Befriending Ogres and Wood-Elves

Understanding Relationship Formation in MMORPGs

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Introduction

Online relationships - whether platonic or romantic – are sometimes slightly troubling even to those of us who have played an MMORPG like EverQuest.

> *In fact, that concept bothers me for some reason. Especially if you go and get Married online. I mean, yeah, I can understand you "liking" to adventure with someone a lot … but to the point of "marrying" them? In an online ceremony? Come on… isn't real life complicated enough?* [m, 28]

To outsiders, and particularly those who are unfamiliar with internet chat rooms, the concept is almost frightening. How can a player develop a good friendship or fall in love with someone in a make-believe world? How can a player feel like they know, or trust, someone whom they have never even met face to face? For the most part, the following is not an essay that tries to justify or criticize the quality of relationships formed online; instead, it is an exploration of several mechanisms inherent in MMORPGs that facilitate the formation of these relationships.

Survey data collected from players of EverQuest (EQ), Dark Age of Camelot (DAOC), and Ultima Online (UO) consistently show that online relationships of both a platonic or romantic nature are fairly prevalent in MMORPGs.

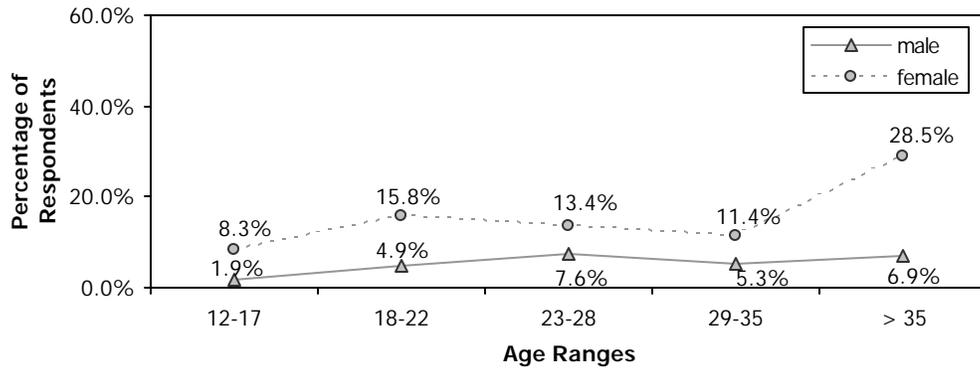**Have you ever become good friends with someone you've met online?**

N male = 2456, N female = 384
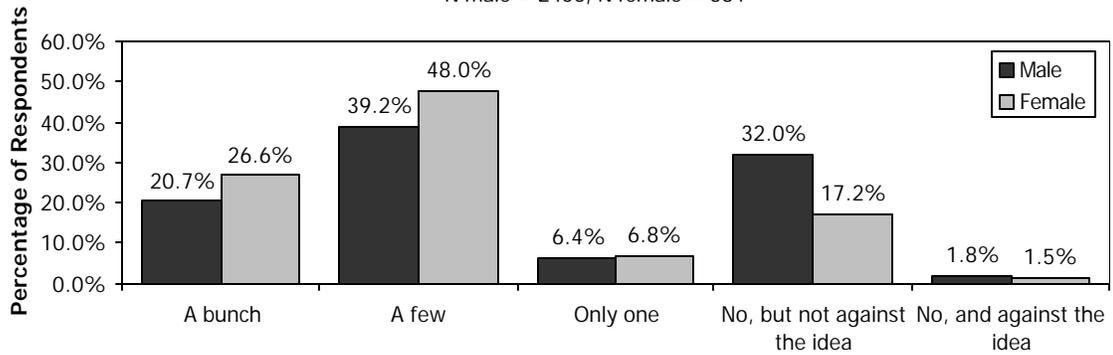
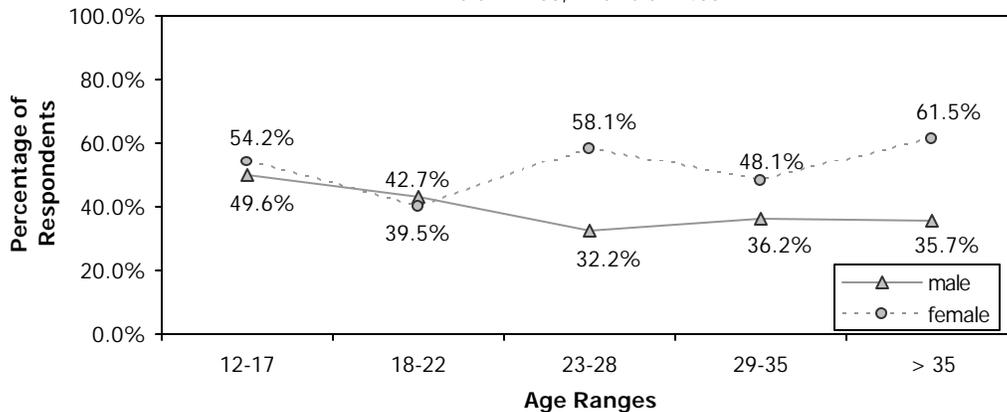**I have physically dated someone who I first met in the game**

