

Character Identification and Withdrawal from the Virtual and Tangible Worlds

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Abstract

Participants were solicited within the World of Warcraft who fulfilled the criteria of having quit the game at some point in their gaming history. A previous study from Parker et al. yielded data that nearly half of participants had quit at least once, and other studies from Nick Yee suggest virtual character usage as a coping mechanism as well as a possible correlation between character identity and real-life identity. The chance that those players who quit also utilize a virtual character for escape produced somewhat of a paradox in that a person would “quit” their virtual self. So, through process of live interview, gamers were asked a series of questions regarding personal and physical likeness to the in-game character, which produced qualitative data towards social implications. Gamers in the study tended to rate slightly higher on identification to a character on a personal level, and to respond freely in terms of social bonds with others in the virtual realm. The statements did not seem to suggest any kind of extreme tie to the game in an escapist fashion or in a fashion of extreme dependency which would be compromised by quitting the game.

Introduction

The massive player base of the *World of Warcraft*, surpassing the 12 million mark of regular subscribers (“World of Warcraft Subscriber Base Reaches 12 Million Worldwide”), has in fact been plagued with an incredibly high number of gamers who have quit for extended periods of time or have cancelled gaming subscriptions. Parker et al.’s brief study, “*The World of Warcraft: I Need that \$#!% in My Veins!*” conducted at the University of Denver produced findings that nearly 50% of participants had in fact quit the game at least once throughout their gaming experiences. However, nearly all of those surveyed had begun to play again and had re-

immersed themselves in the virtual realm. Therefore, a reason must arise for the need and desire to play, the need to quit, and the motivation to begin again. Multiple studies and opinions have arisen regarding why players quit, ranging from add-on interface, expansion releases, changes to the virtual environment, high financial costs, detriments to personal and professional life, and lack of interest in game content. Thoughts have also abounded on causes for initially beginning the game and need for a virtual character, among which, Nick Yee suggests, are achievement goals, social capital, and immersion (Motivations of Play in Online Games). Furthermore, motivational draws for the game have been described in “Hearts, Clubs, Diamonds, Spades: Players Who Suit MUDs” as four main categories including achievement within the game, exploration of the game, socializing within the game, and imposition upon others through tools provided by the game or through greater experience (Bartle).

These potential causes for online gaming, though, express a more surface desire of certain player motivations, while further, more psychological studying on Yee’s behalf provide deeper possibilities for immersion into the virtual realm. His article “On Therapy and Dependency” provides examples of gamers who have created characters in order to relieve stress, relieve rumination, dull physical pain through distraction, feel a sense of control or purpose, find emotional support, find a relief for social anxiety, and overcome physical handicaps in a virtual realm. While this research provides for a sort of escapism, another project from Yee yields data that suggests that physical character types may actually be impacted by the player’s real-life persona and physique. Yee gathered data that hinted at a possible near accuracy for character physique in comparison to actual body type and size, suggesting an accurate representation of the self (Our Virtual Bodies, Ourselves?). It is also true, though, that certain traits were seen to be maximized beyond real-life standards (i.e., height and build) but were

somewhat accurate nonetheless. So, it becomes apparent that possibly a *WoW* character may be created as a virtual extension of the self.

This virtual extension even seems to make sense when considered in the light of Bartle's Player Types. It makes sense that a person would want to increase their reputation, socialization, and achievements through every medium possible, including those that are virtual. However, when a player utilizes game structure and virtual fantasy environments as a coping mechanism and escapes into a world unlike their own troubled one, we might expect the character to mimic attributes unlike the real player, unlike those things trying to be escaped from in the real world. Or perhaps the slight increases in certain characteristics can be attributed to the aspects a person enjoys about himself and subsequently wishes to exemplify through his character. Regardless of how a person is characterized virtually, though, the fact remains that many characters are created somewhat true to form, and some characters are created as mechanisms of escape. Yet, still, players opt to terminate these virtual selves and continue on in the real world.

