

**Beyond Fun in Games: The Serious Leisure of the Power Gamer**

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## **Abstract**

### **Beyond Fun in Games: The Serious Leisure of the Power Gamer**

**Mark Silverman**

Over recent years, considerable scholarly attention has aimed at exploring the forms of played sociality emerging out of the digital spaces of Massive Multiplayer Online Games. Yet, a central limitation of the research thus far is the tendency to generalize to the experience of a ‘casual gamer’, while the radically different experience of the more extreme player type known as the ‘power gamer’ has gone virtually undocumented.

Blurring the line between work and leisure, power gamers take their play very seriously. They demonstrate such intense levels of commitment and perseverance, that they are often cast as deviants, seen as all too willing to compromise every basic valued moral and personal principle, along with several bodily necessities such as sleeping, eating and exercise, all in exchange for success and personal gain in a video game.

Yet, how can we explain their intense level of perseverance? What are their motivations? How can we explain the development of such intense commitment to a social world where participants almost never meet face to face? By using concepts from sociology, social psychology, and leisure studies, my project aims at understanding some of the processes at work which may help to provide some answers to these questions. Through my ethnography of *Everquest*, using both participant observation and interviews, I explore the intense culture of commitment of the power gamer as it is shaped through a digitally mediated serious leisure pursuit.

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## Chapter I

### Introduction

*It is said that outside of space and time, an entity known only as The Nameless exists, and that this being created all that there is and was and will be. It is also written in ancient texts that from His mind sprang not only the universe and its countless suns and worlds, but also a myriad of sentient, powerful, yet finite creatures whom one such as a man, or elf, or dwarf, would call a god. In aeons past came one of these gods upon the world of Norrath; Veeshan, Crystalline Dragon and ruler of the Plane of Sky, found this world pleasing and deposited her brood onto the frozen continent of Velious. With one swipe of her claws, Veeshan opened several great wounds upon the surface of Norrath, staking her claim to this promising new world. Dragons then walked the land and flew the skies, powerful beings of great intellect, wisdom and strength. Thus began the Age of Scale. In time, the other gods noticed Veeshan's work...they too came to Norrath, intent on leaving their mark... It is in this age you find yourself, an age filled with wonder... You're in our world now!<sup>1</sup>*

If the brief passage above appears to the reader as if it were torn from the pages of some fantasy fiction novel, or perhaps excerpted from the script of a recent Peter Jackson movie, it might be a surprise to discover that for millions of people around the world, the land of Norrath is only partly fiction. A fictional geographical location yes, yet a place where real people of all ages converge daily; a place to explore, make friends, conduct business, do battle against evil forces and discover magical treasures that await therein; a place both unreal and real; a veritable heterotopia (Foucault, 1986). In March of 1999,

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpted from the original Everquest instruction manual.

with the release of the video game *Everquest* (EQ), the land of Norrath opened its digital Tolkienesque storybook-like gates to the public for the first time, and nearly 12,000 people walked through. By March 2002, it was the biggest gaming phenomenon in North America (King & Borland, 2003), claiming 350,000 subscriptions with over 100,000 players playing simultaneously during peak hours (Herz & Macedonia, 2002). Welcome to the digital spaces of Massive Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs), where shared fantasies break from the mind to become daily lived realities.

That the digital gaming industry has been enjoying a veritable ‘boom’ over the last decade is well known. As a leisure pastime, video games have now risen to equal (or have surpassed) the status of the film and music industries in terms of revenue, customers, and employees (Kirriemuir, 2002). Moreover, across North America, Europe and Asia, it is now estimated that almost three quarters of people under thirty have played a digital game (Bryce and Rutter, 2001). Yet, as one of the fastest growing subgenres contributing to this market share, the figures surrounding MMOGs are nothing short of astonishing in terms of their growing social significance. For example, Blizzard Entertainment recently announced that the paid subscription base for their immensely popular title, ‘*World of Warcraft*’ (WoW), has now exceeded five million paying customers worldwide. Moreover, according to one recent demographic study which queried over 1000 WoW players, the mean participant age fell at 28.3 years (Yee, 2005). Certainly, these significant figures herald the arrival of many new and interesting research questions, as MMOGs are obviously having a profound impact on the leisure practices of a multitude of both youth and adults in contemporary digitally mediated societies.



## **The Shared Virtual Spaces of MMOGs**

What are MMOGs and why have they become so popular? Emerging from their cultural roots in the popular pen-and-paper “Dungeons and Dragons” type role playing games of the mid 1970’s, MMOGs allow millions of players from around the globe to become simultaneously immersed into self-contained fantasy or science fiction themed worlds. The worlds are immense spaces, spanning hundreds if not thousands of virtual miles, containing cities, towns, forests, oceans, deserts, mountains, and mythical creatures, all rendered in vivid three-dimensional state of the art graphics. In contrast to the traditional ‘arcade style’ home console games where the ludic environment begins and ends with the press of the power button, the worlds of MMOGs are persistent, meaning that they continue to bustle with activity regardless of whether or not a particular individual happens to be logged in. In other words, the play spaces of MMOGs can remain populated with players, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. Yet, the contrast to their offline counterparts does not end there.

Whereas it is characteristic of most video games for the player to assume a pre-determined identity, taking on the role of Super Mario (of Mario Brother’s fame), Lara Croft (Tomb Raider), Tiger Woods (Tiger Woods PGA Tour 2005) or any number of other pre-fabricated personas, in MMOGs players must create their own; a mythical rendition of the self commonly referred to as a ‘character’ or ‘Avatar’. As Castranova (2003) aptly describes,

When visiting a virtual world, one treats the Avatar in that world like a vehicle of the self, a car that your mind is driving. You “get in,” look out the window through your virtual eyes, and then drive around by making your virtual body move. The Avatar mediates our self in the virtual world: we inhabit it; we drive it; we receive all of our sensory information about the world from its standpoint (p.5).

Through the Avatar, the player is able to assume their own uniquely customized in-game identity, selecting its gender, race, physical features and even its religious alignment from a wide array of options made available. The player must also select the Avatar's 'class', loosely definable as its primary occupational role. For example, one may choose to take on the role of stalwart warrior, cunning thief, devout priest, or powerful wizard. In original *Everquest* there were a total of fourteen classes that players could choose from, each alternative having its own specific strengths and weaknesses. Class selection is particularly significant however, as player interaction in the gameworld occurs on the basis of these roles more generally. Lastly, and perhaps most significantly, the player is able to name their own Avatar, a personalized final touch on the digital host to the mind and spirit of the player.

Beginning with the newly created 'level 1' Avatar, players adventure out into the gameworld to do battle with a series of computer generated opponents commonly referred to as MOB's<sup>2</sup>. Each time a player successfully defeats a MOB they gain experience points (XP), the accumulation of which advances the Avatar through game levels, each subsequent level increasing its inherent physical attributes and combat abilities. Moreover, each triumph yields a chance for players to discover treasure hidden on the corpse of the defeated enemy. Loot can include not only cash rewards, but also magical equipment, including weapons, armor, trinkets and artifacts that can either be equipped onto the Avatar to enhance its physical attributes and combat abilities, or sold to other players in the gameworld for virtual currency. As MMOGs generally operate on a 'risk versus reward' principal, the more dangerous the encounter, the more valuable the

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<sup>2</sup> A MOB in the context of an MMOG refers to a non-player character or monster that is both mobile and aggressive to players.

loot the enemy can possess. Thus, despite there being no explicitly defined game trajectory, the primary objective of most players involves the accumulation of both XP and 'loot', which function jointly in allowing deeper exploration into progressively more perilous areas of the gameworld, in order to encounter increasingly more difficult foes, in order to discover increasingly more valuable loot and so on; a rather tautological cycle of play that continues ad infinitum as the gameworld is constantly evolving and growing through added developer content and expansion packs.

As players pass through this sequence of increasing power and wealth, they are provided a real sense of career progression. Those who work hard enough are able to augment their status in the virtual community to the extent of becoming known to others as the most powerful beings in the gameworld. Now, it should be noted that achieving such distinguished a status does not come easily, without cost, nor is it experienced by most players. Hence the usage here of the terms 'hard work' and 'career'. While these terms are normally considered antithetical to the leisure experience, the augmentation of status in MMOGs requires the investment of substantial amounts of time and effort. So much time and effort that many players begin to characterize their play as a second job, the distinction between work and play becoming increasingly blurred (Yee, 2006). Yet, in contrast to the real world where the dominant ideology of Western culture inextricably links 'hard work' to success and wealth when it is in fact rarely quite that simple, in MMOGs, those who work hard enough are able to become the hero. As such, perhaps part of the reason that MMOGs have become so popular lies in their ability to act as a powerful medium through which self-enhancing identity construction can occur; a place

where individuals are able to fully experience 'the dream' that can be so elusive for so many in real life.

Yet, similar to the real world, in MMOGs, the achievement of high status is not something that can be accomplished alone. As players advance in level, and begin to explore the more perilous areas of the gameworld, they are typically required to work together in groups in order to meet their objectives. While many of the initial encounters in game are designed as solo missions, they soon begin to require small groups of five or six players, eventually requiring 'raid' forces of forty or more players to tackle the 'high end-game' content. As every class has its own strengths and weaknesses, efficient groups typically require a combination of classes all working together in an intricate division of labor, the attributes of one tending to balance out the deficiencies of another, and vice versa. For example, warriors, through both their innate defensive skills and their ability to wear steel armor known as 'plate', are best at mitigating damage dealt out by attacking enemies. Thus, they are normally in the front lines of battle, their role being to keep the MOB's attention off the much more fragile cloth, leather and chain wearing classes. As such, they are often referred to as 'tanks'. Warriors, however, have no ability to heal themselves, and must rely on the priest classes, whom while fragile, have innate healing abilities, their role being to keep the group alive. As neither of these classes has exceptional damage dealing capabilities, they both rely on those who can dish out a high amount of 'damage per second' (DPS). Damage classes include wizards, rogues, rangers and monks, whose role it is to kill the monster in as expedient a manner as possible. Thus, and in moving towards dispelling the stereotypical myth of the video game as a solitary and isolating leisure pastime, MMOGs players can rarely 'bowl alone' (Williams,

2006). Through the games increasing demand for player interdependence, a 'social world' is formed, complete with its own economy, argot, moral code and subcultures.

According to Unruh (1980), a 'social world' can be defined as a diffuse constellation of actors coalesced into a particular sphere of interest. It is diffuse in that a social world is not limited by territory or formal group membership, but rather is characterized by voluntary identification and participation; the freedom for the participant to enter into and depart from them at will, even doing so completely unnoticed. As social worlds can operate on local, regional, multiregional, national or even international levels, it is quite common in complex societies for people to belong to multiple social worlds simultaneously (Stebbins, 2001). As participants can be, and often are spread out over vast amounts of territorial space, social worlds are rarely brought to life solely through face-to-face interaction, but instead are often sustained largely through forms of mediated communication; "reliance on channels of communication rather than spatial, kinship or "formal" ties" (Unruh, 1980, p.279). While acknowledging that his definition has been employed under several guises, closely relating to concepts such as 'activity systems' (Irwin, 1977), subcultures (Gordon, 1947; Cohen, 1955) and even communities within communities (Goode, 1957), Unruh (1980) argues that previous applications have been insufficiently generic or have failed to encapsulate the scale and encompassment to which these phenomena may escalate.

Because participation in online gaming is indeed a voluntary pursued sphere of interest where participants are free to come and go as they please, and because the possibility of social convergence and interaction occurs primarily through a digitally mediated form of communication, MMOGs can conceivably be postulated as the

archetypal model of Unruh's conceptualization. Yet, the concept of social worlds according to Unruh is not necessarily limited to leisure pursuits, but can be attributed to a wide array of social organizational spheres of interest, including religion, sexual orientation and industry. Moreover, downplayed in Unruh's conceptualization is the proposition that every social world can contain multiple sub-worlds; coalitions of actors coalesced into a single social world, yet socially sub-divided from one another by their own special set of constructed norms, values, beliefs and performance standards (Stebbins, 2001). As such, a more useful and complete theoretical model I found which may be employed in conceptualizing the digital worlds of MMOGs on a grander scale, while still incorporating the very useful social world perspective of Unruh, is Canadian sociologist Robert Stebbins' 'Serious Leisure' model.

### **What is Serious Leisure?**

Stebbins (1992a) defines 'Serious Leisure' as, "the systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer activity that participants find so substantial and interesting that, in the typical case, they launch themselves on a career centered on acquiring and expressing its special skills, knowledge, and experience" (p.3). While Stebbins (1992a) distinguishes between amateurs, hobbyists and career volunteers, particularly relevant to the present discussion is the delineation between amateurs and hobbyists.

According to Stebbins (1992a), amateurs, typically found in the leisure worlds of art, sports, entertainment and even science, must be understood as being locked into an interdependent system of relations between professionals and publics; what he refers to as the Professional-Amateur-Public (P-A-P) system. That is, amateurs are guided by the

standard of excellence set by their professional counterparts and are inevitably compared to their professional counterparts by their own publics.

In contrast, hobbyists lack this professional counterpart. Although they can occasionally have a public who take interest in their pursuits, they are generally not considered part of the interdependent P-A-P system. Stebbins (2001) identifies five hobbyist categories: collectors, makers and tinkerers, activity participants (in noncompetitive, rule-based pursuits), players of sports and games (in competitive, rule-based activities where no professional counterpart exists), and enthusiasts of the liberal arts, defined as “the systematic and fervent pursuit during free time of knowledge for its own sake” (Stebbins, 2001, p. 29). Gibson, Willming, and Holdnak (2002) suggest that the additional category of “sports enthusiast” should now be included, based on their research on University of Florida football fans. Being that there is no recognized professional body for MMOG players, they can not be said to operate within a P-A-P system, and thus can safely be placed into the category of hobbyist. However, the distinction of whether or not MMOG play can be considered a competitive or non-competitive endeavor remains unclear, and likely depends on the participant’s orientation towards the activity.

While the term ‘career’ is normally reserved to describe the general course of progression of one’s working life, Stebbins uses it in a broad sociological sense, following Goffman’s (1963) elaboration of Moral Career, implying a sequence of transformations of increasing or decreasing statuses or accumulations or retrogressions of reward or prestige, progressing from a starting point and continuing over the course of one’s life in a leisure activity (Stebbins, 1992a). A serious leisure career is distinguished

by stable participation in a structured activity over an extended period of time, including the occasional need to persevere past limiting obstacles. It is through this accumulated history within an activity, as well as through a considerable effort in acquiring knowledge, training and skill associated with the pursuit, that participants gradually become known to others as a sort of ‘expert’ in the field. In turn, participation within the activity becomes a salient factor towards the construction of self-identity. Participants experience durable benefits and rewards including self-actualization, self-expression and self-enrichment, and speak proudly in presenting themselves in terms of their pursuits. Through the sustained, deeply personal investment, inconsistency becomes an unattractive option, as the participant comes to develop an emotional attachment to the norms, values and beliefs of the social world comprised of similar enthusiasts (Morden, 2001); a commitment to what Stebbins (1992a) refers to as the ‘unique ethos’ of the community.

Serious leisure is typically contrasted against casual leisure, which is defined as “immediately, intrinsically rewarding, relatively short lived pleasurable activity requiring little or no special training to enjoy it” (Stebbins, 2001, p.58). Examples of casual leisure include such banal activities as catching a nap on the couch, strolling through the park, engaging with passive media such as watching television or listening to music, or engaging in casual social conversation with friends. Thus, a casual leisure activity is distinct in that it typically plays a less significant role towards identity development, does not offer any sort of career trajectory as implied by the serious leisure framework, and almost certainly does not manifest any special social worlds amongst its partakers.



As such, whether or not all video game play is to be considered a form of serious leisure is certainly open to debate. While traditional console or arcade style games are interactive and do involve the development of some skills and knowledge associated with game play, due to their relative linearity and predetermined play trajectory, the knowledge required is often of a more or less limited nature. Moreover, as traditional type games are typically relatively short lived solo or duo playing experiences, the notion of a participant developing a career based on such play experiences, or developing an emotional attachment to the norms, values and beliefs of a subculture comprised of similar enthusiasts becomes somewhat difficult to imagine. However, as I have already discussed above, MMOGs are games of a different ilk. As has already been mentioned, it is quite common for players to understand and refer to their game progression in 'career' like terms, often viewing it as quite similar to the progression they experience in their own lives (Simon, 2006). Furthermore, due to the incredible size of the gameworld and the openness of game play, the volume of knowledge one is able to accumulate can be quite immense. This can include knowledge of such things as 'class' abilities and limitations, battle strategies, territorial maps and knowledge of game artifact statistics, a short list which barely skims the surface of game knowledge one can accumulate which can facilitate advancement through the gameworld. Beyond practical game knowledge, and because communication in these spaces most often relies on the typed word, players must also develop the ability to type quickly and clearly in often hectic play environments. Due to the inherent social features of the games and the required player interdependence that develops, a player is also required to learn the gaming argot and social etiquette required for dealing with others in the digital space. This MMOG feature

speaks directly to what has already been implied more generally, that emerging out of the social world of MMOGs are several player subcultures that unite on the basis of shared norms, values, beliefs and performance standards. As such, it becomes fairly simple to understand MMOG play as being a discrete form of digitally mediated serious leisure.

In MMOGs, the subcultural distinctions that manifest tend to revolve around different player-type categories, several of which have been identified in the literature. For example, while not focusing on MMOGs specifically, Bartle (1996) outlines four player archetypes based on play preferences manifesting in MUDs that have come to be used in games studies more generally as a basic categorization of player types:

Achievers, Socializers, Explorers and Killers. More recently, Yee (2005), extending on Bartle's work, provides a basic taxonomy of player motivations in MMOGs, breaking them down into three primary aspects of play: Achievement, Social and Immersion.

Yee's work is especially relevant in that his three motivational categories draw closely to the three player-type distinctions as recognized by the players themselves: power gamers, casual gamers and role-players respectively. Yet, while these taxonomical designations are very useful for the organization of player behaviors in a broader sense (Simon, Boudreau & Silverman, 2006), they tend to gloss over the processes at work by which players come to designate themselves into a particular category, the boundary maintenance players engage in to maintain their distinctiveness, as well as their socially constructed claims to authenticity. Furthermore, they tend to ignore the ways in which these categories act to stratify every MMOG social world.

In addressing the issue of social stratification, Stebbins follows Unruh (1980), suggesting that in every serious leisure pursuit, there exist four types of participants

which can be categorized in terms of level of involvement and seriousness: strangers, tourists, regulars, and insiders. Strangers are those who demonstrate little commitment to actually participating in the social world itself, but are necessary to its existence through providing a special service that facilitates its continuation. In terms of MMOGs, game programmers, producers and promoters, computer technicians or graphical artists might fall into this category.

Tourists are temporary participants who participate in the social world transiently; “they come on the scene momentarily for entertainment, diversion, or profit” (Stebbins, 2001 p. 8). In terms of MMOGs, this category might include journalists who review video games, the most transient of players, or a particular player type known as the ‘farmer’; one who participates in the gameworld solely for the purpose of acquiring and selling virtual property for real world money.

Regulars routinely participate in the social world, and may even be seen as having significant degree of commitment, although they tend to not demonstrate exceptional devotion or excessive levels of commitment towards it. Stebbins (2001) suggests that most serious leisure participants within any given activity tend to fall into this category. As such, the very existence of any given social world may largely depend on its regulars. In terms of MMOGs, it is within this category that one would likely place the player type typically referred to as the ‘casual gamer’.

It is only those who demonstrate exceptional devotion to the social world who fall into the category of ‘insider’ or ‘devotee’ (Stebbins, 2001). The category of ‘devotee’ is distinguished from the ‘regular’ in that involvement in the activity becomes a near total life-encompassing endeavor. Insiders not only absorb knowledge about the social world,

but also create and disseminate it. The category of 'devotee' is as close as one can get to achieving 'amateur' status without the existence of a professional counterpart. They can also be considered as those who stand the most to lose if and when a social world fails (Unruh, 1980). In terms of the social worlds that emerge out of MMOGs, it is within this category of 'devotee' in which one would situate the player type commonly referred to as the power gamer.

