

Since the dawn of the Internet, game publishers have been drawn to making games where people play online with or against each other. One such online game genre that has become popular is the MMORPG or Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game. A MMORPG typically is a persistent virtual world where players can explore, fight and socialize all in the context of a game. One of the fastest growing markets of players to enter MMORPG gaming are women. According to researchers, several major themes have emerged from MMORPG games that have attracted female players, even if the game was not originally designed with women in mind. A player's ability to socialize within the larger game world and immerse themselves into the world are several key factors that attract female gamers to MMORPG games and will affect future development of these games.

People are social by nature. The creation of games that tap into people's social nature are one factor that will attract women into MMORPG gaming. In a 2001 NY Times article Patricia Pitzer is quoted as saying, "What women are finding so interesting about these games is that they provide a sense of community and social structure that you don't see in other games" (Laber, 2001). Researcher Nick Yee of The Daedalus Project (2005, p. 6) calls this "the social component". By talking with other players in a friendly way or helping new players, social players create a friendly environment that is less intimidating to female players. Further these social interactions can create relationships between players and encourage working with others to accomplish a common task. These components are especially important when you consider the multiple social aspects within MMORPG games. As Taylor (2003, p. 22) points out, "MMORPGs put the user in many settings: within a guild, amongst intimates, amongst acquaintances, amongst

strangers, with enemies and opposing guilds, with teams, within message boards, and within particular servers”. These various settings create the community that affects the player’s ability to socialize. A positive community can attract female gamers to the social aspect of the game and allow them to comfortably interact with the community. It decreases any anxiety they may be feeling about playing and allows them to enjoy and become part of the game.

The second aspect of MMORPG games that attract female players is the immersion factor. Immersion can mean many things to different gamers and is separate from social interaction. Yee (2005, p. 8) states “The Immersion subcomponents revolve around story-line, role-playing, fantasy, customization and escapism and are independent of the Socializing motivations”. This means a player can be very involved in aspects of the game while controlling the amount of social contact they have with other players. One critical aspect for the success of a game is its story line of a game but it is not the only aspect. A good story line allows women to immerse their character into the overall game story and play a role in it. Yee (2005, p. 7) describes role-playing as “being immersed in a story through the eyes of a character that they designed” while customization is the ability for a gamer to control the appearance of their character. Both of these immersion components can lead female gamers to identify with their characters. The immersion factor of “games provide unparalleled opportunities to play with one’s identity and to ‘try out’ new ones” (Turkle, 1996, p. 117). The games can give women a chance to explore aspects of their personality they normally would not express in public through the game fantasy. The character they create is crafted in such a way that it appears to be part of the overall game story yet the character also contains aspects of the

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player's own personality. The level of detail a player creates helps build the fantasy and allows them to escape reality through the game.

Game producers have begun to take note of women playing MMORPG games saying "they did not design the games with women in mind and have been surprised at the response" (Laber, 2001). Game designers should take note that while the majority of women may be looking for socialization and immersion factors in a game, they should not assume all women are looking for those factors. As Haynes (2005, p. 4) states "ironically, such research might also subtly reinforce gender stereotypes, by focusing on games that, with their potential for social interactions, are assumed to appeal more to women".

Citations

Hayes, Elisabeth, (2005, June). *Women and Gaming: Gendered Identities at Play*. Paper presented at the Games, Learning, & Society Conference, Madison, WI.

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