

## *Introduction*

The first of the genre; Habitat (1986) was published by Lucasfilm Games. It is not a commonly known game and many people, even loyal fans of this genre mistake other games such as Meridian 59 (1996) or Ultima Online (1997) to be the father of the Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPG) sub-genre.

Ever since the birth of Ultima Online, the sub-genre has garnered much interest over the years. As more games joined the MMORPG line-up, the sub-genre grew and became the popular starting from 2007 when player population was at a 50 million high (Martončík & Lokša, 2015).

This essay will discuss the rise and fall of the MMORPG genre throughout the years, as well as social, game mechanics<sup>1</sup>, and monetary aspects through the mention and analysis of notable games in the genre. In a chronological order, this essay present significant games of the genre in relevance to how they influenced social, mechanics, and monetary aspects of the MMORPG sub-genre throughout the eras.

## *1996: The rise of MMORPGs*

What exactly constitutes to an MMORPG? MMORPGs are a sub-genre of Role-Playing Games (RPG), and are played online and multiplayer as the name suggest (Achterbosch, Pierce, & Simmons, 2008). MMORPGs also evolved from multi-user dungeon (MUDs) and RPGs (Achterbosch, Pierce, & Simmons, 2008). A commonly known tabletop game, Dungeons and Dragons (D&D), is commonly cited to be the inspiration for many MMORPGs. There can be many similarities found between the gameplay mechanics of D&D and MMORPGs.

As mentioned earlier, the first game that started this sub-genre is Habitat. Habitat was published in 1986 and was available for play on the Commodore 64 (Marshall, 2017). From then, MMORPGs have also evolved to console platforms. Published in 2002, Final Fantasy XI is a game from the Final Fantasy franchise familiar to many. The game was first released for the PlayStation 2, PC and Xbox 360 versions were later released in 2003 and 2004. It should also be noted that this is the first instance of a cross-platform MMORPG (First cross-platform, n.d.).

## *1996 - 1999: Ultima Online – how it started*

Other than the long-reigning king of MMORPGs, one most notable game in this sub-genre would be the catalyst responsible for the popularity of such games. Right at the start of the Ultima Online experience, players customize and play as their own characters. This would initiate an instinct of self-identification (MMORPG.com, n.d.). At the time of its release, Ultima Online was only the third of the MMORPG sub-genre but it provided something different to people who already played video games; it was different, engaging, and more captivating than its predecessors, Meridian 59 and Habitat.

EverQuest and Asheron's Call launched 2 years later in 1999, these two games were published by Sony Online Entertainment and Microsoft respectively. They quickly gained popularity as the

---

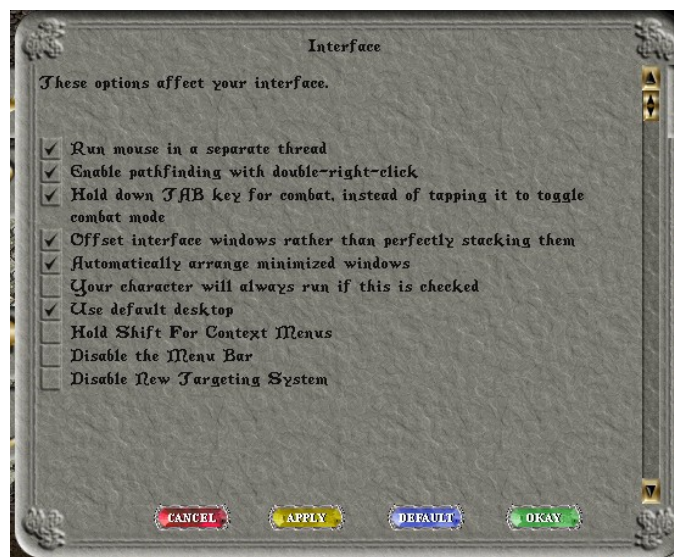
<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of this paper, game mechanics shall refer to the possible actions and physics carried out by players in the virtual world.

genre became more well-known, thanks to Ultima Online. EverQuest and Asheron's Call both offered a more immersive gameplay experience with its more detailed virtual world.

