Is Electronic Community an Addictive Substance?

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ABSTRACT
In this study, we examine how online games, like the Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game (MMORPG) EverQuest, are represented and controlled through media rhetoric. We look at international attempts to regulate their use through policy, and unearth some of the ways in which media reports have constructed public opinion of online games. We then contrast those reports with an ethnographic study of the EverQuest environment. The analysis of game experience and informant testimony shows that regulation and control of games is ultimately not a correct course of action in order to heal social dysfunction, of which excessive participation in electronic communities is only a symptom.

Keywords
Addiction, online community, games, ethnography, policy, EverQuest.

INTRODUCTION
Many people argue that computer games are unhealthy, and some people claim that they are "addictive." Such arguments assert that as a result of these games, children have lost interest in school, spouses have lost interest in partners, and employees are coming to work tired and distracted. Is this true? And if so, what makes online games so "addictive?"

In this study, we examine how online games, like the Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game (MMORPG) EverQuest, are represented and controlled through media rhetoric. It is interesting to examine the way society constructs addiction through the lens of games, because these constructs stand directly to influence policy that is not only in reference to the addictive properties of games, but the pathologization of different forms of behaviour that certain influential groups of people find unacceptable.

To address the implications of addiction policy as it pertains to online games, we approach this study with three primary concerns. First, we wish to look at the phenomenon of online video games and problems that result from behaviour associated with that activity. Second, we address currently existing public and private attempts to control these problems by briefly describing

international game-related 'addiction' cases. Thirdly, we highlight our primary case study, which was an ethnography we conducted on EverQuest. Lastly, we relate addiction and control of online games and look at the implications for future policy. Is it headed in the right direction?

ADDICTIONOLOGY AND COMMUNITY

The word "addiction" was never closely linked to drugs or to disease until the propaganda associated with the mid-nineteenth century Temperance movement became widespread [1]. The movement spurred an intense medical interest in treating excessive consumption of alcohol or drugs. Hence, the vocabulary has revolved around treatment of a condition. Popular self-help books have brought addiction vocabulary to aspects popular culture, promoting the idea that any personal problem manifests itself in some "…form of 'compulsive' behaviour—'addictions' to food, romance and sex, destructive relationships in which one became "dependent" on an inappropriate partner, even excessive shopping and plastic surgery could be seen as 'addictions'" [2]. Through the media and propaganda of various movements, addiction has taken on a different meaning from the original sense of the word. The term is now being used to describe very different types of behaviours, from use of crack to participating in the game EverQuest (often referred to as 'EverCrack'). The mere use of the word addiction is problematic.

We argue that it is not the use of substances that warrant the term addiction, but rather the suggestion of destructive behaviour that causes people to assign the term addiction to an activity. We wish to show why this is problematic, especially in the context of electronic communities. It is necessary to be critical of those seeking to regulate online communities by policies that deem an activity to be addictive. As game manufacturers come under fire for deliberately designing an addictive game, a cautionary light must also be cast upon the other side of the spectrum from those calling for increased pathologization of what could essentially be a compelling community in which one chooses to exist.

Unlike addiction, the word community has a positive association. As Bauman writes, "Community, we feel, is always a good thing [3]." Briefly defined, community is a social structure around a common interest. The word represents the ideal kind of world we wish to inhabit but cannot realistically. Community is where one can be themselves, and when alienated one is negatively detached from community and dislocated. Community appears to talk about "a special closeness or bond which unites some persons and differentiates them from others [4]." According to current definitions of community, EverQuest would definitely qualify as such. The land of Norrath contains a group of people existing in the same locality, following a code of conduct. They have common interests of well-being, and are in groups forming distinct segments of people. There is sharing, participation, and fellowship in many ways while interacting with one another in the game. Norrath is a self-sufficient electronic community, duplicating and adapting many of the relationship dynamics that take place in everyday life. It therefore makes a good field site and case study in a cyber-context.

People are indeed addicted to this game, but they are only addicted in the sense that people everywhere have a need for identity and community. Instead of making 'addiction', in the EQ sense, a disorder, people can be seen as merely looking for a community to which they can belong.

