

Ever On EverQuest:

How the features of EverQuest, a massively multi-player role-playing game, serve to fulfill the emotional needs of its users, resulting in addictive play behavior.

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An Introduction: Vignette, The MMORPG, and Thesis

Tracy Montague is not willing to sell her character, her creation, even when offered \$2500.¹ They wanted to buy “Chanteez”, soul-charmer of Valourguard and dragon-slaying enchantress, a character Tracy has been working on for an average of 30 hours a week for a “very long time”. Yet, Tracy is not a writer, a comic book artist, nor a film production assistant. She is a player of EverQuest, a *massively multi-player online role-playing game*, or MMORPG. Chanteez is Tracy’s *avatar*, or self-created visual representation in the game. For about 30 hours a week, Tracy plays as the character Chanteez on her Internet equipped personal computer. The monetary offers come from other EverQuest players who seek an avatar like Chanteez, with vast power and a high level within EverQuest’s virtual fantasy world. Why has Tracy, a single mom from Abbotsfort, British Columbia, invested so much time living online through Chanteez? Why are other players offering her twenty-five hundred dollars to become Chanteez? To answer such questions, we must jump into Tracy’s – and Chanteez’s – world, EverQuest, and witness the phenomenon that is soaking up free time – and eating, sleeping, or work time – across the globe.

In July of 2002, my employer, Inferential Focus, a news-analysis consultancy, noted that news stories about EverQuest and its players were multiplying. Reports explained that EverQuest is a graphic-rich fantasy world, a virtual-reality, experienced, or “played” *online* in cyberspace. The game world, a land called Norrath, exists on large servers owned by Sony; players connect via Internet equipped PCs in their own homes. Norrath provides a landscape for *role-playing*, that is, all players create a computer character, or avatar, through which they “live” and navigate the fantasy world. The game is *massively multi-player*, in that at any one time, upwards of 100,000 users are playing together in Norrath. Though it was invented as recently as 1999, by July 2002, nearly a half million users subscribed paying \$30 to purchase the necessary

¹ Tracy’s story was reported on CBC’s *Market Place*: October 15, 2002, 8:30pm EST

software, and then \$14 per month to connect to the game servers.² While the *average* playtime is slightly about 20 hours per week, over forty percent of users play 20 to 40 hours weekly,³ and another 20 percent play an extreme 60 to 80 hours weekly.⁴ Here we will focus on this majority of players who use the game 20 hours a week or more. In assessing this phenomenon, passing reference was made by Inferential Focus partners to “marginalized social groups,” “workers discontent with the pressures in their corporate culture,” “desires to escape from reality in the current socio-political climate,” and also a connection to the massive success of three recent films, all in the fantasy genre, Star Wars, Harry Potter, and Lord of the Rings.

While Inferential Focus moved on, my interest lingered with EverQuest because it sounded like the kind of game I might lose myself in.⁵ EverQuest players’ stories of sitting at their screen for hours to complete a quest reminded me of my own childhood sessions playing Nintendo’s *Legend of Zelda*, non-stop, until completing the “first quest”. Later, I became lost in a newer genre of graphically rich – read: almost looks like reality– fantasy/adventure style games (Myst (very famous), Zork Nemesis, and Riven). Although I would not describe myself as a computer game addict, I became lost in each of these worlds when I played, letting sessions often run late into the night. It is important to note however that I quickly bored of each game after successfully “winning” for the first time. Simply, once a game was finished, there was nothing more to do but await a new game. EverQuest provides a way to eliminate the problem of video games’ finite duration. A staff of programmers at Sony assures that no matter how long you have played or advanced, there is always a new mission to complete, a new area to conquer, a higher level to reach, or an “expansion-pack” to purchase. There is no way to win the game.

² In order to prevent overcrowding, Sony actually divides players among 45 identical “Norraths” on one of its 45 California based servers. At most, about 2,500 players interact on the same server at once. –Source: Modesto Bee

³ Denison, D.C. for *The Boston Globe*

⁴ Sbranti, J. N. for *The Modesto Bee*

⁵ Although I have not played EverQuest (pricey, not available on Macs), I joined a similarly themed MUD.

During this same period, I also became an avid user of text-based chat on forums such as AOL Instant Messenger. I found myself not only chatting for hours with people from my middle or high school, but also entering large public chats and meeting people I did not know in any “Offline” way. EverQuest also capitalizes on interest in creating the sort of Online social world that has been popular for years in chat rooms and in a text-based virtual reality known as a Multi-User Dimension, or MUD. Players of EverQuest know that the other characters (avatars) they meet in the game are controlled by real people sitting at computers worldwide. In fact, all players in the game are able to “talk” to one another via text messaging. EverQuest effectively combines two worlds I had found myself lost in, the fantasy world of a graphically rich electronic role-playing game, and the social world of an online community.

It is important to mention (as it will provide a foundation for analyzing EverQuest) that the online social community and the role-playing fantasy game had already been combined in the aforementioned MUDs. Traditionally, MUDs are not video games; they are text-based worlds. Players in a MUD explore and “move” their character by typing directions such as North, South, East, West, Up, or Down, which leads them into “rooms” depicted by text descriptions. Players communicate with other players in MUDs by entering commands such as “say Hello.” Arguably, games like EverQuest, the *graphically rich* MMORPG are really a new subset of video game-MUDs and widely more popular as the graphically rich landscape makes the virtual world seem more like reality. Because communication between players in EverQuest is text-based, research on MUDs strongly applies to EverQuest, for which the body of research is slim.

In the following exploration, consider EverQuest to be at the convergence of three lines of development (video games, role-playing fantasy, and online community, or computer mediated communication [CMC]) and consider EverQuest to be at the technologically advanced

end of all three lines. Why are the majority of players so hooked? We shall see that EverQuest functions in the same manner as the three forms that comprise it. In the cases of video games, role-playing fantasy, and online communities, each venue provides users with a way to satisfy various needs that are not being met outside these venues. Such needs include desires for a feeling of community, gaining control of self and society, accomplishing mastery, and finding an escape from “Offline” problems. As the technologically advanced convergence of these venues, EverQuest is in so strong a position to satisfy these varying needs, that EverQuest players exhibit classical signs of addiction, some seeing their EverQuest life as better or more valuable than their life outside the game. We will explore some schools of social theory, the Social Capitalists and Frankfurt School Marxists, that would be critical of this emerging MMORPG dynamic and its potential sociological effects.

