

# Game Customization and Game Play



Hannah Smith

## **Introduction**

*“Your avatar is you. You are your avatar. It's incredibly important that players like their in-game alter ego and be able to express their individuality.” – Miguel Lopez and Allen Rausch, Gamespy 2004*

Blizzard's 2004 release of the World of Warcraft (WoW) was one of the many exciting leaps into creating a new world that players could shape and make their own, through a variety of questing, raiding, and socializing within the game itself. And the first step to creating a world in which a player is truly a part of is to create a character to insert into that world. For a Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game (MMORPG), customization tends to be a large factor, as this type of game includes playing with other players themselves, and creating one's own space and story within the world before oneself. Customization includes physical customization, which is being able to alter the physical appearance of a character in order to create a pleasing individual for game play, and can be very in-depth where one can even edit the shape of a character's eyes or mouth, or a simplistic set of cycling through prearranged looks. But it also include in-game customization, which is being able to change and affect what abilities a character has, what professions (such as skinning or herbalism) so that it is not simply another of the same class or the same race.

However, in coming from one game to another, the levels of customization can often affect how much a player even wants to play a new game. Gaming customization can be very important to game play, whether it is physical customization or in-game customization. For instance, before ever being introduced to WoW, I played a game known as Perfect World International (PWI), which has many of the same in-game features that WoW does. But the differences between customization, both physical and in-game, were striking, and comparisons

were made the entire time I was creating, and playing. And these were far from the only two MMORPGs whose customization were so vastly different. Before WoW, the most popular MMORPG was EverQuest, which was then updated in the same year that WoW was released with EverQuest II. Both had huge amounts of players by 2005. According to Gamespy (2004), the differences in their customization capabilities were very noteworthy:

Visually, World of Warcraft is not particularly outstanding when it comes to character customization. When creating a character, players can customize their avatar's face, hairstyle, hair color, skin color, and facial hair (or piercing and markings for females)... More disappointing, there's no way to alter a player's face beyond picking one of the pre-made ones Blizzard provides. (p. 2)

This is one area where EverQuest II is completely on point. The suite of options allows for some intense customization, down to some crazily precise parameters. The shape and alignment of your characters' eyes, the style of their hairdos, the tone of their skin, the shape of their heads, noses, and ears -- all of this can be twiddled and tweaked to your heart's content. (p. 2)

There have been previous studies about gaming customization within an MMORPG. One such study is Turkey et al. (2010), who looked at customization within WoW in their article Free to be me: a survey study on customization with World of Warcraft and City Of Heroes/Villains players. They found through a series of surveys that females enjoyed customizing their characters more than did males, but both genders enjoyed the ability to customize, and in the case of WoW, especially when that customization was in-game and directly affected how they played. However, despite having indeed brought in two different MMORPGs to look at, the understanding of both seemed to be somewhat limited, and because

there are so many massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs) available to players now, it did not fully delve into the affects of customization on game play itself.

Another study was “Because it just looks cool!” Fashion as Character Performance: The Case of WoW by Klastrup et al. (2009). This study instead focused on the ability to customize the clothing of characters within a game, focusing entirely on WoW. This detailed both the use of armor and weapons on game play, which directly affects how well a character is in battle, but fashion itself, which is simply clothing worn to increase physical liking, such as wedding dresses or tuxedos. This type of customized was found to allow characters the ability to express their individuality in the largely similar physical feature base of WoW. Using interviews and surveys, they found that females greatly enjoyed the fashion aspect of customization, and that many players spent time acquiring clothing. However, this was the only aspect of physical customization that Klastrup et al. focused on, mentioning nothing about physical features, or in-game.

Because of such studies, and the lack of comparison between multiple different games on both a physical and in-game customization level, I began to wonder how much character customization (or lack thereof), affects other players’ game play—for instance, how much they play, how long they play, or even if they want to play a game at all. Using multiple methods, including surveys, interviews, publishing to WoW and gaming forums, and directly comparing the customization interface of several games, I pose the same question to the community. How important is game customization, both physical and in-game, and what affects does it have on game play itself?

