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MMORPGs' Effect on the Individual

Since their introduction to the world, video games have been a hot topic of debate between groups. Are video games a mere pastime or can they develop physical skills? Do violent video games promote violence in real life for the players? How do video games affect depression and isolation in a person? As the industry moved towards Personal Computers (PCs) and the rise of the internet took place, the possibilities of gaming expanded. New genres of games became possible, incorporating the internet, such as Massive-Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs). These games include massive worlds, typically fantastical in nature, for the players to roam and to go on quests for. Not only do the players have the freedom to explore enormous worlds, the “massively-multiplayer” aspect of MMORPGs allows for one to play with thousands of others in the game world. Their social circles can be broadened by their interaction with millions of other people. Be the person a casual or dedicated player, studies have been conducted to research the effects of these games. Many are done to see how they affect an individual psychologically as well as how they interact with others in the real world. From various studies, a variety of results have shown that video games have conflicting effects on individuals, good and bad results appearing in the studies. MMORPGs have beneficial and harmful effects on the individual, but the beneficial effects outweigh the harmful.

A Brief History of Games

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Video games have a long history, though modern gaming can be traced to the 1980s with the introduction of the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) in 1984 (Kohler, 2018). This is where consoles became immensely popular which laid the seeds for PC gaming. Traditionally before this, video games were played on large arcade machines which were only available in public places. After a crash of the entire industry from too much game saturation, the NES brought gaming into the spotlight once more. Not only did it introduce many classic games, such as Super Mario Bros., but the console also brought gaming into the home (Kohler, 2018). Without the need of going out in public, people could buy the NES and play in the comfort of their own homes. Additionally, the console had many multiplayer games to play with both friends and family. Compare all these features to the PC, which in the 1980s was not powerful enough to allow for such games as Donkey Kong to be played due to the games' graphical intensity, let alone multiplayer capability without the internet. Though the PC did have much freedom in its hardware and potential to grow. With consoles bringing gaming into the home, the PC was set to take to the forefront of gaming.

The popularity of PCs in gaming rose in the 1990s along with the internet (Chikhani, 2015). The combination of the rise in popularity of PC gaming and the internet gave rise to very early Massive-Multiplayer Online games such as the game *Legends of Future Past*. Released in 1992, *Legends of Future Past* was one of the first games to make its transition to the internet. At the cost of \$6.00 an hour, “game masters”

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could host online sessions for players to play together (Tresca, 2011). Five years later, the term MMORPG was first coined by Richard Garriott, the creator of the game *Ultima Online* (Safko & Brake, 2010). Since then, there has been a multitude of games that have come out using MMORPG as their genre-type. One such game was released in 2004 by the company Blizzard, called *World of Warcraft*. Upon release, *World of Warcraft* rose to the top and at present remains one of the most popular games currently played (Reeves, 2013). The gaming industry as well as the lives of individual players are affected by the popularity of these games.

The Gaming Industry

The gaming industry is inevitably affected by the introduction and continued popularity of the MMORPG genre. Going by population alone, the top six MMORPGs of 2020 have a combined total of over 15 million players worldwide (*Top 6 Most Popular MMORPGs Sorted by Population (2020)*). This number goes to show the sheer amount of people affected by this genre and how big it is in the gaming industry. One aspect of Massive-Multiplayer Online games is their in-game microtransactions, which are things players can buy with real money to get in-game stuff. “According to the Enterprise Software Association, almost 50% of gamers have made a microtransaction in the past year” (*MMORPG Gaming Market: Growth, Trends, and Forecasts (2020 - 2025)*). With 50% of gamers using these transactions, with a large amount of them being from MMOs, there is a direct correlation to how much money is given to the gaming industry through

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MMOs. Although potentially harmful for the players and their finances, these transactions help to grow the industry.