A Close Look at EverQuest: The Virtual Becomes Real

As the game never ends and there is no “winning” point, it is imperative to look at how a game begins, progresses indefinitely, and how players become lost in this new world. When Joe Citizen⁶ buys EverQuest, installs it on his PC, and connects to the online server, the first thing he will be asked to do is to create his avatar, what will be his physical representation within the game. Players give their avatars a race and occupation (or class), but the options provided have little connection to our Offline understanding of these terms. Choices are based on a Nordic and Anglo-Saxon tradition of mythology and legend, with such race options as elf, paladin, dwarf, troll and ogre, and occupation choices such as druid, wizard, enchanter, necromancer, or warrior. Sony has scripted a back-story to describe the history and personality of the different races and

⁶ In this paper, the impersonal third-person pronoun is male. Consider this pronoun as hypothetically referring to the male author, or to the average EverQuest player, the vast majority of whom are male.

occupations, so players can identify with the options.⁷ Players customize the facial features of their character. Characters have unique traits such as levels of intelligence, strength, skills, and religion. EverQuest puts subscribers in control of their virtual identity, a concept with important implications. Players are also made to place their avatar on one of 45 servers, each with an “Norrath” but with different reputations for the community of players; some servers have a community of players who enjoy violence, others feature strong social networks, and some feature in-depth role-playing⁸. Players surround themselves with others who share their style.

Once an avatar is created and placed on a server, players start off with little knowledge or platinum, the currency in Norrath. In a sense, there is total equality of opportunity in Norrath. As one heavy user “Jay” told me, “there is a very sharp learning curve.” Essentially, when one begins the game, he does not know what to do, and has little power, skills or weaponry. Players must first learn the complex text commands required to navigate their avatar, and must then learn how to kill the low level monsters necessary to gain “experience points”. Jay insists that getting past the initial stages of the game requires assistance from acquaintances met within the game. Socialization is key. Once beyond these initial stages, understanding accelerates, letting users dive into the EverQuest world more thoroughly. Instructed in part by computer programmed nonplaying characters, or NPC’s, players embark on quests of increasing difficulty, involving finding hidden items or killing monsters, and many tasks are only possible if attempted with a group. With accumulation of experience points, players advance on a range of levels from 0 to 60, with higher-level characters having more abilities within the game.⁹

⁷ It will be interesting to see how EverQuest’s popularity compares with Sims Online, a newly released MMORPG in where avatars are based on “real world” races and occupations in a VR meant to mimic the Offline world.

⁸ Kushner, David for *The New York Times*. Also, Interview with “Jay”, an anonymous personal associate, who logged 6 months of playtime in a 3-year period. All future mentions of Jay refer to this interview.

⁹ Consider that originally the game offered only 50 levels. Sony added more as players approached the top.

By design, EverQuest mimics real life. EverQuest developer and psychologist Geoffrey Zatkin revealed, “EverQuest is really a game about bringing people into contact with one another and everything else is secondary. We built a world in which you can’t win and it doesn’t end. We were trying to mimic real life.”¹⁰ In keeping with this strategy, Sony has now released four expansion packs that keep players interested (read: subscribed) as they give even the most expert players who have seen all there is to see new worlds to explore.¹¹ From the ’80s to the ’00s MIT Professor Sherry Turkle has studied the relationship between people and technology. As early as 1984, Turkle noted that a key promise of some video games was that the game never stops. She clarified, “Mastery of one level of the game, or “screen”, presents another screen, more difficult in its patterns or with the same task to do but at a faster rate.” Turkle argues that people emotionally charge anything that never ends.¹² This sort of leveling up is exactly how EverQuest works. As Jay explained, each higher level comes with more skills and power, but “advancing becomes exponentially more difficult,” in other words, the time it takes to climb one level *increases* with each higher level, at an *increasing rate*. Although all players have an opportunity to move up and become “powerful” only those who invest the most time can do so.

To mimic reality, EverQuest creates sensations of real time and space. The game features what video game researcher Mark Wolf describes as an “interactive three-dimensional environment.” In this group of games, players are provided “an unbroken exploration of space, allowing them to pan, tilt, track and dolly through the space, which is usually presented in a first-person perspective view and is navigable in real time.”¹³ Designed in this style, EverQuest maximizes a player’s ability to “look around” and feel like he is partaking in movement in an

¹⁰ Balint, Kathryn for *The Copley News Service*

¹¹ PR Newswire Association

¹² Turkle, 1984, p. 87, 88.

¹³ Wolf, p. 66.

Offline world. While games before EverQuest used a dynamic 3-D graphic landscape, few of these games, if any, go as far as EverQuest to mimic real time. In most advanced graphic adventure/fantasy video games, players can press a button to “pause” the game, freezing all activity on screen until the game is “unpaused”. Similarly, a player can “quit and save” when he wants to shut off the game, freezing all the attributes of the characters, places and events in the game (such as passage from “day” to “night”) until the next use. As Wolf points out, a player can “save” just before an important decision in a game, and then play the game out in multiple ways from the “save point”, trying different approaches and techniques, and only saving again when the best method is discovered¹⁴. With users continuously logging on worldwide, EverQuest is MUCH more like reality in that the game cannot be “paused” or “saved and quit.” In EverQuest, time is non-stop, (a day/night cycle occurs every 2 hours). If a player wishes to stop playing for any period, the player has to “camp” his avatar in a “safe place,” while life goes on in the EverQuest world. To log off, a player may need hours of preparation to find safety. Without a save feature, an avatar is unlike other game characters. A player of EverQuest would not charge his avatar into battle with an unknown monster, because the player cannot “save” moments before the battle and make repeated trials until the monster is actually defeated. A player must invest time, assessing the monster’s difficulty, perhaps honing skills that will make it possible for him to conquer it successfully, or perhaps the player will join with others to conquer the monster as a group, dividing the its “wrath” among many. These traits of the game mean that true players must become heavily invested in their avatar, or they may be easily killed off.

Even users of text based MUDs, far simpler than EverQuest, think of the MUDs as “real”. In her 1998 study *Life Online*, Annette Markham noticed that the Internet and MUD users she interviewed experienced cyberspace on a gradient from “tool” to “place” to “way of

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 87.

being.” Those who saw cyberspace as a tool tended to see it only as a means for improved communication or research. The heavy users of EverQuest we are examining are those who could be put in the “place” and “way of being” categories. Of some users, Markham describes, “users talk about cyberspace as a place they can go to meet and talk with others. Although such online worlds may not have physical substance, they are thought of as meaningful places where things happen that have genuine consequences.” We will see that many users of EverQuest see Norrath as a social community that one can “go to” – a place. Markham continues, “Some users do not focus on the technology they use or occupy; rather they focus on the expression of self and other through text...For these users, online technology is a way of being¹⁵.” We shall also see how players come to express themselves through the identity and actions of their avatar, whose Online life in some cases becomes primary to the player – a way of being.

