

# Some online video games found to promote 'sociability,' researchers say

**Hang in there, parents. There is some hopeful news on the video-gaming front. Researchers have found that some of the large and hugely popular online video games – although condemned by many as time-gobbling, people-isolating monsters – actually have socially redeeming qualities.**

In theory, anyway. After examining the form and function of what's known in the trade as MMOs – massively multiplayer online video games – an interdisciplinary team of researchers concludes that some games "promote sociability and new worldviews."

The researchers, Constance Steinkuehler and Dmitri Williams, claim that MMOs function not like solitary dungeon cells, but more like virtual coffee shops or pubs where something called "social bridging" takes place. They even liken playing such games as "Asheron's Call" and "Lineage" to dropping in at "Cheers," the fictional TV bar "where everybody knows your name." "By providing places for social interaction and relationships beyond the workplace and home, MMOs have the capacity to function much like the hangouts of old," they said. And they take it one step further by suggesting that the lack of real-world hangouts "is what is driving the MMO phenomenon" in the first place. The new conceptual study was published in early August in the *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* under the title, "Where Everybody Knows Your (Screen) Name: Online Games as 'Third Places.' "

Steinkuehler is a professor of education at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, and Williams is a professor of speech communication at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. The term "third places" was coined in 1999 by sociologist Ray Oldenburg to describe the physical places outside the home and workplace that people use for informal social interaction. Steinkuehler and Williams argue that online spaces, such as those found in MMOs, should also count as third places for informal sociability, "albeit new and virtual places." MMOs are graphical 2- or 3-D videogames that allow players, through their self-created digital characters or avatars, to interact with the gaming software and with other players, to build "relationships of status and solidarity." While still in-game, players can hold multiple real-time conversations with fellow players through text or voice.

The games the researchers studied – "Asheron's Call I and II" and "Lineage I and II" – represent "a fairly mainstream portion of the fantasy-based MMO market," the authors wrote, where rewarding players for cooperation and the formation of long-term player groups or "guilds" is part of the game. Game play in MMOs is not a "single solitary interaction between an individual and a technology," the researchers wrote, "but rather, is more akin to playing five-person poker in a neighborhood tavern that is accessible from your own living room." Steinkuehler and Williams also found that participation in such virtual third places "appears particularly well suited to the formation of bridging social capital – social relationships that, while not usually providing deep emotional support, typically function to expose the individual to a diversity of worldviews," they wrote. "In other words," Williams said, "spending time in these social games helps people meet others not like them, even if it doesn't always lead to strong friendships. That kind of social horizon-broadening has been sorely lacking in American society for decades."

Over the last few years, Williams has published a number of studies that have challenged the common and mostly negative beliefs about game playing. For his work on online games as third places, Williams drew on an earlier study of "Asheron's Call," for which he combined survey research and experimental design and focused on "issues of social capital and real-life community," he said. He even played the game and conducted 30 random interviews, asking players about their motivations for playing, their in-game social

networks and their life outside the game. "There were both positive and negative outcomes," he said.

In her earlier study of cognition and learning in MMOs, Steinkuehler conducted a two-year ethnography of the "Lineage" games, her goal being to explore the kinds of social and intellectual activities in which gamers routinely participate, including individual and collaborative problem solving, identity construction, apprenticeship and literary practices. She conducted repeated interviews of 16 key informants throughout the study. Their overall conclusion in this newest study: "Virtual worlds appear to function best as bridging mechanisms, rather than as bonding ones, although they do not entirely preclude social ties of the latter type."

While they continue to draw fire from many critics, MMOs attract more than 9 million subscribers worldwide, who spend on average 20 hours a week "in-game."

"To argue that their MMO game play is isolated and passive media consumption that takes the place of informal social engagement is to ignore the nature of what participants actually do behind the computer screen," the authors wrote. Still, they suggest that heavy game play might not be healthy in the short term for people who need strong connections, since it could take the place of strong offline relationships. "It's really a question of what kind of balance the person has in their life," Williams said. "For that reason, online spaces are not a one-size-fits-all phenomenon that can simply be labeled 'good' or 'bad.'" The authors suggest that now may be a good time to reconsider how new media are affecting people. "Perhaps it is not that contemporary media use has led to a decline in civic and social engagement, as many have argued, but rather, that a decline in civic and social engagement has led to a 'retribalization' through contemporary media."

Source: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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