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Social Architectures in MMOs

We tend to think of altruism and gregariousness as personality traits. Some people are more helpful; other people are more chatty. One reason why I'm fascinated with MMOs is because it seems that game mechanics also change how communities and individuals behave. For example, when people had to ask casters for "binds" (i.e., set their respawn point) in the original EQ, it seemed to help create a cultural norm of asking for help in general. In a way, altruism was not only an aspect of individual players, it was also partly fostered by the game mechanics. This "social architecture" of virtual environments is interesting because it hints at the possibility of shaping community and individual behavior via game mechanics.

A great deal has changed since the early UO/EQ days, and in a recent survey, I asked players to talk about their own experiences in the MMO they have played. Specifically, I asked players whether they thought the game mechanics changed how players behaved. Of course, running controlled experiments at a community (or server) level is difficult and thus the causal arrows presented in this article must be speculative at best, but I think they are still interesting to think and talk about nonetheless. Towards the end of the article, I'll come back to larger issues of whether this is just a generational difference and whether a game with severe death penalties would even be viable anymore.

Death Penalty

One game mechanic that has changed a great deal since the early UO/EQ days is the dramatic drop in death penalty. In many early MMOs, dying meant a reduction in earned experience points. And dying also typically meant a great deal of recovery time (i.e., the corpse run). In short, dying was a very costly mishap.

You could play for six hours and lose all the progress by dying twice. You could log in and log off with less than you came on with. [F, 25]

People would sit in front of their computers for hours, waiting for a cleric to come to their zone and rez them, because they knew they'd have to play for days to make up for the massive amount of Xp loss if they didn't bother with the rez. [F, 39]

And a comparison with more recent MMOs like WoW shows just how different dying has become.

In subsequent games, I have found it absolutely does not matter if I die. Really, who cares about some repair bills and some dread, or decreased experience gain for a short time? Running naked after your corpse in a dungeon? Potentially losing all your equipment if your corpse decayed or losing a level? That was a penalty. [M, 31]

Death is a Bonding Experience

Many players commented that the severe death penalty intensified social interactions, especially altruistic actions. Helping someone avoid death wasn't simply a symbolic gesture; it might help the other person avoid losing hours of work and then spending more time recover their corpse. As such, many players thought of death as a bonding experience.

The severe death penalty in EQ did help players form a close bond with each other, no one wanted to have friends die, lose levels and couldn't complete quests together. [F, 39]

As much as I hated corpse runs back in old EQ, having to run naked from Fironia Vie to Chardok with a coffin to have my corpse summoned after a raid wipe with my guild was a bonding experience. [M, 20]

And while everyone dreaded dying, it was death (and specifically the gravity of death) that many players pointed to as the driver behind long friendships.

While I'm glad the severe death penalty has been removed from EQ, I think it helped my character bond with her friends. I'm still playing with the same folks I met 8 years ago, and we often talk about the dreaded CRs (corpse retrievals) we went through, especially one in Chardok that lasted hours. [F, 39]

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Altruism and Reciprocity

Some players felt that the severe death penalties increased the general willingness of players to help each other, because all players understood the burden of death and, more importantly, all players knew that they too would need help one day.

Finding someone who could rez or summon your corpse or someone to help you retrieve it was key. People helped others because they knew they themselves would probably need similar help later. [F, 21]

This harshness also fostered a desire for players to actually help each other out in these situations since everybody knew how much death sucked and that by helping someone recover their corpse/experience that person might be willing to help you out in return someday if you ever wound up in the same position. This often led to forming relationships with other players and even getting a guild invite from helping out others. [M, 29]

Guilds, even enemy guilds, would help each other recover from bad wipes because they knew that there were occasions when they would need help. This helped to mitigate annoying behavior since you knew you may need to work together at times. [M, 42]

Death Penalty Creates True Risk

The severity of death also intensified the emotions of all actions that might lead to dying. There is no genuine risk without a true penalty, and as such, the amount of risk associated with normal game-play has changed a great deal as the death penalty has lowered. Compared with the dangerous world of Norrath (the world of EQ), Azeroth (the world of WoW) feels much more rubber-padded.

I remember working for two weeks in the original EQ to get to level 5. I finally got brave and wandered a few hundred yards away from the guards in Kelethin and promptly got lost in the fog. I was soon attacked by several level 8 mobs and died. I've never

experienced that level of fear and concern as I searched frantically for my corpse. I currently play WOW and enjoy it for the most part. However, there is no need to ask for help as the game does 90% of the work for you. Anything the game does not provide can easily be found on the internet. In some ways I like that, but at times I really wish someone could come up with a way to recapture the original spark that kept me playing EQ for close to five years. [M, 39]

The harsh 'sting' of death in those games really made your heart pump during fights and a rush when you killed someone and took their loot. [F, 48]

Death Penalties Weed Out “Bad” Players

Some players pointed out that severe death penalties were also effective filters. Since dying slowed down (or reversed) your ability to level up, only players who understood the game mechanics and could play well were able to advance beyond the mid-levels. This created a high-end culture of players who had shared expectations of each other.

I made some of my best online friends through EQ, but then the learning curve of EQ was such that by the time you were of a certain level you were expected to perform a certain way. In WoW, PUGs are dreaded because that learning curve has been removed. It's double edged sword. WoW definitely brought MMO's and gaming into the mainstream, however it feels, in retrospect, to be at the cost of the close knit groups/guilds/friendships we once had. [F, 34]

Games that had a steep learning curve tended to keep players who have generally more patience. The benefits or requirement of grouping in game creates bonds. In World of Warcraft, the content and mechanics were simplified to a point that just about anyone, in fact, even children could take up roles in group tasks for the benefits (loot, xp, etc.) However, I believe this was part of a major problem. The freedom was great to an extent but it also put too many people of varying skill levels together for the frustration of all. [M, 27]

The Blame Game

Not all respondents felt that a severe death penalty led to more positive social interactions. For example, some respondents noted that attributing blame was more important when raid or group wipes were catastrophic. And that the blame game tended to sour the group's experience.

From my experience, I found that the death penalty in the original EverQuest doesn't so much form bonds as break them. Because no one is really willing to accept blame (with the exception of a few high-end guilds), it is shifted to someone other than the victim. [M, 15]

When a group dies it often becomes a blame game. In games with more severe penalties (e.g. AO's XP-loss) the group first spends 5 minutes to decide who's fault it was, that person then complains for 5 minutes and tries to blame another, which turns into another 5 minutes of the group either ganging up on the second blame-victim or telling the first one that he's a noob and should not even be playing... so after 15 minutes all tempers are flaring, many feelings are hurt and the group falls apart. [F, 33]

Sets Up Large Social Obligations

Another problem that several respondents pointed out with severe death penalties was the strain it created due to social obligations. Helping with corpse runs usually took more time than many players could spontaneously provide. Whether the outcome was anger at not being helped or being guilt-tripped to go to bed late, there was often some emotional damage left behind.