As Unruh (1980) aptly noted, whether manifesting in the worlds of art, fashion, sports, professional associations or prison inmates (cf. Becker, 1976; Karp et al., 1976; Goode, 1956; Irwin, 1970), sociologists who study social worlds have traditionally tended towards examining the so called 'regulars', documenting their experiences as a generic form of involvement. Certainly, this status quo seems to have remained intact in much of the research being done on the social worlds of MMOGs thus far. Certainly, over the last decade, the increasing popularity of MMOGs has garnered considerable academic attention. While the field of research is still in its relative infancy, the emergence of professional journals, conferences and a rapidly developing corpus of literature in the broader field of game studies is testament to its promise. Investigations already include analyses of such gaming phenomenon as the multiplicity of online identities (Turkle, 1996), discrepancies between apparent game goals and actual player behaviors (Jakobsson & Taylor, 2003), trust and communication in virtual worlds (Heide Smith, 2003) and the extension of MMOGs into the real world through the selling of virtual property for real world currency (Castranova, 2002). Some researchers are even countering Putnam's (2000) "bowling alone" hypothesis via Oldenburg's (1989) vision of the 'Great Good Place', heralding MMOGs as a new and inclusive digitally mediated

‘third place’; a virtual space that enables informal sociability and the creation of broad but weak social ties beyond the constraints of time and geographic location (Steinkuehler & Williams, 2005). Yet, a central shortcoming that seems to continuously beset much of the research thus far is the limiting tendency to generalize play experiences to a generic gamer rather than trying to understand the various subcultural distinctions that emerge out of these digitally mediated social worlds (Taylor, 2003). More often than not, this limitation is revealed through research that generalizes to the experience of the regular ‘casual gamer’, while the radically different experience of the devotee ‘power gamer’ tends to get glossed over or completely omitted.

To date, I am aware of only one paper that has attempted to tease out the specificities between ‘casual’ and ‘power gamer’ player types (Taylor, 2003), an especially peculiar absence in the literature given that it is quite common for players to regularly acknowledge these typological categories while emphasizing a grand bifurcation between play experiences. Given that the social worlds of MMOGs represent a relatively new field of study in the social sciences, perhaps it is somewhat understandable that the growing body of literature has focused on mapping out a general lay of the land instead of on delineating the fine-grained distinctions between player types (Taylor, 2003). Yet, I strongly suspect that the tendency to gloss over the playing experience of the power gamer can also partially be attributed to some of the difficulties involved in researching this segment of the gaming population.

### **What is a Power Gamer?**

Prior to discussing some of the problematics involved, perhaps the best place to start is with the question: what is a power gamer? While no firm, all encompassing

definition currently exists, in rendering a most basic understanding, the term 'power gamer' refers to an MMOG social identity; a socially constructed self-classification defined by ideal-type characteristics abstracted from group members in a relational and comparative environment (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Yet, the precise interpretive meaning attached to the social identity varies depending on who you talk to.

For some players, power gamers are the heroes of the MMOG social world, the ones who define the limits of what is possible in the game. Fully dedicated to fast progression, and always striving to remain on the cutting edge of game content as it emerges, power gamers appear to place a great deal of significance on achieving an elevated level of fame and social status in the gameworld, expending enormous amounts of personal time and effort towards defeating the games most difficult encounters. They spend so much time in the gameworld developing both playing skills and game knowledge that "they can almost at times appear *too* good... understand[ing] how things work at a level the average player does not quite grasp" (Taylor, 2003, p.6). As it is typically power gamers who are the first to tackle the newest and most difficult game content, they become the authors of successful battle strategies and 'tricks of the trade', their websites often acting as repositories of game knowledge for legions of gamers to follow. They are also often perceived as vital contributors to the state of play in any given MMOG, acting as unofficial (and unpaid) game testers. As it is most often power gamers who are the first to discover problematic issues within the games most elaborate events, is not uncommon for developers to closely monitor power gamer guild progress in order to fine tune the play experience for the majority of players who will only arrive to enjoy the content at a much later time. For examples of this symbiotic relationship, one need

not look further than the developers of *Everquest* who, in the games early days, would often engage in open message board dialogue with renown power gamers, or personally attend their in-game events as observers in order to monitor and improve their state of play. A more recent example would include the developers of *World of Warcraft* who, during the games production, extended group invitations to prominent *Everquest* power gamer guilds to test the game, and who hired two of *Everquest's* most prominent players to act as project development consultants.

Yet, for all too many others, the power gamer ethos is something to be reviled, their playing habits seen as fanatical, their attitude towards 'play' dismissible as the antithesis of fun. Power gamers are often perceived as rogue players, never willing to compromise with others, never willing to share, and most certainly perceived as not playing the game for the purpose of making any new friends. Assuming the power gamer identity involves coming to perceive oneself as an 'insider' amongst an elite, or 'Uber', group of players. Those who are not deemed worthy enough to grace the inner circle are often treated as inferiors, a particularly abhorrent feature of the culture for many of the excluded. They appear to approach the game with such a megalomaniacal disposition such that to the outsider, they are often perceived as all too willing to compromise every basic valued moral and personal principle, along with several bodily necessities such as sleeping, eating and exercise, all in exchange for success and personal gain in a video game; a group "who play in ways we typically don't associate with notions of fun and leisure" (Taylor, 2003, p. 3). As power gamers exhibit a play style that appears to border on the psychopathological, they are often derided by the 'outsiders' as the winners in a video game at the all too expensive cost of losing at 'real-life'. As Taylor (2003) notes,

The casual gamer is often seen as someone 'with a life' who invests only moderate amounts of time in a game while the power gamer appears as an isolated and socially inept player with little 'real life' to ground them (p. 2).

Having sketched out this most basic of outlines, I now return to my prior assertion that power gamers represent a particularly problematic segment of the gaming community to research. Because their in-game social world tends to be rather inward looking, many of the intricacies of their day to day experiences remain shrouded from public view. Thus, I posit that that in order for a researcher to get close enough to seriously examine all the inner workings of the culture, they themselves must become insiders by fully participating and at least partially assuming the identity. Becoming an insider, however, can require a commitment of up to, or even possibly exceed, forty hours of play time per week for months on end, a kind of extensive rapport building that can be somewhat prohibitive for many researchers with families, personal responsibilities and private interests beyond their professional lives. For this reason alone, perhaps it is unsurprising that only one paper aimed at outlining some of the specificities of the power gamer ethos has appeared thus far.

However, the problem of accessibility appears to get exacerbated by the prevalent social discourses which surround extreme video game play more generally. Rather ubiquitous in our society are depictions of extreme video gamers as individuals who, through their intense participation in what is largely perceived as a non-productive activity, act to increasingly marginalize and alienate themselves from greater society. These popular beliefs tend to stem from the predominant academic discourse which has largely been aimed at vilifying excessive video game play, portraying extreme gamers as responsible for social ills (Anderson & Dill, 2000), or as individuals with low self-esteem



or low social status who immerse themselves into online spaces in order to seek refuge from the helpless realities of their everyday experience (Kurapati, 2004). As these representations are not lost on the players themselves, power gamers are often reluctant to share their stories with outsiders, particularly with researchers, seemingly concerned with the deviant frame into which they are all too frequently cast. As I engaged in the current research project, all too common a question I would receive from would be participants went something along the lines of, "So you are going to talk about what a bunch of losers we all are?" Thus, despite my having already gained access to the community for observational purposes, finding willing interview participants still proved to be a particularly difficult task.

Power gamers are extreme in their play habits, of this there is little question. Yet, I remain particularly suspicious of these deviant frames which have become so omnipresent, as they seem to merely echo those which have surrounded so many new technologies that have roared into such cultural prominence. The telephone, the film industry, radio and television, all of these have had their day in the limelight in being targeted as culprits in the decline of Western civilization (Williams, 2004). Rather than simply abandon power gamers into the slippery discourse of deviance and pathological addiction, I propose that they constitute a digitally mediated leisure subculture; an intense culture of commitment (Tomlinson, 1993) created around a very social video game, quite similar to those which surround other bastions of Western popular culture such as the automobile, sports or music. In other words, following both Stebbins and Unruh, I argue that power gamers constitute the insiders of a social world which manifests out of a digitally mediated form of "Serious Leisure".

### **Serious Leisure in the Literature**

Over recent years, considerable scholarly attention has been aimed at documenting the unique social worlds that emerge through various serious leisure activities. In terms of amateurs, investigations have included American Kennel Club participants (Baldwin and Norris, 1999), the pursuit of archaeological knowledge by non-professionals (Taylor, 1995), and tournament bass fishermen (Yoder, 1997). In terms of hobbyist activities, we have seen inquiries into the worlds of stamp collectors (Gelber 1992), gardeners (Crouch, 1993), dollhouse and model railroading builders (Olmstead, 1993), Canadian barbershop singers (Stebbins, 1992b), and Civil War re-enactors (Mittelstaedt 1995). The social world of the power gamer, however, presents some new challenges to the serious leisure model, to which none of the activities listed above can possibly compare.

First and foremost, all of the research thus far has aimed at documenting experiences in serious leisure activities which are generally deemed as more socially acceptable. Certainly, of all the serious leisure research listed above, none of the activities are typically subject to the type of suspicious scrutiny and dark forebodings that video game playing has been subject to. Hence, much less is understood as to why an individual develops such extreme commitment and devotion to a leisure activity where the costs are widely perceived as more serious and long term (and indeed sometimes are). Stebbins (1992a) suggests that continued participation can be explained using the 'profit hypothesis', whereby the rewards associated with participation, such as enhanced self-image and a sense of belongingness, exceed the costs. Costs that have been covered in the literature include disappointments, dislikes, and tensions (Stebbins, 1992a), monetary

costs (Baldwin and Norris, 1999) and conflicts between family members who do not share the same leisure interests (Gillespie, Leffler, and Lerner, 2002). While MMOG participants can certainly experience all of these, other serious costs can include physical problems such as carpal tunnel syndrome, dry eyes, migraine headaches, irregular eating patterns and sleep deprivation, to more serious personal problems such as lost work days, failing school grades and the neglect of real-life personal relationships (Orzak, 2006). Throughout my research I was continuously confronted by players who reported experiencing such costs, yet quite generally, they remained committed to their endeavors. Furthermore, extreme gamers are often subject to a stigmatizing dominant discourse which portrays them as ‘addicted’ deviants. As research on serious leisure has typically focused on participants who are not subject to the cost of such degrading and stigmatizing societal portrayals and pressures, it remains less clear as to why an individual would continue participation when they are. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, of all the research conducted thus far on serious leisure, all have focused on activities that occur within the context of face to face interaction. No attention has yet been paid to digitally mediated forms of serious leisure. Given the manner in which virtual technologies are increasingly impacting the human leisure experience in very dramatic ways, several fundamental and important research possibilities begin to emerge.

### **Purpose of the Study and Thesis Overview**

The main purpose of this research project is to analyze and describe the rarely documented, and often misunderstood, digitally mediated serious leisure social world of the power gamer. From this, I hope to generate some understanding of the processes at work, both social and psychological, that can help us explain the development of the

power gamer identity, the motivations of the players and the mechanisms that contribute to the development of such intense forms of commitment. This will involve mapping out the player's career trajectory, from neophyte to power gamer, in order to examine the different stages through which the individual passes en route towards the 'power gamer' identity becoming salient. A final aim of the research will be to examine the extent to which power gamers reflect the characteristics of serious leisure as described by Stebbins (1992a; 2001).

The research goals discussed above will be explored through the following chapters: In Chapter II, several theoretical orientations will be identified which will serve to provide meaningful insight into the world of the power gamer, as well as serve to sensitize the reader as to my conceptual foundations. These include: Social Comparison Process Theory as developed primarily by Festinger (1954); theories of commitment as elaborated upon by Becker (1960) and Shamir (1988); and two theories of Identity as developed primarily by Stryker (1968) and Tajfel (1982). Chapter III will briefly explore the methodology used in the research, as well as discuss some of the procedural and ethical implications involved. Chapter IV will analyze the career trajectory of the power gamer, divided into four sections: The Early Game; The Middle Game; The End Game and Decline. Chapter V will provide a summary of findings and conclude with a discussion on the future of power gaming and implications for future research.

## **Chapter II:**

### **CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS AND REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE**

One of the primary goals of the present study lies in documenting the experiences of those who demonstrate intense commitment to MMOG play in order to further understand the patterns and meanings associated with this type of serious leisure involvement. Towards this end, several theoretical perspectives are introduced in this chapter which will serve to inform and guide the research analysis and help to sensitize and orient the reader to the conceptual foundations of the study. The major theoretical perspectives include: Social Comparison Process Theory; Theories of Commitment; and Theories of Identity. These are all interpolated by the Serious Leisure theoretical framework as developed by Stebbins (1992a; 2001).

#### **Theory of Social Comparison Process**

Social Comparison Theory explores the processes at work by which individuals construct a self-concept based in part on how they compare to others on particular dimensions such as personal traits, opinions and abilities. While the theory is primarily attributed to the work of Festinger (1954), its conceptual underpinnings can be located in the early Symbolic Interactionist thought of individuals like Cooley (1902) and Mead (1934) who posited that the self-concept is greatly influenced by people's perceptions of how they are viewed by others (Suls, 1977). Festinger (1954), however, was unique in extending these previous abstract theoretical propositions into what is largely considered the first full scale theory of self-evaluation, complete with nine testable hypotheses, many containing multiple corollaries and derivations (Wheeler, 1991).

The basic principle of the theory rests on the suggestion that there exists a human drive to evaluate one's opinions and abilities (Hypothesis I, Festinger, 1954, p.117). In terms of abilities, Festinger (1954) posited that an individual's first comparative inclination is toward objective, non-social evaluative points of reference. For example, in the realm of sports, one's speed can be objectified by using a stopwatch, or one's shooting ability determined by how many bull's-eyes they can hit in relation to how many shots they fire. In such cases, if the individual's motive of evaluation centers on the question of whether or not they are able to accomplish a specific action or task, a non-social "objective reality" is available that may be used as a standard of comparison. However, objective realities are not always available nor do they often provide any information about one's relative standing in a broader social context. When the motive of evaluation centers on the question "how good am I", results must often be compared to those of others (Festinger, Torrey and Willerman, 1954). In other words, when physically objective means of self-evaluation are unavailable or are ambiguous, the individual will move to evaluate themselves through social comparison with others (Hypothesis II, Festinger, 1954, p.118).

A second principle of the theory focuses on the selection process involved in choosing comparative others. Festinger (1954), argued it beneficial in terms of accuracy of assessment for individuals to compare themselves to similar others rather than to those who are vastly divergent from themselves. Moreover, situated in Western cultural norms which value unidirectional upward improvement, individuals often expect to perform at least as well as similar others, and are pleased when they do and displeased when they do not (Goethals, 1986). Hence, when an individual concludes that his or her ability is below

a similar comparative target, and if the dimension under evaluation is valued, this will likely lead to motivation to decrease the perceived discrepancy. Similarly, if the evaluation yields a positive result, yet the individual is only slightly above the similar comparative target, the motivation, again situated in Western cultural norms, is to increase the discrepancy and protect superiority (Festinger, 1954). Thus, social comparison can function in two directions: upward or downward.

More recent research in the field, however, has suggested that both direction and level of divergence of selected comparative target can vary depending on the particular context. For example, Singer (1966) suggests that individuals will often look to extremely divergent others when they are unfamiliar with the dimension under evaluation in order to define the range of possibilities available on the given dimension. Similarly, Mettee and Smith (1977) suggest that not only can divergent others often yield better information, but can also be a preferred target when comparison to similar others yields unfavorable assessments; “if comparison with a similar other provides unfavorable information about the self, it is more painful than unfavorable information obtained through comparison with a dissimilar other – who can simply be dismissed as irrelevant” (Wheeler, 1991, p.11). Moreover, it is suggested that people typically harbor unrealistically positive views of themselves, and thus, often bias the self evaluation in a manner that is self-serving, either through changing direction in comparison, or by selecting a different attribute upon which to compare (Wood and Taylor, 1991).

While Festinger (1954) emphasized the use of social comparison as a means of evaluating ability or opinion, Wood and Taylor (1991) suggest that comparison can often serve other goals which can have an influence on both direction and selection of attribute.

For example, if the goal is self-improvement, then upward comparisons may act to teach or motivate one to do better on the dimension. If the goal is toward self-enhancement, a comparison to another who is inferior or less advantaged might be preferred in order to make one feel better about oneself or one's situation. Ruble and Frey (1991) agree that self-evaluation involves different goals at different times, but add that these goals can change systematically across development, both in terms of skill development and stage of life. Similar to Stebbins (1992a) identifying four career stages that amateur serious leisure practitioners usually go through prior to career decline, Ruble and Frey (1991) identify four basic phases in skill acquisition that influence interest in and use of self-evaluative information. These phases include the following: first, initial task assessment and the definition of goals (defining and identifying important dimensions and garnering information that will foster improvement towards mastery); second, initial competence assessment (shift from knowing what the task is to assessment of capacities and limits); third, maintenance of adaptive strategies (the development of sub-goals and plans and focusing on progress towards said goals); and finally, completion of goals and reassessment (reassessment of competence level and development of new goals or disengagement).

As to how Social Comparison Theory relates to the present study, it must be noted that the variable of 'ability' or 'skill' in an MMOG is ambiguous by the nature of the game itself. Whereas in a traditional video game, one might typically have a 'high score' to which they might look for evaluative information, no such means is available in MMOG play. Moreover, whereas the emphasis of skill development in more traditional video games often lies in improving one's hand-eye coordination and developing fast



reflexes in often repetitious gestures, neither of these are very significant factors in MMOG play. Instead, ability or skill in MMOGs, as mentioned earlier, is largely associated with one's developed knowledge about the expansive gameworld. However, knowledge, like opinion, is by its very nature an extremely ambiguous variable for one to self-assess, even comparatively. In MMOGs, a much more salient means of assessment resides in the social comparison of the more visible status symbols which manifest in the gameworld.

The idea that signs and symbols play a paramount role in processes of social comparison is nothing new. As Goffman (1951) would remind us, status symbols "visibly divide the social world into categories of persons" (p.294-295). Furthermore, it is generally well understood that the display of signs and symbols, particularly those associated with occupations and hobbies, play a large role in the formation and affirmation of identity, (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Schlenker, 1984). Being that MMOGs are hobbyist activities that lend themselves well to identity construction as well as to the creation of social worlds, we should not expect to find anything different. In terms of power gamers, I argue that social comparison of both status and esteem symbols carry highly significant motivational implications, as both play orientation and level of commitment appear to be fueled by a desire to reduce any perceived discrepancy between the participant themselves and visible superiors, as well as by a desire to maintain or increase the perceived discrepancy between themselves and visible inferiors. Thus, I posit that the social comparison process is significant aspect in the construction and saliency of the power gamer identity.

## **Theories of Identity**

Existing theories of identity divide into two interrelated but conceptually distinct perspectives: Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory (Stets & Burke, 2000). While Identity theory is generally considered sociological and Social Identity Theory largely considered psychological, much like Social Comparison Process, both are rooted in the Symbolic Interactionist tradition. Both orientations suggest that the self should be regarded as a multifaceted social construct rather than as an autonomous psychological entity existing independent of and prior to society. Moreover, both view identities as reflexive in nature, only acquiring self-meanings within the context of social interaction and through a process of social comparison (Burke and Reitzes 1981). Still, despite these similarities, the two perspectives differ in significant ways.

Identity theory is primarily a microsocial perspective which explains social behavior in terms of the reciprocal relationship between self and society (Hogg, Terry & White, 1995). According to Identity Theory (Stryker, 1968), an identity refers to the identification of the self as an occupant of a particular role, and the self-incorporation of a set of associated normative meanings which come to define what is expected of an occupier of the role (Burke and Tully 1977). The set of meanings then act as a reference for future behavior. Having a particular role identity involves acting to fulfill the expectations associated with the role, the information acquired from and sustained through individual reciprocal role relationships within a wider social structure (Goffman, 1961). Since others typically respond to a person in terms of their role identities, they form the basis for self-meaning and self-identification (Hogg, Terry & White, 1995). Moreover, as people tend to be involved in many diverse individual social relationships,

they tend to occupy several roles simultaneously, thus generally having multiple identities (Stryker 1980). As such, Identity Theory posits that the multiple identities involved in the self-concept will be organized in a hierarchy of salience; “the importance of an identity for defining one’s self relative to other identities the individual holds” (Shamir, 1992, p.302).

