Debunking the Myth
of the Anti-Social Gamer Stereotype

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Abstract

Computer gaming has become a major recreational activity with many individuals playing many hours a week, especially, but not exclusively, young adults. As a significant phenomenon, parents want to know if “gaming” is as wholesome and normal as baseball or soccer or an indicator of poor social adjustment. At the other end of the spectrum business is interested in who plays, why, and their characteristics because gaming has, literally, become an industry to the tune of $7.7 billion in 2006 (up from $4.4 billion in 2000) according to the NPD group (Wingfield, 2007).

The stereotype of a “gamer” is that of the social outcast or at least an individual substantially lacking in social graces. This, however, is inconsistent with my experiences as a participant observer of long standing. The purpose of this research is to look into whether the stereotype or my perception lies closer to the truth. A survey that included a range of respondents, from non-players to avid players, was conducted as an exploratory venture. Data from the survey suggests that the stereotype is a strong mischaracterization.

An hypothesis to emerge from this investigation, introspectively, is that Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs) might foster executive abilities and leadership skills. This arises through the need to plan and manage coordinated conduct among groups of players working together toward collective and individual goals.
**Introduction**

When you think of a person who plays computer and console video games as a hobby, what do you visualize? Does the image of an overweight individual, staring at the TV or computer screen with open food wrappings and empty soda bottles littering the floor of a darken room come to mind? A stereotype of withdrawal, poor social adjustment and nerdiness often seems to be attributed to individuals who make computer gaming their hobby, especially when it's their main hobby. Since console games first debuted some thirty years ago (www.wikipedia.org), gaming has undergone as much change as serious office computing. Computer gaming is becoming as much of a mainstream cultural fixture as the Microsoft office. The Wall Street Journal describes Blackberry's Brickbreaker game as pervasive among executives to the point of being a contemporary bonding tool as much as going to baseball games (Craig & Zuckerman, 2007). This investigation will examine the experience of computer gaming (especially massive multiplayer online role playing games), who plays them, and whether there is validity to the stereotype.

**History of Video Games**

In order to understand the people who play video games, we must first understand what a video game is. A video game is “a game that typically involves user/player/computer interaction with a controller interface to generate visual feedback on a video screen. Generally, it also has some system of rewards presented to the user (such as points) in return for certain accomplishments within the framework of a given ruleset” (www.wikipedia.org). Videos games date back to 1947, when Thomas T.
Goldsmith Jr. and Estle Ray Mann invented the first interactive electronic game, a missile simulator inspired by the WWII radar displays. Created to run on an oscilloscope, the game used analogue circuitry, not digital, to drive the action and display the targets. Graphics, with that technology, were not possible (www.pong-story.com). In 1951, the computer NIMROD was created specifically to play a computerized version of the game NIM. NIM is a competition requiring two players to take turns picking up one or more tokens from a pile; the player to pick-up the last remaining token(s) wins. This made the NIMROD the first "gaming" computer (www.wikipedia.org).

Those unacquainted with the time-honored game of Nim owe it to themselves to read Martin Gardner's description (Gardner, 1959). He gives its mathematical theory and a strategy for winning that requires numbers in base 10 to be expressed in binary.

In 1952, 1958, and 1961, more precursors to the modern video games were invented. 1952 saw the birth of a computerized version of Tic-Tac-Toe using an EDSAC vacuum-tube computer by A.S. Douglas for his thesis on Human-Computer Interaction. The Tennis for Two game, invented in 1958 by Willy Higginbotham, became the precursor of multi-player games. The final precursor, Spacewar, was created in 1961 by three MIT students; Martin Graetz, Stephen Russell, and Wayne Wiitanen; using vector graphics on a DEC PDP-1 computer (Levy, 1984; www.pong-story.com).
1966 saw the birth of the first true video game, as we now know them: an interactive game played on a television developed by Ralph Baer. Baer created seven prototypes that played different games, including his first creation, the Chase Game. The last of his prototypes, called the Brown Box, became the model for the first video game system, the Odyssey (www.pong-story.com).

The Odyssey was released by Magnavox in 1972, the same year that Nolan Bushnell and Ted Dabney created the first commercially sold arcade game, Computer Space, and started the company Atari Inc. (www.wikipedia.org).