## **Methods**

### **Publishing to Forums**

In order to gain data in a more qualitative format, the topic of customization was posted to a few forums (Battle.net (BN), DeviantArt.com (DA)) in order to gain feedback from the WoW community. These posts were short but detailed to enable viewers to have a comprehensive understanding of the question posed, and then checked upon a few times a day in order to respond to any responses posted, and to gain clarification for things that players may have said. This method of collecting data assisted with creating a baseline for the rest of the research conducted during this study.

### **Surveys**

To create a general profile of anonymous opinions and averages, a short, fifteen question survey was created using Kwik Surveys and then posted onto various websites, including the Battle.net World of Warcraft forums, and the WoW section of Reddit.com. This also included the gaming section of DeviantArt.com, which while not directly affiliated with WoW, has a large number of WoW players amongst its users. It was hoped that this would generate between thirty and forty responses and hopefully more. Amongst the questions asked, I included ones such as which MMORPGs were played by the participants, and general comparisons of both physical and in-game customization on WoW and one other MMO, that the participant specified while answering. It was also asking questions such as how important it was to a participant to be able to customize their character, and how much being able to customize (or not being able to customize) affected their desire to play the game.

### **Comparing Physical Customization Interfaces**

Four different MMORPGs were chosen for the process of comparing the availability of physical customization on the different games, to determine how much physical individuality could be achieved within a game. The four games chosen were WoW, Perfect World International (PWI), EverQuest II (EQ II), and Freerealms. This process included downloading each game and simply creating a character to see what liberties could be taken from the customization interface. The amount of options was taken into account, as well as color choices, marking styles, hair styles, and relation to realism.

### **In-Game Customization Comparison**

Due to the necessity to play an MMORPG for a while in order to understand its in-game customization format, not all of the mentioned games can be compared. However, since in-game customization is important to overall customization, the WoW, PWI and Freerealms will be discussed to gain a better understanding of types of in-game customization available. This will include skill enhancement as well as professions available within the game.

### **Interviews**

Considering the nature of this topic, it was necessary to interview multiple MMORPG players in order to get their comprehensive opinion of gaming customization. This was accomplished mainly by interviewing players of a different game (in this case, Perfect World International, a game I have previously played) so that it was possible to have a basis of comparison between WoW and one other game, instead of a variety of games so that no baseline was produced. Included amongst the questions were discussions of which of the MMORPGs they played do they feel had the best customization ability (physical and in-game), and why (and why not, for the other games included, if there was something

noteworthy to add about their customization), how important it was for the interviewee to customize a character, and what aspects of customization would be present in the ideal game for that interviewee.

## Results

### Publishing to Forums

When the WoW/gaming communities were presented with the question of customization, both physical and in-game, the majority believed that it was a beneficial component to MMORPGs:

*Customization is a tradeoff, where you sacrifice having a story told to you about a specific character, for the ability to make the MC look however you want. In a game like WoW that's not story driven, customization is just the-more-the-better.*

- *Shininginthedarkness, DA*

*Call me shallow, but if I'm not impressed with a game's character customization, my interest in it is likely to drop a notch.*

- *Lolotea, BN*

*I enjoy customization that allows for personalization, especially in online games. Whether that customization is purely cosmetic or intended to have some form of impact on game mechanics and gameplay doesn't matter, but it's nice to have both. Even better when they're not directly connected to one another.*

- *Folji, DA*

However, other players also believed that while it's beneficial, it isn't necessary to achieve good gameplay:

*It's nice, but not necessary. I'm more upset when there's customization, but I can't make someone who looks like me. Something like WoW or KOTOR where you only have so many faces to choose from get a pass, but if they let you select eyes, nose, etc. etc., but none of the features resemble mine, I get irritated.*

- *Karmacoma, BN*

*As for character customization, that is a plus for games with ambiguous character, but should be limited in games with a direct character. However, more games really need outfit selection and such, at any rate.*

- *EnuoCale, DA*

### Collection of Surveys

The survey population (n=42) revealed several things about the effects of both physical and in-game customization in relation to WoW and other MMORPGs. The age range of participants

ranged from 18 to 40 (Mean=22.36, SD=6.57), with 71% being male. Females who took the survey (n=12) rated that it was more important (Mean = 4.18) for them to be able to customize characters than did males (n=30, Mean= 3.9). 50% of the female surveyed said it was very important to be able to customize, while only 20% of the males surveyed said that it was very

