

# **Is Electronic Community an Addictive Substance?**

## **An ethnographic offering from the EverQuest Community.**

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### **1. Introduction**

Many people argue that computer games are unhealthy, and some people claim that they are “addictive.” Such arguments assert that as a result of these games, children have lost interest in school, spouses have lost interest in partners, and employees are coming to work tired and distracted. Is this true? And if so, what makes online games so “addictive?”

In this study we report on ethnographic fieldwork from “inside” the EverQuest community, including participant observation and in-depth interviews concerning the experience of becoming a member of the EverQuest community. We test our hypothesis that video game addictions are constructions of a greater need for community. First we discuss the issues regarding addiction and community as they pertain to this study of EverQuest. Second, we highlight initial findings from our fieldwork data. Third, we suggest possible avenues for further exploration by looking at possible implications of regulating online communities. We have looked at historical perceptions of addiction, the concept of community, and conducted background research on the online game EverQuest. Our fieldwork included conducting participant observation in Norrath, and interviews with people who treat addiction disorders and those who partake in the community of EverQuest.

The manner in which society constructs addictions like game addiction stands directly to influence policy that is not only in reference to the addictive properties of games, but the pathologization of behaviour that certain groups of influence find unacceptable, or simply different. We acknowledge that it is a risky undertaking to present the concept of addiction as a social construct, but when one uses the word addiction, substance dependence, destructive behaviour, and compulsivity often fall under the same umbrella term which can be confusing at best, especially when concerning online games like EverQuest and attempts at regulating those games in the same manner as narcotics. Quite a few academics in the past have come under fire for similar opinions on addiction--essentially having deviant opinions about deviance. They have been accused of being insensitive or ignorant about the pain caused to self and others by engaging excessively in an activity.<sup>1</sup> Our argument should not

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<sup>1</sup> Examples are Schaler (2000), Peele (1975), and Alexander (2000).

be mistaken for a dismissal of biomedical conceptions of substance dependence and abuse, but rather as a piece that cautions against the application of blanket diagnoses and policies for life conditions that might stem from social, rather than medical causes, exclusively. We also believe that as there is a better vocabulary developed to articulate the difference between physiological, psychological, and psycho-social behaviour, there will be less need for the current usage of “addiction” to describe what could be physical substance dependence, a compulsion for which many reasons may exist, or an engaging and entertaining activity.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. **Addictionology and Community**

We argue that it is not the use of substances that warrant the term addiction, but rather the suggestion of destructive behaviour that causes people to assign the term addiction to an activity. We wish to show why this is problematic, especially in the context of electronic communities. It is necessary to be critical of those seeking to regulate online communities by policies that deem an activity to be addictive. As game manufacturers come under fire for deliberately designing an addictive game, a cautionary light must also be cast upon the other side of the spectrum from those calling for increased pathologization of what could essentially be a compelling community in which one chooses to exist.

The word “addiction” was never closely linked to drugs or to disease until the propaganda associated with the mid-nineteenth century Temperance movement became widespread.<sup>3</sup> The movement spurred an intense medical interest in treating the excessive consumption of alcohol or drugs. Hence, the vocabulary has revolved around treatment of a condition. Popular culture in the form of self-help books and talk shows have also been implicated in bringing medical vocabulary to mainstream discourse, promoting the idea that any personal problem manifests itself in some “...form of ‘compulsive’ behaviour—‘addictions’ to food, romance and sex, destructive relationships in which one became “dependent” on an inappropriate partner, even excessive shopping and plastic surgery...”

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<sup>2</sup> In this case, we mean the term psycho-social to include intangible and ‘soft’ reasons for one’s actions, such as cultural, community, and societal influences. Further elaboration on a similar addiction paradigm can be found at Stanton Peele, *The Stanton Peele Addiction Website* (2002 [cited]); available from <http://www.peele.net/intro.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph R. Gusfield, *Symbolic Crusade: Status Politics and the American Temperance Movement*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986).

were eventually seen as ‘addictions’”.<sup>4</sup> Through the media and rhetoric as found in the Temperance movement, ‘addiction’ has taken on a different meaning from the original sense of the word, which was the diligent pursuit of an activity.<sup>5</sup> The term is now being used to describe very different types of behaviours, from use of crack to participating in the game EverQuest (often referred to as ‘EverCrack’ in popular media).<sup>6</sup> The mere use of the word addiction to govern actions has been and is increasingly problematic. Addiction is a word that serves to encompass so many human conditions, including feelings like pleasure and pain, for which it should be viewed as sorely inadequate.

