NEW YORK LAW SCHOOL

NYLS Law Review

Volume 49
Issue 1 *State of Play*

Article 18

January 2004

MMORPG's in the College Classroom

Aaron Delwiche
Trinity University

MMORPG's in the College Classroom

Aaron Delwiche (adelwich@trinity.edu)
Trinity University
Department of Communication

The State of Play: Law, Games, and Virtual Worlds
New York Law School, November 2003

> "I don't like it here. I don't know what's going on. We're both stumbling around together in this unformed world whose rules and objectives are largely unknown, seemingly indecipherable or even possibly nonexistent, always on the verge of being killed by forces that we don't understand."
>
> Ted Pikul, *eXistenZ* (1999)

In April 2003, thirty-seven Halflings of mixed gender congregated in the basement of Savery Hall at the University of Washington. The first meeting of the Halfling Ethnographers Guild was in session. Known throughout the land for their good-natured hospitality, these hobbit-like creatures were well-suited to the task of collecting qualitative data about their fellow citizens in Norrath. There was just one problem: this group of eager social scientists had quite literally been "born yesterday." Before they could undertake any sort of research, they would first have to learn how to talk, how to move, and how to avoid being killed by diseased rats.

Across all fields of study, a growing number of theorists have used social science research methods to investigate multiplayer environments (Yee, 2002; Schaap, 2002; Griffiths, 2003). These scholars believe that virtual worlds raise important questions about identity, community, and the influence of technology in our daily lives. Some (Turkle, 1995) argue that virtual environments facilitate a "psychosocial moratorium" that has therapeutic and educational benefits.

This conference is a testimonial to the validity of these perspectives. During the previous two days, we have been treated to a remarkable series of presentations on the economic, political, social, and legal implications of interactive games. Speakers from a wide range of backgrounds have confirmed that the world of play contains valuable lessons that can help us tackle more serious problems.

Earlier this year, I taught a course entitled "Ethnography of Massively Multiplayer On-line Role-playing Games" to a group of thirty-six undergraduates at the University of Washington.[1] In this class, students explored the behaviors, cultural practices, and motivations of MMORPG players. In lieu of a textbook, they purchased a three-month subscription to the game *Everquest*. A comprehensive course packet synthesized articles on gaming, virtual community, and social-science research methods. Approximately half of the class time was spent in the virtual world, and students were expected to log at least five hours in the game-

[1] The course syllabus is available on-line at: http://faculty.washington.edu/redwood/com480/

world each week. Role-playing the part of ethnographers, students crafted research questions and set out to collect data through a process of participant observation. They documented their field notes and reactions to class assignments in publicly accessible web logs. At the end of the quarter, students delivered conference-style presentations of their findings. There were a few rocky moments, but the experiment was fun, successful, and educational.

Drawing on lessons from the course, this presentation evaluates the pedagogical potential of multiplayer environments. After briefly reviewing what other researchers have to say about the use of games in an educational context, I explain the course objectives and design. Synthesizing comments from student web logs with data collected from a follow-up survey, I highlight key findings that emerged throughout the quarter. After discussing the way that members of the *Everquest* community reacted when they learned of the course's existence, I briefly consider ways that multiplayer games could be applied in different instructional settings.

Gaming in the classroom

From the corporate training center to the college classroom, education is often conceptualized as the transmission of facts from a credentialed authority to passive consumers. Pablo Freire (1973) described this as the banking approach to education in which students "record, memorize, and repeat" information that has been deposited in their brains by the teacher. Yet, as Reich (1991) has powerfully argued, this strategy is woefully inadequate for preparing individuals to function as citizens and employees in a knowledge-based society. Instead of encouraging rote memorization, we should be teaching students to be "skeptical, curious, and creative" (230). Games can play a vital role in accomplishing this goal. James Gee (2003) contends that video-games have many educational benefits. They reward students for adopting a "hypothesis testing" approach to problem solving, and they foster meta-level understandings of rule-based simulations. Furthermore, by engaging players in an artificially constructed "world of play," games teach that data is always situated in symbolic systems governed by complex rules of interaction.

Role-playing games are particularly effective in this respect. Luff (2000) notes that successful role identification helps students escape the grip of contemporary norms and beliefs. Whether gamers are projected into the role of an Athenian politician or a patient suffering from chronic pain, they are forced to shift perspective and imagine the world through different eyes. Luff refers to role-playing as "the ultimate empathy exercise."

The literature is packed with examples of role-playing techniques being successfully deployed in the college classroom. At Barnard College, history students role-play key moments of the French Revolution and collectively enact imperial politics of 16th Century China (Fogg, 2001). In Australia, college students are prodded to consider the environmental and social effects of building a tourist resort on indigenous territory (Cutler, & Hay, 2000). At George Mason University, students

of international crisis management participate in simulations with peers from twenty universities around the globe (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, 2001). Some of these exercises are conducted on-line, while others revolve around face-to-face interaction.