Quite often actually, it was annoying, because when I was a guild leader and newer/lower level players joined the guild, I often became the 'go-to guy' for corpse retrieval since I was the guild leader. If I said I was busy, there was often passive-aggressive bullshit that would come my way or they'd outright try and guilt trip me into it with lines like 'my old guild leader always helped with corpse retrievals.' [M, 37]

In fact, many relationships were harmed when it was late and some members of a group would log off without helping others to get their corpse. [F, 44]

Risk Aversion

And finally, some players felt that severe death penalties often created a cultural norm of risk aversion, to the point where any true adventure becomes impossible without the perfect team or equipment.

FFS ... it's a GAME. It doesn't NEED to punish you for adventuring a bit too far out of the safety zone, or attempting something that was maybe a bit more than you can handle. After all ... shouldn't a 'hero' be brave enough to TRY something uncertain? [F, 44]

I've had mostly negative experiences with that. I mean that no one wanted to go out fight monsters if the party was not perfect, and people would get very upset if someone died. [F, 26]

Information Databases

While it is true that early games (such as UO and EQ) had third-party database or information sites as well, these pale in comparison to websites such as Thottbot or WowWiki and add-ons such as Quest Helper. For example, the precise drop rates of items, the wandering range of mobs, and tools that calculate optimal sequence of quest completion based on geographical distance are all now available in World of Warcraft.

Databases Discourage In-Game Interaction

It is easy to assume that third-party databases are an information source and thus add to any existing social system. The things that these databases take away from social systems may be less obvious, but by providing a centralized information source, these databases removed the primary method for information gathering before—by interacting with other human players.

There weren't places on line you could go to get all the answers, you had to ask other players. There was a lot more give and take. [M, 29]

I much preferred the early days of MMOs when all the information you ever needed wasn't available on a website. It meant players actually worked together, spoke and chatted lots in the general channels about things directly related to the game and helped each other with quests. [F, 38]

As other players noted more explicitly, these queries could have led to friendships forming.

It does affect the number of relationships formed in-game. Without it, the player offering help will probably have to explain things to the one asking for it, but with it he'll just give a link. [M, 20]

If people were more willing to answer questions, it would be a great conversation starter and there would be more friendships forming. [F, 26]

From Adventure to Task Completion

Third-party databases also tend to remove a sense of adventure by revealing every possible aspect of the world in the form of well-documented tables and guides.

You'd be hard-pressed to find any aspect of WoW that isn't well-documented online somewhere, complete with video footage and everything. [F, 33]

Maps, databases, etc. have taken the mystery out of playing. While it saves time and minimizes frustration, I think in doing so, they've also killed a big part of what makes the games exciting. Yes, it's nice to see what the quest reward is going to be, but it removes any surprises you might have had. Adventuring, finding things out for yourself, discovering things, etc. is a huge part of what makes games fun and interesting. It saddens me that to really enjoy a game, you have to make a conscious effort to avoid or ignore all the tips and info available. [F, 40]

As several players noted, there is no such thing as an adventure when everything is already well-documented. Gaming becomes more simply about task completion, without a need to interact with other players or adventuring into the unknown. Not asking for help and not stopping to chat becomes a cultural norm.

Nobody ever will stop for a chat outside of a Roleplaying server. If you met someone in a mid-level zone while questing, chances are you'd pass them by. You're on a quest and your mission is to get it done, probably ASAP. They're probably thinking the same thing and you'll pass right by. Who knows what interesting conversations you could've had. If you happen to meet doing the same quest, you'll probably join up for a while, slaughter a few minions together then part ways. I could swear that about 75% of people you meet randomly like this will be so intent on completing a quest and moving on to get the next quest are so incredibly focused on it, barely a word will be exchanged between you. There's such an incredibly selfish behaviour when it comes to questing to GET IT DONE that it becomes bigger than anything else. [M, 20]

I think thottbott has created more of a Task-oriented game world. I have a quest, look up where to go and what to do, complete, get a new quest. As a result the 'discovery' aspect of the game has lessened significantly. [M, 42]

Creates Elitist Subculture

The centralization of information on game mechanics and class builds also provides the foundation for min-maxers and hard-core players to create the “best” builds, whether in terms of class spec or gear setups. In such an environment, players become aware of and can regulate the “right” and “wrong” ways to play a character.

Also, players are encouraged to run only certain builds, and attempts at innovation are highly discouraged. A build database, PvX Wiki, is often referenced when telling people what to run. Granted, not all skills in the game are created (or kept) equal, but build databases like PvX Wiki do their part to ensure that players in the game run only 3-4 different builds per profession at a time. [M, 23]

Other Mechanics

Many respondents commented on death penalties and information databases because those were the two examples provided in the question prompt. Below, we will consider examples of other game mechanics that respondents suggested on their own.

Downtime / Pacing

Game pacing has increased dramatically. In EQ, it took significantly longer to kill mobs and there was also much more downtime between combat. As some respondents pointed out, the availability of downtime increased social interaction among players.

Relationships always seemed more based on the speed of the game and the speed of progress than anything else - EQ was so slow and had so much downtime that you had plenty of time to chat, help people in fights, buff passersby and answer questions. In WoW no one stops to look cos by the time they have stopped to see if someone needs helps it's probably too late. [M, 38]

I think the total lack of downtime where you rest and relax together before fighting the next challenge lowers your chances of having a good interaction with people. Without those connections, those hooks most people will never ask questions about each other or make commonality discoveries. [M, 35]

Smaller Worlds

The significantly smaller communities of early MMOs also made it more likely that players knew other players on their server. Some respondents commented on how the small world phenomenon shaped social interactions.

In EverQuest, while admittedly dealing with smaller populations, there were such things as server reputations. If you got a bad rep as a ninja looter, or just as an all-around jerk, people knew your name, and there was a very real blacklist that you would find yourself on that would keep you out of any reputable guild and most pickup groups. Nothing of that sort seems to exist in Warcraft. [M, 36]

It's hard to decide if the stronger sense of community in EQ/UO came from death and grouping mechanics or simply from the fact that those games were smaller communities to begin with. [M, 36]

Soloability / Need for Grouping

Different games also vary a great deal in terms of how much need there is to find a group to accomplish basic tasks. By making it easy to solo, a variety of social effects set in.

The big solo experience that today's MMOs focus at make it easier to log in just for a little while and achieve something, but in my experience it takes away a lot of immersion and bonding to other players/guild/game. [F, 28]

In general, I think EQ required more dependence and community. And heck, you HAD to group to get much of anything done. There was virtually no level-appropriate solo content. [F, 44]

Or even where groups are needed in some games, it is remarkable how quickly they can dissolve after the short task is completed.

I'm sure game mechanics play a role, since in EQ you were pretty much obliged to find 5 friends to do anything. In WOW, grouping is much more fluid -- you come together to accomplish one single objective, sometimes for no more than 5 minutes, and then immediately disband. [M, 37]

And as the following player describes, the importance of social reputation diminishes in an environment where you don't need a group to perform basic tasks.