Unlike addiction, the word community has a positive association. As Bauman writes, “Community, we feel, is always a good thing.”<sup>7</sup> Briefly defined, community is a social structure around a common interest. The word represents the ideal kind of world we wish to inhabit but cannot realistically. Community is often where one can realize a positive sense of self, but when alienated, one is negatively detached from community and the sense of self is dislocated and fragmented. Community appears to talk about “a special closeness or bond which unites some persons and differentiates them from others.”<sup>8</sup> According to current definitions, the people associated with sustaining the relationships in the EverQuest environment would definitely qualify as a valid community. The land of Norrath contains a group of people existing in the same locality, following codes of conduct which can be implicit or explicit. As players indicate, they have common interests of well-being, which the game environment does facilitate, and are in groups forming distinct segments of people. There are occurrences of sharing, participation, and fellowship while interacting with one another in the game. EverQuest is the site of community, where players can be seen duplicating and adapting many of the relationship dynamics that take place in everyday life to the game experience. This is not to say that those relationships are not carried out in the offline world and vice versa, as many are and have become familiar with fellow players on and offline. It therefore makes a good field site and case study in a cyber-context, and the relationships found therein are much more complex than one might initially realize.

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<sup>4</sup> Elayne Rapping, ed., *U.S. Talk Shows, Feminism, and the Discourse of Addiction, Gender, Politics and Communication* (New Jersey: Hampton Press Inc., 2000).

<sup>5</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, ed. prepared by J.A. Sumpson and E.S.C. Weiner (Oxford: Clarendon press, 1989).

<sup>6</sup> *Everquest or Evercrack?* (CBS NEWS, 2002 [cited June 17 2002]).

<sup>7</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001).

<sup>8</sup> Joseph R. Gusfield, *Community: A Critical Response* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975).

People are indeed addicted to this game, but they are only 'addicted' in the sense that people everywhere have activities in which they are actively engaged, fulfilling a need for identity and community. Instead of making 'addiction' in the EQ sense, a disorder, people should be seen as merely finding a community to which they can belong.

### 3. What is EverQuest?

Sony Online Entertainment's EverQuest (EQ), is one of the most popular massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPG) ever to hit the online game market, with a subscriber base of more than 430 000 gamers.<sup>9</sup> At any one point, around 2000 players per server are going about their daily business online. Sony currently supports 41 EverQuest servers and each server runs an independent version of Norrath, which is the EverQuest world. 39 out of 41 servers are based in North America, and the two latest additions are based in Europe.<sup>10</sup>

EverQuest is set up with a persistent environment. This means that events in Norrath happen real-time, and players cannot save the game in order to return to the exact same scenario the next day. Like the real world, events in one place happen whether someone is there or not. The game makes an attempt at approximating real idle time in changing conditions of weather, roaming creatures, and one can pass the time by doing something as simple as watching the sunset. Rare creatures can spawn and be killed by guilds for valuable loot while one is offline. One of the many possible reasons players feel compelled to stay in the game is the fear of missing out on something, or being left behind.

People often spend as much time with EQ as they would a second job (anywhere from 10 to more than 40 hours a week). "Avatars in virtual worlds must work to do anything interesting at all".<sup>11</sup> There are a number of cases in which people have turned to 'addictions' in order to "deal with" being laid off of a job for instance. This is reflective of the value society places on work as self-realization and identity. Informants in our study also noted that the difference between engaging in active

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<sup>9</sup> T.L. Taylor, "Multiple Pleasures: Women and Online Gaming," *Convergence: The Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* Vol. 9, no. 1 (2002): 2

<sup>10</sup> Mark D. Griffiths, Mark N.O Davies, and Darren Chappell, "Breaking the Stereotype: The Case of Online Gaming," *CyberPsychology & Behavior* 6, no. 1 (2003):82

<sup>11</sup> Edward Castronova, *Virtual Worlds: A First-Hand Account of Market and Society on the Cyberian Frontier* (Gruter Institute Working Papers on Law, Economics and Evolutionary Biology, 2001 [cited April 15 2003]); available from

[http://www.bepress.com/giwp/default/vol2/iss1/art1/current\\_article.html](http://www.bepress.com/giwp/default/vol2/iss1/art1/current_article.html);

consumption (like gaming) rather than passive consumption (like watching television) highlighted the feeling of being social and productive—making what they do hardly an addiction.

