

Gamers in their golden years:  
Generational boundaries in virtual worlds

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Abstract

This study focuses on the similarities, differences, trends, and interactions between older and younger generations of video game players, with a specific focus on MMO's, or massively online role-playing games. Age and generation differences in MMO's and virtual worlds are unique from those in the real world both because of gamer culture and because of the anonymity inherent in online gaming. Although age distinctions are not correlated with concrete data such as playing habits and the number of games played, they do fundamentally shape the way interactions are handled within MMO's, particularly those concerning the immaturity of other players. One of the more prevalent patterns is that older gamers are weary of immaturity, while many younger gamers attempt to prove themselves to be mature adults in order to fight it. It is believed that future studies in this area could bring new insight into generational interaction and into the gaming culture as a whole.

Overview

Virtual worlds and massively online games, such as Everquest II, Second Life, and World of Warcraft, have created and utilized a new form of communication unlike anything seen before. This is chiefly because of both the anonymity inherent to online discourse and the unique methods of social interaction provided by the avatar, a virtual representation of one's self that is controlled by the player. As a result of these two things, many divisions and distinctions that define real-world interactions become skewed or even irrelevant in virtual worlds. Age is one of the most pronounced examples of this. After all, an avatar is no more an accurate portrayal of a player's age than it is an accurate portrayal of their gender, or ethnicity. Within the virtual world, a player can be as old or young as he wants to be.

Generational and age differences play a substantial role in real life social interactions. As a general rule, people of similar ages and social circumstances defined by their generation tend to associate exclusively with one another. For example, it is generally considered strange for college students to associate with high school students unless the students are blood relatives or have a pre-existing relationship. This also applies to young adults and older generations- for purposes of this study, older generations are considered those born between 1940 and 1970, i.e. "baby boomers." The reasons for this vary. Some consider it taboo for people in different age groups to socialize with one another. Others just claim that those on opposite sides of the generation gap have too little in common to associate with one another beyond mere formalities. However, in virtual worlds, age distinctions are less important. Players are thrown into the same social situations regardless of age or emotional maturity.

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This raises interesting questions. In an environment in which age is not immediately apparent, do generational distinctions still exist, and if so, in what capacity? In what way are generational differences usually defined? How does the anonymity and ambiguity provided by avatars impact the ways these different generations communicate with one another?

## Literature Review

### Real-world generational interaction, division, and implications

The majority of the literature found on this topic tends to divide the population of today into several distinct generations. Although the terms and divisions for each group vary depending on the author, the three most common terms are "baby boomers," "Generation X," and "Generation Y" (Losyk, 1997; Tapscott, 1998; Wolburg, 2001). In some of the literature, Generations X and Y are combined to create the "net generation," a term coined by Don Tapscott and utilized by several other authors, which is the basic term for the generation of people born into and acclimated towards new states of emerging technology (Leung, 2004; Tapscott, 1998, 1999). In all of the literature perused for this study, two important distinctions were made to varying degrees. One was that Generation "X" and Generation "Y" have a significantly different concept of authority figures than do baby boomers. The other was that generations "X" and "Y," or the "Net-Generation," are much more open and inclined to accept massive technological developments such as the Internet and online games.

The Net-Generation, which is typically defined as those born between the 1970's and 1990's, has several characteristics that make it unique and at odds with the older generations. Its members tend to be more acclimated to a global orientation, thanks in no small part to the world-wide connections provided by the internet. They also tend to be much more emotionally uninhibited, as the anonymous and simple nature of online interactions via e-mails and instant messaging programs makes being open about emotions a relatively simple and consequence-free task (Leung, 2004; Tapscott 1999). Net-genners also tend to be technologically savvy, and have come to desire and expect constant access to limitless pools of knowledge (although whether or not they actively pursue this knowledge depends on the individual) and options as the result of years of web and channel surfing (Leung, 2004; Tapscott 1998, 1999). Finally, and perhaps most infamously, Net-genners have a constant preoccupation with maturity and adulthood. They wish to be treated as adults by adults, and hope for a world in which one is judged by what they contribute to society instead of how old they are (Leung, 2004; Losyk, 1997; Tapscott, 1999; Wolburg, 2001). This is quite an interesting contrast from the fact that so many college students, myself included, refer to themselves as "kids" even upon reaching their twenties - an interesting topic, perhaps, but one beyond the scope and subject of this study.

