

Being-With Online in a Massively Multiplayer Online  
Role-playing Game.

by

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## Chapter 1

### Personal Experience

Beginning in the late 1980's the Internet began to emerge as a medium for entertainment, commerce, information and communication. As personal computers and online services became cheaper, more people started to use the Internet. At first, communication was limited to email and chat. While email was static and had a delayed response, chat was dynamic and involved two or more individuals typing and reading at the same time. Technology has evolved and today communication between people can include voice and images as well as text.

My personal interest in the Internet began in earnest during my last year at Michigan State University. I had one year to finish my degree and all my friends had graduated the year before. I felt isolated and without much company. Fortunately, before my friends left we had joined an online community called the Metaverse. The Metaverse was a type of online program called a MOO. MOO stands for Multi-User Dungeon Object Oriented. Basically, it was a virtual world where many people could meet and talk. It was all done with text with people typing and reading comments in real-time. Individuals at the

Metaverse created characters that could interact with other characters and various objects such as chairs, doors and whatever people wanted to create. Characters could also move from place to place within the Metaverse and could design their own rooms and meeting places. It was like being in a novel written by many different people.

In the evenings I would log onto the Metaverse and talk and write programs with my friend. We would create interactive objects like a guided tour of the pyramids or a room that had virtual weather. We made friends with others and talked about what was going on in our lives. We had arguments and revealed our inner thoughts and feelings in a real and authentic way. We worked together and with other members of the community to build more rooms and items to enhance the virtual experience for everyone. At times the experience was far from virtual and encompassed our entire beings as we immersed ourselves into the world we shared through the Internet. Time would slip away and I would leave the experience and return to my solitary existence. I could always log back in and meet with people. It was during these times, with the support I encountered online, that lifted my day and combated the isolation I felt in that last year at school.

In a brief period of time the Internet has emerged as a reality of our lives. It is no longer considered a fad. There have also been a number of controversies and fears surrounding the Internet. Many people feel that we are isolating ourselves further and doing away with real-life encounters with others. The Internet also allows the individual a greater degree of anonymity. A person can go to one chat room and pretend to be someone and the next day go to another and pretend to be someone else. The use of the Internet to spread pornography and the realization of online predators feeds the desire to regulate and control the Internet. At the other end of the spectrum are people who believe that the Internet will fulfill all the dreams of mankind bringing international commerce and communication that will unite the world. My belief about this technology is neither. The Internet is not the great devil that will enslave us in alienation from each other, nor is it the great unifier. It is technology. We are the users of technology. We are the ones who will decide how to use the Internet and for what purpose.

Humanistic Psychology has a vested interest in becoming aware of and using technology in a way that promotes social justice, self-awareness, community, and a host of other ideals inherent in humanistic psychology. I

hope to show how this technology can be used in a way that is beneficial and an enhancement to the human condition as opposed to creating further alienation. Technology exists to provide opportunities to interact with our world in a more powerful way. It would be a disservice to humanistic psychology if it refused to participate in this endeavor. Rather, it is my hope that Humanistic Psychology will embrace the challenge of moving forward in this direction.

This is the background information and thinking that brought me to the question, "What is the Experience of Being-With Online in a Massively Multiplayer Online Role-playing Game?" With the realization of the Internet as a viable means to communicate comes the necessity to learn how to best use this technology. It is my hope that by examining the experience of Being-With online I will be able to elucidate common experience to enable individuals and groups to benefit from a newer, different way of relating to each other. In order to bring greater clarity and meaning to this study, I will begin by defining the terms of the question.

#### Definition of Terms

The word 'what' as defined by Webster's online dictionary (2000) means, "sometimes used in reference to a clause or phrase that is yet to come or is not yet

complete." This basic definition suffices for what I intend. I use the word "what" to mean something that is to come. This something will be a collection of ideas and themes that arise in the pursuit of this study.

One of the definitions of the word "is" means "to have a specified qualification or characterization" (Webster, 2000). My study will examine the multiple characterizations of the experience of Being-With online. The word "is" together with the word "what" constitutes the phrase "what is." Taking both of the above definitions and applying them to my study creates the meaning of the multiple, specific characterizations of the themes and ideas of the experience of Being-With online.

Webster's (1989) defines the word experience as:

1. A personal instance of personally encountering or undergoing something.
2. The process or fact of personally observing, encountering or undergoing something.
3. The observing, encountering or undergoing of something.
4. Knowledge or practical wisdom gained from what one has observed, encountered or undergone.
5. The totality of cognitions given by perception; all that is perceived, understood, and remembered.
6. To have experience of; meet with; undergo; feel.
7. To learn by experience. (p. 501)

I would like to draw the reader's attention to the word personal in the first definition. This implies that experience is unique to a given individual. It also

implies that a given experience is not passive, but an action that involves the person experiencing (or perceiving) as much as the actual experience. Also, I would like to draw the reader's attention to the word knowledge in definition four. Experience involves not just the one moment in time, but the knowledge of the event. So, if something happens to a person but the person does not recognize it as important, it is not an experience. Therefore, in my definition of the word experience, if a tree falls in the forest and no one is around to hear it, it does not make a noise.

Moustakas (1956) examines the act of experience as taking place in solitude. "Experience is true to the person when he is himself alone. In such experience perception is unique and undifferentiated" (p. 3). It will be assumed that the individual's experience is true to that individual.

No other person's ideas, and none of my own ideas, are as authoritative as my experience. It is to experience that I must return again and again, to discover a closer approximation to truth as it is in the process of becoming in me. (Rogers, 1961, pp. 23-24)

The word Being-With creates some difficulties in defining, as it is not a word commonly used. I first ran across this word in Moustakas' writing (1995). The word

carries with it several existential concepts that I would like to include as well. Moustakas (1995) gives this explanation of Being-With:

Being-With means listening and hearing the other's ways of feelings, thoughts, objectives, but it also means offering my own perceptions and views. There is, in Being-With, a sense of a joint enterprise - two people fully involved, struggling, searching, exploring, sharing. (p.84)

This explanation describes the sense of mutuality I felt while engaged in online communication. Moustakas mentions a joint enterprise. I believe this to be important for Being-With online. Whether it is a simple conversation, an intense debate on a message board or two programmers developing a program there is in Being-With something in common being shared.

The fact that these projects take place online rather than face-to-face does change the nature of how Being-With takes place, but I am unsure if it changes the essence that Being-With is. The individuals who participate in Being-With have Weltanschauung or worldviews that coincide in a given time frame. Eldred (1997) makes the claim that Being-With involves a shared project and a shared sense of time, but not necessarily space:

These little transactions presuppose that Dasein and Dasein share a being-with the matter at hand. This shared being-with... need not be a bodily closeness to each other in a common environment, and the matter at

hand does not have to be anything 'physical', but the shared being-with... does require a sharing of time, even if it is only the time of the present, the moment in which the matter is dealt with. Such 'little projects' in the present are quickly settled, but there are more momentous common projects as well which require claims being made on a common future, in the ambit of which the project can come to fruition. Between the present, in which the common project is decided and agreed on between Dasein and Dasein, and the future, there is an intervening temporal space within which the necessarily individual projects of both (or all) Dasein involved have to cohere with each other so as to realize the common project. (§13)

Eldred is describing the context in which Being-With takes place. He adds an important aspect to the definition of Being-With that I include in my question. The fact that Being-With can take place without a close proximal physical presence is an important aspect in Being-With online.

Besides the context in which Being-With takes place there is the important concept of the understanding and sharing that exists in this context. Moustakas (1995) illustrates this concept when he writes:

In Being-With I enter into the other person's thought-feeling processes, dwell inside them, and come to understand and know that other person's world from my own awareness and understanding. (p. 84)

This understanding is a necessary condition for Being-With. It is the ability to enter as fully as possible into the other person's thought-feeling processes that enables a shared communication. While this cannot be total there is a degree of what Binswager (1958) calls

"empathic ability" that varies from individual to individual (p. 226). This empathic ability involves willingness on each individual's part to engage in an open, honest communication process as well as use a degree of imagining what the other is feeling and thinking and act accordingly.

I define Being-With as a willingness on the part of two or more individuals to engage in an enterprise in which the individuals communicate as openly and honestly a way as possible. This communication will involve some degree of empathy and will take place in the same time without the two individuals occupying the same physical place. This Being-With may involve cooperation or it may involve confrontation and likely will include both. Moustakas (1995) writes about how this seemingly paradoxical relationship may occur:

Being-With may also invite confrontation. The two persons, though fully committed and participating in a fundamental relationship, may at any point be on separate paths of understanding, in terms of what is essential to move life forward. They remain with each other, listening, respecting, and differing in their views and feelings. In the process, a struggle ensues; words and feelings are exchanged. I do not minimize or overpower the other person's judgment. I remain respectful throughout and on a level of equality. In the process, a new vision emerges of what is essential, and both persons shift in some ways their perception and judgment. In Being-With, the personal power of each is retained. Each recognizes

the value of the other. The final perspective includes dimensions of both positions. (p. 85)

The importance of not discounting the other's point of view while remaining authentic is necessary for Being-With. The importance of continuing this process and the willingness to be fully committed is what is vital rather than the content of the disagreement.

The word "online" is a relatively new word to the English language. Webster (2000) defines it as:

connected to, served by, or available through a system and especially a computer or telecommunications system <an *on-line* database>; also : done while connected to a system <*on-line* computer storage>

In my study the word online will be used to describe an activity where two or more people communicate using computers connected to the Internet. I have included both real-time, dynamic communication like chat rooms and static, delayed communication like message boards or both. The importance of the word is simply that the communication takes place using a computer.

A Massively Multiplayer Online Role-playing Game (hereafter referred to as MMORPG) is a type game played using the Internet. These games include such titles as Everquest, Ultima Online and Asheron's Call. For this study I chose to become a participant observer in the game Dark Age of Camelot. This was the newest MMORPG available

at the time of this study. In a MMORPG people play a character in a virtual world populated by other players. This virtual world consists of a program that runs on a computer known as a server. A player installs a program on his or her computer and connects to the server by way of the Internet, therefore the game takes place online. Thousands of players participate in real time with each other, hence the use of the words Massively Multiplayer. The population of the server I played on was 2,000 and more at any given time. Many of these games revolve around a sword and sorcery storyline and players role-play a character.

This ends my defining of terms for the research question, "What is the Experience of Being-With Online in a Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game?" I have discussed the basic definition of my terms as well as philosophic meanings. The next section of this project is a literature review of research on online communication.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

In this chapter I will be reviewing my literature review process. I will describe how and where I located resources pertaining to my question. I will then present the major pieces of researcher in distinct themes. I will discuss the major authors who are doing research on online communication. Finally I will place my study within the current body of research.

I take as inspiration for my work two major science fiction novels that were published at the beginning of the Internet revolution. These books describe the evolution of relationships online and posit a world where these relationships directly impact offline behavior. *Snow Crash* (Stephenson, 2000) describes a world where relationships in the physical world have an impact on relationships in the virtual world and vice versa. *Neuromancer* (Gibson, 1978) is one of the first novels to describe the online world and its influence on the physical world. While these books do not represent relevant scientific literature, I appreciate them because their artistry describes my experience of Being-With online and thus is relevant to this study.

## Search Process Notes

The following is a description of my search process. I searched in the First Search Social Science Databases using the term "internet." I received 95000+ results. I then narrowed the search by looking for the terms "psychology" and "video games." I found 65 entries in the WorldCat database, none in the WilsonSelectPlus database, 46 entries in the Social Science Abstracts database and 27 entries in the PsychFirst database. I then printed a list of all the titles so that I could select the ones relevant to my study.

Next I searched the InfoTrac database. I found 21 articles related to the terms "internet" and "chat room" in the medical database. Two of these articles were relevant because they discussed psychological aspects of online communication. I found five articles using the terms "internet" and "games." None of these I found to be relevant to my study. I located 64 results in the General database. These I printed out and sorted through to select relevant journal articles.

As I approach the date for writing the dissertation I did a final literature search. In my second literature search I again used the above process that resulted in slightly more journal articles. I also searched for the

terms "online" and "relationships" together in the PsychFirst database. I located 70 items and again selected those that were most relevant to my study. I gathered all the articles together and began to explore the references in them to uncover more sources. I discovered several online journals that were either directly or indirectly dedicated to the study of online communities and relationships. I subscribed to the major journals and began to look at the current research.

The purpose of these searches was to find current research articles that are related to my study and to position my study as separate and distinct from previous research. I have to date located no psychological studies that deal specifically with the experience of Being-With online or that have explored MMORPGs. I located one study that examined MMORPGs in a quantitative way (Griffiths, Davies, and Chappell, 2003). The nearest concept related to Being-With online are several studies that explore the issue of presence online (Anderson, Ashraf, Douthier, and Jack, 2001; Jacobson, 2001; Lombard and Ditton, 1997; Shuemie, Van Der Straaten, Krijn, and Van Der Mast, 2001). In addition there are a fair number of studies that have been done on online communication and the effects of online communication (Anderson, 2000; Baker, 2000; Lapadat, 2002).

The majority of these studies continue to point to the need for further research about all aspects of Internet use.

The beginnings of research about online communities and relationships were begun not by scientists but by the participants of the communities themselves. Asynchronous communication such as email and message lists provided some continuity, but did not allow for real-time or synchronous chatting. The synchronous communication technology at the time consisted of Multi User Dungeons (MUDs) and Internet Relay Chat (IRC). These were text-based applications that allowed the formation of online communities in real-time. Soon after the implementation of MUDs and IRC there were Instant Messaging services like I Seek You (ICQ) and American Online Instant Messenger (AIM) that provided additional opportunities for individuals to communicate with each other. Psychology began to take notice of the Internet phenomenon.

After acquiring the relevant articles I began to sort and organize them according to relevant themes. There were five predominant categories that I sorted the articles. These categories are: Online relationships, clinical implications of online relationships, online communities including virtual worlds and MUDs, computer gaming, virtual

presence and online research. I will examine the main authors in each of these areas and discuss the findings.

#### Online Relationships

A qualitative study used a case study approach to explore one woman's experience with online relationships as a way to make a positive change in her life (Biggs, 2000). The article reported that the woman's experience was distinguished from pathological use because of her maintenance of a strong face-to-face social life. Another study examined what qualities were important in online relationships. It was found that trust, honesty and commitment were key factors. It was further found that the anonymity of the online world could allow for greater disclosure and the shift from online chatting to face-to-face chatting can be a sign of growing trust and deeper commitment to the relationship (Whitty and Gavin, 2001). These results were echoed by other researchers who found that online relationships were healthy if used as an adjunct to real life relationships (McCown, Fischer, Page, and Momant, 2001; Peris, 2002).

A qualitative case study examined the factors for success in beginning a romantic relationship online. It was found that physical attractiveness, commitment, risk-taking capacity and resources for travel affected the

success of developing a romantic relationship online and maintaining that relationship in the real world (Baker, 2000). A further study by the same researcher revealed that the meeting place online, obstacles including physical distance and previous relationships, level of intimacy before meeting face-to-face, and the ability to resolve conflicts are factors in the maintenance of romantic relationships (Baker, 2002). Another study attempted to predict relationship satisfaction in online relationships. It found that satisfaction is predicted by trust, intimacy, and physical attraction (Anderson, 2000). A quantitative study of online romantic relationships found that while the use of the computer leads to a decrease in satisfaction with the online relationship, individuals who were more committed to the relationship were able to overcome the barriers imposed by the computer mediated communication (Rabby, 2001).

#### Clinical Implications of Online Relationships

One of the most widely publicized findings concerning Internet research is the study published that reported that the Internet contributed to the increase of depression and feelings of isolation (Kraut et al., 1998). The study was the result of the HomeNet project that followed the use of the Internet for communication by a sample of 73

households. The researchers found that there were increased rates of depression and social isolation and attributed this to the use of the low quality of the online relationships. This was a paradox as the Internet is often viewed as a way to increase communication and human contact. Other researchers began to look at alternative perspectives on this paradox and found that Internet self-efficacy, whether the online relationship is with a known person, and knowledge of how to use the Internet could be factors that influence depression (LaRose, Eastin, and Gregg, 2001). A follow up study of the HomeNet project found that while depression and social isolation did increase during the initial study, these factors decreased or were not a factor in the latter stage of the longitudinal study (Kraut et al., 2002). This study also found that for extroverted individuals there was an increase in social involvement with Internet use as well as a decrease in loneliness. In their most recent study (Cummings, Butler, and Kraut, 2002) found that the quality of online relationships is less valuable than offline relationships in terms of satisfying social interaction. This study discussed online relationships as supplementing offline relationships.

