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Online Gaming and the Interactional Self: Identity interplay in situated practice

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Introduction

In recent years the popular media have asserted that massively multiplayer online role playing games (MMORPGS) like EverQuest are highly addictive (Frankel 2002). Consequently, public opinion has rallied to this latest panic, changing the way in which society views the world online affecting the world offline. According to popular belief, these games have caused players to forsake "real life" obligations and "significant" offline relationships in order to pursue the "fake" and "trivial" online. In this chapter we bring the examination of online games into a broader context by linking the online world of gamers with their offline worlds. We explore phenomena that may indicate that these worlds are more integrated than may initially appear.

In this paper we interpret ethnographic data from EverQuest and its social spaces using the sociological phenomenology of Alfred Schutz (Schutz 1962; 1970) (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973). We argue that the interplay between the everyday, situated lives of online interactive gamers and their activities in games such as EverQuest are much more enmeshed and certainly not the root cause for dysfunction as has been suggested by some. Indeed, using the work of Schutz for phenomenological clarification, we argue here that games are no more "addictive" and "disconnecting" than other sites of play, games, or other social activities. Rather, they are ways of re-enchanting life and sometimes of sustaining meaningful community experiences.

Popular accounts of the dangers of gaming fall into a discourse about the Internet as a lonely and risky place where online users are likely to be depressed and dislocated from the wider, offline population. The Internet and all the mysteries therein are talked about on the evening news as if danger to personal and psychological safety exists in quantities much greater than that found in the real world. In a well-known study that gave ammunition to pessimistic views of the Internet in the popular press, Kraut et al. concluded that the Internet is a paradox: it is both a "social" technology but one that decreases quality time offline leading to reduced "psychological wellbeing" (Kraut, Patterson, Lundmark, Kiesler, Mukhopadhyay, and Scherlis 1998). Nie & Erbring, in a separate and also widely-circulated study, found that the more we use the Internet the less time we spend with "real people" (Nie and Erbring 2000). In addition, Robert Putnam, in his popular book *Bowling Alone*, makes the claim that we are increasingly turning into "suburban hermits" preferring to stay home with our televisions and computers rather than engaging in civic life (Putnam 2000). These critical studies highlight the views of

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contemporary philosophers such as Borgmann and Dreyfus who make the claim that the Internet fractures the individual from the more "authentic" connections of face-to-face life. They argue that "real" community and human connection cannot be sustained effectively on the network (Borgmann 1999; Dreyfus 2001). In addition to these and other increasingly negative accounts of being online, a growing body of ethnographic and survey-based research has tried to provide more balanced accounts of the place of Internet mediation in our everyday lives. These projects are grounded in the human and social philosophies of experience and many show that "cyberspace" and, as we shall contend in this chapter, online gaming spaces, are more mundanely placed in our daily lives (Bakardjieva 2000; Bargh, McKenna, and Fitzsimmons 2002; Herring, Scheidt, Bonus, and Wright 2004; Howard, Rainie, and Jones 2002; Markham 1998; Markman 2003; McKenna, Green, and Gleeson 2002; Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, and Swartz 2004; Papacharissi 2002; Romero 2003; Slater 1998; Walker 2000; (Wellman & Gulia, 1999); Wynn and Katz 1997).

We propose that video game interactions, rather than being addictive sites of social discord, are constructions of a greater need for community grounded in a "will-to-communicate" (Jaspers 1957/1997). This will-to-communicate remains in place even during computational interactions such as those experienced in MMPORGs (Vieta 2004). We re-evaluate technologically pessimistic notions such as the addictive quality of interactive video games by looking at the activity from the perspective of the lived-experience of users (Bakardjieva 2000; Markham 1998; Vieta 2004). As we will discuss, the socio-phenomenological work of Schutz helps us build an interpretive path within gamers' lived-experiences.

Methodology

Our informants contributed their experiences and narratives in the thick, descriptive manner typical of ethnographic studies. In addition to the researcher's participant-observation, informal interviews, and supplementary research, we use the testimonies of EverQuest informants in formal in-depth interviews we conducted. Though this data is 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 research such as implications for online communities and notions of addiction.

The ethnography discussed in this work takes place over a two-year period from 2002 to 2004. In that time, Chee created her own avatar and conducted participant-observation in the land of Norrath on the Terris-Thule server. In the EverQuest participant observation portion, approximately one-hundred and fifty hours were spent playing, participating in online forums, and general online research. Events were documented by taking fieldnotes while playing, keeping a post-session reflections journal, a public web log (blog), and screenshots. Rather than introduce herself as researcher to everyone in the game, the researcher made an active decision not to do so, as it was more appropriate to the inquiry of this study to concentrate on the experiences of the game at hand. It was a case of being a player first, and researcher second. The authors

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believed that the decision was sound and justified, as no players online were pulled aside for answering the research protocol, and ethics clearance of confidentiality and informed consent was gained for informants explicitly chosen for interview offline. In game, the researcher slipped into the natural role of player, with the motives any player would have: to "level up," and have fun. This experience was integral to the study because it directly impacted on her ability to understand the stories of other players, the phenomenological game experience of a relatively new EverQuest player, and possible reasons why games like EverQuest present such an opportunity to participate in an engaging community.