N male = 2760, N female = 406

Players also indicate that these relationships are fairly substantial and meaningful.

Some of my friends in the game are comparable to or better than my real-life friends.

N male = 2760, N female = 406

Personal Disclosure

The formation of any close relationship requires a certain level of understanding that comes from mutual disclosure of personal issues and feelings. While it may come as a surprise to many people, studies have shown that people are more likely to be honest and forth-coming on personal issues when asked over a computer-mediated communication channel as opposed to a face to face setting. When clinical psychologists first began to use computers as part of the initial screening interview process for new patients, they noticed that patients were oftentimes more forthcoming when typing their responses to a computer rather than telling them to the clinician face to face. In other words, even though the end audience was the clinician in both cases, patients were more likely to be honest and revealing when the communication was mediated by a computer (Walther, 1996).

Part of the rationale for why this occurs is that the absence of another person judging and reacting to the speaker's words as they type makes it easier to disclose personal issues. Anecdotally, many people who use instant messaging systems (such as AIM or MSN) are able to talk about more personal issues even if it is to someone who they know in real-life. In both cases, the asynchronous nature of the communication channel as well as the absence of another person who judges the speaker instantaneously, with a full repertoire of facial expressions, probably makes the speaker feel more comfortable with disclosing personal information. This is supported by both anecdotal information as well as survey findings.

I'm not sure why I am such close friends with my EQ buddies. I do know that my EQ relationships are better than most of my relationships in RL. I think this is because when you are talking with someone on-line it's easier to talk about certain things since you don't have to look at a person face to face. [m, 15]

It is amazing how much complete strangers are willing to reveal about their personal lives. I believe that the anonymity might make them more bold. [m, 28]

I have told personal issues or secrets to online friends which none of my real-life friends know.

N male = 2760, N female = 406
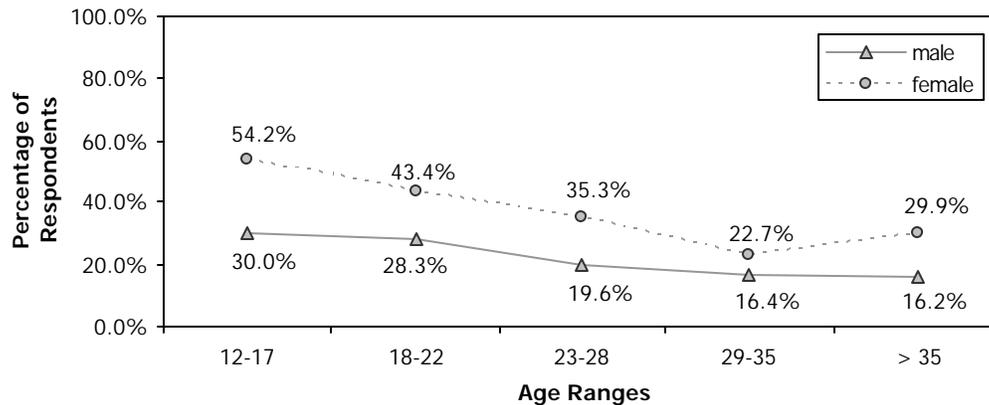
In a conversation between two individuals, as soon as one side offers a piece of personal information, it creates a kind of debt that encourages the other side to do the same. This process is known as reciprocity in psychology. When someone offers us something, we often feel somewhat obligated to return that favor. In the case of disclosure of personal information, the initial tidbit often sets off a chain of increasingly personal exchanges. The ease with which this information exchange occurs allows it to happen earlier and more often than typically in a real-life relationship.

