
   c. Escaping from RL problems
   d. Customizing your character
   e. Being immersed in the MMO

Overall, the top three motivations were: 1) making progress, 2) being immersed in the MMO, and 3) exploring the world. The bottom three motivations were: 1) escaping from RL problems, 2) role-playing, and 3) becoming powerful. It was interesting to see that the sense of making progress was the most popular motivation by a fair margin and that players seemed to differentiate it from the seemingly similar motivation of becoming powerful that was much less popular. And while it is no surprise to regular MMO players, it bears pointing out that it is ironic that role-playing is one of the least important motivations in online role-playing games.
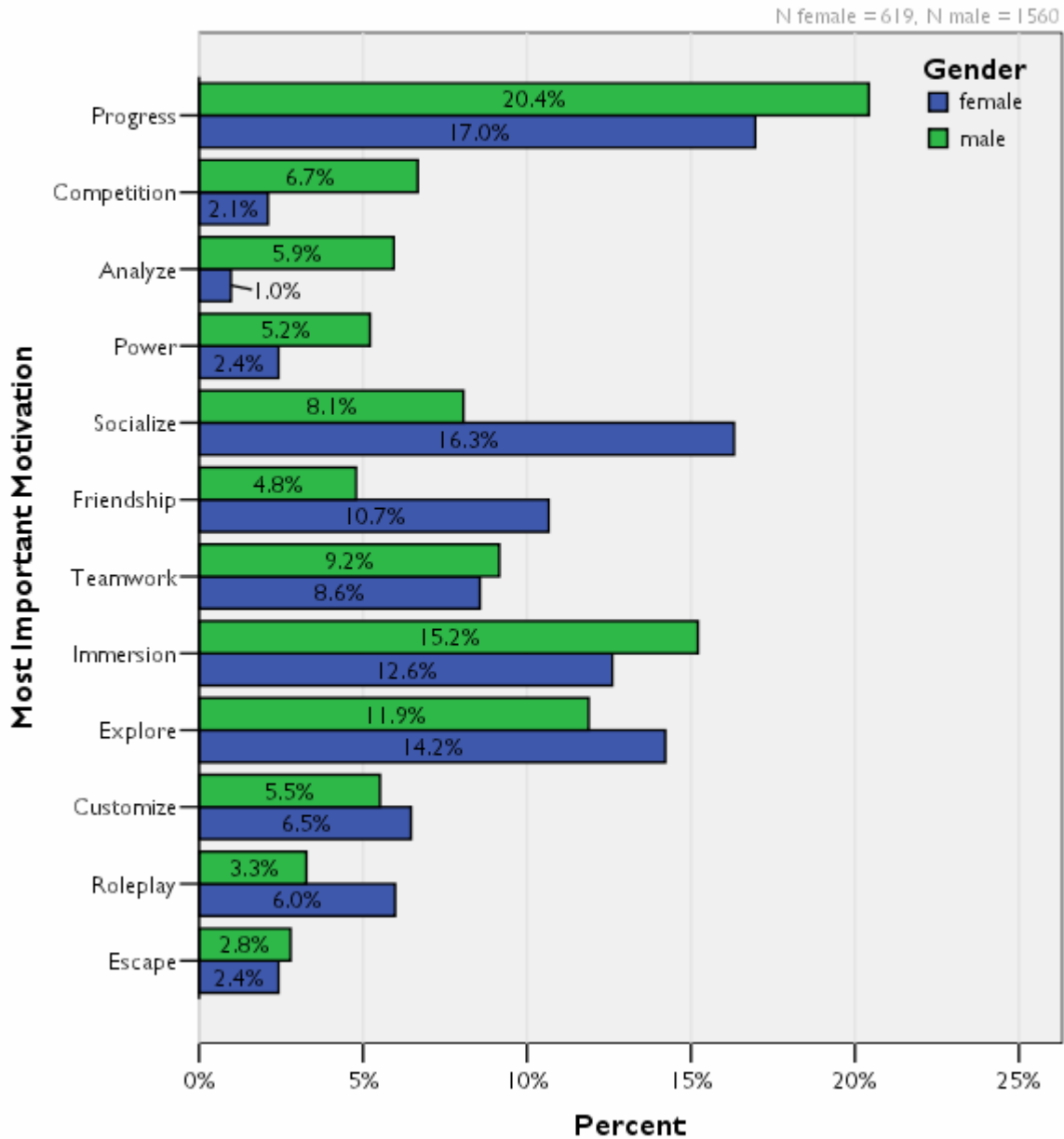
Most Important Motivation

| Motivation	Percent
Progress	19.2%
Immersion	14.5%
Explore	12.7%
Socialize	10.2%
Teamwork	9.1%
Friendship	6.4%
Customize	5.7%
Competition	5.5%
Analyze	4.5%
Power	4.4%
Roleplay	4.0%
Escape	2.7%