When I started playing world of warcraft I was amazed with the total lack of respect that people have for each other. It didn't take me long to realize because the game is easy, you don't need to respect anybody or make friends. You can solo to maximum level. You can ninja-loot epics and then just switch servers or even change your name now. In EQ you lived by your reputation. I remember an incident where I somehow got under somebody's skin in a group and then I couldn't get a grinding group in dreadlands for like 3 days. [F, 26]

Chat Channels

It is oftentimes not obvious that how, when, and where players can chat with each other is a deliberate game design decision. How far your voice carries in /say and whether you can chat with the entire world are decisions every game has to make. Several respondents commented on how different chat channels influence social interactions.

If I had to add to that list I would say that global broadcast or zone-wide chat channels have been nothing but bad for MMOs. Some of the asinine conversations to be had on there are visual assault that I don't feel like seeing every night. [M, 25]

The relationships between characters were a lot stronger at this point than they were today. Why? Well, there were no global or 'zone channels' at all, so people socialized in towns, gathered in towns to sell their goods (no auction house), and to test game mechanics. This was especially true back when bows' damage was unmarked on the bow, and the only way to figure out how good a bow was, was to test it, preferably on other players. [F, 29]

The inability for communication with an opposing faction was a fascinating one with WOW. It was, i think, one of the most effective means of demonizing the opposing side. [M, 24]

Ending Thoughts

This collection of game mechanics and how they affect social interactions and community norms in MMOs is of course not meant to be exhaustive, but I think the examples provided here are provocative in getting us to observe and think about how all game mechanics are selected out of other possible instantiations. More importantly, game mechanics don't only change how we play the game, but they also change how we interact with other players and what cultural norms emerge. In EQ, it was perfectly normal to stop and say hi to a stranger running by and ask for help, for a buff, or for directions. In WoW, you oftentimes can't ask for help without being told to look it up on Thottbot.

While many of the examples above suggested how game mechanics could shape social interactions, these would be very difficult to test empirically (without access to two servers where some mechanic varied systematically). And many of the observed differences between early and recent MMOs may also reflect how the playerbase has itself changed over time. As several players noted,

I don't think it was the death penalty and interdependence that strengthened relationships in EQ. It was the net culture of the times and the newness of the genre. If you ever sat around reading the zone chat in EQ it had a striking resemblance to any random chat room. EQ was a graphical chat room for a lot of people and the game provided them with an excuse, subject matter, and a wide audience. Toss in the MUDing community (MUDs often had less than 200 players) for a base culture and you get UO/EQ. [M, 35]

Personally I think MMOs have just reached a broader audience in recent iterations leading to a decrease in the community feel. [M, 36]

Whether the strong community and altruistic cultural norms of EQ were a function of harsh game mechanics or early adopters of virtual environments, one thing is clear. Those days are gone forever. It would be unthinkable nowadays that a game with a true death penalty could gain broad market share. And third-party databases and more casual game mechanics appear to be the standard now. Even for those gamers who are nostalgic about the early EQ or UO days, the likelihood that we would find harsh worlds palatable after games like WoW is probably low.

On the other hand, as a recent fan of the Sci-Fi channel series *Battlestar Galactica*, a plot element in the current season really resonates with all this. The Cylons, a robotic race, download their memories and knowledge into a new body when they die. In short, they can respawn

indefinitely. In a recent episode, a rebel group of Cylons decide that it is ultimately death that gives meaning to life and set into motion a plan to destroy the resurrection machine. Perhaps this is one reason why MMOs have become stale—adventuring has slowly turned into task-completion, but this does beg a more interesting question, would we be willing to give up our virtual immortality?

Kids and MMOs

I've been working with Qwest lately as part of their online safety program (www.IncredibleInternet.com). They brought me on board to talk to parents, teachers, high-school students, government officials, and law-enforcement officials in local communities about online games—both the potential benefits and the risks. So this has gotten me to think a lot more about key messages to tell people who want to know more about kids and MMOs. As a part of this, I created a survey targeted at MMO players who were themselves parents.

I thought that this would be an interesting group to survey because they have to balance their own understanding of online gaming with their roles as parents and guardians. It's easy for non-gaming parents to overstate the downside of games just as it is easy for gamers without children to understate it. So parents who themselves play online games offer a unique perspective on the issue of potential benefits and risks. And their own strategies in terms of online gaming access for their children would certainly be interesting to explore.

Altogether, 314 online gamers who were also parents (specifically those that had at least one child under the age of 18) responded to the survey. There are three parts to this article. We'll first look at the main risks that respondents associated with online games and their assessment of the amount of risk. Then we'll look at the main benefits respondents associated with online games and their assessment of the amount of benefit. Finally, we'll turn to a collection of advice that these parents gave in terms of managing their children's online gaming access.

Risks

Respondents were asked to describe what they thought were the main risks associated with allowing their kids to play online games. Their responses were coded by category. If a respondent described multiple risks, each was coded separately. Thus, the following percentages add up to more than 100%. We'll go through these risks in order of descending frequency. For each, I'll provide some typical responses.

Exposure to Inappropriate Language and Themes (42%)

Exposure to ideas and behavior that they are not ready for -- e.g. inappropriate language or subjects in OOC chat (porn, aggressive or unfounded political or religious attacks, etc.).

[M, 38]

Online Predators (32%)

A serious (but not very likely) danger would be for an internet perv to attempt to contact my kids. Still, it's something I'm on the lookout about. [F, 50]

The sharing of personal information such as addresses, phone numbers and such by people preying on the gullible and inexperienced. [M, 29]

Spending Too Much Time Playing (25%)

I would also be slightly worried about them becoming addicted to playing on the computer, and ignoring their real life commitments, like school work, or playing outside/exercising. [M, 32]

Abusive Behavior (13%)

There are very rude and hurtful people in every MMO, and children can be very sensitive to personal attacks. [M, 32]

Social Immaturity (10%)

The concern about this risk was its impact on other players (rather a direct impact on the child).

My primary concern is that he is not perceived as rude or annoying to players that don't realize his age. [F, 38]

Also concerned about the adults not being able to enjoy being adults because of the presence of the child. [M, 34]