The moral panic of game addiction

It is a risky undertaking to propose that addiction be thought of in the manner we have proposed, but we are not the only ones that have made this proposition. Quite a few academics in the past have come under fire for what are essentially deviant ways of thinking about "deviance." They have been accused of either being insensitive or ignorant about the pain caused to self and others by one's over-reliance on an activity.[1] Our argument should not be mistaken for a dismissal of biomedical conceptions of substance dependence and abuse, but rather as a piece that cautions against the application of blanket diagnoses for life conditions that might stem from social, in addition to or even rather than, medical causes. We believe that as more of a vocabulary is developed to better articulate the difference between the physiological, psychological, and psycho-social, there will be less of a need to use the one word "addiction" to describe what could be physical substance dependence, a compulsion, or an entertaining activity. [2]

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[1] Examples are Schaler (2000), Peele (1975), and Alexander (2000).

[2] In this case, we mean the term psycho-social to include intangible and 'soft' reasons for one's actions, such as cultural, community, and societal influences.

AROUND THE WORLD – GAMES TO BLAME

Addiction to online games is supposedly a problem that is sweeping the globe. Why is this so? In this section, we briefly relate some international examples of public and private attempts to control and/or deal with problems associated with gaming. It is also interesting to explore the media sensation inherent in the representation of addiction to online games, as found in these stories.

United States

Much of the concern driving this study stemmed from the panic in the United States that resulted from the case of Sean Woolley, a twenty-one year old EverQuest player who committed suicide after playing EverQuest for thirty-six hours straight [5]. Even in Canada, his story hit home for many because of widespread penetration of American media. His mother blamed the game for his suicide and hired a lawyer in order to sue the owners, Sony Online Entertainment, in an effort to open up his account to investigation and get warning labels put on their allegedly addictive games.

South Korea

In yet another extreme case of online game abuse, twenty-four year old Kim Kyung Jae collapsed after playing computer games for eighty-six hours at a 24-hour "PC Baang" (literally, PC Room) [6]. After many years of promoting technological innovation and widespread Internet usage in South Korea, the government is now funding centers devoted to addressing Internet addiction. An example of this is the Center for

Internet Addiction Prevention and Counselling (CIPC). Operating under the Ministry of Information and Communication (MIC) and the Korea Agency for Digital Opportunity and Promotion(KADO), its mission is, "…to correct the Internet misuse and to help Internet addicts [7]." In Korea, games like Starcraft, Lineage, and Ragnarok are popular.

Thailand

The Korean MMORPG Ragnarok has been the game to blame in Thailand, where the game boasts over 600 000 registered players in that country alone. The game has been perceived as such a problem that as of July 15, 2003 the Ministry of Technology in Thailand has imposed a curfew, blocking game servers between the hours of 2200 and 0600 [8]. Internet cafes and the game's persistent universe genre are being blamed for the numerous hours people are logging on.

China

After widespread parental complaints in 2001, Chinese authorities shut down almost 2000 Internet cafes after inspecting almost 60 000 [9]. State media reported on numerous complaints from parents that their children were staying out for days on end. While some viewed and presented the move as a response to an increasing problem in computer addiction, others saw it as an excuse to limit access to subversive material.

Germany

In Germany, computer addiction is not officially recognized as a clinical disorder, and hence it is a taboo subject for many parents [10]. However, in Boltenhagen, Germany there is a camp designed to introduce non-computer oriented activities to children who spend too much time on the Internet. Children at this camp are limited to thirty minutes of computer usage per day and encouraged to partake in outdoor activities. One of the children in the report was quoted as saying, "My friends had no time for me, I think I was probably a computer addict [11]."

Greece

For a person who enjoys video games, Greek law is comparatively draconian. In an attempt to curb illegal gambling, law number 3037 states that electronic games with "electronic mechanisms and software" cannot operate anywhere in Greece [12]. This law also applies to video games and Internet cafes with games. Fines for violation are much steeper than those in Canada, ranging from 5000 to 75 000 euros and possible imprisonment of up to a year.

