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Massively Popular Online Role-Playing Games

In the late 1990s a new kind of computer game hit the shelves. It offered consumers a chance to play in a vast and visually-appealing world that changed with every passing moment whether you were playing in it or not. In addition, it also allowed direct interaction between players within the context of the game whose numbers could—and often did—number in the hundreds of thousands. This game was called Ultima Online and was the online game of choice for many people. It is known as a massively multiplayer online role-playing game, which is more commonly called a "MMORPG" or simply "MMO." Another early MMORPG was EverQuest, which is the one I chose to play four years after its initial debut. Every day countless people log onto its twenty-five servers to adventure in the medieval world of Norrath.

There are dozens of other MMORPGs in existence from the traditional sword-and-sorcery fare to ones set in the distant future. And though majority of the popular ones require a subscription fee there are many more that do not. There is one thing that transcends genre and cost, however, and that is the fact that once you step into these worlds you rarely want to leave. What reels players in? And what keeps them playing long after the novelty has worn off, sometimes to the point of forgetting about the world outside the game?

There have been many debates over the years about the effects of video games on those who play them avidly. The most popular argument that opponents of

MMORPGs use is that it causes players to lose touch with reality. The proof could easily be found in the number of hours spend playing these games, which can average around 20 hours per week according to *Fortune* senior editor David Kirkpatrick (Kirkpatrick, par. 6), which is roughly two-and-a-half hours per day. Marathon gaming sessions (especially on the weekends) leave little time beyond other commitments such as school or work to *sleep* let alone spend any time with friends and family. However, a person could also become just as absorbed in a novel or in a handicraft. The argument that these "lost souls" become trapped in a land of fantasy where the rules of "what is right" and "what is wrong" do not apply requires evidence that has not yet been presented.

Another argument is that excessive MMORPG usage isolates you from the world when it is, in fact, nearly impossible to enjoy playing an MMORPG *without* interacting with the other players. In order to reach higher levels of play you must group with others because your character gains more experience points this way. To the thousands of people playing these games, this is a far better form of entertainment than solo activities such as reading or watching television.

When trying to pinpoint a single reason why MMORPGs are so popular you soon discover that there are many. However, Tom Vanderbilt, contributing editor of the New York-based graphic design magazine *Print*, writes that MMORPG designers have observed that there are several predictable behavioral patterns (par. 7). Traditionally, people play role-playing games because they want to temporarily forget their everyday life by immersing themselves in a different world and taking on the role of someone else. This doesn't typically seem to be the case with an MMORPG. "[V]ery little actual role-play is on the agenda of these gamers [treasure hunters], making the RPG portion

of the MMORPG tag-line somewhat misleading" (Lynn 1, par. 12). I've personally observed this behavior while playing EverQuest, but when you see players with names like "BradsLvrGrl" running around, it's fairly difficult to get into character. Of the twenty-five live EverQuest servers there is only one dedicated solely to role-playing.

However, in non-traditional MMORPGs such as Linden Lab's Second Life (whose slogan is "Your world. Your imagination."), role-playing is almost the law. There you have the opportunity to be whomever you want and most take advantage of this to the fullest. Karen Moltenbrey, the senior technical editor of *Computer Graphics World*, says in her article on the game that "[Second Life] is shaped entirely by its users—from the avatars and environments to the 'events' hosted by the users." It's so unique from the usual brand of MMORPGs that Robin Harper, senior vice-president of marketing and community development at Linden Lab, has said that "some of our players won't even call it a game" (qtd. in Moltenbrey, "Building Fee" par. 7).

The world of an MMORPG can usually draw you in so fully that you are reluctant to leave. It is often so large that you are unable to traverse it in a single day, richly detailed, and populated by intelligent NPCs (nonplayable characters) with whom you can interact with. There are all sorts of enemies to fight as well, from hostile NPCs to dangerous monsters such as orcs and dragons. Economist Edward Castronova at California State University at Fullerton discovered from a survey that 20 percent of EverQuest players would live full-time in Norrath if they could (Kirkpatrick, par. 6).

Many people claim to enjoy the social opportunities that MMORPGs provide. In World of Warcraft, for example, there are quests that you can't complete solo so you have to gather together a group of other players to adventure with you. NPR technical lead and game reviewer Robert Holt avows that "These are the shining moments of the

game, when you're deep inside a dungeon with four other real people, and the unexpected or the heroic occurs." Jeremy Young, an Ultima Online player, was quoted in senior *Fortune* writer Marc Gunther's article on MMORPGs. He believes that "solving shared challenges brings total strangers together like nothing else on earth" (par. 8). Females especially praise the social aspect of the games and they participate in many different activities from volunteering to be guides for newbies to selling goods and services. According to Douglas Rushkoff, an author who often writes about Internet culture, women are drawn to these games because they have the opportunity to make a difference, something they may not have in real life (Laber, par. 17). The confident behavior they feel more free to exhibit in the virtual world sometimes carries over into the real world, thereby helping some women to become more outgoing and assertive. Mark Pesce, author of *The Playful World* and creator of the Virtual Reality Modeling Language (VRML), claims that MMORPGs are "a rehearsal for reality" (qtd. in Laber, par. 20).

In many MMORPGs new players can't do much. You spend most of your time killing monsters to gain the experience points needed to obtain access to the truly interesting areas or quests. Unfortunately, leveling up can take a significant amount of time. This discourages casual players as it can take months to progress to the intermediate levels in some games even if you play at least two hours per day. Because of this, some players spend many hours per week playing an MMORPG just so that they won't be left behind.

A more subtle contributor to avid gameplay could simply be the subscription fee required for many games. By having to pay per month, you feel as if you need to play as often as possible to get your money's worth. There are often other subscription

options available that allow you to "purchase" more than one month at a time, but these pose the risk of being a waste if you later want to move on to another game or if you find yourself unable to devote time to it any longer.

It's difficult to name a single reason why so many people play an MMORPG to the point of being called obsessed by those who have never played one, though for many it seems that the social side of the games keeps them playing longer. Amy Jo Kim, who has studied Ultima Online for her book *Community Building on the Web*, claims that "the essence of the appeal is to live out a fantasy" (qtd. in Gunther, par. 8). You can take on a new identity, explore fascinating worlds, complete quests, interact with other players, or level up your character to the point that he or she becomes like a god. In fact, you could do *all* of these things if you wanted to. My own reason for playing EverQuest as much as I did was a combination of wanting to explore, wanting to complete quests, and the fact that you have to invest so much time in building up your character. When it became apparent that I would never get beyond level eleven without regularly grouping with others, I quit. That was four years ago. Since then it seems that not much has changed. Soloists are still unable to advance beyond a low level and actually role-playing still isn't high on most people's list. Would I ever play an MMORPG again and as often as I have in the past? I admit that I've thought about it. But games that require you to play a certain way to truly enjoy them interest me very little. MMORPGs like Second Life offer a unique alternative to the usual and it's completely free to the casual user. I can see it potentially gaining more loyal players than even World of Warcraft, especially those who aren't interested in medieval-themed games that you have to invest countless hours in. With so many options available there is certainly something for everyone, even someone who has never played a video game in

their life and wants to find out what the big deal is. The popularity of massively multiplayer online role-playing games definitely doesn't show signs of waning anytime soon.

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