Other studies have found that Internet communication actually decreases depression, loneliness, self-esteem and social support (Shaw and Gant, 2002). The major difference between the Shaw study and the Kraut study was in the design of the experiment. Shaw used a college age population in a controlled, laboratory setting, while Kraut followed families in a longitudinal study. The issue of loneliness in online communication has been studied as a possible factor. One study has found that loneliness was not related to online chatting and that people who were lonely remained lonely even when chatting online. Conversely, people who were less lonely were more likely to develop open, honest relationships with others through the use of online chatting (Leung, 2002). Shyness was also found to have a positive correlation with relationship involvement as compared to face-to-face relationships meaning that people who were shy in face-to-face relationships were also shy in online relationships (Ward, 2002). Finally one study explored how one's perception of oneself and others may be exaggerated in online relationships (Sherman, 2001).

Many studies have been conducted looking at the effects of Internet youth among the young, especially teens. There is a perception that this population uses the

Internet more than older individuals. A quantitative study found that most youths have online relationships with peers and that the child's parents knew these peers. Most of these relationships involved offline communication, but rarely involved face-to-face meetings (Wolak, Mitchell, and Finkelhor, 2002). One study looked qualitatively at the experiences described by youths. These experiences included freedom, power, connectedness, and expanding notions of self and identities (Maczewski, 2002). Another study followed the use of distance learning communities. It was found that student's satisfaction with the program increased, anxiety about the online world decreased and participation within the learning community increased over time. It was also found that the student's involvement in offline communities and activities decreased during this time. However, the students returned to previous levels of involvement with the offline activities at the conclusion of the distance-learning program (Kazmer, 2001).

In a study done on college students' use of the Internet, the researchers found that there were no differences between persons who formed online relationships and those who did not form online relationships in the areas of Internet use, relationship formation and personality characteristics. Within the group that formed

online relationships there were differences in the areas of social skills, loneliness scores and the ease of locating people with similar interests online (Bonebrake, 2002).

Another study looked at the emotional intelligence of college students who use the Internet. It was found that those students who had a higher level of emotional intelligence had a more positive Internet attitude and generally used email as a method of communication over other types of communication (Woods, 2001).

Finally there are studies that explore the pathological use of the Internet. There have been so many studies that looked at the dangers of excessive Internet use or Internet Addiction that one author proposes guidelines for incorporating it as a separate disorder (Hansen, 2002). There have also been studies about the use of the Internet to engage in antisocial activities such as pornography (Cooper and Griffin-Shelley, 2002). One study looked at online relationships by troubled youths and found that youths with high levels of parental conflict and highly troubled were more likely to form closer online relationships. The study suggests that these children were more vulnerable to online exploitation (Wolak, Mitchell, and Finkelhor, 2003).

### Online Communities

Research on online communities focuses on the way groups on the Internet develop and are conducted. There was a study done to explore whether online group dynamics can be studied in the same way as face-to-face groups. The study administered the same questionnaire to a group that met online and a group that met offline. The researchers found that both groups demonstrated the same concept of relationships. They therefore argued that virtual groups could be studied in the same way as online groups (Ambrosini, Bernardi, and Benini, 2000). A different study showed that online groups provided a positive experience for those involved. The experience included concepts such as mutual trust, empathic resonance and a sense of belonging (Silverman, 2001). Other researchers have explored how the nature of gift giving in an open source programming community contributes to higher quality and new ideas (Bergquist, 2001). Gift giving in this case indicates sharing of software information. An open source programming community is one in which pieces of computer programs are freely available to everyone, hence they are gifts. The open source community is perhaps one of the oldest communities on the Internet as it is made up of many

individuals who have constructed the protocols and programs that currently allow the Internet to operate.

Online groups can be asynchronous, which means that they are composed of discussion groups where individuals take turns writing, or synchronous, meaning the interaction takes place in real time. One asynchronous study discussed the importance of textural framing of the messages in an online discussion group. The study found that how the message was delivered was significant in regards to the topic being discussed and the level of formality but not for relational involvement (Mabry, 2001). Another asynchronous study explored how the act of writing contributed to the construction of social meaning within an online course. This study argued that the act of writing contributed to the social and cognitive construction of meaning for the participants in the group (Lapadat, 2002).

Many of the first studies on online communities have been done on synchronous communities known as Multi User Dungeons or MUDs. MUDs are a text environment where many users can be in the same virtual space. It is in some ways similar to a chat room, but it also enables the user to move through a series of connected rooms and interact with objects through text commands. The lack of visual cues has lead many researchers to conclude that there is a lack of

depth and emotionality in text only relationships as discussed previously. Several studies have made the argument that MUD users are able to overcome the limitations imposed by text only communication. One study discussed the use of text symbols known as emoticons to convey emotional meaning as well as participant's motivation to engage in relationship (Utz, 2000). The study found that those participants who were less skeptical about computer mediated communication and who used emoticons developed more friendships online. The study also supported earlier findings that online communication helped individuals overcome shyness. Another study that involved participants in a MUD revealed that they provide "a social and powerful context for the formation of personal relationships, many of which will transfer to other settings" (Parks and Roberts, 1997, p. 1).

There have been efforts to study the relationship between online and offline relationships using MUDs. The town of Blackburg, Virginia uses a MUD program to develop a virtual community that is based on a real world community (Carroll et al., 2001). This research is currently ongoing.

There are also MUDS that make use of graphics. This leads to a two dimensional virtual environment where

distance between individuals and what participants can display to others becomes possible. One study explored how the distance between participants can be an indication of a relationship (Krikorian, Lee, Chock, and Harms, 2000). The researchers found that the distance between graphical representation of participants, known as avatars, varied as a function of conversational appropriateness, social attraction and uncertainty reduction. The researchers describe three interpersonal distance zones, the close range zone, the danger zone and the far-range zone. The researchers concluded that scalability increased in the close range zone and far range but decreased in the middle danger zone.

Finally a study was done to examine the interaction between online and offline support in a hearing-impaired online support group. It was found that greater support was indicative of having family and friends participated in the online support group. The more effective the individual with hearing loss was in the real world, the more benefits they derived from the group (Cummings, Sproull, and Kiesler, 2002).

#### Computer Gaming

Much of the literature on the playing of computer games has been decidedly negative (Griffiths, 1991, 2000;

Phillips, C.A., Rolls, S., and Rouse, A., 1995). Common themes in the literature include aggression, addiction and the detrimental mental and physical effects on the player (Griffiths, 2003). Also there is a common perception that only young, adolescent males play video games. One recent study, however, used demographics to study the population of MMORPs. This study found that the majority of players were older than 19 and male (Griffiths, 2003). Further data analysis revealed that there exists a sizeable minority of women that play MMORPGs. The percentage of women playing video games in this study was approximately %15. One study that addressed the aggression aspect of gaming claims that when the opponent is human rather than a computer there are lower levels of aggression noted (Williams, 2002).

#### Online Presence

A closely related issue to Being-With is the concept of presence. A major author in the literature that discusses the concept of presence in mediated communication is Matthew Lombard. Lombard and Ditton (1997) describe six kinds of presence in the literature on mediated communication. The first is Social Presence. Social presence is the "the extent to which a medium is perceived as sociable, warm, sensitive, personal or intimate (p. 4).

The next is Presence as Realism or the degree to which a medium can present an accurate depiction of real life objects, events and people.

There is also Presence as Transportation. This involves three types of presence including "You are There", "It is Here" and "We are Together." In "You are There", the user is sent into another place, such as in a simulation. In "It is Here" the object is transported to the user, as in watching a news show for example, where events are brought into the living room. Finally, and most important to my study, is the concept of "We are Here." This is when two or more people share the same space, as in a MMORPG.

A fourth example of Presence is that of immersion, where the user is immersed in the experience as much as possible by wearing headphones or Virtual Reality eye goggles. The fifth kind of presence discussed by Lombard and Ditton (1997) is Presence as a Social Actor within Medium. This is akin to the one sided relationships with news anchors or actors for example. Finally there is Presence as Medium as Social Actor. This type of presence is a relationship with the medium itself. For example, the relationship a user has to a particular program on television or to a computer program.

Another discussion of presence explores three dimensions of a virtual experience. These dimensions are focus, locus and sensus (Waterworth and Waterworth, 2001). Focus involves the level of attention given to what is occurring in the virtual world. Locus is where ones attention is placed; whether one attends to the physical or virtual world. Finally, sensus is the level of arousal of the user while interacting with the environment.

Another major author on the issue of presence is Biocca. Biocca (1997) wrote about the increasing use of technology to simulate an environment and the use of technology to enable a human to interact with that environment. Studying individuals online involves the use of technology that can enable a real enough presence or sharing of space. This use of technology has also shaped human thought and behavior. Biocca describes this as the Cyborg's Dilemma explained below:

The more natural the interface the more "human" it is, the more it adapts to the human body and mind. The more the interface adapts to the human body and mind, the more the body and mind adapts to the non-human interface. Therefore, the more natural the interface, the more we become "unnatural," the more we become cyborgs. (p. 22)

Biocca is describing the relationship of the human to the computer. Being-With online necessitates this relationship and provides a large amount of unknowns. Since MMORPGs

simulate an environment in three dimensions, it strives to be a "natural" environment. The player's mind and body adapts to this environment and interacts with other players and objects based on this environment. To become a player in a MMORPG, one must become in some ways a Cyberborg.

Other research on the concept of presence has focused on how presence is enhanced or disrupted. One study examined the factors of imagination, competence, activity and Internet bandwidth in MUDs (Jacobson, 2001). Another study found that actors in a virtual reality environment experienced higher levels of presence and realism while observers who saw the environment from the perspective of the actors experienced more distractions (Larson, Vastfjal, and Kleiner, 2001). Another study explored the requirements for presence in the design of virtual spaces (Anderson, Ashraf, Douthier, and Jack, 2001). This study concluded that presence is enhanced when the degree of realism in movement and design of the space is high. Allowing the user to control how their avatar, or graphical representation, looks and what the avatar does also facilitated presence. Also the study found that greater freedom and flexibility in allowing users to control nonverbal communication and speech. Finally the study

concluded that after a period of habituation the user could more easily establish a sense of presence.

One article discussed the use of virtual reality for therapy (Schuemie, Van Der Straaten, Krijn, and Van Der Mast, 2001). The article discusses the gaps of knowledge in psychological study of virtual presence. The most serious of these gaps was the relationship of presence to emotional responses. The article also suggests that further research on the human-computer interaction be studied. The use of virtual environments for therapeutic work has also been looked at with regards to ethics (Kuntze, Stroermer, Mueller-Spahn, and Bullinger, 2002). The authors call for recognition that virtual therapy and research be guided by a set of ethics despite the fact that many developers of virtual environments claim that such environments are value free.

One journal article done by a major researcher in online relationships proposes a model for the study of Internet research (Riva, 2001). This model suggests focusing on looking at activities on the Internet as taking place within a broader social construct. The model suggests using both qualitative and quantitative measures and presenting the data in a general framework that combines and links the results within the context of the

social context, the situation of everyday life and the interactions between people. Other researchers have used the participant observation model to study the bondage, discipline and sadomasochistic subculture present on the Internet (Palandri and Green, 2000).

There are two major psychologist authors who write about online relationships. The first is Suler who has conducted participant observation research online as well as exploring topics such as Internet addiction (Suler, 1998), psychological aspects of the Internet (Suler, 1998), Internet groups (Suler, 1998) and ethical considerations in doing online research (Suler, 2000).

The next psychological author that writes about online relationships is Turkle (1984; 1994; 1995; 1997). Turkle has a psychoanalytic approach to study the formation of personality online. She posits that individuals present fragments of a personality online, but that these fragments are a "testing out" of possible personalities that eventually get integrated into the main personality.

My research will be distinct from any other literature for several reasons. Firstly, there has been no study that specifically examines the experience of Being-With in a multiplayer gaming community. While there have been some participant observation studies on Internet communities,

there have been none that look at the gaming communities. Online relationships have also been studied, however none have involved the concept of Being-With specifically. Finally, my study will involve me as an active participant in the culture as well as an observer.

In this chapter I have listed and sorted relevant research on online communication into themes. I have discussed the major authors in the field of online research. I have also detailed how my study differs from other research. In the next chapter I will discuss the participant observation model.

## Chapter 3

### The Model

This chapter discusses the model I have chosen for my research study. I will discuss the rationale for choosing the participant observation model. I will detail the nature of qualitative inquiry by contrasting it with quantitative inquiry and using relevant examples. I will also define and describe the major components, concepts and theories in the participant observation model. I will also give examples of using the participant observation model while studying online communities as this setting provides unique challenges. I will explore some possibilities of working with the data, however I will go into greater detail in the next chapter where I describe the method of data analysis I employed.

I will begin by examining the difference between the qualitative and quantitative method. A concern of both quantitative and qualitative research models is the cause and effect relationship. In the quantitative method cause and effect are seen as two separate, isolated events. For example, an event A causes effect B. By isolating the cause of the event, the quantitative method seeks to uncover the relationship between cause A and effect B. As

Siu (1957) states, "Scientists prefer to treat cause and effect as separate entities and to focus attention on their relation" (p. 28). This approach rests on the assumption that every instance of A causes the same effect B. Siu (1957) cites a Marcus Long story to illustrate the problem with this approach:

A little chicken sitting comfortably in the henhouse without a care in the world was startled by the appearance of a man and ran away. When it came back the man was gone but there was some corn lying on the ground. Having a degree of scientific curiosity the chicken began to watch and it soon noticed that when the man appeared the corn appeared. It did not want to commit itself to any theory in a hurry and watched the sequence 999 times. There were no exceptions to the rule that the appearance of the man meant food, so it swallowed its skepticism and decided there must be a necessary connection between the man and the corn. In the language of causality this meant that whenever the man appeared the corn *must* appear. On the basis of this conclusion it went out to meet the man on his thousandth appearance to thank him for his kindness and *had its neck wrung*. (p. 28)

The qualitative method views cause and effect as the same event. "Every action, thought and feeling is motivated by an intention and that intention is a cause that exists as one with an effect. If we participate in the cause, it is not possible for us not to participate in the effect" (Zukav, 1989, pp. 38-39). Qualitative research explores the relationships and meanings of the phenomena rather than attempting to isolate the cause from the effect

in an effort to determine causality. The chicken in the above story would realize that it had a place in the scenario and that each corn-giving event was unique in some way. If the chicken had treated the cause and effect as one event, it may have discovered the truth behind the phenomenon. This may not have saved the chicken's life, but it would have given it a new meaning.

Another difference between the two methods is the motivation for research. The quantitative method is rooted in the utility of the knowledge. As Siu (1957) notes, "Despite its aspirations for truth, science is not organized around it. Its approach is not necessarily the path to reality but necessarily the path to utility . . . Industrialists invest money in the repeated verification of the concept of the electron" (p. 23). In quantitative research the tools, methods and utility of the knowledge are the primary concern while the truth of the phenomenon is often a secondary by-product.

In contrast the qualitative method seeks truth for truth's sake. "The discipline and dedication of the investigator is to discover the truth" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 105). In qualitative research the phenomenon takes priority. Data is used to narrow down or define the entire phenomenon by following the data and not just adhering to a

procedure. This is a reflection of the investigator's own subjective truth of the phenomena in a natural state. This contrasts sharply with the idea of isolating the phenomenon by "external rules and methods of control for objectivity espoused by the scientific method" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 105).

The qualitative research model I have chosen for examining the question, "What is the Experience of Being-With Online in a Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game?" is the participant observation model. The need for this type of research is evident once one realizes the fact that we as human beings live our lives in the context of relationships with others. Quantitative research provides an opportunity to measure human behavior, however, it is limited in some ways. Quantitative methods are unable to study human behavior as it occurs naturally. Human beings live out their lives within social relationships. One way to be able to observe how and what this relationship means is to use a model of research first developed by anthropologists. Anthropologists centered their research experience on groups of people and how they interact. Kennedy (1982) writes:

An appropriate method for such research is participant observation, an ethnographic technique in which the researcher joins in and records aspects of a naturally

occurring situation for the purpose of understanding some quality of human life. (p. 9)

The participant observation model will allow me to enter into the world of my co-researchers more fully as I will be able to observe them in their natural situation. Writing as a psychologist, Kennedy (1982) makes the argument that psychological knowledge has been harmed by the lack of attention paid to "the psychological elements of the relationship between people and their lived context" (p. 9).