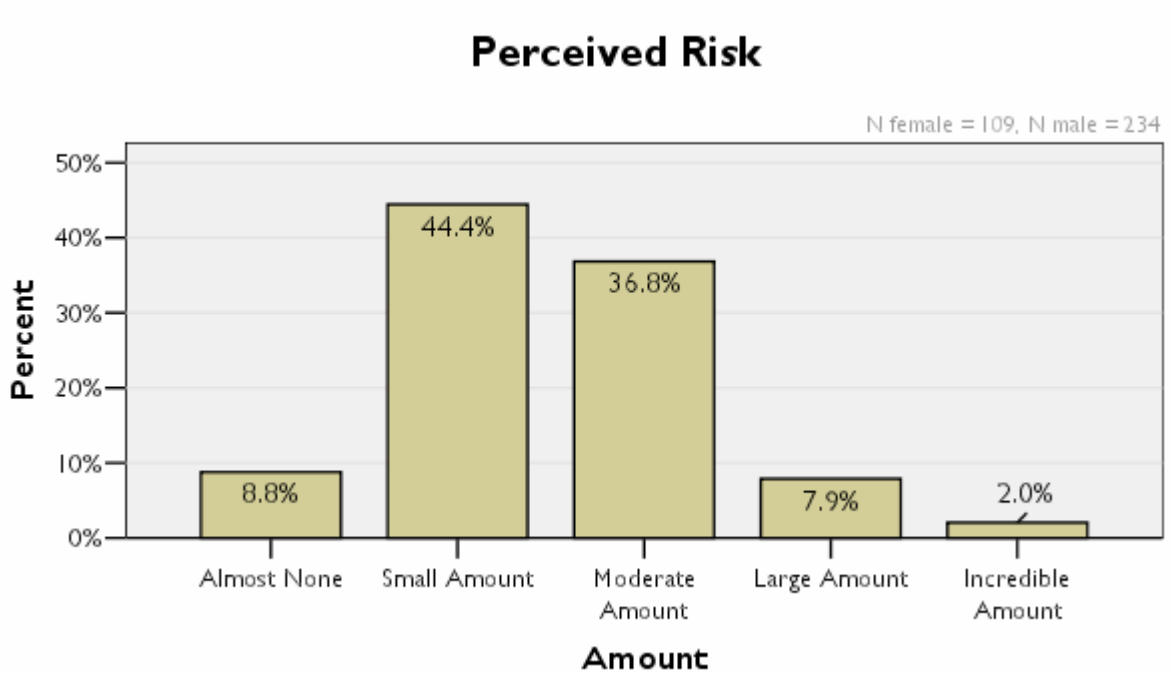
Being Taken Advantage of (6%)

Mostly players that persuade the kids to sell something for way too cheap, i.e. they are susceptible to con men. [M, 37]

The remaining risks were described by 5% or fewer of the respondents and I will list them briefly here:

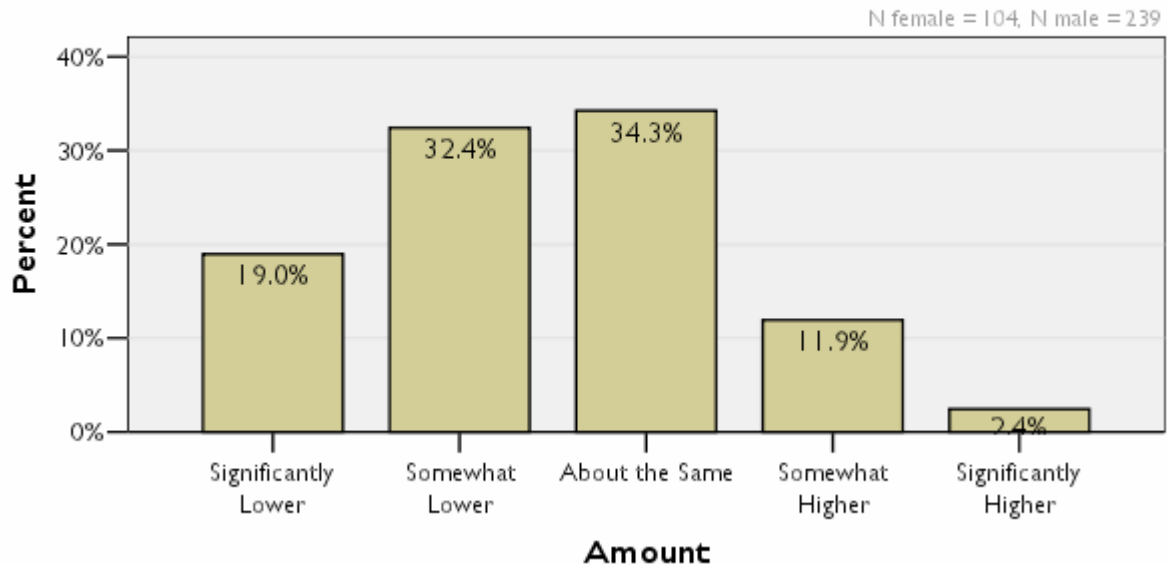
- Thinking of Violence as a Solution (5%)**
- Lack of Social Skills (4%)**
- Lack of Exercise (3%)**
- Inability to Distinguish Reality from Fantasy (3%)**
- Learning Incorrect Grammar / Spelling (1%)**
- Developing Inappropriate Online Relationships (1%)**

When asked to rate the overall amount of risk they felt was associated with allowing their kids to play online games, the majority of respondents felt that there was a small to moderate amount of risk involved.



Parents were also asked to compare the risks associated with online games with other activities their teenage children are engaging in (or might engage in) and rate the relative risk of online games. Here, the majority of respondents felt that MMOs had lower risks than other activities their children were engaged in.

Compare Risks (MMO vs. Other Activities)



Benefits

The responses regarding potential benefits to playing online games were coded in a similar way to the responses regarding risks. Below are the benefits that respondents brought up and example responses.

Working in a Diverse Group (53%)

Children learn to interact and work as a team with others from all over the world. [F, 39]

The biggest benefit is learning what other people with very different world views are like and how to work with them. [M, 45]

Problem Solving Skills (25%)

It's more mentally challenging than sitting in front of the TV. [M, 40]

He has to think and follow through with the quest and turn it in. I believe that this helps him with problem-solving and critical thinking skills. [M, 34]

Reading / Writing / Typing (23%)

My son, now 23, learned to touch type thanks to playing Everquest at 15. [M, 50]

My son is learning disabled, I allowed him to play and his reading levels went up and his thought processes increased. [F, 50]

Social / Communication Skills (20%)

Learning to be comfortable not only using computers but also communicating through computers - something I suspect the world will continue to do. [M, 39]

Computer / Internet Literacy (9%)

My children are growing up in a true digital age. They need to be conversant in the online world or risk being left behind as they grow older. [M, 36]

Hand-Eye Coordination (9%)

Skills picked up through playing - hand-eye co-ordination etc. Reflexes. [M, 31]

Understanding of Systems (8%)

It gives him a small sense of economy as he is starting to figure out supply and demand. He will check the auction hall for items and see if he can sell his items at a competitive price. [F, 34]

Learning how to organize and describe simple social and economic systems. How to operate in simple value systems (auction house, resource scarcity, etc) [M, 50]

Leadership Opportunities (7%)

Where else in the entire world can a teenager lead a group of people including adults into accomplishing a common goal? [F, 33]

My youngest at 17 has been the raid leader for most of the guilds he has been associated with in WoW demonstrating his logic and leadership skills nightly. [M, 47]

The remaining risks were described by 5% or fewer of the respondents and I will list them briefly here:

Math Skills (5%)

Family Time (5%)

Setting Long Term Goals / Deferred Gratification (5%)

Building Imagination and Creativity (4%)