Role-playing games are not just for college students. They can also be used for professional training. Bell (2001) reports on the use of on-line role-playing game to train the academic staff of a large public university. Diamontes & Williams (1999) make a convincing case for the use of similar techniques in preparing school administrators to apply national education standards in real-world situations. Role-playing exercises have been used to train social workers (Moss, 2000), medical students (Benbassat & Baumal, 2002), and graduate-level nurses.

In the examples cited above, role-playing is a vehicle for gaining perspective on broader theoretical and professional concerns. The *Everquest* course used role-playing techniques to study gamers in the virtual world of Norrath. Students were simultaneously engaged in two levels of role-playing. Initially, they played the role of ethnographers who were visiting a strange new world. Casting this methodological objective in role-playing terms stressed the preliminary nature of the research while encouraging students to think of themselves as professional social scientists.

A second level of role-playing existed within the game itself. In order to understand anything about the motivation of on-line gamers, students needed to have first-hand experience with role-playing. All students created a personal avatar for which they developed a back story. Later in the quarter, students created avatars of different races, genders, and alignments, and explored how the manipulation of these characteristics affected the reaction of other players.

Course overview

Communication 480 was an upper-division course offered to evening degree students at the University of Washington. The course objectives were two-fold. The primary goal was for the class to collectively investigate the activities of on-line gamers in the context of what Silver (2000) terms "critical cyberculture studies." Along the way, students would be exposed to fundamental principles of social science research.

I realized that most students had no intention of becoming communication scholars after the course was finished. However, regardless of their occupation, it was likely that they would encounter research findings in both professional and public spheres. This class attempted to make students more critical consumers of research findings by providing first-hand exposure to methods of data collection and analysis. This is analogous to the way that media literacy educators promote critical analysis of images by giving students hands-on experience with video cameras and editing decks. By the time students finished the course, I hoped they would understand the relationship between research questions and method selection, the necessity of obtaining informed consent, sampling considerations, the

way that interview techniques and question design can shape results, and the difference between qualitative and quantitative methods.

The thirty-six students ranged in age from 21 through 41. As is common in evening degree courses, the vast majority of students held down part-time or full-time jobs. Some students were regular gamers, but none had experience with *Everquest* prior to taking the course. The class was split down the middle in terms of gender.

Students were assigned approximately 80 pages of reading each week. The course packet included articles specifically analyzing *Everquest* (Yee, 2001; Castranova, 2001; Griffith, 2003), the cultural roots of role-playing games (Fine, 1983; Mackay, 2001), the psychological significance of role playing (Douse & McManus, 1993; Hughes, 1998), and identity construction in virtual worlds (Turkle, 1995; Stone, 1995). These substantive works were accompanied by articles that described interview techniques and ethnographic research methods (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995; Fetterman, 1989; Mann & Stewart, 2000).

Ethnography is a qualitative research method in which the investigator attempts to develop an insider's perspective of a particular culture. Originally used to study indigenous cultures in remote locations, the method has been widely applied to other cultural groupings within industrialized nations. Ethnographic research combines participant observation with qualitative interviews and analysis of related cultural artifacts. Because the academic quarter is only ten weeks long, it was impossible for students to gain a truly indigenous perspective on *Everquest* players. While recognizing these limitations, the class gave the students a trial run of an ethnographic research project. In class, we jokingly referred to our abbreviated methods as "ethnography light."

Table 1
Comparison of "pure ethnography" to "ethnography light"

Pure ethnography	Ethnography light
1. Long-term, in-depth immersion in the culture	1. Frequent visits to Norrath during a 10-week period
2. Face-to-face contact with participants	2. Computer-mediated data collection
3. Emphasis on textured, qualitative data	3. Use of web-based survey data as a supplement to in-game interviews

In order to conduct their fieldwork, students were required to purchase a 3-month subscription to *Everquest*. Verant (the game's publisher) offered free accounts, but this would have required us to play on the development server. As paid subscribers on the Karana server, we had access to a more representative sample. We stuck with the original version of *Everquest* to make sure that the

game would run on students' home computers. Approximately half of the class time was spent in Norrath, and students were asked to explore the virtual world from home for at least five hours each week. The remainder of class time was focused on seminar-style discussion of the assigned readings.

I worried that a game themed class might generate resistance from the administration, but university officials were remarkably supportive. The major barrier was technical. Like most college campuses, the University of Washington has experienced a steady wave of hacker attacks during the past few years. In addition to the fact that installing the software was time consuming, the *Everquest* software required a broader range of user permissions than most administrators are willing to grant. Fortunately, key decision makers were secretly sympathetic to role-playing games, and we found a solution. The Center for Social Science Computation and Research (CSSCR) allowed us to use its 40-person lab. *Everquest* was installed, along with all necessary permissions, on one condition. All participants were sworn to secrecy about the fact that the game was installed in the lab. Optimized for serious statistical analysis, and sporting extremely fast bandwidth, the dual-processor computers in the CSSCR are prime gaming machines. Administrators feared that gaming fans from all over campus might congregate on the lab and refuse to leave. We happily complied with the stipulation, and kept the secret throughout the quarter.[2]

Findings

Everquest is a difficult game to master

From the outset, it was clear that many students would have difficulty mastering game mechanics. Most students had experienced some sort of console game, but only a few were familiar with the role-playing genre. This was further complicated by the game's unwieldy interface. Basic maneuvering in the game requires:

- the ability to toggle between camera views
- chat-window interaction using a complex set of addressing commands
- interaction with non-player characters
- the ability to give and receive objects
- skilled use of the combat modes (especially the auto-attack key)

The chat window was particularly tricky, forcing the gamer to type a series of text commands (/tell, /ooc, /say, and /reply) while keeping an eye on other visual inputs.

