

The Digital Mask:
Anonymity, Self-identification, and Interaction
in Tabletop Roleplaying Games and
Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games

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Abstract

In this paper, I have employed Tabletop Role-Playing Games (TTRPGs) and Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) as tools to examine the effects of anonymity on psychological introspection and interpersonal relations on the Internet. Through a pair of surveys, I asked participants to self-identify their own personality traits, the traits of a favorite character that they played in these games, and the evolution of their real-life relationships with other players. I investigated whether the temptation for anti-social behavior provided by online persona creation and anonymity undermines the ability to make meaningful relationships, and what these findings may presage for a global society migrating onto the web in ever-growing billions.

The surveys showed that TTRPG players exhibit a wide array of behavior through their Player Characters (PCs), suggesting that the game was encouraging a high level of persona experimentation. Players were often deeply invested in the personal histories and motivations of their invented selves. MMORPG players were generally less interested in this, and were more concerned in achieving supremacy through the game mechanics. If TTRPG players wore a costume, then MMORPG donned a mask. The physical presence and inherent theatricality of TTRPGs allowed for player actions to be more easily attributed to the role they were portraying. With performance less of a concern in MMORPGs, and with many interactions occurring between strangers, these players were more likely to hold others personally accountable for their in-game activities.

Most importantly, my research found that the anonymity and vast connective possibilities of the Internet could embolden people to make interpersonal connections that might not normally be geographically or even emotionally possible. While TTRPGs tend to strengthen existing

relationships, MMORPGs are more effective in establishing new ones. As online gaming becomes more popular and interaction expands, these new relationships have the potential to be as strong and lasting as any originating in the analog world.

Keywords: Anonymity, Self-Identification, Role-playing, TTRPGs, MMORPGs, Group Dynamics, Liminal Spaces, Dungeons & Dragons, Gender-swapping, Power Fantasy, Trolling,

The modern era of Role-Playing Games can be traced back to the early 1970s, when tabletop gaming enthusiasts Dave Arneson and Gary Gygax created *Dungeons and Dragons*. Its J.R.R. Tolkien-influenced settings and medieval combat mechanics injected popular fantasy into the esoteric field of historical war game scenarios that had been popular since the 1950s. While the story elements were largely derivative, *Dungeons and Dragons*' main innovation was to give the player control of a single, well-defined PC rather than the numerous, anonymous units one managed in *Go*, *Risk*, *Stratego*, or *Chess* (Punday, 2005). More radical still was the game's open-ended nature, described by Waskul and Lust (2004) as, "not competitive, there are no time limits, it is not scored, and has no definition of winning or losing... the goals of the game are survival and character development."

Dungeons and Dragons codified rules and concepts that would evolve over the next four decades, selling over 20 million books worldwide and inspiring new games of varying genres and levels of sophistication (Waters, 2004). Despite a lingering mainstream perception that it is frivolous pastime of juvenile power fantasies, there is ample evidence that the game has many lessons to teach and many constructive uses to be had. The equalizing effect of the gaming table and the liminal space of the "consensus reality" can, if done properly, establish a fun and emotionally safe environment for individuals to engage in creative expression, problem solving, team building, and identity exploration.

TTRPGs have had a strong influence on popular culture, and the anthropomorphic proxies utilized in Internet representation were born out of early attempts to mimic TTRPG concepts. The late 60s ARPANet and hippie culture of west coast universities were often closely aligned with gaming culture, and many of the first attempts to create shared, online spaces were inspired by the *Dungeons and Dragons* experience. The gaming term "avatar,"

today used to denote a user's online visual representation, was first borrowed from Hinduism in 1985's best-selling, TTRPG-influenced computer game, *Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar*.

This trajectory continues today, as mass migration and interconnection to the web allows for increasingly greater portions of our lives to be experienced through the veneer of our digital skin. What began with the text-based "Multi-User Dungeons" that enraptured hundreds at England's Essex College have evolved today into a global network of over 600 million people interacting with one another across hundreds of games in a \$13 billion industry (Taylor 22). By subjecting contemporary MMORPGs to the same analytics of their TTRPG predecessors, I have attempted to map a path of human behavior in the emerging digital landscape.