Another way in which the industry was affected was by primarily the massive popularity of *World of Warcraft*. During the 1990s, MMORPGs became a huge rage, with such games as *Runescape* and *Eve Online* allowing a player to game in massive worlds. Both games are hugely different but still let a player tap into their imagination and sense of adventure (Addo, 2017). After a decade of these games taking the forefront of many players' gaming sessions, a new game came out that totally revolutionized the genre and industry. That was, as stated previously, Blizzard's *World of Warcraft*. The game changed everything in how it pretty much killed the industry. "The interesting thing is, it's not like WoW killed the industry because it was just mind-bogglingly bad or revolting or anything, but because it was just too good. It's success was simply unprecedented, but more importantly, it was attractive" (Addo, 2017). *World of Warcraft* was essentially the perfect example of a Massively-Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game. Due to its success and perceived perfection, many MMORPGs that were released afterwards were copies of *World of Warcraft*. For years to come, MMORPGs became saturated in these low-quality, *World of Warcraft* copies. Even for games that were around before *World of Warcraft*, such as *Runescape*, changes were made that saturated the existing industry (Addo, 2017). *World of Warcraft*, one of the most popular MMORPGs even today, totally changed the gaming industry and genre of MMORPGs.

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MMORPGs' Effect on Social Adeptness

Outside of the industry, players are also affected individually from their social interactions in-game. A large number of people all playing a multiplayer game together brings them together as a community. The players help each other out, forming guilds and teams to do better in the game. The social interaction between players involves how they “can search different worlds, complete quests, or simply mill about discussing topics related to the game. It gives players of all walks of life the ability to overcome social anxieties and pursue collective goals with like minded individuals” (Armstrong, 2013). This shows a beneficial trend in that it allows players who have antisocial tendencies to be more out there in the virtual world and meet people and talk to others in ways they might normally avoid. In fact, with the outbreak of the covid-19 pandemic, internet games as a whole have seen massive growth in popularity. One report shows that within one week, the increase in gaming traffic peaked by 75%. “According to Verizon, the increase in gaming traffic was witnessed during peak hours by 75% over the last week” (*MMORPG Gaming Market: Growth, Trends, and Forecasts (2020 - 2025)*). This massive increase helps to show how MMORPGs have provided an alternative.

Another study revealed how Massively-Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games helped players both “bridge” and bond”, as they call it (Chen, A., Mari, S., Grech, S., & Levitt, J. 2020). The “bridge” that they refer to are relationships formed across social platforms between people of various backgrounds and experiences. “Bonding” on the

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other hand is when people form relationships with others who share similar backgrounds and experiences. The study showed that Massively-Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games are beneficial to both bridging and bonding, specifically that “in a population of adults aged 55 years and older, bridging social capital was developed at a higher level than bonding social capital in the game World of Warcraft” (Chen et al., 2020) and “bonding was more predicted by playing with friends and sharing personal stories with game friends” (Chen et al., 2020). The bonding aspect is especially important in showing how MMORPGs affect social adeptness outside of the game. A group of friends in real life can strengthen their bond through playing an MMORPG together, according to the study. If one lacks in forming a strong bond in real life, perhaps playing a Massively-Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game with someone they know in real life can strengthen their bond.

Moreover, there has been research done to show how even hostility in video games has helped offline relationships. The study looked at how players of MMORPGs were affected by the game and correlations between various factors both inside and outside of the game. Specifically, hostility was one such factor that was looked at in players. The study found that hostility in the Massively-Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games was inversely related to relationships in real life, “players high in trait hostility report the strongest skills benefits and positive transfer from online to offline relationships” (Smith, 2020). This is a paradoxical finding. With high levels of hostility

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when playing a game, one would think in real life the person would also be hostile and not form relationships. The opposite is true though and hostility in MMORPGs actually are beneficial for forming relationships. Additionally, the same study actually enforces the idea of not only do MMORPGs help build social connections, but also help with identity formation. The study goes into how “playing multiplayer games and placing greater personal importance on gaming are both associated with higher levels of integrated regulation, suggesting that MMO play promotes identity formation through becoming part of a community via participation in clans/guilds and the formation of trust and close friendships through shared experiences” (Smith, 2020). The benefits found in this study in playing Massively-Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games show how MMORPGs can help a player’s real life relationships.

On the other hand, though, it has real-life implications and effects that may be harmful overall. With the focus on their online worlds at home, players tend to go out less and remove themselves from the real world. “As players have no need to leave the house to meet with their friends, they continue to lead lives of isolation. In fact, the cooperation that users experience in the game is entirely counterproductive-it forces them to remove themselves from the realities of society” (Armstrong, 2013). There are two sides to the social implications of MMOs. The community that is built between players and their teammates helps those struggling in reality to be social to open up and meet new people. Though the world online forces those playing to ignore and even shun the outside world

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and society. With the ability to bring people together over the internet, MMORPGs have the ability to help people socialize, but at the expense of shunning the reality of society.