[2] By July, the secret was out. Shortly after moving to Texas, I received a touching message from a UW student who had accidentally discovered the game on the lab computers. "I was moved to tears when I found the *Everquest* program installed in the Savery basement lab," he wrote. "I took a few moments to calm myself, and chatted with some level 65 friends I haven't seen for months… [I]'d be really interested to learn about the theories behind (by far) the most influential event in my life."

During the second week of class, students took their first collective steps in the game-world. Each person created a Halfling druid on the Karana server. This character class was selected because it combines combat with magic, thus giving students a chance to experience both dimensions of game play. During the exercise, all 36 players were simultaneously incarnated in a region known as the Misty Thicket. Completely unfamiliar with the controls, students ran in all directions, often bumping into hostile monsters and accidentally triggering attacks on the part of non-player characters. In less than an hour, each player had been killed several times. By the end of the evening, the small area near the entrance to Rivervale was littered with dozens upon dozens of Halfling corpses. It looked as if a neutron bomb had exploded in the Shire. The sight was especially disturbing to other gamers who just happened to be wandering through the thicket at that moment.

Students recorded their frustration with the steep learning curve in their personal web logs:

> I feel like all I am doing is running around like a chicken with my head cut off. (Sue[3], COM 480 student)
>
> I feel quite overwhelmed by the game as a whole, and can't seem to be making much progress… I'm doomed to a quarter of wandering loneliness, and frequent death. (Carlos, COM 480 student)
>
> I played *Everquest* in class for about 10 minutes today, and I got killed by a giant bat, a giant spider, a Halfling named Beardo or something, and I drowned. Sometimes, I stay up at night wondering how I got so far in real life. (Eric, COM 480 student)
>
> I wish I had never stepped into the cave that brought me here! (Robert, COM 480 student)

Several in-class exercises were designed to make the learning curve less painful. Most of these exercises were developed in combination with a student who was an experienced gamer with strong roots in pen-and-paper role-playing games. Noting that teaching people how to play the game was almost as fun as "slaughtering goblins wholesale," the student was an enthusiastic contributor and skilled trainer. His efforts were vital to the success of the class.

At first, as I read through the web logs, I was troubled by the reports of frustration and frequent death. But, failure is not necessarily a bad thing. Jones (1997) notes that making mistakes is a crucial element of games *and* of education: "One can be told countless times, but making the mistake and the proper adjustment creates deeper connections with the content than simply trying to remember." By the end of the quarter, most students were comfortable enough in the gaming environment to carry out their ethnographic mission. Only a handful gained full mastery of the game, but most people were able to conduct in-game interviews.

---

[3] Students and respondents are identified by pseudonyms. A web-based utility was used that randomly extracts names from 22.6 million respondents to the US census.

Students preferred social aspects of the game

Students were consistently reminded that they should invest five hours a week in solo play outside of class. This requirement was intended to increase their familiarity with the game while helping their character achieve greater levels. In theory, all students would have spent at least 40 hours in the game-world by the time they started writing their final paper. As the course progressed, it became clear that many of the students were not meeting this requirement. It is possible that other demands on their time made it difficult for these working adults to play the game at home. (One student titled her final paper "Don't get mad dear: I'll do the dishes right after I finish playing *Everquest*.") There might also have been psychological barriers to accepting a game as homework. Yet, a more likely explanation is that students found the game much more enjoyable when other people were involved.

Throughout the quarter, this social aspect of *Everquest* continually emerged as the most important element in understanding the game's appeal. Turkle (1995), in her analysis of multi-user domains, distinguishes between adventure-themed environments emphasizing "hack and slay" approaches and social environments that revolve around interaction with other players. Players can choose to navigate the world alone (soloing) or as part of a group (grouping), but the game's point structure rewards collective action. Griffiths (2003) found that the majority of players (69%) prefer grouping to soloing. *Everquest* quickly becomes boring without the thrill of teamwork and interaction. The phenomenon of in-game guilds provides further support for this notion.

To fully appreciate the benefits of the game, it helps to have established a critical mass of friends on a given server. Addicts regularly cite such social networks as one of the factors that make it difficult for them to leave the game. The absence of these networks can be a barrier to newcomers. Once again, comments in the web logs reinforced the importance of the social dimension.