Literature Review: The meaning of "role-playing" in TTRPGs lay somewhere between the near-formless fluidity of "improv" and the rigid dramatic constructs of theater. In the former, short scenes and characters are created on the spot, with no specific objective in mind at the time of origin. Traditionally, in the latter, both characters and situations are predetermined, leaving the actor room for interpretation only within the fixed confines of the script. In the context of TTRPGs, a group ("party") of 3 to 7 players create, or are assigned, PCs that they will "role-play" during the course of a gaming "campaign". Said campaign, which can be a single event or long-running story, often involves the PCs embarking on task-driven missions devised and moderated by a Dungeon Master ("DM"). The DM creates or adapts the world, narrates the action, designs the quests, and role-plays any characters that the players do not directly control (non-player characters, or "NPCs"). They referee the rules and their decisions are ultimately the final word. A DM who abuses, embarrasses, or overly frustrates the PCs is missing the point of the game and will probably not be playing for very long (Smith, 2013).

A core set of books explain the basic of each TTRPG's game rules, and the years have

brought with them a copious number of added supplements and storybooks that can be added at the DM's discretion. Most TTRPGs have two major aspects: Combat and role-playing. The unfolding of the game is determined by a combination of PC behavior, DM discretion, and simple luck of the dice. As PCs gather more "experience points" by killing monsters, solving problems, and successfully completing storylines, their abilities increase as do their fame and fortune within the game world. Greater skills tip the odds of the dice more in the PC's favor, readying them for even greater challenges (Smith, 2013).

While *Dungeons and Dragons* is often seen as a literal description of the game's challenges, it also serves as a metaphor. "Dungeons" represent the closed story structure that characters participate in. "Dragons" represent the many obstacles that they will face along the way, such as traps, riddles, monsters, and of course, dragons themselves. Together, these elements represent the parameters of the fantastical "consensus reality" established and maintained by player and DM. This liminal space of gaming was named the "magic circle" by 20th century Dutch historian Johan Huizinga. Applying it to poker or billiards, he described it as, "... a stepping out of 'real' life into a temporary sphere with a disposition all of its own." (Waskul and Lust, 2004). Sociologist Gary Allen Fine adds, "For (TTRPGs) to work as an aesthetic experience, players must be willing to 'bracket' their natural selves and enact a fantasy self. They must lose themselves to the game." (Fine, 1983)

Dr. Daniel Punday's 2005 essay for *Poetics Today* explored the unique role that narrative plays in TTRPGs. Eschewing the passivity of television or even the participatory engagement of books, TTRPGs allow its players to make playthings of mythological heroes, ancient pantheons, and monsters of popular culture. The *Dungeons and Dragons* 1st edition *Monster Manual*, the guidebook of adversaries and monsters for the DM to throw at his PCs, draws from high fantasy,

gothic horror, European and Asian folklore, Middle Eastern bestiaries, Pre-Columbian myths, classic literature, and Judeo-Christian religious texts. All of these are rich, historical tales that served various sociological functions in their originating cultures. It is in this intertextual pastiche of cultural output that Punday makes his point, drawing a distinction between “creation” and “invention.” “In creation,” he writes, “agency is supreme and independent of all circumstances; in invention, agency is subservient to conditions, which provide the ‘needs’ that the invention satisfies” (Punday, 2005). The market-driven industrialism of the modern age is pre-fabricated and driven by necessity, often leaving creativity to the minds of blue-sky fantasists, artists, and the rare world-changing visionary. What Punday finds intriguing about TTRPGs is that they take these pre-fabricated, innovative mythologies and allow the players to play creatively within them. It is this fusion of the two major schools of modern thought that Punday finds so noteworthy, as it encourages a rare manner of intellectual resourcefulness and independent thinking that can be valuable to society at large (Punday, 2005).

Indeed, even before the rise of TTRPGs, role-playing had for decades demonstrated itself a useful tool outside of the world of gaming and play. For the early-to-mid 20th century Austrian-American psychiatrist, J.L. Moreno, role-playing was the core component of his concept of “psychodrama.” As a method of treatment, subjects would be placed in a “magic circle” depicting an uncomfortable and alien situation that they needed to resolve or react to. In 1975, a four-month study conducted by Dr. Betty Jean Moore observed the use of psycho-dramatic role-playing as a method of pedagogy in a primary school classroom. It was used to teach socialization and the development of oral language practice, with Moore noting that, “... by playing out a situation, the child gains new insight into personal motives thus reducing some of the barriers to his/her own growth” (Moore, 1975).