Baby boomers, on the other hand, are a generation defined by their history. Generally considered by prominent scholars in this field to have been born between the 1940's and 1960's, baby boomers have gradually gained control over government policy, business, and media as they've gotten older. However, they are characterized as having not grown up as quickly as other generations largely because they were the

first generation in American history to not grow up during particularly difficult times (Losyk, 1997; Tapscott, 1998; Wolburg, 2001). Another notable distinction is that the baby boomers were essentially the first generation to actually exercise birth and population control as a whole, which results in a smaller number of generation "X" and "Y" (Losyk, 1997; Wolburg, 2001). The vast difference in history and upbringing has, as a general rule, put these generations at odds against one another, making interaction and friendly association between those of a different generation not closely related to one another rare and often tense (Losyk, 1997; Wolburg, 2001).

#### Outsiders' perceptions on generational boundaries and virtual worlds

Part of what makes the study and its topic so intriguing is the manner in which MMOs and, for that matter, video games in general, are treated by the non-acclimated members of society, hereon referred to as outsiders. As a general rule, video games are considered to be a child's toy, and MMOs are just another type of video game. This is the main reason that such issues concerning violence and sex in games cause outsiders such concern, and are such hot button issues for politicians. Older people- by which I mean people that aren't children- that play these games are often regarded with confusion and bewilderment by their peers. The older they are, the more profound that bewilderment becomes, or at least that is the impression that media, culture, and even on occasion the gamers themselves attempt to give. What is the source of this phenomenon? Why is gamer culture such a mystery to the outside world, and why is this mystery so often met with hostility? And, most importantly for the purposes of this study, why are games predominantly assumed to be children's playthings?

One of the biggest issues concerning the treatment of MMOs and video games is that they are not taken as seriously academically as other forms of mass media. Although there have been some recent studies, as this paper and the several posted alongside it clearly demonstrate, video games have been ignored by communications scholars and the academic world for a long time. The bulk of literature concerning videogames and their intellectual and philosophical capabilities is written by journalists and hobbyists which tend to link anything they have to say concerning the nature of video games to the video game's history or to a critique or review of a specific game, genre, or system (Sneed, 1992; Williams, 2003). As a result, the academic community is less informed about video games and MMOs than about other forms of communication, and it tends to draw generalities and make assumptions about their accessibility, audience, and academic merit.

As for the specific question of why MMOs and video games are considered to be aimed at children, there are multiple theories. One explanation posed by the literature concerns the difficulty and accessibility of the games. Games are essentially learning machines. In order for players to get the most enjoyment of these games that they can, games should ideally be simple to learn and easy to access- though not necessarily easy to master, as the misinterpretation often indicates. Games that are not accessible to their audience tend not to do well, and the companies that manufacture them lose money. As an indirect result of this, however, many game developers make their games overly simple in an attempt to make their game accessible to the largest audience possible (Gee, 2003; Whitcomb, 1989). The games become targeted to children because children are the only ones challenged by them. Outsiders see this and, for simplification, assume that all video games are marketed for and intended for

children, despite constant evidence to the contrary (Gee, 2003; Williams 2003; Whitcomb, 1989). Another less cynical explanation, however, can be drawn from the general boundaries discussed earlier. Newer generations, as mentioned previously, are more acclimated to new technology. It is possible that outsiders are simply intimidated by games, and see them more as the property of generations "X" and "Y" (Gee, 2003; Holmes, 2005; Sneed, 1992). An interesting trend that supports this is that older generations that existed before the baby boomers tend to have a more open opinion about MMOs and video games. This is largely attributed to their dependence on board and parlor games rather than television for entertainment during their developing years (Holmes, 2005; Whitcomb, 1989).

#### Group identity and shared information spaces

One of the fundamental aspects of interaction in online environments is the idea of group and individual identity in shared information spaces. However, there is a certain degree of ambiguity as to what constitutes shared information spaces. What are the differences between shared information spaces and virtual worlds? What definitions are traditionally used in the literature concerning the nature and existence of these shared information spaces and infrastructures?