In many respects, Chee'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 through networking, experiencing what it is like to live as a local through daily life and guidance from acclimatized locals. Unlike offline ethnography, however, people can be very much in control of the character they choose to be as opposed to having one's attributes assigned due to "accident of birth." It was easier for the researcher to immediately become a resident of Kelethin and instantly assimilate the attributes of being a Wood Elf, their programmed tensions with other races, and at the same time, be an EverQuest community member like everyone else.

Description of interview participants

This fieldwork laid the foundation for general observations 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. We present some key insights from four informants who were recruited by a combination of snowball and convenience sampling methods, as was appropriate for a micro-study of this nature. Throughout this chapter, the testimony of our informants are discussed, along with some additional unique issues arising from the online game environment that one might not obtain by belonging to strictly non-computational communities. The interviews were conducted on males in their mid-twenties, which reflect the average age of EverQuest players according Yee (2001). However, their professional offline activities are quite different.

Our first contact is habitually an early adopter of many games. He is a college student who "... joined the bandwagon, bought it, played it, and it was pretty incredible." He got started on EverQuest after reading about the game in magazines and online when it first started. The longest he has played in one sitting is ten hours. His primary observations about the types of people online are that there are different motives 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."

Our second contact, is a young professional working in the technology industry. He travels often and is very busy with work. In addition to online games, he has always enjoyed tabletop role-playing games and is also a competitive billiards player. The longest he has played in one sitting is eighteen hours. He started playing EverQuest

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because he knew one of his friends liked the game, so he tried it. When asked about the reason he found the game so compelling, he stated, "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." He has become a member of a very elite guild and quite serious about the game as we will describe.

Our third contact is a part-time student and employed part-time. He also seems to be the most dedicated EverQuest player of the three informants, possessing two top-level avatars. Though his average time during one sitting has not exceeded twelve hours, he would play about twelve hours almost every day and outplay the other informants in hours amassed per week. At the time of the interview, he was playing about six hours a day, after finishing work or school. When asked about what he liked about EverQuest, he stated, "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."

The fourth contact was a paradox. He was quiet, mysterious, and initially almost too withdrawn to interview. What he did end up telling us out about himself and his interaction with the online game however was very interesting and valuable for our understanding. He works in shipping and packing, often working long thirteen-hour days. His work schedule impacted his ability to achieve and sustain deep sleep, agitating a pre-existing condition which predisposed him to insomnia. While he did have medication for his physiological disorders, he talked about his troubles in ensuring adequate mental rest. While surfing the Web, he came across a discussion about EverQuest. He decided to try it out as a way to unwind from his day. It soon became more than just unwinding for him, as while his professional occupation did not seem mentally fulfilling, he found that he could engage his mental activity to a greater degree online. Quiet in person, social and powerful online, he summarized his experience in as positive a way as one can expect: "EverQuest saved my life."

How could this game have such an important role in someone's life? In order to lend some greater context for our phenomenological analysis, we briefly describe the game of EverQuest.

A Brief Description of EverQuest

Upon logging on, the world laid out before a player is impressive. The graphics capabilities of 1999 have definitely since been outdone, but yet the visual cues are still enough to give the player an indication of being 'in' a geographical location as opposed to a computer screen. One can be in a forest, walking around a town with stone buildings, or sailing across a vast ocean. In order to participate in this initially strange land, one must first go through the laborious but often pleasurable task of going through numerous windows to choose the looks and attributes of a character or "avatar." A player can choose among many different traits for any given character. They are too wide-ranging to name all here, but some are the race (Human, Wood Elf, Dark Elf, Dwarf, etc), class (Warrior, Druid, Enchanter, Bard, etc) and choose corresponding attributes like wisdom and agility in numeric values.

From that point on, the player is born into a home zone which corresponds to the chosen race almost naked. On a screen surrounded by windows for chat, character

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inventory, spells, and other such miscellany, one can see the environment by first person view, or toggle between other views. There are other people online running around, chatting in order to accomplish the daily tasks of buying, selling, or killing a monster. These players have names displayed above their heads for all to see. There is also very likely a "guild" name displayed under the player's name, meaning that the player belongs to that particular group, that the player is reasonably committed to a peer group with its own rules and code of conduct. It is ultimately up to the player to ensure the avatar is fed, clothed, and advancing in levels. As one might already gather, the EverQuest game world is much too large to describe in totality, and one can spend endless amounts of time exploring the world. It is immersive, impressive, and exercises the imagination.