Because notions of reality become blurred with a game like EverQuest, the obvious meaning of terms like real, reality, and virtual reality are also blurred, and are less able to serve as signifiers of any clear meaning. In her interviews with participants in online communities, Markham observed, “The users I talked with indicate that the term ‘real’, as traditionally defined, is not very useful to them at all. Whether online or offline, everything that is experienced is real, and everything that is not experienced is not experienced.”¹⁶ In order to distinguish between any sort of reality experienced within EverQuest (or a like setting) and what before we may have called “the real world,” I have and will continue to use the terms Online and Offline. Nothing that appears to happen on the screen Online in EverQuest occurs in a physical sense, but the images and the imagination of the player create a reality (however virtual). For instance, Dr. Alain Dagher of the Montreal Neurological Institute found that dopamine is released in the brain

¹⁵ Markham, p. 86.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 120.

when video game players succeed at performing a goal-oriented task.¹⁷ The brain feels progression through the game as real. Feelings of achievement are induced by the game, though it is arguably an artificially induced feeling. Lisa Perez, 37 of Riverbank, California comments, “I get such a thrill out of completing a quest or helping someone complete one of their quests. Some of the quest will require pulling together 36 people to kill one mob. Events or raids like these require tons of planning, organizing, and patience.”¹⁸ Mike Cherry, who once spent 27 hours on EverQuest defeating one enemy, says “every day, you can get online and accomplish something and you get that little bit of adrenaline every time you do¹⁹.” These experiences are indicative of the ways in which EverQuest, though not real in the physical Offline sense, feels quite real Online. Keep what these players have said in mind as we continue.

The dichotomy of “real” provides a key to the mystery of EverQuest’s popularity. Although they know nothing is physically occurring, the experiences on EverQuest feel like real, resulting in the same sensations, emotions, and feelings of an Offline experience. At the same time, EverQuest, and Online worlds like it, are in an important sense, *not real*. That is, in these settings, players are free from real Offline constraints such as physical limitations of the universe, social mores, norms, and constructs, monetary considerations, social inequalities, personal anxieties of face-to-face interaction, etc. etc. etc. Thus EverQuest players are able to experience life-like sensations of events that are either unlikely or impossible in the Offline world. In the virtual landscape of EverQuest, players typically have vastly greater amounts of control over their Online life than they do in their Offline life. EverQuest can provide a realistic yet impossible (Offline) escape from many problems in Offline life.

¹⁷ CBC TV *Market Place*

¹⁸ Sbranti, J. N.

¹⁹ Fisher, Michael for *The Press Enterprise*.

EverQuest As An Ideal Community

As I mentioned when looking at my own interest in this topic, there are two principle elements that we need to look at when analyzing EverQuest: its role as an advanced graphics role-playing video game and its role as a massively multi-player Online community. First, we will look at EverQuest as an online community or form of computer-mediated communication (CMC) using text-based messaging to see why users are attracted to communities in which interpersonal interaction is not face-to-face. Understanding this social aspect is essential to understanding such heavy use of EverQuest. As Joseph Ceirante, 16, of Dehli, California, a two-year player offers, “I can guarantee you that everyone who has played as long as me will say that they came for the game and stayed for the people.”²⁰

Video Games of a fantasy/virtual-reality nature (Myst, Zelda, Zork) have all been seen as minor “cultural phenomena” before, often with youth markets. These games, all single user, allowed players to exist in a virtual world in which normal social and physical rules do not always apply. These games were not substitutes, but rather replacements for social interaction. As a new social venue in the tradition of MUDs, EverQuest offers more than its video game predecessors, explaining in part why 60 percent of players are 20-35 year olds.²¹ Research such as Markham’s reveals users in MUDs experience their communication as real. EverQuest player J.R. Reihl claims that players understand they are communicating with other real people: “‘players often help each other, especially rookies . . . I don’t have friends where we all go to the bar or the pool hall. Our poker night is ‘Let’s hop online and play for a couple hours.’ ”²² Reihl’s poker night metaphor opens our window into the social world of EverQuest. The game acts as a substitute form of social interaction. Heavy EverQuest user “Jay” explained that, like

²⁰ Sbranti, J.N.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Fisher, Michael.

an Offline poker group, bowling league, or other unofficial social group, players of EverQuest unite to form “guilds.” Players in guilds assist one another in completing complex quests and killing challenging monsters. All guild members are able to send text messages that can be read instantly by all other logged on guild members. Jay admitted that a primary reason he logged on for *six months during his 3 years subscribed* was for the social interaction with his guild.

Part of the enticement to join an EverQuest guild over, say, an Offline poker group, is that social connections Online are very easily created and severed. Dr. Mark Wiederhold at the California School of Professional Psychology told Copley News Service that “the anonymous nature of the Internet lets people get emotionally close quickly. People tend to feel more comfortable in revealing more personal information about themselves online because they’re anonymous.’ ”²³ If you or I were to join an internet chat room, MUD, or EverQuest, the other people we communicate with cannot know anything about us but how we choose to represent ourselves, and as we shall see, even these representations can be false. Thus, those communicating via computer do not need to worry about being judged by appearances, or recognized later in an Offline situation at work or a neighborhood community. There is an inherent ease to having one’s Offline self anonymous to the other Online users.

Along with this anonymity, Offline and Online socialization utilizes different norms, customs and mores that can make meeting and greeting ideal. Classically, to walk into a social setting and begin talking to a total stranger is sometimes seen as awkward, or a “pickup” without some sort of third party introduction. It is also rude to simply ignore someone once conversation has begun because of disinterest. These rules do not apply in CMC. In a chat or MUD, it is common to simply begin sending messages to a total stranger, especially if seeking orientation.²⁴

²³ Balint, Kathryn

²⁴ Markham establishes this in Ch. 1 “Going Online” of *Life Online*.

Moreover, in my experience, if one tires of conversation, it is common to ignore someone's message, or where available, "block" messages from a certain user. With these different standards, it is possible to "meet" people at a very rapid pace. People can simply drop conversations (by closing an on screen window, for instance) and start anew until they meet the "right" group. Moreover, many forms of CMC allow for multiple simultaneous conversations (typing in multiple windows at once). Meeting others in an Online setting is physically an easier affair. Finally, for some people, there is a certain level of anxiety in face-to-face interaction. CMC masks facial expression, relieving much of this communicative anxiety. EverQuest is perhaps ideal for anyone suffering from social anxiety, awkwardness, or inexperience with face-to-face interaction, but who still desires to make interpersonal connections with other "real" people. We shall see however that the appeal is certainly not limited to these types.

