

# Virtual worlds: past, present, future

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# Abstract

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The MMO (Massively Multiplayer Online) games are computer games, that can be played online exclusively. During the past eight years MMORPG games gained a decisive popularity in the world of games that is far higher than that of a simple web game. The year 2006 is the year in which the western MMO games become mass products.

The world of the MMO games is very complex: the virtual worlds differ from each other in great measure, the aim of the players is different, the process of game-experience is diverse etc. Because of this the scientific approach of the MMO games and players can be performed on different levels and from different directions: virtual, role-play, tamagochi-feeling, addiction, community, virtual communities, roles and identities, valuable and damaging games etc.

This article is an introduction and horizontal in nature, deals with many aspects of the topic, but none is an in depths analysis.

**Keywords: virtual worlds, virtual identity, MMORPG games**

# Foreword

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**Recently interest in the virtual worlds increased visibly.** Is this more and more significant interest due to the many new services, or is the appearance of the new services due to the increased interest? Probably this will never be decided, as it also will remain a question whether the population boom is the reason for or the result of the English industrial revolution. Anyway, the user-centred online revolution found a new area for itself: the virtual worlds.

**The MMO (Massively Multiplayer Online) games are computer games, that can be played online exclusively.** Basically the makers offer a virtual world for the players, where they „can do whatever they want” – naturally depending on the possibilities of the world, the inverted energies and sometimes their inverted money. Who wouldn't want to be a Jedi knight, or mock agents on rooftops in Matrix-style, or fly on the back of a griffon towards glorious battles? Nowadays more than 250 games exist of this type<sup>1</sup>, but **the market is very segmented.** Among the western MMO games undoubtedly World of Warcraft rules the market; the Asian situation is different in many aspects<sup>2</sup>. Most of the MMO games take place in a fantasy environment, but many sci-fi, historical or heroic worlds exist as well. As the market develops, these games become more complex, their world more interactive and in a certain sense – more real. As we enter these worlds, we can meet thousands of participants, who are players entering from any other point of the world. It is very characteristic that advancing in the game after some time becomes only possible with teamwork.

**The year 2006 is the year in which the western MMO games become mass products,** the number of players increases strikingly, the most well-known western MMO is World of Warcraft, presently with 8 million players<sup>3</sup>; with the number of users the game breaks records<sup>4</sup>. The earlier somewhat stagnating/slowly growing MMO game market and discourse intensified in the last year thanks to this great interest, so we have to rearrange our knowledge. It is obvious now that the results of the previous surveys, in which for example the motivation of the players was examined, are almost useless because of the mass-restructuring.

The world of the MMO games is very complex: the virtual worlds differ from each other in great measure, the aim of the players is different, the process of game-experience is diverse etc. **Because of this the scientific approach of the MMO games and players can be performed on different levels** and from different directions: virtual, role-play, tamagochi-feeling, addiction, community, virtual communities, roles and identities, valuable and damaging games etc. There is a lot of connection between the real and the virtual worlds; the connecting vehicles are of course the players themselves.

The connection doesn't only exist in the minds of the people, but on physical level as well. In many cases there is connection among the players in the real world as well as in the virtual world. The simultaneous game of the identities is an interesting situation, but the examination of the online identities on this field means much more than that. **The popularity and attendance of the MMO worlds can be mostly compared to the most successful community portals.** The behaviour of the players and their avatars in the online game space is only one of the examinable roles, next to this it is important to examine the (typically online) life of the players outside of the virtual world. It can be observed that the players spend much of their time outside the game with the game as well: they read forums, exchange information and trade.

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<sup>1</sup> one impressive list can be see here: MMORPG.Com <http://www.mmorpg.com/gamelist.cfm/show/all>

<sup>2</sup> in business modells, leader games (for example Lineage), visual culture and in player attitudes, too. About Lineage see McDonald 2001

<sup>3</sup> World of Warcraft surpasses 8 million subscribers worldwide <http://www.blizzard.com/press/070111.shtml> Player population in North America now exceeds 2 million, while Europe and China pass the 1.5 million player and 3.5 million player marks, respectively

<sup>4</sup> There are a lot of ratings. We have no punctual datas, but can see the trends and scales. For example: Blake Snow: GigaOM Top 10 Most Popular MMOs <http://gigaom.com/2007/06/13/top-ten-most-popular-mmos/>

Many researchers are into this topic, so poor players can never tell which avatar hides an anthropologist or psychologist, who is watching the participants. Because of the many players the old anthropologist joke can come true<sup>5</sup> in the MMO worlds, but it is better if the players calculate with this risk among the monsters and the other disagreeable players. **The research of the MMO games can provide lessons outside of the field of ludology** – many results can be useful on the fields of online behaviour, tamagochi-culture, group behaviours, law and virtual economy<sup>6</sup>. We will witness a number of new things, because this new game-culture is now free of its former circle of owners and environment, so its judgement and development will be influenced by a wider layer: the business sphere and the parents will react, so will the media, the governments and the professionals etc, only more intensively. It can only be hoped that it will not ruin the entertainment of so many people.

This article is an introduction and horizontal in nature, deals with many aspects of the topic, but none is an in depths analysis. Our research group performs a national representative survey in Hungary (Central-East Europe). 1500 participants fill out the online questionnaire, and we support the online research with small area focuses (appr. 20). Singularly in the field of virtual worlds research this is not horizontal layer-research, but a **national survey**. In my article I intended to summarize some of my theoretical ideas; the results of the primer research will soon be published, so we will see how much it changes the preliminary views.