It was not until 1972, when the game PONG was released by Atari Inc., that video games began to gain world wide popularity and the video game industry was took off. Arcade and home console games flourished in the 1970s and 1980s and were soon joined by the birth of the computer game in the 1980s. As personal computers evolved during the 1970s and 1980s so did the types of video games that could be played on them. The first PC games were usually copies of arcade or home console games of the time. With the technology advances of the 1980s and 1990s, video games became more advanced and complicated. Sound, color, 3D models among other items became staples of the growing industry (www.wikipedia.org).
**MMO and MMORPG**

MMOs and MMORPGs are just two types of video games currently being played today. MMO stands for Massive Multiplayer Online Game, a type of computer game, played over the Internet, that is capable of supporting hundreds to thousands of players at one time in at least one persistent world. Individuals come and go, but the milieu endures and action continues, just as at the Student Center, at Grand Central Station, or in life in general. Players can cooperate and compete with others in the game individually or in aggregates with coordinated alliances persisting for years. Many aspects of MMOs cannot be completed by oneself, only by working together with other players from around the real world within the world of the game. Players also usually have to pay a fee in order the access the servers on which the games are played and maintained. The first MMO, the multi-player flight combat simulation game *Air Warrior*, was created in 1983 by Kesmai and hosted by their Genie online service ([www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org)). The most popular type of MMO is the Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game (MMORPG). In an MMORPG, a player assumes the role of a character, called an avatar, and takes control of the character’s action in a usually fantasy-themed world. The in-game universe is usually very similar to the universe of *Dungeons and Dragons*, considered the forefather of the modern role-playing game ([www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org)).
World of Warcraft

The most popular contemporary MMORPG is *World of Warcraft*, with over 8.5 million subscribers worldwide, with more than 2 million of them being in North America, 1.5 million in Europe, and 3.5 million in China (www.worldofwarcraft.com). *World of Warcraft*, created by Blizzard Entertainment, is the 4th installment in their successful Warcraft series. Launched on November 23, 2004, the game takes place in the Warcraft Universe in the worlds of Azeroth and Outland (only with the Burning Crusade expansion pack) (www.wikipedia.org).

Players create an avatar within the game world, explore the areas, fight monsters and undertake quests given to them by computer controlled characters called NPCs which reward players with money, experience points, valued items or some combination of the three. In creating their avatar, players have a choice of originally 8, now 10 races divided into the two factions of the world, the Alliance and the Horde. The Alliance races are Humans, Dwarfs, Gnomes, Night Elves and Draenai (expansion pack required) and the Horde races are Orcs, Trolls, Undead/Forsaken, Taurens and Blood Elves (expansion pack required). There are also nine character classes to choose from: Druid, Hunter, Mage, Paladin, Priest, Rogue, Shaman, Warlock and Warrior. There are certain restrictions as to which class members of a certain race may be, usually dictated by the lore of the game universe. For example, only Night Elves and Taurens can play the Druid class, and the Tauren and Draenai races are the only races who cannot become Rogues.
Players also have the ability to take on Professions either to enhance their class, make money or a combination of both. There are two types of Professions: Primary and Secondary. A player can have only two Primary Professions but may have any and all of the four Secondary Professions. Primary Professions are further broken down into Gathering Professions and Crafting Professions. Gathering Professions allow players to “gather” the raw materials used to “craft” items for the Crafting Professions. There are ten Primary Professions, three Gathering and seven Crafting: Herbalism; Mining; Skinning; Alchemy; Blacksmithing; Enchanting; Engineering; Leatherworking; Tailoring; and Jewelcrafting (expansion required). The four Secondary Professions are Fishing, Riding, First Aid and Cooking.

Most of the quests given to players during the early and middle levels of the game can be done without the help of other players. However, there are specific areas within the game world that require a group of players, usually 2-5, to work together in order to succeed. These areas are known as Dungeons or Instances. A select number of the higher level Dungeons require as many as 20, 25, or 40 players working together to beat them. These Dungeons are known as “Raid” areas. Other higher level quests also require coordinated collaboration, especially those given at the level cap, the level a player no longer gets experience for killing monsters or doing quests in the game, but can still receive money or items from them. The website www.wowwiki.com is a source of information for anyone interesting in playing World of Warcraft as well as for players who wish to learn more about the game universe and its inhabitants.
The Stereotype

With the growth of video games came the emergence of a subculture: the video gamer and the applied stereotype. Traditionally, playing video games has been a social experience. Most games were played by more than one person, with console systems usually having more than one controller packaged at the time of purchase. However, some who do not play video games and do not know of their social aspects often construe video game players as a monolithic lot, in the image of players of Dungeons and Dragons. In other words, video game players, or “gamers” as I refer to them throughout this paper, have been labeled as unsociable, deviant, and/or prone to aggression.