The Cleric I know only what he tells me. But if I ask, he answers. We are very open and trust each other. I mean it's great stress relief to tell someone who doesn't know the people you know stuff about them ^_^. We have spent some nights in dungeons waiting for people or spawns chatting about our lives, what we want to do, and so on ... [m, 20]

A lot of times when people are burdened with something that is troubling them, they can feel better if they can tell someone about it. The problem is that this is not always possible in the real world. The anonymity of online environments makes it easier for a lot of people to share their personal issues, because oftentimes the very people they might turn to in real life are part of the issue itself. Another reason why the anonymity helps is because it removes any fear of repercussions. A teenager who is unsure of his sexuality is highly unlikely to share this information with his friends and family. A husband who is experiencing difficulty with his spouse might be able to talk about the problems with an online friend without fear of aggravating the problem in real life.

I would say its easier to open up to a person whom you are only writing to and never have to face in RL, I can discuss issues with some of them without worrying that that they will tell my other friends about it. [f, 19]

It's easier to communicate without getting uneasy about the usual "is he going to tell anyone what I'm saying?" thing [m, 15]

Of course, this is not to say that everyone who plays an MMOPRG will share their personal lives with their fellow players, but in general, people are more likely to disclose personal information online than in real life for the reasons mentioned. But beyond a higher tendency of self-disclosure, other factors facilitate the formation of online relationships.

Crises, Trust and Bonding

MMORPGs are surprisingly good at placing groups in stressful crises while they are hunting. For example, an unexpected "add" at a time when the cleric's mana is low, or a bad pull that doesn't immediately seem impossible to take. Most of these situations force groups to have to work together and support each other effectively. These experiences often become salient trust-building situations for the players. Because most MMORPG players spend a significant portion of their free time playing the game, they become very emotionally invested to their characters and what happens to them. The degree of emotional investment influences how elated and excited they become in real life when their character makes a level or finally gets a rare drop, or how devastated and angry they become when their character dies or is treated badly. For the most part, this emotional investment causes many MMORPG players to take the game very seriously. In a way similar to the deep bonds between war veterans, the pairing of emotional investment and frequency of trust-building situations in MMORPGs facilitate the "jump-starting" of solid bonds between players.

To succeed in EQ you need to form relationships with people you can trust. The game does a wonderful job of forcing people in this situation. RL rarely offers this opportunity as technological advances mean we have little reliance on others and individuals are rarely thrown into life-or-death situations. [m, 29]

Moreover, stressful situations in MMORPGs seem to bring out the best and worst of individuals. Most MMORPG players can recall experiences where another player displayed a remarkable degree of honor, altruism, self-sacrifice, betrayal or cowardice. This is not to say that players who act honorably in MMORPGs are honorable in real life, but because most players

assume that other players are as emotionally invested as they are, they tend to feel that these honorable or cowardly actions give a glimpse into how this other person might be in the real world. In a sense, all of us would like to put our friends into simulated crises to see whether they would stand by us in a time of need. We would all like to know which of our friends we can count on. Unfortunately, we usually don't find out the answer until that time of need arrives. Friendships in MMORPGs go through this process almost in reverse. Instead of making friends and then slowly finding out whether they can really be trusted, MMORPG players are making friends with people who have demonstrated that they can be trusted because of their actions under spontaneous crises that required difficult decisions.

> *In EQ, we engage in difficult, sometimes dangerous and often life-threatening struggles. Even though it isn't RL - you learn a lot about the character of the person playing the game. Some are selfish and greedy in EQ and you figure they are similar in RL - others are eager to help and think of others over themselves - and I have found them to be the same in RL. The difference in between these friendships and RL is the ability to watch someone in action before allowing them into your life. Also, the fact that we are all unable to see out real faces prior to becoming friends - we can't prejudge someone on the basis of their looks.* [f, 45]

> *They are able to prove themselves as trustworthy, or intelligent in the game environment … which I find to be just as taxing and valid as RL at times.* [m, 26]

Compatibility

While it strikes some people that meeting someone compatible in an MMORPG is like a shot in the dark, the opposite might be more accurate. MMORPG players who are working in real life tend to work in the IT industry (36% of employed EQ players, N=1099), and most MMORPG players tend to have had previous experience with table-top RPGs (68% of EQ, DAOC, UO, AC, and AO combined, N=3415). IT workers are typically analytical and rational; RPG players are typically imaginative and idiosyncratic. Both tend to be non-conformist. In other words, people who play MMORPGs are probably similar in more ways than not. When you think about it, people who enjoy simulated battles, level advancement, and item accumulation in medieval worlds using sword and spell metaphors under the D&D system probably share other interests and attitudes. And the MMORPG effectively keeps away people who do not share those interests and attitudes. And thus, the following kinds of remarks by players are fairly common:

We've discovered that we share many values and beliefs. These relationships are different from my RL relationships because it was much easier to open up to someone under the relative anonymity of online communication. [m, 26]

We have more in common then most my real life friends. [f, 33]

Meeting someone compatible in EverQuest would only be a shot in the dark if you believed that the players of EQ come from an evenly-distributed cross-section of the general population, which is probably not the case. Thus, another reason why MMORPG players are able to form relationships online is because the people they meet in these worlds tend to be more compatible than a random person they meet in real life. It's similar to meeting someone on a message board about the French culinary arts during the late Renaissance. The interest is so focused that other shared attitudes are highly likely.

In other words, each MMORPG effectively pre-selects for compatibility among its players. The genre, medieval as opposed to futuristic, of each MMORPG probably influences this to a certain degree. Because Sony is developing both EverQuest 2 and Star Wars Galaxies, it is fair to assume that their marketing people think that these two games will attract somewhat different kinds of players; otherwise they would be competing with themselves. Thus they will probably attract a different subset of the overall population, facilitating compatibility.

Even though compatibility between players is higher in MMORPGs than between strangers on a street, another important factor artificially boosts the sense of compatibility, and encourages players to feel that the people they meet are more compatible with them than they really are. It has been well-documented that people tend to like those with similar attitudes and ideas. In psychology, this is known as the "law of attraction". Relationships in MMORPGs, much the same way as in real life, typically begin with a shared attitude or belief – such as "Oh, you grew up in Chicago too?" or "Yeah, I agree with you that she was out of line there." The "law of attraction" states that it is the proportion of shared attitudes rather than the number of shared attitudes that matters. So, if Jane knows only one thing about Bob and they feel the same way about that one thing, then they have a 100% concordance. If Jane goes on to find out 19 more things about Bob and only 4 others match, then the concordance rate is down to 25%. Thus, Jane likes Bob less than she did at the beginning.

The internet is very good at hiding differences because a lot of physical cues we use to judge others are missing – clothing, hair style, speech inflection, accent, age, appearance, expressions and gestures among others. Oftentimes in real life, we feel we would never get along

with another person just from these physical cues alone. But in online relationships, the concordance tends to remain high because so many cues are missing. Until given explicit information otherwise, people tend to assume that others are similar to themselves. Therefore, this sense of concordance is augmented because similarity is assumed for many of those missing cues. The following player puts a different slant on this point.

They are good friends due to the fact you must throw all prejudices away about looks, language impediments, color, race everything related to physically meeting a person. This is similar to RL friends I believe. In RL a close friend is one who you have looked past all that stuff previously mention and you like the person inside. [m, 28]

This is a particularly salient factor in the formation of romantic relationships. The initial stages of passionate love tend to be marked by an idealization of the other person; they become god-like, flawless, and perfect in every way. The thin communication channel in online environments promotes this projection of an ideal onto another person because it lets people idealize much more than there really is while hiding the flaws as much as possible. These idealizations are enforced by the game metaphors themselves – warriors are strong and heroic, clerics are healing and graceful etc. Thus, these metaphors also encourage projecting a superhuman idealization upon another player apart from the underlying inflated sense of compatibility.

Conclusion

While there are many factors inherent in MMORPGs that facilitate the formation of relationships online, it is also equally clear that not all players choose to do so. There are players who consciously do not bring their real lives into the game. Another way to look at the phenomenon is to ask whether certain individuals are more predisposed to these online relationships. One group of such individuals might be teenagers who are struggling with identity and acceptance issues in real life. Many teenagers feel they have no one to talk to because it is their peers and family who are part of the issue they are trying to deal with, and the online environment might present itself as a way to talk about them with someone else. But approval and acceptance are needs that everyone requires to sustain a normal level of self-esteem. Individuals struggling with self-esteem issues might therefore be more likely to form relationships online.

It might also be more productive to think of online friendships as a real kind of friendship that is different from typical real life friendship. We know that soldiers in the same battalion form

deep bonds with each other in a way that is different from the bonds with their other friends and family. It is perhaps the case with our situation that the word "friendship" is being used to mean two different things. Real life relationships tend to center around calm, everyday events. Online relationships tend to grow out of bonds formed during stressful crises. Learning about the personal sides of our friends in real life is usually a time-consuming and gradual process, whereas this process tends to be much quicker online as mentioned above. Because online relationships seem to form in a different fashion from real life relationships, and are driven by different interactions and focuses, it might therefore be more helpful to think of them as a form of relationship that is very real but which we are unaccustomed to in real life.