There is also an important social aspect to EverQuest, and in actuality, looks like the central reason for its success. It is advantageous to talk to others. This necessity for basic social contact and information exchange lays the foundation for deeper, more meaningful interactions that lend to the apparent sense of community found in EverQuest. Because of the difficulties in excelling in the game without others, multiple forums for discussion and collaboration exist in Norrath and other places, both online and offline. As Taylor (2002) finds, games like EverQuest place the user in many settings containing both on and offline friends, strangers, and people across the world, whose avatars may be virtually next to you in avatar form. One of countless examples of an online EverQuest community is the web site Allakhazam's Magical Realm.<sup>12</sup> On this site, there are links to online communities discussing EQ, the latest news, player written storylines, biographies, chat rooms, art created by players, and many more modes of fostering a sense of community identity amongst EQ players. The game is much more than the computer entertaining a player by facilitating a little interaction—the game is the nexus of a vast online community, complete with its own modes of human expression in art, culture, conflict, and resolution.

#### **4. Moral panic and game addiction**

Many players use the term 'addiction' to describe their attachment to EQ, perceiving their time in front of the computer as a source of conflict with their relationships in offline real life (RL).<sup>13</sup> The popular media has often presented EQ as a game so destructive that the moment people start playing it, they begin to sever all ties with the tangible world. Players start to alienate real life friends and loved ones, leaving their school and work pursuits to spend their lives pursuing almost the exact same things in Norrath. There are support groups on the Internet dedicated to the 'victims' that lay in EverQuest's wake, such as EverQuest Widows, Spouses against EverQuest, and so on. Our interest lays in the reasons players have for this abandonment of real life, versus the reasons others may have for this behaviour.

Also under examination is the question of responsibility and culpability: How popular and compelling must something be in order to be a certified addiction that warrants a warning label? Must everything

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<sup>12</sup> Allakhazam, *Allakhazam's Magical Realm: Your Everquest Community* ([cited January 15, 2003 2003]); available from <http://www.allakhazam.com>.

<sup>13</sup> Nicholas Yee, "The Norrathian Scrolls: A Study of Everquest (Version 2.5)," (2001).

strongly compelling have such a label? There have been extreme cases of game overuse. One such case is the story of EverQuest player Shawn Woolley from the United States that made headline news, game forums and discussion groups for months and whose case still makes chilling allegations concerning just how far a game (and its policies) can go.<sup>14</sup> In November 2001, the 21 year-old shot himself after playing EverQuest for thirty-six hours straight. His mother Elizabeth Woolley blames the developers, Sony Online Entertainment, for intentionally creating an addictive game. She is suing the company in order to get access to her son's account and to have warning labels placed on allegedly addictive games like EverQuest. It is interesting that the game, and nothing else, was instantly blamed for his suicide. This raises many questions for how people can arrive at policies that are based on very few and isolated cases. What else was going on in his life? Are other players experiencing the same type of hopelessness he seemed to feel? If a product is as apparently exciting and engaging as EverQuest, should companies that make good games be wary of pending lawsuits? We attempt to convey what at least some players think about their experiences in the game with the fieldwork results in the following pages.

### **5. Methodology**

The fieldwork for this report spans a six-month period from early December 2002 to late June 2003. In that time, Florence created her own avatar and conducted participant-observation in the land of Norrath on the Terris-Thule server. There, she conducted herself with the intention of excelling in the game—the initial motive for almost all game players. By nature, an ethnographic study is rich in descriptive data, and our informants did not disappoint. Here, we provide a relatively brief synopsis the results of the research carried out thus far. First, we discuss the mechanics of the study in terms of scope and methodology. Second, we highlight key themes that emerged from preliminary findings in the fieldwork data. Lastly, we compare and contrast our initial assumptions with the resulting data set, indicating what avenues should be explored further in the future.

In addition to the researcher's first-hand experience with the game, we use the testimony from four key informants: three additional EverQuest players and one psychiatrist who has attempted to treat EverQuest 'addicts' in his practice.<sup>15</sup> Though not intended to be representative and generalizable to the greater population of players, the

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<sup>14</sup> *Death of a Game Addict* (JS Online, [cited May 30 2002]); available from <http://www.jsonline.com/news/State/mar02/31536.asp>.