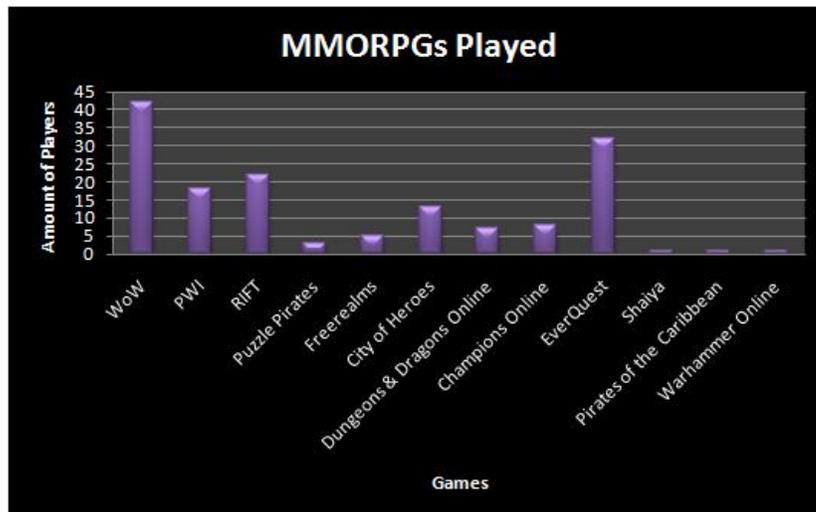


Figure 1.1 – MMORPGs Played

important. The games played varied greatly and had a lot of overlap between games (see Figure 1.1).

Participants were asked to rate WoW’s physical customization; 15 said that it was good, 9 said it was fair, 15 were neutral, and 3 said it was poor (SD=5.74). Of this topic, including in-game customization opinions, responses included:

*I like the art design and that you can't really make your character look retarded. I think it would be good if you could customize the colours of your armor more.*

- 26, Male

*The barber shop is a plus, as is the ability to recustomize. Female humans, despite a rather primitive model, seem to be the pinnacle of the game in terms of options. Not many categories per model can be edited; for example, there is no ability to change eye color. The creation screen is not very intuitive. Uses a class system. Nearly all classes are (at least to some degree) limited by race, sometimes for story reasons. Characters cannot multiclass. Most classes are “hybrids” (that is, they can do more than one thing). However, some are pure damage-dealers, and most have at least one thing that they can’t do. (For example, shaman can’t tank and warriors can’t heal.) The recent streamlining of talent trees was an improvement; locked specs prevent overgeneralization, but make overspecialization almost inevitable.*

- 31, Female

*It’s simple and easy to make a pretty cool looking character, but the older races seem like they have pretty outdated character models compared to the newer ones, and a lot of current MMOs are offering better customization in terms of facial features and body proportions. WoW’s system of premade faces and*

*hairstyles is kind of antiquated. However, in terms of deeper customization (build, profession, etc.) WoW is pretty top notch.*

- 18, Male

*Physical customization is terrible and could use quite a bit of expansion. Talents seem interesting, if somewhat strange compared to other systems I've seen.*

-20, Male

Players were also asked what they thought of another game's physical and in-game customization:

*Rift and DDO both have more alterable categories than WoW and very intuitive character creation screens (a visible scroll bar for facial features and hairstyle, and color palettes for skin tone and hair color, for example). Neither has a barber shop, although characters in DDO can be changed after the fact by other means. Both games use class systems. Neither have race/class limitations. DDO has some degree of railroading (prestige paths usually require particular enhancements) but not much. Players may multiclass, although it's limited. Rift does not allow multiclassing, but allows quite a bit of flexibility within a given class. For example, a mage can learn to heal; a cleric may choose not to. Soul trees are a bit cluttered, but soul points are not hard to come by; at least one per level, with two at every level divisible by 3. There are some mechanical safeguards against overspecialization, but none against overgeneralization.*

- 31, Female

*For Warhammer Online, the character customization was more or less the same as WoW's but with more options and more detailed character models. Champions Online offered the best character customization because you could customize your character's archetype entirely, your character's face and body build, features and costume, as well as power appearances. It did suck when you couldn't make your character exactly as you imagined due to limitations though.*