Objective

Continuing from the University of Denver study which produced data that nearly half of all participants had quit at least once, this study will specifically target players who have quit the game. The previous study had contributed information as to why players quit and why they ultimately began to play again. Now, the "unofficial official" on *World of Warcraft*, Nick Yee, has produced experimental data and gathered player responses that suggest, broadly, two different things. Firstly, in his article "Our Virtual Bodies, Ourselves?" Yee has attempted to validate that gamers create characters that exhibit remarkable similarity to their actual, real-life, physical self-identity. Secondly, in his article "On Therapy and Dependency" Yee also states the

vast array of physical, emotional, and mental trauma and issues that players attempt to escape from through means of the MMORPG, *WoW*. However, from our previous study, as stated, nearly 50% of gamers have quit at some point in their gaming experience, thus creating a paradox in which a player who creates a character like themselves essentially, virtually quits themselves when choosing to quit the game. Furthermore, if a significant portion of gamers utilize *WoW* for some sort of relief, whether psychological, physical, social, and so on, and they eventually quit the game, they are in fact quitting their mechanism for escape and support. Therefore, I would like to engage players in the game to find any who have quit previously throughout their gaming period. Of those who have quit, I would like to inquire as to their personal views of their in-game character: the extent to which they believe their character mirrors themselves, whether physically, characteristically, mentally, or personally.

Methods

Participating and immersing into the game, research was composed through means of a *WoW* character soliciting responses to an interview. The entire interview process was somewhat random and dynamic, in that voluntary participants were allowed to change conversations and to choose to answer or not to answer certain questions. The only stipulation for those interviewed was that they had quit at least once before in their gaming experience, per the objective of the research. A pool of questions was kept ready and frequently used in order to generate responses regarding character sentiment. These questions were not necessarily limited to the list (see appendix), nor were they all utilized. Rather, the reserve was kept at hand in order to assure participant response and an interview of adequate length so as to attain useful data.

The two Likert-style questions regarding character identification were rather important, and responses to them were highly valued, as they provided the only quantifiable means of information from the available questions. Furthermore, the final three questions allowing free response to character identification and feelings towards the game and character were crucial, as they addressed the introductory statements surrounding use of virtual game characters being utilized as self-representations and vessels of escape. Over a period of about one week, participants were sought out in attempts to gather responses to these questions. As the study was only geared towards a smaller sub-interest of a larger study, a large number of participants were not necessarily hoped for. A population of ten or more was a sufficient target for the study, but undoubtedly a version with longer time parameters and a substantially higher population size would generate very interesting results.

Results

After a weeklong period, gathering interview responses on an infrequent basis, 10 participants were found to complete the voluntary questions stated in the methods section. Male and female gamers both volunteered for the study and provided useful information on the topics. Although not each question was posed to each participant, and although each question was not structured exactly the same, the 1 to 5 Likert-style questions were always asked. On the basis of physical identification to the character the 10 participants rated an average 2.5556 ($SD = 1.0442$, $Min = 1$, $Max = 4$), where 1 was rated the lowest and 5 the highest. The second scaled question regarding identification on a personality level to the virtual character resulted in an average score 2.8 ($SD = 1.2517$, $Min = 1$, $Max = 4.5$). When analyzing these scores, though, it was kept into close consideration that the population size definitely was not significantly large, that all the

participants had quit playing at some point, and that all participants also provided useful qualitative responses.

In order to determine some variation in responses to ratings of physical and personal likeness, each participant was also asked the race and class of their character. For instance, one gamer rated his physical likeness at a 3 and personal at a 4 (Male, 24), regarding a human male paladin. While this player did not admit feeling anything was missing from him during a period away from the game, he did admit a connection to friends in the following excerpt from a dialogue:

>Did it feel like anything was missing from you while you withdrew from the game (when you quit)?

<no i just missed my online buddies

<im particularly attached to the game itself just her for the friends

>All right, so the game is a plus, but rather than being involved for your character or for the game, it's more about the connections you've made?

<well sorta

The participant continued on to describe his greatest like as the paladin, saying they are “your stereotypical white knight kinda deal” going on to say they are “chivalrous... honorable, smashing evil in the face with a mallet... that whole thing.” He stated he likes “to protect things” and when asked the favorite aspects about himself and his character, he answered “my forgiving attitude” and “when I’m on my charger... big golden horse... makes me feel like a paladin” respectively. This case provided a great example of a real-life person bonding with the attributes of his character in a very cognizant manner, but not becoming so attached as to be

physically or emotionally lacking while detached from the virtual realm. The gamer stated that he quit because of boredom and rejoined for friends.