<sup>15</sup> For these interviews, we obtained informed consent and followed the code of ethical conduct concerning the use of human subjects as prescribed by Simon Fraser University.

data gathered and ideas presented here do touch upon some insights that we doubt could have been collected by methods other than ethnography. The answers to questions in the findings highlight even more intriguing questions to ask in future phases of this research. This paper shares just a few of the many exciting findings, with a discussion on possible implications for online communities and notions of addiction.

During the project, Florence created an avatar, whose activities and development she oversaw and nurtured. Participant observation involved regularly advancing her wood elf's experience and level, as well as socializing with those she encountered in the community—forming friendship ties and valuable networks as the study progressed. This experience was integral to the study because it directly impacted her ability to understand the stories of other players, relay the game experience of a relatively new EverQuest player, and as a result convey possible reasons of why games like EverQuest present such an opportunity to participate in an engaging community. The implications of conducting fieldwork on the Internet are numerous and intriguing, worthy of further studies in themselves. However, for now, we will convey some key findings with respect to informant testimony and researcher experience which were derived with as much researcher sensitivity to possible ethical and methodological issues as possible.

In current existing research on video game addiction, there is a notable lack of description addressing the subtleties of game experience and player motive. By having Florence act as participant-observer, she was able to bridge the gap between player and researcher, describing her experiences from an intimate point of view, yet addressing those experiences with an academic analysis informed by anthropological method. She socialized with those online and conducted in-depth interviews with EverQuest players offline. We were then able to contrast the reported experiences of these players with the data gained from addiction literature and medical personnel. In addition to the researcher's first-hand experience with the game, we use the testimony from four key informants: three additional EverQuest players and one psychiatrist who has attempted to treat EverQuest 'addicts' in his practice.<sup>16</sup> Though not intended to be representative and generalizable to the greater population of players, the data gathered and ideas presented here do touch upon some insights that we doubt could have been collected by methods other than ethnography. The answers to questions in the findings highlight even more intriguing questions to ask in future phases of this research. This paper shares just a few of the many exciting findings, with a discussion on possible implications for online communities and notions of addiction.

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In the game itself, Florence chose her character's starting attributes. After that, she proceeded to nurture it by getting experience and practising its skills. Choosing what appealed to her most, she settled upon a Wood Elf of Druid class. The game allowed her to choose her name, hairstyle and colour, along with facial features and starting points to which she could allot to certain attributes such as agility, dexterity, and wisdom.

Each avatar has a starting geographic region, determined by their race. EverQuest has many intriguing stories, and stories are continuously being circulated as expansion packs come out and, as one will be able to see, the experiences of individual players make for intriguing narratives. Participant observation involved regularly advancing the avatar's experience and level, as well as socializing with those she encountered in the community, forming friendship ties and valuable networks as the study progressed. This experience had a direct impact on Florence's ability to relay the experience of a relatively new player to the game, understand the experiences and stories of other players, and as a result convey the compelling nature of the EverQuest community.

In many respects, Florence's experiences in the land of Norrath closely matched the experiences of what people have come to know as "traditional" ethnography. That is, immersing oneself for an extended period of time in a given field site while attempting to build rapport and experience what it is like to live as a local through daily life and informant guidance. However, in this case people are anonymous, and everyone can be whom they choose to be. She was, in a sense, immediately a resident of Kelethin and instantly assimilated the attributes of being a Wood Elf, their inherent racial tensions, and at the same time, an EQ community member like everyone else. She was not immediately marked as an outside researcher. The implications of conducting fieldwork on the Internet are numerous and intriguing, worthy of further study at a later date. Various field notes and reflections were catalogued on a web log, further connecting the researchers, making them accessible to the Internet at large. Florence took part in chat sessions, message boards, and general conversation—a necessary component of game play. This laid the groundwork for general questions of players both in the game, and formal interviews outside the game for which we gained ethics clearance and ensured confidentiality of informant identities to the extent they wished.<sup>17</sup> Our offline player informants Derek, Edward, and James were recruited by "snowball sample" in that they were friends of one another and referred to one another in their interviews.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ethics requirements approved according to guidelines for human research subjects as set by the Department of Research Ethics at Simon Fraser University.

<sup>18</sup> Pseudonyms have been used for all informants to provide confidentiality.