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<sup>5</sup> Who does an American-Indian family consist of? - Dad, mum, kid, anthropologist

<sup>6</sup> main topics: players attitudes (for example Taylor 2006, Kelly 2004, Bartle 2003, Jesper 2005), psychology (for example: Nick Yee 2006, Ren Reynolds 2002 etc.) economical approach (for example: Castronova 2004, 2005, Lehdonvirta 2005, Moore-Ducheneaut-Nickell 2007), international and information society law (for example: Yoon 2005, Lastowska 2004, Grimmelmann 2004, Gervassis 2004), education (for example Lisa-Melanie, Delwiche 2006, de Freitas-Griffiths 2007, Childress-Braswell 2006), technical (for example: Chen-Ta-Huang-Lei 2006) or governance (for example: MacInnes-Park-Whang, Jenkins 2004)

# Present

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During the past eight years MMORPG games gained a decisive popularity in the world of games that is far higher than that of a simple web game. Millions of people play such games all over the world<sup>7</sup>. Among them there are some who only identify themselves with the same character temporarily, but some do so for years. During the game the characters not only entertain themselves, though obviously this is their primary purpose, but get involved in different economical activities, build relationships, careers etc. The identity of the MMO players is made special by the responsibility associated with the character, which can derive from loving the character or simply from the fact that the game is paid for. It is also important that these characters not only have online but offline identities during the game, and there is a triple twist to it, namely the identity they take up in the virtual world. These identities overlap, and mutually strengthen one another.

## I. Magic and identity – or a dive into deep water

**Switching, undertaking, using and dropping roles and identities is as old as human civilization.** The phenomenon lives on in the age of the information society with the appearance of a new factor, network identity. Network identity, although it is to a great extent determined by technological circumstances, is a human set of identities. It has been a commonplace that, in order to understand network identity, we must deeply understand offline identity – expert debate on the issue has great traditions and several fields of social sciences have come up with their own answers.

Some idiosyncrasies of the online identity, however, have presented new challenge in the discourse:

- the technological environment (computers, security, privacy, information literacy, attitudes)
- anonymity (key problem; the extent and the necessity of anonymity is to be examined; anonymity can be examined as a right and as a means of causing damages)
- novelties of the social-technological environment (information society and the Internet)

We can only respond to these new challenges by refreshing the professional discourse on the subject and by making use of the new tools of the science of information society. A great number of authors have dealt with network communities and individuals, but the findings are often haphazard or scientifically unproved. Our research team has been looking for a scientifically sound, "hot" research topic with the help of which it is possible to add new findings to the issue of identity (in a general sense), privacy and responsibility.

In the ocean of network identity, the world of network computer games is but a drop of water; we are convinced, however, that the analysis of this drop of water will help us to get to know the ocean itself. MMO games, which have gained popularity in the gaming world for the past five years, substantially surpass simple network games in many ways. Among the several million players involved, there are some who use their identities only temporarily, while others stick to a single identity for years. MMORPGs are rendered special by the responsibility that comes with the assumed identity, which may equally originate from the affection towards the character or the mere fact that playing the game costs money. It is also important that players assume not only an online, but also an offline identity during the game, so the identity assumed in the virtual world comes

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<sup>7</sup> Nowadays appr. 12-15 million players. Source: MMOGCHART. [www.mmogchart.com](http://www.mmogchart.com) There are a lot of doubtfulness: one person with more accounts, temporary players and so on.

as a triple twist. Research has so far proved eloquently that, during the game, characters are not only having fun (although this is their primary purpose); they also get involved in economic activities, building relationships, careers, etc. These identities overlap, mutually strengthening each other. The analysis of MMORPG communities constitutes a chance to analyze identity in different unique ways:

- Voluntary but strong identity
- Assumed identity
- Several oscillating identities
- Responsibility towards the identity
- Power to build and shape community
- Intercultural environment
- Financial risk
- Levels of anonymity
- The role of technology in the preservation of identity, the issue of trust

The world of MMO games is rather complex not only individually, but also the virtual worlds and the aims of players differ to a great extent, each game experience is different etc. Accordingly, the scientific approach to MMO games and players applies on different levels and from different angles: virtuality, roleplay, tamagochi-experience, different types of addiction, communities, virtual communities, roles and identities, games that enhance value and/ or make damages etc., are all keywords of the research.

## 2. Connections

**The real and the virtual worlds are connected in many ways**, and the medium of these connections is of course the player himself. In an MMO game the participants play with several identities simultaneously: their real life identity (RL), their role play identity (the character they personalize, eg. a Jedi Knight), as well as a virtual identity, which are connected to playing on a computer, such as anonymity, account etc. These identities mutually affect one another. As early as the times when role plays by a table came into fashion the important question arose whether to what extent the role play identity influenced the kids, urban legends and real stories about suicides and perplexed youngsters shocked and have shocked the public ever since. It is easy to find an example for each of them, but fortunately there are far more examples for positive interactions than negative ones.