Because of the control over one's representation, the different norms of socialization Online, the technical abilities of rapid and multiple conversing, and the absence of face-to-face awkwardness or anxiety, it is simply easier to rapidly encounter people in an Online setting, and find a group of people who share common interests. Part of the appeal of EverQuest is that it is an Online community of people who share an interest in fantasy/adventure role-playing gaming, and video gaming technology (and perhaps numerous linked traits). Moreover, the aforementioned characteristics of CMC mean that EverQuest players can get very specific in determining the qualities of people they befriend in the game, especially in which guild they join.

Community interaction and socialization contribute to the game's addictive nature. The Calgary Herald offers an enticing hypothesis; "peer pressure also seems to be a factor in EverQuest, since logging off may hurt a guild's chances of advancing."²⁵ EverQuest offers users

²⁵ Irvine, Martha for the *Calgary Herald*

a way to connect to a “team” mentality, while online. This pressure is akin to what someone in a bowling league might feel; if a participant does not show up, it could hurt the team. EverQuest players end up not only playing for themselves, but for the team spirit it offers.

Another part of the enticement toward EverQuest over Offline communities involves issues of control. We shall explore two types of control that EverQuest gives users. Later, we shall explore how as a role-playing video game, EverQuest allows control over a person’s life narrative. As a form of computer mediated communication, or online community, EverQuest also allows its users incredible control of identity. In EverQuest, players have the ability to play with their identity in ways no person could ever attempt Offline. The Modesto Bee interviewed Samantha Bush, 30, of Grayson, California: “ ‘I play a bard,’ . . . But before finding her ideal character, Bush spent time as a monk, wizard, and a paladin.’ ”²⁶ Samantha’s shift from avatar to avatar, until finding her ideal, demonstrates the creative license EverQuest provides players. Players who begin as a monk who learn this occupation does not “fit” them are free to delete this character at any time and start out on a new one. In fact, Players can wield multiple avatars at no extra charge, exploring many different ways of presenting the self to the community. A player is free to reinvent himself indefinitely until he finds his ideal combination of characteristics; this type of reinvention is not possible for the average person (Madonna reinvents herself, but is rich, powerful, and famous). One cannot reinvent his Offline age, race, socio-economic position, family history, friends, etc with a few hours of trial and error at a keyboard. As such forms of Offline identity are not present Online at all, players cannot be judged by them. Even if conversation in EverQuest leaves the game subject matter, moving to Offline life, players can represent these characteristics of themselves however they choose.

²⁶ Sbranti, J. N.

As we begin to explore how EverQuest provides sensations of control, there is an important distinction to expound between games like EverQuest, and the bulk of popular culture in general; video gamers of all varieties (and MUDers) are participants, not viewers. For instance, Valerie Walkerdine looks at how people behave as *viewers* of television and film, identifying with onscreen film characters that share their traits. But players of EverQuest are more than viewers; they are active participants. Anyone with experience playing any sort of video game knows the type of discourse that surrounds the experience. A person playing video games says things like “I’m walking over the hills” or “I’m using my sword to kill this bad guy”. You rarely hear “I’m moving my character over the hills” and you never hear “I’m pressing this button which is telling this computer to move a visual representation of a character over the image of hills.”²⁷ These distinctions in discourse reveal the way players see the division between real and unreal during the duration of play. In general discourse, players and their representations *on screen* are one and the same. Such feelings must be even more marked when the player’s visual representation is his own creation, and not for instance Nintendo’s in the case of Mario, of the *Mario Brothers* series.

Although this identity control feels real to the player, there is something “unnatural,” in terms of the Offline world about the freedom for creating the ideal self with such ease. For instance, as Turkle points out, it takes a good deal of effort (and is not without consequence) for a person to misrepresent his sex “on the streets of an American city.”²⁸ But “being” other than one’s own gender is easy on a MUD, including EverQuest. While 86 percent of EverQuest subscribers are male, only 60 percent of the game’s characters are male; clearly many men wield

²⁷ Michael Hines conducted “Research” on this assessment from 1987 to 2003 in interaction with numerous video game players. In an impromptu, unscientific survey sent to Harvard’s University’s Pforzheimer House e-mail list serve, 34 out of 34 or (100%) of voluntary respondents who had ever played video games said that they always used the first person form of discourse described above.

²⁸ Turkle, 1995, p. 212.

at least one female avatar.²⁹ Both Annette Markham and Sherry Turkle noted such gender bending/exploration was common in the MUDs they studied in the mid '90s.³⁰ Markham reached the conclusion, “When you are what you say, and you can say anything, the possibilities are as endless as your imagination. In an online context, if I control the text, I have control over the presentation of self, provided we have never had face-to-face contact. I have the capacity to control what you see and know of me.”³¹ Why do I use the label unnatural for this ability? Simply, EverQuest is providing communicative “easy-roads,” if you will, that let users avoid developing skills of interpersonal communication. It allows people to isolate themselves into homogenous groups (more on this later), and it has the potential to allow people never to learn how to interact Offline.

EverQuest as a Means of Psychological Pleasure Through Control, Mastery, and Escape

EverQuest offers far more than other online communities, which have existed for years in the form of online chats and text-based MUDs. EverQuest is also Norrath, the world in which users play through their avatars to succeed at many quests, gain experience points, and climb levels. British psychologist Mark Griffiths notes in a paper on addictive behaviors: “Videogames rely on multiple reinforcements . . . in that different features might reward different types of people.”³² Without doubt, EverQuest uses this approach to capture a wide audience. We have seen that EverQuest fulfills the need for a form of social communication, and that the game can make this fulfillment “unnaturally” easy. EverQuest as a role-playing game also allows somewhat artificial fulfillment of needs for control, mastery, and escape.

²⁹ Fisher, Michael. (It is also obvious that some women players would inhabit male avatars).

³⁰ Turkle, 1995, p. 212-226. And also: Markham, p. 159-160. Ibid below.

³¹ Ibid., p. 123

³² Griffiths, Mark. p. 28.

With both Offline and Online worlds that can feel “real,” players can easily favor life Online where they have more *control* than in their Offline life. Recall that at Inferential Focus, some partners suggested the game might appeal to marginalized groups, for instance, the young, low level workers, those without high levels of political, economic or social clout, and the like.³³ If one has little control over Offline society, perhaps EverQuest offers feelings of control in an Online society. Player Paul Lindler, 24 of Riverside, California notes, “the game has its own culture and we pretty much make our own society rules.”³⁴ Who can do that in the Offline “real world” except people in positions of social and political power? In unpublished work, I have theorized that young people stay up later than middle aged adults to give themselves a period of the day in which they are in the majority, seemingly in control, and able to live life by their own rules. This theory applies to EverQuest players. In living all of one’s life in EverQuest, a player isolates himself in a world in which he constantly has the type of control Lindler describes. Players are able to help shape the social norms of the EverQuest society. If such control is not easily obtainable Offline (and arguably, only a few people have even slight influence on culture and society) it can be found Online.