Canada

Canadian law is comparatively lax, simple, and most of the time absent in terms of fines and regulations for gaming. Many municipalities in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia including cities like Vancouver, Richmond, and Surrey have bylaws for amusement centres, which include computer-gaming cafes [13]. Such laws prohibit operation between the hours of 0100h and 0600h on weeknights and 0200h and 0600h on Fridays and Saturdays. Game centers are periodically fined amounts of $100 CDN for violating these laws, which make staying open a risk, but well worth the expense. Our experience with these game centers also indicates that these centers think the same thing, with more than enough patrons to support them during these hours.

Those who choose to seek professional help for game addiction do not have any specific centre for treatment, but may see counselors or medical psychiatrists who have varying amounts of experience with such behavior. We gained some very interesting insights from one informant who has experience treating game addiction, which we shall talk about later in the paper.

Possible social and political implications for addictions and treatments

In the cases above, it is evident that the people involved have been portrayed as helpless victims. Woolley is said to have been a victim of Sony's deliberate design of an addictive game; Kim, a victim of South Korea's effort to become a "cyber leader." There is not much focus on the context of a player's life. What else is going on, and are these cases indicative of the majority of people who play online games? Should these extreme cases be the ones to dictate future policy regarding online games? There are, however, hints in the stories: In the United States, Woolley was not only afflicted with an epileptic condition, but also socially isolated. The virtual community he found in EverQuest could have allowed him to be successful where he might not have been able to participate in his real life communities. Likewise, in the Korean case, Mr. Kim did not have a full time job or other life commitments that might have have pulled him away from pursuing success in online games. In Germany, kids expressed their reasons for playing, which were often related to feelings of some type of social isolation and lack of belonging. One has to wonder how the children, with full access to a supportive community at the camp, will do once they are back in their home environment. In Greece, attempts to regulate gambling have resulted in a wholesale ban on electronic games. In Thailand some have expressed panic over what the game Ragnarok is doing to their children, but others have recommended that parents spend more time with their children. In many if not all of these cases, the 'addictions' implicated coincide with and may even be symptoms of, community deprivation. In essence, people will find a social support network wherever they can find it—online, at an Internet café, or in any number of real life communities. Things can go wrong in any of these and extreme cases result.

PRIMARY CASE STUDY: EVERQUEST

Sony Online Entertainment's EverQuest (EQ), is one of the most popular massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPG) ever to hit the online game market, with a subscriber base of about 430 000 gamers [14]. At any one point, around 2000 players are going about their daily business online. Sony currently supports 41 EverQuest servers and each server runs an independent version of Norrath, which is the EverQuest world. 39 out of 41servers are based in North America, and the two latest additions are based in Europe [15].

EverQuest is set up with a persistent environment. This means that events in Norrath happen real-time, and players cannot save the game in order to return to the exact same scenario the next day. Like the real world, events in one place happen whether someone is there or not.

The sun rises and sets, and the weather can be rainy then clear up. Rare creatures can spawn and be killed by guilds for valuable loot while one is offline. One of the many possible reasons players feel compelled to stay in the game is the fear of missing out on something, or being left behind.

There is also an important social aspect to EverQuest. It is advantageous to talk to others. This necessity for basic social contact and information exchange lays the foundation for deeper, more meaningful interactions that lend to the apparent sense of community found in EverQuest. Because of the difficulties in excelling in the game without others, multiple forums for discussion and collaboration exist in Norrath and other places, both online and offline. As Taylor (2002) finds, games like EverQuest place the user in many settings containing both on and offline friends, strangers, and people across the world, whose avatars may be virtually next to you in avatar form. One of countless examples of an online EverQuest community is the web site Allakhazam's Magical Realm [16]. On this site, there are links to online communities discussing EQ, the latest news, player written storylines, biographies, chat rooms, art created by players, and many more modes of fostering a sense of community identity amongst EQ players. The game is much more than the computer entertaining a player by facilitating a little interaction—the game is the nexus of a vast online community, complete with its own modes of human expression in art, culture, conflict, and resolution.