## 6. Preliminary findings-- some common themes

In this section we report on participant observation fieldwork from “inside” the EverQuest community as well as interviews with players, and a therapist who has treated problem players. To date, we have looked at the past and present discourse of addiction, the concept of community, and conducted background research on the online game EverQuest. We provide player testimony along with some additional unique issues arising from the online game environment that one might not obtain by belonging to tangible community. All three were 26 years old, which also reflected the average age of EverQuest players according to a study conducted by Yee.<sup>19</sup>

Firstly, Derek<sup>20</sup> is a college student who “... joined the bandwagon, bought it, played it, and it was pretty incredible.” The longest he has played in one sitting is ten hours. Derek has interests in anything technical. In his spare time he likes snowboarding and playing both console and computer games. He has played anything and everything since the Atari and Commodore 64 in the early 1980s. He gravitates towards real-time strategy games like WarCraft, and he likes role playing games, though he finds that they take up a lot of time. He currently plays CounterStrike, EverQuest and Allegiance. Derek is habitually an early adopter of many games. He got started on EverQuest after reading about the game in magazines and online when it first started. Originally none of his offline friends played the game, but he states that he made friends online. “Some people have different reasons for playing. Some people are in it for being in a guild, some people are in it for the loot, items, and some people are in it to help others.” Originally none of his offline friends played the game, but he says he “made friends online.”

Secondly, Edward is a young professional working in the tech industry. He travels a lot and is often very busy with work. He enjoys fantasy and role-playing games and is also a competitive billiards player. Having played games for roughly eighteen years, he now plays EverQuest exclusively when he plays PC games. The longest he has played in one sitting is eighteen hours. He got into EverQuest because he knew one of his friends liked the game, so he tried it. The longest he has played in one sitting is eighteen hours. “The gameplay really sucks, but I had to play it. I don’t know why. I’ve given up dates, I’ve ignored my friends... neglected sleep and food and hygiene. I’ve done it all. 18 hours in a row.” He started playing EverQuest because he knew one of his friends liked the game so he tried it.

Thirdly, James is a part-time student, and employed part-time, and seems to be the most dedicated EverQuest player out of the three

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<sup>19</sup> Yee, "The Norrathian Scrolls: A Study of Everquest (Version 2.5)."

<sup>20</sup> Pseudonyms have been used for all informants to provide confidentiality.

informants. Though his time during one sitting does not exceed twelve hours, he used to play twelve hours a day and outplay the other two informants in hours amassed per week. He currently plays six hours a day, when he gets back from work or school. “It was such a huge world, and it was the social interaction. You’d have to talk to people all over the world, which I found was pretty amazing.”

What makes games like EverQuest in particular so compelling? The player informants touched upon a number of different points in their interviews, but some very interesting themes emerged that were not previously highlighted in other studies. The development of the player-driven economy as a particular determinant of the governance of Norrath, grouping and obligation to the community, and social status were compelling factors in one’s decision to play the game for prolonged periods of time. We describe select themes that emerged from our informants in the following pages.

A. The changeover from computer to player-run economy

When EQ first started in 1999, the economy was largely controlled by computer-controlled merchants, known as Non-Player Characters (NPCs). Players, who were all relatively low-level at the time had to rely on NPCs to buy and sell goods. As the game evolved, players increasingly wrested control of the economy from the game NPCs and turned it into the current barter system. Derek talks about practical reasons for the change:

“There were some high level characters like basically I might be level 20, but there are level 40 characters around and they would be able to kill something and get these fascinating weapons that everybody wanted. For example, the wizards, heavy magic users, had to buy spell ingredients. In order to do that, they needed a lot of money. They didn’t care about weapons and armour, so they used to sell the weapons and armour to other characters to get enough money to buy and create their spells. There was a huge investment involved in making spells. There were monks and such that decided that they didn’t need weapons, so could sell weapons for a certain amount of money.”

The developers of the game responded and created a common area called the Bazaar where players meet at scheduled times. Consequently, a freer market came into existence, and with the added experience of increased freedom, emergent narrative and self-determination, the community continued to flourish. “It became a hub. It became where

everybody would go there to buy or sell equipment and you can meet somebody there, and you can always get something there... at the Bazaar.”