If we split the rankings by gender, we see several interesting patterns. The graph below is sorted by broad motivation category (i.e., achievement, social, and immersion) and then popularity. First of all, we see that there were no substantial differences between genders in the top three motivations (i.e., progress, immersion, and explore). Within the achievement category, we see that men were about 3 times more likely to pick competition, analysis, and power as their primary motivation than women. And within the social category, women were about twice as likely to pick socializing and making friends as their primary motivation than men. It is worth noting that within both the achievement and social categories, there was one component where gender differences were comparatively minor, the progress and teamwork motivations respectively.

Most Important Motivation

N female = 619, N male = 1560

Gender: female, male

Motivation	male	female
Progress	20.4%	17.0%
Competition	6.7%	2.1%
Analyze	5.9%	1.0%
Power	5.2%	2.4%
Socialize	8.1%	16.3%
Friendship	4.8%	10.7%
Teamwork	9.2%	8.6%
Immersion	15.2%	12.6%
Explore	11.9%	14.2%
Customize	5.5%	6.5%
Roleplay	3.3%	6.0%
Escape	2.8%	2.4%

If we collapse across the motivation categories, we get the following graph. Overall, the immersion components have a slight edge against the other two motivations and are equally appealing to both men and women. For the achievement and social categories, we see a flip by gender. Men were about 50% more likely to select an achievement motivation as their primary motivation, while women were about 50% more likely to select a social motivation as their primary motivation.
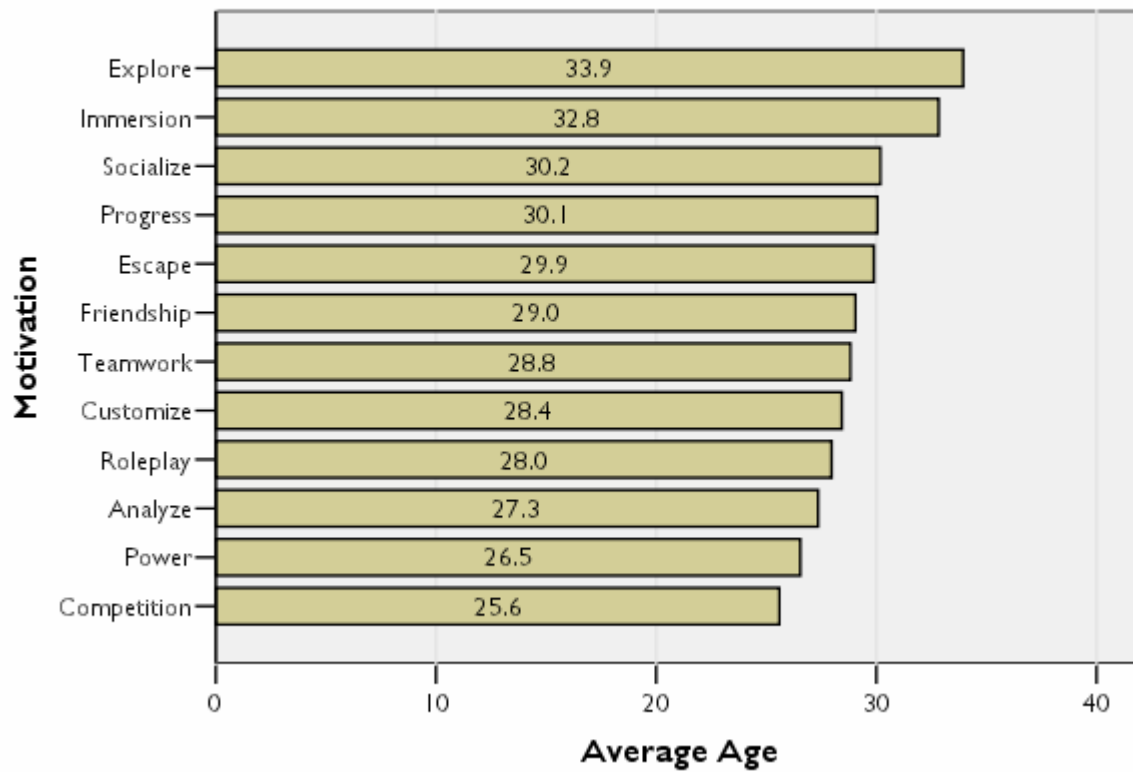
Most Important Motivation Category
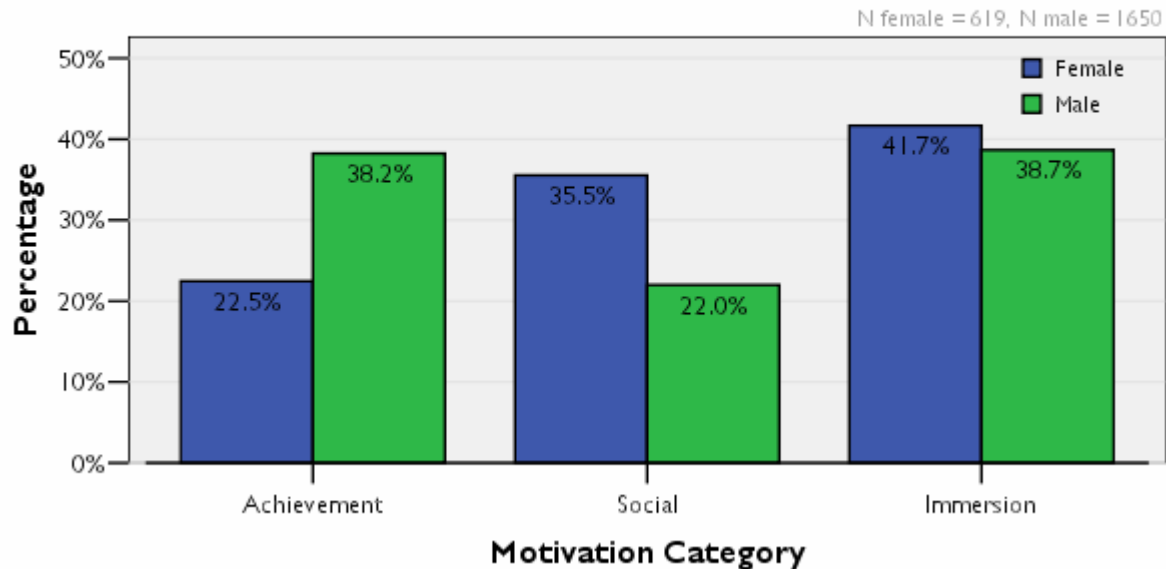
And finally, let's take a look at age differences. The following graph shows the average age of the respondents who selected particular motivations as their primary motivation. Consistent with findings elsewhere (http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/archives/001299.php), players driven by power and competition tend to be younger. The motivations with the highest average age were exploration, immersion, and socializing. It's interesting to note that the motivations with lower average ages suggest a more "hard-core" mentality while the motivations with the higher average ages suggest a more "casual" mentality.