While many players and outsiders may argue that online relationships are superficial and that everyone is pretending to be something else online, the following player makes a very important point that many people wear masks in real life as well, and that "putting up a front" is not a phenomenon unique to virtual worlds.

I believe that whether you've met someone on the computer or in RL you still only see what they want you to see either way. Everyone shows their best face to the world. The potential for someone turning out to be a jerk is same for RL or computer. And I'm good friends with my EQ friends for the same reasons I'm friends with my RL friends … they are fantastic people with great personalities and a sense of humor that meshes with my own. [f, 27]

In fact, a significant portion of MMORPG players feel that they can be more of who they really are in the virtual world.

I am more of "who I really am" in the game than in real-life.
N male = 2760, N female = 406
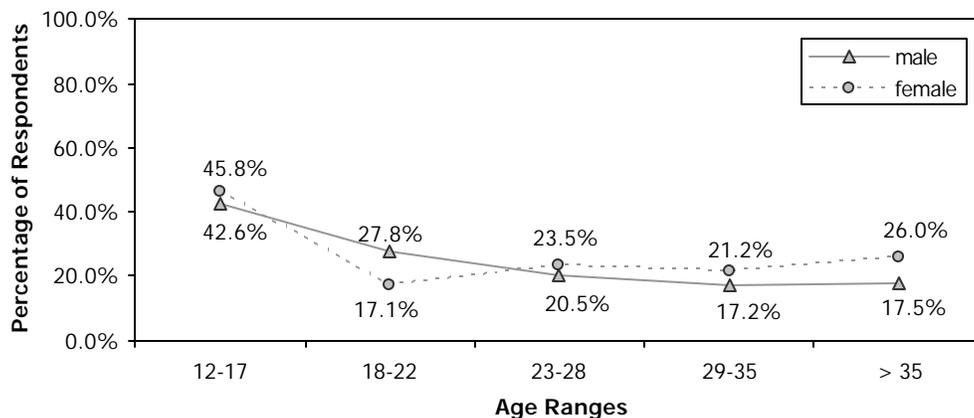
Other players feel that online relationships can be substantial because people are actually less superficial online. The removal of physical cues such as age, appearance, race and social class forces players to interact with each other with far fewer prejudices and stereotypes than they would in real life.

There is more a basis of knowing personality first... kind of a anti-judging the book by it's cover situation. For the most part, however, I don't see any difference between in-game vs. so-called "real life." If I've made friends with someone Out of Character while in-game... then that friendship is RL. Period. To think otherwise would be to believe there is such a thing as "Virtual Friends," and that, I don't believe in. [f, 29]

They are fun to talk to and group with, in a way they are better then rl because they are non judgmental about looks and such. I put my real personality into my characters and i am respected by friends for it. [f, 35]

And as one player notes, the irony is that online relationships can turn out to be less superficial than real life relationships.

An EQ friendship is different from a RL friendship because people tend to open up more to others when in EQ, we get to know each other much more, we truly tell each other what we think/feel and you really create this amazing bond with one another. It's much less superficial than some RL friendships can be. [f, 15]

Thus, in a strange way, it is unfair to stigmatize or question the superficiality of online relationships because we seldom stop to wonder how superficial our real life friends are.

Finally, while many people are frightened by the prospect of encountering individuals with bad intentions in an online environment, those same individuals oftentimes underestimate the number of those same people they are encountering in real life. After all, the "bad" people you meet in virtual worlds live in the real world. Prudence and cautiousness are things that people need to keep in mind in both the virtual and the real world. And considering the restricted range of things that other people can do to each other online when compared with the real world, it seems surprising how worried some individuals get over online relationships. Clearly, there are many well-documented cases where an online relationship led to negative consequences, but there are far more potential negative consequences for meeting people in real life if you're not being prudent and cautious.

Understanding the aspects of MMORPGs that facilitate relationship formation puts players and observers at a much better place to conceptualize and talk about these relationships. Instead of spontaneously criticizing or defending these relationships as a whole and moving into a polarized impasse, it is far more productive to understand why online relationships occur so often and what causes players to feel that these relationships are substantive.

References:

Walther, J.B. (1996). Computer-mediated communication: Impersonal, interpersonal, and hyperpersonal interaction. *Communication Research, 23(1)*, 3-43.