Shared information spaces are largely defined by existing texts as a fundamentally relational concept. The shared information space that is the virtual world, for example, does not just consist of the game, although it could not exist without it. Rather, the shared information space is a combination of the hardware and communication means provided by the virtual world itself, the manner in which the players utilize it, and the manner in which they facilitate the virtual world to others not necessarily accustomed to their manner of sharing information (Bannon, 1997; Star, 1996). That being said, there are a number of common factors that shared information spaces have in common. Shared information spaces and infrastructures are, as a rule, embedded and transparent. They are a permanent conglomerate of social structures and technologies that do not have to routinely be reassembled to function. They exist consistently, and continue to serve their social functionalities without the need for constant maintenance; the inner workings of these should only be overt to users in the event of a breakdown (Bannon, 1997; Bartle, 2004; Star, 1996). Another prevailing factor in shared information spaces is that they have reach and scope beyond single geographic locations; that is, they can be accessed by anyone from anywhere (Bartle, 2004; Meyrowitz, 1985; Morse, 1998; Star, 1996). Finally, and most importantly, although the workings and knowledge to operate within shared information networks are a privilege learned over time upon acquisition of membership, the workings of a shared information space are designed on real-world conventions, and are designed with accessibility by groups and group identity in mind (Bannon, 1997; Star, 1996).

The nature of shared information spaces tends to facilitate the merging of group experiences, which leads to the pronounced formation of separate and distinct group identities in spite of the anonymity inherent within virtual worlds. The anonymity inherent within these shared information spaces has several interesting side effects on the social nature of virtual worlds. The first is that a variety of normally isolated and distinct groups, or those that are normally disenfranchised in small corners of larger environments, tend to receive equal treatment within information networks. This is because, due to the anonymity inherent with the technology, these users are no longer

confined to the associations inherent with their real life allegiances and identities. Rather, they are essentially made a part of the group as a whole, and are judged on their actions and merits within the program (Meyrowitz, 1985; Morse, 1998).

However, distinctions within these groups still exist. There are still social hierarchies within online environments and shared information spaces; they just use a different set of divisions and criteria. The most common sorts of divisions involve how often and how seriously users participate in these virtual worlds. Distinctions are often made between passive and active users, as well as motivators that go out of their way to facilitate events for users that utilize the mechanics of the shared information space to facilitate others. Developers of the information space and those that they employ also play a role in the social hierarchy of shared information spaces, given their ability to fundamentally change the nature in which the shared information spaces work (Bartle, 2004; Morse, 1998).

#### Generational differences and interactions in massively online environments

A relatively interesting trend indicated by existing literature is the variation of uses of online chat programs by players of different age groups. Younger players tend to make less liberal use of the chat programs in online games. The reasons, naturally, vary from game to game and may depend on technical aspects -in the child-oriented Toontown, for example, there is no chat program except with registered friends. This is likely intended to protect privacy. As a general rule, adults and older users are far chattier with their fellow players than younger users (Griffiths, 2003; Koivisto, 2003; Wiklund, 2005). This trend is not omnipresent, however. As the interviews and findings listed later will demonstrate, age is not necessarily related to a person's talkativeness both in the virtual and real world. For the most part, younger players (players below the age of twenty) tend to be more focused on the game's content itself, rather than the people and social interaction to be found within. Older players, on the other hand, tend to use online games as more of a social gathering place than a traditional videogame (Griffiths, 2003; Steinkuehler, 2005). How the social nature of these games is utilized varies greatly from game to game and from player to player. Some utilize official social mechanics in these games by forming raids in World of Warcraft or joining a guild in Everquest. Others tend to just make close networks of friends much like they would in the real world. They seek out those with common interests or, at the very least, pleasant demeanors, and engage in informal discussion often having nothing to do with the game itself (Griffiths, 2003; Steinkuehler, 2005).

Another trend discussed in this literature that is particularly important is the level and nature of interaction between people of different age groups. There are numerous aspects of online games that facilitate interaction between users of different age groups. The most predominant of these is that the social hierarchies of the real world are meaningless in the virtual world (Griffiths, 2003; Koivisto, 2003; Steinkuehler, 2005). The type of social hierarchy that exists in online worlds is dependent on the achievements of the player's avatar. Things of great importance in the real world, such as age, social status, and income, are not of substantive impact (although they do play a minor role in that they determine small things like how often a player can play the game, and whether they can afford expansions and subscription fees). Since relative unimportance is placed on the person behind the avatar, people of different age groups can and do congregate frequently within massively online games.

