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DESIGN PROCESS AND CREATION OF A WEB SITE FOR
PARENTS ABOUT MASSIVE MULTIPLAYER ONLINE GAMES

presented by

Ryan Scott Torre

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of the requirements for the

Master of
Arts

degree in

Department of
Telecommunication, Information
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**DESIGN PROCESS AND CREATION OF A WEB SITE FOR PARENTS ABOUT
MASSIVE MULTIPLAYER ONLINE GAMES**

By

Ryan Scott Torre

A THESIS

**Submitted to
Michigan State University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of**

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of Telecommunication, Information Studies and Media

2005

ABSTRACT

DESIGN PROCESS AND CREATION OF A WEB SITE FOR PARENTS ABOUT MASSIVE MULTIPLAYER ONLINE GAMES

By Ryan S. Torre

The Web site “MMOGs and Your Teen” (www.mmogsandyourteen.org) will focus on helping parents to understand the MMOGs (Massive Multiplayer Online Games) that their teenage children play. The prototype design of the site will be based upon basic theories and principles of design, along with some informal research. Focus group sessions will be conducted after the prototype stage, in order to obtain additional information as to the needs and concerns of parents regarding MMOGs. Various stages in the production process will be explored and described, including the role that research can play in creating a web site.

In loving memory of my mom, Donna Sue Torre.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my friend Kevin Gordon for assisting me over the course of 6 months in exploring the world of MMOGs. My Brother, Grant Torre, helped me to better understand the complex social networks and motivations of MMOG players. I would also like to thank my guild, Heroes of the Blade, for their help in showing me what a guild can be, and the advantages that can come with being in a guild.

Hai-Kyung Min helped with significantly improving the graphical design of the resulting Web site, mmogsandyourteen.org, through providing useful feedback and suggestions. Rev. Sharon McAuley took notes for me during the focus group, which was extremely helpful.

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INTRODUCTION

Massive Multiplayer Online Games are online games that allow the player to become involved in a “virtual story”, where they role play a particular character. While in the game, a player becomes the character of their design. This character can differ greatly from the user, and often this contrast makes the game more interesting. A great deal of attention is invested by game designers to create MMOGs that feel similar to real life, while still keeping the game interesting. Typically, the user designs a character by making decisions about his or her appearance and role in the virtual community. Each character has something significant to contribute to a group, and in this way is considered valuable. A set of characters, each with unique traits, are able to work together to achieve a specific goal. The teamwork and ability to communicate in character with other players online is one of the enjoyable elements of the MMOG genre.

MMOGs are particularly attractive to teenagers, who often are able to find the time required to become involved in their storylines, learn their detailed rules, and explore their vast levels. The parents of these teenagers, however, may be concerned by the number of hours their teen spends playing such a game. Parents may also be uncomfortable with the online element of the game, which allows players to interact with each other online without much control over content. The long list of terms and slang used specifically in MMOGs may also make it difficult for parents to understand exactly what the game is about. MMOGs tend to have a steep learning curve, requiring hours of play before the game is understood. Time needed to learn and to play presents a barrier to parents easily familiarizing themselves with an MMOG.

My thesis will focus on helping parents to understand MMOGs via an online Web site. The prototype design of the site will be based upon basic theories and principles of design, along with some informal research. Focus group sessions will be conducted after the prototype stage, in order to obtain additional insight into the needs and concerns of parents regarding MMOGs. The written portion of my thesis will focus on describing these various stages in the production process including the role that research can play in creating a web site.

The National Institute on Media and the Family (2005) presents a ten year overview of video and computer games, pointing out that every year "games become more complex, more sophisticated, and more realistic..." making it "more and more difficult for parents to determine what is and isn't good for their kids." MMOGs are among the most important fast-changing game genres for parents to understand because MMOGs take so much time to play and involve thousands of other online players. These same factors make MMOGs hard to understand without spending hours playing one.

Chapter 1

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Introduction

The “MMOGs and Your Teen” Web site was originally called “GamerParent.org” during the initial stages. This site was intended to provide a wide array of services, including the creation of guides for all genres of video games, a method of rating games that allowed for input from real parents, and various parental guide articles focusing on how to help increase communication between a parent and their teen(s). Over time, this concept was narrowed down to focus specifically on MMOGs, because they were a particularly challenging genre of game to explain. Depth in this single genre seemed more useful than more shallow breadth across genres, and also more manageable.

To help conceptualize the site, similar sites were reviewed and analyzed. A Google search for “parent video game” yielded more than 8 million hits, including advice sites on parenting that contain articles on video games, guides to video games for parents, searchable online video game rating systems, and much more. Pouring through the sites, starting with the first in the list, ten were selected as being closest to the kind of site I was intended to create. These 10 sites appeared within the first 421 sites found in the Google search.

Sites were selected for analysis if they met the following criteria:

- It contains ratings of games or advice articles about games
- It specifically targets parents of teenagers. Some parenting advice sites do not focus on teen gaming issues. These issues are within the main scope of the “MMOGs and Your Teen”, and thus are very useful to study.

- It is designed for parents of teens within the United States. In other regions, such as the UK, other rating systems like the Pan-European Game Information (PEGI) system are used (ELSPA, 2005). “MMOGs and Your Teen” was designed specifically for parents within the United States, which uses the ESRB (Entertainment Software Ratings Board) video game rating system.
- It is a multipage site, not a single news article about games for parents.
- The site is secular (not associated with any particular religion)

Figure 1.1 – Sample: a compiled list of Web sites.

1. <http://www.parentstv.org/ptc/videogames/main.asp>
2. <http://www.childdevelopmentinfo.com/>
3. <http://www.theparentreport.com/>
4. <http://www.mediafamily.org/>
5. <http://www.aap.org/advocacy/mediamatters.htm>
6. <http://da.co.la.ca.us/pok/default.htm>
7. <http://www.theesa.com/index.php>
8. <http://www.teachersandfamilies.com/open/parent/video1.cfm>
9. <http://www.common sense media.org/>
10. <http://www.gamerdad.com/index.cfm>

Qualitative Observation: Categories

Six categories were developed to apply to each site:

Overview:

- What is this site?
- What makes it interesting?

Reputation/Perceived Source Quality:

- Who takes credit for the production of the Web site?
- Do the producers of the Web site seem reliable?
- Why or why not?

Site/Content Design:

- How is the site divided up (specifically within the topic of parenting and video games)?

Navigation:

- Where is the navigation located, and what does it look like?

Visual Design:

- Is the site visually appealing?
- Does it look like it was designed recently (professionally)?
- How are colors and images used?

Features:

- What features (example: ratings search) are available?
- Do they work properly?
- Do they seem effective at accomplishing what they are designed to do?

Page Size:

- What size screen does it look like the page was designed for?
- Is scrolling (vertical or horizontal) required for an 800x600 display?

Viewing Problems:

- Did any problems occur while trying to view the site?
- If so, what problems occurred?

Qualitative Observations: Results by Individual Site

1. Parents Television Council — <http://www.parentstv.org/ptc/videogames/main.asp>

| | |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| Overview: | Parent Television Council is a grassroots organization that focuses on protecting children from sex, violence and profanity through TV and other forms of media. Their “primary mission” is to encourage bringing “positive, family oriented programming” to television. |
| Reputation/Perceived Source Quality : | President is L. Brent Bozell, who is described in the site as “one of the most outspoken and effective national leaders in the conservative movement today.” He is a “lecturer, syndicated columnist,” and “television commentator,” among other things. This organization has a report available that describes clearly who they are. |

| | |
|-----------------------------|--|
| <p>Site/Content Design:</p> | <p>Articles are provided about specifically violent or offensive games such as Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas. They do not have a rating system. Instead they rely upon a direct link to the Entertainment Software Rating Board's ratings search. Articles cover parenting advice along with information about video game rating legislation. Ratings issues and parenting issues appear to be the two main themes on this site within the scope of video games.</p> |
| <p>Navigation:</p> | <p>Navigation is found on the left side of the page in the form of a long set of category buttons and subcategory buttons. Lots of links to other pages are found within the very tall pages found on the site, so the navigation bar is only useful for reaching a sub-category (not a specific page). There are some places where the navigation completely changes (example: Recommended Video Games section, listed fourth in a list of eight links on the "Video Education for Parents" page), which can be disorienting.</p> |

| | |
|-------------------|--|
| Visual Design: | The site is very busy with images and colors. There is a banner 765 by 140 pixels in size that is loaded containing seven separate links to various parts of the site. This does not include the link back to the home page, which is also available in that same graphic space. |
| Features: | Not Applicable. |
| Page Size: | Vertical scrolling is required for an 800 by 600 pixel monitor to reach all of the navigation. |
| Viewing Problems: | It was not obvious where to find information about the president of the organization, although information about him is also listed in the report located on the main page. |