Role-playing has been used for the treatment of trauma survivors and sufferers of PTSD. In 1994, Dr. Wayne Blackmon detailed the role that TTRPGs played in treating his socially maladjusted, 19-year old male patient “Fred”. “Fred” displayed aspects of Schizoid Personality Disorder, was deeply depressed, and had recently botched a suicide attempt. He had resigned himself to a life of social alienation, repressed rage, and melancholy. Initially unable to reach a rapport due to “Fred’s” emotional withdrawal, Blackmon soon seized upon “Fred’s” participation in several *Dungeons and Dragons* campaigns as a means of finding connection. During each week’s therapy, doctor and patient would examine the events of most recent gaming sessions, discovering that Fred’s unconscious feelings were often projected into the actions of his characters. Once Blackmon began using *Dungeons and Dragons* as a method of group therapy for a number of his patients, Fred was able to more clearly perceive and express his inner feelings and desires. The freeform, structureless campaign they engaged in allowed him to perform many “unscripted” actions, such as inciting the other members of the group therapy to plunder a village and burn it to the ground. He soon invested his characters with rage, sorrow, and other extreme emotions that he was never able to exhibit in the real world. By fleshing out these rich personas, he found himself able to reach the complex emotions and desires within himself. Blackmon ultimately reported that Fred achieved a level of peace and self-awareness through this therapy. He became more emotionally open, found a steady romantic relationship, and felt comfortable leaving treatment after a year (Blackmon, 1994).

The availability of behavioral freedom, exploratory reinvention, and interpersonal connection has remained essential to the enduring popularity of TTRPGs throughout the decades. More than knights or wizards, orcs or goblins, it was the marriage of these features with the anonymity of the digital world that has come to constitute the beating heart of online gaming

culture. For the over 620 million people playing MMORPGs worldwide, this represents an extraordinarily large range of player motivations, ethics, and encounters (Kauppinen, 2013).

The 2007 study by Katherine Bessiere, “The Ideal Elf: Identity Exploration in World of Warcraft”, determined that players tended to imbue their online characters with more favorable psychological attributes than that which they saw in themselves. Encouraged by the anonymity of online interactions, players were creating digital representations that were, on average, “more conscientious, extraverted, and less neurotic than they themselves were.” The authors measure the significance of their findings with the ‘Self-Discrepancy Theory’ of the interpersonal communications field. This theory argues that psychological well-being is best measured by the gap between an individual’s actual self and their ideal self. The authors of this particular study effectively argue that the therapeutic qualities of TTRPGs could be emulated in the digital gaming world by providing a safe, liminal space for players to explore their ideal selves without the judgments or expectations present in their ‘real’ lives (Bessiere, 530 – 535).

Similar findings were made at a separate 2007 study at England’s Nottingham University, where it was also noted that some players reported feeling “‘more themselves’ during gameplay.” Emboldened by the self-assurance and protection provided by anonymity, many were more likely to self-disclose about themselves and their thoughts, creating a more open environment for interaction. The Nottingham study found that 76.2% of the male respondents and 74.7% the female respondents reported that they had made good friends within the game. Only one in five stated that MMORPGs had a net negative result on relationships (Cole and Griffiths, 2007).

However, the positive contributions of anonymity to online gaming culture are often complicated and overshadowed by harmful events and malicious actors. One of the first major

incidents to raise questions about ethics, behavior, and anonymity in MMORPGs took place in the game *World of Warcraft* (WoW) on March 4, 2006. A “guild”, or online alliance of players organized a large in-game memorial for a member that had died of a stroke in real life just days earlier. The event took place at one of the deceased player’s favorite locations in the game universe, and the guild’s plan was to record the funeral procession of PCs as a Youtube video for the deceased’s family. Although the neutrality of the event was respected by thousands of rival PCs, a rival guild called “Serenity Now” launched a sneak attack on the memorial, killing numerous mourner PCs and stealing much of their treasure. Although many of the attackers were openly motivated by classic malicious and greed, others claimed that they had participated because they found the memorial offensive. The mourners had chosen to hold their event in a non-neutral, Players Vs. Player (“PVP”) location, appropriating a public gaming world for their own personal displays of emotional grandiosity. “Serenity Now” claimed that they had only done what the game had been designed for: Using cunning and combat to destroy one’s enemies and increase one’s power. The “Serenity Now Incident”, as it came to be known, became a watershed event in debating the liminal space between the real-world and online gaming. It has also been one of the first examples of a “just war” debate in MMORPGs (Loch, 2009). As in the real, waking world, the Internet has illustrated time and again that cruelty is far easier when the “self” is hidden and the “other” is faceless and dehumanized.