**A connection however does not only exist in the minds, but also on a physical level.** In many cases there is relationship among the players in the real life and in the virtual world too. Many players typically start the game with their friends, or they join it for their friends' agitation, and these players will keep contacts during the game too. A looser, but existent connection is the cohesion of different areas, which in the case of Hungary- being a small country- means the whole of the country: Hungarian players have their own clans and worlds, they keep in touch and organize meetings. This is not only characteristic of MMOs, but other games as well; just think of the clans of Counter Strike. (Let me mention that the key to this is also the existence of multiplayer game, clans and characters).

Another case, but statistically also present, is when **existing couples**– boyfriend-girlfriend, husband-wife, parent-child) play together, though they obviously spend a great amount of time together with their RL iden-

tities. Those interviewed mentioned *joint game experience* and getting to know each other deeper as the most relevant appeal factors.

Compared to other computer games, **in MMORPGs one is increasingly likely to get into contact with people they will never meet in the physical world, or there is only a slight chance of it.** Different players play in different styles, there are some who avoid such connections, but there are some who specifically look for them and they develop the friendships found this way outside the game too.

MMO games are not only characterized by the fact that they can exclusively be played online, but also that the aim of the game is not to go through on a prewritten story line, but life in a virtual world. This arouses quite many difficulties for the developers, as the players cannot be directed easily in order to get a predictable game experience, but they have to be given freedom in a way that they are entertained and challenged at the same time.

In addition to these basic differences several **other differences** can be observed. The chance to develop is almost endless, the world is unrestrictedly expandable, there is an infinite number of player and non-player characters on the game field, MMO games of a higher level clearly facilitate group work, there are more variations of individual character developments etc., but all these are basically result from the difference elaborated above. We can say that in MMO games the characters that can get into contact with the player is almost infinite, as these characters are the other players themselves; the character has many developmental opportunities, as this intends to model the whole real world as opposed to the *environment* of a storyline. In no other game would it be possible to see someone grow rich from virtual tailoring, mining or real estate sales in the RL too, or that adventurer groups of 40-50 from literally all over the world join one another and start a monster hunt together. The world (according to the mutual interests of the developers and players) continuously expands, for instance new islands or cities are opening. This expansion is of course present in other games too (accessories), what is unique is that a player together with other players can modify the world by founding a city for example.

### 3. Skills

**The question what skills are developed or destroyed by the MMO games often arises.** It is a difficult question, but not because of the MMO characteristic, but because of the characteristics computer games have in general, as experts cannot even decide whether these games have more positive or more negative effects on children's lives. But this is still an essential question that has to be answered. In my opinion, there may be hidden dangers in the games like in everything else in our lives, (a child can break his arm while doing sports for example), but with careful guidance and education many values derive from playing computer games. There are many ways of guidance and education from collective playing through controlling playtime to directing attention. I find that in case of MMO games the number of potential values is significant. If we examine the table below, we can see that most players play because of the company. The MMORPG players tend to be more open, more communicative, more sensitive and more sociable. I am convinced that in 10 years' time they will have achieved more success as well. Not to mention the growth of literacy in the young informational society regarding virtual surface, computers, and the internet itself. They learn not only to communicate but to work together, and to deal with people they have never met. The list of tangible advantages is long, but the most important ones include: they develop intelligence, language knowledge, hand-eye co-ordination, communication skills, responsibility and team work.

## 4. Money

**Players not only play in MMORPGs, they live.** They purchase houses, they produce and trade both within and outside the frames of the game. If we look at the productivity of a MMORPG, we see that it is an active virtual world. Several researches examine the productivity of players, the scales of produced values. One of the first such researchers, Edward Castronova, professor at Indiana University, carried out his research on players playing in the virtual world of Everquest. During his research Edward found that the productivity of a player equals to the productivity of an average Bulgarian worker<sup>8</sup>. He thinks that an online player within an hour produces the same quantity of products (for example magic weapons) and renders the same services (especially trading related) on average as an average Bulgarian worker. If we consider population and GDP production, than the closest country to Everquest's world, Norat, is Namibia. This comparison is not the economical criticism of the countries named, but a means to demonstrate **how effective MMORPG worlds are.**

Within the worlds of MMORPGs the „operation” of characters specialized for making different objects has become a separate industry. The bests can earn huge sums of money by virtual handicraft. Although the developers and operators of the games try to set back their users from selling their different articles for personal use, their trading cannot always be controlled. People spend over \$1.5 billion on virtual items every year - **this virtual goods seems not to be objects – they are services**<sup>9</sup>.

**These games are also about money and the values gotten for it as an exchange.** If people pay for something, they consider them as valuable. In addition, in a virtual world this value is not purely material, but might as well be emotional, not to mention the time it consumes.

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<sup>8</sup> Castronova 2005

<sup>9</sup> Susan Wu 2007

# Past

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At the very beginning **split screen and hot seat**, that is change seat, playing allowed for multiplayer play mode at home. These often caused inconveniences such as smaller screensize to mention one, and in case of more than 2 or 3 players people had to wait long for their turn to come. Modem and zero-modem cables made it first possible to connect two computers at home. The parallel link was also a direct solution, which made connection between two computers via LPT ports. Although its speed exceeds that of a serial port, it is not widely used with multiplayer games. The price decline of network accessories allowed for an increasing number of people to build their own home networks. At first the 10 Mbit/sec transmission speed through a coax cable Ethernet, later the 100 Mbit/sec transmission speed through a UTP cable Ethernet spreaded. MMP games, however, do not build on the traditional multiplayer technology. Their revolutionary importance is that they connect users through the internet.