2. Child Development Institute — <http://www.childdevelopmentinfo.com/>

| | |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| Overview: | This appears to be an Institute founded by Dr. Robert Meyers, where Dr. Meyers created the site to “provide parent education that is current, relevant, and easy to attain.” It is funded by advertising and purchases made in an online store hosted within the site (Parent Mart). |
| Reputation/Perceived Source Quality: | Child Development Institute was founded by Robert Meyers, Ph.D. He is a clinical child psychologist. Information provided about him is detailed and easy to find (at the “About CDI” link under the “home” section. |

| | |
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| Site/Content Design: | Not much is available for parents of teen gamers. A section on adolescents is available, and it does not mention games. There is a page on Video Games and Children, along with an external link to articles about violence in video games. |
| Navigation: | Expandable category based navigation is found at the left side of the screen, and uses a color coded list of categories. Other lists outside of the left navigation are often used to hold various articles and links. |
| Visual Design: | This is a very basic site. The color coding uses very bold, basic colors (red, orange, yellow, blue, purple, etc.) Most of the page is black text on white background with some clip art. |
| Features: | Not applicable. |
| Page Size: | The site appears to be designed so that the home page, with the top section of navigation expanded will fit into an 800 by 600 pixel monitor display. Other expandable navigation may require scrolling to view completely. |
| Viewing Problems: | No problems were encountered. |

3. The Parent Report — <http://www.theparentreport.com/>

| | |
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| Overview: | This site is an extension to a commercial FM radio program, hosted by Joanne Wilson. The “parent report” is a series of 60 second radio reports (broadcast on weekdays) about child care issues. According to their “Radio Show” section, “Each report features a leading doctor, family worker or recognized specialist in any given field to help shed light on topics of concern to today’s parents.” |
| Reputation/Perceived Source Quality: | While hosted by Joanne Wilson, “the Parent Report” relies on outside experts to provide useful information and advice about a particular topic. |
| Site/Content Design: | Content appears to be dynamically posted, and based almost entirely off of the 60 second reports aired on the radio. |
| Navigation: | Main navigation is found at the top of the page using dropdown menus probably created in dynamic HTML. Articles can be found through dynamically loaded and updated lists in the content area. |
| Visual Design: | This is a very clean looking site. Google ads are on the right side of the screen but are not very invasive due to the layout. |

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| Features: | Dynamic posting and response to articles from parents is available. |
| Page Size: | For an 800 by 600 pixel display, vertical scrolling might be needed to view the entire home page, but the navigation does not require the user to scroll. |
| Viewing Problems: | Information about the host is under the category “Radio Show”, because the site is an extension of a Radio Show. For people who don’t tune into the radio show, this can be confusing. Also, the radio station’s name, frequency, and location either are not listed or are very difficult to find. |

4. Media Wise® — <http://www.mediafamily.org/>

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| Overview: | MediaWise® is a site produced by the National Institute on Media and the Family. It is founded by Dr. David Walsh, a psychologist. According to the “About Us” section, “the institute is a nonprofit, national resource center for research, information, and education about the impact of the media on children and families. |
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| Reputation/Perceived Source Quality: | Dr. David Walsh, the president and founder of the National Institute on Media and the Family, is a psychologist, and author of eight books, including a national best seller. He has been a guest on several well known TV shows. The site has a clear list of members with bios for all four members of their staff. |
| Site/Content Design: | This site has many advice articles about parents and video games, and has created its own rating system of video games and movies. The rating system, called Kidscore®, offers a detailed rating system that is based on the type of content (violence, sex, etc.), but still uses a simplified rating system in each category (Stop, Go, Caution). This makes the review more detailed but still fairly easy to understand. |
| Navigation: | Navigation is simple top and left navigation, with links to recent updates in the content area. |
| Visual Design: | The home page is filled with visual links that take up most of the content space, filling the majority of the screen with links (both text links and graphic links). |
| Features: | It is possible for a user to register and rate video games. Dynamic features are available through registering online with their site. |

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| Page Size: | The home page does adequately fit into an 800 by 600 pixel display with minimal need for scrolling. |
| Viewing Problems: | The search feature in ratings in the video games section does not seem to work properly. |

5. Media Matters — National Media Education Campaign for the American Academy of Pediatrics

<http://www.aap.org/advocacy/mediamatters.htm>

| | |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| Overview: | According to the “Campaign Overview” on their site, The Media Matters campaign was launched in order to “help pediatricians, parents, and children become more aware of the influence that media...have on child and adolescent health. |
| Reputation/Perceived Source Quality: | The seal of the American Academy of Pediatrics is in the banner of this site. Contact information is available, but no name is given to the contact info...it’s just mediamatters@aap.org . |
| Site/Content Design: | The content consists of a list of articles and documents, which include articles on “children, adolescents, and media” and “testimony on children, adolescents, and media” (these appear to be based on speeches or presentations at public events). |

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| Navigation: | Basic navigation was created through using lists of links. The navigation bar is only for navigating the main site, but this section of the site is completely organized through lists of links. |
| Visual Design: | While clean looking with a professional banner, the content of the site is very basic. Most of it is lists of links. The graphics used for logos are professional looking, and match the style of the banner. |
| Features: | Not applicable. |
| Page Size: | The banner fits into an 800 by 600 pixel display. However, the list of links used for navigation in the “Media Matters” section are in a large size font, which makes the list too tall to view without scrolling on an 800 by 600 pixel display. |
| Viewing Problems: | At least one link lead to a 404 (File not Found) error. |

6. Los Angeles county District Attorney (LADA) — Protecting Our Kids

<http://da.co.la.ca.us/pok/default.htm>

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| Overview: | According to their about section, “Los Angeles County District Attorney Steve Cooley created the Protecting Our Kids program to help parents and other concerned adults safeguard the Internet activities of young people.” |
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| Reputation/Perceived Source Quality: | <p>This site is directly incorporated into the Los Angeles county District Attorney site. A brief “About Protecting Our Kids” section (found under the “Working With Communities” tab) covers some of the people who work on the program. While there is a form called “Tell Us What You Think” within the section, there is no clear contact information of anyone to answer questions. However, if one goes to the main site for the District Attorney, there is a “contact us” section and further information about the District Attorney.</p> |
| Site/Content Design: | <p>This Web site offers web-tracking software for parents, along with basic advice about online safety for kids. One page is devoted to online gaming and provides a basic overview of potential concerns along with some guidelines.</p> |
| Navigation: | <p>Navigation is confusing. Tabbed sections at the top cover four main areas that are used to navigate through the main site. “Protecting Our Kids” falls under the “Working With Communities” tab. If another tab is selected, it changes the entire color scheme of the site (example: “Home” is blue, while “Working With Communities” is green). Sections are listed at the left in a navigation bar, with roll over effects. Navigation of</p> |

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| Navigation (cont.): | pages within sections other than the Protecting Our Kids section consists of links within the content area. The Protecting Our Kids section breaks consistency with the other sections by completely replacing the section navigation bar on the left with a navigation bar for pages within the Protecting Our Kids section. This gives the user no control over viewing other sections within the “Working With communities” tab. |
| Visual Design: | Depending on which tab you select, the color scheme changes. This is disorienting and somewhat aggravating. For some reason, light green (Hex code #D9D9B3) is the background for the content area, regardless of the rest of the color scheme. |
| Features: | Not applicable. |
| Page Size: | A few links would probably get cut off if using a browser (that was not in full screen mode) on an 800 by 600 pixel size display. |
| Viewing Problems: | Navigation outside of the “Protecting Our Kids” section was a problem. |

7. Entertainment Software Association — Facts and Research Section

<http://www.thesa.com/facts/index.php>

| | |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| Overview: | The ESA is “dedicated to serving the business and public affairs needs of companies that publish video and computer games for video game consoles, personal computers, and the Internet.” |
| Reputation/Perceived Source Quality: | This source has a financial motivation to be biased toward the video game industry. The overwhelming majority of information on the site involving parents and teen gaming is in support of video games. Parents would not likely feel comfortable trusting this site, because its information comes off as “one-sided”. |
| Site/Content Design: | The site contains research and legal findings. While the entire site doesn’t focus on video games and violence, it does contain some basic statistics and presentations in support of the video game industry. No advice section for parents is provided. |
| Navigation: | A master navigation bar is at the top of the page. Very simple and clean side navigation is provided with breadcrumbs at top. Additional links are included in the content area below the title of the page. These links rely upon anchor tags to connect the user with the desired content.. |

| | |
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| Visual Design: | The Web site looks clean and organized, with well developed graphics. |
| Features: | Not Applicable. |
| Page Size: | The Facts and Research section appears to be fit so that all links and buttons are accessible on an 800 by 600 pixel display without scrolling. |
| Viewing Problems: | No problems were encountered. |