### *Ultima Online: AGE analysis*

#### *Actions*

- Left mouse click: does most things, use items/skills on hotbar
- Right mouse click: moves character
- Alt + R: Map
- Alt + P: Paperdoll
- Alt + I: Backpack
- Alt + J: Journal



*Figure 1. Interface customization in Ultima Online (UO)*



*Figure 2. Interface customization in UO (part 2)*

#### *Gameplay*

- Use skills to fight other players
- Survive against the environment, NPCs using resources
- Gather resources to improve character

### *Experience*

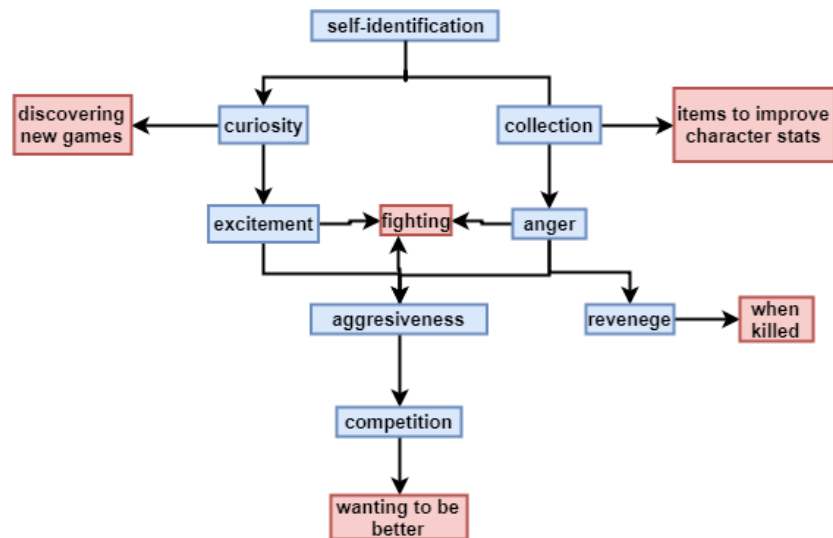


Figure 3. 6-11 framework for AGE analysis of Ultima Online

### *2004: World of Warcraft – Social aspect of MMORPGs*

World of Warcraft is commonly acknowledged the king of the MMORPG sub-genre. It has been doing great in terms of retaining players and attracting new players to the game. Social structures known as clans or guilds in game allow players to bond with other players in an effort of teamwork. As noted by Chang, Koh, Low, Onghanseng, and Tanoto (2008), guild cohesion is strengthened through the conformation of norms in the guild. When a player joins the guild or clan, and has adapted to its rules, the other players will naturally welcome him more.

On a larger scale, these guilds and clans create larger communities when they come together. The authors asserted that “what these players seem to have built over the years is a stable, durable community of play and practice” (Caratarescu-Petrica, 2015). This suggests that the communities, has created a bond through their routines of playing the game together, over a period. As players start to form bonds, friendships, and relationships through the game, they will then experience emotions with their fellow gamers as well. The feelings of fear, anger, pride, joy, excitement and sadness that one may experience during the gameplay experience is

Now, one might question why do these players of MMORPGs not make friends outside, in the offline, real world? The simple answer, a virtual environment provides a safer and more comfortable world with some anonymity that the online world provides (Cole & Griffiths, as cited in Martončík & Lokša, 2015). Additionally, the competition, collaboration in the virtual world provides a goal-oriented and motivating environment to return to (Sergeyeva, Tsareva, Zinoveva, & Kononova, 2018).

### *World of Warcraft: AGE Analysis.*

## Action



Figure 4. Action bar default key mapping for World of Warcraft (WoW)

In World of Warcraft, all players have their skills and some consumable items on their hotbars, this allows for easier gameplay and faster access to crucial items. The slots on the hot bars can then be key-bound to any key of the player's choice.