Control means more however than a community’s social and culture norms; it can also be control over one’s own life history. A person cannot “erase” his actions or the history of his life Offline, but as mentioned before, using multiple avatars, an EverQuest player can sample ways of living and in the end exist through only one ideal character. It is useful for us to follow the lead of Fantasy/Role-Playing Game scholar Daniel MacKay, and think of the progression of a character in a role-playing game as a *narrative*, like any story, perhaps most akin to the

³³ Turkle also expresses this view. 1995, p. 242.

³⁴ Press-Enterprise.

narratives of hero myth.³⁵ In the instances of role-playing games however, the participants are themselves the authors of the narrative, as the history of Norrath and the avatars in it are made up of the individual events and choices of the players on each server. If a player is unsatisfied with the narrative history of his avatar (perhaps because time was misspent joining the “wrong” guild, failing at a mission, or being robbed), he can delete the character and never play it again, moving on to another to relive from the start. Moreover, as each EverQuest server is occupied by typically no more than 2,500 players at once, each player is able to have a measurable influence on the narrative history of his server, especially if he invests time to become powerful or famous among players. As all new players start off in the same position, time is the only input necessary to become a master of the game. As an anonymous man described to *48 Hours*, “I’m nobody in real life, but I’m somebody in EverQuest, damn it.”³⁶ Turkle was somewhat ahead of her time when she noted in 1984: “Like Narcissus and his reflection, people who work with computers can easily fall in love with the worlds they have constructed or with their performances in the worlds created for them by others.”³⁷ She proffers, players can come to prefer Online life to the real. No doubt, players become obsessed with their idealized Online life. Economist Edward Castronova has closely studied economic implications of EverQuest. He ties together our two notions of control (over identity and narrative) when he argues, “ ‘Unlike earth, in virtual worlds there is real equality of opportunity, as everyone is born penniless . . . In a virtual world, people choose their own abilities, gender and skin tone. Those who cannot run on Earth can run in a virtual world.’ ”³⁸ Castronova’s assessment hits the mark. In a virtual world, people can be whomever they choose, and are more likely to have control over the narrative of that virtual

³⁵ MacKay pg. 5

³⁶ “Virtual Addiction,” CBS News, *48 Hours Investigates* with Susan Spencer.

³⁷ Turkle, 1984. Pg 82.

³⁸ Dodson, Sean for *The Boston Globe*

world. With time, a player of EverQuest can exercise this control to achieve a form of mastery in his Online life that is either unavailable, or difficult to achieve Offline.

Indeed, closely tied to players' seeking control, evidence shows that some see the Online world as a place to achieve *mastery* that is not easily attainable in the Offline world. In assessing why males make the bulk of all video game players, Griffiths offers, "males prefer games for competition and mastery, whereas females prefer more whimsical, less aggressive and less demanding games."³⁹ If this were true, it would be one explanation for why EverQuest is heavily male in its users. EverQuest is quite challenging, and "Jay" argues that over three-quarters of game play is involved in violent acts of killing. Arguably, many players are seeking mastery at this complex world of violence. Jay revealed to me a popular method of advancing levels in EverQuest. Many players become experts at killing one monster (once killed, a monster is "respawned" anew after a lapse of time). Players stake out the same monster, becoming experts at killing it, just for the purpose of earning the experience points that killing monsters gives a player. Jay noted that the only purpose to progressing through the game is to reach increasingly higher levels because "your abilities increase and you can do more stuff". In other words, by advancing, you can become a master of the EverQuest world. With an investment of time (and sometimes money we shall see) one can rise to a prominence rarely obtainable Offline.

For some, the offer of Online Mastery tempts because aspects of one's Offline life inhibit mastery in the Offline world. Turkle noted that early video games offered a promise of perfection, that is, with practice, a user can learn to master the game. Turkle introduced readers to fourteen year old Jimmy, born with several birth defects that make him behave awkwardly. Jimmy offers that playing video games provides him a "discipline" at which to obtain

³⁹ Griffiths, p. 29.

perfection.⁴⁰ This mastery provides rewarding feelings in itself. For someone else, mastery might be earning a million dollars, winning an election, getting into Harvard, earning first chair of a symphony orchestra, playing for a professional sports team, or acquiring some other form of hard to achieve status. But if one thinks of these Offline forms of mastery, they all seem to take a great investment in time over many years, and often involve “innate abilities” that someone like Jimmy might not have. Mastery at EverQuest is achievable on an equal opportunity basis.

EverQuest also offers mastery in skills that realistically cannot be utilized in modern society. Video Game analyst Rebecca Tews both hits and misses the mark when she comments, “Regardless of whether the game [video games in general] involves dueling adversaries, a quest for treasure, or simply perfection of a skill—the games themselves become symbolic of our own quest to become better than we currently are.”⁴¹ Tews recognizes the connection between the quest of video games and the quest to self-improve (or achieve mastery), but is perhaps unaware of games like EverQuest in which these two quests become one and the same. For some heavy users of EverQuest, the connection is more than symbolic – the game *is literally* what the player strives to be better at. It is important to consider however that the game offers mastery at things like “magic,” “swordsmanship,” “fighting monsters,” and “dragon-slaying” – concepts which either don’t exist or are obsolete today. Tews argues that like legends, myths, and fairy-tales, video games provide players with a link to the primitive archetypal self.⁴² Turkle also found several MUDers who lived online to have experiences that are impossible in the real world.⁴³ Unlike mastering golf, or even reading a Tolkein novel, EverQuest offers a chance to actually “master” “skills” that satisfy the urges of the so-called primitive archetypal self.

⁴⁰ Turkle, 1984, p. 88.

⁴¹ Tews, p. 176.

⁴² Tews, p. 175.

⁴³ Turkle, 1995, p. 192.

Some players seek mastery, not as an accomplishment itself, but as a way to help and guide others. Turkle found some MUD users who sought a niche in the community in recruiting members and serving as advisor and helper.⁴⁴ As Jay explained, such assistance is imperative for a newbie entering the EverQuest world. Jay added that assisting newbies was a key part of the guild dynamic in EverQuest. Guilds often include characters over a range of levels. In a process known as “twinking” high level characters often team up with low level characters to help these “newbies” find powerful armor and weapons. Sometimes these high level characters simply hand down equipment they no longer need in a process that without doubt offers these game masters feelings of superiority in the game world.