The first real multiplayer game was Empire in 1973. It could be played by 32 players simultaneously. It was placed in the Star Trek Universe, and real time fights could be fought. The game still exists; it can be downloaded from [www.netrek.org](http://www.netrek.org). In 1974 the first multiplayer 3d first person shooter, Spasim was introduced. The originally called Space Simulator is also placed in the Star Trek Universe, and can also be played by 32 players simultaneously. It also ran on PLATO systems. With the spread of game consoles and personal computers the market of multiplayer games further developed. The biggest games (MULE, MIDI Maze, Doom) were followed by several clones, but the first MMP games only appeared in the second half of the '90s<sup>10</sup>.

**It is still a question of debate what the expressions „massively multiplayer” (MMP), and „persistent world” (PW) mean.** The former is not exclusively characterizes role plays, whereas the latter goes further than the complexity of simple adventure games. It is generally accepted that a software qualifies as MMP above a certain number of players who can play on the server simultaneously. Everquest for example supports more than 2000 people on the server. According to this definition many games that only have multiplayer functions, or they build on it, like Quake Arena, cannot be classified here, and neither can MUDs, the ancestors of this category.

The ancestor of MUD (Multi User Dungeon) was invented by Roy Trubshaw and Richard Bartle in 1978 under the name of MUD1. It was running on a PDP-10 computer, building on telnet technology. Basically it was a text based RPG program where the players could get into interaction with each other already. Although MUD was a further improved version and an enthusiastic group gathered around it, it always served as a source of entertainment and as an experimental field for only a limited number of people. Contrary to this, the great game sites such as Sierra Network and QuantumLink had a much bigger traffic. These still worked on an hour- minute basis, and basically took care of player communities, but did not offer own contents.

The **real breakthrough** was Meridian 59. The game, introduced in 1996, built on the MUD technology (it was not the last), and both the expressions MMP and PW were used for this game for the first time. (Of course other interpretations also exist). Today it would not pull through: it could only serve 250 people on 12 servers. This game had all the characteristics of today's typical online games: fantasy environment, almost 3 dimension (here 2.5) visualization, and the possibility of interaction projected a new time to come.

This began in September, 1997. This was the time when **Ultima Online** opened, which was the first game that is classified as MMP even today. Thank to its name it attracted more than 200 000 subscribers, and in

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<sup>10</sup> Zoltán, Orosz – Ákos, Rabi (2001)

spite of all its difficulties, it is still popular. What's more, the occurrence of these problems (bugs, killing of players) made it possible to improve later games.

Many would go on with the story with **Everquest**. It is undoubtedly the biggest success in the Western world. But people tend to forget about the „Korean connection.” Korea owns a special place on the market of the game world. As for a long time there was an import ban on Japanese products, instead of consoles PCs became widespread. High density, having been equipped with bandwidth, the popularity of internet cafés all made this country the hotbed of MMP games. We cannot smile at the isometric, 2 dimension visual world of Lineage, appearing in 1998, if we consider the number of subscribers. Compared to the „huge” group of a registered 500 000 people of Everquest, this game can boast more than 6 million subscribers.

But we must not think that the story of the earlier mentioned Everquest is not a success story. Sony's game, still building on the MUD base technology, was the first 3 dimension MMORPG and this is what made this style really popular and widely known. Of course, having seen the development of the market, several giant companies joined in. The in excludable Microsoft strengthens its dominancy with a game called Asheron's Call, whereas from the world of films LucasArts appeared first with their Star Wars Galaxies, but Matrix Online is also to come. Among the Western MMO games World of Warcraft is the most successful today, having achieved 5 million players in December, 2005, 8 million people in 2007.

Today **interest in video games is growing from year to year significantly**. For first sight, the market of MMO games is little: 42% of most frequent game players say they play games online, but only 9,1% played in MMO games<sup>11</sup>. The role-play games makes 10% from all best-selling computer games by units sold in 2005<sup>12</sup>. But this 10% is a great number, too: around the world there are millions of players, who are online, and lives in one virtual world. The market of MMO games is very variable, there are a lot of games, the number of players is growing hardly, every day starts and close one game and so on. It is complicated gaining punctual datas from world of MMO games. Bruce Sterling Woodcock is working hard for years in one great statistical analysis of MMO games. The source of following datas is the MMOGCHART<sup>13</sup>.

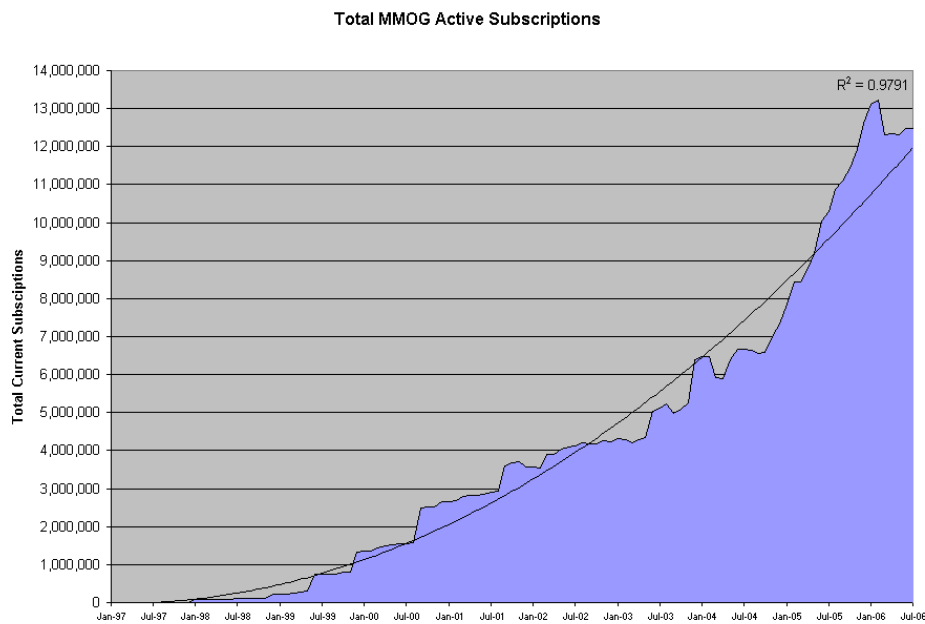
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<sup>11</sup> ESA data [www.theesa.com](http://www.theesa.com)