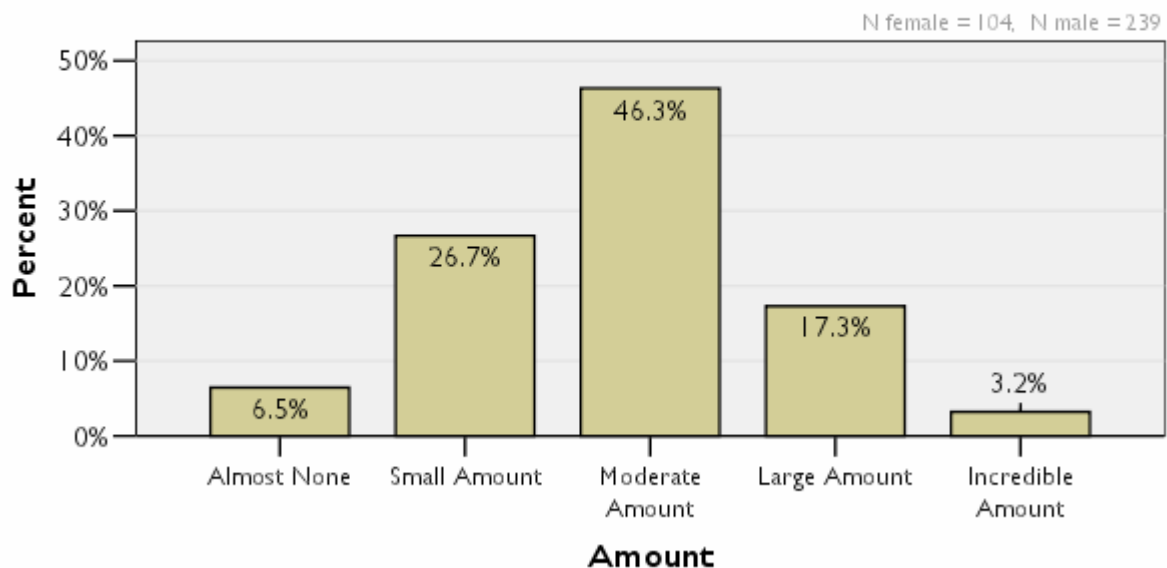
Learning English (from an ESL Standpoint) (3%)

Safe Space for Learning from Mistakes (2%)

Spatial / Map Skills (2%)

When asked to rate the overall amount of benefit they associated with allowing with their kids to play online games, about half of respondents felt that there was a moderate amount of benefit involved, with the other responses falling in a fairly normal distribution around the midpoint. In comparing this chart with the earlier one on perceived risks, it seems that respondents rated the perceived benefits to be slightly higher than the perceived risks.

Perceived Benefits



Advice from Parents

When asked what advice they might give other parents in terms of managing the risks involved in playing online games, a fairly consistent set of guidelines emerged.

Set Limits and Expectations

Many parents talked about setting expectations early and sticking to them. And whether these are limits to time use, who they can chat with online, or who they can group with, it helps to figure out what tools the game provides that can help maintain these expectations (e.g., WoW's time control tools, or turning off general chat).

Starting children with limits from the very first time they play is going to be a lot easier to maintain than waiting until you perceive a problem and then suddenly trying to cut back on their playing. And don't think that just because your children like something, or all their friends do it, means you have to let them do it! [F, 37]

Make it very matter of fact. After a preset amount of time the MMO goes off and the real world goes on. Period. And enforce it, even though it may get unpleasant. [F, 27]

Keep an Eye on Them

Equally important was keeping tabs on their experiences and social interactions in these environments.

Talk to you child about the game, with a special emphasis on their social interaction. In short, know what is going on. [M, 29]

Be adamant about being able to read their screens, or loose the priviledge to be on the computer at all. [M, 33]

Learn About the Game

Given that there are many online games currently on the market and the game mechanics in these environments differ, many parents suggested learning about the game (even if only a basic understanding) before allowing kids to play it.

Learn about it yourself, including any outside sites involved or related that the kids might want to access. [F, 44]

Parents should not only 'sit down and try' the game, but learn what the basic unit of time is where something can be accomplished. [F, 33]

While it may seem daunting to non-gaming parents to have to learn about video games, many websites provide this information specifically using a parental perspective. For example, see www.gamerdad.com or www.whattheyplay.com.

Keep Computers in Public Area

Related to being able to keep an eye on what kids are doing online, many parents keep computers in public areas so that kids can't play alone in their bedrooms.

Computers should be in 'public' spaces in the house. If someone is doing something on the computer that they wouldn't want everyone else to know about, then odds are it isn't a good thing to do. [M, 38]

Put the computers in the room where your family spends most of it's time - NOT IN A PRIVATE BEDROOM. This will help with many issues, not only MMO's. It DOES inconvenience you some, however that is what being a parent means to me - I sacrifice some of my conveniences for the protection of my children. [M, 47]

Maintain a Balance of Activities

Some parents stressed the importance of balancing a variety of activities in a kid's life. Spending time online and in online games is appropriate as part of a mix of activities the kid is engaged in.

For every hour that they play the game, they have to spend an hour doing some other activity that is physically active (little league, walking the dog, going to the park, etc...) [M, 42]

Be Involved and Stay Involved

Above all, many of the advice parents gave revolved around being involved and staying involved with their kids. And along with this was showing genuine interest in the activities a child is engaged in to maintain an open channel of communication.

Parents need to be involved, engaged and aware of what their teen is doing online just as they need to offline. [F, 39]

Always try to maintain an interest in your child's life, really. Learn about their friends, who they think is cute at school, what happened to them in 3rd period today. If you keep the lines of communication open for the mundane things, they'll feel more comfortable coming to you when a real problem arises. [M, 36]

Ending Thoughts

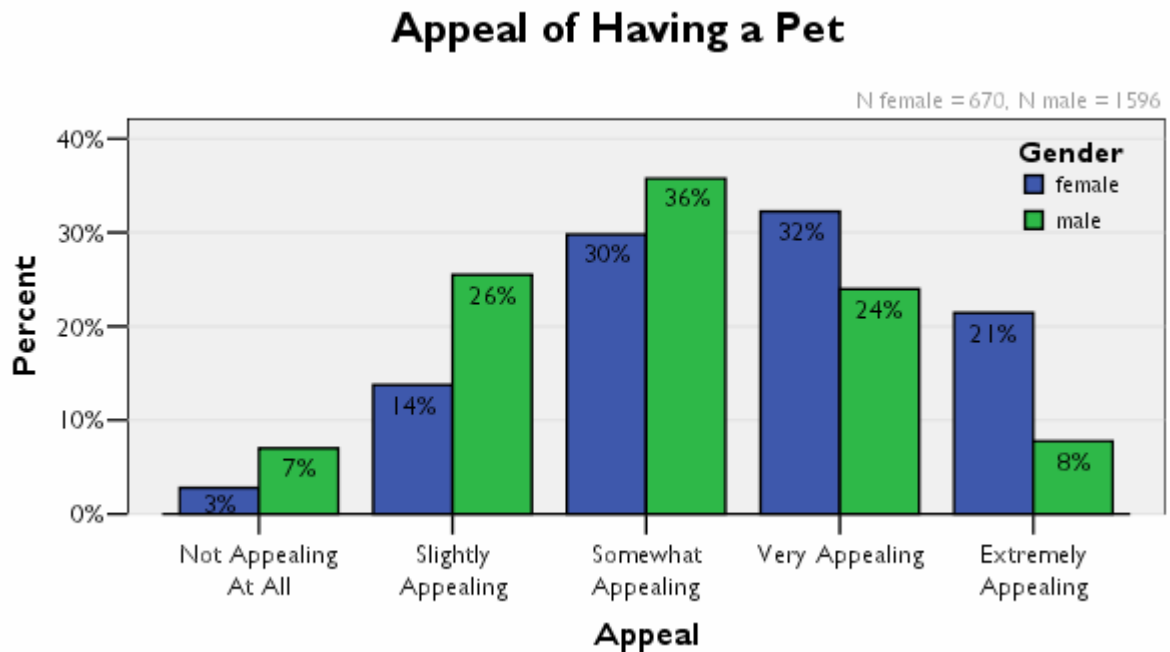
While it may seem surprising that more parents were concerned with exposure to inappropriate themes rather than time spent playing, it must be remembered that the sample of respondents had children spanning a large age range. Thus, while time spent online is probably the main risk for college students, parents of younger children are often more concerned with exposure to adult themes.