> Someone I met on the Sanya server told me that Everquest is just a game until you talk to someone. He was right. Interaction with others expands the enjoyment of the game exponentially. (Joyce, COM 480 student)
>
> The fighting is fun in Everquest. However that can get boring after a long time. The cooperative/social aspects of the game are a good break from the fighting. I enjoy talking with other people and traveling with other characters. (Henry, COM 480 student)
>
> I think that the reason the in-class exercises were popular was because everyone was able to see that their classmates were as clueless as themselves about the game. It's always better to be lost with a buddy, than lost alone. (Carlos, COM 480 student)

Students preferred visual environments

Graphic multi-user environments have descended from multi-user domains (MUD's) and classic text-based adventures such as *Zork*. In a MUD, the virtual world is constructed through text. The appearance of one's avatar, and their activities in the virtual world, are controlled by a series of written commands. In the definitive work on this topic, Turkle (1995) suggests that MUD's raise questions about the nature of virtual community, the construction of identity, and the slippery nature of the dividing line between the virtual and the real. After reading excerpts from Turkle's work, students spent an entire class session in some of the most popular text-based environments (Dhalgren, LambdaMoo, and Diversity University). Most of the students felt that these environments were deeply inferior to *Everquest*.

> I am a visual person, so it was incredibly boring for me right away. That and the list of commands was immense and I wasn't into trying to memorize more terms than I had to for chemistry class" (Craig, COM 480 student)

> "My first experience in the MUD's was exactly what I expected: boring and not very entertaining. I don't think I will ever play in another MUD again. (Sam, COM 480 student)

> "Unless Mudding is otherwise required of me for educational purposes, I do not think I shall ever enter one again." (Katy, COM 480 student)

> "It feels less like a game and more like the old CIS text system I have at work." (Sonja, COM 480 student)

Text-based environments were particularly impenetrable to those for whom English was a second language, and at least four students made this point in their web logs. Yet, the reaction was not entirely negative. Some students preferred the text-based environments to *Everquest*. These were the same students who clearly derive great pleasure from written assignments.

> In Everquest, it's like there's a graphic interface cushioning the creativity whereas, in the MUD, that's all there is: your typing and the words coming back. (Joyce, COM 480 student)

> I think that I would be more interested in doing this than playing Everquest. EQ leaves nothing to the imagination. (Allen, COM 480 student)

One student sided eloquently with the physical world against *both* types of virtual worlds:

> It seems to me that Everquest is more addictive [than MUDs] because there is the graphic element to keep things interesting. But with the way the sun has been shining lately, both are a crime in my opinion. (Carlos, COM 480 student)

It is impossible to extrapolate to the broader population based on anecdotal evidence collected from 36 college students. Nevertheless, this reaction to text-based environments is unlikely to surprise most teachers. In a recent study of

American college students, Gallik (1999) found that approximately half of the respondents spend less than two hours a week engaged in pleasure reading. Thus, graphic environments are more likely to stimulate student involvement. On the other hand, the appeal of text-based role-playing may stem from the assignment to which it is compared. Text-based role-playing would probably be more popular with students than an 800-page treatise on the politics of 18th Century France. Textual environments would also be a terrific vehicle for teaching creative writing.

Students produced quality research

Despite the steep learning curve, students were genuinely engaged with the course themes. This was most apparent as they refined their research questions and headed out into Norrath to interview other gamers. Students selected their own topics, often raising issues that had not been considered by other researchers. With few exceptions, this was the first time that anyone in the class had undertaken a research project, and many worried that their results would not be sufficiently rigorous. I tried to allay their fears by emphasizing that it was *impossible* to produce a full-blown ethnographic study in just ten weeks. Similarly, for those students who chose to incorporate survey data,[4] it would have been difficult to obtain a random sample of sufficient size. I attempted to sensitize students to the importance of these factors while relaxing the standards for their final papers.

Students explored a range of topics, including: the characteristics and motivations of EQ players (Neils & Hanhart, 2003; Veckaktins, 2003), the appeal of supernatural themes (Moore & Baldoz, 2003), gaming addiction (Kim & Kim, 2003; Swansby, 2003; Varriano & White, 2003; Bain, 2003), the therapeutic effects of role-playing (Stephenson & Warum, 2003; Vital, 2003), the slippery relationship between the virtual and the real (Gottlieb, 2003), construction of on-line identity (Hallock & LeDoux, 2003), the depth of on-line friendships (O'Brien, 2003), gender-bending (Folger & Hartnett, 2003; Whitehead, 2003), effects on off-line relationships (Nakano, 2003; Bensovska, 2003), the dreams of Everquest players (Shreck, 2003; Coughlin, 2003), the relationship between introversion and avatar attractiveness (Atienza & Pedrozo, 2003), and the attitudes of gay, lesbian and bisexual MMORPG players (Lau, 2003).

After reading about gaming addiction, Chong (2003) wondered if gamers used mind-altering substances before entering the virtual world. He conducted face-to-face interviews with gamers at an Internet café in Federal Way, and combined this data with on-line interviews. Chong found that some players do consume substances such as marijuana and alcohol to enhance the gaming experience, but concluded that a relatively low number engage in such activities. He also noted that the low sample size made it impossible to extrapolate his findings to the general population.