This dehumanization of the self and the other can be compounded by the hardwired restrictions of MMORPGs, which by either circumstance or design can stifle a player’s exploration of self and the other. Dietrich’s study (2013) of race representations in 65 of the most popular MMORPGs found that 26 of them had no option to change an avatar’s skin color beyond its default Caucasian setting. Those 39 games that did allow skin color to be changed often did so

with an extremely Anglo-centric range of tones, facial features, or hair styles. Asian features were often slight variations of Caucasian ones, and African features were often nonexistent or extremely limited. It was not uncommon to see games with hair options in fantastic greens and blues, but that lacked any choices for those of African descent. When all was accounted for, only 14 of the 65 games permitted the creation of avatars whom looked realistically non-Caucasian. Perhaps unsurprisingly, these disparities often hinted of deeper, more uncomfortable subtexts. In the popular space trading game, EVE Online, the player-selectable race known as “Brutors” are “tribal, dusky-skinned” former slaves described who favor “physical prowess over anything else” (Dietrich, 2013). Contrarily, the freeform design of TTRPGs removes any such constraints, allowing the player to create their character with any sort of appearance or background that they desire.

While some players use their online experiences to forge strong relationships and express themselves positively, there is a smaller, albeit highly vocal community at the other extreme who regard Internet anonymity a chance to indulge in abject cruelty and gleeful nihilism. Known as “Trolls”- another term borrowed from the mythology of J.R.R. Tolkien and *Dungeons & Dragons*- this group is known for antisocial online behavior that, according to a 2014 study by the University of Manitoba, is rooted most deeply in sadism and psychopathy. On Wikipedia pages, on Youtube forums, social media, and in online gaming, Trolls cause disruption and chaos without much concern for furthering any larger agendas. Rather, it is the unprecedented scale of antisocial disruption that excites them, even if the exercise is ultimately a hollow and alienating one. Where some gamers see the anonymity of the Internet as a way to be self-exploratory and social, Trolls view it as a pathway to malice (Buckles, 2014).

In her 2013 study on cyber-bullying, Audrey Brehm cited a statistic from the

Entertainment Software Association (ESA) estimating that in 2012 women made up 45% of all gamers and 42% of all online gamers. Despite this, she found through her study of MMORPGs that a deep-seated culture of misogyny lay at the very heart of the gaming industry. In a survey of female WoW players, 63% reported experiencing some sort of gender-based harassment during their time playing the game. WoW's younger and less mature player base, combined with the ability of players to speak and act without real consequences, has created an atmosphere where women are frequently subject to sexual insult, are excluded from activities, or generally assumed to be incompetent. Many women assume the guise of male characters simply to avoid harassment (Brehm, 2013).

This larger trend of misogyny in the gaming world was further illustrated in the "Gamergate" controversy that dominated the online gaming community in the Summer and Fall of 2014. This widespread public debate and online hostility began when indie game developer Eron Gjoni wrote a blog post accusing his erstwhile girlfriend, game designer Zoe Quinn, of trading sexual favors with gaming bloggers for positive reviews of her games. The "scandal", dubbed "Gamergate" by actor and conservative blogger Adam Baldwin, was initially a rallying cry to combat "unethical behavior in gaming journalism." A subsequent investigation by Newsweek quickly determined that Gjoni's charges of impropriety were false, but Gamergate nevertheless became a cause du jour for young, white, middle-class males who resented the intrusion of women into what they considered their own private club (Wofford, 2014).