To attest to EverQuest's popularity, the game developed by Sony Online Entertainment was one of the most popular massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPG) in North American history. In 2002, subscriptions exceeded 430 000 gamers (Taylor 2002), and 2004 estimates situate the numbers as greater than half a million players. At any given time, around 2000 players per server are going about their daily business online, totaling 100,000 active users at peak times. But, perhaps more intriguing to the social scientist, EverQuest is a fascinating case study because of its reputation for being an especially addictive game and one that has been the subject of lawsuits and policies addressing that alleged addictiveness (Death of a game addict, 2002). People often spend as much time with EverQuest as they would in a second job (10-40+ hours per week). According to Castronova (2001:17), "Avatars in virtual worlds must work to do anything interesting at all." Our informants distinguished between engaging in interactive engagement (like gaming) and passive consumption (like watching television). They felt that their active participation in EverQuest highlighted the feeling of being social and productive—and this, we claim, makes what they do not an addiction. Schutz's notion of the "working self" will help us unravel what these social and productive experiences might mean. 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. Even a superficial examination reveals that 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.

Phenomenological Perspectives: MMORPGs as Online Communities

Rethinking gamer social groupings and their online environments as communities is not as radical a move on our part as would first appear if we think of online environments as intimately intertwined with the greater life-world of gamers. Communication theorist James Carey points out the importance of the similar etymological roots of the words "communication" and "community" linking it closely to the life-world (Carey 1989). Philosophers of community have known the link between communication and community for a long time. "Community through communication is found, to be sure, already among the merely living existences; it is in consciousness as

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such, and it is in spirit...[as an] openness in the will-to-communicate" (Jaspers 1957/1997).

Further, as Feenberg & Bakardjieva and Anderson rightly point out, the notion of "community" is both an empirically observable co-presencing of individuals (we can count community members) and, at the same time, an "imaginary" social construct (Feenberg & Bakardjieva, 2002; Anderson 1983;). By considering both realities when defining online community, Feenberg & Bakardjieva and Mynatt, O'Day, Adler, & Ito, for instance, have shown that the "real" versus "virtual" community debate is a dead-end when describing actual practices of computer-mediated communities and for designing appropriate community tools (Feenberg & Bakardjieva 2002; Mynatt, O'Day, Adler, and Ito 1998). Indeed, in a now-classic work on the concept of community, Anderson argues that all communities, from the "primordial village" on social groupings as large as the nation state are all "imagined" (Anderson 1983:16-18) and so, it would seem, are all "virtual" in that sense.

For all these reasons a significant distinction between "real" face-to-face community and "virtual community" seems superfluous. As an alternative, we introduce Schutz's theories of intersubjectivity as a substitute to the real/virtual community dichotomy, which will, we hope, add weight to our assertion that the worlds forged in online communities like EverQuest, while "imagined," are no less "real" than communities in the world of flesh-and-blood.

Schutz's Working/Partial Self and the Interactional Selves of EverQuestians

Although mostly ignored by gaming researchers and Internet studies in general, Schutz provides theories of interaction and community that are useful for theorizing mediated experience (Bakardjieva 2000; Vieta 2004). What has been especially fruitful for us in understanding the Internet-mediated life of EverQuest, are Schutz's phenomenological theories of the "working self" (Schutz 1970), the myriad "provinces of reality" (1962; 1973) we all possess, and how both concepts interplay within our "intersubjective" life-worlds. Schutz's theories of worldly praxis and intersubjectivity are useful for grasping how the online phenomenological experiences of gamers are intertwined with their offline lives, and vice-versa. It is necessary to realize that the interactions of gamers are not merely play and fantasy but also social interactions that occur within intersubjective and existentially-rooted and "real" engagements that are also intimately linked to gamers' "real" offline lives.

One of Schutz's (1970) key "phenomenological baselines" (53-7) is his concept of the "working self" (68-71). It is the part of the interactional selfⁱ that acts onto the world, manipulates things, and strives to fulfill projects by somehow changing some aspect of that world.ⁱⁱ Moreover, the working self's acts of worldly transformation happen in an individual's "wide-awake" "plane of consciousness" where we have the fullest attention to our existential surroundings in the "vivid present" (1970: 69). That is, as the working self acts onto the world, that part of us is already-always in the present.

Similar to George H. Mead's I/me framework, the interactional self emerges explicitly as a dialectic between this "*working self*" and the "*partial self*" (Schutz, 1962 emphasis added). What Schutz adds is an explicit action theory encapsulated in the

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notion of a future-oriented "project" (Schutz, 1962: 24) that is characterized, as Barber (2002) explains, "by the intention to bring about...[a]...projected state of affairs" (sec. 2). At the same time, "*the partial self*" is that part of us which is socially determined (Schutz, 1962: 216, emphasis added). The partial self is the reflective role taker, accessed through circumspection and reflection (Schutz, 1962: 216). The partial self is passive, recollecting "performed past acts" from its socio-biographical stock of knowledge by referring "to a system of correlated acts to which it belongs" (216). In essence, as an observer of oneself, we use our socio-biographical and historical "determinates" to connect to and inform our ongoing projects and completed actions (Barber, 2002). In this chapter we argue that player experiences in EverQuest follow similar *working* (action, projection) and *partial* (reflective) experiences.