- 18, Male

*On PWI, it's like you're creating an actual person with the amount of options that there are to customize physically. However, in-game is lacking, and everyone virtually becomes a cookie-cutter for their class.*

- 19, Female

*I like the whole customization concept in PWI because it allows you to customize almost everything (eye, nose, mouth, head shape, etc.), I just wish they could improve some textures like some haircuts going through the body and such.*

- 19, Male

*Stat points I find to be a good feature in PWI, although it would be better if there was a better explanation of stating for new mmo players. Upon the outset, it is not apparent, for example, that the dex stat is useless to a wizard and mag is useless to an archer. The crafting skills available could use to be expanded.*

- 20, Male

Participants were also asked about how they felt on customization in general (both physical and in-game) and how important it was for them to be able to customize. Of the latter, 43% said it was very important:

*They're the reason why online gaming is still around, it keeps the play interesting and somewhat fun*

- 18, Female

*I think it's important to have a degree of character customization (for example I could never play Diablo 2 because I didn't like any of the looks of the characters.*

- 26, Male

*It is a vital aspect of mmo play, given the number of other players. A high degree of it is needed in order to stand out in such numbers, which is something I wish to do.*

- 20, Male

*I really like in-game customization, but my favorite part is building your character as you play and upgrading his/her gear. Super fun.*

- 18, Male

### Comparison of Physical Customization Interfaces

#### World of Warcraft – Physical Customization



Figure 2.1 – WoW Customization

WoW has a very straightforward physical customization process, which includes only one screen to decide all of the features of the character (see figure 2.1). The first step is choosing which faction one wishes a character to be a part of, Alliance or Horde, and subsequently what race to choose from either of those factions. For Alliance, the choices are Night Elves, Humans, Worgen, Draenei, Gnomes, and Dwarves. For Horde, the choices are Blood Elves, Goblins, Orcs, Trolls, Tauren, or Forsaken. Then a player chooses either male or female, and which class is desired. This option varies from race to race, but the classes are warriors, paladins, druids, mages, priests, shamans, death knights, warlocks, hunters, and rogues. Each has different characteristics that make them unique. Next comes choosing the actual physical features of a character. The available options are skin color, facial features, hair

style, hair color, and facial hair (or markings and piercings for females). Each of these has 15 premade options that are cycled through until a likeable combination is made. The final step is creating a character name, either original or using the “Randomize” button (which is actually fairly useful; there is also a randomize button for the physical characteristics). And then a player is able to enter the world with his or her new character.

## EverQuest II – Physical Customization

EQII's system of physical customization is more complex, spanning three screens



Figure 3.1 – EQ II Classes

with the final screen containing multiple in-depth features. The first screen (figure 3.1) is where the player chooses what class a player wants to be from four different types of classes, those being Fighters (guardians, berserkers, monks, bruisers, shadowknights, and paladins), Priests (templars, inquisitors, wardens, furies, mystics, and

defilers), Mages (wizards, warlocks, illusionists, coercers, conjurers, and necromancers), and Scouts (swashbucklers, brigands, troubadours, dirges, rangers, and assassins).

The next stage of creating a character is picking a race and gender. There are quite a few different races, which are either aligned good (Dwarves, Fae, Frogloks, Halflings, High Elves or Wood Elves), evil (Dark Elves, Arasai, Iksar, Ogres, Trolls, Sarnak, or Ratonga), or neutral (Erudite, Barbarians, Half Elves, Humans, Gnomes, Kerra, or Freebloods). When playing the free version, though, Erudite, Barbarians, Half Elves, and Humans are available (see figure 3.2).



Figure 3.2 – EQII Races



Figure 3.3 – EQ II Physical Aspects

The final step to customizing a character is choosing the actual physical characteristics. This is accomplished on one final screen in which the players has multiple features to edit, including the head, hair, eyes, body, and features (see figure 3.3). Features can vary from race to race (for Barbarians it is a set of tribal tattoos, for Erudite it is glyphs on their foreheads, and for Half Elves it's scarring, for example). The player can edit the shape and color of many of these features, such as changing

the length or width of the nose or the size of the body. The colors,

although more ranged than WoW, are preset to certain colors for that race (a Human's skin cannot be blue, for example, but has to be a reasonable human color). Like WoW, though, there is a randomization button in addition to the actual aspects.