#### B. Grouping and participation in raids

Another theme was the need to join a player-organized group in order to be as successful as possible in the game. Edward brought up raids, which are missions involving many high-level players (30 to as many as 80) to vanquish a large target. He told me of a time when his guild was “camping” (waiting for) a target to emerge. The target was Rage Fire, which was a triggered spawn that one had to catch at the right time. The target could take anywhere from three to five days to spawn, and Edward’s guild was camping it for a while. One of the guild members camped Rage Fire for two days straight in shifts with a friend. One night, Edward’s phone rang at 3:45am. He picked up the phone, and the guild member in charge of the phone list told him that Rage was “up.” “So I get up and boot my computer, log on, and park in the right area, and we killed the creature and went back to bed. <laughs>”

Playing with a group of peers and the social element associated with that is by far the key determinant of what players talked most about as “fun.” When we asked James what raids were like, he described his experiences as, “...it can get really boring, cause you’re just waiting. Then all of a sudden it’s just like—turns from sheer boredom to complete terror.” All three players spoke of a reluctance to leave a good group. Each player Class is capable of contributing its particular talents to a group, such as healing, spell casting, or fighting. Derek recounts his experience playing a Cleric, and, being the only full healer in the group, he could not log off while the group was still playing because that would essentially mean destroying the group. “There’s the aspect that you didn’t want to be a loser and just drop from a group after you get something.” Florence felt this pressure the times she grouped as well, and even though it was 3 o’clock in the morning and she had to wake up for work in three hours, her sense of “responsibility” to the players she had known a very short time kept her logged on and contributing. It was not the promise of monetary personal reward that kept her and other players on, but more a sense of duty. James reported that it is currently this social dependence that keeps him playing. He mostly participates in raids to help other people, as opposed to being in it for personal advancement and loot.

While “soloing” is possible with certain classes like the Druid, many players find “Grouping” ultimately fulfilling and an essential part of the greater EQ culture, as players could only get so far alone. Their complementary strengths serve in being able to accomplish the most for one’s group in a given amount of time. There are many facets that make finding a group attractive, such as the continuous rapport building amongst guildmates, companionship during raids of 30 or more players, and getting

the most loot and experience by taking down a larger target. James conveyed the excitement he felt in a particular raid he recalls:

“Most people do it with 50 people, but there’s 32 of us. We were doing pretty good and then all of a sudden people started dying. A lot of people. Even I died when [his] health was at 40%. So I’m bound in the Nexus, and I’m naked and all I can read is the main channel. And you know those war movies? They’re yelling and stuff, that’s what it was like. The Druids saved us. [the Dwarf] was at 10%, they were like Nukem! Nukem now! And boom, we won.”

The level of dedication indicated by players is rarely seen for something that people do not care about, and leaves much to be considered when studying the place EverQuest occupies in the lives of individual players. James’ guild, like many, works on a point system. The more guilds a player attends, the more points they get. When loot is up for auction, players use their points to then bid on items. Hence, many players want to log on and attend as many raids as possible.

### C. Status and sense of accomplishment

In their respective interviews, I asked Derek, Edward, and James what they felt kept them and others playing, and the reason that came up each time was the desire to achieve the next level for their characters. Edward insisted that the real fun did not begin until level 60, so one is more inclined to play more to get one’s character there faster in anticipation of participating in high-level activities such as raids. James’ thoughts when he was offline would be occupied with the cool things he could do once he reached a particular level. My experiences were similar, as I felt compelled by reaching the next level when I played as well.

Achieving status and sense of accomplishment could be done in a number of ways. As James’ testimony indicates, he does feel an immense sense of pride in conducting a raid with only 32 players when most guilds need at least 50. He also indicates his feeling of being a part of something bigger, creating a historical narrative (as in war movies), his enjoyment of teamwork and the fulfilment that comes with those elements. “I’m in it because it’s really good. Especially when you take someone down that’s really hard. It makes me feel pretty good to do more with less.” As well, the drive to increase a character’s level exists because it allows the player to do more and see more, therefore lending more status to the character. Having the best weapons and skills help a player participate in more group events like raids and be seen as a more valuable member. Hence, the more time one spends online nurturing their character, the more prominent that

player becomes as a member of the community. James noted, "... if I get to level 45 I can cast all these cool spells. That was the motivating factor back in the early days... [now it's] 5 more alternate experience points and I can get a horse."

Equipment is a very important status marker in the game. Edward stated that he "twinked" out his level 1 Druid, meaning that he transferred equipment that was better than completely new player might have to his Druid. "I had the best stuff that you could buy for a Druid." James is five alternate experience points away from obtaining a horse—a highly visible marker of prestige and prowess for high-level characters. One can gain the awe of peers with the best equipment the same way having a large house or an expensive car might, and one can gain the respect of peers by being a high-level character the same way holding a prestigious profession might in the tangible world.