Traditionally, psychology has dealt only with the quantitative measurement of individual behaviors that occur in isolation from the society that surrounds these individuals. Participant observation research departs from this tradition in two aspects. Participant observation is qualitative rather than quantitative. Also, participant observation explores individuals in their natural environment rather than in isolation as occurs in a laboratory. Humanistic psychology shares with this method the view of the individual as a whole as well as existing within the context of society.

The qualitative researcher is uniquely able to join in and understand these qualities of belonging to a society. Whereas a quantitative researcher observes and records

outside the context of the lived experience, the qualitative researcher joins in and participates in the experience. I feel comfortable being a participant-observer in the online environment and have little difficulty passing unnoticed, when appropriate. Because of my submersion in this culture, I know, understand and am able to describe situations accurately as they occur.

An important question about the validity of the information gained is raised. Does the investigator's participation in the group he or she is studying influence or bias the reporting of that information? Kennedy (1982) states, "that objectivity and involvement in a situation are not mutually exclusive" (p. 12). The reason that bias or prejudice are minimal is because the investigator adheres to a research model that has methods to eliminate bias or to make these biases explicit in the write up.

The skill of the researcher lies in the ability to be "aware of his or her feeling toward the group members while remaining open and unprejudiced in reporting and apprehending their way of life" (Kennedy, 1982, p. 12). Thus, the researcher remains constantly aware of his or her preconceptions, feelings and biases and develops a way to

put them aside and remain open to the experiences of the group in which he or she is participating.

Because I have the experience of being online, I naturally have biases. My most prevalent bias is the enjoyment I have of Being-With people online in a gaming community. This enjoyment leads me to interpret data towards a positive description of the experience. In order to minimize this bias, I attempted to clear my mind of biases before I wrote my notes. I did this by engaging in a brief period of meditation.

The methods and procedures for the participant observation model vary, however at least two things are fundamental in conducting the study. The first is that the researcher immerses himself or herself into the world and experiences of the people being studied. The second is that the researcher remains open and unbiased while conducting the research. Holmes (1997) illustrates how these two fundamentals operate when she writes:

Humanistic research requires the researcher's total immersion into their pursuits and the setting aside of preconceptions and biases. To explore human phenomena, researchers must give the utmost attention to the topic of their study, remain totally open to others' perceptions, and avoid coloring these perceptions with personal beliefs and indoctrinations. (p. 24)

The philosophical principles of qualitative exploration, immersion into the world of the subject and maintaining an open, bias-free attitude, form the foundation of the participant observation model.

The methods and procedures in the participant observation study evolve and adapt as the study progresses. Taylor and Bogdan (1984) note that "Although participant observers have a methodology to follow and perhaps some general research interests, the specifics of their approach evolve as they proceed" (p. 16). This evolution of methods is necessitated by the varied situations being studied. The participant observation model is a guide rather than a set program. It involves considering and choosing carefully the approach one takes in selecting a setting, establishing rapport, gathering data, varying the level of participation, and analyzing the data. The first practical consideration of a participant observation study is the selection of the site.

Taylor and Bogdan (1984) describe the ideal research setting as "one in which the observer obtains easy access, establishes immediate rapport with informants, and gathers data directly related to the research interests" (p. 19). They also acknowledge that this setting rarely, if ever, exists. The researcher must weigh and balance access,

rapport and ease of data collection when considering a setting for the research.

Once access has been gained to the site, the researcher seeks to establish a sense of rapport with participants. Holmes (1997) notes in her study of the homeless that establishing rapport is key to this stage:

How I made my entrance might have negative or positive ramifications for the research. It was a phase I anticipated as a formalized means for achieving trust and establishing rapport between the residents and myself. To facilitate my goals, I related with the residents informally and did not impose questions on them. Essentially, through gradual mutual initiating and relating, and thorough lack of pretentiousness on my part, the first two weeks of participant observation were dedicated to introductions and beginning inquiries into the life of homelessness. I not only utilized this approach but I served as a role model in my behavior in opening and closing interactions. The initial phase permitted the residents to become accustomed to me as an individual and my presence on a regular basis in the residential home. (p. 36)

The technique of achieving rapport involves approaching individuals in a non-threatening way and engaging them in an informal manner. Holmes rightly notes that this process is best conducted gradually. Her sentiment is echoed by Taylor and Bogdan (1984) when they write, "Rapport comes slowly in the field. Even then, it may be tenuous and fragile" (p. 36). They go on to list several ways to elicit rapport such as paying homage to their routines, establishing what you have in common with

people, helping people out, being humble and acting interested.

The establishment and maintenance of rapport will enable me to begin to participate more in the group's activities. Kennedy (1982) lists four ways in which researchers can participate in a group's activities:

One may take the role of a *complete participant* (traditionally known as the participant observer) or a *participant-as-observer*, an observer present in a situation as a scientific observer; or one may act as an *observer-as-participant*, usually in a one-visit interview, or as a *complete observer*, employing systematic eavesdropping. (p. 12-13)

These roles vary over time. In the beginning of the research the researcher will likely be a complete observer. This role enables the researcher to learn the various customs and rituals of the community. In the online world, such a person is known as a lurker. A lurker is someone who does not participate with others, but maintains a constant presence. A researcher studying online communities can easily be a lurker, depending on the community one is studying.

As the researcher spends more time in the community, he or she becomes an observer as participant. The researcher in a MMORPG, for example, could join a hunting party and remain essentially silent as he observes how the group interacts. This enables the researcher to become

more involved in the world of the community and learn more of the language and meanings. The researcher can also ask questions about what certain words mean. This is similar to learning the language of a culture as online communities often employ abbreviations and keyboard shortcuts that convey meaning.

Eventually the researcher becomes skilled enough at moving in the culture that he can begin partaking in various activities and rituals. The researcher takes on the role of a participant as observer. In this role, the researcher becomes a participant that is trained in observing human behavior. The research remains the focus, but the researcher may still remain outside of the more intimate goings on of the community.

Toward the end of the research process, the researcher becomes fully immersed in the world of the observed. At this point the researcher is in the role of a complete participant. He or she is invited to take part in the community and learns many of the nuances of behavior. This is the part of the research that enables the researcher to gain valuable data through the continuing dialog with community members. He or she has become accepted as part of the community as much as possible. In a MMORPG for

example, the researcher may become privy to conflicts, relationships, and special events.

Just as the level of participation changes over time so does the level of data collection and subsequent analysis. In the beginning of the research study, the researcher spends a great deal of time simply watching and taking notes. There is very little analysis of the data gathered. The researcher

might begin to have some ideas about various themes and ideas, but the primary activity is one of

observation. As the

research proceeds more and more time is spent in the analysis of the data and less on observation (see Figure 1). This method is one advocated by Loftland when he writes, "There is a temporal overlapping of observational and analytical work. The final stage of analysis (occurring after observation has ceased) becomes, then, a period for bringing final order into previously developed ideas" (1971, p. 118). I believe it to be an efficient and idea generating way of working with this model.

There are three basic materials that are used as data in qualitative research. These are: "(1) in-depth,

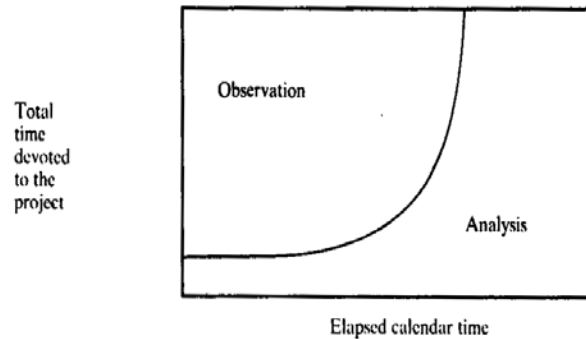


Figure 1. Level of analysis over time.

open-ended interviews; (2) direct observation; and (3) written documents" (Patton, 2002, p. 4). I will examine each of these data types in light of the participant observation model with examples from my own study.

Interviews are conducted with key members of the community. According to Jorgensen (1989), "participant observers commonly gather data through casual conversations, in-depth, informal, and unstructured interviews, as well as formally structured interviews and questionnaires" (p. 22). There are several qualities that go into a good qualitative interview. Unlike the quantitative model interview that relies on preformed questions with multiple-choice answers or ratings scales, the qualitative interview is constructed of open-ended questions and is flexible. An open-ended question is one that seeks to uncover the experience, feelings, and thoughts of the interviewee in their own words. "The truly open-ended question allows the person being interviewed to select from among that person's full repertoire of possible responses those that are most salient" (Patton, 2002, p. 354). For example, in my study I wanted to discover the qualities of the perfect adventuring group. The question I asked my co-researchers was, "describe the perfect hunting group." Based on the co-researchers response I could

further explore their thoughts and feelings about being in that group. I could also begin to construct the qualities of a good group.

There are three different kinds of interviews according to Patton (2000). These are the informal conversation interview, the standardized open-ended interview and the general interview guide. The informal conversational interview is one in which the interviewer adopts a conversational tone and "relies entirely on the spontaneous generation of questions in the natural flow of an interaction" (Patton, 2002, p. 342). This type of interviewing may take place in several sessions and the person being interviewed may not realize they are being interviewed due to the casual nature of the inquiry. This type of interviewing might be focused on the general topic of the study, but the questions evolve out of the conversation. The benefit of this kind of interviewing style is its flexibility. I did not choose this style because I was uncomfortable with its clandestine nature and what I perceive as a lack of consistency in the questions being asked. I wanted my co-researchers to know they were being interviewed and I wanted to explore the same topics with all of them.

The standardized open-ended interview explicitly states the questions prior to the interview. There are no modifications in questions or in the order in which they are asked. The benefits of this type of interviewing include:

1. The exact instrument used in the evaluation is available for inspection by those who will use the findings of the study.
2. Variation among interviewers can be minimized where a number of different interviewers must be used.
3. The interview is highly focused so that interviewee time is used efficiently.
4. Analysis is facilitated by making responses easy to find and compared. (Patton, 2002, p. 346)

I did not choose this type of interviewing because it seemed too rigid. I wanted to have the freedom to explore responses and form my questions in a way that I believed to be understandable to the individual I was interviewing.

The general interview guide approach differs from the informal interview because it "lists the questions or issues that are to be explored in the course of an interview" (Patton, 2002, p. 342). Thus, the researcher comes to the interview with questions designed to explore the experience being studied. This style of interviewing has the benefit of being more structured but still allows room for the co-researcher to describe his or her individual experience. It also presents the same general

topics to each co-researcher. I like this method of interviewing because it is the middle ground between the informal and standardized interview. It allows the researcher to ask focused questions without being constrained by the rigidity of the standardized interview.

Data gathered from interviews provides an in-depth look at the subject being studied. Another form of data is gathered using the method of direct observation. Direct observation has the benefit of being the least intrusive of the methods as it does not require informed consent and the researcher does not have to reveal himself to those he or she is studying:

#### 6.12 Dispensing With Informed Consent.

Before determining that planned research (such as research involving only anonymous questionnaires, naturalistic observations, or certain kinds of archival research) does not require the informed consent of research participants, psychologists consider applicable regulations and institutional review board requirements, and they consult with colleagues as appropriate. (APA Ethics Code, section 6.12)

There are two possible ways for a researcher to observe.

The researcher can be a known or unknown observer.

The unknown observer "may take a job, join a group, or enter a setting for the purpose of observing it" (Loftland, 1971, p. 93), however, the researcher does not tell individuals they are being observed. The advantage of this

way of observation is that the researcher can become closer to the experience he or she is studying. "(I)n occupying a particular role, one becomes intimately acquainted with it, providing richer material on that particular role and its involvements than one would have obtained simply as a known observer" (Loftland, 1971, p. 3). The disadvantage of this type of observation is that because the researcher is performing a role, he or she is constrained by that role. "In being an unknown observer, the range of matters into which one can openly inquire is restricted to those things that to members seem appropriate for someone in his role to ask about" (Loftland, 1971, p. 94). There are moral questions in becoming an unknown observer since it involves the studying of people without their knowledge. In my study I was a known observer to some people and an unknown observer to others. I will go into this question in more detail in the Methods and Procedures section of this document.

In contrast to the unknown observer, the researcher can also be known to those he is studying. Being a known observer requires going to someone who has access to a setting and asking permission to observe. Finding this person may require the use of existing contacts. For example, in my study I began asking my online friends, whom

I had met by playing the game Quake 3 Arena, about various MMORPGs. This not only helped me narrow down the choice of the game I would be studying, but I also found someone who was already involved with a guild. He introduced me to the Guild Master and soon I had gained access to a guild. The advantage to being a known observer is that "one enjoys the enormous advantage of being able to move about, observe and ask questions unrestricted by the duties and socially defined constrictions of an extant role in the setting" (Loftland, 1971, p. 96). In fact, the researcher is not only more free, but in my experience people actually enjoyed having me study them and I did not have to feel like I was being duplicitous.

The data from direct observation is collected in the form of field notes. For my study I chose as a model for field notes the work done by Loftland (1971). The field notes contain running descriptions, analytical ideas and inferences, personal impressions and feelings (Loftland, 1971, pp. 105-106). The running descriptions describe physical (in my study virtual) places, conversations and movements of people within such spaces. They are concrete and objective containing "the lowest possible level of inference" (Loftland, 1971, p. 105). In my study I was both fortunate and unfortunate to have the ability to

record large amounts of data automatically using the built-in logging function of the program. This logging function enabled a verbatim and exact recording of all conversations and activity in my general vicinity. I will go into depth on how I worked with this advantage and disadvantage in the Methods and Procedure section. I kept track of my personal perceptions and ideas by writing them down on a tablet next to my computer as I observed. At the end of the observation period I would write up my field notes by combining the logged data and my written notes.



Figure 2. An example of a screenshot

The last type of data used in the participant observation model is written documents. Examples of written documents traditionally include clinical records, written memorandums,

correspondence, official publications, reports, diaries, artistic works, photographs or memorabilia (Patton, 2003, p. 4). In an online study, written documents can include websites, message boards, email list discussions, email messages, screenshots (see Figure 2) and logs. Many guilds

and Alliances have individual websites for example. These websites may contain message boards, information and tips on the game, a schedule of upcoming events, screenshots from the game and statistics on how well players have done.

In this chapter I have discussed the fundamentals of the participant observation model. I have detailed the types of data used, the different kinds of interviews and the various ways that a researcher can participate in the society being studied. In the next chapter I will discuss how I applied the participant observation model in my study of Being-With online in a MMORPG.

## Chapter 4

### Methods and Procedures

In the last chapter I described several theories and processes of the participant observation model. In this chapter I will discuss how I applied the methods and procedures of the participant observation model in my study. The online world required me to carefully consider how to apply the model with a virtual community. I will discuss how I entered the setting, the rationale for choosing participants, the ethical stance I took in conducting the study, how I wrote my field notes, the interview process and how I worked with the data.

The first consideration I had when beginning the study was selecting a proper setting. The development of MMORPG's has resulted in several such settings that are ideal for research. Because of the anonymous nature of online work it is relatively easy to gain access to these sites. All that is required is to purchase a retail copy of the game and pay for access to a server. This allows entry into the site. The games themselves provide a world rich in virtual detail. Players can buy, sell and make items, engage in virtual combat, hold conversations and engage in online events and meetings. In short, the game

developers strive to simulate many of the activities of the real world and place these activities in a virtual world. The MMORPG's then are a microcosm of life waiting to be observed.

At the time of the study there were many Massively Multiplayer Online Role-playing Games (MMORPGs). There were many established games in this category including Everquest and Ultima Online. These had large, well-established communities, however I believed this to be detrimental to the study as it would require a great deal of work on my part to develop a character to the point where I would be recognized as a legitimate player and not a naïve beginner (referred to commonly as a n00b). Being known as a noob would have a deleterious effect on my establishing rapport, a factor I discuss below. I had learned the importance of having some form of legitimacy from playing other online games and being in the online world. I decided I would look at the newer generation of MMORPGs as I believed the community would be newer and be composed of people who were also somewhat new. In this way, I hoped to blend in as much as possible. I reviewed several titles until I found one that I personally enjoyed. I chose Dark Age of Camelot (referred to as DAOC) for its reputation as the fastest growing MMORPG and its relative

newness to the market. I began playing in December of 2002.

A large part of my decision to use DAOC in my study came from discussing my proposed research with online friends. I had made many friends on Internet Relay Chat (referred to IRC) and by playing the online game Quake 3: Arena. I happened to mention this to a friend who suggested that I play DAOC and he also volunteered to introduce me to his Guild Master (referred to as the GM).