In recent times, video games have joined Metal music, horror movies and Dungeons and Dragons, among others, as scapegoats for incidents of violent and antisocial behavior. Some have tried to place the blame of the Columbine High School Massacre of 1999 and the Virginia Tech Massacre of April 16, 2007 on violent video games such as Doom and Counter-Strike respectively (www.gamepolitics.com). Studies
have been done since Columbine exploring the possible linkage between video game violence and real-world violence. The body of evidence collected since 1999 neither establishes nor rules out such a linkage (Braun, 1999; Phillips, 2007). One piece notes the parallel between the rise of the Doom/Counter-Strike type of video game over the past ten years and decline in the number of crime victims per 1,000 (Damian, 2007); in other words, an inverse association.

I, personally, find the obsessive accusation of gaming for social violence by certain commentators, such as Miami attorney Jack Thompson, to be offensive and ignorant. Such commentators are quick to jump to the conclusion that regularly playing a game like Doom, a first-person shooting game, automatically transforms you into a homicidal misfit. With regard to Jack Thompson’s assertion that video games played by the killer, Seung-Hui Cho, in High School caused him to massacre 32 people in Virginia Tech; columnist Peter Hartluab had this to say in the April 24th issue of the San Francisco Chronicle:

“Jack Thompson was on Fox News.... Once again, he said, violent video games were to blame.... But the Thompson situation is infinitely worse, because his misinformation mostly goes unquestioned by anchors who clearly know nothing about video games. All of this is a shame, because it sets back important debate. There are real video game issues that need to be discussed intelligently.... Using Thompson as a mouthpiece is like starting a marijuana discussion by screening ‘Reefer Madness.’ For gamers hoping for a sensible video game dialogue in the mainstream media, there are a few signs that Thompson’s influence is on the wane.” (www.gamerpolitics.com).

Jason Della Rocca, executive director of the International Game Developers Association (IGDA), also commented on Thompson’s aspersion:

“It’s so sad. These massacre chasers - they’re worse than ambulance chasers - they’re waiting for these things to happen so they can jump on their soapbox” (www.gamepolitics.com).
This stereotype of all gamers being anti-social, aggressive, and prone to violence is not valid. Most gamers are eminently fit for society, having jobs, families, and school lives along with playing video games. They are also not prone to aggressive behavior simply because they play a game that depicts turmoil. As a gamer, I find the exaggerated and unjustified blame of video games for real world violence committed by unstable individuals misguided and counter-productive. It obstructs informedness on the true causes of violent pathology. I also find the stereotype of gamers, locked up in their rooms for hours at a time, playing games in voluntary solitary confinement, isolated from humanity, uniformed and objectionable.

MMORPGs are an example of how the stereotype is false. MMORPGs are, as stated earlier, games played online where a large number of players interact with one another in a virtual world. A player in a MMORPG can only advance so far in the game independently. Many parts of the virtual world require groups of players to work together in order to survive and conquer the enemies. This collaborative aspect of MMORPGs led to the development of guilds or clans within the game world. A guild or clan is a group of players within the game world who play together and help each other advance within the game world. Guilds can be large or small, as real world organizations, and are usually organized in similar ways. These guilds originating in the virtual world may even arrange to meet in the real world.
The Study

In order to test the applicability of the gamer stereotype, I conducted a survey of 25 people. Participants included both players and non-players of video games among the student body at Pace University as well as members of my World of Warcraft guilds. The survey consisted of the following 10 questions:

1) How long have you been playing video games?

2) Do you play MMORPG (Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games)?

3) If answered yes to the previous question, which MMORPG(s) do you play?

4) How often do you play the game a week?

5) When you play the game, how long do you usually play in one sitting?

6) What do you do besides playing video games? Do you work, go to school, etc?