8. Parenting Perspectives: Video Games — Teachers and Families

<http://www.teachersandfamilies.com/open/parent/video1.cfm>

| | |
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| Overview: | This is a four page mini-site about issues involving children and video games. |
| Reputation/Perceived Source Quality: | The content appears to be an article called “Video Games: Do You Know What Your Child Is Playing?” By John M. Garruto, NCSP. The author of this book is a school psychologist and doctoral candidate at the Indiana University of Pennsylvania. It notes at the bottom of each page, “This article is provided by the National Association of School Psychologists.” |
| Site/Content Design: | Content falls into four categories: an introduction, “Game Past & Present,” “Protecting Your Children,” and “Resources.” |

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| Navigation: | Navigation is simple and practical; a 4 button navigation bar is located at the top of the content and just below a large illustration (the illustration is on every page). The resources page also has some links on it, but most navigation is through the navigation bar. |
| Visual Design: | This is a simple visual design. The illustration is clear and relatively sharp. The navigation bar would look better if it were graphic based. |
| Features: | Other features are available through a membership with TeachersAndFamilies. However, it is not certain if this includes more articles are about teens and video games. |
| Page Size: | This Web site does not require scrolling for an 800 by 600 pixel display in order to use the navigation. |
| Viewing Problems: | No problems experienced. |

9. Common Sense Media — <http://www.commonsensemedia.org/>

| | |
|---|---|
| Overview: | Common Sense Media is an organization that helps parents choose media that is appropriate for their children. |
| Reputation/Perceived Source Quality: | James Steyer is a “National Children’s Policy Expert and Media Entrepreneur.” He has over 20 years of experience working “on behalf of kids.” Information about staff is easy to find. A contact page is also easy to find in the “About Us” section. |
| Site/Content Design: | Reviews (from experts, parents, and kids), newsletters, advice, and a list of resources are available. |
| Navigation: | Top bar navigation, with side bar for navigation within a section. |
| Visual Design: | Organized, colorful, and well thought out. Alignment of objects on the page is good. |
| Features: | Login and post your rating (as a kid or adult) with a review. View other parents/kids ratings and reviews. |
| Page Size: | Main navigation methods do not require scrolling on an 800 by 600 pixel display. |
| Viewing Problems: | No problems encountered. |

10. GamerDad — <http://www.gamerdad.com/index.cfm>

| | |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| Overview: | This appears to be a dynamic post-based Web site where parents can find reviews of sites and read articles written by other parents. |
| Reputation/Perceived Source Quality: | Some text in the left column of the page explains it rather clearly, “What is GamerDad? Why do kids love games? Are games harmful? You’ll find the answers here. At GamerDad, we believe in gaming with children.” Playing video games with their children seems discomfoting to some parents, they may avoid this site. |
| Site/Content Design: | The site is divided into the main page, forums, reviews, columns, feature articles, and news. Some of the content includes interviews with people in the gaming industry. An interesting section included is “MomGamer,” which covers topics like how to set parental controls on the Xbox 360. |
| Navigation: | The master navigation bar at the top divides content into five sections. Most of the navigation beyond those sections is list based. |
| Visual Design: | Some of the graphics seem to clash with one another (especially the advertisements). Alignment of graphics could be improved. |

| | |
|-------------------|--|
| Features: | Searchable game ratings (look for game with a certain GamerDad rating) located at the bottom of the home page. |
| Page Size: | Vertical scrolling is needed on an 800 by 600 display for this site, due to it's long lists of links. |
| Viewing Problems: | No problems were encountered. |

Qualitative Observations: Synthesis Across Sites

Overview:

Four sites were run by organizations (this includes political organizations), three were considered educational (mostly institutes), two were business based, and one appeared to be independently run (GamerDad.com).

Reputation/Perceived Source Quality:

Three sites featured psychiatrists as a "leader" (president, CEO, etc.) of the group. Other "leaders" included a lecturer/columnist, a radio host, a district attorney, and an entrepreneur. For two sites, information about a leader of the group or organization was not clear. The Entertainment Software Association Web site stood out as being less balanced on examining issues. Not having a balanced look at the issue may be enough to turn a parent away from their site.

Site/Content Design:

Three sites included their own ratings systems to rate video games. One site linked their page to the ESRB ratings site for explanation. The other six sites did not have ratings on them.

Navigation:

The main approach to navigation was a top navigation bar, which was used by eight Web Sites. The other two used a left side navigation bar as their main navigation.

Visual Design:

Three sites were described as ugly or busy, while the other seven sites were described with words like “clean, basic and well organized.”

Features:

Half of the web sites contained dynamic features such as options for posting ratings or searching through rated games to find ones that match your target age group.

Page Size:

Four Web sites required scrolling to reach portions of the menu, while the other six did not require scrolling.

Viewing Problems:

Problems encountered included: problems finding information about the leader of the group (CEO, president, etc.), a search feature failed to work, 404 (File Not Found) errors, and problems with navigation,

Summary

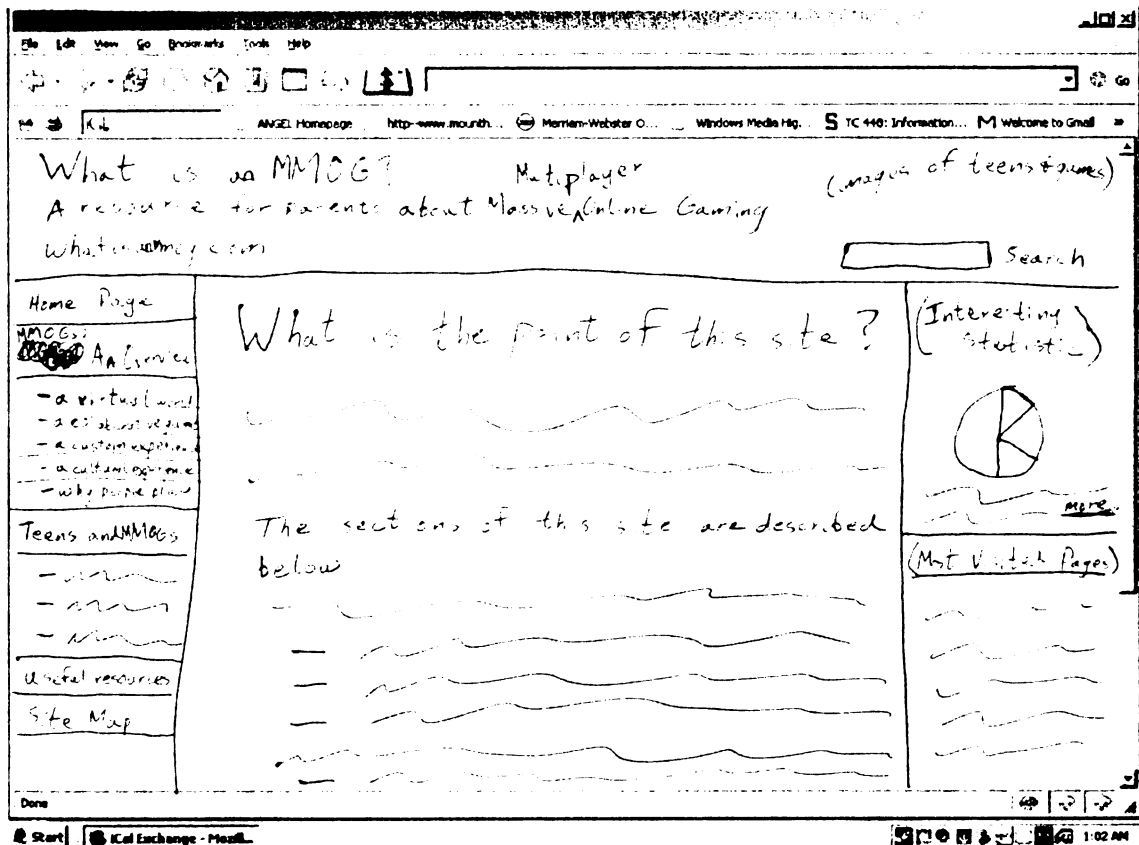
Ten Web sites were reviewed in order to get a sense of what (if any) similar or related sites existed, and to help define and focus the goals for the site. Each of the Web sites addressed some goals of the “MMOGs and Your Teen” site, but none completely overlapped.