A GM is a player who has organized a guild or team of players within the game. I accepted his offer and began a discussion with the GM. After describing my study and what I wanted to do, the GM agreed to allow me to join the guild. In the discussion I had with him he said he would tell everyone in the guild that someone would be studying the guild, but would not reveal my identity as a researcher. I was a bit uncomfortable with this and said I would introduce myself to people as time went on. The conversation with him is attached in Appendix A.

After choosing the game I wanted to study and securing permission from the GM, I began to struggle with the dilemma of whether to be a known or unknown observer. I had begun the study with the idea of announcing myself as a psychologist to everyone I met. However, I discovered that

this was very cumbersome and awkward. There are over 2,000 players on the server at any one time and announcing this to all of them was impossible. I could announce this to the general area I was in, however this would be like shouting in the middle of Times Square that I was observing everyone. There do exist small groups that one can join. These are temporary groups formed of 2 to 8 players. I decided that I would announce to whatever group I joined that I was recording the activity. I would join a group and seek permission from everyone to record. I discovered that the group members changed so frequently that this approach was impractical. Therefore I made a decision. I began to announce to individuals in the guild that I was doing research, however in the larger community I would not reveal this. I was thus an unknown observer when I was among the larger population and I was a known observer in the guild. This decision resulted in providing me with the best of both worlds as far as observational data. I not only had access to the public population in an unrestricted way, I also had access to a smaller, more intimate group within the population. Finally, I reviewed the End User Agreement that all players must agree to in order to play the game. I found nothing in the agreement that stated research or observation was forbidden, however I did find

some information that I will discuss later in the informed consent section of this chapter.

Having gained access and deciding to observe, I proceeded to learn the game and become familiar with the environment. I spent this time as more an observer than a participant. This was a longer process than I had imagined. I had had experience with playing video games, but never one like this. I spent a considerable amount of time reading the manual and visiting websites to learn as much about the game as possible. Next, I selected a character class to play. I chose a friar because they seemed to be the most flexible class available and I hoped this would be useful when it came time to begin playing with others in a group. My friend who had initially connected me with the GM met me in the game. He proved an invaluable resource in catching me up to speed on some of the use of language in the game as well as providing me with gold and a full suit of armor. These resources enabled me to get a head start as most beginning characters do not get this kind of support.

For the next two weeks I did very little collecting of data other than my own process of being a n00b, a term used to describe an inexperienced player. I learned how to operate my character, how to hunt monsters to get

experience and how to train my character in the various skills gained by advancing levels. It was a time where I was often bewildered and confused by what I experienced. Other players on the various chat channels were talking about raids, taking keeps and what the enemy realms were doing. I could understand some of the language, as it was similar to many abbreviations common to other online chat rooms, however much of it was unfamiliar to me. I was hesitant to ask anyone besides my friend, as I did not want to be perceived as bothersome. I also struggled with my own feelings of being in an unfamiliar environment and insecurities with initiating contact with other players. I found it necessary to use the technique of free form writing and also consultation with my committee chair to move through this process and begin to initiate contact.

Initiating contact with the other players was a slow process. Rapport was established slowly with other players because my character was not powerful enough to survive where most of the other players could go. In my study I found it necessary to work on my character so that it would become as powerful as possible. In this way, I was able to assist others with tasks or goals in the game. A significant increase in rapport, for example, happened when my character reached level 50, the highest level in the

game. By that time I had earned the trust and rapport required and had demonstrated that I was a committed player.

For the first month or so of playing I said very little, but learned a great deal about the way players communicate in the game. The chat interface in the game includes up to six main channels. Each of these channels can have a conversation in it. As a member of a guild I had access to the Guild's private channel, the Alliance channel and the Main channel. The Main channel was open to anyone in the same general virtual space meaning that one could only communicate with another player who was within sight. All the other channels were not limited by vicinity meaning players could be on different sides of the realm and still communicate. The guild channel is only available to members of the guild. The alliance channel is only available to players whose guilds are in the alliance. The other channels include the group channel. A group is a collection of up to eight players who join together for a limited time. When a group begins a temporary channel is created and when all members of the group leave the channel disappears. A player can also get a message privately from another player. The game software can log all these communications automatically.

The automatic logging of all communication and actions can be ideal for the participant observation model. Almost everything gets recorded. All communication that a player has access to is saved to a file on the player's computer. This file, called a chat log, can then be looked at after the observation period. The drawback to this is that it can result in a massive amount of data for the researcher. By the end of my data collection I had approximately eight megabytes of raw chat logs. This roughly translates into 3500 pages of single-spaced text. Fortunately there are several ways that I organized this data.

The first thing I noticed about the log was that it contained a great deal of information in which I was not interested. The following is a sample of the raw chat log. The names have been changed:

```
[16:40:30] @@[Party] Ted: "inc"
[16:40:50] @@[Guild] Kriss: "sorry i can t do that..."
[16:40:56] The tomb keeper's skin erupts in open
wounds!
[16:41:00] The tomb keeper's skin erupts in open
wounds!
[16:41:04] The tomb keeper's skin erupts in open
wounds!
[16:41:06] The tomb keeper dies!
[16:41:06] You get 3,224,371 experience points.
(602,931 camp bonus)
[16:41:06] The tomb keeper drops a essence of the
haunted.
[16:41:06] The tomb keeper drops a bag of coins.
[16:41:06] The destructive energy around tomb keeper
fades.
[16:41:09] George picks up a essence of the haunted.
```

[16:41:09] (Autosplit) Loot goes to Cathy.  
[16:41:09] Your share of the loot is 3 silver, 44 copper pieces.  
[16:41:10] @@Leo says, "mine"  
[16:41:10] @@[Guild] Kevin: "what, get your message to its intended recipient?"  
[16:41:15] @@[Party] Kyle: "ding!"  
[16:41:21] Wanda is enveloped by searing heat!  
[16:41:25] You stand up.  
[16:41:27] @@[Party] Larry: "grats"  
[16:41:32] @@Ted says, "sorry friend"  
[16:41:39] @@Leo says, "np .. it happens"  
[16:41:43] @@[Guild] Kevin: "now that harry hs left, you are the sole champion of mistells"  
[16:41:45] You sit down. Type '/stand' or move to stand up.  
[16:41:53] You get 2,384,016 experience points. (397,336 camp bonus)  
[16:41:55] Your share of the loot is 3 silver, 26 copper pieces.  
[16:41:56] @@[Guild] Kriss: "mine wasnt a mistell"  
[16:42:00] @@[Guild] Kevin: "oh"  
[16:42:03] @@[Alliance] Steven: "Kevin yuu wanna try and organize a Sentry raid?"

As the reader can see, there is a great amount of irrelevant information. Also, the chat log does not separate the channels into neat sections, rather the software begins each channel communication with the characters '@@' and the channel name in brackets. Fortunately for me there exist programs available on the Internet that would do most of the organizing of the chat log for me. I searched the internet for a program called a chat log parser and soon found one written by a DAOC player designed to do what I wanted. It was written in a programming language that I understood and therefore could

be easily modified. This saved an enormous amount of time in the first stage of organizing the data. After running the raw chat log through the log analyzer program I had separate files containing the conversation in each channel.

While I was playing the game and recording the conversations, I kept a pad of paper next to my keyboard. This was where I recorded my thoughts and impressions of what was going on. I recorded the date at the top of each page and also noted the approximate time that I wrote the note. This allowed me to refer back to my own perceptions when I wrote my field notes for the day.

At the end of the observation period I would run the raw chat logs through the log analyzer. I would then sit with my handwritten notes and the log writing my field notes. I found a program to help me organize the field notes also. This program, called Wizfolders, allowed me to organize the logs by date and by channel. The program also allowed me to write my notes on each observation date so that the field notes and the log would be filed together. This program also allowed me to search and move around notes easily.

I endeavored to write my field notes immediately after each observation period. There were times when I was unable to do this and had to wait a day. I would go

through each channel log and write a brief running description about important events and experiences that were significant to my study. I noted key people, important places, and who discussed events with whom. I would combine my handwritten notes with the log and include my personal thoughts, ideas, opinions and feelings.

For my study, I observed and wrote field notes over a period of two months. For my direct observation I conducted twenty-five observation periods. The length of time I spent observing ranged from between one and eight hours. The average time spent observing was two and three-fourths hours. The variance is due to the unpredictability of the social behavior. At times there was very little conversation or activity, however, at other times there was a great deal of activity or an opportunity to observe a special event. At the end of two months, I conducted individual interviews with members of the guild to further clarify and illuminate specific areas.

The first step in beginning the interview process was to develop a set of guiding questions for the interview. I selected a mixed method of interviewing. I combined the flexibility of the informal conversational interview with the more structured general interview guide method. This would allow me to have some focus for the interview and

allow me the flexibility to explore other aspects of the online world as needed. I consulted my field notes and general knowledge gained from them when I constructed the interview guide. The interview guide is included in Appendix B.

Having completed my field notes and observation I knew what questions I would like to ask the co-researchers. I began to approach individuals in the guild and explain my study to them. I also posted the web address for my study for all who were interested. I was initially apprehensive about the response to this. I was known by many in the guild to be observing, however there were many people who had joined the guild after the study had begun and were unaware. To my surprise people were very interested in the study and I had no shortage of volunteers. Everyone who I asked to interview gladly agreed. I had initially thought to offer an incentive of virtual money that could be used in the game, however the people to whom I offered it declined to take it. I selected six people that I felt to be ideal co-researchers. However I was only able to interview four individuals. One person left the game and another joined another guild and I was not able to reconnect with him.

The criteria for the selection of co-researchers was as follows:

1. They had been in the guild at least as long as I had.
2. They frequently talked in the guild chat or alliance chat.
3. I had grouped with them and had experienced them as being part of a team.
4. They demonstrated an ability to express themselves well.

I believed that these individuals would provide good data. I was on good terms with most of the people in the guild. My co-researchers were people with whom I had spent enough time with to consider them friends. Therefore I believed that they would trust me and be as honest and as open with their experiences as possible. I also wanted to be sure to interview at least one leader of the guild. After selecting the co-researchers I proceeded to arrange and conduct the interviews.

I contacted each of the co-researchers and briefly explained my study. I also directed them to my website for a more detailed explanation. When they agreed to the interview I set up a time for the interview. In online work it is important to clarify the time zone. Many people I interviewed were not in the same time zone and therefore I had to reschedule the interview because we missed each other by an hour.

Before beginning the interview, I briefly went over my list of biases. I then sat for a few minutes in meditation imagining my biases leaving my thoughts. I also began thinking of myself as an objective researcher and not as a player in the game. I placed myself in a calm, objective frame of mind through the use of Zen meditation. I was concerned with only what was being done at the moment. I remained open to any intuitions I had and placed my guiding questions on the clipboard next to my computer.

When the time for the interview arrived I would send a private message to the individual asking if they were ready. Although the interview could take place with both of our characters in separate areas of the virtual world, all the co-researchers asked to meet in the same virtual space.

When the co-researcher and I arrived at the same virtual place I invited them to join a private chat group. I once again explained the purpose of the study, that the interview was confidential, and that I would assign them an alias should I use quotes from them in the study. I also informed them that the End User License Agreement stated that the owners of the game reserved the right to monitor any communication and asked if they would prefer a more private method of communication. Every co-researcher did

not seem concerned by this and agreed to be interviewed under this limit.

I began the interview by asking basic demographic questions such as age, occupation, marital status and gender. I then explained what I was going to be exploring and that I wanted to know their personal thoughts, feelings and ideas. I attempted to include some humor and jokes in the beginning of the interview to establish a degree of rapport. I found that the easiest way to do this was to refer to a common experience or in some cases a shared interest. Most co-researchers responded well to this and talked openly about their experiences.

Throughout the interview I followed the co-researchers line of thought and asked them to explain their experience to me as best they could. Conducting an interview in real time using asynchronous communication presents a major difficulty for the researcher. Because each person in the chat channel can send a message at the same time, there were times when a co-researcher had not finished discussing something and I would ask another question. Pacing was important, as I did not want the co-researcher to feel rushed or become bored. I had no visual cues common in face-to-face communication to let me know when someone was thinking or had finished a thought. Therefore, I became

very patient and waited a long time between asking questions. I also began asking the co-researcher if there was anything else they would like to tell me about a particular topic. Occasionally a co-researcher would say they were finished with a thought to let me know to continue.

I endeavored to reflect my understanding of what the co-researcher had said to me by repeating back in my own words what I thought they meant. This was invaluable as it not only clarified the co-researchers meaning, but also lead to further exploration. This also improved the validity of the data as it showed that the co-researcher and I were with each other in our understanding. At the conclusion of the interview I thanked the co-researcher for their time. I also asked if they were willing to answer further questions after I reviewed the interview. All co-researchers agreed. After the interview was conducted there was a period of time when the co-researcher and I simply chatted about various events in the guild and our personal lives. This served as a cooling down time and a way to transition back into being friends and planning various activities. I personally experienced a feeling of growing closer with many of the co-researchers as a result of the interview.

Following the interview I wrote up notes. I included the basic demographic information, where the interview took place and my personal thoughts and feelings about the co-researcher. I then went through each interview individually and drew out themes. Under each theme I placed verbatim what the co-researcher had said. Each note therefore contained separate themes for each co-researcher. In the next chapter I will further clarify how I worked with this data.

The final type of data I collected was archival in nature. DAOC has a large number of players and there are collections of websites devoted to the game. Over time, I collected various conversations and topics from these archives. I again selected topics and conversations that I determined spoke to my topic. I was amazed to find that there were many people who reflected on the nature of online communication. The forums were a vast source of information for the study. I sorted and filed these articles and discussions in the same manner as my field notes and personal interview notes.

In this chapter I have described how I went about collecting data for my study. I went over my rationale for choosing my observation method and interview style. I also explored some of the challenges and benefits of doing

qualitative research online. I have described what I included as data in my study and briefly how I organized the data. In the next chapter I will go into greater detail on how I worked with the data. I will also present the data I collected.

## Chapter 5

### Data Presentation

In this chapter I will describe my process of working with the data. I will discuss basic demographic information on individuals who play MMORPGs. I will explore how these individuals are perceived by the larger society. Finally I will present the themes and polarities discovered in my research.

After collecting the data, I extracted from field notes and interviews the essential qualities of Being-With as it occurs online. I examined my data and made a list of statements and actions that seem to me to be indicative of Being-With as described by major existential writers as defined in Chapter One. I then pulled out similar situations and strategies. In this chapter I will present recurring themes and then provide quotations and excerpts from my field notes, interviews and direct observations as support for these themes.

Loftland (1976) describes a four-stage process of presenting data using the participant observation model. First is the introduction, then the situation, the strategies and finally the summary and implications. In the introduction the researcher attempts to place the

people in the culture being studied in "the realm of the general, the commonplace, and the relevant" (Loftland, 1976, p. 83). This involves discussing the context of the society being studied as it relates to everyday life.

Included in this stage is a description of how access was gained to the research arena, how the data was collected, the length of the study and details of the demography of the culture. I have already described my method of entry and the data collection process in chapter four. In this chapter the introduction will consist of a description of the culture in the context of the larger society and some basic demographic information.

The situation section of the report takes the raw data and organizes it into "a set of generic and abstract features" (Loftland, 1976, p. 84). This means that the important, salient elements of Being-With online will be listed and explored. This will include descriptions of the situations where the experience takes place. This becomes a depiction of the data as it exists. Then contrast is used to bring the depiction into a clearer light. ". . . (T)he depiction is made more meaningful if it is constructed to point up a contrast of the studied situation with one or more empirical or hypothetical possibilities" (Loftland, 1976, p. 85). Thus, the situation is polarized.

If, for example, a major situation is that of struggle between group members, the polarity would be complete cooperation.

The next stage is called the strategies section. This section describes the way in which individuals create the sense of Being-With online. "Most typically, qualitative strategy analysts simply present a list of types of strategies found employed in the studied situation, or merely depict one or a few major strategies observed" (Loftland, 1976, p. 86). In this section I will present ways that the people in the culture create the experience of Being-With online.

Finally, I will summarize my findings. The summary will include a synopsis of the situation and the strategies. The summary will also highlight salient aspects of Being-With online as well as polarities. Finally, the summary section describes the implications and applications of the data gained. Loftland (1976) places these two sections together. However, in order to comply with the format of my doctoral program and because I think it makes sense intuitively, I will include the summary section in this chapter and keep Chapter 6 devoted exclusively to implications and applications.

I include many excerpts from chat logs and message boards in this chapter. All names have been changed to protect the identity of the various players, guilds and alliances. Where I speak I call myself Researcher if I am being a participant observer in a group and I call myself Interviewer when I am in an individual interview. I have corrected many misspellings for readability. Where able, I have explained the various terms used by players in conversations either in brackets or in the sentences immediately before or after the chat log excerpt.