Figure 5. Default key mapping for character movement in WoW

### Gameplay

- Players use skills to complete quests to level up
- Interact with other players to work through dungeons
- Players can fight other players

### Experience

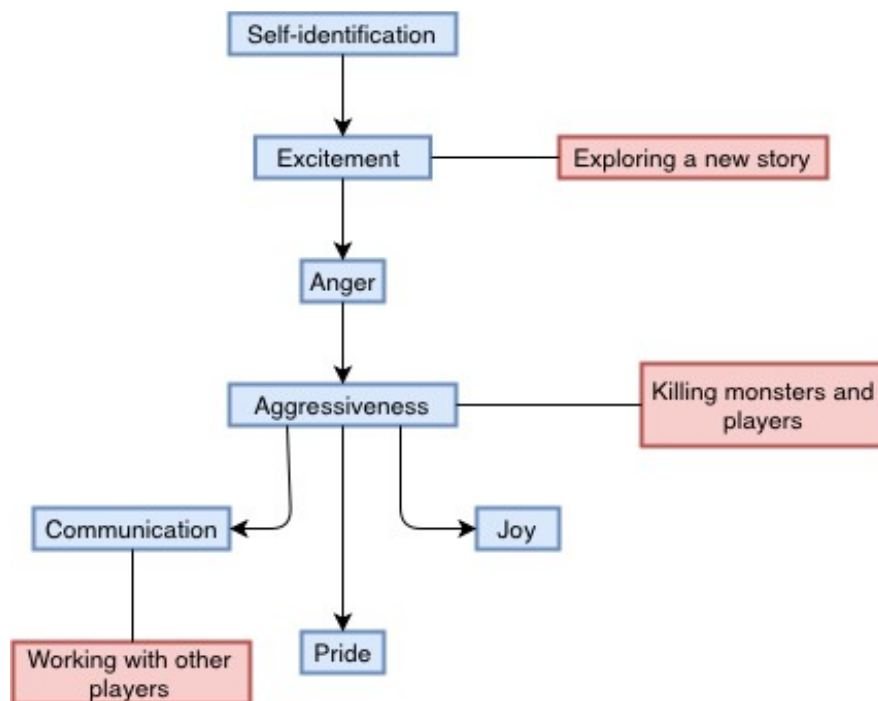


Figure 6. 6-11 framework for AGE analysis of WOW

### 2006 – 2008: *Aion: The Tower of Eternity* - Special game mechanics

Most notable for its flight mechanics, *Aion* was published by NC Soft in 2008. The flight mechanics of the game allowed players above a certain level and having met the requirements, to fly on their own set of wings. What makes flying in *Aion* stand out from other games: at higher levels in certain parts of the virtual world, player-versus-player fights can include flight combat (Aion, n.d.), something that is unique to *Aion*. As *Aion* was open-tested and published during the height of MMORPG popularity, the game gained the interest and loyalty of many players from the start. Other than the special flight combat that set the game apart, thanks to the improving technology at the time, *Aion* also had captivating graphics.

Another example of differing game mechanics would be *Granado Espada*, published in 2006. Back when the game was first published, the idea of controlling more than 1 character was a novelty in MMORPGs. Instead of creating a personalized character like most other games in the sub-genre, the player selects characters, and customization is limited to gender selection. The player can choose 3 characters to control simultaneously (known as multi-character control or 3MCC) (Granado Espada, n.d.). As noted on the game's official website, characters can be unlocked and added to one's arsenal.

Such differing game mechanics and virtual environments called for the need to adapt. Players who wanted to try or played multiple games needed to learn the contradicting interactive challenges and strategies (Dickey, 2007).

