

Chapter 9

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF MASSIVELY MULTI-USER ONLINE ROLE-PLAYING GAMES: MOTIVATIONS, EMOTIONAL INVESTMENT, RELATIONSHIPS AND PROBLEMATIC USAGE

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1. Introduction

Every day, millions of users [1, 2] interact, collaborate, and form relationships with each other through avatars in online environments known as Massively Multi-User Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs). For example, in a planetary system known as Corbantis, geological surveyors are busy inspecting their chemical harvesting installations to maintain their daily quota for a cartel of pharmaceutical manufacturers. These manufacturers, allied with a rebel faction, are struggling to research and supply key medical supplies to the front lines of the conflict. Corbantis is an incredibly sophisticated online environment capable of supporting thousands of users at a time. Users log on to the server from remote locations independent of each other, and interact with each other through graphical avatars to accomplish complex goals. But Corbantis is merely one planetary system out of many other equally complex worlds. These online environments offer tantalizing glimpses of how millions of avatars interact on a daily basis outside a laboratory setting and what users derive from that experience.

The study of MMORPGs is highly relevant to research on social interaction in Shared Virtual Environments (SVEs) and avatars at work and play in these environments. Although many of the theoretical implications of social interaction in virtual environments have been explored in the artificial confines of Virtual Reality (VR) research laboratories [3–8], MMORPGs are the only existing naturalistic setting where millions of users voluntarily immerse themselves in a graphical virtual environment and interact with each other through avatars on a daily basis. The opportunity to study what

people actually do when they choose to be in a virtual environment with thousands of other people cannot be overstated, and the results and implications of a survey study of 30,000 MMORPG players will be presented in this chapter.

In the following section, the history and structure of MMORPGs will be presented, followed by an overview of the methodology used in the survey study. The demographics, usage patterns and motivations of users will then be presented. A combination of quantitative and qualitative data will guide the discussion of relationship formation, role exploration, skill transfer, and problematic usage in these environments. Finally, potential uses of these environments for social science research will be discussed.

2. History of MMORPGs

MMORPGs are a new class of Multi-User Domains (MUDs) – online environments where multiple users can interact with each other and achieve structured goals. The first MUD—an adventure game in a persistent world that allowed multiple users to log on at the same time—was created in 1979 by Roy Trubshaw and Richard Bartle [9]. While it is commonly thought that MUDs descended from table-top role-playing games (RPGs) such as *Dungeons and Dragons*, the two genres emerged around the same time and co-evolved beginning in the early 1970s [10] and became popular during the 1980s. Both games allow users to create characters based on numerical attributes (i.e. Strength, Dexterity, Intelligence) and templated roles (i.e. Warrior, Cleric, Druid) with different strengths and weaknesses. Game-play typically revolved around a combination of interactive story-telling and logistical optimizations under the guise of slaying monsters and attaining higher levels and skills. In RPGs, a designated Game Master controlled the outcome of events based on dice-rolls and references to charts and tables. In MUDs, this is controlled by the server.

As the graphical and processing capabilities of the modern personal computer increased, and as accessibility to the Internet became widely available, it became possible in the early 1990s to build MUDs with graphical front-ends. *Ultima Online*, launched in 1997, is recognized to be the first MMORPG—a persistent, graphical, online environment that allowed thousands of users to be logged on at the same time. The number of active users that *Ultima Online* could support was what distinguished MMORPGs from existing graphical MUDs. The second MMORPG, *EverQuest*, launched in 1999, quickly achieved a sustained user base of 400,000 and remains the most popular MMORPG in North America as of 2004 [2] even though at least 10 competing MMORPGs have emerged since then.