

# Online Gaming

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## INTRODUCTION

Despite the rise of computer games as a leisure phenomenon, relatively little research has been conducted in this area. A majority of the research to date has concentrated on adolescent players (Griffiths, 1996, 1997a). Furthermore, most of the research has tended to concentrate on the more negative aspects, such as excessive play and addiction (Griffiths, 1991, 1997b; Griffiths & Hunt, 1995, 1998; Phillips, Rolls, Rouse, & Griffiths, 1995), the effects of playing aggressive games (Griffiths, 1998, 2000) and the medical and psychosocial consequences (Griffiths, 1993, 1996). However, there have been a few psychologically-based studies on personality and computer game play (Douse & McManus, 1993; Griffiths & Dancaster, 1995)—although these have been exploratory. Thus, the image of a typical gamer (and the pastime of computer gaming) is seen as socially negative and remains firmly within a youth subculture.

As the 1990s came to a close, a new generation of machines with increasingly sophisticated processing power began to replace the early 1990s consoles. However, an even more revolutionary development was also occurring, involving the Internet as a gaming forum. New games emerged that enabled people to link up online to game together. The games varied in their mode of operation. There are basically three main types of social virtual gaming over the Internet—Stand Alone Games, Local and Wide Network (LAWN) Games, and Massively Multiplayer Online Role-playing (MMORP) Games.

- **Stand Alone Games:** Games placed in this category of “stand alone” are defined as single-player-orientated games for the PC with the option to go online to seek a human opponent. However, the main use of stand alone games, until very recently, has been to pitch player vs. computer. Examples include *Black & White*, *Dungeon Keeper II* and *Diablo II*. These games, if played online, by definition, do not immerse a player into a virtual, narrative-enriched

world. Where players can choose to represent themselves as a single character, they are usually fixed in the view offered (e.g., over the shoulder) and rarely do players engage in grouping behavior. Player communication is possible, but the depth of the social immersion in the game is restrained by the lack of a clear game narrative.

- **LAWN Games:** LAWN games arose from the desire to link players together in support of tournaments. Examples of this style of gaming include *Quake III* and *Counterstrike*. The main style of play involved in these games is tactical combat. Common to the games is a limited game narrative, with an emphasis on tactical play. Character development is very limited if existent at all. Out of this style of gaming has arisen gameplay where people group in “Clans.” For example, in *Counterstrike*, players’ identity is akin to an army’s special operation forces or terrorist group. The *Clans* then meet in cyberspace to compete in deadly combat. The aim of these *Clans* is to kill or destroy opponents. The kill is usually denoted by the term *Frag* and the view is first person. The *Clans* may also have a real existence (i.e., people living together in the real world) or may be a virtual grouping. This form of gaming has grown in popularity to such an extent that “LAN parties” are now regularly held, where hundreds to thousands of individuals meet and link transported PCs to compete over a weekend. A further development has been professional game tournaments and emergence of professional gamers.
- **MMORPG:** MMORPGs are the latest Internet-only gaming experience. These are typically represented by large, sophisticated, detailed and evolving worlds based in different narrative environments. Examples of such games are *Everquest* (heroic fantasy), *Anarchy Online* (futurist science fiction) and *Motor City Online* (classic car racing). In these games, the non-player characters (*NPCs*) are designed with advanced artificial intelligence (AI) that offers a rich

and unpredictable milieu for players to experience a virtual world through their own “player character.” The nature of these games is to offer a rich three-dimensional world populated by thousands of players. This game form is a fully developed multi-player universe, with an advanced and detailed world (both visual and auditory). The most popular and, therefore, largest of these MMORPGs is Sony Online Entertainment’s *EverQuest*, which reports having more than 500,000 people playing it.