As Stets & Burke (2000) point out, much of the work stemming from the Identity Theory perspective has been interested in understanding the likelihood of an individual activating one identity rather than another in a given social context. It is generally held that identities positioned at the top of the hierarchy, the more salient identities, are more likely to be evoked, and hence are more likely to affect behavior. It is also posited that, along with affecting behavior, highly salient identities tend to be more self-defining than those closer to the bottom and thus can have a significant impact on an individual’s motivation, self-esteem and level of psychological well being (Stryker, 1968; Hogg, Terry & White, 1995; Thoits, 1991). Connected to this concern is the idea of commitment to a particular identity; the greater the salience, the stronger the commitment to the role. Stryker and Serpe (1982) propose that level of commitment to a particular identity is influenced by the number of persons to whom one is tied through that identity, as well as by the strength of those ties. In other words, commitment to a particular identity will be greater if the individual perceives that many of their important social relationships depend on them occupying the particular role, and that its abandonment would result in the loss of an important social network (Hogg, Terry & White, 1995).

In contrast, Social Identity Theory is primarily a meso-social perspective, positing a distinction between a personal and a social identity (Tajfel, 1982; Tajfel and Turner,

1986). Social Identity Theory begins with the assumption that identity is derived primarily from group memberships (Brown, 2000), and thus is largely concerned with how people come to see themselves as members of an “in-group” in relation to an “out-group”, a categorization of the self derived through the similarities and differences perceived through a comparison process. Having a particular social identity means seeing oneself as similar to others within a social group, behaving like others in the group and seeing things from the group’s perspective (Stets & Burke, 2000). Similar to Identity Theory, Social Identity Theory acknowledges that people are typically affiliated with a wide array of social groups that vary in relative overall importance towards defining the self, yet that each group membership represents its own social identity that prescribes how one should think, feel and act as a member of that group (Hogg, Terry & White, 1995). The concept of salience remains significant, yet where Identity theorists contemplate identity salience in terms of probability of activation in a given situation, Social Identity theories have tended to merge the concepts of activation and salience and equate them; “a salient identity is an active identity” (Stets & Burke, 2000, p.229). Hence, whenever a person perceives themselves as a group member rather than as a unique individual, the social identity is said to have become salient. As Hogg (2001) points out, the key question for social identity theorists thus becomes, “what causes social identity as opposed to personal identity (self-conception in terms of unique properties of self or of one’s personal relationships with specific other individuals), or one social identity rather than another, to become the contextually salient basis of perception, thought, and behavior” (Hogg, 2001, p.188).

While a full discussion on the processes at work which underlie social identity salience delves deeply into the psychological literature and thus moves beyond the scope of this sociological review (for a full discussion see Oakes, Haslam & Turner, 1994), it is important to highlight one of the affective outcomes of a social identity: in-group favoritism and out-group derogation. According to Brown (2000), it is common knowledge that group member's are prone to view their own groups as superior to other groups and, as a consequence, are quite prepared to discriminate on such a bases. The most common understanding of this behavior is derived from the hypothesis that there exists a desire for maintaining a positive evaluation of group identity, and that a "primary means of achieving this end is via biased comparisons with other groups along dimensions which are particularly relevant to that identity" (Mullen et al., 1992, p. 105); "that group members seem to feel better about themselves after engaging in such discrimination" (Brown, 2000, p.747). In other words, it is assumed that people have a basic need to evaluate themselves in a positive light in relation to relevant others, and that self-enhancement can be achieved by individuals making group comparisons along stereotypical dimensions which favor the in-group, rather than on other dimensions that might be less becoming; a process extremely similar to the widely held tenet in Social Comparison research which argues that people typically harbor unrealistically positive views of themselves, and thus, often bias the self evaluation in a manner that is self-serving (Ruble & Frey, 1991). Hogg, Terry & White (1995) suggest that salient social identities are typically accompanied by a positive evaluation of others who share the same group-based identity, which in turn provides motivation for the in-group to adopt both cognitive and behavioral strategies for achieving or maintaining favorable

intergroup comparisons. That is, when a social identity becomes the salient basis for self-perception and self-regulation in a particular context, intergroup behavior tends to acquire competitive and discriminatory properties which manifest in varying degrees depending on the nature of relations between the two groups.

Yet, others suggest that group status has a significant impact on this process. As Sachdev and Bourhis (1987) note, when low status confers a negative social identity, thus constituting a threat to self-esteem, and when low status group members acknowledge the superiority of a high status group on valued dimensions of comparison, Social Identity Theory predicts out-group favoritism rather than in-group favoritism. Conversely, as high status typically confers a positive social identity and by implication a favorable comparison vis-à-vis low status out-group members on relevant dimensions of comparison, Social Identity Theory predicts that high status groups will discriminate against low status groups. While much of the evidence in experimental research has tended to support this hypothesis, demonstrating that ‘winning groups’ show reliably more bias than ‘losing groups’ (Brewer, 1979; Hinkle and Brown, 1990), Mullen et al. (1992) conclude that this will typically be the case only when considering ad hoc artificial groups (groups assembled for a specific purpose) as opposed to natural groups (such as groups based on ethnicity). Following Tajfel et al., (1971), Sachdev & Bourhis (1987) suggest that “the mere categorization of people into two groups is sufficient to induce intergroup discrimination” (p.278).

### **Social Comparison, Theories of Identity, and Serious Leisure**

Despite the slight differences in orientation between the two outlined theoretical approaches to identity, both have much in common and can be used in conjunction with

each other to explain a wide array of social phenomena. Both theories conceive of identity as a process of self-classifying through social comparison: how individuals view themselves versus others, either as individuals occupying particular roles, or as members of groups. In other words, where Identity Theory focuses more on individual similarities and differences, contrasting roles with counter-roles, Social Identity Theory focuses more on similarities among people who share a categorical affiliation (Williams, 2003). Hence, where Identity Theory tends to be more useful in explaining interpersonal behaviour and perceptions in interactive contexts, Social Identity Theory becomes more useful in explaining intergroup aspects of behaviour, such as conformity, group solidarity and stereotyping (Hogg, Terry & White, 1995). In following Stets and Burke (2000), I find a synthesis of both theoretical orientations useful in providing functional tools toward a more complete analysis of the processes at work in power gamer culture, on both the micro-level of the individual and the meso-level of their primary social units known as 'guilds'.

Furthermore, several of the qualities that define Serious Leisure imply a significant association between the chosen pursuit and its impact on participants' identity formation, both on the level of the individual and the group. The most notable examples include the durable benefits experienced by participants as outlined by Stebbins (1992a), such as the enhanced self-image, feelings of accomplishment, or the attachment to a community of similar others and the sense of belongingness that this experience can provide. Gibson, Willming, and Holdnak (2002) contend that the social identities which emerge through serious leisure are what act to provide that "we feeling", something they posit as seemingly lacking in an increasingly fragmented postmodern society. It has also

been suggested that positive affirmation of identity by others who occupy the same role or group in a leisure activity can lead to enhancement of self-esteem and positive emotional feelings about the chosen activity (Hoelter, 1983). In turn, this affect can act to reinforce the salience of the particular identity. Finally, serious leisure (Stebbins, 1992a, 2001) always involves a great deal of commitment (e.g., perseverance, a significant personal effort in acquiring special knowledge, training, or skill relating to the chosen leisure pursuit). Shamir (1992) offers evidence that identity salience is related positively to the level of effort and skill invested in the leisure activity; the more salient identity, the greater the probability that the participant will actively seek out opportunities to perform in terms of that identity. Thus, in terms of serious leisure, it can be hypothesized that the more one identifies with a particular role or group, the higher will be their level of commitment to continuance.

### **Theories of Commitment**

While it is not uncommon for the concept of ‘commitment’ to appear in discussions on courtship, marriage and work, as Shamir (1988) points out, only recently has it begun to appear in the literature on leisure. This perhaps due to the terms ‘commitment’ and ‘leisure’ being somewhat contradictory, even oxymoronic in their nature; “Leisure is commonly associated with spontaneity and self-expression, while commitment is used in association with self-control and restraint” (Shamir, 1988, p. 239). Hence, prior to infusing the concept into the present discussion, careful consideration as to its differing situational meanings is required.

In its common everyday usage, the term ‘commitment’ generally carries two distinct meanings, the first referring to the inability to back out of a line of action (e.g. he



can't back out now, he has committed himself), the second referring to a strong, personal dedication to carry out a line of action (e.g. he is committed to spreading the Gospel); the first carrying implications of constraint, the second implying freedom, choice and self-expression (Johnson, 1973). As such, the concept as employed in existing sociological and social psychological discussions tends to divide into two interrelated but conceptually dissimilar theoretical perspectives; "One refer[ing] to the material and social circumstances of the individual, the other referring to his or her internal state (Shamir, 1988, p.241). While the two dimensions have been discussed under different categorical names, following Shamir (1988), I will refer to them here in terms of their locus of motivation, either external or internal respectively.

External commitment is said to be salient when an actor feels obliged to continue in a consistent line of action, role performance or relationship by the conditions and situations in which they find themselves; "a decision dictated by the force of circumstance" (Selznick, 1949 as cited in Johnson, 1973). In this case, a perceived obligation is created by the actor who, by making an investment of sorts, has staked something of value, and whereby discontinuance is perceived as carrying too great a cost (Shamir, 1988). This type of commitment is typically associated with the work of Becker (1960) who, in examining the concept of commitment, identifies a process of mind which the actor evokes whereby the cost of abandoning a certain behavior is perceived as exceeding the costs of maintaining it. Referring to this process as making 'side bets', Becker (1960) offers this example,

People feel that a man ought not to change his job too often and that one who does is erratic and untrustworthy. Two months after taking a job a man is offered a job he regards as much superior but finds that he has, on the side, bet his reputation for trustworthiness on not moving

again for a period of a year and regretfully turns the job down. His decision about the new job is constrained by his having moved two months prior and his knowledge that, however attractive the new job, the penalty in the form of a reputation for being erratic and unstable will be severe if he takes it (p.36).

In evoking the 'side-bet', the actor has wagered something of value (i.e. their reputation) on being consistent in their current behavior (i.e. staying with the job for at least a period of a year). While making a 'side bet' in the example above involves a 'face saving' performance in light of culturally imposed expectations and norms, it is useful to note that external forms of commitment can also derive through monetary investments, as well as investments in identity. Whereas an example of the former might include the individual who, through signing a contract, risks the cost of litigation should they decide to not carry through with a particular line of action, an example of the latter involves the personal expectations created within a social context. For example, one may commit him or herself to a consistent line of activity by making verbal public statements and by representing ones self as someone who is involved in that activity (Shamir, 1988). In such a scenario, others who share the same role or group affiliation may indeed come to rely on the participant's continuance, or even depend on it. In turn, their expectations may act to influence said person's behavior towards continuance, as a switch in course would entail a loss of group identity as well as a diminished social network. As Goffman (1961) elaborated,

An individual becomes committed to something when because of the fixed and interdependent character of many institutional arrangements his doing or being this something irrevocably conditions other important possibilities in his life, forcing him to take courses of action, causing others to build up their activity on the basis of his continuing in his current undertakings and rendering him vulnerable to unanticipated consequences of those undertakings. He thus becomes locked into a position and coerced into living up to those promises and sacrifices built into it (p.88-89).

In other words, when an actor engages in a line of action involving others, and as they become aware of this behavior and begin to associate reciprocally on such specific terms, they may come to form normative expectations regarding continuance (Johnson, 1973). In summary, in external forms of commitment, we see the emphasis placed on the perceived penalties involved in ceasing or altering action rather than on the benefits of consistency and continuance (Shamir, 1988).

The second conceptualization of commitment differs from the first in that the locus of motivation towards continuance in a consistent line of activity, role performance, or relationship comes from the within the actor. In broad terms, the actor is motivated not by the weighing off of particular costs and benefits, but regardless of either, as the line of action acts to reinforce a salient self-identity. In other words, with internal commitment “the person is motivated to continue the line of activity...and to invest in it because it expresses or enables the attainment of his or her internalized goals, values and norms” (Shamir, 1988, p.244). Referring to this type of commitment as “role attachment”, Goffman (1961) notes:

The self-image available to anyone entering a particular position is one of which he may become affectively and cognitively enamored, desiring and expecting to see himself in terms of the enactment of the role and the self-identification emerging from the enactment. (p.89)

Thus, internal commitment can be said to be salient when an individual comes to define themselves in terms of the activity, role or relationship, something to which leisure activities, particularly forms of serious leisure, are particularly amenable. As Shamir (1992) suggests, leisure activities can act to reinforce identity three ways: 1) by allowing for the expression and affirmation the individuals’ talents and capabilities; 2) by allowing one to experience an increased level of social recognition; and/or 3) by affirming the

individuals' personal values. Through continuous reinforcement, the individual can become attached to the identity prompting them to continue in the associated behaviors; "once the identity is established, individuals become attached to it may resist its relinquishment" (p. 302).

As has been previously discussed, several of the questions which ground the current research involve the broader question of why power gamers show the intensely high levels of commitment towards play that they do. Moreover, several qualities that define serious leisure imply a significant association between identity salience and levels of commitment. As Stebbins (2001) states, "To understand the meaning of such leisure for those who pursue it is in significant part to understand their motivation for the pursuit" (p.11). Informed by the theoretical perspectives above, I aim to demonstrate how both forms of commitment, internal and external, act to motivate and coerce players into continuance in play. That is, I aim to demonstrate how, as the individual comes to assume the power gamer identity, developing an attachment to the goals, values and norms associated with the culture, they develop an internal commitment to their role, and begin to present themselves proudly in terms of their social affiliation. Yet, at the same time, they also become externally committed to one another to perform and act in a specific manner in order for success to continue and goals to be reached. Moreover, I aim to demonstrate how special mechanisms are constructed within power gamer culture which act to buttress both forms of commitment amongst participants.

## **Chapter III**

### **Methodology**

This study analyses the social world of the power gamer on three overlapping and interrelated levels: the personal level, the interactional level and the ‘mesostructural’ level. On the personal level, the research aims at exploring the social and psychological processes at work by which a participant comes to assume the power gamer identity, as well as the motivations and mechanisms at work which bring them to develop intense forms of internal commitment. On the interactional level, the research aims at exploring the creation of the social identity; how participants interact with each other, the nature and forms of this interaction, how this interaction contributes to the development of a group social identity, and how participants become externally committed as a result. On the mesostructural level, the research aims at exploring the unique ethos that emerges out of the power gamer social world; its structure, its commitment enhancing mechanisms, and its impact on the ‘outsider’ gaming community. In its totality, the research aims at providing a description of a digitally mediated form of serious leisure participation.

In working towards this goal, I employed a triangulation of theoretical perspectives and qualitative data collecting methodological techniques, including in-depth biographical interviews, participant observation, and qualitative content analysis. According to Denzin (1989), triangulation raises the rigor of a study through the use of a multiplicity of methods, which assist in capturing the best information possible for knowledge construction and development. In other words, by employing several different methodologies, data sources and theories, researchers attempt to achieve a ‘more accurate view’ of a subject of study, in an attempt to “overcome the intrinsic bias that comes from

single-methods, single-observer, and single-theory studies” (Denzin, 1989, p. 307). As an extensive overview of the theoretical perspectives used to guide the research was presented in the previous chapter, this chapter provides a brief description of the different methodological techniques used, provides rationale for their employment, and discusses some of the challenges and ethical considerations involved.

### **The Biographical Interview**

A primary method of data gathering employed during the research process was the in-depth biographical interview. A total of eight interviews were conducted by phone with key, purposively selected informants, each lasting between 90 and 120 minutes. In terms of sample selection criteria, most significantly, all selected participants did at one time, or continue to self-identify as power gamers. All selected participants began their MMOG gaming careers in the early days of Everquest. Although they all had prior gaming experience with arcade style console games or pen and paper type role playing games, their knowledge of MMOG play was rudimentary at best prior to their experiences with EQ. The sample consisted of only males, and while the gender skew is likely to be questioned, it should be noted that previous research has shown that women only represent a small fragment, approximately 16%, of the total MMOG population (Yee, 2005). Certainly from my observations of power gamer culture, female representation is significantly less than that, the culture being distinctly masculine. Still, despite their diminutive numbers, it is important to note that female power gamers do exist. Unfortunately, none of those whom I approached consented to participate, and I must acknowledge their omission as a limitation of the present research.

The interview schedule was designed to trace the participants playing career trajectories from neophyte to power gamer as they remembered it, while simultaneously inquiring into their 'real life' experiences and contingencies. As such, I was able to gather biographical data of both player as Avatar and player as individual. According to Sullivan (2001), life histories are particularly useful towards developing an understanding of the social world based on the perspective of the person or group being studied; "they permit the people being studied to play a large part in framing and providing meaning for their lives rather than having meaning and interpretation imposed by the observers" (p.332). While the data obtained through these types of interviews is typically not generalizable beyond the particular cases being studied, the advantage lies in producing richly detailed descriptions of people's lives, experiences and circumstances. Being that a predominant aim of this research is to provide a general description of the power gamers' digitally mediated social world, biographical interviews seemed well suited towards meeting this goal.

There are also several features of biographical interviews that make them a particularly useful method for studying an individuals experience in MMOGs. For example, previous research has demonstrated that MMOG players understand their play in terms of biographical time, either in terms of passing through game levels or in terms of different eras of game expansion (Simon, Boudreau & Silverman, 2006). That is to say, it is quite common for a player to make a statement like "I began to venture further from the main city at 20", where "20" indicates the level of the character, or position different phases of their career as occurring during the "Kunark" or Velious era<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> The Ruins of Kunark and The Scars of Velious are the titles of expansion packs brought out to add content on to the original Everquest package.

Previous research has also demonstrated that, like traditional biographies, EQ biographies are structured largely around social relationships of various kinds, including important friends and mentors, social networks and guilds (Simon, Boudreau & Silverman, 2006). Moreover, that the games are without ending and that, in the typical case, players are able to enjoy near limitless progression, it is not uncommon for players to live out their character careers over the span of many real life years. Jakobsson (2006) provides further support of the biographical structure of MMOGs, generating five distinct phases through which the player passes as they develop their Avatars; beginner, intermediate, high-end, endgame and death. Jakobsson's framework intersects well with Stebbins (1992a) five career stages of the serious leisure career discussed earlier. Finally, in addition to the notion of distinct serious leisure career stages is the hypothesis stemming from social comparison research which posits systematic changes occurring in both direction and use of comparative information as one progressively moves through stages of skill development (Ruble & Frey, 1991). Thus, biographical histories allowed for the interpretive analysis of important moments in the respondents gaming career by permitting me to signpost particularly important changes as they occurred throughout the development of the player, including changes in directions of comparative target selection, changes in the players' primary social groups, the various changing complexities of their social experiences, and changes in associated perceptions and behaviours.

Of course, with every method comes its own set of drawbacks. One crucial consideration that surfaces out of the biographical method concerns the considerable amount of subjectivity that emerges, and as a consequence, a lack of generalizability to



the broader public. However, in following Kennedy (2003), the goal here is not to “draw generalized conclusions which can be used to theorize the lives of many, but rather to understand the many and varied ways in which individuals negotiate social experience” (p. 120). That is, through the gathering of player biographies, I am able to highlight the many ways in which the game can be played and the culture understood. Being that this research rests on the basic constructivist ontological assumption that there exist multiple social realities which are inter-subjectively constructed, lack of generalizability was not a primary concern.