Schutz's 'self' is one which is rooted simultaneously in agency and action of the working self *and* reflection and recollection of the partial self. To Schutz, the world is one of "well circumscribed objects" (Schutz, 1962: 208) encountered through "eminently [and imminently] practical interest" (208). We "gear into" the world, manipulate and use things in the world, and both change the things we manipulate and use and are changed by them. That is, this world is overseen by a "pragmatic motive that governs our natural attitude toward the world of daily life" (209). However, there is a tension in the way we encounter the world. We give agency to our plans, purposes and actions while transforming objects in the world. The world mitigates our efforts to change it as it resists those attempts at transformation. These resistances often alter the ultimate outcomes to our projects and actions.ⁱⁱⁱ

Critically for Schutz, this working involvement with the world is not solitary. Unlike Martin Heidegger's concept of *Dasein*, Schutz explicitly adds intersubjectivity to this worldly encounter: "The world is from the outset not a private world but an intersubjective world, common to all of us" (208). We live with others. We are social creatures. We actively pursue worldly transformation "with our fellow men" (209) within the common ground shared by working selves mutually engaging with the world's things and with each other. Thus, this shared world is Schutz's "outer world" (69) made up of the "manipulatory sphere" (203) of life. That is, the outer world of action is a world where things are done by "gearing into" and manipulating things in shared common projects with others as found in one's participation in EverQuest. But, while one shares the outer world, the reflective attitude of the partial self is situated in inner experiences which are not directly shared with others. The outer world, rather, is where we engage in our purposeful pursuits with others and where our life-worlds merge and overlap with common interest, shared situations, and shared meanings and values. This is what we mean by the term "intersubjectivity." Borrowing from Edmund Husserl, Schutz claims that we cannot avoid this intersubjectiveness to life. Further, this intersubjective world of everyday life is "the scene" (209) where work, action, and interaction happen. We believe the world of Norrath is part of this outer world made up of intersubjectively attuned working selves. When working within EverQuest, gamers are engaged in purposeful pursuits with others. As such, we will show that these pursuits cannot be dismissed merely as irrelevant play, nor can they be tar-brushed as simply "addictive" practices. It is a medium with which people form legitimate community, with mutual

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projects and plans. EverQuest appears, phenomenologically, to be an arena for meaningful human communication and social life and a medium for our will-to-communicate.

Importantly for our ensuing analysis, Schutz's usage of "work" is *not* to be confused here with economic work values and employment, although this could certainly be a subset of Schutz's concept of work (as we will show with Castronova's economic analysis of EverQuest). Rather, for Schutz, "work" is, more broadly, any *engagement* in the world that is rooted in "purposive action" (p. 211).^{iv} Thus, on EverQuest, we claim, gamers engage in work, change and are changed by work in the world of Norrath, and share this work with others in online realities that never quite leave their offline, situated lives.^v

Findings and Analysis: Towards a Phenomenology of EverQuest

What makes games like EverQuest so compelling? The player informants touched upon a number of different points in their interviews, but some very interesting themes emerged that have not been highlighted in previous studies. One such theme is the development of the player-driven economy that can more broadly be interpreted as working selves "gearing into" Norrath. In addition, "grouping" and/or more the more committal form of joining a "guild" (forming avatar cohorts) and feelings of obligation to the community were compelling factors in one's decision to play the game for prolonged periods of time.

One of the questions this paper attempts to answer is whether the world of EverQuest can be considered an "outer world" or a closed world of fantasy? Perhaps EverQuest isn't a "closed" world of fantasy but an "outer world" of intersubjective ways of "gearing into" its outer worldliness in community. As our informants ultimately show us, EverQuest is a world of doing, of acting, of gearing into things, of manipulating things and doing these things collaboratively. In short, EverQuest activity is rooted in *real* kinds of community based-actions and interactions.

The question then transforms from the authenticity of actions within EverQuest, to instead what degree real interactions happen in the game. Do players actually "gear into" the world of EverQuest as we are suggesting? Do they share in common projects together? We must answer affirmatively here because players have and continue to view the EverQuest world as "work", both as a sphere made of manipulatory things (Schutz's "well circumscribed Objects"), as well as online locales of economic kinds of work. The informants Chee interviewed reveal EverQuest as a productive and engaging space in how there are everyday tasks, errands, and obligations to be done intimately linked with player conceptions of "real time" that also require emotional and bodily commitments:

"There's no point in logging on for a short time. It's kinda like going into work for an hour. It just doesn't make sense. You spend more effort in trying to log on for 10 minutes than you would playing the game. You have to log on for at least an hour. Even an hour seems too short. Probably about 3 hours before you find a good group to join yourself with and to get everything sort of in time, and actually

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start gaining stuff. There's just no way you can do it in half an hour/an hour."