But notions of mastery in EverQuest can be quite artificial. Multiple sources report that players often resort to buying high-level armor or weapons, not with Norrath platinum, but with US dollars on sites like eBay. Some players even buy the platinum piece from other players with US dollars to make themselves “rich” in the game.⁴⁵ Players make a monetary exchange on eBay, and then an exchange of “goods” on EverQuest. Some players, who seek to jump immediately into the seat of a high level avatar, buy characters from expert players like Tracy Montague. The Industry Standard reported on one player’s perspective: “ ‘Likened it to buying godhood,’ says ‘Blazar,’ a 23-year-old **EverQuest** player from Galveston, Texas, who claims to hold the record for receiving the most money for a character account. In September [1999], Blazar sold his ultrapowerful character for \$4,850.”⁴⁶ This sort of mastery is available too easily, without effort. In reality, it offers only the illusion of achievement.

While some players seek control and mastery in the Online world, others see it as an *escape* from the Offline world. At the beginning of this exploration, I suggested that EverQuest

⁴⁴ Turkle, 1995, p. 191.

⁴⁵ Dodson, Sean.

⁴⁶ Nickell, Joe for *The Industry Standard*.

is popular and addictive because it satisfies the varying needs of its players. Even within just the category of “escape” EverQuest succeeds at providing different forms of escape for those who seek them. What you might not expect: Turkle introduces us to Marty, a 29 year old economist who is a self-described “Type-A” and “worrier”. Marty plays video games “ ‘to have something to do which is so hard that [he] can’t think of anything else.’”⁴⁷ We need to remember for a moment that this person is speaking in 1984, when computer games were remarkably simpler than today with very arcane two-dimensional graphics. Imagine now the vast difference between that and the very real appearing EverQuest. Of games in general, Turkle points out, “Executives, accountants, and surgeons stand behind the junior-high-schoolers in game arcades. For people under pressure, total concentration is a form of relaxation.”⁴⁸ Recall that 65 percent of EverQuest players are between ages 20 and 35, and many players who appear in the news about EverQuest hold professional occupations. Twenty-nine percent of all players are high tech workers.⁴⁹ For a person who for forty hours a week is engrossed in a form of thought-intensive labor, EverQuest, though thought intensive itself, could actually provide a diversionary escape.

News sources provide other examples of EverQuest players seeking escape within the game from other Offline problems. The Beauchamp couple of Perth, Australia told the Modesto Bee why they play 60 hours a week: “we have five children, and its actually an escape for us.”⁵⁰ An anonymous woman told CBS news, “its realistic enough to believe but it’s escapist enough to *just relax* and have a great time”⁵¹ [emphasis added]. Part of this escape can be through, as mentioned, identity control. Newsweek presents 40-year old mother Bridget Goldstein: Every night starting about 10, after she's put her two children to bed, she spends a couple of hours

⁴⁷ Turkle, 1984, p. 84.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Sbranti, J.N.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ “Virtual Addiction,” CBS News, *48 Hours Investigates* with Susan Spencer.

playing EverQuest as Nin Lyrael, a buxom, flirtatious bard who can fly and slay dragons with equal aplomb. ‘It’s no different from losing yourself in a good book, [but here] you’re the star, and you have slim hips and no stretch marks, says Goldstein.’ ” Goldstein is able to escape into her own fantasies through the game. It is interesting that Goldstein compares her experiences to losing oneself in a good book. EverQuest players are comparable to the avid readers of romance fiction studied by Janice Radway.⁵² Radway studied a group of romance readers that read an atypically high level of romance books, with forty percent of her study group reading 20 romance novels per month.⁵³ Similarly, our heavy users of EverQuest spend more time in the game than the typical video game player or participant in an online community. Many romance readers cited “escape from the drudgery of servicing their families” as a reason for reading⁵⁴. EverQuest users seek a similar escape from the unpleasantness of their Offline lives through the game. This escape into fantasy, as Goldstein describes is even more pronounced in an MMORPG than in reading because “you are the star,” the protagonist of your own narrative fantasy. Also, Radway explains that her readers “readily admit in fact that the characters and events discovered in the pages of the typical romance do not resemble the people and occurrences they must deal with in their daily lives.”⁵⁵ Consider how when we discussed *mastery* I offered that EverQuest players were able to “master” skills (swordsmanship etc.) not common in the Offline world. As with Radway’s readers, EverQuest offers an escape into a fantasy world that, regardless of one’s Offline position, cannot exist outside the game.

Being the star of one’s own escape allows EverQuest to be addictive enough that some users stay logged on for incredible stretches. Sherry Turkle argues that MUDs are more

⁵² Sherry Turkle makes a similar connection, but I was unaware of it before.

⁵³ Radway, p. 58.

⁵⁴ This Summary is Valerie Walkerdine’s in “Video Replay: Families, Films, and Fantasy” Formations of Fantasy, Victor Burgin et al, eds. London: Methuen, 1986.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 59

psychologically evocative than traditional role-playing games played face-to-face. She explains “In face-to-face role-playing games, one steps in and out of a character. MUDs, in contrast, offer a character or characters that may become parallel identities.”⁵⁶ Literally, as there is no limit to how long one can be signed on to the MUD, they can live a parallel life in it. A player can log off only to sleep, spending his waking hours on the game, communicating with others and participating in quests - essentially living his life through the character. Turkle refers to this as a “psychological adjunct to real life,” and we can view EverQuest as such an adjunct.⁵⁷

Whether for control, mastery, or escape, EverQuest allows its players to seek that which is not easily attainable in the Offline “real world.” What makes EverQuest so psychologically addictive is its ability to evoke very real emotional responses and feelings from players that are not being found Offline. At the same time, EverQuest provides users with a social community that feels real to players, though the social bonds forged here may not be strong. No matter how real these experiences are, it is tempting and perhaps imperative to comment that these realities are “artificial”. As drugs give their addicts an “artificially” induced sensation of being a high (a very real sensation), EverQuest (or EverCrack, as many call it) “artificially” induces all sorts of sensations and emotional responses from its heavy users. But what is meant by the apparently value judging label of “artificial” (of which I am self imposing) when applied to these contexts? When the term is used, it seems to imply that whatever word it modifies, however real seeming, should not be as valued as highly as something “not artificial”. While success in the Online world of EverQuest might feel good, I suggest that some might call this success “artificial”, as in, not as valuable as success in an Offline experience. CBS’s Susan Spencer summarizes, “here are chances for adventure and heroism and romance rarely found in real life. It’s all great fun,

⁵⁶ Turkle, 1995, p 186.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 188.

unless, of course, you start to think that it is real life, or at least a much more interesting place to be than the real world.”⁵⁸ Those who would make such a distinction are no doubt Social Capitalists and Frankfurt School cultural theorists.