#### Introduction

The online gaming community is a relatively new phenomenon. Computers as a consumer product have only been available and affordable for approximately 25 years. The introduction of the Commodore PET, Apple II and the TRS-80 being the first successful home computers was in 1977. The Internet became increasingly commercial and accessible to those outside of research in the early 1980's (Leiner, 2000).

Individuals who were involved with computers were often initially portrayed in the media as nerds or geeks in such films of the time as *Revenge of the Nerds* (Fields, 1984), *Weird Science* (Hughes, 1985) or *Real Genius* (Grazer, 1985). The image of the socially inept, withdrawn, and

sometimes antisocial adolescent male has remained somewhat consistent in popular culture as evidenced by the character, Rat, in the movie *The Core* (Bail, 2003). Rat is a small, slightly built adolescent male who is also a hacker. Often this association between individuals who society views as participating in computers and computer gaming has been perpetuated through the media, especially films (Cox, 2000). There has emerged a new branch of culture that studies this subculture known as geek studies. "Some constants emerge from geek studies. Geeks are almost always depicted as deficient in traditional social skills but as possessing some special gift or talent in recompense" (Blume, 2000). This then is the perception that the larger society often has of people who play computer games.

Individuals that play MMORPGs are often stereotyped as "being a socially withdrawn young male with limited sex role identity" (Griffiths et al., 2003, p. 81). In addition much has been written in journals and the media about the phenomena known as Internet Addiction (Efford, 1999). The society at large seems to view the playing of online games as a juvenile and perhaps even dangerous activity. Recent demographic research has begun to dispel many of these beliefs.

Griffiths, et al. (2000) collected demographic data from two different websites that players of the MMORPG game *Everquest* frequented. *Everquest* is a similar game to DAOC and players of DAOC also frequent one site used in the study, Allakhazam. Therefore, I believe the data to be applicable to many MMORPGs. In fact many of the players of DAOC have reported playing *Everquest*.

The demographic study by Griffiths found that one site reported that 60% of the people that played the game were above the age of 19, while another site reported that 74% of players were older than 21. A sizable number of players were over the age of 30 with one site reporting 19% and the other 28%. Another demographic study has also shown that over three-quarters of video game players are adults (Wright, 2001). The majority of players seem to be older than the popular stereotype.

The majority of the players were male according to Griffiths et al (2003). One site reported 84% were male while another site reports that 86% were male. While the study shows that most players are male, some demographic research has shown that the number of women playing games, especially online games, has been rising (Wright, 2001).

Other demographic findings by Griffiths, et al. (2003) looked at the nationality, education level and income of

online gamers. Most people who play games online are from North America with a minority of players from Europe. One third of the people playing games were currently in school with 23% of players have a high school diploma, 33% have an undergraduate degree, 7% have a Masters and 2% have a doctoral degree. In addition 55% of players reported having an income over \$30,000 per year.

Results from the demographic studies seem to indicate that the population of MMORPGs is more varied than the stereotypical adolescent male. In my selection of co-researchers, I chose individuals who seemed to be able to identify and express the qualities of Being-With online. I had no knowledge of their vocations, age, or education level. I had some knowledge of their sex as they revealed this freely to other people in the society. As it turned out, two of the co-researchers selected for individual interviews were male and two were female. All had graduated high school or had college level degrees. One was an undergraduate student, one worked as an independent Internet Consultant, one was a systems consultant who was planning on studying history and one worked in a hospital. The ages of the co-researchers ranged from 20 years old to 33 years old. These individuals best represented to me players who were typical of the culture at large.

I will next describe the situation present in a MMORPG. I will be exploring the construction of social groups, the use of various communication channels and the various activities in which players partake. I will then explore the various polarities present in the game that represent how one can approach the game.

#### Situation

An individual person who has purchased the game can then install the game and log onto a remote computer called a server. There are various servers available to players of DAOC. Each server contains three realms named Albion, Hibernia and Midgard. Realms can be thought of as opposing teams, each with their own territory. These realms fight against each other in special virtual areas known as frontiers. There are several types of servers available to the player, each having different rules. Co-operative servers mean that there is no inter-realm fighting. Player versus player servers meant that any characters could fight any other character including members of his or her own realm. Role-playing servers expected characters to adopt the names and speech of medieval persons. Regular servers contained the standard rules of the game and had no restrictions on speech or character names.

The server that I used for this study was designated a Role-playing (RP) server which had implications for the kind of data I had access to. This meant that there was an expectation that players would play the role of a character as if they were that character. Role-players can be thought of as one subculture within the MMORPG community.

Role-playing has implications mostly in how the individual communicated with other players as well as what they were able to name their character. Names were expected to fit in with the theme of Role-playing. For example, a character could be named "Kobath" on a RP server, but not "Kyle" or "Uberl33t Troll." Players were also expected to communicate in a way that fit the setting. I will explore further the concept of Role-playing in the polarities section.

When the player has installed the game on his or her computer he or she can create a character to play. The player can choose among three different realms. The realms are Hibernia, Midgard and Albion. Hibernia is loosely based on Celtic myths, Midgard on Viking myths and Albion on Arthurian myths. Each of these realms has it's own territory that must be defended from the other two realms. The conflict that results from the invasion of one realm by another is called Realm versus Realm conflict or RvR. Once

a player has selected a realm on a specific server they can only play a character in that realm on that server. This is done to prevent spying on the activities of other realms on a particular server to ensure that the invading realm does not lose the element of surprise. However, conversations between players of opposing realms can take place on message boards outside the game. The following is a conversation that illustrates the rivalry present between the realms:

Hibernia Player 1:

Yesterday, Hibernia was accused by some Mids of being in an alliance with Albion.

Today, Hibernia is accused by some Albs of being in an alliance with Mids.

How exciting, we shift alliances faster than Nevill Chamberlain did! Obviously, our only propelling impetus is to keep Mid and Alb hobnail and chainmail bootheels from mussing up our putting greens in Emain [Hibernian frontier].

Albion Player 1:

Hibernia is doing something right...they've had all three power relics for a while now.

Hibernia Player 1:

hmmmmmmmmmm When has Albion and Midgard ever turned on Hibernia..... Oh that is right ALL THE TIME. Yes, just the cycle of things.

Midgard Player 1:

Midgard wanted revenge for the 4AM relic raid that embarrassed them. Word to the wise, if you mess with Midgard, they'll mess with you back, so you'd better be prepared.

This conversation took place on one of the many message boards available to all players of the game. During the

time the player is logged onto the server the only form of communication that can take place is non-verbal actions. Message boards allow a place for members of the community who play on opposing sides to communicate with each other.

After a player has selected a server and a realm he or she can make a character. A player can select from a variety of different classes and races. Each race and class has different abilities. The race of a character has an impact on various abilities and what class a player can choose. The four main types of classes are Healers, Rogues, Fighters and Mages. Healers have the ability to heal other characters, Rogues can move about unnoticed and launch surprise attacks, Fighters can engage in hand to hand combat and Mages cast spells. Within each type of class there are specific classes. For example, the general Fighter class contains the specific classes Paladins, Armsman or Armswoman, or Mercenary, each with unique abilities.

After a player selects a race and a class to play he or she can distribute points among various abilities and skills. Finally the player can select a name and log onto the selected server. For example, I made a character known as a Friar. Friars are a mix of healer and fighter, but were not as powerful as a pure Healer or as powerful as a

pure Fighter. I believed that this would allow me the opportunity to have access to more groups as I had more abilities. This turned out to be very true. There was rarely a time when I was not invited to a group based on the abilities of my character.

Each new player begins at level one. Levels are a measurement of the power of a character in the game. A level 10 Friar for example is not as powerful as a level 30 Friar. Higher levels mean a greater number of abilities that the player can perform as well as more powerful abilities. A player gains higher levels by defeating monsters (called MOBS) and gaining experience points. When enough experience points have been gained the character advances a level. The following log excerpt shows what happens when one reaches a new level. Explanations are enclosed within parentheses.

```
You raise to level 37!  
Your hits raise by 20 points. [Hits are the amount of  
damage a character can sustain]  
Your power raises by 6 points. [Power is a measure of  
how often a character can cast spells]  
Your stats raise! [Stats are physical characteristics  
of the character such as strength, quickness, etc.]  
You learn the Minor Refection spell ability! [A new  
healing spell is gained]  
You get 55 more Specialization Points to spend this  
level! [These points can be used to improve various  
character abilities].
```

A common ritual in groups and in guild channels is to announce one's new level by saying, "Ding!" This is normally followed by members of the party saying "gratz" which is short for "congratulations."

```

Researcher: "DING! DING!"
Group Member 1: "gratz"
Group Member 2: "grats"
Group Member 3: "congrats"
Group Member 4: "grats"
Group Member 5: "grats"

```

This achievement marks an increase in character power, which enables the player to fight harder MOBS and therefore gain more experience and loot.

Beginning players often have to contend with a variety of challenges, including learning the controls, interacting with other players and simply surviving. The following quotes are from a message board. The topic was describing the experience of playing an MMORPG for the first time.

```

I remember not having a clue what to do, but being too
intimidated to talk to anyone.

```

```

I remember running around my starting town and not
being able to find the exit to go hunt level 1 mobs.

```

```

DaoC...my first impression was: omg [Oh My God], I
will never learn all those keys...

```

All beginning players experience such confusion in the initial moments of playing the game. This often results in blunders, early deaths and occasionally social friction.

In the following selection a player describes accidentally killing a friendly guard controlled by the computer.

Then I hit 'a' by error and clicked on the guard and he demolished me in 0.000001 seconds. hrm. [an expression of confusion]

In the next selection, the same character is warned to avoid a powerful MOB, Queen. However, since the player did not understand the social meaning of the warning, he or she soon died.

At dawn I stepped out and followed the road for a minute or so....and found people hitting a HUGE spider which had like a bunch of little spiders with it. People were shouting "QUEEN ON PATH!!". So I whacked a little spider and the big spider killed me..hmm. [an expression of confusion]

The following section describes the character's first interaction with another player. NPC stands for Non-Player Character, one that is controlled by the computer. The phrase "spam inspecting" means that the new player continually clicked on the experienced player's virtual representation of his or her character over and over again. This constant clicking resulted in a series of messages displayed to the experienced character over and over again, known as spam.

It was dawn again soon, and I saw a person with a SURNAME go by. I thought he was an NPC so I went and clicked on him. I was by now kinda hooked to window-shopping at every darn merchant I saw with 0 copper in my pocket). He sent me a tell saying he was a player and to stop spam inspecting him. Oh

hmmm...but he looked so mean with his axe I didn't want to give him any lip. God knows I have died enough times already and didnt want him to kill me once. I think he sensed I was a brand newbie and asked me if I wanted any help.

I said what do I do? He then took me to my monk guild and showed me my trainer, and told me to hunt near the gates for a few levels! Boy, I felt sooooo safe and at home inside the monk guild!

The term "newbie", "newb", and "n00b" refer to inexperienced players new to the game and still learning how to move about and do things. After a period of initial confusion, the player is able to move about in the game and begin to develop affiliations with other players.

The game is structured in such as way as to encourage the player to connect with and form affiliations with other players. Affiliating with other players and groups allows the player to advance in level quicker and to gain access to items that their characters can use. There are several ways that a player can become affiliated with other players. The most common way is to join a group. A group is a collection of up to eight characters that join together for a short time. Groups are temporary and often change members quickly. Group membership is open to any player of the same realm. A player can join a group either by inviting other players to join him or her or by being invited by another player. In the following selection of data, a new group is just being formed.

Group Member 1: "Hail!"  
Group Member 2: "hello and well met all"  
Group Member 3: "Greetings"  
Group Member 2: "if we can get a full group we can  
take vigs"  
Group Member 4: "got 3 spots left"  
Group Member 5: "hail and thanks for group"  
Group Member 6: "Blessed be, another cleric... thank  
the gods."  
Group Member 4: "anytime just looking for 3 more"

When forming a new group it is customary to greet each new member with the word "hail". This selection of data also illustrates the Role Playing (RP) language frequently used on RP servers. A group just beginning will often decide what MOB they will be hunting, in this case the group is trying to get three more members in order to hunt MOBS called vigs.

A group often forms for a specific purpose such as hunting MOBS to collect experience or money. When that purpose is accomplished the group often disbands and the players go their separate ways to join other groups or adventure independently. A player's decision to join a group may sometimes depend on what the group will be doing. Some players prefer to hunt specific mobs because of the items they drop or the experience gained. This conflict of interest can be interpreted as rude or anti-social.

Group Leader: "I just sent Player 1 a message saying we have a spot and he replied it depends on what your hunting... geesh"

Group Member 1: "screw Player 1 get the Minstrel :)  
[an emoticon meaning happiness]"

This conflict of interest can be intensified when the group has been of assistance to the player who leaves. In the following log excerpt, Group Member 1 is leaving the group after having gained a level. Group Member 1 is leaving to be pl'd (Power leveled by a higher level player, this is explored below). This results in a negative appraisal by another group member.

Group Member 1: "ok Player 2 is going to pl me some  
somewhere"  
Group Member 1: "so going to entrance, thank you"  
Group Member 2: "ding and leave"  
Group Member 2: "that's low"  
Group Member 2: "real low"

While groups are transitory and temporary there are other social entities that are more permanent. The most common of these social entities are guilds.

Guilds are a collection of players in the same realm who have chosen to affiliate with each other on a more long-term basis. Any number of individuals can be in a guild. The guild I was in had approximately 100 players. Guilds are the foundation of social organization in the game. Belonging to a guild provides the player with a greater opportunity to join groups composed of other guild members. Guilds also provide access to a larger range of information, friendships, items and opportunities to take

part in special events. Players will very often assist guild members before they will assist other players. The abbreviation "sc" stands for Spell Crafting, a craft skill that is in high demand as it results in the creation of magic items.

Guild Member: "I'm only doing sc for guildmates now"

Group Member: "aye got to help guildies and alliance members or else why be in them"

In the following log selection, the Group Leader is having players leave a group created to help Guild members gain levels so that a Guild member (myself) can join.

Guild Member 1: "why you booting people"

Guild Member 2: "Researcher wants to come"

Guild Master: "Because I'm here to help guildies"

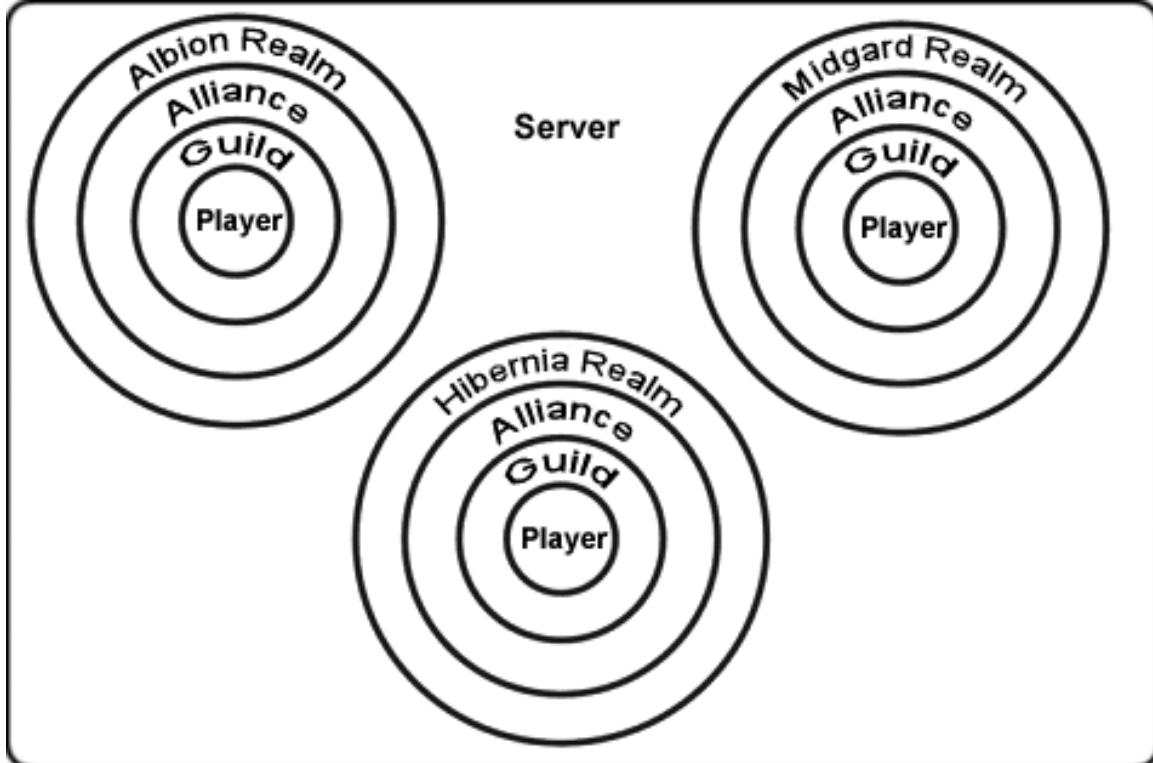
Guild Master: "not strangers"

Guild Master: "they are just filling the holes till more guildies need experience"

A guild can also join with other guilds by forming alliances.