Indeed, the ugly deluge of misogynistic hostility summoned forth from the darker corners of the Internet was not easily dispersed. Zoe Quinn, as well as other women in the gaming world who defended her, received social media messages and e-mail far in excess of any of the men who were directly involved in the controversy. The threats of physical and sexual violence were

of such frequency and severity that many were forced to contact the FBI, leave their homes, and go into hiding. Feminist gaming critic Anita Sarkeesian, an outspoken opponent of Gamergate and the long tradition of harassment and degradation of women in gaming, was forced to cancel a mid-October speech at Utah State University when an anonymous caller threatened a mass shooting in response to her presence (Van Der Werff, 2014).

Bessiere's "*The Ideal Elf*" and the research provided by Cole and Griffiths would seem to demonstrate that MMORPGs do indeed have the tools necessary to facilitate interpersonal communication and personal development. However, the events of "Gamergate", "Serenity Now", and the sociological findings of Brehm threw this into question. My research into gaming in the Spring of 2014 found that most players of TTRPGs experienced a net positive effect for both of these behavioral factors. Using this first survey as a control group, I conducted a near-identical study to see how MMORPGs players, ensconced in digital worlds of total anonymity, depicted their experiences as compared to analog gamers whose proximity to other players can leave them emotionally vulnerable. Was cyber-bullying and social isolation winning the day, where the personas that people imagined for themselves were only serving to alienate them more from their peers and themselves? Or could the liminal space of the Internet, the most sophisticated feat of engineering and coordination the world has ever seen, compete with the effectiveness of a tabletop and bag of irregularly shaped dice?

Methodology: The crux of my research results emerges from a pair of surveys designed to elucidate interpersonal behavior in the offline and online RPG experience. The design and implementation of these survey questions was based upon my 20 years of experience playing as both a PC and a DM, across numerous games with dozens of other people.

Using NYU Steinhardt's "Survey Gizmo" account, I developed an 18-question online

questionnaire for TTRPGs players that remained open from 4/26/14 to 5/7/14. (**Appendix 1**). It was designed to gather participant demographics, their self-perceived personalities, the RPG personas that they tend to adopt, whether these games have led to lasting and significant relationships outside of the gaming worlds, and if it had improved their social skills in the real world. It was initially distributed to friends and acquaintances with a history of playing TTRPGs. Social media and word of mouth helped garner a total of 100 responses.

This initial survey was slightly modified for the MMORPG player survey, which was distributed from 9/28/14 to 10/3/14 (**Appendix 2**). While the TTRPG survey relied more on word of mouth, my lesser knowledge of the MMORPG community prompted me to make direct appeals to message boards and “Guilds”, which are real-world teams of players who work together in numerous games. The MMORPG survey received 87 completed responses from 9/28/14 to 10/3/14. As in the TTRPG survey, it inquired as to the player’s behavior, interactions, and long-term relationships in the context of gaming. However, as this paper is designed to examine the added dimension of digital anonymity, the questions were tweaked in such a way to explore this issue.

Results and Discussion: In the case of the TTRPG survey, fewer than a quarter came from the New York City Metropolitan area where the survey was designed. A total of 80 came from the greater United States, while the remaining 20 hailed from such disparate locations as Peru, Germany, China, England, and Sweden. The gender division was 73% male, 24% female, and the remaining 2% preferring not to say. 94% of the respondents described their skill level as either “intermediate” or “advanced”, while 68% of the respondents reported playing for over 10 years and 64% played at least once a month in the past six months. All of these factors provided an ideal and broad spectrum of TTRPG enthusiasts.

The MMORPG survey proved to be more geographically diverse, with only 53% of respondents coming from the United States. The rest were spread out across nearly two dozen nations. The gender division here was much sharper, with 90% identifying as male, 7% as female, 1% as transgendered, and 2% refusing to say. Of course, one must account for Brehm's trend that women are more likely to identify as male online, although it is unclear if this would carry over into an anonymous survey. The TTRPG players skewed slightly older, into the 30s and early 40s, which is not surprising given its era of origin. MMORPG players tended to be younger overall, mostly in their 20s or teens, but also had a broader range of ages and a more diverse swath of the population.

To truly understand the issues at the heart of an RPG, one must understand the motives and personalities of the people who play them. It is, after all, a game of psychology and imagination, where even the most innocuous character decision can be rooted in the deep psyche. When asked what it was that they enjoyed about TTRPGs, most answers centered around the game's core promise of creativity, storytelling, camaraderie, and as one survey-taker put it, "the thrills of playing as other people". Participants were asked to fill out a personality profile in which they self-identified traits along a spectrum of pro/anti-social and ethical/unethical behavior. This was then repeated for the PC they found the most enjoyment playing.