Chapter 2

STORYBOARDING

Two storyboards were created in order to help give focus group participants an idea of what the final website could look like. Storyboarding is useful in this situation because it is easy to change and yet it still is capable of clearly expressing a design. The background of a browser was used to help express the size of each section of the layout in proportion to the browser.

Figure 2.1 – Original storyboard of the home page.

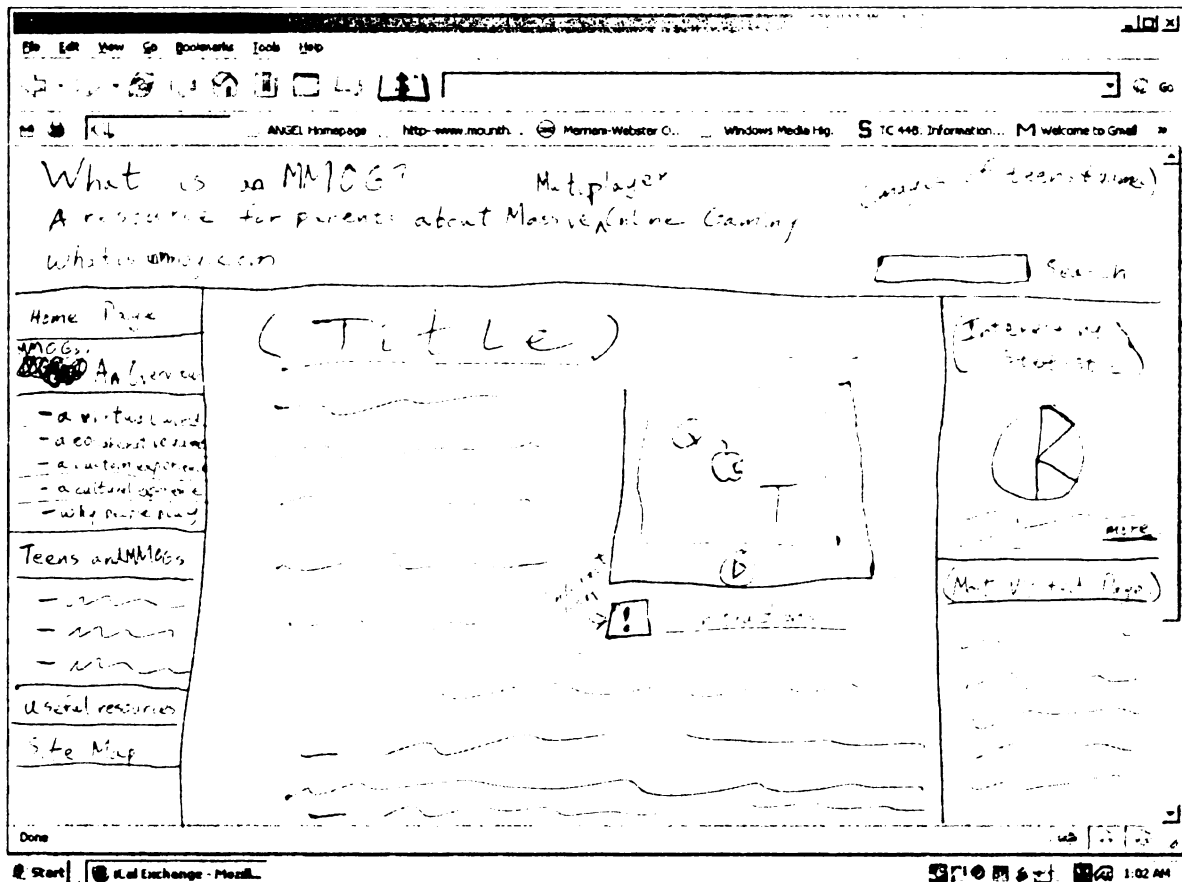


The home page was divided into five major sections: title banner (top), navigation (left column), content (center column), statistical information (right column, with pie chart), and quick information (below statistical information). The title banner gave the user an immediate idea of what the site was about, clearly displayed the name of the site, and featured a search box.

The navigation consisted of dynamically expanding sections. Upon loading the page, subsections of the site (indicated with hyphens before them) could be collapsed into their associated section. Each subsection could expand or collapse dynamically based on if it is currently selected. If “MMOGs: An Overview” was selected, this section would expand open and would reveal the subsections below it, while the subsections of “Teens and MMOGs” would remain collapsed. Dynamically expanding menus are an effective way of conserving space while maintaining accessibility

The content for the main page was intended to explain the purpose of the site and provide a brief explanation of its sections. The statistical information section would be a useful location for polls and other recent statistical information that could be of interest to parents. The example shown is of a pie chart that perhaps would display the percentage of various MMOGs that teens are playing. The quick information area was designed to contain a list of the most commonly desired pages on the site. This list could be determined based on tracking hits to pages using cookies.

Figure 2.2 – Original storyboard of a page with interactive content.



The content page represents any page other than the home page. The statistical information and quick information areas would remain displayed on content pages. Interactive portions of the content would be embedded into each content section. There might be an icon, such as the box with the "!" on it, that could indicate that this is an interactive portion of the site. Such an icon would distinguish embedded multimedia from still image examples. Instructions could be next to the icon to clearly explain to the user how the interactive portion works. The example here is of an embedded QuickTime file. However, it could also be a Macromedia Flash based demonstration of a concept.

Chapter 3

FOCUS GROUP

A focus group was conducted as part of pre-production research, to gain perspective on parental concerns and to seek feedback on the paper prototype. It was conducted in the early stages of the design process in order to ensure that the information obtained could still be easily incorporated into the design of the final site. Originally, a goal of ten male parent subjects and ten female parent subjects was set, in order to have one focus group for each gender. Flyers were placed at various bulletin boards on the campus of Michigan State University, and an email was sent out over an MSU email list of parents working or living on campus. Despite these efforts, we received no response. Perhaps this was because there was no payment or incentive for parents to participate, or maybe it was difficult for parents to accept that they didn't know about the games that their kids played. Regardless of the cause, the plan for the focus group had to be revised and simplified significantly. With help from church officials and personal contacts, I found six parent participants from a local church (three married couples) willing to participate in the focus group. Each couple had at least one child between the ages of 13 and 19.

The six participants were asked to come up with their own fictitious names, which were used instead of their real names during the interview and in notes and reporting of results to protect their privacy. The table below gives some background on the three couples and their children, using their chosen pseudonyms.

Table 3.1 – Background on the six participants (using pseudonyms).

| | | | |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Names | Fred and Yolanda | Sebastian and Marie | Ray and Helga |
| Last Name | the Smiths | the Reids | the Mercers |
| Children | Daughter, Age 18 | Son and Daughter, Ages 15 and 16 | Son and Daughter, Ages 13 and 17 |
| Number of Comments | Fred: 14 Yolanda: 22 | Sebastian: 18 Marie: 10 | Ray: 10 Helga: 19 |

Early video game experiences of the parents when they were teens

Favorite games (any kind of game) that the parents played as a teen included softball and other sports, Frogger, Asteroids, Bridge, Spades, May I?, and other card games, Pinball, Monopoly, Capture the Flag, Tag, and Clue. None of the six parent participants named the same game. There were times during our discussion when a parent would mention arcade style video games in connection with bars. The parents in general did play basic games on the PC when they were teens, including pyramid, pinball, and freecell. Arcade/PC/Console games that they played in the past tended to be located in public places (arcades or bars) or were owned by friends.

Use of the Internet for the parents

The parents in the focus group seemed to be comfortable using the Internet. Their uses of the internet included email, research, online banking, weather forecasts, flight information, and buying music. Ray described the internet as the “world’s greatest library.”

Children and games

The children of the focus group members ranged from 13 to 18. While some of the children did not play electronic games at home, some played cell phone games, game boy games, and some computer games. Games mentioned specifically include Animal Crossing, and pool on Yahoo.com. When asked if their kids played video games with friends, a parent mentioned that her son goes to a friend’s house to play “Halo.”