### Perfect World International – Physical Customization

PWI has a physical customization akin to that of EQ II, but seems even more in-depth in



terms of variability. The first step is much more simplified than the other two games thus far, though; upon the first screen, gender, race, class, and name are all chosen (see figure 4.1). In this game, though, there are only five races to choose from (Earthguard, Winged Elves, Humans, Untamed, and Tideborn), and for each race there are two possible classes to choose from (for the Winged Elves it's archers or clerics; for Earthguard, it's seekers or mystics) based upon the in-game history of a given race.

Figure 4.1 – PWI's Class, Race, Gender

At the bottom of this catch-all box there is a “Customize” button, which actually takes the player to an area to customize their character. PWI offers presets to initially get a character going, but are then available to be edited to a player’s content, or a player can start from scratch. Virtually every aspect of a character can be edited (see figure 4.2). There are different sections for the face (as in, facial shape itself), eyes, eyebrows, nose, mouth, ears, hair (with at least twenty different options for each race gender), body and color. PWI uses a free RGB system, so that any color imaginable can be used for anything. A character’s hair, for example, can be lime green and their skin can be purple. There are also some examples of race-specific customization aspects, such as the Earthguard “Gods’ Eye”,



Figure 4.2 – PWI Customization Options

customizable under the eyes tab (figure 4.2). PWI features no randomization aspect.

## Freerealms

Freerealms is unlike the others in that it is played on a browser, rather than needing to be downloaded. Creating a character has three steps to it within this game. The first is choosing a race and gender. There are only two races, however, those being humans or pixies (see figure 5.1). This then progressed to choosing the physical features of the face, clothing, and wings (for pixies). The different categories were face type (which had three different



Figure 5.1 – Freerealms Race/Gender Choices

choices), skin tone, hair style, hair color, eye color, facial hair (for male humans), wings (for pixies), clothing, and face paint/makeup. With

the exception of the face type, each section only had six

different options to choose from, and in the case of clothing, it was often the same clothing in different colors (see figure 5.2).

The final step to create a character on Freerealms was to choose a name. This, though, was created through a list of predetermined names in three sections. For example, the first name could be Sabrina, and then the first part of the last name would be Titan, and the last part of the last name could be pick.



Figure 5.2 – Clothing Styles

Thus the name would be Sabrina Titanpick. While there was an extensive list of names to choose from such as that one, it was not possible to immediately choose a name that was not



Figure 5.3 – Naming Approval

to create a temporary name while it was being approved.

in the Freerealms' database. If an original name was wanted, it had to be approved before it could be used (see figure 5.3). It was not clear how long a process

like that took, and players were offered the chance

### **In-Game customization**

#### **World of Warcraft**

In WoW, players are allotted one talent point every other level starting at level ten to be put into one of three Talent Trees. Talent Trees vary in between classes (the Talent Trees for a druid are balance, feral combat and restoration, for example). When allotted, the talent provides the player with a unique skill that cannot be learned from a class trainer. Talents are included to add variability between as far as how skills work and how effective they are for the various aspects of WoW game play, such as raiding or questing. At level 30, players can also purchase from their class trainers

“Dual Talent Specialization”, in which they gain another set of Talent Trees and talent points that they can allot to a different set of skills. Players are then able to switch between one tree and the other depending upon their preference and situation. In addition to this, players are able to learn several primary and secondary professions. The secondary professions are Archaeology, First Aid, Cooking, and Fishing, which are available to everyone (although Archaeology requires the Cataclysm expansion). The primary professions are much more expansive and players are allowed to learn only two. These professions include Herbalism, Alchemy, Blacksmithing, Skinning, Leatherworking, Mining, Enchanting, Engineering, Inscription, Jewelcrafting and Tailoring. Often one profession is required to better another, such as Herbalism being needed to collect the proper reagents for Alchemic creations. These professions allow players to create and enhance their own gear, and provide services for other players.