The nature and success of these interactions, however, is shaped by the different natures and playing habits of players of different ages (Griffiths, 2003; Steinkuehler, 2005).

### Study Design

The goal of this study, as detailed above, was to determine whether or not generational distinctions existed in online worlds, and if they do, then to what degree. I hoped to discover assumptions that some gamers made about the ages of those they interact with in virtual worlds, the impact of these assumptions on socialization with other players, and possible parallels to generational dynamics in the real world. The study and research questions were designed to find out the answers to these questions using a pool of research subjects that I personally believe to be both varied and an accurate sampling of the population of online role playing games and video games in general.

#### Participants

Recruiting participants was an interesting process. As a general rule, I have a strong, almost pathological dislike for forums, and felt myself leaning strongly towards other means of recruitment for my study. I did make some use of online forums, such as Everquest II and World of Warcraft's general discussion forums, which seemed like good places to begin. I also looked at the Older Gamers forums, which seemed the best place to pick up, well, older gamers, but forums were not the primary place from which I acquired participants. Instead, I gathered the bulk of my participants from within the games Everquest II and World of Warcraft. I attempted to duplicate the manner in which anthropologists gather their data. I actually played these games, locating people to group with, interacted with them normally, striking up friendly conversations with them, and then finally asking them to take part in my survey. I had a remarkably high acceptance rate through this method, likely because of the non-controversial nature of my study and because of the trust I had earned from these participants by playing alongside them.

#### Procedures

For the actual interview process, I divided the questions into two parts. The first part consisted of mostly quantifiable questions, such as how old the participant was, how many games they played, etc. The purpose behind this was twofold. First, the answers provided data I would later use to try to locate trends between age and things such as playtime, games, etc. The second was to put the interviewee's mind at ease with relatively simple questions in order to prep them for the more open-ended questions that appeared later. The second half of the questions was more about social interactions and age differences. If I wanted to, I could have probably chosen more controversial questions to ask (generational differences has sparked some dicey conversation, after all), but I felt that immediately assuming such an aggressive tone would have ultimately hurt the study. Instead I left these questions fairly open-ended, and let the interviewee interpret them as he/she would. If the interview were done in game or by instant messenger, I would occasionally follow up with more questions \ based on what had been discussed. In interviews conducted via e-mail, I tried to

tailor each e-mail based on information I had about the subject beforehand. For example, when interviewing the guild master, I mentioned the guild on occasion, and asked if his position within it affected how he interacted with other players or his assumptions about them).

The fourteen participants have been given false names for the purposes of this study. For the sake of privacy, consistency, and humor, the false names have been taken from the popular 1993 Super Nintendo game Final Fantasy III (or Final Fantasy VI as it is referred to in Japan). Any connotations of these characters should not be associated with the participants. Quotations from the interviews are indented, while relevant interview questions are underlined. Although statements by the participants were recorded and reproduced as accurately as possible, some paraphrasing occurred for the sake of consistency, clarity, and grammar.

## Results and Discussion

One of the first things that I noticed from this study is that there does not seem to be much correlation between the age of gamers and quantifiable statistics such as the number of games played or the amount of time spent on games per week. Although I wasn't expecting to be able to make generalizations anyway, given the small sample size, I still found the vast differences in playing habits between players in the sample to be noteworthy.

It is clear from the data in Figure 1 (on the following page) that playing habits are not completely dependent on age. They are instead determined by outside factors and personal preferences. In the sample chart above, the player that spends the biggest amount of hours gaming per week (Setzer) and the one with the smallest amount (Relm) are only a year apart from one another. This can be attributed to a number of variables, from the ability of these players to immerse themselves within the games to the amount of free time that they have at their disposals. Another factor that was frequent amongst players of all ages that played relatively less than others was the eventual dwindling of interest in the games in question. Here's an example of Edgar's experiences with World of Warcraft during time spent overseas:

**How many hours a week do you participate in virtual worlds/play online games on average?**

Maybe one or two in college, between six and eight the last time I was home in December. My friends all left to come back to the 'States before I did and there was nothing at all to do. But, since then I've gotten bored with [*World of Warcraft*]. The distraction they provide is nice, especially the sense of humor that can accompany Blizzard's games. *World of Warcraft* has let me down in this regard. (Edgar, Age 21)

Player Name	Age	Hours spent gaming per week	Number of games played at once
Terra	42	7	1
Locke	20	5-6	1
Edgar	21	6-8	2
Sabin	21	10	1
Celes	38	30	2
Shadow	21	12-15	8
Cyan	21	6	3
Gau	46	20-30	2
Setzer	18	40	3
Mog	31	5-10	3
Strago	52	15	1
Reim	17	2	7
Gogo	21	12	3
Umaru	40	10-25	1
Rachel	22	2-5	1

Figure 1: Chart of Participants' Age and Playing Habits

The same can be said for the number of games people devote themselves to at one time. Aside from the obvious time and monetary restrictions, several players tend to prefer devoting their time to one game in order to properly immerse themselves and achieve the maximum amount of enjoyment from the game...

Now-a-days I usually stick with one game until I'm finished with it - I probably take longer than usual but I'd say at least 7 hours/week especially if I'm at a hard place that I'm having a tough time getting through... not that I'd finish the game in a week - [it usually] takes me a good deal longer than that! (Terra, Age 42)

In this small sample, player habits were not determined by age. They tended to be determined instead by personal preferences followed by the amount of time and money at the player's disposal. Although age can occasionally be an indicator of the last two variables- seeing as how older people have work and younger people have

schoolwork and classes, and both groups go through periods of time where their budget for games and subscriptions are limited- the data clearly demonstrates that there are too many variables for gaming habits to be guessed based solely on age.

Trends in gaming and age can be seen, however, in what players search for in the games that they play and how they interact with other players. Although there is occasionally some deviancy here, the majority of "net generation" gamers focus specifically on the atmosphere and game play mechanics of online games, whereas older generations of gamers, or "baby boomers," tend to focus more on the atmosphere that these games create and the social networks that they provide...

I play EVE-Online because I enjoy the technical challenges, the complexity, and the involved tradeskills and market. I play World of Warcraft because I enjoy the extra 'life' blizzard put into the emotes and personality around every corner. All the races and environments have a theme, deep lore and consistency. Plus I actually get to play with my wife and kids- we all enjoy it. (Gau, Age 46)

Currently I mainly play *Everquest II*. I enjoy the social aspect of playing in a world full of people from different places - there always something happening regardless of what I do myself. I do like such games with a solid background story with characters and environments to learn about and explore. I like exploration and am quite quest oriented, so many quests and varied environments is a definite plus. (Umaru, Age 40)

I played Ultima Online first. I played it since I had friends playing it and the concept of playing a character with many others was appealing. I also came back to it in later years because I love the non-leveling up and non-monster killing way to getting skill up. You did not have to attack a single thing to be let's say, a kick ass blacksmith. UO has been unique more or less in that aspect. I also played a lot of Diablo 2 a lot. That was fun because it was free and because the game was very addicting. Finding the next best item was all that kept you going and it worked surprisingly well. Unfortunately, it was also why I eventually stopped with it. (Sabin, Age 21)

My favorite element of *World of Warcraft* is that it is PvP. I am also a fan of *World of Warcraft's* character customization and advancement

and of conquering new content that is released regularly. (Gogo, Age 21)

Another interesting trend, as demonstrated by Gogo, is that younger players in the study tended to be more open to the idea of player versus player, or PVP combat, and competition in MMOs in general...

I've been playing Conquer: Online recently. I enjoy it because, along with being free, it is essentially completely player versus player. It definitely makes the game interesting and provides an extra layer of depth to the strategy that must be employed in the game. However, it can be frustrating at times. Ganking is a huge problem, and there are high level characters that regularly kill newbies for fun. (Cyan, Age 21)

Older players, in general, tend to be less enthusiastic about the competitive elements of MMO's. The older participants in the study claimed to generally not make use of PVP or dueling mechanics in games, and some even expressed distaste in the competitive nature of other players, and tend to associate the more abrasive instances of this with immaturity...