The positive or negative effects of teens and video/computer games

When asked about positive or negative effects of video and computer games, the initial reaction was negative. The first answer to that question was Yolanda, who said, “I think they have a horrible effect.” Marie and Helga agreed. Much of the group had concerns about isolation due to video game playing, and a feeling of becoming disconnected from real life. Fred mentioned that with Dungeons and Dragons, “kids got screwed up playing it.” Ray then said that “it’s not all bad”, to which Marie replied, “It’s a matter of balance – If it’s all they do, it’s a problem.”

Reaction to the storyboards

The overall reaction to the proposed layout of the site was fairly positive, although a few requested that the site be simpler. Helga particularly liked the embedded content, and made a reference to “the wheel” that is promoted by Comcast.net. Sebastian thought that the first page had too much information and that it should be simple. A list of content-related concerns is listed below.

Figure 3.2 – List of content-related concerns.

- Who produced the Web site about MMOGs and can they be trusted?
- Violence and sexual content.
- Game ratings and “unbiased” reviews (perhaps multiple sources of reviews)
- Privacy Issues: “Is my daughter, through these games, going to meet some guy in another city who’s dangerous?”
- There is too much information on the home page. If there is too much, parents will find it overwhelming and go to another site.
- Have the word “teens” or “and your teen” in the title.
Example: <http://www.mmogsandyourteen.org>
- Are there hidden messages that might be objectionable?

Chapter 4

THE PRODUCTION PROCESS

The focus group had a significant impact on the overall design of the site. The proposed layout was seen as being a bit busy, so the entire right column of content will be removed. The name has changed and the sections have been reorganized to be easier for parents to find what they are looking for.

Figure 4.1 – Revised storyboard of the Home Page

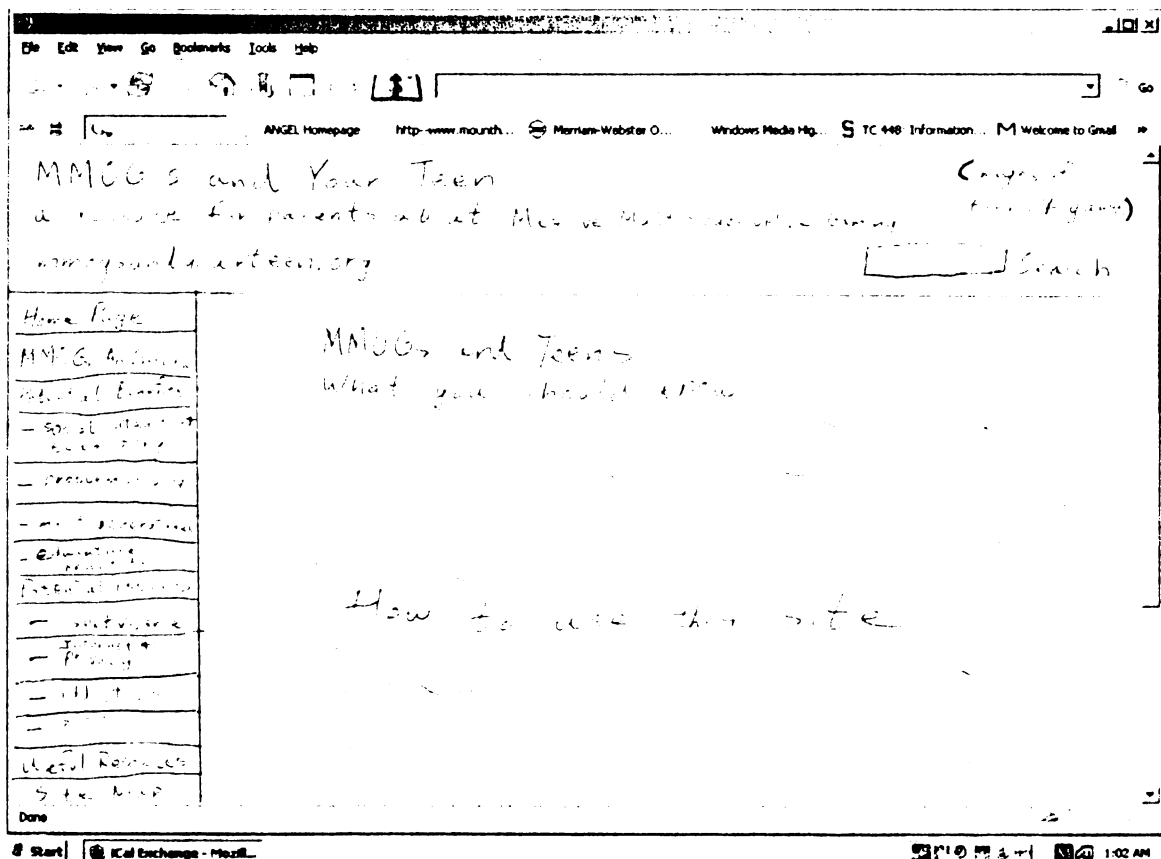
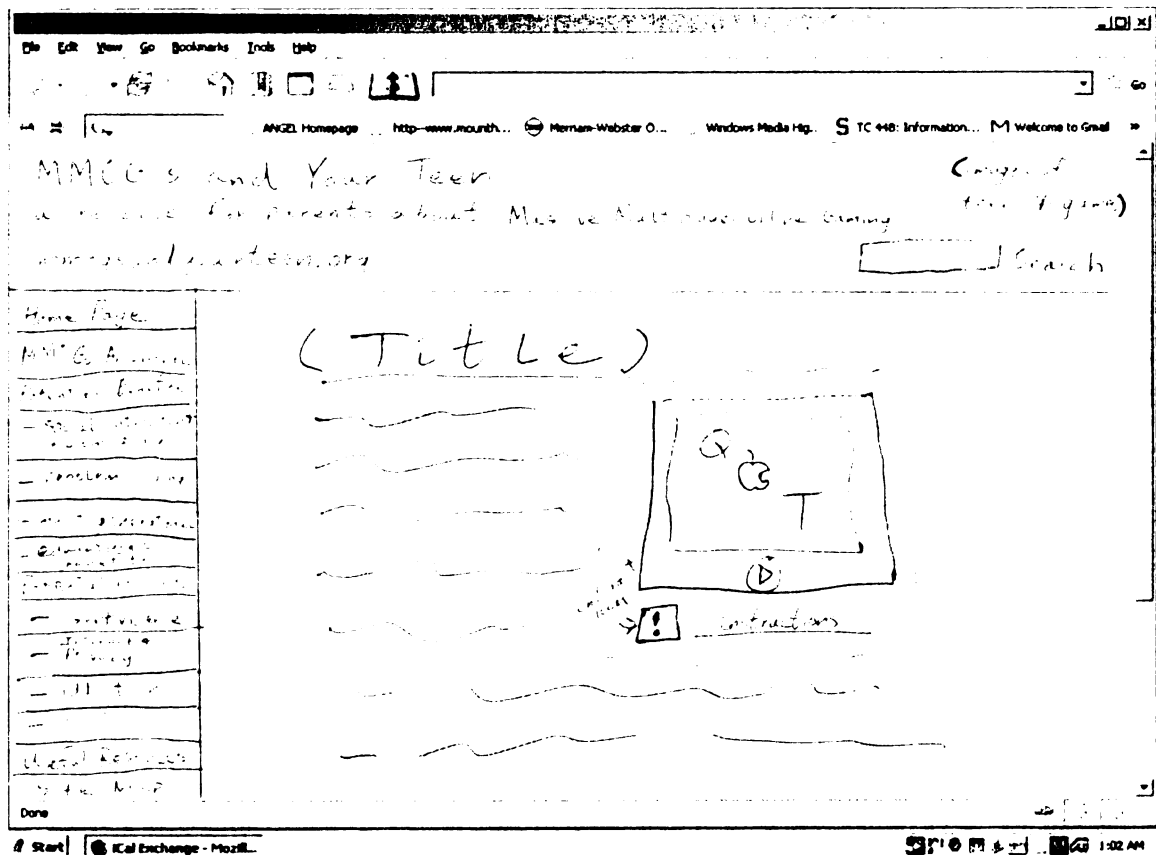


Figure 4.2 – Revised storyboard of a page with interactive content.



Chapter 5

WEB CONTENT

Introduction

Electronic games have transformed dramatically since the early days of "Pong," "Space Invaders," and "Pac Man." Computer processing power, advances in computer graphics, network connectivity and innovations in content and style all contribute to next generation games.

For parents who did not grow up playing today's games, they can be quite mysterious. Understanding a complex game often requires hours or even tens of hours to play.

This Web site is created for parents who want to understand more about Massively Multiplayer Online Games — What they are, potential benefits to your teen from playing, and potential parental concerns.