In both surveys, traits traditionally viewed as ethical and pro-social are on the left side of the spectrum, while more anti-social ones are on the right. This is not intended as a value judgment, merely an observation that extremely introverted behavior can sometimes diminish opportunities for interpersonal connection as much as antisocial behavior can.

(See Appendix 3)

The same personality profile was distributed in the MMORPG survey, save for the

addition of a “Compassionate/Cruel” category to better assess the presence of ‘Trolling’ behavior.

(See Appendix 4)

In identifying their own personality traits, players of TTRPGs and MMORPGs held to strikingly similar trends. In six of the eight categories shared by both surveys, players generally viewed themselves as leaning at the more conventionally ethical, pro-social end of spectrum. They were more ethical than unethical, more collaborative rather than competitive, and more patient than impatient. They were confident, funny, and active. One exception lay in “introversion/extroversion”, where both survey groups favored the former.

In regards to the characters that they chose to play, TTRPG participants generally favored an array of rich and detailed personalities that demonstrated far more behavioral diversity than they attributed to themselves. Using an optional section of the survey, over 80 people provided rich, often humorous details regarding the history and motivations of their characters. There was a such as “a Dwarven crime lord” searching for a magical family gem “that doubles as a disco ball”, a louche blue-blood in a *Call of Cthulu*-themed campaign, an apprentice wizard struggling to rise above his lowly social class, a “magipunk” Daoist rapper, and of course the obligatory, “Big, dumb sword guy who wants to be a knight.”

One interpretation of these answers involves viewing the personality profiles at face value. It follows that similar personality types would naturally be drawn to the same hobby, and the diversity of invented personas is a testament to the spirit of externalized experimentation studied in the games by Punday, Fine, Lust and Waskul. By this point of view, the core of these games lay in the myths, mysteries and friendships of the outside world reinterpreted in the game. A different viewpoint, one more likely to be embraced by Blackmon and Moore, is that the

character surveys actually reveal more about the players than the self-perception surveys do. The first set, with its range of similar, ideal answers would seem to present a series of unified, socially desirable personas. The latter, with its wider array of personalities, would represent more realistic aspects of the player's personality, good and bad, that he unconsciously seeks to explore in the game. As in the case of "Fred", the role-playing games are less about experimenting with the new and more about discovering what is already within.

From a social standpoint, the TTRPG gaming experiences were almost universally regarded as positive by the survey participants. Over 88% said that their relationships with fellow players had "strengthened" or "strengthened some" over the course of the campaign. Only 4% reported that there was some degree of strain, and 8% felt that there was little overall effect. Over 87% of gamers who had been involved in TTRPGs over 2 years felt that they had become "more confident" in their playing, 78% were more willing to play characters outside of their comfort zone, 70% were more collaborative, and over 58% stated a willingness to play with strangers.

In their own personality profiles, MMORPG players collectively self-identified a range of slightly less diverse answers than those in the TTRPG survey. Results for four out of the nine categories collectively represented a shift away from a distinct pro- or anti-social position and closer to the "Both".

Although roughly the same number of people used the optional section in both surveys to provide more detail about the characters they most enjoyed playing, MMORPG players were often less descriptive in regards to back stories and characterization. More often than not, answers were literal and short, (e.g. "A Gnome Warlock", "Assassin", "Troll Hunter in WoW") or referred to a specific slot that a character played in the game's larger social context (e.g. "a

corporate CEO and alliance leader”, “(A) character (whose) skillset is very useful for raids”, “wizard with ranged skills.”)