7) What in particular about MMORPGs make them interesting or fun for you in contrast to other ways you could spend your free time (or other types of videogames)?

8) Do you consider video game playing to be a social or solitary activity? Why?

9) The stereotype says that loners gravitate towards video games. Do you think this is true for MMORPGs? Why?

10) If you could please give me your age.
The Findings

The ages of respondents ranged from 18 to 45, with the majority at the younger end of the spectrum. Most of the people who completed the survey were video game players who had been playing them since they were young. This could be because the present generation of college students, in fact individuals up to the age of around 30, grew up with the ready availability of video games. Currently, 78% of 12-to-17 year boys play console games (as on Sony’s Play Station or Microsoft’s Xbox) at least once a week (Wingsfield, 2007). This shows that when games are available, they have appeal.

However, not all the people who played video games played MMORPGs. Those who did not play MMORPGs stated that they preferred games with endings, a feature not present in MMORPGs. MMORPGs, like life itself, continues on while individuals come and go. Of those who did play MMORPGs, most stated that they played World of Warcraft. Other MMORPGs played were Guild Wars, Shadowbane, and Ragnarok. MMORPG players stated they usually played between 2 to 5 times a week, sometimes more. The amount of time played in one sitting ranged from less then 1 hour up to 10 and 12 hours straight. When asked what they did besides playing video games, most answered that they worked, went to school, or hung out with their friends. A few respondents were married with children. Some played sports. Others were in a band, still others went camping and fishing. One wrote music.
When asked what they liked about MMORPGs, the majority stated that it was the opportunity to interact with other people. An attraction was that this interaction was with people from around the world. One participant stated that:

"MMORPGs make social interaction simpler, actually. As a very busy man, I find it much more enjoyable to sit down after finishing daily chores and 'escape' with a few close, real life friends as well as some new ones online. It allows me to 'hang out' with friends without actually leaving my house."

Another participant stated that:

"The fact that hundreds to thousands of people play this game everyday – 24 hours a day, 7 days a week – is probably the biggest factor that keeps me coming back"

Other participants liked the style of game play associated with MMORPGs:

"MMORPGs usually offer a much richer and longer game play than other games which is far more appealing."

When asked whether playing games was a social or solitary activity, many people said it depended upon the game and the person playing it. Many people played video games with friends, whether they are MMORPGs or console games. Others used console games to get away from people when they did not feel like socializing but played MMORPGs when they wanted companionship. This seemed a normal desire because there are times when a person is too tired for the social give and take or just wants to be alone with their thoughts. Instead of reading a book or watching television, people can play video games."
With regard to the stereotype of "loners" gravitating to video games, one participant made an interesting observation in response to item 9:

_You first have to define loner....a) Social outcast: I feel this person might well gravitate towards MMORPGs because there is something different about them, quite often physically...or they weren't blessed with typical social graces...Everyone starts out equal in the game whether you are Miss America or Ugly Betty, Einstein or Forest Gump, The Fonz or Potsie so the game is a great equalizer and thus, to the Bettys, Gumps, and Potsies of the world, an attractive arena.  b) True loners: people that genuinely don't like to be around or socialize with others; this person might very well not enjoy MMORPGs because they would still be required to socialize to at least some extent. These are the people for whom the title was generated, but the concept of 'loner' has grown to include all all of the above as well."

This sentiment was shared by most of the people surveyed. Several believed that individuals with stigmas might gravitate to video games as it would be a place for them to be accepted and make friends. Other believed, like the individual quoted above, that a true loner would not like MMORPGs (or certain other types of video games) because these require a modicum of affability, albeit not face-to-face. Many games today are designed specifically to be played by more than one person in order to complete or derive greatest enjoyment. Blizzard seems to have taken notice of this factor, as one of the tips that appear when you are logging into the game world tells you to make friends both within the game world and the real world.
The Leadership Aspect

A part of the MMORPG experience that no one touched upon, probably because it was not the explicit focus of a question, was the leadership abilities a game like this can foster. As stated before, players can join organizations called guilds. Guilds are not set-up and run by the company that created and supports the game. Players organize and manage their guilds autonomously. As a player of World of Warcraft, I belong to a guild. I have been in the guild for almost 2 years and have been an active member of its raiding group for about a year. I have learned by watching our past leader and our current leader that it takes a great deal of work to run the guild. Our original leader, the person who created the guild, had to step down because commitments in real life did not allow her the time that coordination, communication, monitoring, and supervision required. Leadership is now handled by the player who organized the raid group, a job he continues to perform.