Modern MMOGs include games such as World of Warcraft (WoW), The Matrix online, Final Fantasy XI Online and many others. The main example used in this resource is World of Warcraft, because it was the largest and most popular MMOG when this site was planned. While there are differences between MMOGs, this site focuses on the themes that are common to any MMOG.

If You Have a Particular Interest or Concern:

MMOGs are not all good nor are they all bad for teen players. The sections on potential benefits and potential concerns offer perspectives. Exploring the sections on potential benefits and concerns is a good place to start. Useful Resources for Parents links to other sites that address issues of parenting, games, and media.

About the Word "Player":

The word "player" is used often on this site to mean a person who is actively playing as a character in a Massive Multiplayer Online Game (MMOG).

What is a MMOG?

MMOGs give power to the player.

Massive Multiplayer Online Games are just what the name sounds like — a massive number of players together online in a virtual game world. Players take on the role of fictional characters. Often players can customize the appearance and skills of their character. Players play against and/or in cooperation with one another in order to achieve the challenges or “quests” within the game.

Unlike board games, MMOGs do not have the printed rules telling players what to do.

MMOGs have different quests depending where the player goes in the world and depending on what "level" they have achieved.

Players find current quests by communicating with Non-Player Characters, or NPCs.

NPCs look like player characters, but they are artificial characters programmed by the game designers to advance the story. NPCs may offer helpful hints and directions. NPCs may also be obstacles — monsters to defeat. The MMOG is populated by a mix of NPCs and player characters.

MMOGs offer a series of quests. The goal of a quest can range from delivering a package to defeating a boss in a well guarded dungeon. While some quests can be completed without the help of other players, many quests require cooperation among players in order to achieve a goal.

Players can communicate with one another through a chat room interface. To humanize communication, some MMOGs allow the usage of “emotes,” special key combinations that cause the player's character to portray a particular gesture or emotion. In World of Warcraft (or WoW), players can taunt, laugh, cry, point, wave, and do other behaviors that enrich communication in the world.

MMOGs establish a virtual yet life-like world.

Part of what makes a MMOG appealing is the ability of a player to encounter, interact, and travel (virtually) with other players in the game. Some MMOGs are set in medieval times or are inspired by mythology, while others take place in space, futuristic or other fictional settings. Because other characters in the game are played by real people, the fictional world feels quite real.

MMOG worlds are complex. Tens of thousands of players can be logged in simultaneously. The worlds are vast, including many locations. Game play length is indefinite, perhaps infinite. Players can play for hours, days, or weeks.

The virtual worlds of MMOGs are typically very diverse in design, in order to maintain replay value. For example, players may be able to choose from doing quests in areas that could be tropical, dry, snowy, hot, or swampy. In World of Warcraft, each race of player (Tauren, Orc, Undead, Troll, Night Elf, Human, Dwarf, Gnome, Goblin) inhabits their own style of architecture and has special influence over various parts of the world.

Other aspects of the game add richness, emotion and depth to the story. In WoW, there are various classes of characters: Warrior, Paladin, Shaman, Druid, Mage, Warlock, Hunter, and Priest. Each of these classes has its own set of abilities and handicaps, and with it their own story of what they must do to succeed. Some quests are specific to class and can give the player a better understanding of what makes their class unique. A druid, for example, has to speak with a bear spirit and complete a quest in order to turn into a

bear. This ability is unique to the druid, and adds to the story of druids having a strong connection with nature.

Beyond the class definition, a character may also have a job, such as making armor, weapons or other useful items. Both a player's class and job often require that he or she interact with other types of players in order to succeed.

MMOGs often have their own economy.

In a virtual world where items such as weapons, armor and various other things are traded or sold for virtual money, a virtual economy has been created. In the World of Warcraft, there is an Auction House located in a select set of locations within the world. At the auction house (often referred to as AH), players can auction or sell items. These items may fluctuate in value from day to day or over the course of a few hours due to sudden increases or decreases in demand. One advantage to this type of economy is that if more items or more money need to be created in order to regain a balance, it's possible for the game designers to implement such changes in future updates to the game, which often come as part of the online service. Game designers make changes and additions to a MMOG while it is being played! MMOGs are dynamic (changing) worlds due to the behavior of live human players and actions by the game designers.

Potential Benefits of MMOGs

Potential Benefits: Social Interaction and Team Play

MMOGs are very social games. While they can be played by a single player (this is called “soloing”), the best features of MMOGs are experienced by working with other players. This creates an incentive for players to cooperate with one another in order to achieve their goals within the context of the game.

Characters are designed to be specialized, so that they have specific special abilities and handicaps. By cooperating with players that have different special abilities and handicaps, it is possible to have a balanced group that is very powerful. Working in a balanced group is an ideal way of making progress in the game.

Because of the need to work together, MMOGs incorporate ways for players to find other players to help them. In World of Warcraft, the most basic way of finding people is to talk in a chat “channel” called “Looking For Group.” All a player has to do is describe what their goal is in this channel, and other players who are interested in helping will respond.

Near each of the main dungeons in World of Warcraft is a meeting stone, a place where a player can find others who are looking for a group. The meeting stone serves the same purpose as the “Looking For Group” chat channel. The meeting stone may make it easier to find players to team up on a quest in a dungeon because it is adjacent to where the quest begins.

The players who become a group using the “Looking For Group” channel or the meeting stone do not always work well together, because you don’t know who you’ll end up with, or how cooperative they’ll be. Working with such random players in the game is not ideal, but it is easy, and a normal part of playing the game.

As players become stronger, there is a greater incentive to join a “guild,” which is a group of players who generally play together or help one another achieve their goals. The closeness and focus of a guild depends on its players. Some guilds focus only on playing the game, while other guilds are more social and relaxed. They are usually run by more experienced players, who are often able to help other players learn more about the game.

A guild is a great way to find a regular group of players to play with. By working with the same players, over time it becomes easier to communicate goals and plan strategies for going into battle.

Potential Benefits: Problem Solving

When a player is in the virtual world, they are part of a community of virtual people who have tasks and jobs, friends and enemies, money and goals. With all of these qualities, it's possible for the producers of an MMOG to create thought-provoking situations that fit into the plot of the game.

Strategies to battle are something that is often discussed. Typically, there needs to be a balance between casters (players who fight from a distance) tanks (players who fight up close), and healers (players who can heal people when they get hurt in battle). There are also abilities that other characters have that complicate things further.

In World of Warcraft, a druid is a fairly balanced character, which is capable of being either a caster, a tank or a healer. It can only be one of these at one time, so a druid should be aware of what is needed in the group and adapt to fit that need.

Strategy based decisions exist for every type of player, so there are plenty of choices to be made in battle. One of the biggest problems that players may face is communication. There are many different ways to play an MMOG, and different players have different motivations for playing. Having to discuss how a group will play in battle is an opportunity for players to explain their own approach and learn more from the way other people solve problems.

Potential Benefits: Multigenerational Play

MMOGs provide a situation where people of various ages can work together to achieve a particular goal. Because of the wide range of ages of players, people of different ages can and do play together in ways they might not in real life.

(source: "Gender and Age Distribution" by Nick Yee)

In a MMOG, players tend to be males about 12 to 28 years old and females 23 to 40 years old (Yee, 2003). Despite the wide age range, these players all have something in common; they are all working together to complete a common set of quests and goals. People of different ages are likely to play differently than one another, and because they are encouraged to work together, this creates an opportunity for people of different ages to better understand one another.

(source for stats below: "Playing with Someone" by Nick Yee)

A unique kind of multigenerational play that does occur is playing with a relative. According to a study done by Nick Yee, 19% of all MMOG players "play with a family member" (excluding "romantic partners"). These people were then asked how they were related to the family member they played. The study found that "the most often listed family members were brothers, followed by [fathers or mothers and] sons" (Yee, 2005).

You can view this study at:

<http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/archives/001468.php>.

It is interesting when playing with a relative to see how differently one plays in comparison with how they are in the "real world". For example, relatives with less experience in the real world (young people) may have lots of experience in the "virtual world" (playing the game). In this type of a situation, some older relatives may look to younger relatives for guidance in how to play.

To some extent, playing an MMOG can allow people from multiple generations to pursue the same goals, thus making them virtual equals. This is not often the case (especially for teenagers) in real life, where what you can achieve may be based highly upon your family's income, your job, your ability to travel, and your lifestyle.