### *Aion: AGE Analysis*

#### *Action*



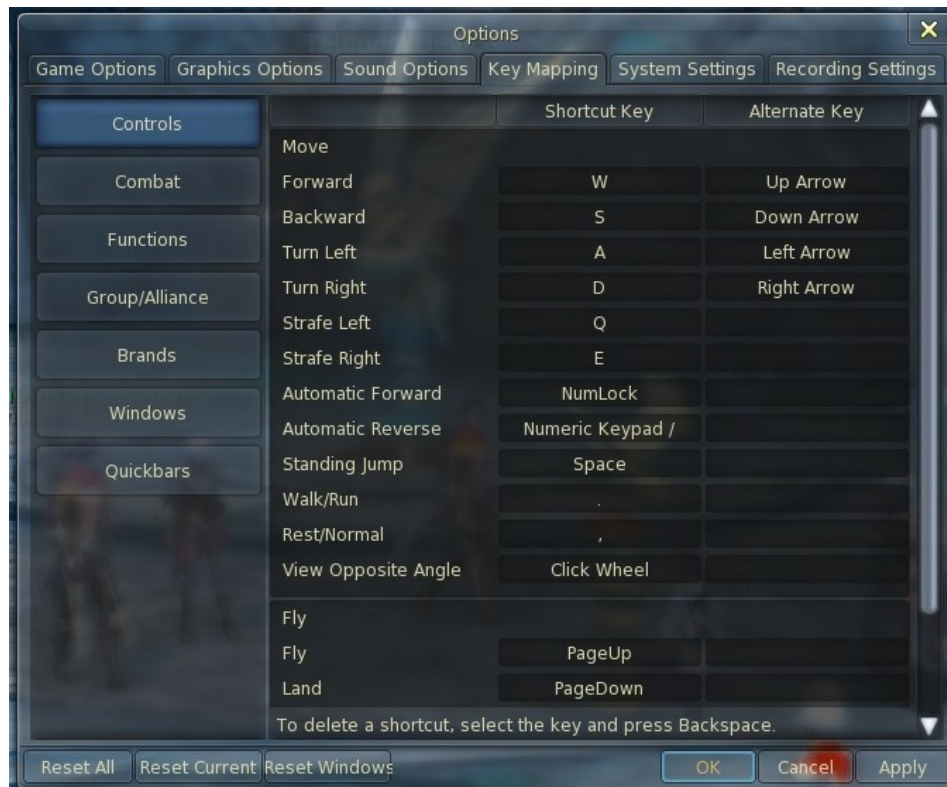


Figure 7. Key mapping for movement in Aion

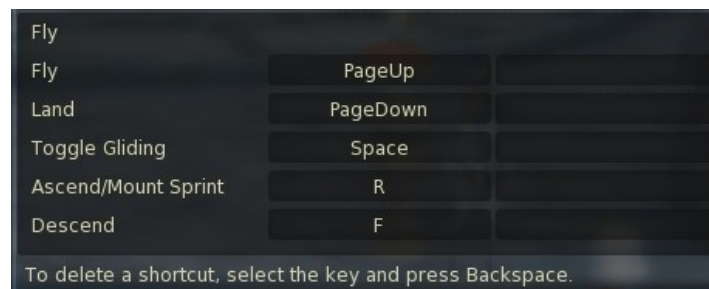


Figure 8. Key mapping for flight mechanics in Aion

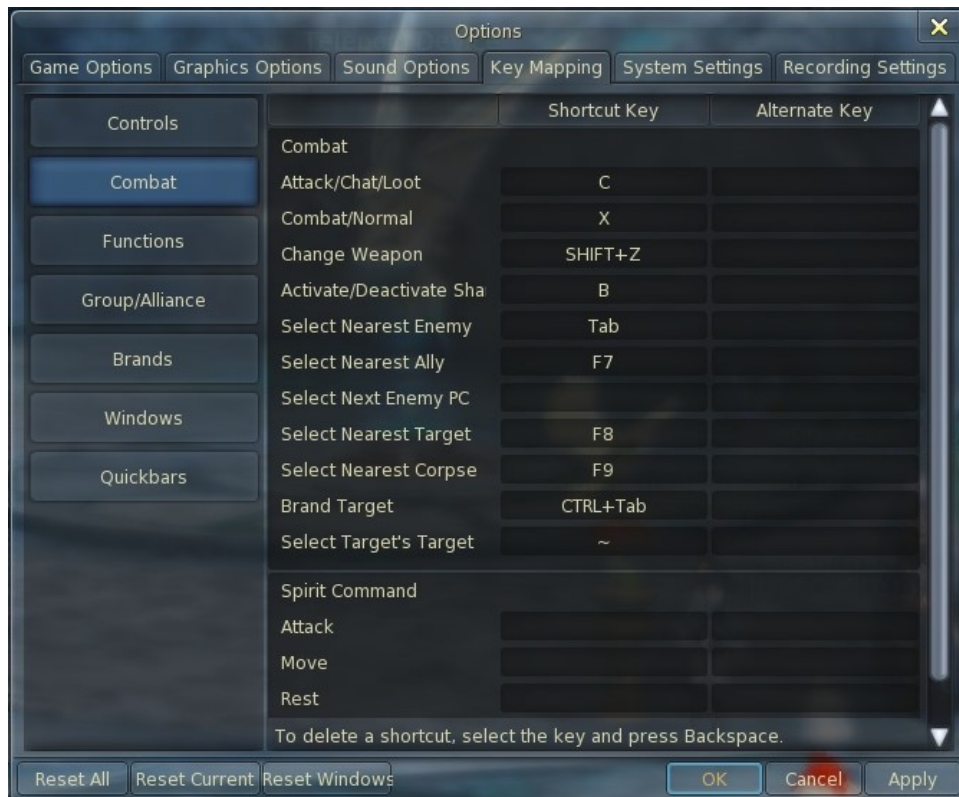


Figure 9. Key mapping for combat in Aion

### Gameplay

- Players have to use skills to level up
- Kill monsters and win boss fights to get better equipment
- Make use of skills & environment to kill enemy player and rank up
- Flight combat with other players

### Experience



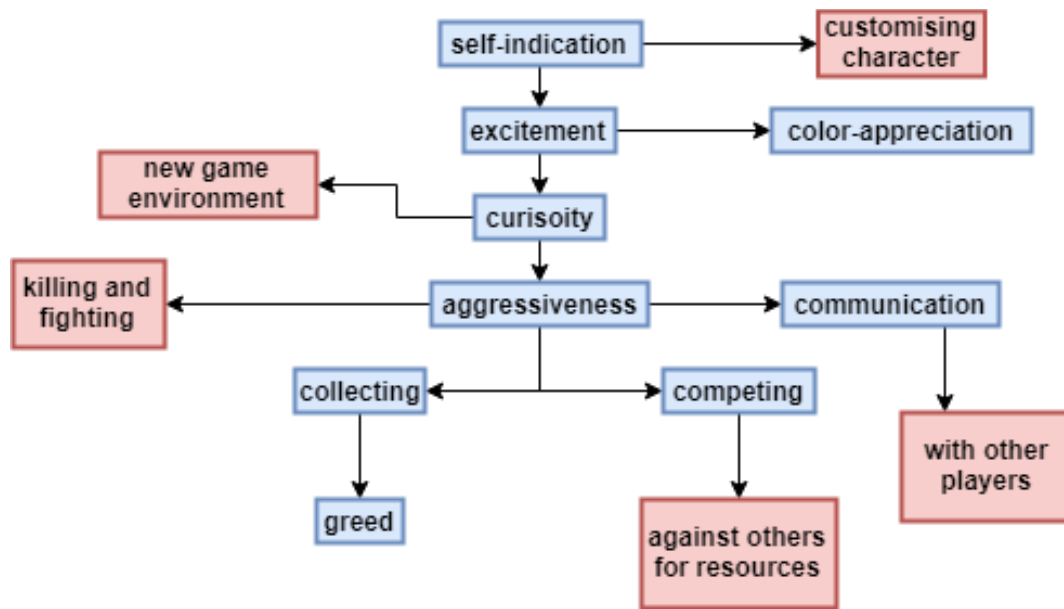


Figure 10. 6-11 framework for AGE analysis of Aion

### 2012: Blade & Soul – money and the virtual world

Blade and Soul, originally published by NCSOFT in 2012, is an action-oriented MMORPG which was later released in other parts of the world. Blade and Soul advertises its paid content on the official website and in-game (<https://www.bladeandsoul.com/en/shop/>). There are different types of virtual goods such as appearance, functional, and social (Lehdonvirta, as cited in Hamari & Keronen, 2015). The authors also highlighted that since games such as Blade and Soul are using the free-to-play business model, their offering of advantageous virtual items that can be bought with real-life money will be heavily utilized by the publisher.

For example, in Blade and Soul, players are able to use real-world money to purchase NCoins (NCSOFT's virtual currency). NCoins are used to purchase materials and items that would boost their progression either by giving the player additional experience points directly or help the player in bettering their weapons and armor. This has been dubbed as “pay-to-win”. Many do not agree with the unfair advantage that “pay-to-win” gives to people willing to purchase virtual goods. What's more is that within the game world, people use the paid content items to start virtual entrepreneurship (Jung & Pawlowski, 2014) which encourages people to follow in their footsteps.