One thing I realized about [*World of Warcraft*] was how focused it was on competition and status. The most important thing for many players is the equipment they have, especially after level 60, because there is just no other way to progress once the level cap has been reached. Many players struck me as being very judgmental about other players, simply from what equipment they had or from the other player making a common mistake. These players can also be very disrespectful in how they interact with other players. Just look at the tone on the WoW forums. If someone posts with a problem or reasonable complaint, or just makes a suggestion, you can guarantee that about half of the responses will be something like "lrn2ply," "QQ, go play solitaire," "it's because you suck, reroll." That's just not how I want to deal with anyone. The tone is worse on the forums than in game, true, but still reflects what you will encounter in game. Playing in a virtual world where one is anonymous makes it very easy to forget that there are real people playing the characters. Maybe that helps to explain the tone. Maybe people have transferred the attitude they can take in solo games, where you can do anything you want without real consequences, to a world where they do interact with other people who will be affected by what you do. (Celes, Age 38)

These findings are interesting in that they support Wilkund's (2005) findings on the relationship between age and game mechanics. Although his research samples were considerably younger- he used subjects as young as grade-schoolers in his study- there are some interesting parallels here. Ultimately, it seems that younger generations of gamers tend to use games as more of a quantifiable learning tool, focusing on the mechanics and trying to figure out how best to utilize all the content a game has to offer, while older gamers tend to utilize games as more of a form of escapism- a way to unwind in a virtual world whose atmosphere is what they and their fellow players make of it. Of course, this is not to be considered a blanket statement on what players of different generations search for in virtual worlds. Some younger players frequently allow themselves to be immersed in a game's atmosphere...

**What aspects of these games do you find particularly entertaining or engaging?**

It's just an escape from reality. Especially in WoW, the immersion is incredible. You can sit and quest for hours and hours and never realize that you're just wasting the day away. Online games provide keys to exploration that real life could never offer. How many times a day on your way to work do you have to dismount off your horse and kill a gang of troggs that have been chasing you? Or what about strolling through the charred remains of a city in a panzer tank looking for Nazis on your lunch break? The technology that goes into games these days brings such a realistic atmosphere that reality just can't hold a candle to it. (Shadow, Age 21)

Other younger players define their gaming experience through social interaction...

I would say that my favorite part of these online games is just talking with other people from all around the world and teaming up with them to fight monsters. If I don't have someone to group and chat with, I generally do not play. The only reason I started playing Everquest 2 again (I had previously stopped, due to boredom) was because a buddy of mine from work started to play so then I had someone to play with. It's also why I started playing *World of Warcraft*, because this same friend convinced me to play with him. (Relm, Age 17)

These examples, I think, are more in tune with Constance Steinkuehler's (2005) emphasis on the universally social nature of online games. Even in "lackluster social environments" such as those seen in Asheron's Call II (a medieval-themed MMO with a strong focus on battles between warring classes), playing MMO's creates positive social "bridging" effects and can improve players' perceptions on the real world community, however, they do not necessarily guarantee a means of vital personal support (p. 22). Ultimately, age and generational boundaries do not determine whether or not social

interactions in MMOs occur, as the very nature of these games makes them inevitable to some degree. Rather, age and generational differences play minor roles in the content of these interactions, the emphasis that they are given by the player in terms of his or her enjoyment of the game, and the nature in which these interactions impact or alter the player's real life community perceptions.

An area in which gamers of different age groups and generations are often very different is in their perceptions of older and younger players. However, given the nature of virtual worlds and their largely anonymous context, age is not immediately apparent. As a result, gamers base age-related reactions to other players within MMO's on how long players have been in games or, arguably more often, the maturity of the player. Older participants in the study tended to cite the maturity aspect of online interaction more than anyone else...

If they act young, I treat them young. On a case by case basis, if a person always acts like a 2 year old, that is how I will treat them. (Mog, Age 31)

I consider all players to be my peers until they act less than maturely. I assume most gamers are from 16-36 or so, that seems to be the average range I encounter. If I find someone acting particularly childish I will inquire of their age. I expect less maturity from those under 18 and so am not surprised when they act childish, after all they are children. (Strago, Age 52)

Younger players in the study tended to focus less on maturity and age, and defined their interactions based on their own maturity and perceptions.