It should also be understood that the accounts generated through biographical interviews are not objective representations of meaning and action but rather retrospective accounts. Thus, another drawback to be considered is the validity of the memories of the players in terms of accuracy. It certainly was not uncommon throughout the interview process for players to get timelines, names and locations mixed up, as some of the questions required them reconstruct experiences that that occurred over five years prior. In order to overcome this, the descriptive memories of players were compared to other data, such as for example the memories of other players, the data gathered during my own observation/participation, and the informal qualitative content analysis of the meta-game; the many message boards and web sites exterior to the game itself. Moreover, prolonged engagement with the data and regular consultation and reconfirmation with participants assisted in ensuring that the data presented here accurately represents the participants’ voices. Furthermore, as Sullivan (2001) aptly notes, “errors in memory or selective recall may themselves produce valuable data in that

we may learn as much about people from how they remember or reconstruct their past as from their actual past” (p. 332).

Lastly, it should also be noted here that all interview participation was done on a purely voluntary basis, each participant being informed as to the purpose of the study and notified as to their rights as a participant prior to each interview as dictated by the guidelines for ethical research of Concordia University. All the names of players, Avatars, guilds and game servers have been altered in the presentation of this material in order to protect the anonymity of all who participated.

### **Participant Observation**

Participant observation has been a popular data collection method in the social sciences for decades, allowing researchers to gain close familiarity with a culture through prolonged immersion and active involvement in the daily activities of a group, community or organization. In other words, the method aims at understanding a particular social world from the perspective of an insider. As Streubert and Carpenter (1995) argue “One of the best ways to establish credibility is through prolonged engagement with the subject matter” (p.25). Yet as Fine (1983) points out, all too often sociological research has tended more towards the ‘observation’ side:

Perhaps the term “participant observation studies” is a misnomer. Typically these projects involve little “participation” in that the participant observer takes on the clumsily defined role of “sociological observer” [and] frequently participant observation studies read like studies based on in-depth interviews, with a few observations of behavior thrown in (p.243).

This limitation became all too apparent through my review of the current literature in game studies, as many of the writers appeared to have only cursory experience in actually playing the games. In terms of the present research, however, such is most definitely not

the case. Over the last six years, I have spent over 10,000 hours involved in MMOG play, most of it situated within the game *Everquest*, and much of it spent as a participant within the power gaming community. While the majority this time was not spent in the role of a researcher, I am not hesitant to posit my deep and intensely personal understanding of the social world upon which this project is based.

Specifically as a researcher, over the course of the study spanning the last two years, I participated extensively in four different gaming guilds primarily situated in *World of Warcraft*: two of which I identify as power gamer types, the other two non-power gamer types. Participation in the non-power gamer types was limited and sporadic at best, and as such, I was able to render myself practically invisible. I did not talk much in guild chat, participate on their message boards or attend any guild events. This did not pose any particular problem as guild events were extremely rare occurrences, if occurring at all, and participation in any form being completely non-mandatory. Moreover, the player base of these organizations tended to be rather unstable, with many players joining and leaving the ranks on a weekly basis. As such, and as the focus of this research aims primarily at documenting the experiences of power gamers, I felt no qualms about leaving my presence as a researcher unmentioned. Here, I was simply gathering anecdotal evidence against which I could compare and contrast the observations made in the power gamer sample.

In the power gamer guilds I engaged with, I chose to be as regular player as possible and as a consequence assumed the power gamer identity. This required me to play at least five days a week, attending guild raids for 4-6 hours a night as mandated by the guild policies, while also keeping my Avatar in compliance with other guild policies

(e.g. being the maximum level, obtaining special 'gear' necessary for certain encounters etc). As this schedule of participation continued over many months, play was at times exhausting. However, it did allow me to develop a fuller understanding (or at least to remind myself) as to what it 'feels like' to be a power gamer and the dedication and perseverance it entails. Yet, in twisting the old adage ever so slightly, with great knowledge comes great methodological and ethical responsibility. As such, some questions that are likely to arise involve such issues as 'neutrality of values' and 'the researchers influence on natural behavior'.

### Neutrality of Values

While it is often recommended that the researcher maintain a value neutral position during the research process, others argue that any hope of this is merely a façade; that research is seldom, if at all ever, truly value neutral (Fine, 1983). After all, it is not uncommon for researchers to select subject matter based on their own personal interests or extrinsic motivations. Furthermore, researchers do not operate in a vacuum outside of society, but are of course a product of society. Thus, various values, moral attitudes and beliefs are invariably bound to influence their thought processes (Berg, 2004). However, as Gans (1967) notes, "Overidentification is a major problem for the participant-observer, which may create such strong attachments to the population he studies that he fails to see undesirable elements in their behavior" (p.444).

The extent to which my own values affected my findings is quite difficult to ascertain. For example, coming into the research with previous power gaming experience, I may have been more sympathetic to the intense forms of play I aim at documenting. Yet, at the same time, I have no doubts that this is often equally and oppositely the case

for the researchers who never actually participate, yet subsequently report on forms of digital game participation. Thus, in a sense, I posit that any form of bias that crept unknowingly into my observations due to prior participation with the community will only act to provide some balance to the broader field of video game research in general. Moreover, in taking on the power gamer identity, I was required to abide by the groups norms and values. As they say, when in Rome, do as the Romans. Yet, I argue that such intense immersion in the field allowed me to construct better and more relevant interview questions, and allowed me to engage with research participants on their own ground through the trust and respect I was able to generate as a player amongst players. Furthermore, I argue that my assuming the power gamer identity provided me with the ability to interpolate a reflexive account of my own experiences into the narratives of those whom I interviewed. I believe that all this has led to a much richer descriptive account of the power gamer social world.

### The Researchers Influence

As is widely known, the very presence of a researcher can often be a problematic obstacle in conducting observation. Occasionally referred to as the Hawthorn effect, it has been demonstrated that when subjects are aware that they are being observed, it can lead to a change in their usual behavior (Berg, 2004). As Fine (1983) points out, “Sociologists have criticized all forms of participant observation, but particularly those projects which the researcher participates as well as observes, claiming that one’s presence inevitably alters behavior” (p.250-251). As such, many methodological texts advise the researcher to take a passive ‘invisible’ role in the group being observed.

That any form of participation within a group invariably has an effect on certain outcomes is not disputed here. For example, as a daily participant in guild events, I ultimately had a part to play in both the successes and failures of the team. Yet, I feel that that this was not an overly influencing factor on behavior or results. Although my presence as a researcher was often openly stated in both guild chat and on the guild message boards, I strongly feel that it was for the most part forgotten about; an erosion of visibility which Stoddart (1986) refers to as ‘personalizing the ethnographer-informant relationship’. In concrete terms, through the computer mediated non-face-to-face and general anonymous nature of the contact, as well as through the prolonged period of time over which it occurred, I became ‘one of the gang’; “the informants suspend[ing] concern over the research aspect of [my] identity in favor of liking [me] as a person [and player]” (Berg, 2004, p.163).

Yet despite this erosion factor, it should also be noted that many steps were taken in order to minimize my impact as a researcher. For example, I avoided becoming a dominant member of the group, maintaining as low a profile as possible and participating as sparingly in group chat as possible. I avoided influencing guild direction by becoming a ‘follower’, withdrawing from giving any input or advice in guild matters or strategy. In general, while recognizing that my role as a player did contribute in many ways, I feel that it did so as a nonspecific fellow player rather than as a sociologist.

### **Informal Qualitative Content Analysis**

Beyond the internal boundaries of each MMOG gameworld lies the meta-game: the multitude of player and developer run websites and digital bulletin boards used by the gaming community as communicative tools to disseminate both game knowledge and

personal opinion. As one of the aims of this research is to analyze the ways in which players interact, and how this interaction leads to the development of group identity, it was important to pay some attention to these external communicative forms. Towards this end, one of the useful methods employed during the research process was an informal qualitative content analysis of the meta-game. As Babbie (2001) notes, the main focus in qualitative content analysis lies in analyzing social communicative texts, including books, magazines, speeches, letters, and more specific to the present research, Internet bulletin boards and web pages, in order to discover “who says what, to whom, why, how and with what effect” (p.305). Yet, I use the term ‘informal’ as data obtained through this method was not subject to any explicit rules or criterion of selection as is required of more formal content analysis procedures, but rather was used primarily for its illustrative qualities in buttressing the data obtained from interviews and observation.

However, as Paccagnella (1997) points out, this technique of data collection on the Internet leads to its own ethical considerations, concerns which have thus far fueled much scholarly debate:

Scholars generally do not agree on common ethical guidelines: some feel that they have a moral obligation to obtain explicit permission from the authors for *publishing* logs in academic papers (e.g. [Marvin, 1995]); others collect logs without asking for permission but the logs are then only processed by statistical software and not read by humans [Danowski & Edison-Swift, 1985]; many others simply do not declare explicitly whether permission was obtained for their logs (e.g. [Reid, 1991]) (p.8)

While some argue that public posts should be treated like private letters, others argue that public discourse is just that, public, and that analysis of such content is akin to studying “tombstone epitaphs, graffiti, or letters to the editor. Personal? – Yes. Private? – No” (Sudweeks & Rafaeli, 1996, p.6). What is typically agreed upon is that researchers must

take precautions such as changing names, pseudonyms, or web addresses; “Changing not only real names, but also aliases or pseudonyms (where used) proves the respect of the researchers for the *social reality* of cyberspace” (Paccagnella, 1997, p.8). In addressing this concern, it should be noted that individuals who posted messages on these boards and websites were not identifiable to me in any way except through their screen alias, which in all cases was a pseudonym. Further measures were taken to protect individual anonymity, as all pseudonyms, guild names and server names were altered in the presentation of this material.



## **Chapter IV**

### **Analysis**

#### **The Career Trajectory of the Power Gamer**

This chapter presents the data gathered over the course of the research project as explored through the previously outlined methods: 8 formal biographical interviews; participant observation conducted over the last two years; and an informal qualitative content analysis of the metagame. According to Stebbins (1992a), serious leisure participants usually go through five career stages: beginning, development, establishment, maintenance, and decline. As such, this chapter develops a detailed analysis of the career of the power gamer as divided into four sections corresponding with phases commonly identified by the players themselves. The first section, titled ‘The Early Game’, examines the players’ introduction to the game *Everquest*, their initial play experiences, and some of the processes at work which acted to sow the power gaming seeds. The second section, titled The Middle Game, discusses initial social groupings and the trajectory towards the power gamer identity becoming salient. The third section, titled The End Game’ discusses unique ethos of the community; how players enter, the structure of the primary social unit, the mechanisms of commitment created, and the impact the rest of the gaming community. The final section discusses the power gamer career in decline, leading towards retirement. It is important to note that this section does not mean to generalize to the career experiences of all power gamers, but rather intends to demonstrate the existence of a career path, the contingencies that can occur, and some of the key moments encountered over a course of play that can span several months, or more commonly, several years.

### **The Early Game (Beginnings and Development)**

Corresponding loosely to first 20 levels of the Avatar, the early game is the period of initial task assessment and skill development, as well as the period of initial social contact with others in the gameworld; a period of “defining the nature of the dimension, learning what abilities and evaluative standards are involved, and adopting an orientation towards information that will foster improvement” (Ruble and Frey, 1991, p.81). As such, participants typically spoke of this stage in ‘learning’ terms: the learning of playing skills and game knowledge as well as learning how to communicate with others and of the social etiquette required. It is also the time where the neophyte player develops a sense of purpose within the game (Simon, Boudreau & Silverman, 2005). Because this is a period of considerable uncertainty, it is quite likely to be a period of low concern with self-evaluation as well as a period of low commitment as individuals engage in constructing the meaning of the task at hand. In other words, following Ruble & Frey (1991), it seems rather unlikely that the first question posed by someone entering into the MMOG world would be: how good a player am I? Instead, initial questions are likely to concern pragmatics: how do I play this game?; or what is the point of this game?

As they engaged in initial task assessment, the players I spoke with typically found their initial play experiences to be somewhat mind boggling. Despite coming into the game with previous video game experience, one’s entry into the world of Norrath can be a disorienting experience. The first thing that all players must grapple with upon entry into the gameworld is learning how to manage the extremely daunting ‘user interface’ (UI) (Jakobsson, 2006). The UI is the players window into the gameworld; the command center from which the player can both view and execute the actions and interactions of

their Avatar. Surrounding the window into the world are a series of buttons known as 'hotkeys' that can be clicked on in order to make the Avatar perform corresponding actions (attack, sit, stand, walk, run etc). There are also a series of hotkeys that can be programmed by the user to enact one of seventy-four different customizable physical or communicative emotes. For example, when encountering another player in EQ, one might want to enact the slash command '/wave' which makes the Avatar wave hello, or the '/hail' command which sends a greeting message (Hail Soandso) to the chat dialogue box of the player being greeted. Instead of retyping these commands for each new personal encounter, players can simply hotkey those most often used. Yet, beyond the window into the gameworld, perhaps the most salient feature of the UI, something that immediately grabs the players' attention upon entry into the game, is the rather pervasive chat window through which textual communication with others in the gameworld is conveyed.

Operating quite similarly to an Internet 'chat room' in the traditional sense, by executing specific typed commands, a player is able to send messages over a variety of channels. For example, in executing the '/say' or '/yell' command, the players' typed utterance is visible to anyone who is within a certain proximity to their Avatar. Other command executions, such as '/guild' or '/group' chat, result in less public communication, the text visible only to those in the speaker's clan or adventure party, regardless of distance. There also exists a private communication channel, the '/tell' command, where text is sent directly from one player to the next, again regardless of physical proximity. As the more public messages begin to scroll through the chat dialogue box mere seconds after entering the gameworld, quite common a first task for

the players I spoke with was to begin familiarizing themselves with communication system; a task that more often than not involved repeated 'reminder searches' through the accompanying game manual. Having become oriented to the most basic functions of the UI, it was time to begin exploring.

In *Everquest*, newly created Avatars begin their 'careers' in a home city, equipped with only the most basic of gear required to begin their journey: a small bit of food and water, a simple weapon and, the most flimsy of armor (a cloth tunic and cloth pants). The area immediately surrounding the home city, referred to as the starter or 'newbie' area is the place where players get the chance to cut their teeth on the many different commands available to them through the UI, the most prominent of which being the 'Attack' function. The starter area is rife with low level creatures (such as bugs and rats), the killing of which give the players their initial taste of experience points (XP). These points are accumulated on an 'experience bar' visible on the UI which indicates how many more points one must achieve before advancing to the next level. The higher one advances in level, the more XP is required to advance to the next, thus requiring increasingly longer periods of time spent towards advancement. While higher levels can take several days or weeks to advance through, at the beginning of the game, say roughly the first 10 levels, accumulating XP is easy, the first three or four levels typically achieved in the first hour of play. As each new level greets the player with a hearty "Congratulations" message and a sound commonly referred to as a "Ding", players almost immediately get introduced to a central goal of the game through a form of classical conditioning that would make Pavlov himself chuckle knowingly: the 'leveling up' of the Avatar.

For the players I spoke with, despite having had previous video gaming experience, it was quite common for them to discuss this learning period in terms of coming to the realization that much of their previously accumulated knowledge was, for the most part, non-transferable. As Drar, a former Everquest player illustrates:

I was of the impression that...hey, if I attack and I move around and I jump around, that I should be able to dodge things. Quickly you figure out that you better stand still.

Kaya recounts a similar experience:

Well yea, I mean, I couldn't do any of the...I could barely work my character, like the way it should be worked. I didn't know anything about the character. I just kind of ran around and killed rats in the yard...ya know

When asked how they began to learn the basics of what to do with their Avatar, the most common response given was both through trial and error as well as through observing other players around them. Yet, it should be noted that while observational learning as a method of acquiring relevant techniques and skills is considered a form of social comparison (Bandura, 1986; Ruble & Frey, 1991), this process is quite different and must be distinguished apart from Festinger's (1954) fixed selection of specific targets for the purpose of self-evaluation. As Berger (1977) notes "the mere involvement of others in setting a standard is not a sufficient basis for defining a standard as "social"...it is the discriminatory nature of model selection rather than the mere involvement of a model that defines the social aspect of the comparison" (p.211). As the initial levels are typically a solo playing experience, all self-evaluative information during this period is more likely to derive from comparisons with objective points of self-reference over time (e.g. initial level gains, monetary gains, initial combat skill point gains etc).

Another prominent theme of the early game that emerged through my conversations was player's speaking about feeling 'dwarfed' by the daunting size of the virtual world. Certainly this was a much larger, less constrained virtual landscape than what they had experienced in previous games, the world being immense with very few restrictions placed on where players may venture. However, typically, players quickly learn that they must explore slowly, in increasing distance increments corresponding with level. Venture too far from home too quickly and one can quickly become disoriented and lost. Perhaps worse than that, while the starter area contains creatures of appropriate level for players to engage in battle, beyond it lays increasingly higher level creatures against which a new player is yet unable to defend (Jakobsson, 2006). As most players tend to venture beyond the starter area almost immediately, if for no other reason but sheer curiosity, it is not long before they are introduced to a second prominent feature of MMOG play: death and the corpse retrieval.

The death of the Avatar in an MMOG is not a permanent state, and is a feature with which the players grow very much accustomed as they venture forward in the game. In MMOGs, much like many other video games, one's Avatar dies...a lot. Between levels one through ten, death is rather insignificant; if you die, you simply reappear with all your belongings at the gate of the starting city – nothing gained, nothing lost. After level 10, however, dying carries with it a cost, the Avatar now reappearing at the gates of the starting city with nothing. Unarmed and without any protective armor, the player must seek out their dead corpse in order to retrieve all of their belongings. Worse than that, the Avatar suffers an 'experience penalty' – a loss of some of the accumulated experience points. Die too often and level progression can become level regression. In

addition to the experience penalty is the associated time cost involved in seeking out the corpse. The worst case scenario involves the possibility of losing all of ones possessions permanently. If the corpse can not be located or if it rests in an area where retrieval is particularly difficult, after a certain amount of time it will decay, leaving the player to begin re-accumulating possessions from square one. While this worst case scenario occurs extremely rarely, and generally represents more significant a loss for players of much higher level, it was quite common for those with whom I spoke to discuss the 'fear' they experienced at these low levels; the fear of death, and the potential loss of possessions. In addressing my question on what made this game such a novel experience, Alerone illustrates this 'fear' of loss:

There was a fear involved in this game, something that I had never experienced in any other game...if you were going somewhere new there was the fear of dieing...I mean you would play games where there were save points, you could turn it off and turn it back on...this was the first game where that just wasn't possible. When you died, you lost a fair amount of time, your gear, your equipment, your money...you could lose it all.

Drar discusses this same sense of fear, describing it in a similar way. Yet, as was the case with most that I spoke with, fear was associated more closely with the loss of time involved:

It was way different than any other game, because even [level] one to ten took a good amount of time, especially when you are stuck with rusty short swords...and every time you died you got penalized. So staying alive was just huge as far as the biggest concern. You are scared of everything. You are so cautious. When I was playing it wasn't like I am gonna go out there and go AFK<sup>4</sup> wherever and if I come back and I am dead, oh well. It was like, you were worried that things would kill you...if you were to die in Everquest back then, you would lose something akin to a quarter of a level or half a level, and that was just awful, and you didn't want to do that because it was a waste of your time.

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<sup>4</sup> AFK = Away From Keyboard

Hence, death after level 10 is often perceived by players as a pretty serious event. As such, after developing rudimentary knowledge of the task at hand and usually after experiencing multiple deaths and corpse retrievals, players typically begin to figure out that safety lies in numbers, getting introduced to a third prominent feature of MMOGs: group play.

As mentioned previously, MMOGs are intentionally made social by design, each 'class' having both strengths and weaknesses which complement others in a group context. As players get introduced to the grouping aspect of the game, it is a time of learning one's class role and the role's of others in a group context, and consequently, is a period of initial identity construction. Realizing that one needs others to advance efficiently, but not yet having developed any stable personal network, the players that I spoke with typically engaged in seeking out random others; transitory and informal 'pseudo-friendships' (Beniger, 1987) which acted to facilitate advancement. Drar illustrates:

I remember, it started with the Willow Wisps that I started needing groups, because I realized...ok I can't take these, I need more people. I would just run along and meet someone and ask ... hey want to go kill something.