Critical Theory Opposed to EverQuest

In my own critique of EverQuest, I must place myself with the Social Capitalists, as the dangers EverQuest or like games pose to civic engagement appear all too clear. In his 2000 treatise, *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam outlines the problem of diminishing “social capital” in modern America. In short, Putnam outlines how since the mid 1960s, on average, Americans are engaging in less social and civic activity, with real costs on our nation’s social fabric.⁵⁹

In one section of *Bowling Alone* Putnam explores, with no clear conclusion, whether online communities will be able to function as a new source of social capital. The shortcomings he finds are fully applicable to EverQuest. Putnam points out, “Real world interactions often force us to deal with diversity, whereas the virtual world may be more homogeneous, not in demographic terms, but in terms of interest and outlook.”⁶⁰ Putnam calls this *cyberbalkanization*. Putnam’s observation is important when looking at computer-mediated-communication in MUDs, including EverQuest. If a computer user does not want to communicate with another user, he can “block” them, sign off, ignore their text messages pretending he does not receive them, etc. It is much harder to ignore someone in a face-to-face situation. In essence, players of EverQuest are by choice living their Online lives surrounded by *only other players of EverQuest* who obviously share a narrow interest range. Recall that EverQuest players even isolate

⁵⁸ “Virtual Addiction,” CBS News, *48 Hours Investigates* with Susan Spencer.

⁵⁹ There is truly no time here to argue why social capital has value that merits our concern. For a convincing argument, see Robert Putnam, chapters 16-22 of *Bowling Alone* (pgs. 287-366).

⁶⁰ Putnam, p. 178.

themselves on one of 45 servers where others share their playing style. In fact, discussion of Offline events (family, politics, society) is *discouraged* on EverQuest, as players are supposed to be play-acting (role-playing) as if their life were the life of the avatar they control. Players are able to affectively block out everything that is not part of the EverQuest narrative. This hardly builds social capital – worse, it robs social capital as players pay more attention to their way of being Online, and less attention to Offline concerns such as current events, job life, family life, and community life. Putnam also points out that CMC “transmits much less nonverbal information than face-to-face communication,” inhibiting interpersonal collaboration and trust, keys to social capital.⁶¹ Despite these shortcomings, Putnam remains uncertain as to whether evidence will emerge that online communities can build social capital.

If any Online communities will be found to succeed at social capital building, EverQuest will not be one of them. Putnam demonstrates in his text that in America’s younger generation, television viewing replaced other activities that he sees as building social capital.⁶² Though there is some interpersonal communication evident in EverQuest, as this communication seems to have no application in the Offline “real world”, I have no choice but to view EverQuest like television as a time occupation (read: escape) that replaces other activities that build social capital.⁶³ If the Online community of EverQuest has any effect on the Offline world, it would seem to be a bad one. Tews notes of video games that, “What is most fascinating is that the gameplay may modify the player’s behavior in interpersonal relationships.”⁶⁴ Heavy players note that their Offline relationships sometimes suffer as a result of being lost Online. The Copley news service reports that some players who are married Offline will “marry” another

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 175, 176.

⁶² Ibid., p. 216-276

⁶³ Turkle shares this apprehension regarding the text based MUDs she studied. Turkle, 1995, 244.

⁶⁴ Tews, p. 176. Same idea is also in Turkle, 1984, p. 82.

player Online, sparking jealousy and threats among the three parties.⁶⁵ Mrs. Renee Griffin complains to CBS reporter Susan Spencer of her husbands heavy playing: “I want my girls to be able to have him as a father, not—not as a – as a fixture in our house in front of the computer.”⁶⁶ Liz Woolley laments how her son Shawn isolated himself from family to play EverQuest constantly, shortly before committing suicide.⁶⁷ EverQuest not only robs people from civic engagement, but it steals people away from their most intimate family relations. As trust and mutual understanding are keys to building social capital, and as EverQuest players spend less time in face-to-face interactions that build these qualities, EverQuest detracts from social capital. While it allows players to establish an Online community, it promotes isolationism in the Offline community, where civic engagement matters in dealing with “real world” problems.

Moreover, it is perhaps impossible to argue that the ties formed in an Online community are as strong as those formed in the Offline community, even in an age when social capital is already low. If a player is hiding an illness, eating or mental disorder, substance abuse problem, or financial trouble, because of the identity control Online, an Offline acquaintance is more likely to find out before any Online “friend,” and is in more of a position to offer physical support. I cannot deny that in some cases, friendships on EverQuest eventually led to Offline relationships, and in some guilds, members offer one another Offline support.⁶⁸ However, “Jay” notes that these relationships quickly disappeared for him when he gave up playing. In the message boards of Online-Gamers Anonymous, Paul Emrby laments, “Of all the people I knew and met through EQ I can honestly say that none, -none- of them have emailed me since I left.

⁶⁵ Balint, Kathryn

⁶⁶ “Virtual Addiction,” CBS News, *48 Hours Investigates* with Susan Spencer.

⁶⁷ “Are Online Video Games Addictive.” CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation) *Market Place*.

⁶⁸ A few publications could provide one example, with most by Kathryn Balint for the Copley News Service.

Not a single one.”⁶⁹ Generally, as Putnam notes, because of the lack of trust-building face-to-face interaction, the bonds of Online relationships are on average not as strong as Offline bonds.

That EverQuest robs people of their Offline interactions would bother many groups beyond Social Capitalists, including Marxists and their sub-branch of popular culture critics, the Frankfurt School. Earlier we noted that with the advent of programs like EverQuest, notions of what is “real” are blurred. As Terry Eagleton, a scholar in the Frankfurt School tradition explains, however, a program like EverQuest would be seen as “false” by a Marxist philosopher such as Georg Lukács’. Eagleton paraphrases Lukács’s view:

“A ‘false situation for him is one in which human ‘essence’ – the full potential of those powers which humanity has historically developed – is being unnecessarily blocked and estranged; and such judgements are thus always made from the standpoint of some possible and desirable future. A false situation can be identified only subjectively or retrospectively, from the vantage point of what *might* be possible were these thwarting, alienating forces to be abolished.”⁷⁰

Indeed, as we have seen, EverQuest serves to alienate its users from interpersonal face-to-face interaction in their Offline lives. As Social Capitalists would complain, for any desirable change to occur in the Offline world, participants in the Offline world must be engaged in it, not blocked and estranged from their “full potential” by submission and escape into an Online reality. When players take the so-called easy road to fulfilling their emotional needs through an arguably alienating force like EverQuest, they are not reaching their full potential. We can assume that Marxists’ as a whole would be grossly disturbed by the oft cited reason of “escape” as a reason for losing oneself in EverQuest, as such statements evidence that 1) society is not yet at an ideal state — which on a universal level indicates people are still unhappy with their lives, requiring some sort of change, and 2) rather than affecting change in their Offline lives (whether through revolution, or other means), individual desires are being “falsely” sated in an Online experience.