### Blade and Soul: AGE Analysis

#### Action

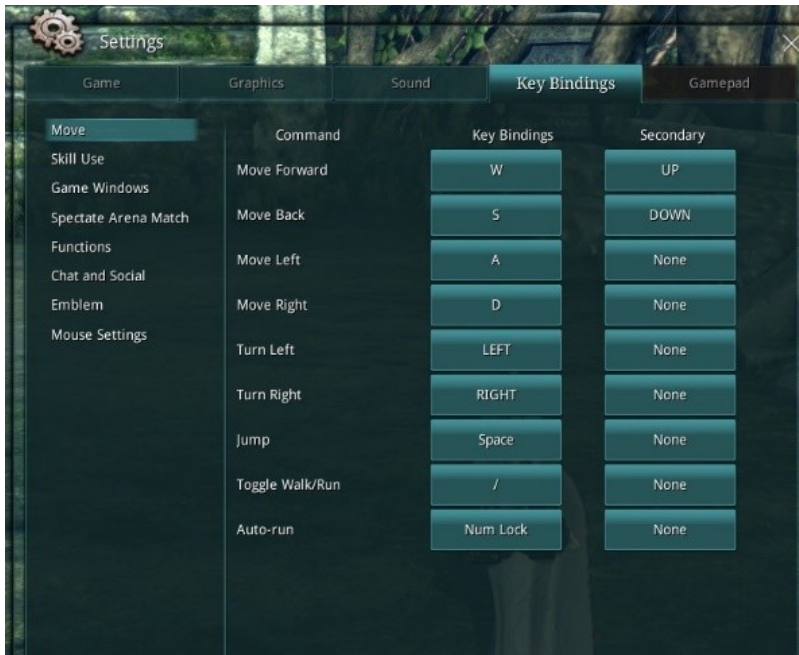


Figure 11. Movement key mapping in Blade & Soul

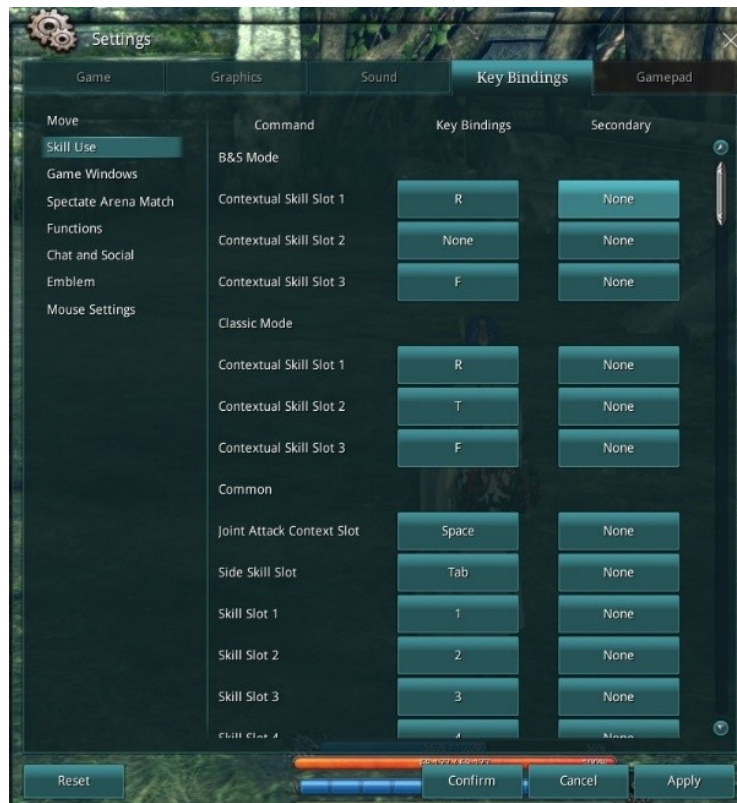


Figure 12. Skill use key mapping in B&S

Contextual skill slots and skill slots are hot bar slots that are associated with skills. Players cannot change the skill location on the hot bars slots but they can customize the key bindings.