<sup>12</sup> The NPD Group / NPD TechworldSM data [www.npd.com](http://www.npd.com)

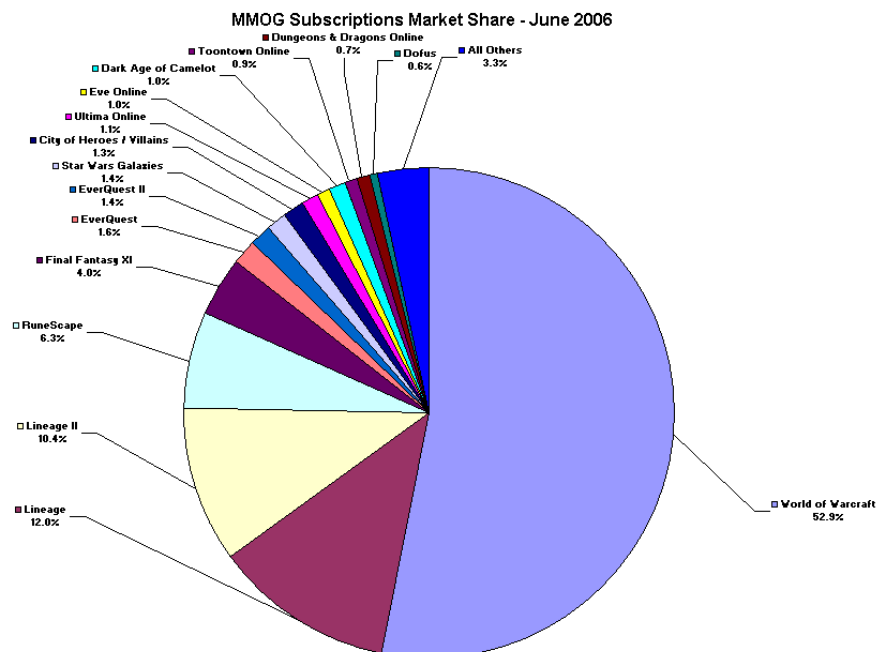
<sup>13</sup> <http://www.mmogchart.com/>

## Total MMOG Active Subscriptions



Source: Bruce Sterling Woodcock 2006 [www.mmogchart.com](http://www.mmogchart.com)

## MMO Subscriptions Market Share – June 2006



Source: Bruce Sterling Woodcock 2006 [www.mmogchart.com](http://www.mmogchart.com)

**The stereotype that video gamers** are part of a youth subculture, implying that these online environments only appeal to a small slice of the general population. The demographic data of MMORPG users challenge the stereotypical image of video gamers as part of youth subculture, and forces us to realize that adolescents are not the only users we should be paying attention to. But more importantly, the data demonstrate that MMORPGs appeal to a very wide demographic and that this appeal is strong and elicits high time investment from users<sup>14</sup>.

<sup>14</sup> Nick Yee 2006 and the Daedalus Project <http://www.nickyee.com/index-daedalus.html>

# Interaction with the RL environment

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## I. "...the computer game killed again..."

After a 12- hour monster hunt a 12 year old boy died in Jekatyeringburg in June, 2005. According to the news.ru news portal, after the school holidays started, Sergei practically moved into one of the gaming-rooms in Jekatyerinburg, where he spent ten to twelve hours daily. He only went home to have some food and sleep, and his parents did not prevent him from doing so, as they thought Sergei had the right to relax and have fun after all the hard work he had done at school. On the day in question the kid went to the gaming- room in the morning just like he had done on other days and he got involved in his favorite game. In the twelfth hour of virtual „monsterhunt” the kid suddenly fell off his chair. The unconscious boy was having seizures and was taken to hospital diagnosed with epilepsy. Although he gained back his consciousness for a short time, he did not recognize his parents and his behaviour was confused. Day by day his state became worse, and on he fifth day he had to be put on a ventilator. Three days later he died. According to the autopsy records the cause of death of the otherwise healthy child was cerebral hemorrhage. Doctors said computer games were to be blamed for the tragedy.

Also in August this year, a 28 year old South- Korean man died of complete exhaustion after he had been playing 49 hours without a halt in an internet café. Li, who lived in the city of Tegu, and whose first name was only made public by the SEULean authorities, was playing on a real time strategic programme, called Starcraft. He became so indulged in the game that he forgot to drink any fluids or take in food for two days, he did not go to sleep and refused any attempts aimed to take him away from the computer. Li collapsed on Friday, and although he was taken to hospital immediately in a few hours he died of a heart attack, as doctors suppose. The man had been discharged from work the week before this incident happened, as he could not stop playing, and therefore had been often out of work.