⁶⁹ Online Gamers Anonymous. Internet: <http://www.olganon.org>

⁷⁰ Eagleton, p. 191.

Frankfurt school Marxists in particular, with their connection to popular culture analysis, would be quite vocal about their perceived dangers of EverQuest. From our psychological standpoint, we have explored how EverQuest satisfies desires that are not being met in the Offline world. Eagleton worries, “to expel desire from the subject is to mute its potentially rebellious clamour, ignoring the ways in which it may attain its allotted place in the social order only ambiguously and precariously.”⁷¹ When EverQuest players sate their needs and desires through the game, they lose an interest or need to correct for the Offline imbalances that cause these needs, and may ignore the underlying social or political problems that cause these imbalances. Frankfurt School scholars Theodore Adorno and M. Horkheimer were both critical of pop culture media that seemingly provided a realistic escape from the real world, which in their era was primarily indicative of film. They warned that real life and the movies were becoming indistinguishable, with life seeming more and more a continuation of the life presented on the screen⁷². When this idea is transferred to our discussion, it reads: Offline and Online lives are becoming indistinguishable, with *Offline life seemingly a continuation of Online life*. Indeed some EverQuest users see their Offline lives as little more than a means to support their Online life. The single difference between this Frankfurt school critique of the film industry and the market for MMORPGs is that in films, users are totally passive, with no creative control over what they are viewing, whereas arguably, within EverQuest, though there are certain guidelines and restraints set out by the game’s developers, users are indeed writing their own narrative experience within the game (sort of).⁷³ Adorno and Horkheimer’s view of the mass

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 216.

⁷² Adorno and Horkheimer, p. 126.

⁷³ Despite the obvious level of control an EverQuest player has compared to a movie viewer, I believe members of the Frankfurt School would be highly critical, noting that this control is more appearance than reality. While players grasp a certain level of control, that they all pursue the same course of development, (climbing level to level) suggests that they are rigidly constrained by the designs of the cultural industry, i.e. Sony.

culture industry can be summarized in their view of the “escape from everyday drudgery” that the whole culture industry promises. They claim: “The paradise offered by the culture industry is [itself] the same old drudgery. Both escape and elopement are predesigned to lead back to the starting point. Pleasure promotes the resignation which it ought to help to forget.”⁷⁴ In other words, games like EverQuest perpetuate their need; by offering an escape, they prevent users from altering their life in ways that would make the need for escape defunct. They continue, “pleasure always means not to think about anything, to forget suffering even where it is shown. Basically it is helplessness. It is flight; not, as is asserted, flight from a wretched reality, but from the last remaining thought of resistance. The liberation which amusement promises is freedom from thought and from negation.”⁷⁵ In Frankfurt school theory we can see the important link between the “escape” and “mastery” reasons for playing EverQuest. Many players are clearly in the game because they want to achieve perfection or mastery over something – but in this way, the Frankfurt school would argue, they are escaping from the fact that they have no mastery over their Offline world; they are fleeing a necessary resistance against others, in the case of Frankfurt School Marxists “The Bourgeoisie” that have already achieved mastery.

Conclusion: What do we know, and why do we care?

During the last weekend in July, 2002, over 100,000 people logged at one time.⁷⁶ Yet when compared to the television audience for any prime time show that evening, we can assume this number is drastically low. Although there are nearly a half-million users, is EverQuest a phenomenon even worth mentioning? EverQuest is currently the most popular program in its genre, and is seeking to expand. NCsoft forged an alliance with Sony earlier this year to

⁷⁴ Ibid, p. 142.

⁷⁵ Ibid, p. 144.

⁷⁶ Denison, D.C.

introduce EverQuest to South Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong.⁷⁷ Concurrently, many new and highly anticipated titles (Sims Online, and a Star Wars based Universe) are to be released in 2003, offering the MMORPG form in two different narrative contexts (anytown USA, and a long time ago in a galaxy far far away). I want to dismiss those hypotheses made by members of Inferential Focus that the sudden surge of players into the EverQuest world was related to Offline events such as September 11, or the down-turning economy. First, the game was popular from its inception in 1999. Second, it would seem the reasons players site for losing themselves in the game are universal, regardless of epoch or current events. Most likely, growth in the use of the game is simply a factor of 1) the time necessary for world of mouth to carry the game to more users, and 2) increases in the percentages of homes with Internet equipped PCs powerful enough to handle EverQuest's graphics and data stream. Many people don't even know these games exist yet and the level of computer technology and bandwidth necessary to play them is still permeating into homes. EverQuest is only three years old in March 2003, and many new forms of pop culture (the television for instance) took decades to develop a mass audience.

Arguably, many of the heavy users of EverQuest who exhibit the sorts of behaviors we have discussed are addicted to the game. Griffiths lists a number of components to addiction.⁷⁸

- 1) Saliency for a person is when an activity becomes dominant. With the hours some people log, there is no debate that for some, EverQuest is their dominant activity.
- 2) Mood modification is when an activity functions as a coping strategy; "they may experience an arousing buzz or high or paradoxically tranquillizing feel of 'escape' or 'numbing'". We have discussed numerous ways that EverQuest offers its users feelings and emotions that they cannot find Offline.
- 3) Tolerance is the need to play more and more for the same response; unfortunately I have no evidence to

⁷⁷ Ward, Andrew for *The Financial Times*

⁷⁸ Griffiths, p. 3, 4.

offer here, though some players are clearly logged on all the hours they physically can. 4) Addicts suffer withdrawal symptoms and relapse. I can offer that on the online gamers anonymous website, many testimonials revealed players who had tried to quit, didn't know what to do with themselves, and returned to the game. Finally, 5) Addicts suffer external conflicts. We have seen complaints from players and relatives about losing touch with family life, and many players at online gamers anonymous claimed to have lost jobs for playing too much, whether at work, or simply not showing up to play from home.

It is still too early to tell if games like EverQuest will sweep America and other technologically advanced countries (one game in South Korea does boast over two million users), but there is no doubt that in the way these games are designed, the potential is there. Video games, role-playing games, and online communities are all in a sense tools that can allow people to meet psychological needs not being met elsewhere, or to fulfill needs in an easier manner than elsewhere. In a sense, all are tools, and in combination, they are more complex but more successful. The problem with any sort of technological advance is always dependence. What we have seen suggests that it is easy for some players to become dependent on EverQuest as the means to live their emotional life, seeing the Offline world as merely a means for physical sustenance, and connection to the Online world.

EverQuest is enticing, even for the uninitiated; and this is just one of many games like it to come. With the market just opening up, this is a form of Pop Culture that needs to be watched. There is more to be written about EverQuest and its kin. Like EverQuest, our exploration never ends.

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