[4] When designing the course, I assumed that most students would collect data through in-game interviews. Yet, many decided to use web-based questionnaires as a means of collecting more data. Though this is not a common ethnographic technique, this was an acceptable approach for their final projects.

Fuller (2003) wanted to understand the impact of gender and race on the reactions of other players. He created eight characters of different races and genders and asked for donations from high-level characters in the Plane of Knowledge. Though his results were not statistically significant, Fuller found that female characters were far more likely than male characters to donate money to a female avatar. Noting that this contradicts real-world findings about female-to-female giving relationships, he hypothesized that this might be explained by exaggerated role-playing and virtual cross-dressing.

Smart & Turini (2003) took a different approach and decided to study their classmates' feelings about the game of Everquest. They found that the percentage of students with a positive view of the game climbed steadily throughout the quarter, but predicted (accurately) that all of the students would abandon the game when the quarter was finished. They also asked respondents to identify factors that detracted from the pleasure of playing Everquest, with 95% of the respondents citing the amount of time required for character advancement. Observing that the in-class exercises were preferred to solo play, the authors concluded that the fault rested within the game itself. "It's as simple as game design," they wrote. "Everquest's quests are often hard to understand and sometimes just plain cryptic... [T]he issues brought up in class are issues the game designers need to resolve if they want massive appeal. If these types of games are to be the future of gaming, they must take a risk and listen to the average person."

Everquest players respond to the class

Two months after the course ended, an anonymous netizen linked the course syllabus to a popular site called *Fark.Com*. The link was quickly forwarded to game-themed mailing lists and MMORPG discussion forums. During the next few weeks, I received almost 100 e-mail messages from gamers around the world. As one respondent wryly commented, "it appears that the players are as interested in your students as your students are in them."

On the whole, the gaming community's response to the course was positive and good-natured. Players of all ages wanted to know if they could take the course via distance education, and some were willing to move to Seattle if necessary. Several high-level players courteously introduced themselves and offered to answer all of the students' questions.

Many players were amused by the possibility that their hobby was deemed serious enough to warrant academic investigation:

> Is this for real or a hoax? It is very well done if it is a joke, and it is a joke if it is for real. (Kurt, gamer)
>
> Sir, I submit that you slipped in the shower. (Lance, gamer)
>
> You make the gaming community seem like a whole new breed of people. . . [E]xactly what are our behaviors and cultural practices? Only thing I can think of is how we sleep in the day

> and game through the night with a caffeinated beverage by our side. (Matthew, gamer)

Several respondents supported the idea of the class in principle, but wondered if novice players could ever hope to grasp the complex dynamics of the game.

> EQ is an entirely different game at that [lower-level] tier. About every 10 levels, the game changes, the content changes, the economy changes, guilds change... [M]y concern is that I don't think your students will walk away from your class understanding MMORPG's any better since they will not have the opportunity to experience (and thus understand) 95% of the game's dynamics. (Ted, a player with five level-65 characters)

Players who raised this issue acknowledged the difficulty of solving the problem. One suggestion was to invite participation of higher-level characters, and for students to shoot in-game video of high-level encounters.

Others pointed out that the dynamics are much different on the player vs. player (PVP) servers where players are allowed to kill one another.

> I noticed there was very little regarding the dark side of on-line gaming. . . [T]here is an entire social dynamic that was not explored regarding the player-killer and the griefer. (Neil, player killer)

> Playing on a PK-enabled server provides a level of immersion not possible on a regular server… [Y]ou must constantly be on the lookout for other players who may try to kill you during or after the fight and steal your money and items. (Neil, player killer)

There were several thoughtful messages from gamers who felt that *Everquest* was too combat focused to give students an understanding of authentic on-line role-playing. Some respondents pointed me toward an open-ended world called *Second Life*, while others advocated role-playing in text-based MUSHes (multi-user shared hallucinations), MUCKs, MOOs, and MUXes.

> *EQ* is not, in my book, a role-playing game. It's what's commonly called a hack-slash level based game. Role-playing is just that – pretending to be other people. (Patricia, MUSH-player)

> MUSHes and the like go much deeper into personality. . . [T]hey appeal to many, despite the lack of visual stimulation. The bonds formed between a player, their own character, and the other characters are much more potent. Issues like TS (tiny sex), gender, identity, and interpersonal skills are more integral to these games than they are to the standard MMORPG. (Cynthia, MUSH-player)

The absence of full-blown role-playing on most *EQ* servers has been widely noted (Jakobson & Taylor, 2003), and many students reported less exposure to role-playing than they had expected. Nevertheless, the class was largely dissatisfied with text-based virtual environments. Other applications such as *Second Life*, *Game*

Neverending, and *Sims Online* might have been more effective vehicles for understanding role-playing.