A 22-year-old Ukrainian gamer, considered one of the top Lineage II players in Europe, stomped another gamer to death after the man tried to stop a fight between rival clan members<sup>15</sup>.

## 2. Panic-attack in Great-Britain

„The sad truth is that my husband played 11 hours of World of Warcraft today.” – says a British housewife who prefers to keep her anonymity. Finally Blizzard’s long awaited MMORPG, World of Warcraft reached Europe too, with ungrantable buyers’ demand, full servers and a huge success. The great success of the so far best considered MMORPG is of course accompanied by huge aversions too, mainly coming from worrying family members, partners and friends.

Within two days after its publication 400. 000 copies were sold of the game. The games on stock were sold within minutes; the tradesmen could not guarantee further supply. Thank to the online game supervision, fake games cannot fill the gap. (It is not a coincident that the MMORPG game market is considered the most stable one.) The happy players dived into the world of Warcraft with fresh enthusiasm. Although there was

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<sup>15</sup> Lineage II gamer kicks player to death Moscow Times <http://kotaku.com/gaming/moscow-times/lineage-ii-gamer-kicks-player-to-death-232857.php>

no place for big surprises, as the game could have been observed months before, it seems that Blizzard gained a knock-out victory again on the market- at least for a while. The typical symptoms of its success can be observed in Hungary too, even in these minutes: the game was sold out from the stores, it is impossible to get on the best servers etc., several scandals disturbed the last few days. As in the case of many others games, the first days are typically chaotic and filled with increased excitement, but without doubts, the professional game industry- mechanism will pour oil on troubled waters. It seems that the few months the European players had spent with observing their American peers with their mouths water, achieved its desired effect.

The expectations were so high, and so were the initial interests,- which of course showed in exceptionally high game hours,- that the waves generated by the publication of the game showed in the environment free from virtual worlds too. Many parents and wives went, „obviously” online, to the British BBC web site to call the world’s attention to the „danger”. „My husband plays 15 hours a day, leaving our 5-day-old kid behind.” – complains a housewife. „I am convinced that the main reason for my husband’s depression is this game.”- writes another.

**With the increasing number of players and with the spread of the improved games the MMORPG market takes higher and higher segments from the market of games, and consumes more and more time from players’ lives.** The British example above is not at all exceptional. The only thing that is making it special is the huge number of protesters. The most important thing is yet to grab the phenomenon. This phenomenon is startlingly familiar with the phenomena accompanying the widespread of role plays: the spread and success of the new game style (and almost lifestyle) is followed by a lack of comprehension, and an increasing, more and more conscious group of protesters.

**The gathering of opponent forces has appeared many times in the history of computer game industry.** (There were waves of actions against violent games, tamagochi games etc., achieving legal – but in fact shallow- game technical constraints.) When talking about MMORPG games it is worth discussing the movement against role plays, which is a much more spectacular countermovement, and is an essence of the MMORPG.

### 3. The story happens again

In 1979, a student of Michigan University, James Dallas Egbert committed suicide, and thank to the media this case is considered as the first „D&D” suicide<sup>16</sup>. In 1982 something happened again that seriously harmed the reputation of role plays. Depressed, lonely and mentally instable Irving Pulling killed himself with his mother’s self defense gun. The victim’s problems were well known and so the responsibility shifted to D&D again.

After a short time Pulling’s mother, Patricia, founded Bothered About Dungeons and Dragons that was an organization carrying on anti-role play propaganda. They were everywhere: in radios, on TV channels, they published in books and made films. BADD’s campaign aroused many people’s interests. Game Manufacturing Association (GAMA) published studies by independent researchers on the subject, and in 1987 Armando Simon wrote the first serious expertise declaring that D&D cannot be made responsible for the suicides<sup>17</sup>. GAMA later assigned Michael Stackpole to examine BADD and Pulling, and as a result in 1990 the famous Pulling- revealing article was published<sup>18</sup>, in which the manipulative methods of the organization were ex-

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<sup>16</sup> Shaun Hately 1999

<sup>17</sup> Armando Simón 1987

<sup>18</sup> Michael A. Stackpole 1990

posed. After that BADD was dissolved, and The Committee for the Advancement of RPGs (CAR-PG) was founded whose aim is to prevent any attacks against role plays.

**For roleplayers of today it is difficult to understand how harmful BADD's actions were in their times-** games were banned from schools, preachers preached against them at masses, many shops dealing with the subject closed down, firms went bankrupt. The worst is that hundred thousands of people were made to believe that role play is dangerous, and there are people even today who associate role plays with suicide and occultism.

It is not difficult to tell that a similar process will take place regarding MMORPG games as well. The radical spreading of games, computer games, computer role play games spiced with all the positive and negative branches of online presence will serve as a stressed argument field for both parties (opponents and supporters), and their communication will have an effect on the judgment of using the internet in general, as well as today's forms of entertainment.