#### **Perfect World International**

In PWI, in-game customization is primarily done via stat points. A player has four stats, similar to tabletop Role Playing Games such as Dungeons and Dragons, and as they level they receive five points each level to distribute between these. The vitality stat gives increases health points (hp; with how much hp depending on the player's class), hp regeneration, physical defense, and magical defense. The dexterity stat increases evasion, physical accuracy, ranged (bows) damage, and dagger damage. Strength increases melee weapon attack (aside from daggers) and physical defense. Magic increases magic damage, mana points (mp), mp regeneration, and magic defense. Certain stat points are also required to equip gear. By distributing points in

various ways, players can wear different types of gear or focus on different areas, such as high damage or high survivability. Players may also level manufacturing skills, starting at level five. Any player may choose to pursue these skills and use them to create gear or other items, and there is no limit on how many a player may level. Blacksmithing allows the crafting of weapons, tailoring allows the crafting of armor, craftsmanship allows the crafting of ornaments (items such as rings, belts and necklaces that improve statistics), apothecary allows the crafting of special potions, and runecrafting allows the crafting of runes, which give a temporary buff to a weapon they are equipped on.

### **Freerealm**s

In Freerealm, players do not enter the world with a class directly in mind. In truth, there are a variety of classes that they can dual-take when within game, under different headings such as Combat classes (Archers, Brawlers, Medics, Ninjas, Warriors, and Wizards), Crafting classes (Blacksmithing, Chefs, and Mining), and Freestyle classes (Adventurer, Card Duelist, Demo Derby Driver, Fisherman, Kart Driver, Pet Trainer, Postman, and Soccer Star). Some of these classes are only available through a monthly subscription, but players can take up as many as they like, and due to the nature of questing within the game, most almost always take up all of them if they have the monthly subscription. Beyond questing, there is no in-game system that allows for individual, unique advancement. There is some physical customization available in-game in the form of buying different clothing from vendors, but most of that always requires real-world money and so is not a very common occurrence within the game itself.

## Interview Results

Five MMORPG players were interviewed for this process, with all having played both WoW and PWI to establish a baseline and actual comparison between some of the games, although most of the players also participated in other games beyond those two, such as RIFT, Freerealms, EverQuest, Vanguard, RF Online, Runescape, and MU Online. When asked which game had the best physical customization, it was unanimously PWI:

*PWI, no contest. It lets you create and make just about any character that you want if you just spend time making it. You can choose any color you want for just about everything, and it really feels like your character.*

- Danicka, level 50 Winged Elf, PWI

*PWI, because they have a lot of more individual... Like they use RGB rather than preset colors, so you get to pick stuff into choosing.*

- Hikishi, level 69 Undead, WoW

*PWI, by far. The degree of customization possible is quite impressive, and it allows for unique characters, which is something that I like, as well as allowing me to make characters which I find visually pleasing.*

- Marista, level 100 Untamed, PWI

While the other games were clearly lacking in this regard:

*In comparison, WoW was sorely lacking since there was only, like... 10 options to choose from, so you get a lot of cookie cutter characters, although I do like the feature that you have specific features that only that race can get. And then Freerealms... First of all, it was a crappy game. I do NOT recommend it. But for its customization there were only maybe five choices per option (hair color, hair itself), so I found at least five different characters that were all clones of me. I wasn't original at all. And to make matters worse, you had to choose from a list of names for your character. If you wanted to create your own name, it had to be submitted to a GM in order to be used.*

- Danicka

*Honestly I'd hate to play a character that looks almost the same as the rest which happened to me playing MU since you couldn't customize your character at all. As for WoW all I can remember is that you could change the eyes and skin color but the rest was the same for everyone.*

- Dante, level 101 Human, PWI

In relation to in-game customization, there was a mixture of responses that varied from player to player:

*I preferred pwi, from what little I experienced of that aspect on wow, but I did not experience enough of the latter to make a firm decision. I like fashion items to cover ugly or mismatched armor, since I'm a fairly competitive player who would choose armor based on stats rather than looks, which would be frustrating if I could not cover unattractive armors. I also like the stat point system, which allows for multiple builds on the same class, such as potentially wearing heavy armor on a class that would normally be expected to equip arcane armor. I also like the ability to choose sage or demon cultivation at higher levels, allowing for different skills, since they are otherwise uniform between members of the same class.*

- Marista

*RIFT – the whole 4 classes with 8 souls to talent into made that game's population very different. Never see an exact copy of anyone >.>... The others simply just got too repetitive, one you've done one it seemed like you've done them all.*