You may want to consider playing with your teen. Ask your teen to teach you how to play, if she or he already plays. Or learn together. Often a shorter play session lasts between an hour and three hours. If you are clear with your teen about how long you want to play, he or she may be able to help you choose quests to fit that amount of time. If you do plan to play an MMOG (and if you enjoy it), play can go on for weeks or months.

Here are two ways to help your teen regarding multigenerational play:

- **Talk to your teen about what goes on in the game world.**

While the technical descriptions and detailed information about the game may be difficult to understand, the focus of an MMOG is that players are working in a group with other people to achieve some a shared goal.

- **Encourage your teen to play with a friend or someone they know in real life who can act as a friend and role model (perhaps an older relative).**

Playing together provides an opportunity for a parent or relative to model and talk about moral challenges faced in the context of the game. An adult can help evaluate situations they encounter in the game.

Some players, (fortunately, a small minority) enter MMOGs with the intent of causing trouble and interfering with other people's game.

Potential Benefits: Educational Benefits

It may seem strange to think that playing a video game would have educational benefits. MMOG virtual worlds create complex cultures, races, and stories. Some MMOGs take place in historical settings. Others are futuristic or imaginary.

A graduate student at Stanford who has studied MMOGs for many years, writes about learning leadership skills, teamwork, and relationship/communication skills.

Here are links to three of his weekly articles on MMOGs and learning:

Learning Leadership Skills:

<http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/archives/000338.php>

Learning Relationship / Communication Skills:

<http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/archives/000339.php>

Helping Teenagers Deal with Identity / Gender Issues:

<http://www.nickyee.com/mosaic/adolescence.html>

James Paul Gee, the author of "What Video Games Have to Tell Us about Literacy & Learning," suggests, "There is no such thing as learning 'in general.'" We always learn *something*." (Gee, 2003). In MMOGs, players learn techniques for effective communication while in the game, and also learn about how a fictitious culture can have an effect on gameplay. They have to remember or keep track of information about the virtual world in order to complete quests, and this involves techniques for memorization that could be applied to the real world.

MMOGs can even be used at the college level for educational purposes. Aaron Delwiche taught a course at University of Washington called "Ethnography of Massively Multiplayer On-line Role-playing Games." According to Delwiche, "Ethnography is a qualitative research method in which the investigator attempts to develop an insider's perspective of a particular culture." The course was taught using an MMOG called Everquest as a context for practicing ethnographic research.

MMORPG's in the College Classroom

AaronDelwiche (adelwich@trinity.edu)

Trinity University

Department of Communication

<http://www.nyls.edu/docs/delwiche.pdf>

MMOGs are immersive experiences. Each player constructs their own unique play experience from moment to moment.

Potential Concerns of MMOGs

Potential Concerns: Video Game Content Ratings on Reviews

The ESRB (Entertainment Software Rating Board) rating system is a common way for the video game industry to help parents understand the sex and violent content that may be in a video game. This system consists of two main parts: a rating symbol and a content descriptor.

The rating symbol can be found on both the front and back on the box of any video game or computer game, and are rated as one of the following:

- Ec (Early Childhood)
- E (Everyone)
- E10+ (Everyone over 10 years old)
- T (Teen)
- M (Mature)
- Ao (Adults Only)

In order to provide additional information to the customer, ESRB added content descriptors, which are a set of 32 phrases found on the back of the box describing content in video and computer games. These descriptors include:

- Comic Mischief
- Fantasy Violence
- Partial Nudity
- Suggestive Themes
- Use of Drugs
- and many others...

For the full list with detailed explanations, please refer to the ESRB Game Rating and Descriptor Guide at

http://www.esrb.org/esrbratings_guide.asp

There is also the option for a warning in the descriptor section that states:

"Game Experience May Change During Online Play."

This warning will be listed on all MMOGs, as the inclusion of a chat room and regularly updated content are not able to be rated using this system. While it may be possible to rate the part of the MMOG that the programmers create (the storyline, use of video, the characters, etc), it is difficult, however, to rate something that involves a massive number of players in a virtual world with a chat-based interface built into the game, and potentially constant updates. The ESRB rating is based only on the initial game content itself (and not the in expansions or what goes on in the chat interface).

Studies have shown that the ratings system for video games is not always understandable or accurate to how parents rate video games. Researchers at Harvard conducted a study of a random sample of 81 games and played each for an hour and rated each. "In reviewing 81 games, the researchers found that 48 percent did not correctly identify that the game contained potentially inappropriate content." (Prange, 2004).

According to the ESRB site, "The ratings are not meant to recommend which games consumers should buy or rent or to serve as the only basis for choosing a product." (ESRB, 2005). Instead, they recommend that parents combine usage of this rating with reviews of the game in newspapers or Web sites, and rely upon parents' "own tastes and standards and their individual knowledge about what's best for their kids."

Here is an example of a video game rating site that is available on the Web.

MediaWise® KidScore:

"MediaWise® is an initiative of the National Institute of Media and the Family, a non-profit organization."

<http://www.mediafamily.org/kidscore/chart.asp?MediaType=games&place=0>

Other players are in a MMOG and can technically “say” (type) whatever they want. Because of this, communication in many MMOGs, including World of Warcraft, are monitored, 24 hours a day.

If someone “says” something that is offensive, graphic, or threatening in World of Warcraft, anyone who “hears” (reads) it can report it to the staff at Blizzard (the makers of World of Warcraft) at the push of a button. Offensive players are kicked out of the game — their passwords are disabled. They can create a new identity. Keep in mind that this feature is most effective against these types of incidents when they are reported, and no level of monitoring is perfect.

The issue of offensive content from players is further examined in the Antisocial Players section.

Potential Concerns: Violence in MMOGs

All commercial MMOGs as of January 2006 involve fighting and killing as a key part of game play. The storylines may involve killing monsters. They may be based on historical civilizations (including wars and conquests) or far-future galaxies where alien civilizations fight for control and freedom. MMOGs are epic in scope with a good versus evil storyline.

Usually some game activities in an MMOG do not involve violence. But most do, including all or almost all quests. The violence that tends to be rewarded in today's MMOGs is violence for the sake of your people. But it is still violence.

Violence in games (and movies and television) is pervasive. Are players able to differentiate game violence from violence in the real world? Most probably are. Does game violence have negative effects on players?

Observed outcomes of game violence parallels findings about violence in other media:

- Aggressive thoughts and feelings increase.
- Heart rate increases during exciting game play.
- Players become desensitized to violence -- violence becomes less shocking, more normal.
- Players may perceive the real world as being a more violent place than non-players do.

Research DOES NOT SHOW that players tend to directly imitate recently played or viewed violent acts. Extremely rare headline news stories describe a person who played a game and then committed a similar crime, but such an individual could have been easily very disturbed long before they played the game. When children commit acts of violence, this behavior is determined by multiple influences. Despite the huge increases in children and teen video game play, murder rates in the U.S. continue to decline.

Researchers speculate that a small group of children may be particularly vulnerable to negative effects from violence in games and movies. High risk children would be those for whom even a small increase in the relative risk of aggressive behavior triggers aggression. These players would be children who are drawn to violent video games because playing fuels pre-existing violent fantasies such as bullies who already have low empathy, low guilt, insensitivity to victims and an underlying view that violence is fun and the right way to solve problems.

Researchers hypothesize that imitation is most likely when game play or movies closely mirror the player's real life experience. For example, if there were a game that takes place on a school playground and involves killing schoolmates using a rock, that game would be cause for strong concern. A game that involves killing dragons with laser weapons, games where the situations are clearly fantasy, are thought to be far less likely candidates for imitation.

Violence is everywhere in media, including games. Talk with your teen about the violence in any MMOG they play. Ask about when and why players engage in violence. What are the consequences of violence within the game? Is that violence like the real world? Would that violence be "right" to actually do in the real world? Why or why not?

Potential Concerns: Antisocial Players

MMOGs are online and have a massive number of players. These two qualities make it a challenge to protect the player from others who may say things that are offensive, graphic, or threatening.

However, many MMOGs, including World of Warcraft, are monitored, in order to protect the players and enforce the ESRB rating of "Teen." Game designers want to minimize antisocial play behavior because it drives mainstream players to quit playing. Players who say (type) something offensive, graphic, or threatening can be punished and potentially banned. Keep in mind that this is most effective against these types of incidents when they are reported, and no level of monitoring is perfect.

Here are some ideas to keep in mind.

- **Playing with members from a guild avoids many of the people who would say things that are offensive.**

The goal of a guild is to commit to helping your fellow guild members, playing together to benefit everyone involved. By regularly playing with guild members rather than just looking for random players, your teen will have more control over knowing his or her teammates are committed to cooperation.