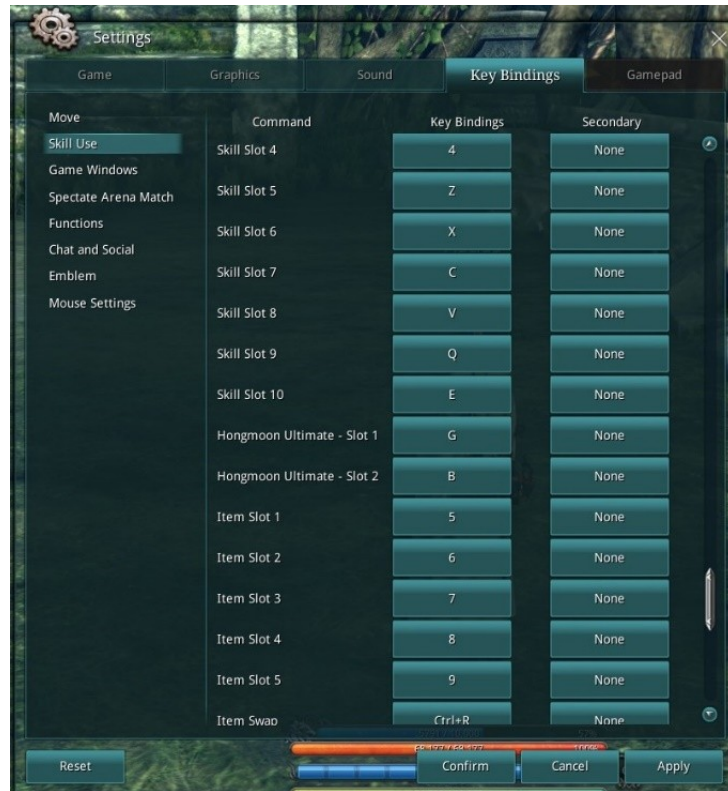


Figure 13. Skill use key mapping in B&S

Item slots are for players to use as a shortcut access to their consumable items.

### Gameplay

- Use skills to progress through the story-line
- Work with other players to progress through side-story and more difficult content

### Experience

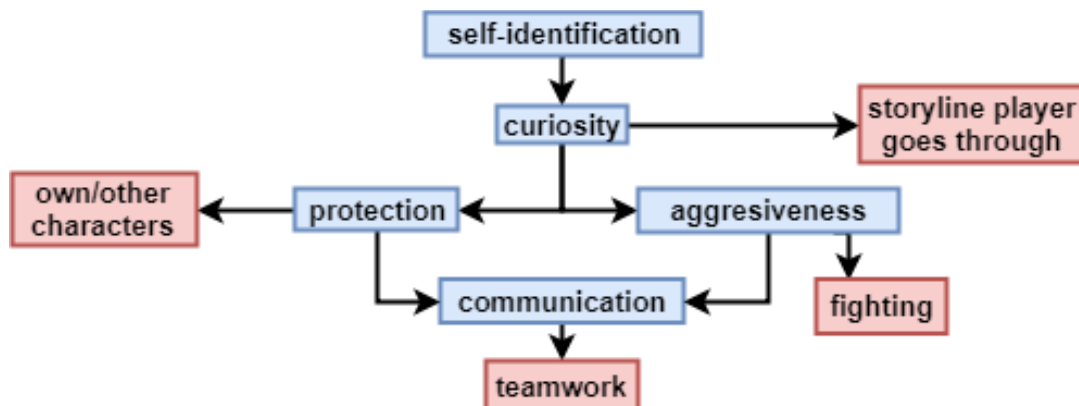


Figure 14. 6-11 framework for AGE analysis of B&S

2012-2016: The fall of MMORPGs

The MMORPG genre is undeniably “dying”, with the steadily decreasing player count and game servers shutting down for good over the years. Some say that MMORPGs started “dying” around 2014 while others argue a more recent date, but it is no doubt that this sub-genre is not where it once was.

One main reason for the “death” of the once-beloved sub-genre is the shift in business models. Most games were once pay-to-play where players purchase the game once for infinite access to the game, or subscription-based model where players pay for the base game and subsequent expansion packs. The shift from pay-to-play and subscription-based models to free-to-play has seen the dwindling loyalty from players due to the lack of monetary commitment and motivation (Doyle, 2017).