As players engage in these randomly formed groups, they are provided an opportunity to test out different class combinations in order to determine what works best in conjunction with their own class. As players generally present themselves to others in terms of their class, and as interaction occurs on the basis of these roles more generally, the early game is a period where players begin to construct their role identity through developing knowledge of the playing norms expected of both themselves and others in a group context.



Being an element generally absent in their previous gaming experiences, it was common for players I spoke with to identify this initial social contact with others as the feature which drew them deeper into the MMOG experience. In one of my interviews, Ibsen described his amazement upon realizing that “Every other character you ran into was someone else”. Darizra, a long time *Everquest* player and former power gamer, described the novelty of the game’s social aspect this way:

I remember back then it was just like, get a bunch of people and go to the Orc camp in East Commonlands and just kill what you can...you know? The experience wasn’t good but it was just like, Whoa there are so many people out here to group with, it was cool just the fact that you could meet other people and have so much interaction with them.

Similarly, another participant, Alerone, discussed the immersive nature of the games and the great degree of freedom he felt in his initial interactions with others; a freedom felt due to the perceived shroud of anonymity.

It was an experience outside of the real world; it definitely was something that allowed you to sort of get away. It was like watching a movie or reading a book but more socially interactive... You were living a book at this time with people that you didn’t know... There was a lot of things you could talk about without any real fear of these people being your next door neighbor. You could talk about anything you wanted and people had different perspectives. It was a wonderfully freeing experience from everything else in your normal social interaction in daily life

Thus, we get the sense here of the player being instilled with a sense of freedom through anonymity. Yet, despite the freedom perceived due to their real life identities being completely masked, players quickly learn that the Avatar’s identity is not. In MMOGs, an Avatar’s name can not be changed post creation, and hence similar to the real social world, players must quickly learn the social rules and etiquette required for interacting with others; lessons in the presentation of self in everyday [digital] life (Goffman, 1959).

While some of the social rules are made explicit by the Terms of Service (TOS) of the game itself, such as those prohibiting players from engaging in any threatening, abusive, or hateful racially or ethnically charged forms of communication, others are much more implicit; 'grey area' rules developed by players themselves and learned within the context of game play. These include rules against 'kill stealing' (intervening into another players fight for the expressed purpose of taking XP or loot away from them), 'training' (purposively leading monsters to another player for the expressed purpose of getting them killed), or channel spamming (engaging in repetitive incessant banter in the chat channels beyond what is necessary). While transgressing these rules are typically perceived as more serious social infractions in later levels, in the early game, most social violations can just as easily be chalked up as mistakes in play rather than as intentional malicious behavior. However, the most serious of violations involve transgressing against the socially constructed rules surrounding the distribution of in-game resources or loot. These include rules governing against 'loot whoreing' (treating other players unfairly in the distribution of loot in a group context), or the much more serious 'ninja looting' (stealing 'loot' from someone else's kill). While flagrantly violating the TOS can result in a suspension (or in extreme cases a permanent ban) being imposed on the players account by the games developers, violating socially constructed rules, particularly those which surround in game resources, can result in sanctions being meted out by the community at large, repeated violations often resulting in the Avatar becoming 'stigmatized'; a discrediting mark on the [digital] self which can result in a spoiled identity (Goffman, 1963). Typically, players are socialized as to the significance

of these social rules and the consequence for violating them quite early in the grouping experience. As Zeg pointed out:

You learned real quick on how to act in a group especially with like looting, you don't be a grabby person cause you get a reputation, and you were able to find out quickly that if you started doing that people would find out. If you called out that you were looking for a group people would say don't group with him, he's a loot whore.

Thus, as evidenced by his statement, players in the early game learn proper game behavior largely through played sociality, many of the ones I spoke with becoming quite concerned with how they perceived themselves to be viewed by others. Moreover, it is evident that players begin to understand the significance of loot and its connection to reputation early in their careers.

As the game becomes increasingly more social, and as loot acquisition becomes an increasingly more salient aspect of play, it is the time where social comparison becomes useful as an evaluative tool for determining ones place in the gameworld and the limits of what is possible in game. For the players I spoke with, comparisons usually took place on both symbolic and objective points of reference simultaneously. This became evident in players recounting stories about their development of role models. As players begin to venture further into the gameworld, it is typically not long before they begin to encounter others who are both higher level and visibly much different than themselves. They might, for example, see another player of much higher level wielding a particularly impressive looking weapon or donning a fancier set of armor. If the game is brand new and no such player is yet to exist, the focal point of reference is often a Game Master, paid employees of the games production company who are often visibly present in the gameworld during its introductory phases, and who are always at maximum level,

equipped with the games most visibly elaborate armor. Through my interviews, the reactions participants expressed to these early encounters ranged from “I was in complete awe” to “I was so jealous” to “It was that damned flaming sword”. Yet what remained true for all was the motivation these encounters provided. Zeg, who began playing *Everquest* in the Beta tests prior to official release, recalled his first encounter with a visibly superior other this way:

I played with Brad McQuaid<sup>5</sup> on the Beta server. I played with him multiple times and grouped with him once. That was fun because I was playing with one of the guys who designed the game. He had his green armor on and his flaming sword...what was his characters name...Aradune, that was it...that was fun... there were high levels around and you realized that if you wanted to be good you had to level up. I strove to get to higher level and my play time increased at that time...seeing Aradune with the Fiery Defender...that was cool. I really wanted to get that.

Thus, although Festinger (1954) argued it beneficial in terms of accuracy of assessment for individuals to compare themselves to similar others, my interview participants typically identified their earliest targets as those who were vastly divergent from themselves. Implicitly, it is quite plausible that encounters such as these acted to trigger a desire to be the one who inspired the sort of awe or jealousy in others that they themselves felt; a quest to be recognizable to others in the gameworld. What is certain is the significant impression left by these divergent others, encounters which evoked the most lucid recollections of memories, some of which were more than five years old at the time of the interviews. Drar’s comments on his experiences five years prior illustrate this outstanding recall:

The first 50 on the server was a guy named Lufazz, he was an ogre shaman. I remember being a level 15 in east commons and seeing him

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<sup>5</sup> Brad McQuaid was a lead designer of the original *Everquest* and its first expansion, *The Ruins of Kunark*. His Avatar’s name was Aradune

running alongside of the zone and everybody is freaking out that he is so high. And it just turned out that over time I would just send him tells and ask questions, and he was nice enough to respond. Then there was a paladin who was called Gwenn, a guy who played a half elf chick, and it was like, I was always trying to catch him, but I couldn't. Alkinaar had the first bone bladed claymore in the game. He was somebody who always had the best gear. Once again, I just started talking to him to find out stuff. He wouldn't give out information, so it was more like....kinda conniving in a way, but just trying to be friends because I knew eventually, by being friendly, you normally can find out more information from a person than if you beg for stuff.

While I found his detailed recollection truly astonishing, what emerges through Drar's comments is the purposive selection of targets which act to identify the boundaries of superior performance, as well as explicit evidence of his desire to reduce the discrepancy between himself and these visibly superior others as he begins to actively seek out their knowledge and advice. Yet, in one case, we see his desires and actions colliding with the counteractions of the superior other who, by not releasing information, demonstrates a desire to protect his superiority. Thus, Drar is forced to put forth effort in acquiring the knowledge he wants, in his case through engaging in what he refers to as "conniving" behavior. Therefore, explicitly, we may infer that for many, the 'awe' experienced through initial encounters with widely divergent others acted to heighten their interest in the activity, and prompted interest in increasing their knowledge about the gameworld.

According to Stebbins (1992a), a hallmark of the serious leisure participant is that they frequently put forth significant effort in acquiring knowledge, training and skills so that they may eventually present themselves to others as an expert in the field. As mentioned previously, due to their immense size, MMOGs require the acquisition and retention of vast amounts of information about the gameworld, useful in helping the player navigate through and prosper in the enormous virtual space. This is true for all

players, not just for developing power gamers. Yet, a commonality shared by most of the gamers I interviewed was that they began to spend a lot of time gathering knowledge at a very early stage in their careers, not only through sources inside the game as was the case with Drar, but also from sources outside the game. As Draveth describes:

Usually I was spending a lot of time on the websites looking for information. I would kind of switch between the game and that, or take breaks from the game and go on the websites if I needed to find something. I would take breaks and go on the websites...I can't remember what it was at the time...Caster's Realm maybe...I would go on there to look up stuff, figure out what I wanted to get and kind of model my character out in my off time.

Ibsen discussed his penchant for seeking out game knowledge in a similar way, however when searches from outside sources prove unsatisfactory, he engages in gathering and meticulously documenting his own knowledge of the gameworld. As he stated:

When I got up to level 10...somewhere around there, I began looking around on the internet to find information about quests, about the characters, about the classes...to understand the game more...to understand where to go to find the stuff I wanted to find. I ran across this gaming guide...the reason I looked at the guide was to just get maps, and I realized that many of the maps just sucked...so I made a map of Lake of Ill Omen in Photoshop that was very detailed and actually had relief where the mountains were...I just started making my own maps.

As alluded to above, while most players of MMOGs will put forth some effort in acquiring knowledge about the gameworld, the power gamers I spoke with differed in that knowledge development seemed to become an integral part of the game itself. Thus, my data appears to corroborate that of Taylor (2003), who noted, "While the casual gamer may visit a map site on occasion or peruse a bulletin board sometimes, power gamers are regularly consulting, disputing, refining, and building knowledge" (p. 10). Yet, what is significant here is that this penchant for seeking out knowledge manifests in

the early game, long before assuming the power gamer identity or even knowing what a power gamer is.

As already mentioned, in the virtual spaces of MMOGs, knowledge of the gameworld acts to facilitate advancement, as the more knowledge one is able to accumulate about the gameworld, the more proficient one is able to become. It is upon these cornerstones that the career of the power gamer is built. As they head into the middle game, the unique ethos of the power gamer begins to solidify, as players begin to construct their virtual identity, both perceiving themselves, as well as presenting themselves to others, as exceptionally skilled and knowledgeable players.

### **The Middle Game (Establishment)**

The middle game tends to be characterized by most players as the period they switched from learning to play the game to actually playing (Simon, Boudreau & Silverman, 2006). The game itself is no more complex than it was at level 10, yet, by the early to mid 20 levels, the 'fear' once experienced subsides, and players begin to move about the gameworld with increased confidence, traveling further over majestic landscapes and venturing deeper into cavernous dungeons. The question is no longer one of task assessment, determining the limits of what is possible or even competence assessment. Since by this point players have already begun to make a significant investment in play, both in terms of time spent in the gameworld and in the accumulation and development of skill and knowledge, and as they have already begun to make initial 'side bets' (Becker, 1960) on their reputation in presenting themselves to others as being skilled and knowledgeable players, we can assume that their competence level is already perceived as high, their level of commitment increasing. As Ruble and Frey (1991) note,

once a positive self-evaluation is reached as to one's competence, or when a commitment is made to a particular philosophy or identity, emphasis on diagnostic assessment information is instead turned towards competitive performance evaluations and self-monitoring of progress towards achieving particular goals and standards; "as long as the plans and sub-goals are met with some regularity, the sense of certainty provided by initial competence assessment makes additional assessment efforts unnecessary" (p.89).

Fueled by the desire to reduce the perceived discrepancy between themselves and vastly divergent others, the most pressing goal to mark the middle game for those I interviewed was presented almost unanimously and in no uncertain terms: reaching the level cap as quickly as the game design permitted. Reaching the level cap has many important implications for the power gamer. Not only is it the point in the game when the player is finally able to take on the most difficult encounters and begin to reap the most prestigious symbols of status available, but more significantly, it is the point at which they will have finally caught up in level with their role models and possibly even enter into their esteemed social circles. However, since advancing the Avatar through levels becomes increasingly more difficult, each subsequent level requiring greater amounts of XP to advance through, achieving the cap can often require many months, even years of play, making the middle game a much longer period than was the early game (Jakobsson, 2006). As such, it was quite typical for the players I spoke with to refer to the middle game simply as 'the grind'. As they began to intensely strive towards their goal, it was not uncommon for them to describe engaging in marathon like play sessions lasting between 6-12 hours a day, day after day, as they 'camped' in areas of the gameworld



killing monsters repetitively ad nauseum in their quest for XP accumulation. As Vonce illustrates in describing his leveling experience:

I probably played, you know, there were probably periods when I played 48 hours straight. Very little sleep and umm I would do that for multiple days and I would just, umm I couldn't even sleep because every time I closed my eyes I would see Everquest basically. I couldn't sleep very well. And, you know, I would probably umm, I mean, I guess early on I played those kinds of hours.

Yet, despite this intense personal commitment lasting over several months, players' memories of this period tended to be rather imprecise, remembered most prominently as a period "dominated by routine and boring game play taking up hours of "wasted" time from the player's life" (Simon, Boudreau & Silverman, 2006, p. 19). Yet, through some prompting in conversations, several features of the middle game began to emerge as a pivotal in the power gamer career.

Due to the game's increasing demand for player interaction and interdependence in order to achieve individual goals, a key feature of the middle game for the players I spoke with was the development of more firmly established social circles as opposed to the transient, short lived social interactions that characterized the early game. As such, it is often the time when players will join their first guild. The guild is the primary social unit in MMOGs, roughly definable as groups of likeminded individuals who band together in order to pursue shared goals. Guild creation requires a leader, referred to as a Guild Master (GM), and nine other players who together must co-sign a digital 'guild charter' made available either through provided in-game tools, or in the early days of *Everquest*, by sending an email to the games producers. Once officially formed, the guild name, or 'tag', hovers visibly over the heads of each member's Avatar, and the group gets its own dedicated chat channel through which all private group communication can

be carried out (Jakobsson, 2006). The GM is granted full control of the membership roster, having the ability to invite or disband whomever they desire. However, they may also appoint officers of the guild to help with organizational duties. Officers also have the ability to invite or disband members, with the exception of the GM or each other.

Like the players who comprise them, guilds tend to operate somewhere on a continuum between the most casual and most serious, the degree of which is typically correlated to the level of player commitment, the rigidity of leadership structure and guild admission policies. For example, while all guilds are structured in a top/down hierarchal fashion consisting of a leader and officers presiding over 'rank and file' members, the importance of these titles is relative to the climate in which the guild wishes to operate; the more serious the guild, the more significance placed on rank. Moreover, whereas admission to a more 'serious' guild typically involves some form of membership screening procedure, more casual guilds tend to accept almost any player into their ranks, regardless of level, class or ability, or do so based on friendship or family referrals. While a much more detailed discussion on the structure of extremely serious guilds is to follow, typically, guilds operating in the middle game who allow developing players into their ranks tend to be more 'casual' or family oriented, consisting of other mid-level players who band together primarily for the purpose of social interaction and to facilitate searches for other players to group with. As Ibsen describes:

With Everquest, you get to a point that...you have to be in a guild setting. You get to a point where leveling is very difficult the higher you go, almost to the point where it pays to be able to log in and have a group of people in a guild who might or might not be available, to exhaust that resource, before you start sending random tells to people you don't even know.

However, more important for the developing power gamer, as Taylor (2003) aptly notes, is “not just grouping, but getting *good* groups (productive ones in which you get a decent rate of experience and have minimal deaths and downtime)” (p. 12). As such, and despite many of them now being members of their first guild, a salient aspect of the middle game that began to emerge through my interviews with power gamers was the development of an ‘in-group’; small cliques of players who come to perceive each other as similar in terms of playing norms, values and performance standards. In concrete terms, the ‘in group’ consists of individuals who, either through lateral or upward social comparison, come to perceive each other as the most proficient players able to assist one another towards the accumulation of XP and capital resources in the minimum amount of invested time. Those who are not perceived as such are shunned as ‘noobs’ or ‘newbies’, a derogatory term meaning someone who is ‘new’ or without skill. Simply stated, the ‘noob’ is perceived by the power gamer as someone who is more likely to make errors in play that will slow advancement towards particular goals. Due to the primary goal being reaching the level cap as soon as possible, and due to the amount of play time now being invested, wasted time is extremely frowned upon. Drar’s comments illustrate the type of purposive selection that began for him during the middle game:

A better quality player knows how their class works. I knew the paladin inside and out...I became a selective person, I would only group with people I knew or knew of. You wouldn’t wipe as much, you didn’t have to do corpse recoveries. In Everquest dying was awful cause you could lose so much time. You could die and lose 2 hours of play.

On a similar note, Mastu describes how his tolerance level for mistakes in play seemed to grow increasingly thin during the middle game:

As I played...I became less and less tolerant of other people, and their annoyances and stupidity. I liked grouping with people who knew what

they were doing. I think it just went a lot better. I didn't like people that really didn't know what the hell they were doing

Hence, demonstrating proficiency and reliability in play, as well as demonstrating sufficient levels of accumulated knowledge about the gameworld is of the highest importance towards establishing and maintaining one's status as a member of the in-group, and thus minimizing the chance of being relegated to association with the out-group in order to pursue goals. As such, the middle game as a period corresponds well with what Stebbins (1992a) referred to as the 'establishment' stage of the serious leisure career; "practitioners enter into the establishment stage when they feel they have moved beyond the status of learner of the basics. In general, their task...to become established in their pursuit" (p.82).

Certainly, a prominent middle game theme that emerged through my interviews was the players' desire to develop a reputation as being amongst the best in their particular class, a feature of power gamer culture that was also noted by Taylor (2003).

As Zeg illustrates:

[I] wanted to be the best. The best of the best...I wanted the reputation of being one of the best, so I would help people that were better than me to try and move up. Most people who were lower than me I would just brush off... people would want you because they knew you were a better quality player.

Through Zeg's comments, we see evidence that upward comparison remains as a strong play motivator as he purposely begins to identify and engage with targets that he believes will help him advance in game and foster his reputation, disregarding those he perceives as inferiors. Evidence in the literature provides an explanation for such behavior, suggesting that highly competitive individuals who are motivated towards a goal are especially likely to engage in upward target selection in order to learn from those who are

more skilled or draw inspiration from their example (Wood & Taylor, 1991). Moreover, there is evidence in the research which suggests that that subjects' performance on a task improved when they were in the presence of someone whose performance was slightly better (Seta, 1982). In addition, Bandura (1986) showed evidence in his research on modeling that individuals often demonstrate improvement when exposed to successful models that are performing a desired behavior (Wood & Taylor, 1991, p. 28).

As the game becomes increasingly cliquish, we see the first evidence of the power gamer social identity begin to emerge. As was mentioned earlier, Social Identity Theory posits that identity is derived primarily from group memberships (Brown, 2000), and that having a particular social identity means seeing oneself as similar to others within a social group, behaving like others in the group and seeing things from the group's perspective (Stets & Burke, 2000); a categorization of self as a member of an "in-group" in relation to an "out-group" derived through the similarities and differences perceived through social comparison. Based on my observations, such 'in-group' favoritism and 'out-group' derogation is a salient feature of the power gamer ethos. Yet, a result, or side-effect of these classifications was the manifestation of an intensely competitive social climate amongst players competing for reputational status.

In a game that is without a set trajectory or definitive goals, players enter into a side-game of 'keeping up with the 'virtual' Joneses', striving to be the first amongst their now developing social group to hit particular career milestones, such as maximum level for example. It is a 'game' after all, and despite there being no way to do so, the mindset of those I spoke with turned towards the social 'win'. Festinger (1954) addressed the symptom of competitive behavior amongst similar others in his original statement,

arguing that it is the result of a social situation that never reaches quiescence; the unidirectional drive to self-improvement still operating, and the desire to reduce discrepancy constantly being countered by the desire to protect superiority. In many cases, the intense competition became a source of contention amongst players as heated rivalries began to emerge, often resulting in a high level of animosity developing particularly amongst those who occupied the same role. As Drar's comments illustrate as he reflects back on another player who played the same class:

Mellow is probably the single person I hate the most in any online game...because he was a paladin and I can't remember much other than that, except I had extreme hate...it was more hate through competition than being annoyed by the person...general talking crap

While a question remains as to whether or not Drar's sentiment of 'extreme hate' was mutual, its manifestation is congruent with Social Comparison theory which posits that people tend to compete most fiercely against those who occupy a role similar to their own (Festinger, 1954; Suls, 1977).