- **There is likely to be a selectable feature that will censor swearing so your teen doesn't have to see it.**

This feature in World of Warcraft can be activated in the interface options menu.

When turned on, it will display characters ("#\$^%\$#@") instead of cursing.

- **Talk to your teen about what goes on in the game world.**

While the technical descriptions and detailed information about the game may be difficult to understand, the focus of an MMOG is that players are working in a group with other people to achieve some a shared goal.

- **Encourage your teen to play with a friend or someone they know in real life who can act as a friend and role model (perhaps an older relative).**

Playing together provides an opportunity for a parent or relative to model and talk about moral challenges faced in the context of the game. An adult can help evaluate situations they encounter in the game.

Some players, (fortunately, a small minority) enter MMOG's with the intent of causing trouble and interfering with other people's game.

Potential Concerns: Interacting with Strangers

It's possible for people to meet other people online through MMOGs, and it certainly does happen. However, meeting outside of the game is neither necessary nor common.

The topic is important to discuss with your teen.

- **Role Playing involves playing in character, so it is fairly normal not to chat about your other (real) self. Talk with your teen about what you consider to be "personal information".**

Unlike a "chat room", where the entire purpose is to chat, the chat interface in most MMOGs is primarily included for use in achieving goals in the game. This means asking questions about enemies or items. MMOGs give players something to chat about other than themselves. In game locations and quests, it is natural not to give out personal information in an MMOG than in a chat room.

- **Players choose their gender. Most "female" characters in an MMOG are actually male.**

Approximately 84% of people who play World of Warcraft are male. According to a study by Nick Yee, "In WoW, males are about 7-8 times as likely to gender-bend than females." (Yee, 2005) 25% of Men (over 18) play a female character, while only 10% of male teens (males 18 or under) do this.

In the same study, 55% of female characters are played by a male, and less than 1% of male characters are played by a female.

source: <http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/archives/001369.php>

There could be many reasons that this occurs. In a study that Yee did of players of EverQuest (another MMOG), players who played characters of the opposite gender gave the following reasons for doing so:

- for role-play purposes 27.4%
- visual appearance 25.6%
- other 16.8%
- to gain advantage in the game 11.8%
- gender exploration 7.1%

(Yee, 2001)

(source: <http://www.nickyee.com/eqt/genderbend.html>)

- **While chatting is possible, the main activity of players in an MMOG is playing the game.**

The incentives (completing quests to earn the reward of cool virtual items to improve your character's looks and abilities) in the game are such that most players are focused on advancing in the game.

- **Encourage your teen to play with a friend or someone who can act as a role model (perhaps an older relative).**

I mentioned this in another section, but it applies here as well. Playing with someone who shares a similar set of moral values can help the player in evaluating their behaviors in the virtual world.

Potential Concerns: Time Management and Addiction

Playing a game where the player is part of a virtual world can be very appealing and engaging. Like going to see a movie to take a break from the "real world", playing an MMOG can be a nice way to relax and temporarily get away from the quirks and annoyances of everyday life. Going to see a movie also allows the viewer to potentially see the world from another perspective (through dramas and documentaries), or experience an entirely different world (through historical, science fiction or fantasy movies).

To play an MMOG as a break from the "real world" is not necessarily unhealthy. It is only when a player of a MMOG begins to give their game play priority over the "real world" that problems occur. The point where this happens may be hard to define, so it is a good idea to speak with your teen and make sure that you establish a shared understanding of what is "too much".

Here are a few aspects of an MMOG that may play a role in addiction:

- **An MMOG is a multiplayer game that typically has people playing it 24 hours a day.**

Due to time zones and different people's availability, there is usually at least a few people playing and often thousands of people playing a MMOG regardless of when a player logs in.

- **An MMOG is a game that has no defined end.**

Most MMOGs offer quests or various goals to complete, but there are so many available, and more are added, that there's always something to do. Players who want to play 24 hours a day could find things to do.

- **Peer Pressure from members of a group may exist, depending on their personalities.**

Players may feel guilty if they have to leave before completing a quest (or goal) because many quests require a full group to finish.

- **There is no easy way to estimate how long a quest (or goal) will take to complete.**

Even when a player thinks that he or she is almost finished with a quest, problems can occur. Sometimes a quest is in multiple parts, and the goal is to finish all of the parts. If the player does not know how many parts there are to the quest, they could end up completing many more tasks than they initially wanted, thus spending more time on the game than they should have, or intended to at one sitting.

- **It is easy to lose track of time.**

MMOGs are so engaging it is easy to lose track of time passing in the real world.

Here are some suggestions for how to help your teen enjoy a MMOG while avoiding addiction.

- **Set clear limits.**

Set clear time limits or rules as to when your teen can play the game, and adapt those over time if needed. It is important to be clear how long is "too long", and why.

- **Learn about what parts of the game are time consuming, and help your teen come up with a way to limit their playing time without causing unnecessary frustration.**

In World of Warcraft, the general order of activities for players from most time consuming to least time consuming are as follows:

- Instances (dungeons): These often take over three hours to complete.
- Quests (goals): Some can be very short or may take over an hour to complete.
- Other activities in the game: There are typically smaller activities that don't yield as much reward as quests or instances, but are interesting or enjoyable for a player to do. Activities usually involve gathering or building things (tools or items) that can be sold for money in the virtual world.

Activities are a side activity — for highly competitive players activities may feel like a diversion from the "real" game or a waste of time. Less competitive players may actually prefer activities over quests. Activities allow players to stop whenever they want.

Note that all times here are estimated and may vary based on the game. Ask your teen for details if you need to know what parts of the game are longer than others.

- **Make sure that your teen has at least one other real world activity that they enjoy other than playing MMOGs.**

Make sure that playing video games is not the only fun activity that your teen is involved in. An engaging real world activity can provide balance to virtual play.

- **Get your teen involved in some real world activity that involves working or playing with other people his or her age.**

Sports or team based activities or clubs can help your teen to become or remain comfortable communicating with their peers in the "real world".

RESOURCES FOR PARENTS

Various resources are available for parents interested in learning more about MMOGs, although many focus on more general concepts like teen gaming or teens and the Internet, and not MMOGs specifically.

Common Sense Media

<http://www.commonsensemedia.org>

This site offers "family friendly reviews" of games and other media.

Teenagers Today (Resources Page)

<http://www.teenagerstoday.com/articles/>

This collection of web articles is produced by iParenting Media, which also publishes a magazine called Family Energy: Your Guide to Raising Healthy Kids. Their list of information covers all sorts of issues that parents may be facing with their teens. While much of these articles are related to parenting teens in general, some of these do apply directly to teens and MMOGs. Teenagers Today has an article called, "Side by Side: Exploring Virtual Worlds With Your Teen." There are also some good articles on privacy issues, cyberbullying, and internet strangers.



Social Study Games

<http://socialstudygames.com/>

This is a collection of information (mostly articles) about the Social aspects of MMOGs. If someone is interested in learning about how people behave in virtual worlds, this may be a good place to look.

Pew Internet and American Life Project

<http://www.pewinternet.org>

This organization provides some useful research about teens and the Internet. This information is not designed to provide advice, but parents may still find it informative.

“The Daedalus Project: The Psychology of MMORPGs” by Nick Yee

<http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/>

Nick Yee has done some interesting studies on MMORPGs, which is another term for MMOG. The RP in MMORPG stands for Role Playing. The Daedalus project focuses on learning more about the people who play games like World of Warcraft. This includes demographics of players, motivations for playing, and other issues that are related to players interactions with one another. If a parent is trying to understand how a player behaves in an MMOG, then this is a very good resource.

Chapter 6

FUTURE STEPS

Further improvements could be made to the information provided in the current “MMOGs and Your Teen” Web site in order to include more specific examples and detail in certain areas. It would also be nice to have a list of the terms used in MMOGs.

After getting some feedback from parents via email or a contact form, the next logical step would be to add more interactive features to increase parent and teen participation in the site. Informal research of preferences on interactive features could be collected through online feedback from parents. Parental chat rooms could be established to support discussion of various parenting issues. Further expansion of the site could include the creation of content by registered members (teens or parents) who could write reviews for games or make recommendations.

Updates will most likely be needed for the examples used within the site, as popular gaming trends change over time. World of Warcraft already has plans for an expansion pack, called “The Burning Crusade”, that players can buy to add new features, levels, and new types of experiences to game play. Some of the changes will affect the original version of the game, through additional patches, so that players can play either version of the game without problems.

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