Being a guild leader can require a great deal of attentiveness, diplomacy, and adeptness at the governance of informal groups. Included among the issues I have seen our leaders handle are: mediating disagreements between players within the guild; managing the maintenance of the guild website; organizing groups to run the dungeon and raid areas; maintaining the guild bank; and mentoring lower level players. Guild Masters, as they are called in World of Warcraft, can be compared to the owner of a business. Guilds also have their own version of managers, called Officers. Officers assist the Guild Master in making decisions for the guild. They can also be “Class
Leaders,” people who members of a certain class can go to with questions about their respective class.

However, a player does not have to be a Guild Master or Officer to develop leadership skills. Players who spend a fair amount of their time in small groups fighting in the Dungeons can become leaders as well. They can direct the group against the monsters of the Dungeon, making tactical evaluations, indicating where the other players need to stand, determining which monster in a threatening bunch should be handled first, and deciding which players should be keeping the other monsters away from the group. The same principles of effective leadership apply to collective goal attainment in this setting as in the real world of school, work, and community.
The MMORPGs as Simulations

Lest it seem a stretch to claim that real leadership skills may be honed in this unreal environment, epidemiologists are interested in using MMORPGs to study the spread of contagious disease mediated by how people respond to outbreaks (Coppola, 2007). The idea came about back in 2005, when World of Warcraft released a new Dungeon into the game: Zul’Gurub. The final boss of the Dungeon, Hakkar the Soulflayer, had a negative spell, or debuff as it is termed within the game, called Corrupted Blood. Corrupted Blood caused 250-300 points of damage every few seconds to the infected players. Players standing within range of an infected player were also infected. The debuff would kill most low level players in a matter of seconds, but higher level players with any type of ability to heal themselves could live through the debuff. The debuff was suppose to stay within the dungeon, but players found a way to bring the disease out to main cities. Hunters and Warlocks, who can call on pets to help them in fights, would have their pets get infected and carry the infection into cities. The debuff spread like a plague, making many of the major cities uninhabitable until the designers of the game were able to find a “cure.” The cure came with a change to the mechanics of the dungeon that removed the debuff’s ability to jump from player to player (Coppola, 2007).

This “plague” in a virtual universe tantalized scientists who wished to enhance mathematical models of contagiousness with the effect of human response to the threats of disease. Models of contagiousness are currently implemented on computers to simulate disease diffusion. However, these simulations do not take into account the various things that people might do as a result of their anxiety or outright fear. Most
presume routine conduct, something that is rarely seen during an epidemic. They do not take into consideration the effects of panic, which can be far-flung and nearly impossible to predict. This is where an MMORPG like World of Warcraft could prove helpful.

Unfortunately for scientists, Blizzard was too busy trying to stop the spread of the Corrupted Blood to keep track of any information that may have been useful. However, Blizzard has stated that many players enjoyed the “epidemic” and that the designers may plan another outbreak in the future, and they will let scientists study it (Coppola, 2007).
Conclusion

In conclusion, the stereotype that video game players are anti-social, loners prone to violence does not seem factually substantiated. In reality, gamers are well-adjusted individuals with real world lives coexisting with their virtual lives. Gamers have families, friends, jobs, hobbies, and interests outside of our virtual community. The same potential for leadership is developed through running guilds and leading groups into dungeons as it is through participation in other voluntary organizations. Games may also assist scientists in simulating epidemics through the use of avatars in a virtual world. MMORPGs are continuing to evolve as understanding of this game type builds and the use of the Internet grows. Perhaps MMORPGs will lead to increased global solidarity and international good will as future corporate, scientific, and political leaders will have developed trusting friendships with each other before assuming positions of responsibility.

It must be acknowledged that, like any large aggregate, gamers have their black sheep that blemish their good name. But those disturbed individuals do not represent the overwhelming majority. They are a tiny minority within a community of people that encompasses the entire world. So please, come join us. You will no be disappointed. You will almost certainly make some friends along the way.
Work Cited


16) Survey taken by Pace University students and players of World of Warcraft not attending Pace University.

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