Alliances are the largest social entity within a given realm. Any number of guilds can belong to an alliance. A guild that is part of an alliance increases the opportunity for its members by providing access to an even larger range of information, friendships, items and opportunities to take part in special events. Figure 3 is a graphical representation of the social construction of the DAOC

MMORPG.



**Figure 3 Social Construction**

Each of the largest circles represents a realm within the rectangle. The rectangle represents the server. The concentric circles represents ever encompassing access to other affiliations. Temporary groups of eight are not included in the diagram as they temporary and change often. Each affiliation communicates by way of chat channels.

A player must be part of an affiliation to belong to a certain chat channel. Each group, guild and alliance has its own chat channel. In order to talk on a specific channel, a player must be a member of that particular affiliation. An individual can also communicate with

another player privately by sending a message. This is communicating by using a "tell" or "send." Lastly there is the ability to create a temporary chat channel called a "chat group." This channel is often created to coordinate among several groups that are engaged in the same activity, such as a raid or keep defense. For example, a player who is a member of a guild that is a member of an alliance could become part of a group of eight that is defending a keep with several other groups. This would mean that the player could send and receive messages privately with another player through the use of "tells", talk with members of the guild in the guild channel, talk with members of the alliance in the alliance channel, talk with members of the immediate group of eight through the group chat and communicate with the chat group conducting the defense.

Naturally the player would be hard pressed to keep track of five conversations among hundreds of other players as well as participate in the activity at hand. In the following selection of data, one group member is asking for someone to take over the job of "pulling." Pulling is when a member of the group attracts the attention of a MOB in order for the group to kill it. In this case the group

leader declines this job as he is receiving many tells from people asking to join the group.

Group Member 1: "somebody else pull for a while?"  
Group Member 2: "Group Leader?"  
Group Leader: "sorry I would but getting a lot of tells for joining."

In my experience, the player focuses on the activity in the immediate virtual space, however the player's attention could change from time to time. For example, while my group was engaged in combat with an enemy, I would focus most of my attention on the group and the chat group. When the battle was over I could then switch my attention to other channels that are not as salient such as the guild chat or the alliance chat. Channels are sometimes designated for specific purposes.

The guild I was in was also a member of an alliance with other guilds. A conversation on the alliance channel was restricted to certain subjects. The leader of the alliance enforced this norm.

Alliance Leader: "Ok, way too much idle chatter. This is for HELPING to find groups, RvR, and tracking enemy location. Not a Chit chat line, that's what AOL is for. Thanks for understanding"

Many times chat groups were established in order to coordinate many groups. Often, the leader of the chat would restrict conversation only to topics that were relevant to the task at hand. Restricting topics was one

way the community had of minimizing the enormous amount of information available to players. Other channels did not enforce this rule. My guild had no such rules on conversations in the guild channel and members were allowed to discuss almost anything. The guild channel was more of a social channel with a smaller number of players in it. The group channel was often used to both coordinate group actions and socialize as it contained at the maximum, eight players who were all dedicated to the same goal. I have never seen a conversation in a group channel restricted by anyone. Lastly, a private tell is completely under the players control and not subject to any moderation.

The chat channel's primary function is to enable the player to connect with other players in order to join them in various activities. It is in this way that a player comes to connect with others and create relationships based not only on conversation, but also shared experiences. The primary activities that a player can engage in with other players are realm versus realm combat (RvR), player versus environment combat (PvE) and crafting. RvR combat involves player versus player combat with enemy realms. PvE combat involves combat with computer controlled monsters or MOBS. Crafting involves practicing a craft such as weapon making in order to produce items for other players.

Almost all players begin with a level one character and require experience points and money in order to improve. The best way to do this is to engage in PvE activities. Most players group with other players to maximize success or to socialize; however there are some players that choose to conduct this activity independently. There are several activities that can be done in PvE including hunting, questing and going on raids into various dungeons or against high-level MOBS.

Hunting is the way that most lower level characters spend their time in the game. Hunting is simply killing MOBS in order to gain experience and money. A player will go to a certain location in the virtual world that contains monsters that are roughly equal to or higher than his or her character's level. The player will then join a group or hunt independently. Killing higher-level MOBS means more experience and more money. Since several characters working together can defeat MOBS that are of higher level, most players attempt to join a group as this greatly increases the chance for survival and profit.

Questing is an activity that can result in experience, money and items. A player will visit a non-player character (NPC) controlled by the computer and will receive a quest by talking to it. Once the player has completed

the quest they receive a certain reward. One quest in particular is a rite of passage for many players. This quest is known as the epic quest. An epic quest can only be completed by a character who is level 50. The reward for this quest is a set of epic armor and signifies that the player has risen as high in level as possible. The completion of an epic quest is impossible to do alone. It will sometimes take several groups of high-level characters to complete the quest. Therefore, a player will need to elicit the support of several other players in order to complete the quest. Another PvE activity that involves a large number of players is a raid.

A raid is conducted against a very high level MOB or takes place in an area that is filled with high-level MOBS. Raids are popular with players because they result in a great deal of experience points, money and very rare items. Raids vary in the number of players that participate in them, but most are composed of 100 or more characters. Players spend a majority of their time in PvE activities until they reach a high enough level to participate in RvR combat.

This amount of shared time together often creates bonds between players. One co-researcher talked about his

forming a relationship with people through this shared experience.

...just time... suffering through the frustrations and joys of the game i.e. seeing friends die.. trying to console them, because they are frustrated enough to put fist through monitor. Or being there to enjoy successes.. i.e. hitting a big level (50) in daoc case, rvr adventures, etc"

The amount of time spent grouping with other players in PvE activity until a player reaches level 50 often is quite extensive. This length of time creates those experiences that lead to the development of relationships in an MMORPG.

RvR combat takes place between players of opposing realms. Each realm can consist of hundreds of players at any given time and a portion of these players often participate in RvR activities. Because RvR is conducted with members of opposing realms, most players who do RvR have leveled their characters to the highest level possible, in this case level 50. This is done to maximize the chance for a positive outcome. Also, RvR combat does not result in the acquiring of much experience points or money. When one player defeats another they are awarded a certain amount of experience points, however they do not get any money and they are not able to take the defeated player's items. There are four main activities that a player can take part in. A player can raid the enemy

keeps, defend their own realm's keeps, gank or conduct a relic raid.

Raiding and holding an enemy keep gives the player's realm certain strategic advantages, while defending their own keeps denies the enemy realms these same advantages. Participating in raiding another realm's relic also gives the player's realm an advantage. Lastly, ganking involves going into the enemy's territory for the purpose of killing enemy players. Ganking is often done with a single group of eight players, while raids typically involve several groups and often have 100 or more players. Success in RvR and PvE combat relies on the level of the character and on the quality of the equipment that the character uses. In addition RvR combat is more demanding than PvE combat since the opponent is another human being.

The intensity of RvR combat requires a great deal of cooperation from each of the members of the group. The increased intensity of this activity has an impact on the relationships formed or lost. An interview with a Guild Master (GM) reveals the effect this intensity has on relationships.

GM: "I think rvr draws people together or splits them up faster than anything else"

Interviewer: "Interesting, why is that do you think?"

GM: "Because of the need to depend on one another in intense situations"

Interviewer: "RVR is much more intense then fighting MOBS"

GM: "way more intense"

Interviewer: "and the need to depend on each others means that one might be let down or let others down, yes?"

GM: "yes, most definitely"

The level of intensity and dependence on one another is a significant factor that I will be exploring later in the strategies section. The last activity in which a player can participate is the crafting of items.

Crafting is often a solitary activity that consumes a great deal of time and money. The results however can be beneficial. Most player made items are more powerful than the items available from raids or that are acquired by defeating MOBS. Player crafted items can also be customized to suit the particular characters needs. Crafting as an activity is very simple. It involves buying ingredients, pressing a button on the keyboard and waiting a certain period of time. If the ingredients are combined successfully the player's skill in crafting rises allowing him or her to create more powerful items.

Because it is such a simple activity, many players use the time crafting to socialize with others. For example, two of the individual interviews I conducted were done while my co-researcher and I crafted items. Many times

relationships were developed while individuals crafted and passed the time. I would often chat with fellow players when I was crafting, either by talking in the guild chat or becoming part of a temporary chat group. One player described it this way:

We sit around chatting and getting to know each other better . . . Some of my best times spent in game were when I would head out with a friend and sit together crafting for hours just talking about what has been going on in our real lives. I really have gotten to be close friends with a lot of the people I craft with, and can say that we know each other as good as if we were friends who met in Real Life (as opposed to) the game.

Crafting then is a solitary activity that is often a way to increase social connection, sometimes past the boundaries of the game.

There are several different polarities that exist in a MMORPG. I will present these polarities and discuss their implications for Being-With online. The first polarity involves the communication style and attitude of the player. One type of player is the Role-player while the other is commonly known as the l33t (sometimes spelled l337) player. In addition there are polarities in terms of Being-With someone online. These polarities influence the subjective feeling of Being-With someone. There is the Social polarity and the Functional polarity. Finally,

there is the polarity of Real Life (RL) and Virtual Life (VL).

The polarity of Role-playing versus l33t players is related to communication style. L33t speech is a form of expression developed over time in the gaming world and the hacker community. It is, in a sense, slang. It often involves unique words and spellings of words. For example, the phrase "j00 pwned that mob and got some phat lewt! We are uber!" roughly translates as "You killed the monster and received some good items! We are great!"

Role-playing, on the other hand, involves the use of language that enhances the fantasy element of the game. The above phrase could be stated as "Thou hast slain the dragon and plundered its wealth! We are mighty!" in Role-playing terms. Players will often gravitate toward one or another of these polarities. However, it is not uncommon that they will change from time to time according to the task at hand or who they happen to be with at the moment.

There exists in the community of MMORPGs some conflict between the two groups of players. Many Role-players on the server will simply not choose to assist or group with individuals who persist in l33t speech as the Role-players feel this spoils the mood. The below comments were from a

message board discussion on how Role-players can handle conflicts with non-Role-players.

I don't help people who make it difficult for me to RP. I wish I could refuse to rez [resurrect] them... but I can't bring myself to do it. However, I don't buff [cast spells that increases abilities] non-rp'ers and I don't group with them if I can avoid it.

It's rather simple for me.  
I only hunt with guildmates, and all my of my guildmates are roleplayers.

On the rare occasion when that is not the case, I leave the group.

The typical way that a player handles conflict is to withhold help or leave the group.

The server that I played on was a RP server and players were expected to maintain the fantasy element. This was accomplished by advising each player when they logged onto the server to read the requirements for language and naming of characters. However, most players on the server spoke in modern English rather than l33t speech or RP speech. Theoretically a player could file an appeal with customer service if another player did not comply with the RP requirements. I have never heard this happen for the manner of speech, however it often happened regarding character names and players were forced to change their names to something more appropriate to a RP environment. While conflicts exist at times between Role

players and 133t speakers, most players would use some 133t speech and some RP speech. The majority of players would use everyday online language to communicate with each other and resolve this polarity.

There also exist polarities in terms of choosing groups and playing the game. These polarities are Function versus Social and Real Life versus Virtual Life. Function versus Social relates mostly to choosing group members and the role that those members play in a group. Real Life versus Virtual Life involves the conflict between the game and responsibilities in the "Real World."

Function is a determinate of a player's class and therefore role in a group. For example the role of a Fighter in the group is to engage and keep the MOB's attention because Fighter classes are best able to survive a mobs attack. The healer keeps the Fighter alive by healing while the Mages and Rogues attack the MOB with their specialized skills that do more damage than the Fighter can do independently. In this way a group maximizes its chances for survival and therefore gain for all its members.

In my first group experience I had my role explained to me. My character was a friar. The Friar class was both a healer and a fighter so I had the option to perform

either function in a group. However, I could not heal as well as another healing character class called a Cleric, nor could I fight as well as a fighter character such as an Armsman. Since the group I joined initially did not have a better healer I was needed to heal. Group Member 1 was a Fighter class so he or she was assigned the role of protecting me from the monster.

Group Leader: "Researcher u do understand yer babysitting us..heh!"  
 Researcher: "Group Leader, um Healing and such yes?"  
 Group Member 1: "If something attacks Researcher, I'll smack it.. heh."

As the group progressed my role changed. We had some members of the group leave and a Cleric join us. Since the Cleric was a much better healer than I was, I was now encouraged to fight.

Group Member 1: "You should swing your stick Researcher hehe"  
 Group Member 1: "Let the Cleric do the heals"  
 Group Leader: "grab yer fighting..stick? and lets go..LOL!"  
 Group Member 1: "time to swing some lumber Researcher!"

The development of a highly functional group is then a good mix of various classes and abilities. The roles that are assigned are based on the particular abilities that a character possesses. These roles can change as the group members leave and others take their places. Rather than being focused primarily on known players, a functional

group concentrates on attaining the most experience or loot as possible for its members. The polarity of the functional group is that of the social group.

The social group is one that is formed based on players' relationships rather than the skills and abilities the players bring to the group. This type of grouping is focused less on accomplishment and more on socializing. These groups tend to be very talkative and often involve members from the same guild. For example, at one point in my study a collection of friends and I started new characters and began a group together. The group was unbalanced in terms of function, but was highly social. A group can be both social and functional also. Many guilds are created with mutual friends who decide to create characters that fulfill certain roles. For example some players create very small, intimate guilds that engage in the same activity, often ganking in RvR combat. Conversely, friendships can begin by grouping with someone who has a needed skill and beginning a relationship with that person.

Several co-researchers spoke about the conflict that exists sometimes between selecting someone for a role in the group rather than a person who was known to them.

Interviewer: "Is there a conflict sometimes between selecting a player for their skills vrs selecting someone for their qualities as a person?"

GM: "yes sometimes"

GM: "but not if I am group leader :)"

Interviewer: "how so?"

GM: "i take the person first, skill second :)"

GM: "I try to do this for fun after all, hehe"

Another co-researcher talked about how being treated in terms of her character's class differs from being treated as a person. I experienced this often myself while participating in groups. As the interview progressed, I began to wonder if the Co-researcher was talking about someone wanting to get to know her as a person or someone wanting to fill a function in a group. The following excerpt is from an individual interview where I explore this intuition.

Co-researcher: "for example, I tell you I have an exam and you are interested in what subject. Shows me you are interested in more than "Co-researcher the friar"

Interviewer: "So there is "Co-researcher the Friar" who is a character in a game and the person behind Co-researcher the friar. The people you choose to be with tend to be people who are interested in you as a person rather than you as a player?"

Co-researcher: "not choose to be with, choose to stay in contact with outside the game. But the way you are wording it makes it sound like I am two different people, me and my "friar" and it isn't that way"

Interviewer: "Seems to me that there are people who treat you in one way and then people who treat you another."

Interviewer: "for example"

Interviewer: "When I inquire about your exam, that means that I am not just concerned with how you can further the group with your healing abilities, etc."

Co-researcher: "sure"

Co-researcher: " :) "

Interviewer: "but that I am engaging you in a way that is on a somewhat deeper level"

Co-researcher: "right"

There seems to exist a distinction then between knowing a person in terms of his or her character and knowing him or her as a person. To be treated as simply a function or object seems to be detrimental to the creation of deeper, more meaningful relationships. In the immersion provided for by the game the players become their characters and as such feel and experience relationships much the same way as in RL although the experience departs from RL. One player posted this in the alliance chat:

Alliance Member: "you know I read this wonderful post on a website about a month ago about how in games there is no real life how your characters and what not are you"

Alliance Member: "was very enlightening"

Alliance Member: "I'll post it on alliance boards"

The characters become an extension of the player's will, thoughts and feelings.