As competition intensified, another theme that began to emerge in the Middle Game was the increased level of conflict players experienced between their in-game aspirations and their real life obligations and relationships; conflicts which the power gamer must negotiate and persist through if they wish to maintain their goal directed trajectory. Developed through their intense desire to achieve their goals, the emergence of an 'in-group', and fueled by the intensely competitive social climate, the power gamer gets caught in a 'feedback loop' of commitment, as both internal and external forms begin to circle back on one another. Internally, the individual is "motivated to continue the line of activity...and to invest in it because it expresses or enables the attainment of his or her internalized goals, values and norms. Externally they get locked into the pattern

of behavior due to their verbal public statements and self-representations as one of the elite (Shamir, 1988). When the individual perceives that many of their important social relationships depend on them continuing in the line of action, and that its abandonment would result in the loss of an important social network, commitment intensifies (Hogg, Terry & White, 1995). The results of this can often be unfortunate, as incurred costs can be “ignored or discounted in order to maintain goal directed activity” (Ruble & Frey, 1991, p.90). Mastu’s comments best illustrated the serious consequences that can result:

I took the race to 60 incredibly seriously ... That was my freshman year in college, and I played Everquest a lot...too much. Like 8, 9, 12 hours a day and it really adversely affected my real life. Freshman year I got all C’s first semester, second semester I got a .5 GPA, put on suspension and lost all my scholarships. I had to take out loans and pay for the rest of college myself... I just remember racing to 60 and getting there and then realizing that I’m failing out of college so I ended up quitting the game for at least 7 months

While Mastu’s experience was extreme, stories of personal issues arising in the middle game were not uncommon to the narratives of the players I spoke with; a ‘career contingency’ of sorts that can “hang like the sword of Damocles over the heads of practitioners” (Stebbins, 1992a, p. 89). Faced with such a dilemma, players are presented with several choices: they may either disengage from play altogether, continue to play but cease competition, or continue to persevere towards their goals. For those who choose to cease competition and pursue the game in more casual manner, we might expect them to begin comparing on different dimensions in order to spare themselves feelings of inferiority, particularly as they take leave from their perceived dominant social group (e.g. He might be better in the game, but I have a better ‘real’ life) (Wood & Taylor, 1991). This might help to partially explain the sort of derogation aimed at power gamers from their more casual counterparts spoken of earlier. However, whether through co-

managing their real-life obligations and in-game aspirations, not having many real-life obligations to begin with, or ignoring them outright, power gamers typically opt towards continuance; finding a way to mobilize their activity so they can pursue the game on a more or less regular basis (Stebbins, 1992a).

In sum, although the Middle Game tended to be glossed over rather quickly by those I spoke with, we see how it can be a particularly significant and somewhat stressful period in the career of the power gamer. It is a time of intensifying competition and commitment, a time where players are especially vulnerable to suffering severe real life costs or falling into disrepute with their developing social network. Being that this is supposed to be a leisure activity, it is no wonder that the majority of players are not power gamers, as ‘getting established’ can be perceived as somewhat antithetical to fun. Yet, as the players I spoke with approached the end game, many of them still had the sense that all their play up to this point was merely a warm-up, their attention now turned towards tackling the much bigger accomplishments that lay ahead.

### **The End Game: The Power Gamer Ethos**

After many months and countless hours of ‘leveling up’, the moment that has been so greatly anticipated and strived toward finally arrives. Without any more fanfare or ado than what had been seen for each of the previous 59 levels, a message flashes up on the players screen: \*Ding\* Congratulations! Welcome to level 60!<sup>6</sup> It is a moment of great relief, the moment signaling the end of “the grind”; the ‘end-game’ has finally

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<sup>6</sup> In Everquest, maximum level has been raised several times over the years. In the original package released in March of 1999, the maximum level was 50. A year later it was upped to 60 for the first expansion; The Ruins of Kunark. With the release of the fourth expansion in October 2002, the Planes of Power, it was upped again to 65. Omens of War, the eighth expansion pack released in September of 2004 raised the maximum level to 70 where it still stands today. In this text I use level 60 simply for illustrative purposes.



arrived. Gone are the days of sitting in one place for hours on end killing MOB's for XP, the sense of urgency that most prominently characterized the 'race to 60' dissipating. Players are now able to enjoy the game at its utmost, as "nearly all the aspects of the game are open to the player" (Simon, Boudreau & Silverman, 2005, p.29). As such, the end game corresponds well with Stebbins' (1992a) 'Maintenance' stage, where the serious leisure participant's career has reached fruition.

As the primary goal which has been motivating play slips into the past, players must develop new goals to strive towards in order to make their play meaningful. Although this newly found freedom is used in many different ways (some even start new characters and begin the whole process again from step one), for the power gamer, the new goal is crystal clear. As the Avatar has by now accumulated as much of its innate abilities as is possible, and as there is typically little in the way of significant loot left to be derived from smaller 'single-group' encounters except perhaps as a means of generating monetary capital, the player's attention turns towards advancing their Avatar's power, and by extension their reputational status in the gameworld, through acquiring the most prestigious or 'Uber' loots available; loot obtainable only through conquering the game's most powerful creatures known more commonly as 'boss MOB's'.

High-end boss MOB events are much more complex than any encounters experienced by the player during the middle game. Most often requiring a 'raid' force of forty or more players, successfully tackling end-game content also demands a high level of player organization, precise communication and the mutual coordination of a combination of Avatar strengths in order for a team to emerge victorious. Beyond these criteria, achieving success in the high end-game also takes both patience and practice.

Raids tend to be extremely time consuming, often demanding five or more hours of sustained play to complete a particular campaign, and often involving multiple failed attempts before a team discovers the elaborate strategy required and learns how to properly execute it. As such, raid content is most typically pursued as a guild endeavor, the single 'guild chat' communication channel and mutual trust built up amongst players through their daily contact with one another heavily contributing to the development of the form of teamwork necessary. The key word here is 'teamwork', as high end raid content requires players who are willing to pay attention and persevere through many hours of potentially unrewarding play, "put[ting] aside their own individual needs for the good of the group" (Taylor, 2003, p.12). This being the recipe for success, in the end game, the focus of the power gamer shifts ever so slightly, the new goal now involving "not [only] to be the best per se, but to be part of the best" (Yee, 2005).

As they approached the end game, in search of the best play opportunities available, the players I interviewed began to look towards affiliating themselves with a much larger group of similar others in terms of norms, values and performance standards; a coalition of power gamers typically referred to by players as an 'Uber guild'. As Zeg described:

That's when guild tags started to really matter to me. When you see people with better gear, and hearing the things they do...that was something I really wanted to get into... [I] REALLY wanted to join The Council. It was a larger group of people who played more regularly, more intensely. It became more focused on each other. Before [60] all you really did was level, here it was more about trying to gear yourself up and prepare yourself for the end game...

For the power gamer, joining an Uber guild represents entering into the 'big leagues' of MMOG play; a serious organizations of gamers where friendship and social interaction as

a primary feature of guild life take a back seat to an intense focus and commitment toward guild advancement and the development of both individual and group reputational status.

### **The Uber Guild**

There are several features that distinguish Uber guilds from their casual or family type counterparts, one of the most notable being the rigid, militaristic-like structure in which it operates. In most cases, all managerial, tactical and strategic decisions come from the top in an oligarchic fashion with very little say being given to 'rank and file' members. As such, and due to the level of organization required in tackling end-game content, the role of leadership is of significant importance, crucial to the guilds success and by extension, each and every member's success.

Leading an Uber guild is an extremely demanding endeavor, requiring the social skills to motivate players and the patience to mediate in their often ego driven disagreements. As the fine balance between success and failure in end-game raids often hinges on the quality of team leadership, the position also requires strong typing skills and the ability to coordinate 40+ players simultaneously in often very hectic play environments<sup>7</sup>, the exhibition of playing skills that are beyond reproach, and a strong commitment to the mastery of game knowledge. When asked what makes a great Uber guild leader, Drar responded as follows:

You earn it by being there, and leading successful raids and making choices through being there and making choices that everyone, eventually, sees as a good decision...I guess it's the aura one presents. The best guild leader I ever had in Everquest was a druid...coolest guy ever and awesome guild leader. He was not a Hitlerish type, he never yelled at people...he just removed people. He was very short order about stuff. It's

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<sup>7</sup> With the recent proliferation in use of group voice communication software in MMOGs, typing skills are no longer as important as they once were.

kinda like he was just able...he commanded respect. I think it was the fact of how he lead...the lack of berating, he never yelled at anybody, but he was firm with people...he told them what was up. I think it was his perseverance, his ability to always be there, to always be available, to always be pushing forth, and to always provide more information to the guild so that they could do better. His playing skills were top of the line.

Simply stated, a guild leader who is unable to successfully lead the team toward their goals will quickly fall from grace in the eyes of his or her mates, as the whole premise upon which the guild was initially formed was players seeking increasingly better play opportunities. Conversely, a guild leader who is able to successfully master the criteria listed above is often perceived as the most proficient player in the guild, and is rewarded by the trust, respect and dedication of the guild's members. While there is typically little in the way of explicit compensatory indemnities rendered for assuming such a demanding role, based on my observations, it is often this heightened sense of esteem and regard bestowed unto them by both their teammates as well as by the broader player population which underlies the motivation for any individual to assume such a position.

Consequently, the position can also become somewhat of a 'cross to bear', as it involves an enormous amount of responsibility for other people's level of enjoyment in the game. Guilds can become so completely reliant on their leadership that, in many cases, if the leader misses a day of play, the guild is unable to function properly in a raid context. Thus, Uber guild leaders often feel compelled to play every day, becoming externally committed to the group who come to rely, or even depend on, their continuance (Shamir, 1988). As ED, a prominent *Everquest* guild leader describes,

The level of concentration it takes...I'm tired after I'm done [playing]... it's just exhausting, you know? Leading the raid, actually...I really didn't like doing that because it was too much work...I dunno, I guess I did it because I felt a sense of responsibility to the people

Partially due to the high level of stress and responsibility which the position carries, and due to guild achievement being paramount, Uber guild leaders will typically place rigid restrictions on the number of players they will allow into their ranks, emphasizing quality of player over quantity, in order to facilitate management and maximize the player to benefit ratio. Hence, a second feature of the Uber guild that notably distinguishes them from their casual or family counterparts is their rigid application process and membership screening procedures.

Whereas more casual guilds will often accept any player into their ranks, regardless of level, class or ability and where family guilds typically accept players based on friendship or family referrals, joining an Uber guild usually involves undergoing a process closely resembling a real-life job application, where a player must meet all the specified qualifications listed on the guilds website. Not only must the applicant have already achieved the top level in game before being considered, but are also typically asked to list all of their previous MMOG play experience, their available play times, the gear their Avatar possesses, the hardware and type of Internet connection they use, any little bit of information that pertains to the players ability to contribute to the group may be asked. More significantly, only if there is a need for your class will you be encouraged to apply. However, what remains of utmost importance in the way of player credentials, characteristics which define the power gamer ethos more generally, is a high level of game knowledge, the ability to persevere in play, the right attitude towards goal achievement and thick skin (Silverman, 2005; Yee, 2005). As the formal requirements on the application page for Scion, a well known *Everquest* Uber guild, dictate:

**You MUST be Level 60.** We have no use for players who are not 60. If you aren't 60 at the time of application then don't even bother applying.

**You MUST have high playtime.** This is a huge one, so pay attention. We're a high-end raiding guild. You're applying to us. If you are the best player on the face of the earth but can only play once a week for 2 hours, that's not good enough...we raid 6 out of 7 days per week. If you're not a hardcore, dedicated gamer, this guild is not for you.

**You MUST know your class inside and out and be able to demonstrate it.** Scion is a guild of skilled players, so if you suck (or don't pay attention) you'll be ridiculed right out the door.

**You MUST have a decent computer AND a stable internet connection.** If you come to join us on a raid and we notice you [disconnecting] or lagging a lot we won't accept you. This means if your computer can't handle 45-60 people on your screen at the same time and/or prevents you from performing to your fullest don't apply.

Having met the criteria and the application having been deemed acceptable, the player is then invited into the guild as a recruit, a trial period usually lasting about a month, where their playing skills, attendance and attitude are closely monitored, evaluated and openly critiqued. Typically, a recruit must attend all planned guild events during this phase, a schedule that can demand anywhere between 40 to 50 hours of scheduled play per week above and beyond any personal unscheduled play times. Moreover, they will likely not be entitled to any material benefits for their efforts during this period. Again, the application for Scion illustrates:

You are entitled to nothing while on trial. If we invite you to become a trial member, you're expected to impress us. Don't be late to raids, don't fucking AFK<sup>8</sup> unannounced for long periods of time. Do the job that you're expected to do as a member of your class to the best of your ability at all times.

While the occasional mistake made during the course of play is more or less tolerated of full guild members, they are rarely suffered lightly and can be met by open verbal criticism, often in language that can be quite biting. Thus, breaking with the notion that

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<sup>8</sup> Away from keyboard.

real life psychological chains of inferiority, helplessness, dependence, and ridicule often disappear in MMOGs (Kurapati, 2004), power gamers must be relatively ‘thick-skinned’ and be able to endure occasional verbal abuse and potentially offensive ‘humor’ on a daily basis if they wish to maintain their membership. As stated openly on Scion’s application page:

**You MUST be able to tolerate harsh language and abuse.** We’re not a family guild. We have a lot of fun, but if you fuck up you’re going to hear about it. We swear in guild and at each other, we lewdly joke around with people a lot as well. If you can’t take this kind of thing on a daily basis, don’t sign up. Scion isn’t for the sensitive, touchy-feely types.

However, whereas full members have developed the social capital necessary to be able to defend against any verbal abuse without experiencing much threat to their guild status or self-esteem, recruits are in an especially vulnerable position, as openly objecting to any criticisms, giving advice, stating ones opinions or even joking around too much during the recruit phase is typically considered a social faux pas. Once again, the application page for Scion provides illustration:

**Bitching, moaning, groaning, snapping.** Those privileges are reserved strictly for full members. Know your place or we’ll put you in it! If we seem like a bitter and hateful guild, we’re not. We’re actually a ton of fun. If you do make full member, you’ll be entitled to many things, including reaping in the glories of end-game content that most people won’t ever see.

Following the recruitment period a decision is rendered, most commonly at the sole discretion of the guild’s leadership. If successful, the player is then confirmed as a full fledged member. Because gaining entry into the guild involves such a deeply personal investment on behalf of the individual, it is reasonable to assume that the player, having successfully endured the rigorous initiation procedure, experiences an enhanced self-image as well as an increased sense of belongingness; the ‘guild tag’ which now

hovers visibly above the Avatars head becoming yet another 'status symbol'. The power gamer social identity can now be said to have become salient. As Tajfel (1982) notes of the social identity:

In order to achieve the stage of "identification", two components are necessary, and one is frequently associated with them. The two necessary components are: a cognitive one, in the sense of awareness of membership; and an evaluative one, in the sense that this awareness is related to some value connotations. The third component consists of an emotional investment in the awareness and evaluations. (Tajfel, 1982, p.2)

Having now entered into an organization where they are able to increase their virtual capital and status within the gaming community at a profound rate, we can assume the level of internal commitment to be high, as membership enables the player to attain his or her internalized goals (Shamir, 1988). Yet, in presenting themselves as suitable candidates during the initiation process, and now being able to present themselves to others as one of the playing 'elite', the ultimate MMOG 'side-bet' is made, committing the player to continuance as a switch in course would entail a loss of group identity as well as a loss of a perceived important social network. Thus, external commitment can now also said to be high. Because the player's "Uber" social identity becomes so intertwined with their guild membership, the possibility of losing one's position becomes an extremely unattractive option, one that can potentially involve similar stigmatized feelings of a self often associated with 'losing face', status and network loss more generally. As Dalran, a retired member of one of *Everquest* most prominent power gaming guild ever described:

You didn't want to be [kicked] out of the guild. There was no where else to go but down. I mean, being out of the guild was tantamount to losing your job in real life...like moving out from being an executive to going to flip burgers.



Through Dalran's analogous comparison, we see the importance a player can attribute to their guild membership, and even how they can begin to equate the possibility of membership loss to downward mobility in real life social class. External commitment can reach such an augmented level, that players will even begin to ignore behavior from others in the guild which they might find offensive or against their real life or in-game personal values. As Drar described:

You thought about where you were going to go if you quit. Because, I could complain about this, but if I complain about it and I am out, I am not going to see anything ever. So most people learned to just kind of shut up and deal with it, and if they thought they were wronged, they would voice their opinion, but not enough to piss people off

As Shamir (1988) notes, "once the identity is established, individuals become attached to it [and] may resist its relinquishment" (p. 302).

### **Forms of Competition**

A third prominent feature that characterizes life in the Uber guild is the intensification of the competitive climate that so prominently marked the middle game; competition now manifesting not only amongst individuals, but also amongst groups competing for status. Much like the college football teams studied by Rees & Segal (1984), power gamer guilds have several features that make them great 'natural laboratories' in which to study the effects of competition. First, there is a precise delineation of each member's role within the group: the class they play. Second, there is a known status hierarchy based on both rank (GM, officer, rank and file) and group seniority. Third, members view high individual task performance as essential for attaining highly valued group goals. Finally, success in the end game can not be achieved through uncoordinated individual activity, but requires an interactive and cooperative

group effort (Rees & Segal, 1984, p. 330). If the middle game was distinguishable by intense competition amongst individuals striving to hit particular personal milestones, it is magnified exponentially in the end-game once the 'Uber' social identity becomes salient and as the goal of status development becomes a near limitless pursuit. Yet, once again, the manifesting competition in both its intragroup and intergroup forms acts as the catalytic fuel necessary towards sustaining the level of motivation required for pursuing the activity at such an intense level.

### Intragroup Competition

As mentioned, success against end-game encounters demands a high level of organization, precise communication, and the mutual coordination of complimentary Avatar strengths, requiring individuals to pull together into a tightly knit cohesive team unit. Yet, despite Uber guild members generally sharing the same common goals in the way of achieving team success, still highly present are the intense intragroup rivalries that so prominently marked the middle game; interpersonal competitions amongst similar others over status and rewards in an effort to declare Avatar superiority, sustained through a near constant, and highly salient social comparison process. Yet, as goal attainment in the end-game depends on the cooperation and collective orientation of the team as a whole, crucial to every Uber guilds success is controlling against the negative effects of competition (Rees & Segal, 1984) such as, for example, the ill feelings that can develop between competing individuals as was discussed earlier.

As mentioned, the primary goal of the end-game for most power gamers lies in advancing their Avatar's power and, by extension, their reputational status in the gameworld through acquiring the most prestigious loots available. Yet, when a boss

MOB is killed, it will typically only drop between 1 to 3 pieces of loot. As such, one of the most difficult tasks for any guild leader, whose ultimate concern lies in keeping his team successfully focused, involves the equitable distribution of in game resources amongst the competing guild members. There are generally three methods employed in MMOGs that are used to decide such matters. The first involves letting the dice fall where they may...literally. In MMOGs, there typically exist random number generators available to the players which are used to decide loot distribution, most often used when grouping with unknown others. By executing the '/random 100' command, a random number between 1 and 100 is generated, the highest roller usually receiving the reward. Yet, this method becomes problematic within the context of a guild, particularly when, for example, 'player A' attends 90% of the guild's raids, and 'player B' attends only 50%. In such a scenario, due to random luck, 'player B' can repeatedly get rewarded over 'player A'. In that situation, not only does 'player A' feel that they got less than they deserved, but the guild is negatively affected due to important gear going to a player who does not play as regularly. As such, the '/random 100' method is seldom used for guild resource allocation.