Overall, the respondents felt that there were more benefits than risks associated with online games, although the risks are clearly not negligible. On the whole, many respondents noted that being involved with kids mitigated risks while boosting the benefits. And as we've seen before, parents can play with kids productively.

In talking to parents and teenagers during my Qwest trips, involvement and setting up expectations are the two themes I stress. We've done informal surveys at high schools and it's often surprising how many young teenagers have internet-enabled computers in their own room without any clear rules or limits about internet use. Whether it's spending too much time online or misunderstanding the nature of online relationships, parental involvement is the key to mitigating many of the risks present when kids play online games.

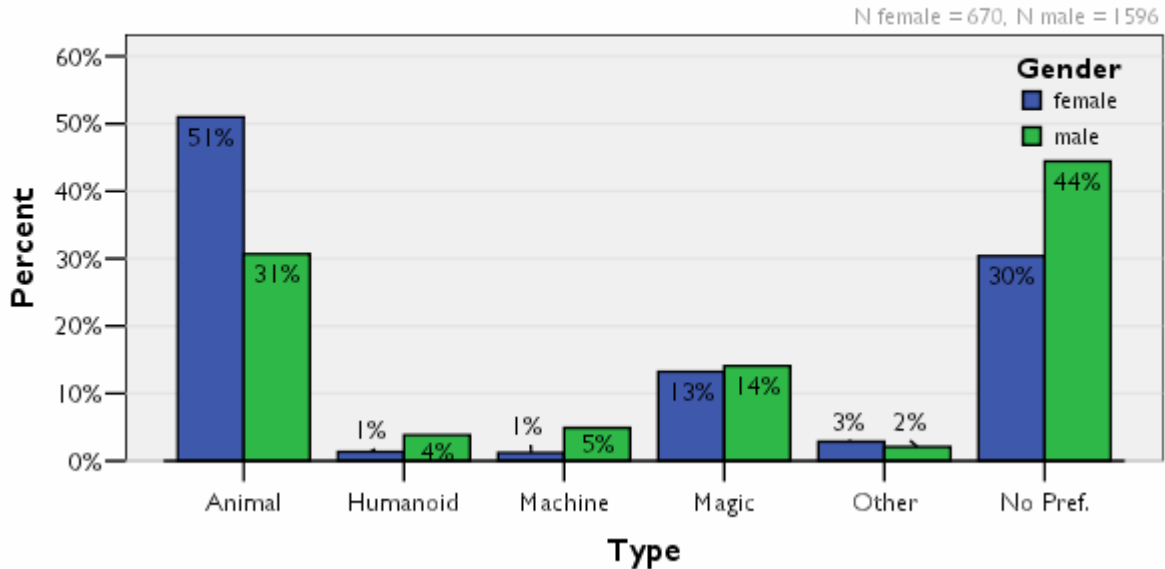
Pets

What do players think about having pets in the game? We'll take a look at the general appeal of pets and whether there is a preference for certain types of pets. The overall appeal of pets falls into a normal distribution. Most players find them somewhat appealing with a smaller number of players on both sides of the middle-point. There is a gender difference where women find pets more appealing than men.



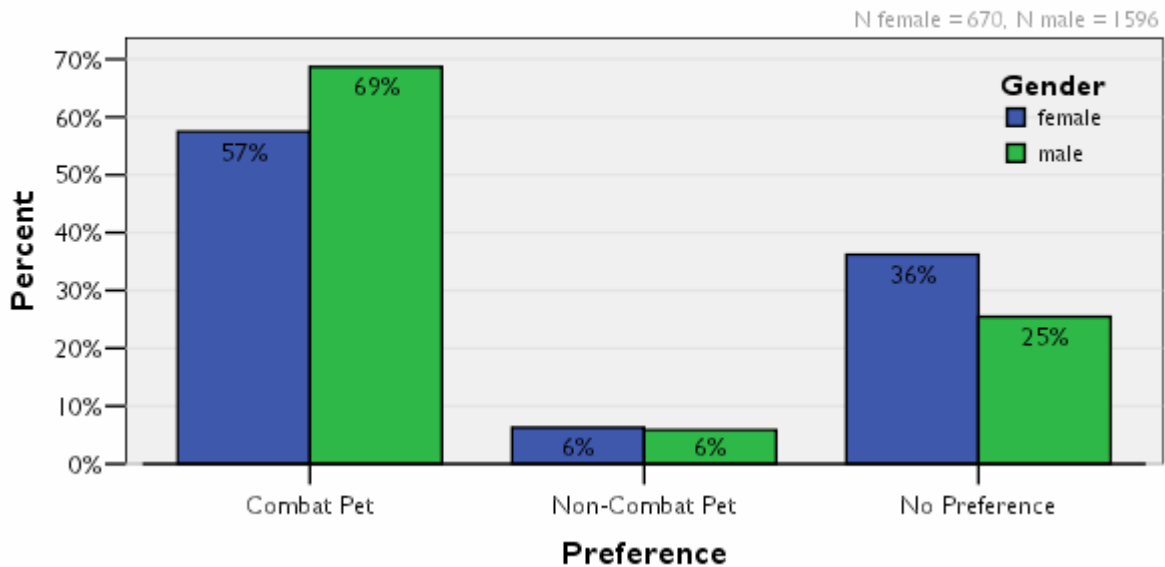
When different types of pets were presented to players, the predominant preference appeared to be for animals. And we can also see that male players typically don't have a preference for pet type whereas female players typically prefer animal pets

Pet Type Preference



In many games, pets can serve as combat companions or decorative non-combat pets. Here, players of both genders preferred combat-based pets, with only 6% of players of both genders preferring non-combat pets.

