

## Chapter 12

# Analyzing Multi-Modal Digital Discourses during MMORPG Gameplay through an Experiential Rhetorical Approach

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The digital game industry has contributed disproportionately to the overall U.S. economy and GDP in spite of recent economic recession. The rapid ascent of MMORPGs as an increasingly popular digital game genre has affected the manners that gamers interact with each other to generate a new type of digital discourses and human experiences that are multimodal, synchronous, interactive, and engaging. Despite the existence of ample digital game research in user experience (UX) in the human-computer interaction (HCI) literature, there is a lack of programmatic exploration from a rhetorical perspective to examine the process and outcome of these digital interactions and co-generated discourses. Derived from the concept of “the rhetoric of experience,” this book chapter analyzed a representative gaming session captured in real time to study digital discourses that represent various aspects of gameplay experiences in World of Warcraft. The chapter discusses the methodological and theoretical implications of this approach to analyze and study MMORPGs and other digital game genres.*

## INTRODUCTION

### Emerging Digital Game as a Research Phenomenon

The Entertainment Software Association (henceforth, ESA) (2014) reports that U.S. consumers have spent \$21.53 billion on digital game content, accessory, and hardware purchases. In 2014, the expenditure has increased to \$22.41 billion (Entertainment Software Association [ESA], 2015a). Over 45% of users who subscribe to multi-player digital games report that they spent a monthly average of \$11 dollars on virtual goods (McKinsey & Company, 2011). Latest usage behavior statistics also estimate that more than 150 million Americans are gamers and 42% of them play digital games at least three hours per week (ESA, 2015a, 2015b). Four out of five households (80%) own a device to play digital games, while 51% of the U.S. households own a dedicated game console (ESA, 2015b).

Despite the growing role of digital games in shaping contemporary human experiences, game-related research has often been marginalized and ignored as a serious academic research because of its content (Bogost, 2007; Humphreys, 2003). However, in recent years, scholars are compelled to examine this emerging field due to the increasing importance of the digital game industry, as well as the exponential growth of their users that span various demographics (ESA, 2015a, 2015b; Wolf, 2005). For example, in terms of gamers' age distribution, 56% of the gamers are under 35 years old, while 27% of them are above 50 years old (ESA, 2015a, 2015b). In a global survey of 100,000 consumers (aged between 13 and 64+) in China, Europe, and North America, McKinsey & Company (2011) found an emerging *Gamer* segment who obtains their digital experiences through gaming console platforms in single- and multi-player gaming situations. Compared with other digital consumer segments, the *Gamer* segment is reported to spend 2.2 times more on playing digital games per day (McKinsey & Company, 2011).

With the growing presence of digital games in shaping human experiences, in the past decade, scholars from various disciplines have rushed to study digital games. For many gamers, playing digital games has become an important part of social life when 56% of the most frequent gamers interact with others (ESA, 2015b). The trend to interact with other gamers grows with the popularity of Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (henceforth, MMORPGs) that digital game researchers found "intensely social" (Humphreys, 2003, p.2). Role-playing and interactions with other gamers in the virtual space have generated new research topics to examine, such as notions of self, identity, representation, collaboration, and social interaction (Raessens & Goldstein, 2005).

The rapid rise of MMORPGs as an increasingly popular digital game genre has affected the manners that gamers interact with each other to generate a new type of digital discourses and human experiences that are interactive, multimodal, synchronous, and engaging (Kang, 2011). MMORPGs refer to any network-mediated digital games where thousands of gamers are role-playing simultaneously in a graphical and 3-D environment (Filiciak, 2003; Hussain & Griffiths, 2008 ; Kang, 2011). Examples of popular MMORPGs include *Ultima Online*, *EverQuest*, *World of Warcraft*, and *Second Life* (Kang, 2011). MMORPGs, MMOs, and MMOGs have rapidly attracted much attention from digital game researchers (Chuang, 2006; Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006). However, there is a lack of exploration from a rhetorical perspective to examine the process and the outcome of digital interactions and discourses during gameplay. Extended from Kang (2011), the digital game environment is arguably equivalent to a virtual rhetorical situation from all gamers when they generate digital discourse in responding to the rhetorical situation created in MMORPGs. In other words, MMORPGs are designed to create a fantasied gaming space where gamers can collaborate and negotiate with other players to co-create an engaging user experience in a mythical world with chosen identities (Kang, 2011).

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