A second method is often referred to as 'officer's decision', where after a boss MOB is killed, the GM and the officers will discuss and decide amongst themselves as to which of the players in the raid are to receive rewards. Typically, several factors are taken into consideration, including such things as attendance, date of last loot received and who the loot would benefit most. While many guilds do use this option, it also has its share of problems, particularly in the context of an Uber guild. First, it is often difficult to judge who is more deserving than the next when you are dealing with players who have

all closely contributed to guild goals. Second, GM's and Officers must also award themselves loot, a situation ripe for accusations of favoritism. Third, it is not unusual for guild members to think of themselves as having contributed more than others, even when in reality it might not be the case. When players get less than they feel they deserve, or when favoritism is suspected, hostility toward the guild leadership is usually expressed, which can result in a high level of tension manifesting in the guild, or frustrated members quitting outright. Because goal attainment depends on the attendance, collective orientation and a coordinated effort amongst members, controlling against dissenting 'guild drama' is of utmost importance. As such, Uber guilds typically opt for method number three: The Dragon Kill Point system (DKP).

#### The DKP system

Originally developed by the *Everquest* power gaming guild *Afterlife*<sup>9</sup>, the DKP system is designed to assure that the people who are most deserving get the items they want without the decision resting in the hands of lady luck or guild leadership. Although there are many variations in use today, it is still generically referred to by the name Dragon Kill Points, named so because back in the original days of *Everquest* when the system was created, the only two raid targets available were both dragons: Lord Nagafen and Lady Vox.

Following an 'equity norm' which sees rewards being distributed according to members contributions to group goals (Rees & Segal, 1984), DKP is a numbered system designed to monitor participant merit. In a power gaming guild, 'merit' is determined primarily by raid attendance, and to a lesser degree, performance of the member in living

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<sup>9</sup> 'Afterlife' is the real name of an extremely prominent *Everquest* power gamer guild which operated on the original Mithaniel Marr server between the years 1999 and 2004. In presenting this material, I decided to not alter the guild name as I believed credit for the development of the DKP system was due.

up to what is expected of them in the context of their role. In a nutshell, each time a boss MOB is killed, everyone in attendance is awarded a pre-established amount of DKP, the amount often fluctuating depending on the difficulty of the MOB and the total value of the loot it drops. All loot that drops is assigned a point cost by the officers which is subsequently noted in a database on the guild website; the better the loot, the higher the cost. DKP point totals for each player are also entered into the database, open for all members to see. Loot that drops is then put up for 'auction' amongst the players. If a player wants the item, they send a message to the officer conducting the action, and the player with the highest DKP is rewarded. The point cost of the item is then subtracted from the player's point total.

The primary objective of the system is to promote attendance at raids as well as to assure fairness in loot distribution by virtually eliminating any of the issues discussed earlier; those who attend more raids accumulate more DKP and are thus rewarded with more buying power over those who attend less. Since the database is public for all to see, and since players generally agree that attendance and good play furthers group goals and thus constitutes merit, the DKP system removes most of the possibility for arguments developing over loot distribution. The DKP system also provides guild leadership with the ability to penalize players who are not performing up to par. If a player misses too many raids, does not pay attention to instructions, or if they make a mistake in play that causes the guild to fail, a certain amount of DKP can be subtracted from the player's total. In this sense, DKP acts as a type of 'esteem symbol': signs which "designate the degree to which a person performs the duties of his position in accordance with ideal standards" (Goffman, 1951, p.295). Lastly, DKP also rewards seniority in the guild.

When a new player joins, they start at 0 DKP and must begin accumulating points before they are able to garner any purchasing power. This can sometimes be the source of anxiety for new members, as they imagine themselves having to wait several months before getting rewarded for their play. However, this is a misconception as when new players join, many of the veterans will already have significantly better gear. Thus, while the new member will never win the most valued game loot over the veteran, the daily raiding schedule and already well geared veterans ensures the availability of a plethora of lesser loot upgrades. If the recruit decides to save their points, and if they attend raids nightly, it isn't long before they catch up to those in the middle or top of the list, as other players are always spending their points. All tends to even out in the end. Besides, in a power gamer guild that raids daily, there is typically so much loot dropping that by the end of a particular expansion, all guild members have everything they want before moving on to the newly released game content.

Since loot acquisition is the primary play motivator of the end game, the accumulation of points for attending raids motivates and commits players in two ways. First, it provides players a sense of control over their own advancement and goal attainment, allows players to spend their points on whatever loot they choose rather than the decision coming from an outside party. Second, and most importantly, it gives all participants in the raid a kind of 'pseudo loot' in the way of points towards their DKP bank, even when their efforts do not yield them a real in game reward. This provides players with the illusion of Avatar advancement through accumulating 'money in the bank', internally committing them as the means through which achieving their personally developed goals can become realized at a later time. Yet, for power gamers, DKP also

acts as the ultimate mechanism of external commitment. As Rees & Segal (1984) note of equity based reward systems, “while equitably rewarding performance furthers goal attainment, it also encourages intra-group competition” (Rees & Segal, 1984, p.328). Since the power gamer social climate is highly competitive, the system can start to act on the players psyche. Competition over DKP totals often ensues, players becoming externally committing to continuance as they begin to perceive missing raids as carrying to great a cost. Furthermore, as DKP represents a form of payment rendered for ones services, players may, and often do decide that they can not quit playing the game until they have spent all of their ‘back pay’, a cycle that becomes difficult to break as players are constantly adding to their point totals by attending raids. As Mastu describes:

We had a DKP system which is really good for somebody like me, cause it was constant rewards. Again I started getting very addicted, because in DKP you earn points for your attendance...so there was a gain every time. Even though you didn't get loot you got points so that kept me playing a lot longer than I would have...cause I am advancing somehow at least

DKP systems also introduce a second negative consequence, which I will refer to here as the “mercenary effect”. Simply stated, players operating under a DKP system will often cease ‘working for free’, which in turn may have a negative result on group cohesiveness and advancement towards group goals. Despite the primary end game goal being the killing of Uber mobs, there are often several things that players must accomplish either on their own or, more typically, in smaller groups that enable or facilitate their play in the raid context. For example, access to many of the areas containing boss MOBs are often restricted by ‘keys’ which players must obtain through killing less powerful MOBs in the gameworld. Often these MOBs only require a smaller group to defeat. Yet, as DKP is typically only rewarded for boss MOB killings, players

are not rewarded for these small group endeavors and thus can become less motivated to help their guild mates once they themselves are keyed. As such, and as was the case in the middle game, players often must rely on their own particular clique to help them accomplish individual goals. Hence, I refer to this phenomenon as the “mercenary effect” as players in essence become ‘hired guns’ motivated solely by the desire to accumulate or spend DKP. If the player does not perceive the task to be something that can benefit them directly, they will often not ‘go to work’.

Despite the mercenary effect and the intense climate of competition, as long as the general perception of equity in loot distribution is high, players in the guild are generally content in helping the guild advance towards its goals. Yet, this does not mean that it is one big happy family. Based on my observations, power gamer guilds tend to be as cliquish, or perhaps even more so, than what characterized power gamer sociality during the middle game. As Draveth informed me:

Uber guilds are not for friendship. Chat channels are for friendship. Uber guilds are for advancement. An Uber guild is like a business. Not everyone likes each other in a business...but as long as they can work well together as a team and accomplish the goal...

His words seemed to echo the sentiments of Mastu, who described intra-guild relations this way:

You don’t get along with everyone in your guild, especially in Everquest as your guild gets bigger, you need key classes and all that. I mean I always had a core group of friends in whatever guild I was in, like 5 people, 6 people, 7 people, the rest of the people hated me and I hated them...A family guild is a guild that is about friendship, having fun and helping each other. A hardcore Uber guild is all about getting loot, and controlling the server and having the power and raiding and playing a lot. Friendship is definitely not as important. It’s who can raid every night



## Intergroup Competition

Due to the immense population in these games, and the self imposed Uber guild member limits I spoke of earlier, there are typically between two to five power gamer guilds operating simultaneously on a given server, all fiercely competing against one another for control over resources and status. As new game content emerges, the race is on to see who will be the first guild to defeat the most difficult encounters. The more 'firsts' a guild can achieve, the higher their status in the gameworld. Being first worldwide across all 'servers'<sup>10</sup> is considered to be of the highest honor. Guilds who repeatedly achieve worldwide server firsts can, and often do develop their own publics; other player who regularly visit the guilds website and participate on their open forums, following every progression move, fishing for strategies that they themselves can subsequently employ, and perhaps even living vicariously through their more successful counterparts in a peculiar form of MMOG fandom. Being first on an individual server also holds a position of high esteem, particularly since it is at server level where all daily face-to-face contact between players occurs, and where intergroup competition is most salient. Anything less is typically considered 'par' if not sub-standard. Guild accomplishments often morph into a one-upmanship type discourse manifesting between guilds; 'bragging right' verbal feuds that play out both within game and in the metagame.

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<sup>10</sup> Due to the high population of players in MMOGs, and due to the limitations of current computer hardware capabilities, players are divided onto different servers, each hosting its own identical and parallel running gameworld. Server selection occurs prior to Avatar creation, determining the particular social world in which the player will partake. In the days of original EQ, communication with other players in the gameworld was limited to only those who played on the same server. Moreover, only in extremely rare cases were players permitted to move their Avatars to a different servers post creation. Several years later, the developers of EQ added a 'cross-server' /tell function that allowed players to privately send messages to players on other servers, as well as instituted a 'server change for a fee' policy where players could pay the somewhat hefty charge of \$75 US to have the programmers move their Avatar. Still, it should be noted that face-to-face contact and cooperative group play can only transpire between players whose Avatar's exist on the same server.

After a successful ‘first kill’, Uber guild members will often taunt their competition openly, claiming the encounter as being far too difficult for any of their rivals to accomplish. Competitive others will often then retort by accusing their rivals of cheating, gaining victory through exploiting unintended game mechanic glitches, or through ‘zerging’ the encounter, a derogatory term used to describe a group who achieves victory through overcoming the opponent with sheer numbers rather than through the skilled execution of a finely tuned strategy. As intergroup competition heats up, in order to maintain their superiority, guild leaders who accomplish server firsts will often go so far as to guard their developed strategies from rival guilds through evoking strict ‘no tell’ policies within their own guilds; mystifying the performance through “the limitation and regulation of what is shown (Goffman, 1959, p.69). As Alerone discussed:

There was a strict no tell policy in the guild. You didn’t talk to anybody. It didn’t matter if you have a real life friend that lived down the street that was on a different server, you didn’t reveal strategy. And everyone would follow that, because you didn’t want to be out of the guild.

Yet, more often than not, the taunts and forms of mystification employed simply act to anger the opposition, heightening their commitment to continuance and further motivating them to up their level of play. As Vonce described:

I really wanted the guild to succeed. I mean, you know, when we saw those posts by The Order about that shit, about you know, how we are never gonna do this and we’re never gonna do that, you know, its like a challenge...they are basically rubbing our face in it, right? And to prove them wrong was quite a bit of motivation.

The antagonism that develops between guilds competing for status achievements are further exacerbated by the accompanying struggle over scarce resources. When a boss MOB is killed in *Everquest*, it usually takes between three to five days before it reappears in the gameworld. When it does, it is an open target for all, most often resulting in races

between competing guilds to be the first to organize at the spawn location in order to lay claim to the event. This can result in all sorts of ugliness developing between groups, ranging from guilds training monsters onto the other for the expressed purpose of wiping each other out, to vicious personal verbal attacks, often only ceasing once game officials arrive on the scene to mediate in the dispute.

As studies of relations between groups show, negative attraction to the out-group often results from competition over scarce resources (Rees & Segal, 1984). Hence, the type of malicious behavior that transpires between rival players and guilds is perhaps not altogether that unexpected. Yet, in power gamer culture, coming out on the short end of these feuds once too often can result in guild members defecting to join the more successful group, a circumstance suggesting a positive attraction to an out-group when competition over scarce resources consistently yields a negative result. Of course the superior guild is often quite content in taking the best players from a rival faction, strengthening their own position while simultaneously weakening that of their competitors. As such, players defecting from rival guilds are often able to forego the application process and begin a much less stringent and often shortened recruiting phase. Such was the case for Mastu and some of his guild mates when they felt their guild begun to slip in the status rankings:

First The Order passed us, and then Axe and Saw...Darkside was now number 3...it was lame. We weren't competing. Anyway a deal was made with the leader of Axe and Saw that a large number of us...were going to join them, without having to apply...and that's the key...without having to apply.

Thus, a guild that is unable to compete can risk losing its best members to a more successful rival guild, as the whole premise upon which members joined the guild in the

first place was “to be part of the best” (Yee, 2005). This might suggest that for power gamers, a member’s social identification with the group tends to only be as strong as the groups status, a finding which supports the related Social Identity Theory hypothesis of Tajfel (1972) who posited:

A social group will, therefore, be capable of preserving its contribution to those aspects of an individual’s social identity which are positively valued by him only if it manages to keep its positively valued distinctiveness from other groups...social comparisons between groups are focused on the establishment of distinctiveness between one’s own group and other groups (p.296 as cited in Turner, 1975, p.8).

Yet, conversely, being ‘part of the best’ can also have its drawbacks, particularly if the guild becomes so superior to others that there is no one left to compete against. Following the defection of Mastu and several of his friends, the competing guild that absorbed them soon became the undisputed top guild on the server. As competition dropped off to nil, Mastu found himself growing increasingly bored with the game, despite his having gained uncontested access to scarce resources. As he stated,

Actually, I think I enjoyed it more when we weren’t the best guild. When we would constantly compete...race for mobs...it was much better that way. Once you are top dog though, it becomes not as exciting, you don’t have anything to work for....like you are the most powerful but there is not as much rush when you do something first cause like...who else was going to kill it, there was nobody else even close to you

This might further suggest that for the power gamer, the value of loot and in-game resources is greatly diminished outside the context of “social competition” (Turner, 1975).

## **The Collective Performance and its Impact on the Casual Community**

I hate Uber guilds, I hate the ego's, the n00b calling, the crazy commitments in order to participate, online applications to be considered for membership. I have had job application less intense then the apps I've seen for guilds. [Post on the official World of Warcraft message boards]

According to one recent MMOG study, players who spend 40+ hours in the gameworld per week represent approximately only 8% of the total MMOG population (Yee, 2005), placing power gamers into a significant segmental minority of the total player population. As posited by Social Identity Theory, a salient social identity is typically accompanied by the positive evaluation of others who share the same group-based identity, and a negative evaluation of those who do not (Hogg, Terry & White, 1995), with 'winning groups' showing reliably more bias than 'losing groups' (Brewer, 1979; Hinkle and Brown, 1990). Related to this concept are hypotheses in Social Comparison research that posit a tendency for people to "perceive themselves as superior to others, and that they will in fact construct perceptions of themselves and social reality that support this wish to the maximum degree that physical and social reality permit" (Goethals et al., 1991, p. 163). Given that Uber guild members consider themselves as part of the 'winning team', and given that the physical social reality presents them with far more targets of downward comparison than similar others, a final feature that characterizes the power gamer ethos is the collective presentation of superiority over others in the gameworld.

Based on my observations, as the Uber social identity becomes salient, members of the out-group become "undifferentiated items in a unified social category [of inferiors]" (Tajfel, 1982, p.243). In more concrete terms, non-competitive others simply get lumped together into the single category of 'newbie', perceived and often treated as

second class citizens of the gameworld and/or virtually ignored. Out-group derogation can become such a salient feature amongst the in-group that many power gamers can even come to perceive their rights to content in the gameworld as superseding the rights of the majority. Throughout my fieldwork, it was certainly not uncommon for me to observe instances of Uber guild members actively reinterpreting, or disregarding outright, many of the social rules that governed so much of their play in the early and middle game stages in order to accomplish their personal goals in as expedient a manner possible. As the player's ability to advance their Avatar is now solely dependant on the in-group, developing a stigmatized reputation amongst the out-group becomes much a less threatening proposition than it was prior. Moreover, based on my observations, whereas it is quite common for casual or family style guilds to have an official code of conduct explicitly spelling out how members are expected to conduct themselves when interacting with others in the gameworld, and where it is quite common for the leadership of these types of guilds, being largely concerned with their guilds reputation amongst the wider community, to sanction their members for violating generally established social rules, most Uber guild leaders appear to care less about how their individual members conduct themselves in the wider community providing the behavior does not bring down official sanctions on the guild from the game officials. As the website for one EQ power gaming guild states bluntly to anyone attempting to voice a personal grievance to the guilds leadership:

Axe and Saw exists only to conquer the fantasy challenges posed by the EverQuest environment. It is not a social club or babysitting service run by the leadership. Accordingly, officers will not attempt to mediate personal disputes... use [the in game] tools (/ignore, /report, /petition) to resolve such [matters].

Fearing no sanctions from their relevant social network, and no longer fearing any sanctions to their reputation from the rest of the 'inferior' gaming community who are now perceived as completely inconsequential to their ability to access in-game resources, many power gamers can begin to feel that they are 'above the law'. As Mastu's sentiments illustrate:

It was all about the power of the members of the guild and the guild. No one else on the server mattered. We were complete dicks...we were hated...I took the guild I was in very seriously. I mean that was my team, and you are not in my team...so fuck you!

As the competitive dialogue between rival Uber guilds heats up in its often sensationalistic and very public ways, as the disparity between Avatar power and social status grows increasingly larger and more evident, as scarce resources become the monopolies of the most powerful, as out-group derogation becomes the collective norm of the power gamer ethos, and as many of the broader social norms come to be ignored, many in the casual and family gaming community come to resent power gamers, often uniformly characterizing them as 'rogue' players with no honor, no respect, no class and no life. Yet, while considering the power gamer style of play as the antithesis of 'fun', more casual type players can also begin to perceive themselves as excluded from much of the game content. Similar to the real social world, in the virtual worlds of MMOGs, the elite seem to have an easier time moving forward, while those in the middle or at the bottom stagnate or move forward at a much slower rate. However, many casual players argue that MMOGs should not function in this manner, that it is after all 'just a game', and that they should not be disadvantaged in a game for "having a real life". Examples of this hostile relationship between player types are legion, the angst playing itself out time and time again on the official game message boards as casual gamers plead with the

developers to diminish the increasing disparity in power and status brought about by the power gamer's ability to persevere in play. Take for example a recent exchange found on the official World of Warcraft developer message boards, where the casual gamer begins:

I've got a guild of +/- 50 casual players. Only 1 time I have seen 20 people logged at the same time, and I was wandering: damn we will NEVER be able to do raids of 40 people...we want a try at Onyxia and we want to try Molten Core, but it will be impossible if we don't join an Uber-guild of power gamers!! And that is what bugs me, I mean, I want to have FUN and I want to see ALL the content of the game, what are my options? Quitting my guild and fun and joining an Uber-non-fun guild and seeing all the content OR staying in my guild, having fun and missing a lot of content...I don't see the point of having a guild if, when you reach 60, you need to go to an Uber-guild to do the High End Instances!!<sup>11</sup>

This was immediately followed by a reply from a power gamer type:

It's bad enough that casual players can attain the exact same level, talents, and abilities as power gamers who put in 10 times or more the amount of time, but now you want to have the EXACT SAME gear etc? IF I PLAY 3000 HOURS AS WELL AS HAVE FAR MORE KNOWLEDGE OF THE GAME THAN YOU AND YOU PLAY 300 HOURS WITH LESS KNOWLEDGE, THERE SHOULD BE A LARGE NOTICABLE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN OUR CHARACTERS! Otherwise why should I keep playing? I should just cancel my account...What a crock."<sup>12</sup>

The fact of the matter is, even if poster #1 wanted to join an 'Uber guild', the odds of him being accepted into the community are nil, unless he is able to conform to their high proficiency demands and extreme time requirements. However, posts such as these provide more evidence of the social comparison process at work in MMOGs, as both player-types attempt to hinder the performance of the other through pleas to the game developers; the casual gamer hoping to convince the 'devs' to minimize the perceived discrepancies by making the game more 'casual friendly'; the power gamer perceiving a threat to his 'Uber' status arguing the justification of such a discrepancy.