Finally, I was contacted by several players who described themselves as former *Everquest* addicts. While acknowledging that the sociological aspects of the game are intriguing, these players worried that the assignments might inadvertently cause students to become addicted.

> [Y]ou could potentially get people addicted and lost in this world. I was addicted to the game for 3 years and it IS a very, very powerful addiction. I strongly urge you to explain to everyone in advance that if they have strong addictive-type personalities not to force them to do this. . . [I] could not be any more serious. (Karen, recovering addict)

One man in his late 30's asked me to think carefully about the potential risks, citing many stories of students whose lives had been ruined by *Everquest* addiction.

> The very nature of this game, which makes it such an intriguing subject to build a college class around, is inherently alluring to those whose lives and priorities are lacking in meaning and substance. (Nick, recovering addict)

Had I received these comments before the class started, I would have considered ways of communicating the risks. In a follow-up survey, I asked students if their relationship with *EQ* had ever reached the level of an addiction:

> Gnomiak and I played every night for hours on end. We would talk about when we could play all the time. We would send text messages to each other during class trying to set up a time. It was crazy. However, once we started our jobs for the summer, neither of us played anymore and we eventually canceled our accounts. (Henry, COM 480 student)

> There was a time during which I nearly could not turn it off. I'd get involved in conversations with other people on-line and they'd be so intriguing, so fascinating that I'd never have signed off if it weren't for my boyfriend hounding me. . . [I] haven't played any other games [since canceling my account]. Still, no time. Also, I still believe fundamentally that walking, hiking, camping, cooking, anything is at least physically better for me than sitting at that computer. (Joyce, COM 480 student)

> I did develop a slight (hee hee) addiction to the game, and it did carry over to my home time. However, it didn't make me more or less addictive in other aspects of my life. I stopped playing near the end of the quarter, and found it less intriguing towards the end. (Eunice, COM 480)

Fortunately, though a few of us became heavily involved with the game, we were all strong enough to cancel our accounts at the end of the quarter

CONCLUSIONS

On balance, the *Everquest* class was a success. As noted earlier, the primary objective was for students to gain a basic understanding of research methods and cyber-culture themes through their study of on-line gamers. The depth of analysis displayed in the final projects, combined with strong performance on the two exams, suggests that the course successfully accomplished these goals. Comments in the follow-up survey support this conclusion.

> I didn't really know anything about researching and interviewing actual people until this class. I was a science major, so all my research was on the Earth or out of books. Learning how to phrase questions and creating open questions (such as these) gave me a good understanding of how to get answers out of people the easiest. (Henry, COM 480 student)
>
> I learned a great deal about ways to make the research repeatable and as closed to individual interpretation as possible. I'm actually looking forward to the next time I study people and behaviors. (Joyce, COM 480 student)
>
> The main lesson I learned is that you have to really think through which research method is best applicable to your study, and carefully consider where errors could occur. (Sonja, COM 480 student)
>
> This class, without exaggeration, was one of the best learning experiences I had during my eight-year college career. Through play, I was able to learn on a transparent level. I learned without the pain. (Tim, COM 480 student)

Castranova (2001) identifies three defining features of virtual worlds: interactivity, physicality, and persistence. To this, I would add a fourth characteristic. Virtual worlds are safe. The player's avatar may be exposed to an array of in-game dangers, but the human being is never at risk of physical harm. Grimmelmann (2003) points out that virtual death "doesn't really seem very deadly." He notes that this dimension of safety is what makes virtual reality an effective therapy for agoraphobia and other anxiety-related disorders (Vincelli et. al., 2003).

Safety is also crucial to any learning environment. When students feel threatened, they clam up. Diamontes & Williams (1999) cite research suggesting that the uppermost levels of the human brain function best in supportive, non-threatening environments. Conversely, dangerous environments are more likely to provoke fight-or-flight responses in the lower-brain stem. In the *Everquest* course, students were asked to do something that can provoke as much anxiety as public speaking. They were asked to interview other people. The safety offered in the virtual environment, combined with a mood of playful intellectual freedom, made it easier for students to throw themselves into the role of experimental social scientists.

This paper has focused on the use of role-playing to teach research methods and cyber-culture themes, but MMORPG's could be used in other situations. Bradley and Froomkin (2003) suggest that these environments could be an effective realm in which to assess the effects of simple changes to legal rules. Castranova (2001) argues that virtual worlds provide insight into economic transactions. Grimmelmann (2003) explains how the analysis of guild dynamics highlights classic themes in political theory while providing insight into the formation of political communities. Transnational organizations could use virtual environments to promote teamwork and to develop intercultural communication skills between members in far-flung offices (see Cox, 1999; Hofstede, 1999).