Thus, our evidence shows that the EverQuest world is an "outer world" of work as suggested by Schutz. The world of flesh-and-blood engages the self with the other, just like EverQuest players engage with others and "gear into" the things of the world on EverQuest and its communally-created realities. As mentioned earlier, Castronova found working realities (trading weapons, for example) within the game. While Schutz's concept of "work," as we have explained is not necessarily economic work but a broader notion of engagement with the world, Castronova discusses both economic and, motor-practical notions of work at play on EverQuest:

"The typical user devotes hundreds of hours (and hundreds of dollars, in some cases) to develop the avatar. These ordinary people, who seem to have become bored and frustrated by ordinary web commerce, engage energetically and enthusiastically in avatar-based on-line markets." (Castronova 2001:3)

In EverQuest, we also encountered working selves that were economically working and motor/practically working, as well as "worked over" worlds. We witnessed gamers' avatars running errands, working collaboratively, building their surrounding life-world structures, and even, as Castronova reports, engaging in "free market" exchanges of EverQuestian goods and services. Players reported the "rush" and the feelings of accomplishment they felt as they "geared into" the world of Norrath together so to speak, as they helped fellow players accomplish goals and by acting on the virtual spaces and objects of Norrath pragmatically. For example, players were seen going into wooded areas of Norrath to forage for goods that they could either eat, store, or trade or sell. An interesting element of the game is also the ability for an avatar to be under the influence of alcohol. A player can buy and consume EverQuest alcohol, changing their in-game experience. Things look fuzzier on the computer screen while one's avatar even moves differently.

Chee also experienced exchanges with gamers that showed that while gamers view these shared events and engagements as lived and even vividly visceral experiences, gamers also described "projected state of affairs" (Schutz, 1962: 212) that were shared with other gamers in the "bodily movements" (212) of gamers' avatars. Through commands one can laugh, cry, or even mourn a body. These are what Schutz would call "wide awake" (212) descriptions of their online activities that constitute "the reality of the world of daily life" (212) of these gamers. Castronova (2001) would agree:

"These communications allow social interactions that are not a simulation of human interactions; they are human interactions, merely extended into a new forum. As with any human society, it is through communication that the VW society confers status and standing" (Castronova, 2001:14).

Gamers were well aware of their own and other's avatars' movements, the spaces of Norrath they shared with other gamers via the traces of embodied selves left by other

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avatars, and the shared projects with others in guilds and raids:

“So you have to rely on other people to make it happen for you, and when you find other people who have similar interests in the game, and want to achieve the same thing you do –which is essentially just to get to that next level, then it works really well. I really enjoy hanging around with those people, and spend the time...they ask you to do stuff like wake up at 3:30 in the morning so you can kill the dragon you have been camping for 2 days... and you do it. You give your phone number.”

Further, Castronova’s work supports our analysis in that he also claims that the worlds of EverQuest worked over by gamers are “inherently social” (2001: 18). Castronova, however, adds an economic dimension to the work of a player, further delineating Schutz’s notions of work and intersubjectivity in EverQuest. He does this by pointing out an economic dimension to avatar interactions on EverQuest that is interlaced with the same motivators and drives that inspires one to engage economically in the non-computational realm of the life-world:

“Moreover, since the VWs are inherently social, the achievements are relative: it is not having powerful weapons that really makes a difference in prestige.... In a postindustrial society, it is social status, more than anything else, that drives people to work so diligently all their lives. In this respect, VWs are truly a simulacrum of Earth society” (Castronova, 2001:18).

Therefore, players can be said to “gear into” the world of EverQuest both economically and motor-practically via the mediation of their avatars as, “extensions” of themselves (McLuhan 1964). These players feel as if they are changing the world of EverQuest as it changes them. Further, the same things that tend to motivate people in the non-computational world drive gamers just as much. Some motivators include: prestige, acquisitions, social standing, friendship, camaraderie, connection, and community. Players talk about their experiences online like they are “doing” things, projecting goals, and making things happen together with others. When our informants described what they did in EverQuest, their language was a language of work in Schutz’s sense of the word. That is, their descriptions indicated attempts to change the world of EverQuest and, at the same time, be changed by it. The descriptions spoke of interactions:

“[In a group,] I need someone to heal, which would be a Cleric; an Enchanter’s ‘slow’ so they hit me less often, some higher damage output players like a Rogue, or a Ranger, or a Wizard to kill them faster, but then they don’t have any hit points so they need a Cleric as well to keep them alive... Druids are fun because you can solo. You have to be in an outdoors zone, but you can kill 5-8 mobs [mobile objects] at a time. You can just run them around behind you.”