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<sup>11</sup> Retrieved on May 20<sup>th</sup>, 2005 from [www.worldofwarcraft.com](http://www.worldofwarcraft.com)

<sup>12</sup> Retrieved on May 20<sup>th</sup>, 2005 from [www.worldofwarcraft.com](http://www.worldofwarcraft.com)



## **The Death of the Power Gamer**

Because MMOGs are games without an ending, and because the Avatar's physical capacities do not decline with advancing age as would be the case in a real life, the decision to pull the plug on the playing career is always left to the sole discretion of the player themselves. While the reason to quit the game can vary from player to player, for those I spoke with, the most common reason given was sheer burnout, the daily raid schedule having finally taken its toll. In most MMOGs, there is a '/played' command which will tell the player exactly how much time they have spent playing that particular character. For the players who participated in this research, by the time they got around to making the decision to retire from *Everquest*, their /played report typically revealed between 350 to 500 played days. While it might take a second for the magnitude of those numbers to click into place for the reader, allow me to expand on it. A played day is 24 hours real time. Thus, 350 played days means that the player has spent roughly a full year of their lives in the gameworld.

When it is finally done, there are no prizes, no accolades, and no acknowledgements. The Avatar simply "lingers on in a kind of limbo for an undisclosed period of time before eventually risking deletion from the database and being gone forever without a trace" (Jakobsson, 1996, p. 10). Realizing that, in the end, all their intensity and hard work ultimately comes down to nothing, almost all of my interviewees expressed regret. As Ibsen declared:

To be perfectly honest, when I look back on all the time I put into it, I am disappointed. It is such a big time sink. I put so much into it for something that really amounts to nothing. My only hope of really getting anything out of it beyond my memories and experiences playing the game is to sell the account...so ultimately, I'd say I'm disappointed...it's a really good way of wasting your time.

Mastu described his final days in a similar way, having come to the realization that his choice of leisure was in fact not leisure at all:

One day I just stopped raiding for a few weeks and realized that I didn't miss it...that I didn't care...I just stopped giving a shit about the loot...I realized I never had fun raiding...I realized that it was a second job, and that I didn't care anymore about my character advancing...so I just quit... If I had to do it again I would probably wish to never have played Everquest, but it is what it is

Drar described his experience of parting with his Avatar in bitter sweet terms, making this analogous comparison:

Its kinda like being in a relationship for a long time and you go, ok...we have been in this too long, we already know we are done with each other, lets just finish it, we're done...you know, that type of thing.

While Zeg was somewhat regretful at a lot of time lost, he expressed his final days in somewhat more positive terms:

I enjoy the fact that I can leave my life for those hours a night and go to what you might consider a better place. As weird as that sounds. I can be a hero. People [in game] know my name still if you mention it....I feel like I made a marking in history.

Interestingly enough, only one of the players I interviewed left MMOGs for good. The rest created new Avatar's in World of Warcraft, and continue to play to this day.

## **Chapter V**

### **Runaway Commitment and the Fate of the Power Gamer Ethos**

#### **The Serious Leisure of the Power Gamer**

According to several leisure scholars, serious leisure can be seen as a reaction to the recent social and cultural condition of advanced societies, where crucial civic and social institutions that formerly acted as sources of solidarity, trust building, reciprocal relationships and identity construction are in a state of decay (Tomlinson, 1993; Rojek, 2001). Stebbins (1994) argues that “serious leisure activities contribute to the integration of society through the highly evolved social worlds that spring up around [them]” (p. 182). Moreover, and particularly relevant to the present study, Stebbins (1999) conjectured that in the Information Age, the Internet would become an increasingly important medium in providing space for the serious leisure activity enthusiast.

Throughout the preceding discussion, I have been attempting to demonstrate, amongst other points, how power gamers constitute the ‘insiders’ or ‘devotees’ of a digitally mediated form of serious leisure; a culture of commitment so intense that participation becomes a near total life-encompassing endeavor. In terms of the qualities of serious leisure as proposed by Stebbins, (1992), the data I have presented provides evidence of a player career trajectory spanning a number of years of MMOG play. The career is characterized by several key turning points corresponding with the achievement of particular social and game related milestones, as well as by progressive stages of skill, knowledge, reward and status accumulations. I have also demonstrated several examples of how a power gamer intensely perseveres in play as they move through these career stages in order to reach their established goals and maintain their social circles. Finally, I

have suggested the existence of a power gamer subcultural ethos constructed on the basis of shared norms, values, performance standards and mutual identification.

Yet, how can we explain this intense level of perseverance as demonstrated by the power gamer? What are their motivations? How can we explain the development of such intense forms of commitment to a social world where participants almost never meet face to face? If one was to ask a power gamer these questions outright, it is almost sure that they themselves would not be able to provide much in the way of a substantial answer. In fact, it is quite likely that most of them would simply fall back onto an explanation that is drilled into them by the social discourse that surrounds extreme video game play more generally: I am addicted! Yet, I argue that the term ‘addiction’ used in this context, and being the value laden misnomer that it can be, is a slippery generalizable slope that only serves to open up more questions than reveal answers. Moreover, even if such an answer was to satisfy ones query, it does not explain what exactly it is that these participants are ‘addicted’ to. Throughout this research project, by using concepts from sociology, social psychology, and leisure studies, I have attempted to generate some understanding of the processes at work which might provide some answers to these questions. I do not argue that the material presented here is representative or archetypical of all of power gamer culture, but do believe that my research informs sociological and cultural knowledge of their social world. In this final chapter I summarize my key findings, discuss some of the implications and offer some insight into the future of MMOG power gamer culture.

### **Social Comparison and Initial Side-Bets**

The first key finding that emerged through the research is that social comparison with vastly divergent others played a significant motivational role and acted to increase

the level of player perseverance during in the early stages of the game. While transient social interaction and immersion into the fantasy environment (fear) were both typically cited as factors which initially drew the player deeper into the gaming experience, the moment vastly divergent others begin to appear, the players I spoke with became motivated to reduce the perceived discrepancy between themselves and these others. It is certainly quite plausible that, having set the standard of excellence, these encounters triggered a desire to inspire the sort of awe in others that the participants themselves felt; a quest to be recognized by others in the gameworld. What is certain is the significant impression these vastly divergent others left on the players that I spoke with, since memories of these events remained incredibly vivid despite several years having passed since they occurred. Thus, although Festinger (1954), posited a self-evaluative comparative tendency towards similar others rather than towards those who are vastly divergent, the results here support the suggestion of Singer (1966) who argues that individuals often look upward to extremely divergent others when they are unfamiliar with the dimension under evaluation in order to define the range of possibilities available. It also supports the suggestion of Wood and Taylor (1991), who argue that when the goal is self-improvement, upward comparisons to vastly divergent others may act to teach or motivate one to do better on a particular dimension.

The bar having been set and the desire to reduce the perceived discrepancy motivating play, players focused on quickly leveling up their Avatars, often engaging in marathon-length play sessions. In an effort to facilitate advancement, the player also begins to put forth a significant effort in acquiring knowledge about the gameworld, some even documenting their own knowledge when existing repositories proved sparse. As

knowledge accumulates, initial identity construction begins to take place, as the player comes to perceive themselves, as well as present themselves to similar others, as exceptionally skilled and knowledgeable. In presenting themselves as such, players begin to make initial side-bets on their reputation, albeit with a firmly established social circle having yet to emerge at this early stage, the penalty for losing a side-bet remained somewhat inconsequential. Yet, this would change in the middle game as the 'feedback loop' of commitment begins to take hold.

Internally, the individual comes into the middle game motivated to attain his or her internalized goals. Yet, due to the game's increasing demand for player cooperation, the expeditious achievement of personal goals begins to depend on 'getting *good* groups' (Taylor, 2003). As such, small cliques begin to develop consisting of players who, through social comparison, come to perceive each other as similar in terms of playing norms, values and performance standards; the development of an in-group in relation to an out-group. As the development of an 'in-group' is typically accompanied by a positive evaluation of others who share the same group-based identity, maintaining ones status within this in-group is already likely to be perceived as being significantly important for all involved. Yet, in presenting one's self as a worthy member of the elite in-group, players make further side-bets on their reputation, becoming externally committed as group members come to rely on one another to live up to their role performance. When an individual perceives that the abandonment of a particular line of action will result in the loss of an important social network, commitment intensifies (Hogg, Terry & White, 1995).

Exacerbating this commitment condition is the manifestation of an extremely competitive social climate. As the players I spoke with worked at developing their reputations, intent on becoming known amongst the in-group as being the best in their particular class, they entered into a game within a game if you will; a social comparison game of 'keeping up with the virtual Joneses'. As one players desire to protect superiority is constantly being countered by the desires of another to reduce any perceived discrepancies in a game that never reaches quiescence, the level of both perseverance and commitment intensifies once again.

### **Runaway Commitment in the End Game**

As the player finally achieves the primary goal that had been motivating play, namely maximum level, their attention turned toward advancing their reputational status by affiliating themselves with a more permanent social group consisting of those whom they perceive as being the best of the best. Because gaining entry into this desired social group requires the individual to make a significant personal investment in passing through a rigorous screening procedure aimed at determining 'hardcore player' authenticity, it is reasonable to assume that acceptance into the group will be accompanied by an enhanced self-image and an increased sense of belongingness. The 'Uber' social identity can now said to be salient. Yet, as such, the ultimate side-bet is made further committing the player to continuance, as a switch in course would now entail a loss of a group identity which one invested so heavily in to attain and possible social humiliation.

Further exacerbating this condition are the mechanisms employed by power gamer guilds to promote player attendance and ensure the equitable allocation of rewards

according to individual member contributions to group goals. Most often referred to as Dragon Kill Points, the mechanism places a numerical value on ones level of commitment, consequently allowing players to objectify the cost of inconsistency. As the power gamer social climate is particularly competitive, as DKP acts as a very public objective point of reference by which an individual's value to the group can be measured, and as the acquisition of status remains the primary play motivator, inconsistency is often perceived as carrying too great a personal cost.

Finally, as the struggle over scarce in-game resources heats up amongst groups competing for status, often resulting in the public airing of extremely vocal feuds, commitment intensifies once again, this time fueled by the players desire to maintain a positive evaluation of their group identity. As I have suggested of power gamers, social identification with the group tends to only be as strong as the group's level of success. Yet, providing that the group is able to succeed on a more or less regular basis, identification with the group is strengthened, once again acting to elevate the level of commitment to continuance (Shamir, 1992).

Hence, perhaps we can explain the power gamers intense level of perseverance in terms of a commitment to a social identity that begins to 'runaway' on the participant, as the many internal and external forms begin to circle back on one another in an Ouroboros cycle until the player finally burns out and experiences the 'awakening'. Eventually coming to the realization that no pot of gold awaits at the end of the rainbow and that all their intensity and hard work ultimately might have better been focused elsewhere, it was common for players to experience a significant sense of regret.



These findings have several implications in terms of the qualities of serious leisure according to Stebbins (1992), suggesting that for some, both level of perseverance and effort in acquiring knowledge and skill associated with the activity is augmented by the drive to reduce a perceived discrepancy between self and superior other, particularly when the dimension under evaluation is valued. Furthermore, while Stebbins (1992a) suggested that continued participation in a pursuit can be explained using the 'profit hypothesis', whereby the rewards associated with participation exceed the costs, the research presented here suggests that this may not necessarily always be the case. When commitment begins to 'runaway' in a feedback loop of internal and external forms, it is quite possible that one can begin to discount, ignore or become outright blinded to both costs and benefits, and not be able to effectively weigh between the two at all. There is also some evidence that runaway commitment can reach such a fevered pitch, individuals can even begin to ignore the behaviors of others which they might find extreme, offensive or against their real life personal values, and might even produce a tendency in the individual to alter their own opinion on what constitutes costs and benefits so as to remain uniform with the group. Of course, further research would be required to explore this possibility in depth. Yet, perhaps future research focusing on documenting the experience of the female power gamer might provide some interesting insight into this proposition. As power gamer culture is distinctly masculine, both in terms of participants and attitudes, and since females in this group are forced to endure consistently male topics of talk and sexist commentary, it would be interesting to explore if the runaway commitment and group uniformity hypothesis is supported by female power gamer group.

Another interesting direction future research might wish to consider lies in further understanding the role that game structure plays in generating player commitment. Undoubtedly, as technology is always rapidly changing, it almost goes without saying that MMOGs a decade from now will not look the same as they do today. Yet, as the genre continues to grow exponentially in popularity, it appears as though changes are afoot in the industry which may come to threaten many of the values and norms upon which power gamer culture is moored.

### **Conclusion: The Future of Power Gaming**

“EQ is like your first kiss. You’ll never get that feeling back again”

- Brad McQuaid, CEO Sigil Games Online and  
former lead designer of Everquest.

With the release of *World of Warcraft* (WoW) in November of 2004, *Everquest’s* virtually unchallenged reign as the most played MMOG in the world came to a definitive end. With a subscription base of over 5 million player’s world wide, WoW is now on track to gross more than \$1 billion in subscription revenues by years end<sup>13</sup>. The game has made such a global impact that its lead architect, Rob Pardo, has been named by Time Magazine as one of the top 100 most influential people who shape our world<sup>14</sup>. While many different factors can be recognized as contributing to the game’s astonishing success, unquestionably one of its main draws is that it caters to the casual gamer much more so than did first generation MMOGs like EQ.

Of the many differences in WoW, one of the most notable is that the time demands made on players in the early and middle phases of the game have been reduced significantly. Whereas it was quite common for players to take over a year, sometimes

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<sup>13</sup> New York Times Article. Online. Available HTTP: <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/09/technology/09video.html> (May, 2006)

<sup>14</sup> Time Magazine Online: Available HTTP: <http://www.time.com/time/2006/time100> (April, 2006)

several, to reach maximum level in EQ, in WoW it is more typical for players, even the most casual, to reach maximum level in less than six months of play. In WoW, players who play less are able to advance nearly as quickly as those who play daily, due to the advent of the 'rested experience' state. In rendering the most simple of explanations, when a player is logged out of the game, they accumulate a rest bonus modifier. Upon returning to play, the Avatar will gain double XP per kill until the bonus is used up, thus flattening out the playing field between hardcore and casual player to a degree.

A second noticeable change is that in WoW, players are no longer required to group with others in order to advance their Avatar through game levels. While it still remains advantageous to do so in order to obtain the highest quality loot in the game, all classes are able to solo quite efficiently to the point where a player can level their Avatar from 1 to 60 without ever talking to another. Gone are the days of grinding XP by repetitively killing MOBs while camped in one area of the gameworld for hours on end with a group of others. In WoW, players get XP by embarking on quests that they receive from non-player characters, the majority of which can be completed more efficiently as a solo player.

A third major difference is that competition between players has all but been eliminated through a feature known as 'instancing'. In EQ, when a boss MOB spawned, it was an open target for all guilds in the gameworld. The guild that organized the fastest and operated most efficiently got the reward. In contrast, the 'instance' is basically its own unique copy of a dungeon in which players are free to explore without interference from any outside person or group, a new instance being created for every group that

wants to attempt the content. The official *World of Warcraft* web site offers this illustration:

Party 1 enters Deadmines, an Instance dungeon. They enter copy A of the dungeon. Party 2 comes along 20 minutes later and enters the Deadmines. They enter copy B of the dungeon, their own version. They do not come in contact with party 1, except perhaps if they both meet outside the instance. Party 3 comes along an hour later. They enter copy C of the dungeon<sup>15</sup>.

Instancing eliminates the need for guilds to mobilize quickly, and thus much of the competition between players, since each guild is guaranteed its own shot at its own instanced boss MOB encounter on its own schedule. While this feature was implemented to ease much of the interguild hostility that was so prominent in EQ, it also eliminated much of the sense of status associated with conquering a boss MOB. In WoW, you no longer have to be a 'great' guild, but rather simply need to keep trying until you emerge victorious. There is nothing that impedes success other than a lack of time or practice.

The implications of all of these changes combined appear to be quite significant. In WoW, compared to EQ, the augmented rate at which players advance their Avatars implodes the sense of a career trajectory. Distinguishing between the early, middle and late phases of the game has now become practically impossible if not meaningless. In offering an illustrative analogy, where would the sense of career be if everyone was able to play professional hockey only three short months after learning how to skate. Because leveling an Avatar has become so easy in WoW, it is quite common for players to have multiple level 60 characters, identification with a 'main' character and primary occupational role becoming increasingly fragmented.

As players no longer must rely upon one another to advance, WoW provides less of that 'we feeling' than did previous MMOGs. The manifestation of a social identity is

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<sup>15</sup> Official World of Warcraft web site is available at [www.worldofwarcraft.com](http://www.worldofwarcraft.com)

impeded if ever emerging at all. Developing a player reputation is no longer the significant factor in the career of the gamer as it was in EQ. If I may be so bold as to conjecture, the argument of MMOGs being a medium through which solidarity, trust, reciprocal relationships and identity could be built has now become increasingly difficult to sustain. In WoW, players are much more likely to be found 'bowling alone'. When asked to explain how WoW differed from EQ, Darizra offered the following:

The only thing that makes WoW good is that it has really nice graphics. In Everquest there is so much based on a team thing. It wasn't about you. You couldn't do anything by yourself. If people didn't like you...if you weren't part of anything, you couldn't be anything. If you didn't have friends, if you didn't have a reputation, you were nothing. In World of Warcraft, you can be the worst player in the world and still get anything you want. I see these complete morons who have amazing gear. I mean it's stupid how easy it is. They just give everything away. They have to cater to a larger audience now. In Everquest it was smaller. The more people you have to cater to, the more people you have to keep happy. So it just keeps getting worse and worse. You know...all that time we spent sitting around camping MOBs, we had a chance to get to know one another. We learned how to play together as a group. In WoW you can do it alone without grouping for the most part...you are never forced to have a 'friend' for more than an hour or two to finish a quest or something...in EQ you had friends you did everything with for years.

The implications of these changes on power gamer culture should by now be obvious. As players have become increasingly indistinguishable carbon copies of one another, social comparison has now become almost meaningless. There is a much reduced sense of awe experienced when comparing one's self to a vastly divergent other. It is no longer a question of "will I ever be good enough" but rather a foregone conclusion that in relatively short order, one will. Status has become increasingly meaningless as the sense of competition that fueled so much of the player's drive has all but been eliminated. Even the prestige that Uberguild membership once bestowed unto a participant has now seemed to all but vanish due to there now being hundreds of top

guilds rather than dozens. In fact, whereas the term 'Uberguild' was a prominent feature in the EQ gamer argot as a social distinction in and of itself, in WoW, due to the sheer amount of guilds that have become exact replicas of one another, the title has been rendered practically meaningless. Zeg described it this way:

The pride you took in your character just isn't the same anymore. Level 60s are a dime a dozen. Even if you are in the best guild in the game, nobody really cares.

While it is impossible to determine what the future holds for power gamer culture at this point, based on my preliminary observations of WoW, the shackles of intense commitment that were such a hallmark of their ethos in EQ play have been weakened considerably. For many of those with whom I have spoken, WoW seems to be regarded more simply as a game, no longer as a way of life. Do future changes loom on the horizon which will prove to be the demise of power gamer culture entirely? This scenario does of course seem unlikely. Even in WoW, power gamer type guilds continue to dominate the playing field in terms of game progression and Avatar power. Yet, undoubtedly, as MMOGs become increasingly popular, game producers will have to cater to the interests of the majority who for the most part seem disinterested in their leisure becoming another form of work. In MMOGs, everybody wants to be the hero.

It should be noted that in conducting this research project, my underlying expectation was that it might have some implications beyond being a mere descriptive analysis of an intense digitally mediated social group. I researched power gamers because they represent a particularly serious, often misunderstood, and scarcely documented segment of the broader MMOG social world. For sociologists interested in researching forms of commitment and competition in digitally mediated environments, few groups

are better suited as a subject of analysis. Yet, as Fine (1983) aptly noted, “Just as the mechanics of the wheel can explain tractors and dune buggies, lazy susans and escalators, so does the understanding of one social world provide sociologists with the tools necessary to understand others, which may have no more than a tangential similarity” (p.242). It is my hope that perhaps the dynamics which I have proposed here as underlying the power gamer social process can be extended to explain intense forms of commitment demonstrated by groups operating in other spheres of serious leisure participation, in both online environments as well as off.

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