Another reason for the increasing number of players leaving the game is that the sub-genre is believed to have gone stale. Even the more recently published game Black Desert Online (2014 in South Korea and 2016 internationally, which had gain popularity quickly is now seeing a decline in its player base (Appleton, 2016).

### *Conclusion*

MMORPGs have quickly gained the loyalty of fans since the beginning in 1997 thanks to the popularity of Ultima Online. Throughout the years, notable title such as Runescape, and Neverwinter have also populated the subgenre. Most studies surrounding the topic of the MMORPGs and why players like this subgenre of games are directed at the social aspect. It is undeniable that the main contributor to the stickiness factor of MMORPGs are the relationships that the community of players have built amongst themselves (Chang, Koh, Low, Onghanseng, & Tanoto, 2008).

Since many players have become unwilling to pay for games either one-off or monthly, many game publishers have resorted to enticing players to spend on virtual goods to continue earning money. Yet, with the “pay to win” issues, players have become reluctant to play MMORPGs since what was once earned through hard work, can easily be bought with the click of a few buttons.

The MMORPG subgenre in general has risen and fallen in just about 20 years. The games that have contributed significantly and positively to this subgenre and community will forever be treasured by their fans.

## References

- Achterbosch, L., Pierce, R., & Simmons, G. (2008). Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games: The Past, Present, and Future. *ACM Computers in Entertainment*, 5(4). Retrieved from <http://doi.acm.org/10.1145/1324198.1324207>
- Aion. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.aiononline.com/about>
- Appleton, R. (2016). The MMORPG genre is dead, and we killed it. Retrieved from <https://www.fresnobee.com/entertainment/ent-columns-blogs/video-games/article98016107.html>
- Caratarescu-Petrica, I. (2015). Do those who play together stay together? The World of Warcraft community between play, practice and game design. *Journal of Comparative Research in Anthropology and Sociology*, 6(1). Retrieved from <http://compaso.eu>
- Chang, K., Koh, A., Low, B., Onghanseng, D. J., & Tanoto, K. (2008). Why I Love This Online Game: The MMORPG Stickiness Factor. Retrieved from <http://aisel.aisnet.org/icis2008>
- Dickey, M. D. (2007). Game Design and Learning: A Conjectural Analysis of How Massively Multiple Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) Foster Intrinsic Motivation. *Educational Technology Research and Development*, 55(3), 253-273. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30221245>.
- Doyle, S. (2017, May 16). 9 Reasons the MMORPG is Dead. Retrieved from <https://www.mmogames.com/gamearticles/9-reasons-mmorpg-dead/>
- First cross-platform online role-playing game. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/world-records/first-cross-platform-online-role-playing-game>
- Granado Espada. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.granadoespada.com/page/main.php>
- Hamari, J., & Keronen, L. (2015). Why do people buy virtual goods? Attitude toward virtual good purchases versus game enjoyment. *International Journal of Information Management*, 35(3), 299-308. doi:10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2015.01.007
- Jung, Y., & Pawlowski, S. (2015). The meaning of virtual entrepreneurship in social virtual worlds. *Telematics and Informatics*, 32(1), 193-203. doi:10.1016/j.tele.2014.07.002
- Marshall, C. (2017, May 26). The Story of Habitat, the Very First Large-Scale Online Role-Playing Game (1986). Retrieved from <http://www.openculture.com/2017/05/the-story-of-habitat.html>
- Martoncik, M., & Loksa, J. (2015). Do World of Warcraft (MMORPG) players experience less loneliness and social anxiety in the online world (virtual environment) than in real world (offline)? *Computers in Human Behavior*, 56, 127-134. Retrieved from [www.elsevier.com/locate/comphumbeh](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/comphumbeh).
- MMORPG.com. (n.d.). What Ultima Online Gave us 21 Years Ago. Retrieved from <https://www.mmorpg.com/ultima-online/columns/what-ultima-online-gave-us-21-years-ago-1000013056>
- MMORPG timeline. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://worldhistoryproject.org/topics/mmorpg>
- Sergeyeva, O., Tsareva, A., Zinoveva, N., & Kononova, O. (2018). Social Skills Amongst MMORPG-Gamers: Empirical Study. *SHS Web of Conferences*, 50, 01008. doi:10.1051/shsconf/20185001008