Derek summarized what keeps many players from logging off: "...it was the idea that if you're in a very good group, and you're gaining a lot of experience points... you enjoy the feeling of achievement." Griffiths (2003) indicates that players found the difficulty of advancing for casual players to be the least fulfilling aspect of the game.<sup>21</sup> This finding is consistent with our detailed informant reports and observation, that there is indeed a significant difference in rewards for players who spend more time online, socially and logistically. On the other hand, players reported that their favourite activities were levelling and building up their character, grouping and interacting with other people, and chatting. Derek pointed out that there is very little reward in logging on for a short time. The game takes roughly ten minutes to log onto. His experience coincided with the researcher's in that he found that he needed about three hours to fully get into the game and find it rewarding. This was an interesting coincidence, though understandable. There are numerous everyday little 'errands' to do while waiting for something "exciting" to happen. It is our assertion that the game provides common goals that are fulfilling for the individual as well as the group, and that this is what facilitates the rich socially interactive environment that is so attractive to many players. Similarly, the Griffiths indicates that one of the most consistent points regarded the significance of the social milieu in determining the level of enjoyment one attained from gameplay.

#### D. Anonymous therapy

James, in his many hours online, had the chance to nurture relationships with his fellow players. The chat system became a way for players to obtain anonymous therapy regarding their offline problems. James recalls being almost a "surrogate father" to a ten year-old who told

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<sup>21</sup> Griffiths, "Breaking the Stereotype: The Case of Online Gaming." :85

James his problems, as well as countless times during idle moments people asking general advice about relationships. "People keep telling me things that they normally wouldn't tell anyone else. Maybe it's because of that anonymity...they don't know me, and I don't know them, so who will get back to you."

Unlike Edward, James prefers to remain anonymous. Edward has given his contact information to his guild members for use in raids, whereas James keeps in touch by way of forums and separate email accounts. This shows that one's apparent emotional attachment to the EverQuest community is not necessitated by revealing one's identity in the tangible world—and one might not want to anyway.

#### E. Therapy for EverQuest addicts

As Alexander notes, "Membership in something seen as destructive is far more endurable than no identity at all."<sup>22</sup> Our interview with a psychiatrist who specializes in troubled youth was especially enlightening with regards to the implications of calling EverQuest an addiction. In his experience, despite the obsessive-compulsive nature of addiction, those who came to him as "EverQuest addicts" did not respond to the obsessive-compulsive medications that he administered. "Someone who's addicted to alcohol doesn't respond to anti-obsessive medications either." When we asked what the circumstances were by which he met these kids, he stated that it largely seemed to be part of some other concern such as not doing well in school, lacking friends (offline), and battles with parents.

"One kid was in here with his dad and the dad couldn't get him to school...Dad had his own addictions and this boy was just massively addicted to EverQuest/EverCrack. That's how he came in. Not going to school and not participating...You don't really see the addiction you see the fallout of the addiction, you see school, friends, and marks, hassles... I don't really know if that's the outcome of the addiction or whether those pre-exist with the addiction, or maybe those are some of the ingredients needed for addiction."

The psychiatrist believed that the main allure of games like EverQuest is the power and control players feel. He makes reference to the amount of time players indicate they have invested in evolving their avatar to its current level of power. While it is possible to think of the allure of the game in this light, as we have noted, the feelings the players have seem

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<sup>22</sup>Bruce Alexander, "The Globalization of Addiction," *Addiction Research* 8 (2000).

to be much more complex. Then again, why wouldn't someone wish to participate in something that allowed the player to engage with others, feel in control, and be able to work hard to achieve power?

When we asked players about the reward of levelling up, players did initially report the power. However, that power, when probed further, became a multitude of other senses—primarily the sense of accomplishment one might get from doing anything well. Edward bragged about getting his Druid from level 1 to 53 in two months. Derek noted a feeling of accomplishing something greater, particularly in that every member of a group plays an integral role in its success. James feels the biggest sense of accomplishment when he is part of a raid that can eliminate a target with thirty people when it would normally take fifty to do so. There are bragging rights associated with being known as part of one of the most powerful guilds on the server.