When asked what their favorite aspect of MMORPGs was, a plurality (34%) of respondents pointed to the social/teamwork element, followed by “Gaming Combat” (20%), and “Power Acquisition” (15%). A mere 12% cited “Roleplaying”, and 6% the thrill of outwitting other players. The low priority of role-playing, the tendency of gamers to assess their PCs from a tactical perspective, and the overall value of group collaboration would suggest that MMORPG players are more likely to see online avatars as extensions of the direct will of their players, rather than as characters being played by its logical internal dictates. In the personality category, “Compassion/Cruelty”- added to better explore the phenomenon of “Trolling”- roughly 72% of respondents said that in real life they were “compassionate” or “very compassionate”, 25% said they had an equal capacity of compassion and cruelty, and a mere 3% said that they were “cruel” or “very cruel”. In regards to their characters, who might be regarded as less distinct from their players than in TTRPGs, only 39% said that they were “compassionate” or “very compassionate”, 33% said “equal capacity”, and 26% identified as “cruel or “very cruel”. On the surface, this suggests that even if Internet anonymity doesn’t encourage “Trolling”, it at least indicates a reduction in empathy.

And yet, when asked about the amount of abusive or disruptive behavior that MMORPG players had experienced beyond the normal scope of play, 47% of the survey-takers stated “Some Extent”, 10% said “Considerable Extent”, 4% said “Great Extent”, and 39% said “Not At All”. And while this would indicate that a 61% majority had received some form of online harassment, it is also the case that 87% of the total respondents categorized their experience at the lowest two levels of severity possible. Furthermore, despite the claim by 45% of respondents

that they did not know anyone within their game of choice when they started, a majority of players felt that they had established significant, real-world relationships during the course of their gaming. Over 32% said that these were “Somewhat Significant”, 31% said they were “Moderately Significant”, and 20% said they were “Very Significant”. In an optional section, many talked of having made strong friendships over vast geographical distances, with some having met them in real life. Finally, of those who had been playing for more than three years, 77% felt more confident in their playing, 71% were more collaborative, 54% were more competitive, and 66% were willing to play outside of their comfort zone.

Limitations: As an objective descriptor of personality, this method used in this study is not without flaws. Even under the promise of anonymity, it is possible that many respondents tailored their questions towards more socially desirable traits in certain areas. This might explain survey results with participants who are deeply ethical, extremely funny, highly patient, confident, and generally work well with others.

In addition to the issue of objectivity in player self-perception, it must be noted 75% of the TTRPG began their groups with pre-existing friends, while only 17% reported doing so with strangers. A survey of campaigns consisting largely of strangers would be needed to better determine if TTRPGs can establish relationships as well as they can develop and maintain them. Another possible issue is that players who had a negative experience with TTRPGs might not take the time to fill out the survey, thus skewing the results in favor of the positive.

For MMORPGs, it can be difficult to get a sense of how large a sample survey might be needed to represent the gaming population. Unlike TTRPGs, which follow the same basic rules and overall objectives, the style of gaming can vary wildly for each online game. Whether fighting against the computer or against other players, the whole of WoW is locked into a binary

war of “the alliance” vs. “the Horde”, the choice of which is entirely dependant on your initial character selection. In EVE Online, there are thousands of player-managed corporations that PCs can join, opening up an entirely dimension of intrigue and deception, as well as a different emphasis on the gaming experience.

Future Research: Scope and penetration are two major variables open for exploration. The number of participants in both online surveys can be vastly expanded in order to secure a more accurate reading of gaming culture. Participants might also be required to identify themselves in order to see how anonymity affects survey answers themselves. Additionally, deeper research might be conducted on a smaller number of case studies, incorporating direct interviews with relevant participants.

Conclusion: While the anonymity of MMORPGs can tempt players to engage in anti-social behavior, this does not diminish from the net positive effects that online games have on establishing lasting and significant relationships. While the culture and rule structure of TTRPGs tends to encourage characters of greater complexity and introspection than MMORPGs do, Internet anonymity and the sheer number of participants encourages greater social interaction in online gaming.

This anonymity allows players to be more brazen in their behavior towards one another, but the diminished importance of role-playing results in players being held more accountable for their actions. While this can tempt some to engage in Trolling and cyber-bullying, it also allows acts of benevolence and friendship to seem more genuine, or at least more grounded in the real world. MMORPGs are “games”, yet at the same time “real” in that it they are unscripted and unchanging. Their locked, indifferent rules and physics do not allow for the flexibility and forgiveness that a DM might grant in the elastic liminal space of a TTRPG. While the stakes for

online interactions are often quite lower than those in non-gaming circumstances, they are nonetheless filled with the possibility of intellectual connection, emotional resonance, and lasting importance.

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