When probed further, the descriptions changed from primarily economic to

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resemble Schutz's deeper definition of work as "doing," as "gearing into" something on Norrath collaboratively and intersubjectively. When Chee first asked about what motivates players and how things are done, we got this response:

"I remember before when there weren't a lot of level 60 enchanters, and they said oh, well this is an opportunity to make lots of money. I would give them 100 [for casting a spell]. But now I just give people 50 and there's no argument. I just give them 50 plat and that's it. Same thing worked with porting around for Druids and Wizards. They made tons of money just by porting people around. Ever since the books came out, they don't make any more money. The only way you can make money is to go to certain areas... remote areas... where there aren't any. That's where most of them port."

When Chee asked about his view of productivity in EverQuest versus a game like Medal of Honor (not Massively Multiplayer), the contact admits to another level of "productivity." He talked about projecting intentions, goals, accomplishing tasks and of manipulating things. In seeing things emerge and grow, one can notice the level of intersubjectively projecting and manipulating things players do that is predicted by Schutz:

"I dunno... I'd say yes, playing EverQuest would probably be more productive. Cause if you're on a raid and you help people get their epic weapon or something... that's more productive if someone got an item they really really wanted. Unlike when you're playing Medal of Honor, especially single player mode, which is you and the computer pretty much. To me that's less productive."

In the above quote the player talks about *helping others* be more productive. His response articulates the collaboration and interconnections that take place among EverQuest players. Moreover, it alludes to Schutz's notion of mutual projects, of gearing into the world of EverQuest, and of accomplishing things communally, with others in future oriented tasks.

Thus, the social groups and interactions carried out on EverQuest should not be merely considered as an economic model, nor dismissed as a game that is rife with the possibilities for addictive behaviors. Rather, the EverQuest interactions we witnessed were expressed as acts of mutually interested gamers interacting with each other via the mediations of their chosen and earned avatars, sharing in common projects together. As Vieta (2004: 194-198) shows, Schutz also articulated his theory of intersubjectivity as a theory of community that he termed the "in-group" (1970: 80-85). Schutz claimed that members of in-groups are able to sustain the group long-term by framing their communal interactions within four in-group characteristics that guarantee cohesion and group continuity. What we have been describing thus far map to Schutz's requirements for the cohesion of an "in-group." EverQuest gamers guaranteed group "consistency" and "coherency" in the world of Norrath via shared "values, beliefs, and myths" and the practices of specific "rituals and ways of communicating" between avatars and players

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(Vieta 2004: 194). Most guilds have member policies and codes of conduct. Stealing the kill of another player can be grounds for dismissal as can be vulgar or offensive language. The system by and large relies on the integrity and self-policing of community members, in most cases solving problems internally.

As in other types of communities, those forged via the mediation of player avatars on EverQuest are also based on notions of reciprocity, the consideration of others, and deep collaboration of working selves in mutual projects of interest. Thus, when the claim is made that EverQuest leads ultimately to addictive behaviors, such notions are problematic. If we can call EverQuest interactions addictive, then what is to stop us from calling a strong commitment to a soccer team, chess club, or homework "addictive?" Who is to decide these normative values? It is interesting to note that most people who have labeled games like EverQuest as "addictive" tend to be non-players who have perhaps never even set eyes on the world of Norrath.

From Addiction to Intersubjectivity to Interaction

It seems as though players who call themselves addicted are often using that term to articulate what they later elaborate upon as unavoidable obligations to their peers. They are engaged in acts of community. When we asked one player what indicated that EverQuest was an addiction, he said:

"When you can't really get off. 5 o'clock in the morning, you have a headache, but you still don't want to get off....Either I was with a good group, or there was something I needed to do in the game like get a new weapon, or I needed to get a certain amount of experience points or something like that."

As the dialogue proceeds, Derek touches upon his dependency on the game, but when pressed further, what he describes is actually the language of the work self interacting with others and acting on the world of Norrath. Tellingly, he reveals the interactional dependency of others on him and his social commitments that strongly resemble the same social commitments of non-computational life:

"[When playing a crucial character] there's the aspect that you didn't want to be a loser and just drop from a group after you get something. You didn't want to do that, especially, when I was playing a cleric I was the only healer, and healers are hard to come by. If I dropped from the group, it would mean that the group would be practically destroyed."

Another player shows similar sentiments of commitment to fellow players and this deep connection between his non-computational and computational realities that suggest phenomenological effacements between their online and offline realities:

"You needed reliable people that stuck around for the hours that you need to play. People like that you're committed, and not just here for a minute and abandoning your group and ruining the whole night. You would have to stay on,

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find the opportunity, gather a force big enough to take it, and it's a dragon it's a tough mob, before anyone else does or else you lose. First in force gets to take the mob down, that's the rule that EverQuest set. So, the one player that was camping it was on for 2 days, 24 hours straight in shifts with a friend of theirs, waiting for this thing to pop. And then, you need to get first in force so often it would pop overnight and no one was on, so she [the guild leader] got a call list of phone numbers of everyone in her guild... I was sleeping one night, it was a work night. The phone rang at about 3:45am, and they told me Rage is 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>."