There is something for everyone in the game, and multiple ways for people to define their own power. People are very inventive with the ways they finance themselves, as James recalls with a Bard who made her living by buying things for below market value, and selling them for above market value. When commerce is involved, this type of outsourcing is possible, so people who do not wish to engage in combat can find strategic ways of avoiding it, as in this case. The Bard made enough money to pay one of the most powerful guilds on the server to help her do her epic quest and obtain high-status equipment. In this manner, she did not have to do the quest herself and saved herself time.

So far, he and his colleagues have been unable to find an EverQuest 'antidote', but we found it thought provoking that the only successful "treatment" for his EverQuest players was for the therapist and parents to work together in getting their offspring interested in other, non-electronic activities. Ironically, all of these drug free solutions centred upon finding alternate communities, such as horseback riding or swimming although one must think of why these are considered solutions. Are they only solutions because society tends to privilege non-electronic activities like sports, which people can do just as if not more compulsively? Derek echoed this sentiment when he noted:

"Sports are addictive. A person will play hockey for their entire lives. If a person spends the same amount of time on a sport as they do a computer game, we would not label them as being addicts because they're striving to improve themselves. The problem with a computer game is that they're trying to improve themselves in a virtual way, something that doesn't accomplish something in real life. That's sort of the difference, but you still have the same level of accomplishment. You still feel good about yourself."

Social roles and relations are continuously being negotiated and played out online. The case is no different in EverQuest, where there are many instances of behaviour reflecting those found in the tangible world like social hierarchy, gender experimentation, and construction of bonds like marriage. James shared an anecdotal experience of a wedding he attended in Norrath. The ceremony took place on one of the most beautiful white bridges of Norrath, located in North Karana. Numerous players attended the ceremony and James got there by paying someone 200 platinum pieces to port him there because he was late. He described the scene to be like what would find in a medieval movie, with beer, duels, and much jubilation. Apparently the marriage only occurred online, though there are other instances of EverQuest players meeting offline as well. One wonders, if EverQuest is just a simple game, or even an addictive 'substance,' why people would bother to do things like get married.

## 7. Conclusion

Around the world, people are dealing with online game usage by doing things like suing game developers, calling for warning labels to be put on games, implementing curfews to curb game usage, prescribing medications and sending kids to therapy.<sup>23</sup> On one hand, businesses like game manufacturers and Internet café owners are blamed, but at the same time game players are encouraged to realize they have a problem that could be all their own. The evidence is complex, and often conflicting. Our informants likened their participation in EverQuest as a hobby that lent status and identity. Is it right to label an online community addictive? Are curfews necessary? Are stricter laws working to curb game addiction? Our analysis of game experience and informant testimony shows that regulation and control of games is ultimately not a correct course of action in order to heal social dysfunction, of which excessive participation in electronic communities is only a symptom. It seems as though energies that are spent searching for stricter rules and better treatments should indeed be spent on addressing gaps in the context of people's lives.

Through discussion and exploration of addiction and community through the lens of EverQuest, it is apparent that EverQuest is a valid community, and that labelling the game as addictive is a fundamentally incorrect course of action. The experience of EverQuest does not seem to be an addiction from which one needs to be dissociated, but rather a community with which one chooses to identify. An in-depth discussion of perspectives regarding the historical contexts and social causes of

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<sup>23</sup> Caroline Gluck, *South Korea's Gaming Addicts* [Web News] (BBC News, 2002 [cited June 30 2003]); available from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/2499957.stm>.

addiction such as the basic human need for community will be addressed in future reports.

In this case study of EverQuest, we tested our hypothesis that video game addictions are constructions of a greater need for community. First we discussed the issues regarding addiction and community as they pertain to this study of EverQuest. Second, we highlighted initial findings from our fieldwork data. Thirdly we have also suggested possible avenues for further exploration throughout the paper in terms of policy, implications, and social causes of addiction.

Player testimony and participant observation have indicated that the game is compelling, but it should only be considered addictive in so much as any other social behaviour like work, school, and hanging out with friends is. EverQuest should not be labelled as an addictive substance because if we were to do that, then we would most likely need to label everything potentially likeable as addictive. EverQuest fits the criteria for a community, and is a rich, robust, imaginative and almost utopian one—unlike many communities found in the tangible world. It is for this reason we believe EQ is a very attractive community of which to be a part.

We believe EQ is a very attractive community of which to be a part. We were curious to see if the researcher's participation in the game would have adverse effects similar to that of other reported worst-case scenarios. We can safely say that aside from a few nights of staying up late to group or chat, there was no harm done.

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