MMORPGs Effect on Individual's Psyche

On a more individual level, MMORPGs also affect their players psychologically. One study shows how many adolescents use MMORPGs as ways to escape reality (Scott & Porter-Armstrong, 2013). For various reasons, from depression to external stressors, adolescents who play MMORPGs use them as a form of coping for real-life issues. “...their default model showed substantial data model fit which explained pathological online gaming as a function of all three factors indicating the complexity of the phenomenon and highlighting again the idea of MMORPG playing as a very modern coping strategy for individuals hoping to avoid” (Scott & Porter-Armstrong, 2013). The study here shows how the effects of MMOs can be somewhat complicated. In a more negative tone, there is a correlation between the game and real-life that shows how individuals who play video games tend to have depression and negative feelings. Researching more into various sources, studies also reveal a more positive side to playing video games and Massively-Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games. Scott and Porter-Armstrong found that there are external stressors that could be the reason why this is the case and show how MMORPGs could actually just be a modern-day coping method (Scott & Porter-Armstrong, 2013). Rather than the MMORPGs being what causes depression, players actually look to them in order to cope with their depression or

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external stressors. MMORPGs used in this way can be viewed as a safe alternative to deal with stressors. Studies reveal how Massively-Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games have effects on an individual that can both harm the player and benefit from them, forming a complicated relationship between MMORPGs and an individual's psyche.

For a more clear result, there is also a study to show how MMOs benefit an individual on the cognitive level. One such benefit is the ability to problem-solve. In one study, the link to problem solving and video games is explored, "video games play an important role in problem-solving skills. As the researchers point out, many games present problems without a "manual" on how to solve them. As a result, gamers have a blank slate on which to try a variety of problem-solving techniques, often when there are multiple solutions" (Bryan, 2013). The worlds of MMOs present their players with problems for them to solve without much hand-holding along the way, especially the more you progress in the world. Related to problem-solving, MMORPGs also help to develop creativity in individuals who play them. From the same research, "there's evidence that playing any type of video game enhances creativity. It's not conclusive because the research doesn't show whether players become more creative after playing games or whether the video games themselves tend to attract creative people" (Bryan, 2013). Regardless of Massive-Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games nurturing and developing creativity, this is an important trait for individuals to have. Creativity helps individuals solve problems and better society as a whole. So much so that in the same

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article, there is a brief mention of how creativity is what helped make a breakthrough in AIDS research (Bryan, 2013). Although seemingly unrelated, this breakthrough goes to show how important creativity is. With Massively-Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games having a direct linkage to creativity, it is clear how beneficial MMORPGs can be.

Further research has gone to use actual gameplay data to show the benefits video games in general have on mental health. A study at Oxford University specifically used the games *Animal Crossing* and *Plants vs. Zombies: Battle for Neighborville* and found that “people who played more games tended to report greater ‘wellbeing’” (Hern, 2020). These two games are quite different in nature, where *Animal Crossing* is a relaxed game wherein the player moves to an abandoned island and tries to make a town out of it. *Plants vs. Zombies: Battle for Neighborville* on the other hand is a shooter game that the player tries to defend their home from zombies. With the common belief that violent video games make individuals more violent, the research presented here directly contradicts that. Although *Animal Crossing* may be a more friendly game that would be hard to make a case for relation to violence, *Plants vs. Zombies: Battle for Neighborville* is clearly a violent game. Despite that, those who play have reported a better sense of wellbeing. This shows how video games in general are actually beneficial, and therefore so are MMORPGs. There are many effects on an individual’s psyche who plays MMORPGs, both beneficial ones and harmful ones.

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Conclusion

The video game industry has a long history. As more and more users became attracted to video games, many studies looked into just how beneficial or harmful they can be. Through the internet, video games have developed into massive communities stretching worldwide, especially in the game genre of Massively-Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games. Their popularity exploded with games such as *World of Warcraft* and *Runescape*. There are many studies that look into how individuals need to remain dedicated to the games to keep up, as well as how MMORPG players can benefit from playing them. Individuals are affected by these games from their social adeptness to the individual's psychology. Massively-Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game players both reach out to form new relationships but can also isolate themselves from real life. The players might develop depression and anxiety in these games, but also learn to be more creative and have a better state of wellbeing. From looking at the benefits and harms of these games, one can see how the benefits outweigh the detriments.

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