Not only do we see the deep commitments players have towards their EverQuest social groupings, but it suggests that the experiences of gearing into the world of Norrath are not simply whimsical activities of "partial" selves engaged in realms of fantasy. Rather, they are deep social involvements between future directed and co-responsible "working selves" committed to meaningful mutual projects in the "Now and Here," as Schutz puts it. There is also for example, interplay between the player's online activities and offline realities of work and sleep. Indeed, if player activities were rooted in, mere "fantasy worlds" that prevent one from "produc[ing]" in the "external world," why would they feel such social pressure to not drop from their groups or to be "reliable people?" Why does it ultimately matter that "the group would be practically destroyed" if he left it? It matters because these experiences are not simply inconsequential acts of fantasy. For these players, EverQuest is deeply meaningful and shared experiences that are rooted in community values and reciprocal projects. The experiences of both gamers are deeply circumscribed social acts with deep investments of emotion and time. Their descriptions are sentiments of socially committed people intimately and intersubjectively linked to their fellow EverQuest gamers in communal formations of respect and reciprocity. In short, the working selves of our players, as mediated by EverQuest, together with the partial selves that are reflecting on their experiences, have deeply cohered with others on Norrath. They are relating situations where both gamers have socially "geared into" the world of Norrath in, "*a commonality of projective means, sharing in the processes and values that are intersubjectively constituted and agreed upon*" by fellow community gamers (Vieta 2004: 205). These are sentiments of real community members engaging in real community activities in ways that are intricately entangled with offline situations.

EverQuest's Offline/Online Links

Our players experienced EverQuest not only cognitively but also viscerally and bodily. They lost sleep while engaging with EverQuest. They described physical discomfort and even pain when engaging in EverQuest activities. They also articulated the tensions that can emerge when their loved ones who do not share their EverQuest activities are neglected. Further, when describing their online interactions, the players interviewed referred to the other people they knew on Norrath as "people," not avatars. We recall an interesting portion of a conversation with one of our players, when Chee asked him what gradually cut his thirty hours playing per week:

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“My girlfriend helped [me spend less time online.] It was also the idea that there was starting to become too much of a gap between the high level characters and the low level players, and then they were finding all the new [items] so there was nothing left for us. When I started advancing levels there was nothing new that I could search out. I couldn’t explore the higher level areas without spending a LOT more time on the game, and so... I was basically stagnating. I couldn’t gain levels as quickly as I used to, so there was no sense of accomplishment.”

What caused this player to cut his online hours down was not medication or counseling in the conventional sense. Instead, it was a choice of replacing one activity with another, as is often the case with such behaviors. It was a combination of wanting to spend more time with his girlfriend (who was getting progressively more annoyed with him because of his online commitments) and his in-game level stagnation, causing his interest in the game to ultimately wane. This decision was not arrived at easily and there were deep tensions between offline lives and online activities that could not be kept separate. Indeed, what seemed to ultimately drive this player to ease up on his EverQuest activities was the waning sense of accomplishment he was feeling increase each time he logged on. And for the other player who woke up in the middle of the night to play with his guild mates, his commitment to fellow raiders was so great that he felt compelled to do these things to alleviate his EverQuest community members tasks while fully aware that he had to be at work in a few hours. These are *not* the sentiments of people who have disconnected their offline lives from their online ones. They are the sentiments of individuals who, like many, struggle to make sense of the myriad tensions of our intersubjectively attenuated life-worlds. For the players, these intersubjective realities, when engaging in EverQuest, express themselves in the tensions between their merged offline/online realities that resonate within vague and indeterminately overlapping dimensions of their life-worlds.

Conclusion

After looking at gaming from a socio-phenomenological point of view, one might question to a greater degree how the behaviors exhibited in these online environments are vastly separated from or any less important than those exhibited through other media or life-world settings. Our application of Schutz’s phenomenology of intersubjective interaction highlights the importance for social researchers, game designers, and policy makers to seriously ask themselves if the computational worlds of EverQuest are radically different from the non-computational worlds of flesh and blood before conceptualizing the gamer, designing the games, and legislating restrictive policies in regards to gaming activities. Studying the game player at their level, as ethnography helps us to achieve, is of paramount importance when trying to understand the motivations truly at work with in mediated environments like EverQuest. Rather than just being a world of fantasy set apart from “real life,” we have attempted to show in this paper that

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the phenomenological realities of gamers are not clearly distinguishable between their offline and online realities. Rather, the online interactions of gamers are deeply embedded within their offline lives, and vice-versa.