In regards to a participant playing a dwarf hunter, he rated physical likeness at a 3 while rating personality likeness at a 1. In this instance the gamer stated that his reason for quitting was that his “wife asked me to quit” but that “[she] went back to school and gave me free time to play” (Male, 26). Again, the necessity for quitting did not appear to be too great, nor did the reaction, as the gamer stated “miss[ing] raiding... hav[ing] an online family to complete things with.” He did continue on to state, though, that his favorite aspect about his character was that he “is great at being alone... has a pet [and] can do lots with him” indicating enjoyment of interaction at least on some basic level.

Discussion

I believe there is in fact some sort of psychological information to be discovered in the relationship between those individuals who choose to create a virtual likeness in order to provide a channel for release or escape. However, the parameters of this study did not allow for particularly in-depth questions regarding psychological factors such as family life, sentiments towards using characters to escape, and so on. Furthermore, the responses from the study were somewhat spread apart, which would actually be expected with such a small sample size. Therefore, if this study were to be conducted again, with a much larger target sample, results would very hopefully be much more conclusive. Also, rather than targeting gamers who had quit at one point or another, hoping to gather responses based on use of a virtual character for means of withdrawal from the real world, it would likely be extremely beneficial to search for characters who already utilize virtual characters for those very means. Gathering participants to

meet that criteria, narrowing the gamers down further into those who *had* quit at some point would present the opportunity to better approach the study. This would allow for more accurate discussion of the effects of “quitting the virtual self” when that self actually is a self-representation or a device for escape.

Recognizing these experimental limitations, though, it is true that the study did in fact unearth some interesting responses from players. A common trend among those interviewed in this study, as well as in Parker et al.’s initial study, was that gamers often tend to hold very special bonds with other friends met in-game. These people actually become another, virtual family unit. Regardless of reasons for leaving, whether boredom on a current game expansion, financial reasons, influential real-life events and decisions, and so on, many gamers create enduring ties to others in the virtual realm. The participant Wolffollower scored indicated a very low likeness to his character, yet described him as a character with a “family I have made in-game” as well as his real family, which he states “spent more time in-game than... interacting with each other” which represents a dual familial tie in a virtual and real aspect.

In this manner, it may be considered that rather than a means for total escape or immersion into a complete fantasy realm, perhaps the *World of Warcraft* simply presents a common ground for connections in a manner that is simply more convenient and familiar to certain individuals. Although *WoW* has reached 12 million subscribers (“World of Warcraft Subscriber Base Reaches 12 Million Worldwide”), and is in fact experiencing a current fluctuation in the downward direction (Kody, “World of Warcraft Subscriber Base Currently at 11.4 Million”), the gaming community actually represents an extreme minority on the world scale. In considering this ratio of gamers to the rest of the world, which can then be narrowed even further to gamers who use the virtual realm as a social world as opposed to just a gaming

world, the number becomes quite small. The majority may believe that normal familial ties and social interactions occur over the dinner table, on a sports field, during a music concert, or through other means. Rather than considering great involvement in the virtual community as an anomaly simply because it does not conform to a common perception does not necessarily ensure its “difference.” Those interviewed in this study did not seem to exhibit some overarching need and addiction to their character, as if unable to cope with life without it; rather, they expressed a certain personal bond to the character and an overarching tie to the family creating on the virtual level. Perhaps a more in-depth study may produce evidence that escapists truly feel a deep need for their character as a coping mechanism, but perhaps the gamin community has simply been viewed in a quizzical light because of its minority status which does not necessarily conform to all preconceived social notions.

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Appendix

¹Gamer Interview Questions Pool

- Have you ever quit playing *WoW*?
- On a scale from 1 to 5 (1 being the lowest, 5 being the highest), how would you rate the level to which you identify with your *WoW* character, physically?
- On a scale from 1 to 5 (1 being the lowest, 5 being the highest), how would you rate the level to which you identify with your *WoW* character in terms of personality?
- Would you say that your character accurately represents your height?
- Would you say that your character accurately represents your body build?
- Why did you begin to play again?
- Did it feel like anything was missing from you while you withdrew from the game?
- What is your favorite thing about the appearance of your character?
- What is your favorite thing about yourself, whether it is physical, skillful, intellectual, etc.?