Most Important Motivation & Age

N female = 619, N male = 1560

| Motivation	Average Age
Explore	33.9
Immersion	32.8
Socialize	30.2
Progress	30.1
Escape	29.9
Friendship	29.0
Teamwork	28.8
Customize	28.4
Roleplay	28.0
Analyze	27.3
Power	26.5
Competition	25.6

Keeping in Touch

While the media tends to portray online gamers as anti-social people, we've seen data before showing that most MMO players regularly play the game with someone they know in RL (http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/archives/001468.php). Thus, we have seen some preliminary evidence that players were using the game environment as a way to maintain relationships.

As opposed to talking to someone over the telephone or chatting over IM, online games allow people separated geographically to work together and collaborate on something. Thus, online games may be used by some players to maintain relationships with friends and family members who don't live close to them. In this article, we'll take a look at data on this issue.
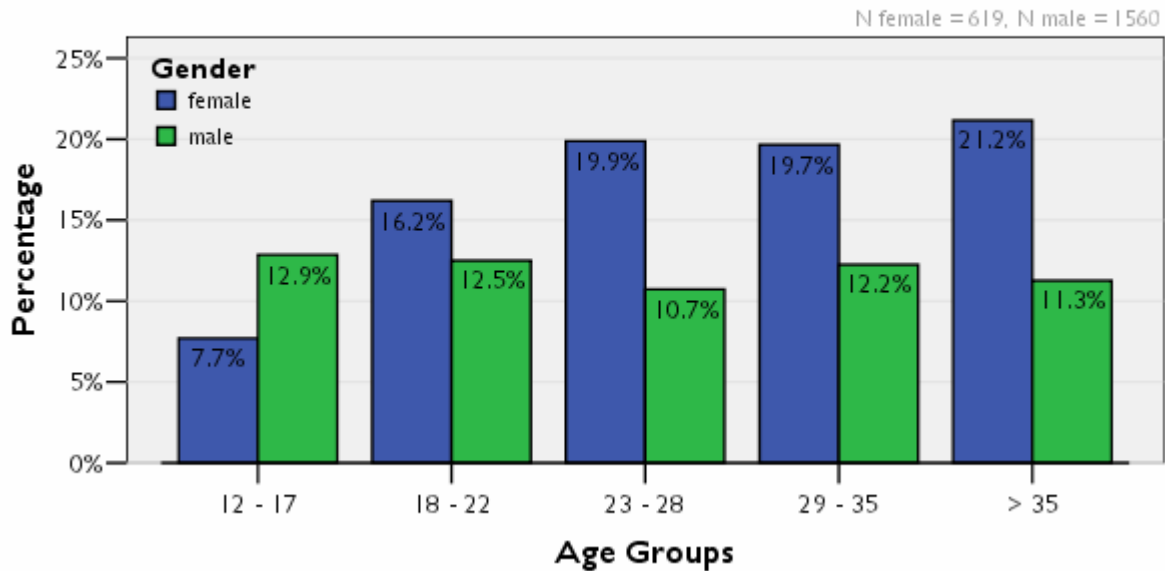
Overall, 60% of MMO players use the online game to keep in touch with friends who don't live close to them. There was a mild decline with age. Younger players were more likely than older players to do so, and there was a small gender difference. Female players were marginally more likely to do so than male players.
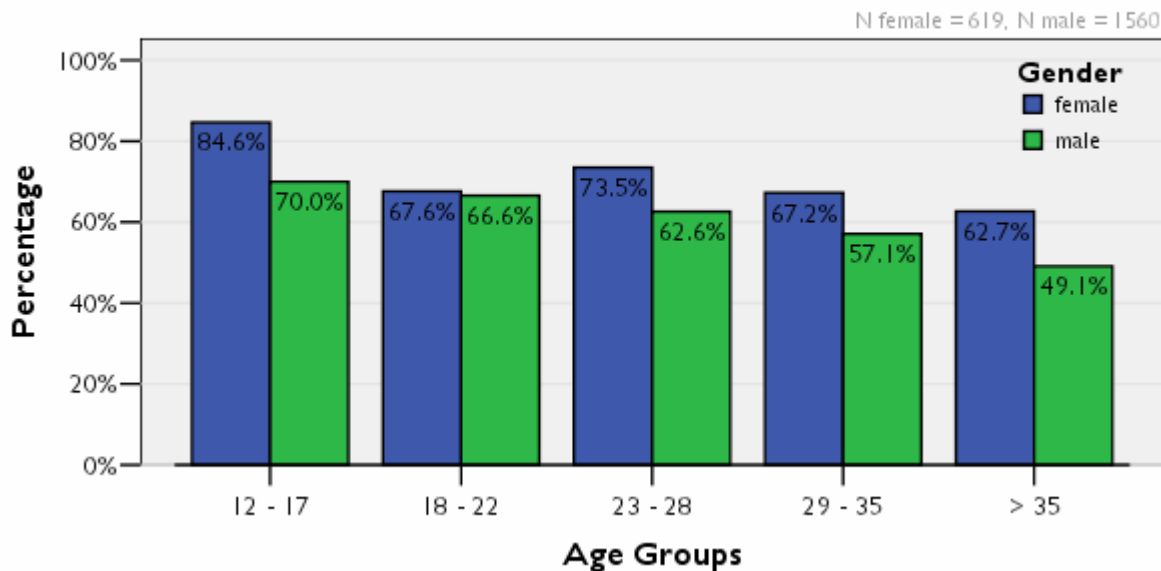
And overall, 14% of MMO players use the online game to keep in touch with family members who don't live close to them. Female players above the age of 22 were about twice as likely to do so than male players.

Play to Keep in Touch with Family

Percentage

Gender	
■	female
■	male

Age Groups

- 12 - 17: female 7.7%, male 12.9%
- 18 - 22: female 16.2%, male 12.5%
- 23 - 28: female 19.9%, male 10.7%
- 29 - 35: female 19.7%, male 12.2%
- > 35: female 21.2%, male 11.3%

Thus, while it's easy to think that playing online games can be a socially-isolating experience, most MMO players in fact use online games as a way to sustain relationships with friends and family who don't live close to them. While the media tends to emphasize the social isolation or the danger of meeting strangers in online games, the data shows that online games play a role in maintaining existing relationships for many players.