As mentioned previously, the amount of time invested in a character can be immense. The game is structured to allow the player to highly customize their character by allocating points gained through experience into various skills. Even within a given class there can exist many different combinations of skills and abilities. In addition the items that a player can acquired through

combat or by crafting can be highly individualized. The choices a player makes in allocating points and acquiring items results in the creation of a unique, distinct character. The creation of a character involves an investment of will and thinking on the part of the player.

How a player uses their character communicates a distinct style. For example, although my character could both heal and fight I was sometimes required to heal while participating in a group. However, as a player I was reluctant to heal because I felt the activity was boring compared to combat. Therefore, I spent a great deal of time in creating the best battle friar I could. However, there were times when I joined a group when I was the only character who could heal, albeit poorly since I had chosen to increase my combat abilities at the expense of my healing abilities. When I grouped with friends or guildmates they knew my preference and the leader of the group would try and find a cleric who could perform the healing role. There was a running joke within the guild that no one would die as long as I was the only healer. This good-natured joking was the result of my characters chosen function and of the personal relationships I had established with other players. It seemed to me that this resolution of the conflict that exists at times between

function and social facilitates a closer relationship with others.

The last polarity is the polarity of Real Life (RL) versus Virtual Life (VL). Many players play the game from their homes and some players play from work. From time to time there is a disruption in the game play due to a RL event, whether that be a bathroom break (called a bio) or some other RL event. It is customary and a societal norm that a player would inform their group that they need to be away from the computer for a time. Many times this is done by announcing to the group that they are afk or away from keyboard. Some examples of temporary disruptions include:

Group Member 1: "i must go bio"

Group Member 1: "may i afk?"

Group Member 2: "afk for a sec dads bothering me with computer problems :)"

In other cases there are situations that require the player to be gone longer. Leeching is when a person joins a group and benefits from the experience and loot gained, yet they do not help the group because they are afk. Sometimes the player will ask to remain in the group while they are gone and the members of the group may agree to allow them to remain.

Group Member 1: "guys my wife needs to be ran to class it will take about 15 minutes then I will return, I

would like to stay in the group while I am gone, but I will trust your guys judgment"

Group Member 2: "it is fine with me"

Group Member 1: "I will need to leave in about ten minutes gtg (Good to Go) till then"

Group Member 3: "that is fine"

Most groups will allow such temporary interruptions in the flow of the game, as players understand the realities of needing a short break. What is deemed unacceptable to many players is being away and not notifying the group as this can have disastrous consequences for everyone.

Virtual Life too can interfere with RL. One Guild member had to leave the game for a time because of unspecified conflicts with RL. A GM made the following announcement in the guild chat:

GM2: "GM1 has had to take a leave from us for awhile...I am working on making his return as quick as possible. I am currently acting GM till he is back"

Member1: "ohh"

GM2: "I promise you he wanted to wish you all good luck w/ your characters and will miss you dearly and to keep this good group of people together"

Member2: "tell him we hope he ok :("

Member3: "aye"

Member4: "what happened?"

Member1: "what happened"

GM2: "I will remain in contact w/ him so will keep you all informed I will call him weekly"

Member5: "Aye, please wish him well"

GM2: "he has some personal issues to deal with homelife and work that must be dealt with and maybe in the future return to us"

While the member eventually returned there was a direct impact on the members of the guild. In interviews

with guild members most discussed the impact of friends leaving had on them. I also felt the loss of this individual as he was the one who allowed me to observe and seemed to me to provide a great deal of structure, leadership and good-natured joking.

Interviewer: "Yeah I hated hearing about GM also"

Member2: ":("

Member2: "so sad"

GM: "As far as affecting me personally only one person has left that really affected me personally."

Interviewer: "Could you tell me something about how it has affected you?"

GM: "And I can understand why he did it, since real life demanded that he leave."

GM: "It really saddened me and still does...as I moved away from this person in RL and this was our way of maintaining a quasi interactive friendship over great distance"

Interviewer: "How did his leaving affect you?"

Co-Researcher: "and I was sad when he left"

Co-Researcher: "I felt like I had lost a RL (real life) friend"

Many players report experiencing emotions of loss when individuals leave the game for a temporary or permanent time. When the GM returned after a brief period of time there was a great deal of celebration, although very little was said about the reasons he was away. As I was a known observer in the guild and did not know the GM very well I did not inquire very insistently and no one volunteered the information.

RL and VL do not always have to be in conflict. Many members of the guild joined the guild based on RL association. All of my co-researchers have pointed out that the time spent in VL with people they know from RL has maintained and in some cases deepened the relationship. The GM I interviewed talked about how he became involved in the game through a RL relationship and it continued to evolve in a deeper way. The relationship he is describing is one between himself and the GM who had to leave the game for a time. GM1 is the co-researcher and GM2 is the GM who left the game. They had had a RL relationship before the game that was interrupted when they moved away from each other.

Interviewer: "Could you describe what it meant for you to maintain contact with him through the game while he was still playing?"

GM1: "It was meaningful to me as it replaced some of the RL activities we are no longer able to do...but more importantly it was a way to do something we both liked to do together and still maintain that bond of friendship with the ability to communicate with"

GM1: "with one another in much the same way as we were able to in RL."

GM1: "GM2 is a person that is very different than I am, we share many of the same interests, but mostly in a physical plane more so than a philosophical or cognitive way....."

GM1: "That was until we started playing the game together...."

GM1: "Once that started we lost a common bond by the same physical interests but strengthened our friendship by discovering common interests in non physical areas...."

GM1: "that may be a poor way to describe it, but best I can think of off the top of my head"

GM1: "and I think I miss that more from him in-game than anything else"

Interviewer: "So in RL you had one set of interests. Then you discovered that you had more things in common than you at first thought?"

Interviewer: "Or did you develop new interests together?"

GM1: "Yes, that is very true....and more to the point discovered interests that we probably never would have in real life"

GM1: "and yes we did discover new interests through the game"

Another co-researcher described how he maintained a close relationship with his brother through the use of the game.

Interviewer: "Would you say that the relationships you have online provide you something in life?"

Interviewer: "i.e. fulfilling"

Co-Researcher: "hmm... yeah, I would... .. but"

Co-Researcher: "I can quantify that with evidence of how it has helped my brother and I stay close"

Interviewer: "please do"

Co-Researcher: "when I was on hiatus, we definitely drifted"

Co-Researcher: "he seemed to express the same thing... I remember I believe"

Co-Researcher: "also, he was VERY open minded about getting back online when I did (we both took hiatus)"

Co-Researcher: "as a matter of fact..."

Co-Researcher: "I lent him 700 dollars to get his computer able to play so he could be on w/me"

Interviewer: "So the online aspect enhanced communication and feelings of being connected with your brother?"

Co-Researcher: "absolutely"

Co-Researcher: "I can't say with conviction what the value is of other relationships are I have established over time... some definitely stronger than others....."

Co-Researcher: "but.."

Co-Researcher: "it has DEFINITELY improved my real life relationship w/my brother"

RL relationships seem to be facilitated in these instances. Being-With online seems to involve the player being able to successfully negotiate a balance between RL and VR activities. The successful integration of RL and VR enhanced RL relationships for at least two of my co-researchers. In chapter six I will discuss more about the possibilities for further research in this area.

These are the major polarities present in an online community. This is by no means an exhaustive list, however they seem to me to be the most relevant in terms of explaining the situation of Being-With online. In the next section I will explore the strategies that people used to connect with each other online. I will explore what behaviors and actions best elicit a positive group experience online in a MMORPG.

### Strategies

In this section of the data presentation I will be discussing the strategies that individuals use to connect and be with each other online. I will also be discussing the inevitable conflicts that were present during my observations. I will then conclude with a description of the ideal grouping situation.

The first strategy that was present in almost every observation period and which every co-researcher identified

was basic courtesy, respect and assistance. Rudeness was unacceptable for all of the Co-Researchers and most of them avoid people who demonstrate that behavior.

Co-Researcher 1: "I play for fun, not to be around rude people"

Co-Researcher 2: "I don't enjoy playing with people that like to complain a lot, or bring me down while playing"

Co-Researcher 2: "bitch when they die, or accuse others when things go wrong..."

Co-Researcher 3: "I just really hate mean people"

Co-Researcher 3: "I have left guilds over it"

Polite behavior was typical of the server I was on. The average player was polite and almost all players were willing to assist other players.

The following incident took place during my first experience in RvR and demonstrates the willingness of the majority of players to provide assistance to others. I had initially heard that the enemy was attacking and wanted to see what that experience was like. I was far too low a level to be an effective participant at this point in the game, but my intention was to simply observe. I entered the frontier and began to follow a group of fellow realm members toward the battle. I immediately was invited to a group despite my low level. The leader of the group said, "I just picked ya up i dont like to have albs solo out here." Because of my inexperience with the terrain I

quickly became lost and separated from the group. They provided me with directions to the battle and I eventually arrived too late to have taken part in the battle. I was sorry to have troubled the other members of the group with my inexperience, however their responses revealed a key component to the societal norm of what is considered polite.

Researcher: "ok. Thx I'm kinda new at this frontier thing ;)"

Group Member: "We all started somewhere."

A key ingredient of politeness is providing assistance to those who are a member of one's group, guild or alliance. There is a recognition that players in the game have all been through the same learning process as I was going through at the time.

The GM whom I interviewed discussed the importance of this learning process when I asked about the issue of power-leveling (often abbreviated to pl). Power-leveling occurs when a high-level character joins with a lower level character in order to advance the lower level character quickly. In some cases, this is often done in exchange for in-game money. More often it is done to help out a fellow guild member or friend. The GM discusses the ambivalent feelings about this kind of assistance:

Interviewer: "Can you tell me your thoughts on Pling?"

GM: "in some ways I hate, in others I am all for it"

Interviewer: "Tell me a bit more about that conflict for you"

GM: "For those that are new to the game, I think they should almost never be pl'd"

GM: "for those new to a character then some pl'ing is acceptable"

GM: "for those that are not new to either the character type or the game, then I am all for it"

Interviewer: "So experience is necessary with the game?"

Interviewer: "Is it sorta like paying dues?"

GM: "yes, very much so"

GM: "but mostly has to do with having the courtesy to know what you are doing when supporting others"

Experience with the skills that one's character possesses is necessary if one is to be of benefit to the group. A player who is concerned only with his or her own gain at the expense of others in the group runs the risk of becoming known for such behavior.

Sometimes entire guilds and alliances will refuse to invite the offending individual into a group. One member of the guild I was in was hunting with a member of another guild. The individual decided not to lotto for an item. A lotto is conducted when more than one member of a group desires an item won from a battle. A lotto typically involves letting the computer generate a random number for each player. The player with the highest number wins the item. In this case the individual refused to lotto an item with poor results for the group and the individual.

Guild Member 1: "can I appeal someone who wont allow loot to be lottoed in group"  
GM: "no"  
GM: "but you can leave the group"  
Guild Member 1: "for future reference I ask members of our guild not group with this person's guild"  
Guild Member 1: "Group Member 1 sent me a tell telling me how I glow with newbiness"  
Guild Member 2: "haha"  
Guild Member 3: "who is that?"  
Guild Member 1: "guy in a group I was just in"  
Guild Member 3: "I hate jerks"  
Guild Member 1: "I left group and so did cleric because they would not random a drop "  
Guild Member 1: "they promptly died afterwards"

Not only did the entire group die because they lost two important members, but the individual's conduct had consequences for his or her guild's reputation and access to resources in our guild.

Another strategy of Being-With online is shared goals. In the guild I observed several members left at one point to join other guilds because their goals were different. One member wanted a stronger RvR guild with requirements for membership. Many others in the guild, myself included, did not want such requirements. Becoming a member of a guild brings with it certain expectations and sometimes requirements. This will sometimes result in players leaving what they are doing at the moment to participate in guild activities. The following quotes illustrate this conflict between the guild and the individual.

Group Member 1: "there is a keep raid. why everyone leaving for guild crap"

Group Member 2: "my guild member doesn't want in now bah"

Group Member 3: "Don't look at me. I remain guildless for that reason. To avoid having requirements :)"

Group Member 1: "hey guys, I gotta go soon, guild thing"

Guild and alliance requirements had a definite impact on the guild I participated in. At one point in my observation of the guild there was conflict concerning requirements.

The crux of this conflict revolved around the issue of requirements. One GM wanted to have the guild move in the direction of being more RvR oriented. This desire created conflict within the guild because many members did not want such requirements. The result of this conflict was that the GM left and a number of people left soon after he did. The GM who left joined a guild that had more stringent RvR requirements that suited his style of play. A GM who stayed with the guild described the conflict in this manner:

GM1: "GM2 was mad cause he wanted the guild to be another kind of guild, most others did not want it that way"

Interviewer: "Ah He wanted a stronger, larger rvr guild?"

GM1: "more disciplined rvr guild"

You send, "A more formal guild rather than informal would you say?"

GM1: "sorta"

GM1: "not so much formal as a guild with requirements, and requirements that are enforced"  
You send, "ah I see. And the people who stayed did not want the requirements?"  
GM1: "nope"  
GM1: "a lot left"  
You send, "What were some of the requirements?"  
GM1: "required rvr"  
GM1: "required that they make certain characters for rvr"  
GM1: "alliance response requirements"

The guild I was in was at its core a social guild. There were no requirements per se. Rather, there existed a more informal association between guild members. One guild member described it as a "mini family." Many guild members refer to each other as "brother" or sister."

Guild Member 1: "I feel like they are mini families"

Guild Member 2: "lol I come back but only if you want me :)"

Guild Member 3: "you are our guild sister of course we want you"

Rather than having requirements for participation, relationship and assistance were the main factors for inclusion. In my experience, individuals in the guild were free to do whatever they liked without having the pressure of requirements.

Finally, another factor is necessary for a positive experience in the group. Since it is a game played for a pastime, most people report the best grouping experience is the one that results in the most fun. Participants

describe this fun as having a good-natured aspect,  
accomplishment and challenge.

Alliance Member: "the perfect" group is one that has  
fun together :)"

Guild Member 1: "they have fun :) and not yell at each  
other"

Guild Member 1: "work as a team to accomplish the  
mission"

Guild Member 2: "because the people in them are ones  
you know"

Guild Member 2: "you don't have to deal with the  
hassle of rude people"

Guild Member 2: "guild groups usually know how to work  
with each other"

Guild Member 2: "more playful"

GM1: "I guess there is a perfect group, and that is  
one that can have fun and cut up with each other, but  
at the same time take what they were doing seriously  
for the benefit of the group."

Interviewer: "what is 'cut up'?"

GM1: "meaning they can joke with each other without  
offending anyone or hurting anyone's feelings"

This is perhaps the core of Being-With online. Most  
co-researchers describe shared fun experiences as the ones  
they remember the most and seek to recreate. A shared  
experience can result in lasting memories among the  
participants and a cementing of relationships. This  
experience is often the end result of spending time with  
one another and sharing positive and sometimes negative  
experiences. As one Guild member put it, "The Guild that  
dies together, stays together ;)."

The data suggests that there exists several polarities in online gaming. The better that the player and groups can navigate these polarities and the inevitable conflict, the more an experience of Being-With is engendered. The basic strategies used to establish positive experiences with others online seem to be basic courtesy, respect, mutual assistance, and shared goals. There is also having the personal experience necessary to contribute to the group's success. Continued success breeds more enjoyment for the game as expressed by the co-researchers when they describe the game as fun.

This concludes the data presentation section. I have attempted to illustrate the polarities that exist in the experience of playing a MMORPG. I have also attempted to delineate the basic strategies that players use to select players to Be-With online. In the next section I will be discussing and summarizing my findings.

#### Summary

In this section I will be summarizing and bringing together the salient elements of Being-With online as discovered in an MMORPG through the participant observation method. I will first summarize the situation section that contains the data describing the environment and culture of the structure of the gaming society. Then I will summarize

the strategy section and delineate the basic strategies employed by people and organizations to establish a sense of Being-With. Finally I will discuss the qualities and essence of Being-With online in a MMORPG.

The individual player is located in the society in terms of his or her affiliations. These affiliations listed in descending order of number of participants are

1. Server type
2. Realm
3. Guild. Including players who do not choose to participate in a guild. Guild choice also determines Alliance.
4. Temporary Group
5. Personal connections established with other players.

Each affiliation has its own chat channel with its own rules of conduct. Each affiliation also has varying degrees of requirements and expectations of behavior.

The player participates in activities with other players within the structure of the game. These activities include Player versus Environment (PvE), Realm versus Realm (RvR) and crafting. The activities demand varying levels of character skill as well as player knowledge of their role within the group.

The situation contains three major polarities. These polarities are Role-playing (RP) versus l33t, function versus social, and Real Life (RL) versus Virtual Life (VL).