Instructors who hope to use MMORPG's to explore these (and other) concepts can draw certain lessons from the Everquest course. Initially, a decision must be made about which virtual environment is most appropriate for the class curriculum. Key issues include *accessibility*, *genre*, and *extensibility*. The learning curve for *Everquest* is very steep, and it is difficult for beginners to understand game dynamics without investing huge amounts of time. A more usable environment would allow the students to spend more time making connections between in-game occurrences and specific theoretical concepts. The game genre also matters. Swords and sorcery themes have a long, proud tradition in the world of gaming, but they don't appeal to everyone. *Sims Online* and *Uru: Ages Beyond Myst* are two multiplayer games that break this mold. Also, depending on the context, it may be important to find an environment that allows the instructor to extend the world and design new scenarios. *Second Life* and *Game Neverending* appear promising in this regard.

For an MMORPG-themed class to be effective, learning objectives should be identified at the outset. Along with the macro-level goals, students should be given a series of smaller objectives or baby steps. In the *Everquest* course, the broader research objective kept the class on track. However, more low-level goals would have increased students' mastery of the game during the first few weeks. The in-class exercises were effective precisely because they gave students immediate objectives on which to focus.

Finally, the decision to implement an MMORPG-themed curriculum should be more than a gimmick. In many instances, face-to-face role-playing makes more sense than on-line interaction. Once again, context is crucial. When the focus of the class is cyber-culture and strategies for on-line data collection, the justification for such an environment is self-evident. But there are advantages to on-line role-playing that would apply to a wide range of scenarios. Virtual worlds offer a sense of safety that may be lacking in face-to-face simulations. Furthermore, because they transcend the limits of geography, in-game training sessions could bring together employees from branch offices around the world. Since these environments are persistent, participants could return later and analyze the lesson from a different perspective. Emerging data capture techniques (e.g. log files and screenshots) could also preserve records of the session for subsequent review.

During the previous decade, many predicted that the Internet would revitalize the public sphere, transform the economy, and contribute to the formation of a global culture. Though the most optimistic predictions have been exposed as hyperbole, new media technologies are having a significant impact at all three levels. As we embrace virtual worlds, we should remind ourselves that technology is not a panacea. In many situations, traditional methods of instruction will work just fine. Yet, we should not be afraid to experiment. Experimentation, like play itself, is ripe with possibility.

REFERENCES

Syllabus. (2001, January 12). *Chronicle of Higher Education, 47,* 10-14.

Syllabus. (2001, February 23). *Chronicle of Higher Education, 47,* 14-18.

Asakawa, T., & Gilbert, N. (2003). Synthesizing experiences: Lessons to be learned from Internet-mediated simulation games. *Educational Administration Abstracts, 38*(3), 1-3.

Atienza, J., & Pedrozo, M. (2003). *The study of introversion and facial attractiveness in virtual on-line games* (Undergraduate term paper for Communication 480). Seattle: University of Washington.

Bain, C. (2003). *Everquest as an addiction* (Undergraduate term paper for Communication 480). Seattle: University of Washington.

Bell, M. (2001). Online role-play: Anonymity, engagement and risk. *Education Media International, 38*(4), 251-260.

Benbassat, J., & Baumal, R. (2002). A step-wise role playing approach for teaching patient counseling skills to medical students. *Patient education and counseling, 46*(2), 147-153.

Benesovska, A. (2003). *Massively multiplayer on-line role-playing games and real life relationships* (Undergraduate term paper for Communication 480). Seattle: University of Washington.

Castranova, E. (2001). Virtual worlds: A first-hand account of market and society on the Cyberian frontier. *The Gruter Institute Working Papers on Law, Economics, and Evolutionary Biology, 2*(1).

Chong, D. (2003). *Entering a different world* (Undergraduate term paper for Communication 480). Seattle: University of Washington.

Coughlin, K. (2003). *Everquest: Fantastic dreams* (Undergraduate term paper for Communication 480). Seattle: University of Washington.

Cox, B. (1999). Achieving intercultural communication through computerized business simulation/games. *Simulation & Gaming, 30*(1), 38-50.

Cutler, C., & Hay, I. (2000). 'Club Dread': Applying and refining an issues-based role play on environment, economy, and culture. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education, 24*(2), 179-198.

Daniel, M. (2001). *The fantasy role-playing game*. London: McFarland & Company.

Diamantes, T., & Willams, M. (1999). Using a game format to teach national education standards to aspiring school administrators. *Education, 119*(4), 727-730.

Douse, N., & McManus, I. (1993). The personality of fantasy gamers. *British Journal of Pyschology, 84*(4), 505-509.

Emerson, R., Fretz, R., & Shaw, L. (1995). *Writing ethnographic fieldnotes.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Fetterman, D. (1989). *Ethnography: Step by step.* London: Sage.

Fine, G. (1983). *Shared fantasy: Role-playing games as social worlds*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Fogg, P. (2001). A history professor engages students by giving them a role in the action. *Chronicle of Higher Education, 48*(12), 12-14.

Folger, D., & Hartnett, J. (2003). *The study of gender-bending in EverQuest and the world of Norrath* (Undergraduate term paper for Communication 480). Seattle: University of Washington.

Fox, C. (2003). *Gender gap* (Undergraduate term paper for Communication 480). Seattle: University of Washington.