- Vitrus, level 101 Untamed, PWI

*For this I would say WoW. The talent point system was a really interesting idea because it meant that even though you were the same class as a lot of other characters, you had the potential to have abilities that were specific to you. Plus, there were a lot of professions that you could choose from, and I liked having that as well. In PWI, you just got five points to assign to either dex, mag, strength or vitality and every other player in the same class was going to have close to the same point configuration because that was the best way to get the most out of your character. Freerealms... Had no in-game customization.*

- Danicka

However, most of the players needed some sort of customization (either physical or in-game)

in order to want to play:

*I would say the degree of physical customization available is essential in deciding if I even have any interest in playing, since I like to stand out. In game customization is important for the same reason--I like having options to choose from, rather than being forced to have a cookie-cutter set of stats and abilities.*

- Marista

*Very, otherwise I wouldn't be able to enjoy the game. If it the stat system was better in some ways for other classes it wouldn't be fair and I wouldn't feel like playing it anymore.*

- Dante

*It's not really too important, as long as it's different enough that there'd always only be one way of doing ANYTHING, I can deal, and I honestly have gotten used to it. >.>*

- Vitrus

All agreed that they wouldn't want to play an MMORPG if they couldn't customize:

*No. If that was the case I'd rather just play a single player game, which would be more likely to offer in-depth storyline and other features to compensate for the lack of visual variability.*

- Marista

*Probably not, when it comes to mmo's I'd have to have customization freedom of some sort. x.x*

- Vitrus

*If it was physical customization... No, not really. I mean, I only played Freerealms for three months because of that reason, along with it being craptastic anyway. For an MMO, if you can't customize a character, what's the point? It's supposed to be –your-story, right?*

- Danicka

For their ideal game, my participants all wanted features present from different games:

*For my ideal game, there would be the customization at the level of PWI, but also the feature of races having traits that were specific to them, rather than not necessarily knowing what certain races are because they're so customizable. But the professions and talent point system of WoW would also be nice to have.*

- Danicka

*High levels of visual customization, many options for how to build a character with regard to stats and what can be equipped, the ability to keep appearance independent from armor if desired, the ability to choose between all of the various factions (including evil ones), and multiple, mutually-exclusive storyline paths to follow when leveling a character.*

- Marista

*Mm. Something identical to RIFT when it comes to classes (4 classes with the 8 souls to talent into for different purposes) but with the prettiness and free world pvp of PWI.*

- Vitrus

*Personal choice rather than cookie cutters. Uhm... RGB rather than preset colors. I dunno... Full skill and talent customization. Uhm... And in-game looks customization. Ability to customize armor, ability to change your look after you create it.*

- Hikishi

## **Discussion**

Through this research, I first determined that the levels of customization between games greatly varies in how well both the physical and in-game categories. For example, for physical customization, Perfect World International is clearly the best in terms of individuality. Everyone who was interviewed agreed on that, no matter what other games they had played. It had the most intensive and customizable interface for any given character; a player literally could create anyone he or she wanted as a character if they put enough time and effort into it. EverQuest II followed that; although the options were not quite as extensive and colors were limited within the races, they clearly had the ability to create a good number of different character features. World of Warcraft and Freerealms, though, were not as extensive, with the latter being almost childish for an MMORPG. The fact that a player could not have an original name without approval would likely annoy many players. WoW, though, is better in that regard in that it does have several options for each of its categories. At the same time, though, it did use cookie cutter features and it was rather likely that a player would come across their character somewhere in the game.

However, WoW was able to balance its physical customization level with its in-game customization. Barring EQII (due to inability to correctly describe that system or know how it works), WoW had the best in-game customization, allowing for variability between same-class characters in terms of what skills were even available to be used. The extensive profession list, as well, was very well thought out and detailed. PWI is quite a bit more simplified in comparison, where it seems very likely that characters will have the same statistics based on their character class. In addition to this, the professions were not very original, and from experience, not very engaging while playing. Contrasting both of those, though, Freerealms again comes up short.

Although there are a variety of professions that players can take up, the fact that they're available to everyone and that there's no way to uniquely enhance any given profession makes it ineffective in this category as well.