These situational polarities influence player's interactions with one another. These polarities are not all or nothing positions and an individual player maybe vacillate between the polarities depending on the situation.

Being-With is enhanced when the individuals involved value similar polarities. For example, some guilds are highly functional in nature and require players to create certain characters to fill a need within the guild. A player who is predominately social may find that there will be conflicts with the other members of the guild who prefer a more goal-oriented, functional guild. A player who values role-playing may not get along well with the communication style of 133t players. Finally Being-With online can be enhanced or disrupted based on events in RL. I have provided examples of players successfully negotiating conflicts with other players concerning these polarities. Each successful resolution of a given polarity engenders Being-With the other.

Players employ three major strategies to facilitate the experience of Being-With online. These strategies are basic politeness, shared goals and fun. Basic politeness includes offering assistance, sharing in gains made by the group, refraining from rude behavior and performing their

role within the group. Shared goals revolves around players' preferences in activities, whether that be an emphasis on PvE, RvR, gaining experience for their character or gaining loot. Lastly, players use the strategy of fun to decide with whom to join. Players who share time together in a way that they perceive to be fun will seek out relationships with those same players.

The situation provides the opportunity to meet players, while the strategies influence the qualities of Being-With. A player's choice of activities and his or her successful resolution of the strategies to elicit a positive experience with others result in a greater number of affiliations and more opportunities to engage in more activities. The increase in affiliations brings with it access to a broader range of skills, items and leveling opportunities to the individual player. A continuous cycle is created where Being-With others online leads to an ever widening circle of possible connections with other players and the growth of the player in terms of reputation in the community.

I defined Being-With in Chapter Two as two individuals sharing a common enterprise where each person communicates openly and honestly their thoughts and feelings. Being-With will at times involve conflict. When the

individuals respect each other's point of view and move through the conflict process Being-With is enhanced. In the online gaming community there exist ample opportunity for a shared experience. One co-researcher describes it this way when he talks about the meaning of these relationships:

It's the grand epic adventures we had and the funny things we would do, the great success and failures, etc.

The shared experiences provide the psychological foundation for the experience of Being-With. The software, the Internet and computers provide the environment and shared experience to meet individuals. It is the individual player's actions and words that will bring to this shared enterprise the human element of relationship.

Respect for others, especially when there exist conflict, contributes greatly to the experience of Being-With. One co-researcher expresses this as a requirement for a relationship online.

Co-researcher: "Basically those I have a closer relationship with are those that have common interest, but not necessarily the same opinion....and can carry on a relatively intelligent conversation without fear of reprisal from either side due to differences of opinion."

Interviewer: "Reprisal in what way online? Specifically in DAOC for example."

Co-researcher: "Reprisal in the form of extreme negative feedback, primarily.....I guess those that would argue instead of fight. But specifically in DAOC

those that can differ in opinion, but still maintain a friendship and at the same time have fun together and enjoy the game for the entertainment are the ones I have a closer relationship too."

While the conflicts present in the online gaming community may be different than the conflicts in RL, the process of Being-With exists in both the virtual and real world.

This concludes the data presentation of this document. I have placed the society of players of MMORPG's within the context of the larger society. I have also used basic demographic information to describe the individuals in the society. I then discussed the situation and strategies of the society according to the participant observation model. Finally I summarized my findings. In the next chapter I will be discussing the implications and applications of my findings as well as the limitations of my study.

## Chapter 6

### Implications and Applications

In this chapter I will be discussing the implications and applications of my research. I will first summarize what I have learned having completed the research. I will then discuss how various individuals and groups might use my findings. I will discuss the limitations present in my study. I will also explore possible future studies in the area of online communities. Finally, I will compare my findings with other research in the area of online relationships and communities.

While writing this document and conducting the research I learned several academic, personal and professional lessons. Academically I learned about the participant observation model, current research in the area of online relationships and gained the experience of conducting a structured data collection methodology. Personally I have learned about my process as a writer and researcher. Professionally, I have gained in-depth knowledge of a growing culture and the resulting interpersonal and societal aspects.

Choosing the participant observation model as a method to explore online relationships has allowed me the opportunity to explore fairly new terrain in the field of psychology. I found the methods used in data collection to be structured and explicit. This I enjoyed doing very much as it provided a framework in which to work. There was very little ambiguity for me in the data collection process. The data presentation process was more difficult for me personally as it had only a limited structure and I was required to fill in the missing elements in order to demonstrate what I discovered. The model enabled me as the researcher to enter into a new culture and become part of it. This resulted in an understanding of all the nuances of the culture and provides a way to understand the people within it.

Applying the methods of the participant observation research model to the online world was exciting, challenging and immensely satisfying to me. I learned how to handle informed consent, data collection, working with vast amounts of data and conducting interviews in new ways. I enjoyed the challenge of applying the APA ethic standards in an online study. I believe this experience will enable me to become more of an expert in the field of online communities and relationships.

Personally I learned a great deal about my writing process. I discovered that I write best in the morning in total silence. I learned that I have about two hours of writing in me before I need to take a break. As a researcher, I discovered that it is much easier for me to observe than actively participate in the culture. This trait has remained consistent whether I am in a RL or VL setting. In the virtual community, I acquired new understandings of how people cooperate and engage in activities that they perceive as fun.

I learned many facets about the online processes and environment. As discussed in Chapter Five, there are a variety of strategies that people employ in MMORPGs. In addition, the situation present in MMORPGs and the resulting social structure contributed to the sense of Being-With as expressed by the participants. The results of my research have implications for several areas.

My research has applications for therapists, online game and community designers, the general society, and other qualitative researchers conducting online work. As a result of this study, therapists now have a larger base of knowledge in which to understand clients who participate in MMORPGs. This increased understanding allows therapists to better assess the benefits or risk of this behavior for

their clients. Rather than assuming that anyone who participates in online communication is automatically at risk for Internet Addiction, the knowledgeable therapist can use and understand these relationships as therapeutic tools. A person could be trying out new roles or ways of Being-With people. They may be fulfilling a need that is lacking in their own lives. They may actually be socializing more than the average person since many players log on for a few hours a night and interact with many different people from many different areas of the world.

The question of whether online gaming is a benefit or a risk for individuals is for the client and the therapist to discuss, however the therapist would need to have some background understanding in order to understand what the client is talking about. This research provides that understanding and underscores the reality of "virtual" relationships and the impact they have on players.

Recently there has been the advent of online therapies. This area of online relationship will doubtless require much further study to determine its effectiveness and the ethical implications. My study reveals that online relationships do exist and do have meaning for individuals in a MMORPG. The closest experience I had that would approximate therapy would be the individual interviews

conducted. These interviews entailed finding what meaning relationships had for the co-researchers, what feelings were present and how they selected the people with whom to affiliate. I chose co-researchers based on the level of trust I believe had been established and on the basis of their demonstrated ability to communicate well. I did gather useful data from the interviews that I believe demonstrates the ability of people to communicate the essential qualities of Being-With. While I am not prepared to say that the relationship between the co-researchers and myself was therapeutic, it was also not mundane. It is important to note that the relationships I established grew out of the context of a game and not out of a therapeutic alliance. It is also important to note that I chose co-researchers because I believed they could communicate their experience well and that this ability may not be typical of every person seeking online therapy. I have no doubt that some forms of online therapy may work for some individuals. However, it is my hope that the therapy community moves cautiously but surely into this area and that further research in this area be conducted.

Society in general has new information which to look at online games. The interactions presented in this research have an adult quality to it. For example,

rudeness and self-centered actions might be typical of a teenager. Whereas understanding what role an individual fulfills in a group and how to best perform that role is indicative of someone who has a better understanding of working with others. In addition, the demographics discussed in Chapter Five reveal an older, more educated and more wealthy population than the society at large.

Developers of games can use the results from this study in order to maximize and test the structure of a game. The descriptions and themes present describe the positive aspects of group interaction and can be used as a baseline to test the capacity of a given game for sociability. Online communities can also use the themes and strategies presented here to create a more positive experience between members in much the same way. Individual players will be able to recognize what facilitates success in terms of grouping with others. This in turn will maximize the gain for not only the player, but also the group they are in at the moment.

Finally, my study has implications for education. It is a certainty that the use of the Internet will grow. It is also a certainty that children will play games and that children today play video games. The creation for a virtual world in which educational scenarios could be

played out would provide an opportunity for children and adult learners to partake in an educational experience with individuals without being constricted by geographic boundaries. Learning about different cultures becomes possible in a way not possible before. If a group of people can coordinate and work together online in a game to achieve a goal, imagine the possibility of participating in an exercise of cooperation between people of different cultures. Almost any environment can be simulated, any action undertaken and large amounts of educational content available for learners who have access to the Internet. While the possibility of application of my study are exciting to me, it is also important to note several limitations. While the themes presented in this study can have wide-ranging implications, there were also limitations in the study.

The primary limitations of this study was that it was specific to one server of one game type. MMORPGs are only one of several types of games played on the Internet. There are also first person shooter (FPS) gaming communities, strategy gaming communities and a myriad of other gaming communities. In addition, this study was done on only one DAOC server. The server was a Role-playing

server and there may be different strategies and situations on other servers where Role-playing was not a factor.

The design of the game is another limitation of this study. DAOC was designed to be a game in which players are required to cooperate in order to effectively participate. While the game could theoretically be played completely independently, the individual player would be severely hampered in capability. It would be close to impossible to play the game and not interact with anyone at all. Since the structure of the game, imposed by the programming, requires some form of cooperation it cannot be ruled out as a factor in assessing the qualities of online relationships. The quality of Being-With online may be different in a game where cooperation is not required by the structure of mutual cooperation.

While conducting this study I became aware of several possible areas of further research. Initially I discovered that I would need to create many new forms of data collection unique to online research, as there were not many available. Many of the tools I used to handle the vast amounts of data I had to modify and adapt to extract the data I needed. The issues of informed consent and confidentiality need to also be spelled out more clearly. My personal belief about informed consent is that it can be

dispensed with in many situations because the behavior being studied is public and accessible to anyone with an Internet connection. However, some groups require a user to enter a password in order to view messages. In this case informed consent is not clearly defined. Also, what about groups who post a message as part of their user agreement that the message board is to be used solely for the purpose of its members? Even if the board is publicly accessible, does the researcher need to obtain consent before using direct observation data? The issue of confidentiality is another area that is not yet clearly defined. Since people use aliases regularly on the Internet, is there a need to protect their aliases identity? My own belief is that the alias is a representation of the individual on the Internet and is their identifying name, and therefore must be protected. However, some may argue that the actual person behind the alias will never be known so confidentiality is not broken if the alias is used. Clearly, definitive answers to these ethical dilemmas need to be addressed.

There are as many online communities as there are human interests, each deserving to be researched and explored. The Internet has given people who are separated geographically, but bound together by common interests, a

place to join together. Further studies on each of these subcultures could be done in an effort to further understand how these online communities form and create opportunities for relationships. A meta-study could then be done to explore the data and elicit the essential ingredients in online relationships.

I also became very aware of the need to explore the differences in online relationships versus offline relationships. Several co-researchers describe having a relationship with another player in RL before playing with them on the game. These relationships were begun in RL and then were severed when the individuals moved apart from each other. The players used the game to continue this relationship online. Both co-researchers who had this experience expressed a new level of relationship with the other as discussed in Chapter Five. Conversely, some people use the Internet to meet people and develop relationships with them in real life. It would be worth exploring these two polarities of relationship making. A study could be done where one group of people assess the level of connectedness to people they have known previously but moved away and then reconnected with them online. Another group could assess the level of connectedness they have with people they met online and then met face to face.

It would be interesting to note what the difference would be in terms of the quality of both the face-to-face and online relationships, if any.

As discussed in the literature review chapter, there were no studies done on the MMORPG community. There were, however, some studies done on online relationships. I will now discuss my findings in light of these studies. Prior research on online relationships has focused primarily on whether or not these are legitimate relationships (Parks, 1997), if these relationships are of lower quality than Real life relationships (Cummings, 2002) and what makes online relationships successful (McCown, 2001).

The co-researchers in my study reported that at times they experience relationships with people online as valuable to them. That these are valid relationships to my co-researchers is evidenced by the reports of feelings about other players. All co-researchers describe emotions of loss when people leave, anger at being treated rudely and pleasure when they accomplish something with others. The polarity of Function versus Social groups also illustrates that these are individuals in relationship with each other. In individual interviews and through observing group actions, I found that the function of a player, while important to the group, is secondary to the strategies

employed. Individual players will often leave a group and thereby cut off relationships with other players when the strategies for Being-With are not in place. As a participant in groups online, I consider these real relationships that take place in a virtual world. To me it is the environment that is virtual, not the relationships.

Parks, et al. (1997) found that genuine relationships do exist online. 93% of survey respondents reported having personal relationships online in a MOO. As discussed in Chapter Two, MOOs are a kind of MUD. MUDs are text-based virtual environments where participants communicate in real-time and have the ability to interact through the use of text. Parks, et al. (1997) found that the depth of online relationships varied depending on the medium used to communicate. "On average, MOO relationships were found to be more developed than newsgroup relationships, but less developed than off-line relationships (p. 1). I would theorize that part of this increase in depth of relationship has to do with the virtual environment.

Newsgroups are an asynchronous method of Internet communication. MUDs are a synchronous text-based method of Internet communication. MUDs take place in a virtual environment where participants can interact with some objects and talk with people in the same virtual room.

MMORPGs are a synchronous, graphical method of Internet communication. MMORPGs allow the player to develop and improve his or her character with a great deal more freedom and depth than MUDs. MMORPGs also allow the player to interact in many more different ways than MUDs. Therefore MMORPGs are a much more "real" virtual world. Future research on online relationships should explore how the reality of the virtual world contributes to deeper, more meaningful relationships between people.

Another study on relationships in MUDs focused on how the types of participants varied in how they communicated (Utz, 2000). Utz (2000) looked at the difference between participants who role-played in MUDs and those who did not. Utz found that individuals who did not role-play formed more relationships than those who did role-play. In my study, role-playing was a polarity that existed, although I cannot report for certain that role-players made more friends. It was an ingredient of relationships when role-players conflicted with non-role-players. In my study, players would gravitate toward other players whom they could Be-With based on communication style.

McCown, et al. (2001) looked at the quality of online relationships and examined what personality characteristics were present in successful online relationships. The study

reported that "cyberfriends tend to be socially skilled, have strong verbal skills, and demonstrate empathy for others" (p. 593). I found that Being-With online involved basic politeness and understanding what role a player occupies in a group. This would support McCown et al.'s findings of social skill and empathy.

This concludes the Implication and Applications section of my dissertation. I have summarized what I have learned in my study. I have also discussed how others might use my study. I have also highlighted the continued need for further research into this new area of study and suggested some avenues where future research might go. Finally I have discussed my study in light of other research on online relationships and theorized that as virtual environments become more "real", online relationships will become deeper and more meaningful to many more people.

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Appendix A

Conversation conducted on Internet Relay Chat. Names have been changed to preserve the individual's identity

Session Start: Fri Dec 13 17:49:09 2002

Session Ident: Kevin

[17:49] < Kyle > Hiya

[17:49] < Kyle > Here is the link to my website describing the research

[17:49] < Kyle >

<http://www.aum-web.com/kyle/diss/intro.html>

[17:50] < Kyle > when you get a chance let me know if you think it will work for you guys

Session Close: Sat Dec 14 10:05:19 2002

Session Start: Sat Dec 14 16:39:45 2002

Session Ident: Kevin

[16:39] < Kevin> ya it looks fine to me

[16:39] < Kevin> send me a tell in daoc and i will add you to the guild

[16:40] < Kevin> im going to tell everyone that it will be monitored but but now who is monitoring it

[16:40] < Kevin> so enjoy the game and be a gamer :)

[16:40] < Kevin> its the best way to fit in and get the feel of it

[18:17] < Kyle > weee!

[18:18] < Kyle > thx kevin

[18:18] < Kyle > I'll let people know I'm the one

## Appendix B

### Interview Guide

1. Explanation
  - a. Explain informed consent
  - b. Explain purpose of the study
2. Basic demographics
  - a. Age
  - b. Sex
  - c. Occupation
  - d. How long playing DAOC
  - e. Experience with other online communities
3. Relationships
  - a. History of belonging to guilds
  - b. How do you choose whom to group with?
  - c. What has helped in maintaining these relationships?
  - d. What role do these relationships have in your life?
  - e. Describe the 'perfect' group experience.
  - f. Explore the meaning of these relationships.