

Virtual studies answer real questions

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"Are online games just for male teenagers?" About 80 percent of "EverQuest II" players are male, but the hardcore players are women. And, almost all players are adults.

"The women play more intensely than the guys do," Williams says. "They're less likely to quit, and they're happier playing."

They also buy into the males-only stereotypes of technology use: women under-reported their playing time much more than men. Williams believes that female players may lie about their playing habits out of a sense of shame.

But female players spent an average of 29 hours a week in-world, versus 25 for males.

"Can game researchers trust players to self-report their playing time?"

No. As the first researcher with the ability to compare survey responses to server data, Williams found a large discrepancy, with most players systematically underestimating by 3-4 hours per week. This potentially calls into question 30 years of game research based on self-reported data.

"Why don't we do anything together anymore?"

Server data doesn't lie: in the online game "EverQuest II," men in committed heterosexual relationships prefer to play alone, while women prefer to play with their partner. Follow-up surveys confirm that "what's

good for the goose is not good for the gander," Williams says.

"Men are happier when playing without their partner. Women are happier when they play with them," says Williams, a sociologist and assistant professor in the USC Annenberg School for Communication. He will report findings at AAAS from his upcoming study of gender differences.

"If I'm a head case, will role-playing make it worse?"

Not necessarily, says Williams: "We found it to be, surprisingly, a pretty healthy thing."

Only a small number of players adopt a character other than their real self, Williams explains. Those that do tend to have more mental health problems than average.

"Every psychological indicator is worse for them: drug use, ADD, depression, substance abuse," Williams says.

However, Williams found that online play provided a valuable outlet.

"They're very aware of the pitfalls of doing it for the wrong reasons or in the wrong way, and most of them see it as a release. It's people who feel they can't express themselves offline."

Williams was the first game researcher to be granted access to a major online world's database. As a result, he was able to match hard data about in-world behavior with survey responses. Nearly 7,000 players of "EverQuest II" agreed to participate in exchange for an in-world prize, "The Great Staff of the Sun Serpent."

The symposium "Analyzing Virtual Worlds: Next Step in the Evolution

of Social Science Research," will start at 8:30 a.m. on Feb. 14 in the Columbus GH room of the Hyatt Regency Hotel.

The symposium organizers are Jaideep Srivastava of the University of Minnesota, Noshir Contractor of Northwestern University, and Scott Poole of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Each will present on a different aspect of virtual world research.

To learn about previously published research by Williams, go to:
www.physorg.com/news141484615.html

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