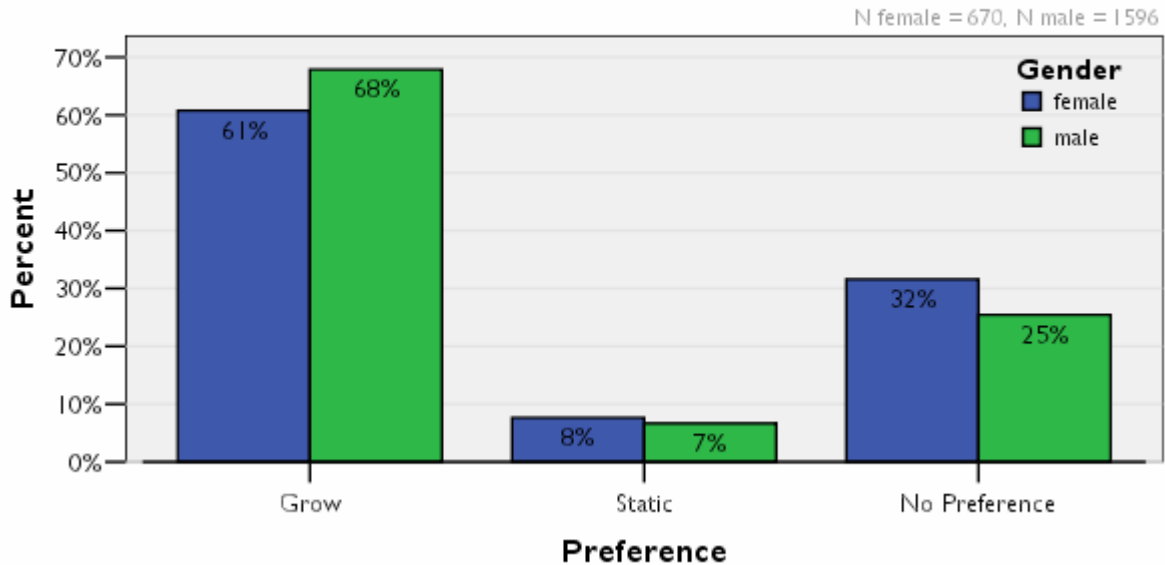
Preference for Combat Pet



Another variation in pets is whether they grow over time (i.e., baby to adult) or whether they are static (i.e., come as adult). Here again, we see a fairly strong preference. Players prefer pets that

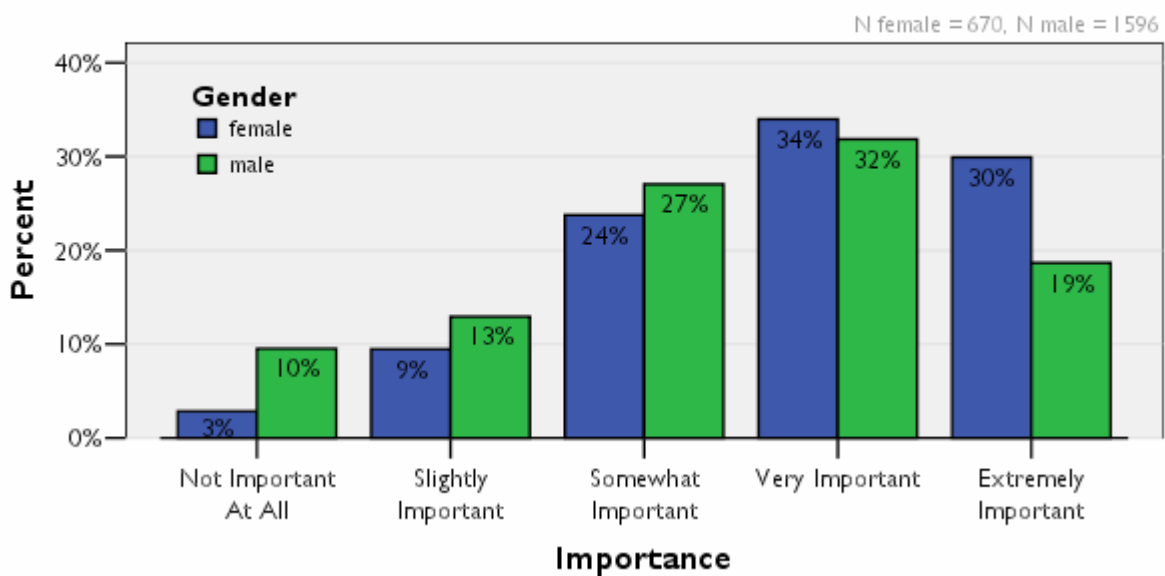
grow over time even if this means that their pets are weak at first. Only about 8% of players preferred static pets.

Pet Growth Preference



And finally, as a measure of customization, players were asked how important it was to them to be able to name their pet. Overall, players rated this to be fairly important. The majority of players said that this was very important or extremely important. We also see that female players rated this ability as being more important than male players.

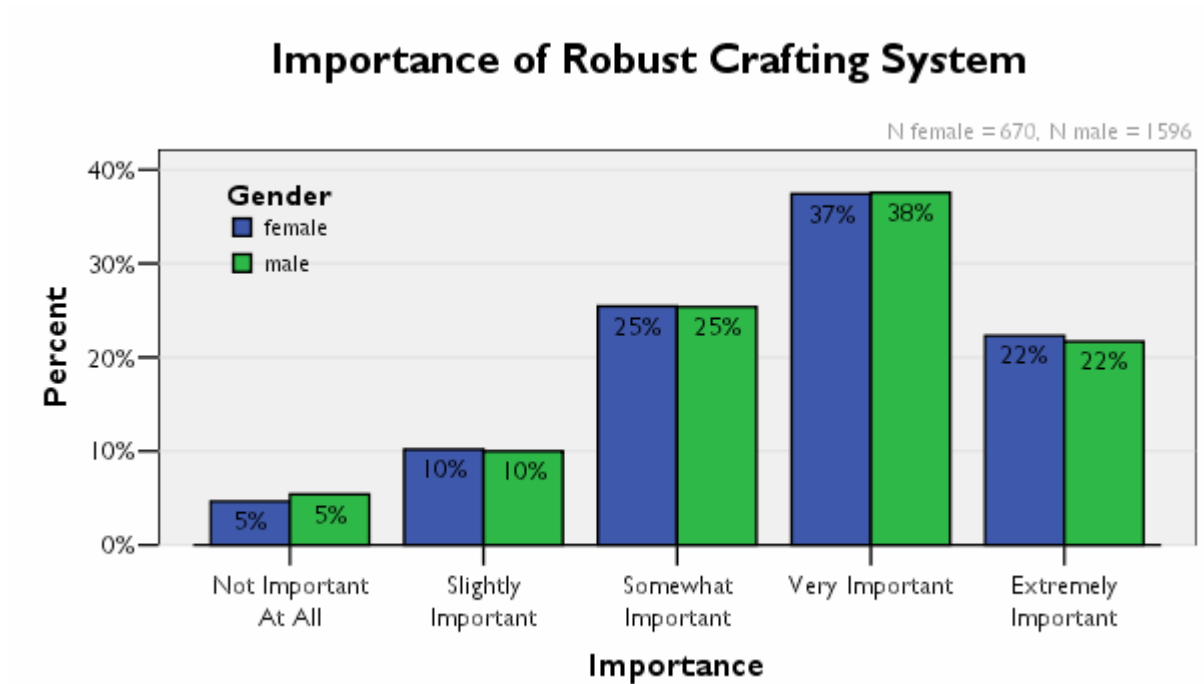
Importance of Ability to Name Pet



It is unclear, of course, whether the preferences we're seeing here are driven by a player base more familiar with games like EverQuest and World of Warcraft. Unfortunately, there were not enough players in the sample from non-Tolkien games to really see whether preferences of players from other games differed. On the other hand, given that most MMO players are playing fantasy games with strong Tolkien elements, these preferences probably do capture the overall preferences of the MMO player base.