Often I attempt to judge based on their behavior. I tend to assume those that make a lot of grammatical mistakes are younger or around the same age that I am, although I have certainly been proven wrong in that regard before. As a general rule, if someone logs off to do homework, I assume that they are in college as I am, although high school or even junior high is a legitimate possibility. Overall, however, I generally ignore age unless it comes up in conversation, and if it does, my behavior changes depending on the age (if I find out the other player is much older or younger than me, for example, I tend to crack fewer jokes because I always fear I'm annoying them). (Locke, Age 20)

I would say that my interaction with older people in online games doesn't vary greatly with how I speak with them in real life. I am polite to

most of the older people I speak with. I enjoy listening to their stories, and feel that I learn a lot from them. Generally, I interact with people online the same way, taking in their personalities and making judgments about their character and age accordingly. (Rachel, Age 22)

With older people I usually interact with them the same as I would with someone close to my own age. With younger people, it just depends on how much younger they are, if they're not too much younger, then I would interact with them the same as I would with someone close to my own age. If they are considerably younger than me, such as a little kid about 10 years of age or younger, of course I'll probably interact with them differently and treat them nicer, although I probably wouldn't be hanging out with someone that young in the first place because I just don't like little kids, heh. (Setzer, Age 18)

These trends provide an interesting reflection of the way generational dynamics work in real life social interactions. Leung (2004) argues that generations "X" and "Y," which are collectively referred to as the "net generation" tend to have "a preoccupation with maturity" (p. 335). Essentially, the net generation wishes to be treated like adults and is continuously under the notion that their ideas are held under suspicion by older generations for reasons based solely on age. The reactions of the older players concerning maturity, on the other hand, also provide an interesting reflection of the perceptions that "baby boomers" have about the net generation. According to Bob Losyk's "Generation X- What They Think and What They Plan to Do" (1997), many characteristics of the net generation put them at odds with baby boomers, not the least of which is their tendency to communicate differently and to question authority (p. 42). It is often difficult to determine whether these characteristics occur from issues with maturity or simply from a conflict of cultures and world views- only time can be the ultimate judge of that. However, it is clear that these characteristics have made the older generation wary of the younger generation's motives. Although it is not a perfect reflection because of the anonymity of age, it is nonetheless interesting to see how this dynamic plays out similarly in MMOs and virtual worlds.

### Conclusion

The generational and age dynamics of MMOs and virtual worlds yield a good amount of both surprising and expected data. The differences in generational distinctions and interaction within virtual worlds and real life can be attributed to both the outsider's perspective on gamer culture and the anonymous nature of the internet and MMOs. Although age and generation issues still exist in online worlds, they are not nearly as prevalent as they are offline, in the real world. They do not govern how players act towards one another, but merely provide an indicator for the outside stimuli that may influence those actions. Rather than age, a lot of assumptions and

interactions by players in MMOs tend to be based on maturity. Both old and young players tend to take this notion to heart, but do so in different manners: older players become weary of immaturity, and come to either tolerate it or be driven away, while younger players eager to prove their own maturity attempt to combat it through their actions. However, little correlation has been shown between age and maturity in MMOs. As one of the participants in the study put it...

I have learned that people on the internet, and especially in games, don't tend to operate at their age level all the time. Some younger players tend to talk over their age level, while some older players will act immaturely. That is one of the fun things about the internet and role play games.  
(Cyan, Age 21)

More research on this subject could do wonders for the status of videogames and MMOs both as a subject for scholarly study and as a form of media. One of the biggest areas that I would like to see further research on is the perceptions of games held by outsiders. Video games have long been considered to be children's toys, and this has had a profound effect both on the lives of older gamers and on the gaming community in general. Determining the source of this phenomenon and how it has affected video games and the public's reactions to it would likely lead to a greater understanding of why gamer culture is perceived by outsiders the way that it is and quite possibly may even be a vital step in solving this problem.

I would also like to see research on age and generational boundaries in other forms of gaming besides MMOs. Although the unique nature of MMOs in terms of avatars, virtual worlds, and second spaces make it an intriguing setting for a study on social interaction, many other forms of gaming could also yield interesting data on the nature of generational boundaries in communication. For example, a couple of the participants in this study, along with MMOs, also took part in live action role playing games...