To play *Everquest*, a player has to log on to a server that hosts the *Everquest* world. Sony currently supports 41 servers, and each server runs a full version of the *Everquest* world. On each *server* there are typically around 2,000 players at any one time. Most of these servers (39 out of 41) are based in America, although the two latest servers are based in Europe. The game allows a range of identities (and genders) to be explored by playing a character created by the player. The identity can vary along the lines of race, profession and deity alignment (morality). As a result, each character can be played as good or evil, a friendly or unfriendly race, and a profession that is seen as a team player or more of a loner. A player’s choice will impact directly on the game, as *NPCs* will respond to the character’s profile. For example, a “player character” troll will have low *faction* (see glossary) with dwarven *NPCs* and therefore will initially be kill-on-sight (KOS). However, the *faction* can be raised by undertaking deeds, which in the eye of the dwarves makes the player the exception rather than the rule.

Once in the virtual world, the players can either group or play solo. Social communication is via on-screen text. This can either be done privately (within a group of up to six players) or across the “*zone*” that includes all players in the *zone*. Zones are different areas within the game on the same *server*. Inter-zonal communication is possible through *Guilds* and private text messages. Game developers are currently exploring inter-server communication. In addition, due to the visual richness of the games, it is possible to “*emote*” visually; that is, signal an emotional state by gesture such as kneeling, saluting, waving and so forth. Within these self-contained worlds, a rule-governed behavior emerges from the various interactions between players (within the parameters of reasonable behavior).

Although computer gaming is now seen as very much in the mainstream of cultural pastimes (no longer only part of the youth culture), very little is known about the psychology of online gaming. There is very little data even on the basics. For example, the relationship between personality and amount of time spent gaming (or the type of gaming pursued) has received little attention. The data that does exist suggest that gaming in general, particularly online fantasy gaming, is associated with introversion,

lower empathic concern and low feminine identity (Douse & McManus, 1993). Case study reports concerning the impact of online gaming have shown detrimental effects, although these studies concerned excessive online gaming use rather than occasional or regular use (Griffiths, 2001).

## EXISTING RESEARCH

There has been very little research into these online gaming communities, although a number of disciplines are beginning to generate research from different perspectives, including the psychological (e.g., Griffiths, Davies & Chappell, 2003; Yee, 2003), sociological (e.g., Bartle, 1996) and economical (e.g., Castranova, 2001). However, apart from the work of Griffiths et al. (2003), much of this work is “grey literature” that has not been peer reviewed and is self-published on the Internet. Therefore, such data must be treated with caution. For instance, Bartle (1996) has studied multi-user virtual environments (MUDs) and has classified players into four different sub-groups (achievers, explorers, killers and socializers) formulated from the inter-relationship of two dimensions of playing style: action vs. interaction, and world-oriented vs. player-oriented. He concluded that each of these four sub-groups views the playing of MUDs differently. More specifically, MUDs were games (like chess, tennis, etc.) to achievers, pastimes (like reading, gardening, etc.) to explorers, sports (like hunting, shooting, fishing, etc.) to killers, and entertainments (like television, going to night-clubs, etc.) to socializers.

Using Bartle’s (1996) classification of MUD players, Andreasen (2003) surveyed players from all major online gaming communities. Among the 4,380 *Everquest* players polled (3,672 males; 618 females), 34% were explorers, 25% were achievers, 23% were socializers and 15% were killers. As reported, over one-third of all *Everquest* players (34%) were explorers in the game. However, this is too vague to be meaningful. One of the main criticisms is that a player has to do all of these actions (exploring, killing, socializing, etc.) if they want to advance in the game. In a number of unpublished studies on his Web site, Yee (2003) has collected demographic data about *Everquest* players (with sample sizes ranging from 1,240 to 2,470). The main findings he reported were that: between 84% to 88% of players are male; the average age of players was 25.6 years old; 30% of players are students and 36% work in the IT business; players spend an average of 22.4 hours a week playing the game; and 25% play the game with their partner.

In an attempt to establish some benchmark data, Griffiths et al. (2003) collated data from two online gaming fan sites for *Everquest* players—*Everlore* ([www.everlore.com](http://www.everlore.com)) and *Allakhazam* ([everquest.allakhazam.com](http://everquest.allakhazam.com)). Each of these

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