We use Schutz's theories to help us see two major socio-phenomenological actualities in EverQuest gaming practices. First, involvement in EverQuest life intimately links the offline desires, passions, and pursuits of players in multiple levels of sociability and phenomenological interests that have been, to date, sorely neglected. Second, what players *do* when engaging in their online activities are largely perceived as *real* engagements with *real* fellow gamers involved in *real* forms of community. To these players, life in Norrath is associated with community life. As such, we hope the work in this chapter has hinted at the possibilities for further understanding the ways interactive games and the way online activities interplay with offline lives and the sense of self.

Therefore, it seems that either calling immersive multiplayer games such as EverQuest "just a game" or contrarily, claiming that they have the power to destructively influence the "real" lives of users assists in creating ill-informed and simplistic views of complex social formations that can take place via the mediation of these games. We have shown in this chapter that, phenomenologically, there is no strong case to be made that such a sharp dichotomous separation exists. The life-world of players and the ways community experiences are described by them are just too complex and too integrated into the everyday life of everyone concerned to make strong assumptions regarding the uni-linear influences of MMPORGs on the lives of users.

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Endnotes

ⁱ Blending the action theories of human-computer interaction researchers such as Dourish (2001) and Suchman (1987) and the critical hermeneutics of technology of Ihde (1983; 1990) and Feenberg (1999), Vieta (2004) has worked through Schutz's theories with several related phenomenological and social interactional theories of embodiment and praxical worldly encounter (i.e., Husserl, Heidegger, Mead, Merleau-Ponty, Ihde). In this analysis, Vieta has suggested that such theories of "lived experience" can help us understand how users phenomenologically integrate Internet-mediated social interactions into their everyday lives. Taking a cue from American phenomenologist of technology

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Don Ihde (1983: 14) and Schutz (1970: 163-199), Vieta developed a working concept he called the “interactional self” to encapsulate how the related aspects of worldly encounter and lived experience of existential phenomenology and social interaction theory help us understand the intimate phenomenological connections between online realities and offline sociability. Further, the acts of apprehending the things of the world, anticipating a future, and experiencing others within the sedimented reality of everyday life sees the interactional self, as with the self of symbolic interactionists, projecting onto others as others and things project upon it. The intersubjective theories of interaction of Schutz prove to be central in beginning to decipher how closely linked online sociability is to offline situations. Indeed, approaching the Internet-mediation from an interactional perspective, Castells emphasizes that the Internet is “an extension of life as it is, in all its dimensions, and with all its modalities” (p. 119). Miller & Arnold’s ethnographic study of expressions of online identity echoes Castells’ sentiments: “the things people do on the Web, and the selves presented there, should not be expected to be distinct and separated from actions and self in other areas of life” (Miller & Arnold). Schutz and the interactional self concept help us see that, despite all the hype surrounding gamer addictions and “time wasted” playing MMPORG games, Castells’ and Miller & Arnold’s views of the deep interconnections – rather than the deep separations – between online and offline life might also apply to social interactions on EverQuest.

ii It is the same Being-in-the-world that Heidegger views as the precondition for *Dasein*’s (Heidegger’s essence of humanness) ways of coming to know itself by changing and moulding its world (Dourish, 2001; Vieta, 2004).

iii As Schutz explains: “Our bodily movements...gear, so to speak, into the world, modifying or changing its objects and their mutual relationships. On the other hand, these objects offer resistance to our acts which we have either to overcome or to which we have to yield.... World, in this sense, is something that we have to modify by our actions or that modifies our actions” (p. 209).

iv This is akin to the *Canadian Oxford Dictionary*’s (1998) definition of work as a noun – “*n.* 1) the application of mental or physical effort to a *purpose*; the use of energy” – or as a transitive verb – “*v.*...9) *tr.* a) bring about; produce as a result” (1676). That is, as a noun, “work” for Schutz means an action or “a doing” that changes something for a greater purpose (e.g., “It took collaborative work to build that house”). As a transitive verb, work produces results (e.g., “They worked the fields in order to prepare for the harvest”). Notice how each of these definitions of “work” is future oriented; work, in these definitions is directional in that it moves an action, desire, or project forward. It projects. As such, the working self is the part of the self that is “directed towards the objects and objectives to be brought about” (Schutz, 1970, p. 70) from the present into a world of future oriented and open-ended “anticipations” (p. 70). That is, the working

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self is always in the present, rooted to a past of recollections via the partial self, but already-always directed towards future goals.

^v To Schutz, then, work is action in the outer world, based upon a project and characterized by the intention to bring about the projected state of affairs by bodily movements. Among all the described forms of spontaneity that of working is the most important one for the constitution of the reality of the world of daily life...the wide awake self integrates in its working and by its working its present, past and future into a specific dimension of time; it realizes itself as a totality in its working acts; it communicates with Others through working acts; it organizes the different spatial perspectives of the world of daily life through working acts. (p. 212)