I do the LARP games from white wolf publishing through the camarilla. I find the genres to be interesting, the game backgrounds are well developed, and I get to meet a lot of interesting people. It's fun to participate in an ever evolving and changing storyline. (Cyan, Age 21)

I prefer the worldwide LARP games about the World of Darkness over MMORPGS because it is much more malleable than MMORPGs, you can literally own the world if you really try (though people will oppose you). You can also have a much more social interaction with people. But most of all, it is strongly more story based than MMORPGs since you can develop a characters story and it is essential to do this if you want to get anywhere in it. The emphasis is strongly taken away from actual fighting and placed more on character development

and story. You can have a character that never touches combat and is highly developed and many people do. In that way, I like these games much better. (Sabin, Age 21)

These games seem to differ from MMOs in the sense that they are both more character-driven (the role-playing aspect some players take part in with MMOs becomes the center of the game in live-action roleplaying) and, as a result, require much more social interaction. It would be interesting to see a generational study in these types of games, as well as other gaming circumstances where the inherent anonymity of the internet is not present.

Appendix 1. Sample recruitment message and list of forums

The message below was posted at: Everquest II: General Discussion Forum, World of Warcraft: General Discussion Forum, and Older Gamers: MMORPG's, The Realms.

Hello. My name is Grady. I am a gamer and communications major at Trinity University in San Antonio. I am taking a course on virtual worlds (<http://www.trinity.edu/adelwich/worlds/index.html>), and am fascinated by generational issues in Everquest II, World of Warcraft, and other online role-playing games.

I would love to speak with gamers of all ages about their thoughts on these issues. All interview participants must be at least 18 years old, or they must have parental consent.

Those who wish to participate in the study should feel free to contact me at [oldyounggamer@yahoo.com](mailto:oldyounggamer@yahoo.com). From there, we can discuss how to arrange the interviews.

I am aware that researchers of online games have a bad habit of gathering information, then leaving without any sort of feedback to their subjects concerning the nature of the study and its results. Rest assured that this study will not be conducted in that manner. I, along with the rest of the class, fully intend to post our research findings and papers online when they are complete, and I personally will contact each of my subjects on completion of my project as best as I am able. If you wish to learn where/when the project is expected to be posted, or have any questions about the class or other projects related to it, feel free to check here for more information:

<http://www.trinity.edu/adelwich/worlds/faq.html>

If you would like to participate in my study or have any further questions, the e-mail being used for the study is [oldyounggamer@yahoo.com](mailto:oldyounggamer@yahoo.com). You may also participate by taking a survey at this link: <http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.asp?u=404912097589>

Thank you all for your time, and I look forward to hearing from each of you.

-Grady

Appendix 2. Interview questions

- How old are you? (verification purposes only)
- How long have you been playing online games?
- How many hours a week do you participate in virtual worlds/play online games on average?
- How many different online games do you play? List them.
- What aspects of these games do you find particularly entertaining or engaging?
- Do you play any other games besides online RPG's? If so, what other types of games particularly interest you and why?
  
- How often do you interact with other players? What is the nature of these interactions most of the time (grouping, dueling, etc.)?
- What criteria do you use in choosing which players to group with? Do you actively seek out players you already know? Do you search specifically for players that can help you accomplish objectives within games?
- Do you ever make assumptions about the ages of your fellow players and, if so, do these assumptions affect how you interact with them?
- How do you usually interact with those older or younger than you outside of virtual worlds? Does it vary greatly from how you interact with people in-game?

I also asked individual questions depending on how much I knew about the person ahead of time based on playing sessions, and based on material I found particularly interesting that was brought up during online discussion through IM.

## Appendix 3. Pseudonyms

These names masked the identities of participants in this study. They were borrowed from the 1993 Square Enix game Final Fantasy VI. Any connotations or biases concerning these character names held by readers familiar with the game should not be associated with the participants to whom they are assigned, nor are the names intended to be any indicator of the participants' real life or online identities.

- Terra
- Locke
- Edgar
- Sabin
- Shadow
- Celes
- Gau
- Cyan
- Setzer
- Mog
- Strago
- Relm
- Gogo
- Umaru
- Rachel

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