Within the community, though, both physical and in-game customization proved to be something that players enjoyed and expected out of an MMORPG so that they could further develop their own character's story, which is, in essence, the point of games like WoW and PWI in the first place. Some players said that they would still play such games with customization—but most said that even if they would still play, they would rather play a plot-based game such as the Legend of Zelda (LoZ) series, which doesn't require any sort of customization to make it enjoyable to play. In-game customization was sometimes more important than physical customization to participants, because they weren't able to make their characters significantly better than another player in the same class at game play itself without constructs such as the talent point system in WoW or even PWI stat point system.

The research conducted showed that although players liked the physical and in-game customization constructs of the games they played, there were lots of ways that games could improve upon it. This was best exemplified in my question to the interviewees about what they would want to see in their ideal game. All of them chose different aspects from the different games that they had played, and added things that they would like to see. Getting such information from players would likely prove useful to WoW or PWI game creators.

I didn't expect the topic of plot-based games like LoZ to come up, but in retrospect they are the virtual opposites of MMORPGs. The fact that they have in-depth plots makes it impossible to have much customization at all, whereas in games like WoW without a direct plot throughout the game, customization is a must. This sort of comparison would be interesting to

look into in the future, and further compare whether players would rather have customization or plot.

Within the research itself, it was difficult to obtain a cluster of games that all participants played, so it's hard to say for certain if one game really is the best in all categories or not. This was somewhat remedied by including interviews only from players who had participated in both WoW and PWI, so that the comparison was clear in terms of what players had experienced and what they thought of the games they had played, and what they hoped to see in other games. However this was difficult to circumvent, and it would be best to try and find maybe only three or four games in the future to compare, if that's possible. The best way would really be to actually intensively play those four games, whatever they may be, and interview players on each game to come up with feelings and thoughts about customization.

## Works Cited

- Admin. (2011, April 2). Top 10 Best Free MMORPG. Retrieved May 18, 2011, from <http://www.hiplayers.com/news/top-10-best-free-mmorpg.html>
- Dual Talent Specialization. (n.d.). Retrieved May 26, 2011, from WoWWiki: [http://www.wowwiki.com/Dual\\_Talent\\_Specialization](http://www.wowwiki.com/Dual_Talent_Specialization)
- EverQuest II. (2004). Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game. Sony Online Entertainment.
- Freerealms. (2009). Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game. Sony Online Entertainment
- Klastrup, L. et al. (2009). "Because it just looks cool!" Fashion as Character Performance: The Case of WoW. In *Journal of Virtual Worlds Research Vol. 1, No. 3*. Virtual Worlds Institute, Inc. (pp. 3-17). Retrieved from University of Hawaii at Manoa at <http://hdl.handle.net/10524/1691>
- Lopez, M. & Rausch, A. (2004). EverQuest II vs. World of Warcraft. Retrieved May 16, 2011, from <http://pc.gamespy.com/articles/572/572447p1.html>
- Perfect World International. (2005). [Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game]. Perfect World Entertainment Inc.
- Profession. (n.d.). Retrieved May 26, 2011, from WoWWiki: <http://www.wowwiki.com/Profession>
- Skelton, Jaime. (2009, October). World of Warcraft: The Stale Comparison. Message posted to <http://www.mmorpg.com/gamelist.cfm/game/15/feature/3576/The-Stale-Comparison.html>

- Skelton, Jaime. (2010, April 30). World of Warcraft: Avoiding the Elephant. Message posted to <http://www.mmorpg.com/gamelist.cfm/game/15/feature/4206/Avoiding-the-Elephant.html>
- Supageek. (2007, August 26). General: PC-Gaming: World of Warcraft graphics vs. other mmorpg's. Message posted to <http://www.tomshardware.com/forum/98244-13-world-warcraft-graphics-mmorpg>
- Talent. (n.d.). Retrieved May 26, 2011, from WoWWiki: <http://www.wowwiki.com/Talent>
- Turkay, S. & Adinolf, S. (2010). Free to be me: a survey study on customization with World of Warcraft and City of Heroes/Villains players. In *Procedia: Social and Behavioral Sciences*. New York: Columbia University (pp. 1840 – 1845). Retrieved from ScienceDirect database at <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1877042810010359>
- World of Warcraft. (2004). Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game. Blizzard Entertainment.
- Zen Geekz. (2010, September 22). World of Warcraft. The God of MMORPG's. Message posted to <http://zengeekz.com/world-of-warcraft-the-god-of-mmorpgs>