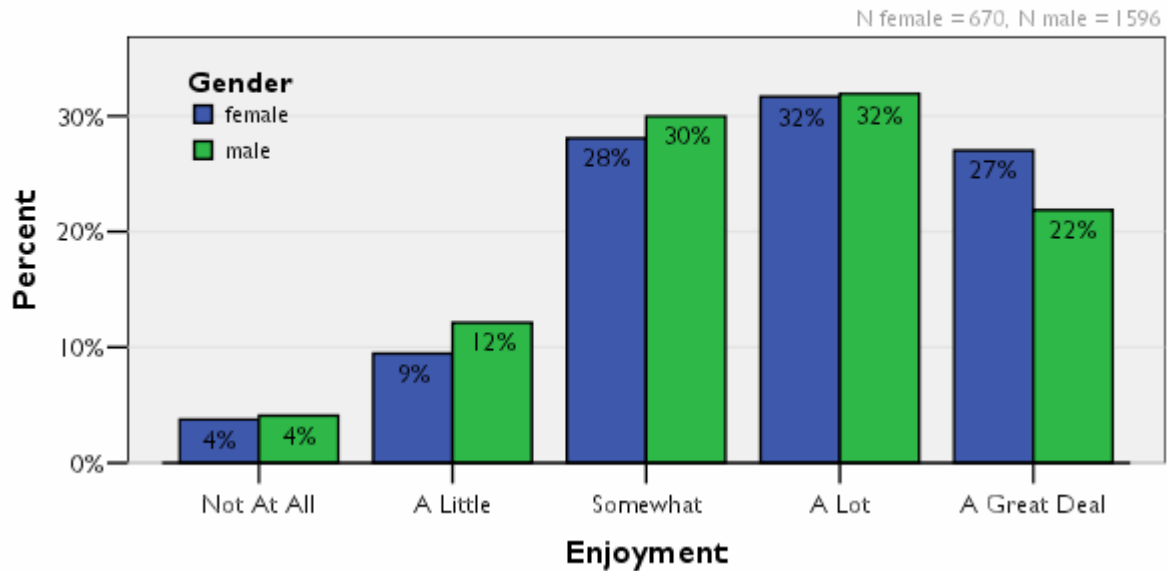
Crafting and Trading

How important are good crafting systems and the ability to make money in the economic game to players? We'll start with crafting. 60% of players thought that having a good, robust crafting system was either very important or extremely important. There were no gender differences.



We see a very similar pattern in terms of being able to make money in the economic game (via auction houses, etc.). The responses were skewed towards the more positive end of the graph. And here too, there were only minimal gender differences.

Enjoyment of Making Money in Game



There were some mild age differences. Older players were more likely to be interested in crafting (correlation of .13 for women, .08 for men), while younger players were more likely to be interested in making money in the game (correlation of -.07 for women, -.04 for men). These correlations were fairly small though, but it's interesting that they were in the opposite direction.

What do Players Want to See More of in MMOs?

(I would like to thank Sam Natale, a second-year student at the University of Vermont, for helping code the responses for this data.)

Asking players about their current gaming experiences may constrain us to thinking “within the box”. The data we get simply reflect the effects of current design trends. As a way of getting out of this constraint, I asked players in an open-ended question to tell me the one thing they would want to see more of in an MMO. 500 responses were coded into categories.

Overall, no one category accounted for more than 10% of the total coded sample. Below are the coded categories with brief descriptions in descending order.

- 1) **Quests (9%):** More interesting quests. Quests with variable outcomes. Quests that involve trade skills. Quests that drive social interaction. Quests that utilize logic.
- 2) **Customization Options (8%):** More customization features. Ability to look truly unique. Unique classes or races. Hybrid classes. Unique abilities.
- 3) **Solo Content (7%):** Soloability and solo content.
- 4) **Storylines (6%):** More lore and background threads. Interesting stories or plot lines. Active storyline.
- 5) **Casual Content (6%):** More casual-friendly content. More content for small groups. Low-level content.
- 6) **PvP Content (5%):** More opportunities for PvP. Well-designed PvP content.
- 7) **Crafting / Tradeskills (5%):** Robust crafting and economic systems.
- 8) **Role-Playing (5%):** More support and enforcement for role-playing. Tools for role-playing.
- 9) **Community Changes (5%):** Regulate farmers. Ways to report people. More mature / honest / civil players.
- 10) **Social Tools (5%):** Ability to build houses or social spaces. Group transportation. Collective player-created content. Social events tools.
- 11) **General / Regularly Updated Content (5%):** More content in general.
- 12) **Grouping (4%):** Content for small groups. Content that fosters cooperation among players. Player interaction more integral to gaming.
- 13) **Combat Changes (4%):** More skill-based combat mechanics (as opposed to gear-based). Better AI. More complex mechanics. Simpler combat mechanics.
- 14) **Alternative Leveling Options (4%):** Ability to level via non-combat routes. Alternatives to leveling and grinding systems.
- 15) **Events (4%):** Holiday events. GM events. Server-wide events. Community events.

- 16) **World Impact (3%)**: Actions having a persistent impact on world or environment.
- 17) **Technical Features (3%)**: High graphical realism. Better class balance. Faster turn-around time on bugs.
- 18) **Dynamic/Random Content (2%)**: Randomness in loot stats or mob stats, etc. Dynamic terrain. Dynamic events. Dynamic content.
- 19) **High-Level Content (2%)**: Content for large raids. Challenging endgame content.
- 20) **Difficulty of Play (2%)**: More difficult content. More danger in the world. Larger death penalties. More complex mechanics.
- 21) **Fun Fluff (2%)**: More humor. More fun, little things in the game. Fun mechanics.
- 22) **Exploration (1%)**: Bigger emphasis on exploration. More zones to explore.
- 23) **Variety (1%)**: More variety. More choices overall.
- 24) **Content Changes (1%)**: User-created content. Content that adjusts to group level.
- 25) **Ease of Play (1%)**: Simpler game mechanics. Less grinding. Higher drop rates.

Because of the small number of responses in individual categories, drilling down into gender or age won't yield reliable results so that analysis won't be presented here.