Fuller, J. (2003). *The changing nature of race and gender in Everquest* (Undergraduate term paper for Communication 480). Seattle: University of Washington.

Gallik, J. D. (1999). Do they read for pleasure? Recreational reading habits of college students. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 42*(6), 480-489.

Gee, J. P. (2003). *What videogames have to teach us about learning and literacy*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Gottlieb, S. M. (2003). *Jacked in: Addiction and residency in Norrath* (Undergraduate term paper for Communication 480). Seattle: University of Washington.

Griffiths, M. (2003). Breaking the stereotype: The case of on-line gaming. *Cyberpsychology and behavior, 6*(1), 81-91.

Hine, C. (2000). *Virtual ethnography*. London: Sage.

Hofstede, G. J., & Pedersen, P. (1999). Synthetic cultures: Intercultural learning through simulation games. *Simulation & Gaming, 30*(4), 415-440.

Jakobsson, M., & Taylor, T. L. (2003). *The Sopranos meets Everquest: Social networking in massively multiplayer online games.* Paper presented at the MelbourneDAC, the 5th International Digital Arts and Culture Conference.

Jones, M. G. (1997, February). *Learning to play, playing to learn: Lessons learned from computer games.* Paper presented at the Association for Educational Communications and Technology, Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Kim, C. J., & Kim, C. J. (2003). *Everquest addiction* (Undergraduate term paper for Communication 480). Seattle: University of Washington.

Lau, P. (2003). *Gays, lesbians, and bisexuals in massively multi-player on-line roleplaying games* (Undergraduate term paper for Communication 480). Seattle: University of Washington.

Law, S. (2001, August 3). Bid to get students to play around in class*. Times Higher Education Supplement*.

Luff, I. (2000, August). "I've been in the Reichstag": Rethinking roleplay. *Teaching History,* 8-18.

Mann, C., & Stewart, F. (2000). *Internet communication and qualitative research: A handbook for researching on-line*. London: Sage.

Moore, B., & Baldoz, C. (2003). *Supernaturalism in Everquest* (Undergraduate term paper for Communication 480). Seattle: University of Washington.

Moss, B. (2000). The use of large-group role-play techniques in social work education. *Social Work Education, 19*(5), 471-484.

Nakano, J. (2003). *Warning: Everquest can be hazardous to your relationships. Or "Don't get mad dear, I'll do the dishes right after I play Everquest."* (Undergraduate term paper for Communication 480). Seattle: University of Washington.

Neils, J., & Hanhart, P. (2003). *Evercrack* (Undergraduate term paper for Communication 480). Seattle: University of Washington.

O' Brien, N. (2003). *Relationships in Everquest: An ethnographic report* (Undergraduate term paper for Communication 480). Seattle: University of Washington.

Schapp, F. (2002). *The words that took us there: Ethnography in a virtual reality*. Somerset, NJ: Transaction Publishers.

Schreck, G. (2003). *Dreams and massively multiplayer on-line roleplaying games* (Undergraduate term paper for Communication 480). Seattle: University of Washington.

Silver, D. (2000). Looking backwards, looking forwards. Cyberculture studies 1990-2000. In D. Gauntlett (Ed.), *Web.studies: Rewiring media studies for the digital age.* (pp. 19-30). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Smart, A., & Turini, E. (2003). *The Everquest class: Everquest exposed* (Undergraduate term paper for Communication 480). Seattle: University of Washington.

Steindorf, S. (2001, December 11). A student-researched website simulate escape from slavery*. Christian Science Monitor,* p. 12.

Stephenson, S., & Warum, S. (2003). *Are on-line role-playing games a form of therapy?* (Undergraduate term paper for Communication 480). Seattle: University of Washington.

Stone, A. (1995). *The war of desire and technology at the close of the mechanical age*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Swansby, P. (2003). *MMORPG addiction and the neglect it causes* (Undergraduate term paper for Communication 480). Seattle: University of Washington.

Turkle, S. (1995). *Life on the screen: Identity in the age of the Internet*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Varriano, E., & White, K. (2003). *Everquest addiction: Physical vs. psychological effects* (Undergraduate term paper for Communication 480). Seattle: University of Washington.

Veckaktins, L. (2003). *Everquest: A medium evaluated* (Undergraduate term paper for Communication 480). Seattle: University of Washington.

Vincelli, F., Anolli, L., Bouchard, S., Wiederhold, B. K., Zurloni, V., & Riva, G. (2003). Experiential Cognitive Therapy in the Treatment of Panic Disorders with Agoraphobia: A Controlled Study. *Cyberpsychology and behavior, 6*(3), 321-329.

Vital, C. (2003). *Postive aspects of on-line gaming?!?* (Undergraduate term paper for Communication 480). Seattle: University of Washington.

Whitehead, J. (2003). *Gender-bending online: Who are you really talking to?* (Undergraduate term paper for Communication 480). Seattle: University of Washington.

Yee, N. (2003). *Ariadne: Understanding MMORPG addiction*. Retrieved October 1, 2003, from http://www.nickyee.com/hub/addiction/home.html