# Future

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**Nowadays the MMO-games are becoming mass products, but the next level has also started:** these virtual worlds are used or abused on other fields as well. One of the most basic realizations in connection with the MMO-games was that for the players it is more than just entertainment; **real virtual lives are formed, with economic and social activities.** If the unnecessary game layer is swept off of the working virtual communities, a new communication channel and representation surface reveals itself, basically a new model. It is not the model itself what is new (it is boring to talk about online communities, but is unavoidable for years now), but its representation form. This new form opens a new layer, and gives many new opportunities. Praising and world-changing articles appear regularly, and their counterparts as well, reports mentioning cheating, pyramid-games, and balloons. The language of the two sides is uniform, they differ only in their adjectives (positive or negative), so it can be seen that these worlds (like many other cultural phenomena) do not strengthen any of the extreme sides.

However, there are more important utilization possibilities than the previously listed ones: these virtual worlds are perfect for **information sharing, education and value-added communication.** IBM is integrating this model into work, and BBC is building a world for children. China is planning a virtual world to share its culture and language. I honestly believe that this increased interest and the refined technology will influence the fields of education and training.

**The importance of the virtual worlds will be so significant in the future that the governments' policy will greatly influence the development of the area.** At the present there is a trap; on the one hand the development and selling of the computer games is a huge income-generating factor (it is probably the most increasing segment of the economy of China, Korea etc.). On the other hand there is a regulating battle going on (mostly in the same countries) because of the many averse feelings, stereotypes and the government policies against the extreme playing. The situation probably will not change, **in the government policies the duality of the economic gain and the hypocrite surface will remain.**

## I. The Second Life

Because of its economic possibilities the world of Second Life will be in the spotlight; the last six months have brought wide-range popularity for this world as well. In the last two months more than 1.4 million users signed in, and at the time of writing this article 34.720 players wander around in the system<sup>19</sup>. These are exceptionally loved by marketing, open-minded (having fun at the moment), potential customers in the size of a small settlement, so as the massification increased the PR and communication directors started counting as well. **This is a new trend,** a new phenomena to which everybody react in their own way; the business participants, the representatives of the media and even government institutes appear. After the battle for the lead, the next wave will try to conquer with other superlatives: better, nicer, more comfortable virtual space, more services. Specialized worlds are created, the most recent initiative is for example by MTV music channel. **Probably none of the experienced virtual citizens will be surprised by the appearance of the first virtual supermarkets, where we can do e-shopping in 3D,** if any visual or comfort experience lacked in this field. The 3D e-governing services are not far, but because of the known problems in the beginning they will serve only in the areas of PR and information, according to the classic division of EU, on the first level.

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<sup>19</sup> [www.secondlife.com](http://www.secondlife.com)

**As many other cultural phenomena, Second Life ([www.secondlife.com](http://www.secondlife.com)) is distinctively dual.** The informing activities about it and the real situation of the world is dual as well. It can be seen more and more that Second Life is approaching an important turning point in its development, it is easily imaginable that the unbroken development of this virtual world will come to a halt.

**Many years ago, when Second Life started, it was like a strange, neglected little brother.** It did not have an elaborated world concept, and (at that time) it was surprising that it emphasised the easy conversion and correspondence of real money and virtual money (American dollar – Linden dollar). Today the trade of virtual goods in the different MMO worlds is a business of billions of dollars.

Second Life is a little different. Practically it offers in exchange for some money a virtual environment, where you can do 'anything'. The entrance to this world is free, everything else – naturally – costs money. This is a big, virtual pot that the participants fill as they wish. It is important, as we saw in the case of MMO games, that the players not only entertain themselves, but they live virtual lives, make economic transactions and many traditional cultural elements appear online, from the first date and rivalry to marriage and funeral. All this is even more true for Second Life.

## 2. News and reality

We have referred to Second Life as being a dual phenomenon in many aspects. It is certainly dual, how the different media describe Second Life, and how most people (the temporarily curious ones above all) experience it. Second Life in most of the cases is characterised by colourful descriptions, and that it is really a second world in which one can get lost, where people can get rich, or have nervous breakdowns, the border of real and virtual can get blurred, but anyway the question of „where does it all lead to?“ can emerge in the first minutes. Where the trend leads to can be guessed, but the long-lasting success of Second Life is more doubtful.

Excited by the news, many interested people enter the world of Second Life. We can only encourage those readers who have not done it so far, to do the same, because the registration, the client, so the entrance and the wandering around in this world is completely free. You can sign up on the [www.secondlife.com](http://www.secondlife.com) webpage, you have to download a program, install it, then immediately you can set the appearance of you initial character (it won't be very detailed first), you can choose a name (only one name) and you can jump into the world of Second Life. This is the point in the game where 9 new players out of 10 are surprised, halt and after half an hour they leave it forever. The main reason for this is that the attractive and colourful descriptions and the (initial!) picture are not coherent. The users find themselves in a place, learn how to navigate, fly around a little, have a look at the places they heard of (the most popular target is the virtual Amsterdam and other cities, and the important buildings that appeared in the news), but after this they look around doubtfully: when will the overwhelming feeling of the virtual existence infiltrate me? How will I have money, what can I do here, and why is this better than the already existing solutions? For example, for chatting and getting to know people there are the community sites and chats, for getting to know Amsterdam there is the homepage of the city, and the online maps, and thousands of beautiful, online photographs.

## 3. Scales of flare

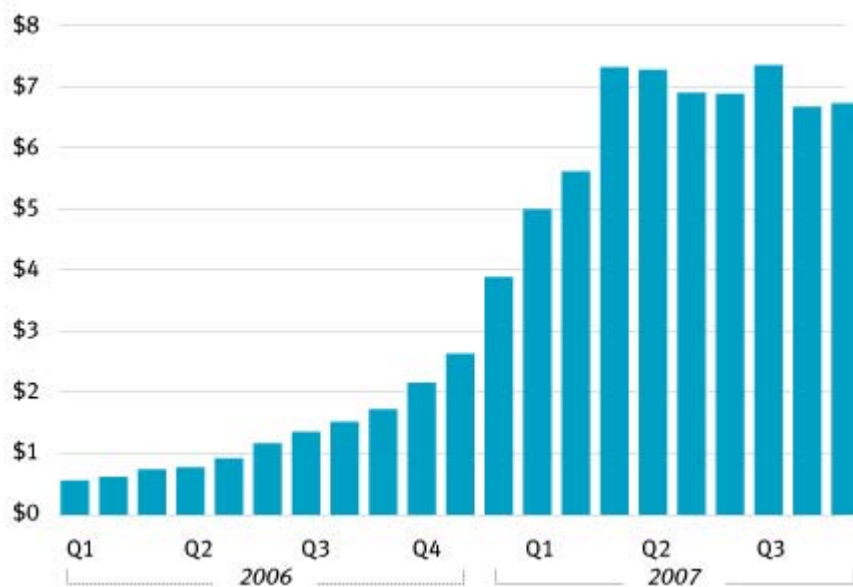
Of course, some people get the 'groove' of the world, but this is not true in most cases. But there is no problem you got to know something new, and spent an hour – for free – of your life. The case is a little worse

when someone has spent many hours with this and then leaves disappointed, because they took for granted the exaggerations of a few journalists. And of course there will be some, who enjoy this new communication world, and some can even become rich and famous – although this is mostly true for the owners of the world.

You shouldn't worry about the world Second Life: since the number of users reached the critical mass, and since the game is one of the protagonists of the news in connection with the information society, the number of participants of this virtual world is increasing. In January, 2005, the players spent 1 million game-hour in the virtual world, in March 2007 they were at 16 million game-hours. To put it differently, we can say that **they spent more than 1800 years in Virtualia<sup>20</sup>**.

The scale grew business-wise as well, the initial few hundred thousand dollars exchanged is today 7 million dollars a month – this is how much money was changed to virtual money to buy land or cloth, or to use services.

US dollars exchanged on Lindex (in Millions)<sup>21</sup>



The size of the world grew as well: **the area created and used by the players is over 500 million m<sup>2</sup> today**, that is 500 km<sup>2</sup>. It is not the size of a country yet, but it takes time and energy to get to know it.

## 4. Nature of flare

It is a commonplace that the entrance of the known people of the real world into the virtual environment increased the popularity of Second Life above the critical level. The virtual environment itself wouldn't be attractive without the reality; a pixel-city in itself is not really interesting (only because of its inhabitants), but the virtual Amsterdam can interest many people. In the same way it was a huge step when the first companies, embassies and media stars appeared in the virtual environment. This not only increased interest, but made the virtual world more diverse and colourful. But this decisive step created a trap. The turning point mentioned in the title of the article is thanks to this trap as well. The initial great attraction of Second Life was freedom – the appearance of the 'official' participants inescapably creates or requires some consolidation. At this point of the development of the virtual world such questions arise:

<sup>20</sup> [http://secondlife.com/whatis/economy\\_stats.php](http://secondlife.com/whatis/economy_stats.php)

<sup>21</sup> <http://secondlife.com/whatis/economy-graphs.php>

## 5. What is Second Life?

Is it a virtual playground, where anyone can do anything? Is it a new communication channel, and marketing possibility? The tool for self-expression? Or a virtual state? **We cannot forget that besides the promise of freedom it is the product of a company.**

In the past months and years, many phenomena that excited the real world appeared in virtual environment as well, for example, terrorism, but cheating and abuses are also becoming more and more common. The greatest attraction of Second Life is freedom, but because of the appearance of the more official-like participants, it is exactly this freedom that is regulated, because of the emerging conflicting interests. The inverter expects service. These conflicts are not direct, but Linden Lab (the owner) has to find the balance. It has to decide which development course it would like to take, and this course will be in the direction of developments of communal-cultural value, 'sellable' products and the support of participants. The creation of the digital copy of Frankfurt is an attractive and sellable 'product' from many aspects. Following this logic we can come to the realisation that the most successful 'product' is the digital copy-world developed out of fun.

This movement creates regulations formally and informally as well – on the developer blogs of Second Life the expression „our community” appears more and more with its embracing and distancing meaning as well. The creation of underground, freer worlds seems natural, because the possibility is given for everybody with the inversion of some time and energy. An unknown, closed world small in number has many attractions especially for the subcultures, but the main line supports the already know, popular one.

## 6. Turning point

**The growth and freedom in style of the wild west is followed by an also creative but more controlled expansion.** The ones who leave because of the change will become the first inhabitants of the many new virtual worlds. In the near future many specialised, more sophisticated clone of Second Life will appear – this is not a guess, because many companies have already announced their developments. **In connection with the Linden Lab the most exciting question is whether in 10 years Second Life will be the great, but already dead pioneer forefather, to which it is a prestige to remember, or it will be a virtual metaworld unavoidable in all aspects.**

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