The common folklore (media, urban legends) presents EQ as highly addictive. This paper addresses the discourse surrounding addiction as it pertains to online communities like EverQuest. Many players use the term 'addiction' to describe their attachment to EQ, perceiving their time in front of the computer as a source of conflict with their relationships in real life (RL) [17]. The popular media has often presented EQ as a game so destructive that the moment people start playing it, they begin severing all ties with the tangible world. Players start to alienate friends and loved ones, leaving their school and work pursuits to spend their lives pursuing almost the exact same things in Norrath. There are support groups on the Internet dedicated to the 'victims' that lay in EverQuest's wake, such as EverQuest Widows, Spouses against EverQuest, and so on. In contention is the question of responsibility and culpability: How popular and compelling must something be in order to be a certified addiction that warrants a warning label? Must everything strongly compelling have such a label?

People often spend as much time with EQ as they would a second job (anywhere from 10 to more than 40 hours a week). "Avatars in virtual worlds must work to do anything interesting at all" [18]. This is reflective of the value society places on work as self-realization and identity. There are a number of cases in which people have turned to 'addictions' in order to "deal with" being laid off of a job for instance. Informants in our study also noted that the difference between engaging in active consumption (like gaming) rather than passive consumption (like watching television) highlighted the feeling of being social and

productive—making what they do hardly an addiction.

Methodology

By nature, an ethnographic study is rich in descriptive data, and our informants did not disappoint. However, for the purposes of this paper, it was more fitting to provide a brief synopsis of the results of the data collection carried out thus far.

Our fieldwork expanded upon our discourse analysis surrounding concepts of addiction, community, and online environments. The 6-month fieldwork project included spending time as a player in the EverQuest community and in-depth interviews with offline informants.

In addition to the researcher's first-hand experience with the game, we use the testimony from four key informants: three additional EverQuest players and one psychiatrist who has attempted to treat EverQuest 'addicts' in his practice.[3] Though not intended to be representative and generalizable to the greater population of players, the data gathered and ideas presented here do touch upon some insights that we doubt could have been collected by methods other than ethnography. The answers to questions in the findings highlight even more intriguing questions to ask in future phases of this research. This paper shares just a few of the many exciting findings, with a discussion on possible implications for online communities and notions of addiction.

[3] For these interviews, we obtained informed consent and followed the code of ethical conduct concerning the use of human subjects as prescribed by Simon Fraser University.

During the project, Florence created an avatar, whose activities and development she oversaw and nurtured. Participant observation involved regularly advancing her wood elf's experience and level, as well as socializing with those she encountered in the community—forming friendship ties and valuable networks as the study progressed. This experience was integral to the study because it directly impacted her ability to understand the stories of other players, relay the experience of a relatively new player in the game, and as a result convey possible reasons of why games like EverQuest present such an opportunity to participate in an engaging community. The implications of conducting fieldwork on the Internet are numerous and intriguing, worthy of further commentary. However, for now, we will convey some key findings with respect to informant testimony and researcher experience.

Preliminary findings

In this section we report on participant observation fieldwork from "inside" the EverQuest community as well as interviews with players, and a therapist who has treated problem players. To date, we have looked at the past and present discourse of addiction, the concept of community, and conducted background research on the online game EverQuest.

The following is some information about our player informants. We introduce them, as well as give the reader an idea of their mindset with some selected quotes.

Derek[4] is a 26 year-old college student who has interests in anything technical. In his spare time he likes snowboarding and playing both console and computer games. He has played anything and everything since the Atari and Commodore 64 in the early 1980s. He gravitates towards real-time strategy games like WarCraft, and he likes role playing games, though he finds that they take up a lot of time. He currently plays CounterStrike, EverQuest and Allegiance. Derek is habitually an early adopter of many games. He got started on EverQuest after reading about the game in magazines and online when it first started. Originally none of his offline friends played the game, but he states that he made friends online. "Some people have different reasons for playing. Some people are in it for being in a guild, some people are in it for the loot, items, and some people are in it to help others."

Edward is a 26 year-old young professional working in the tech industry. He travels a lot and is often very busy with work. He enjoys fantasy and role-playing games and is also a competitive billiards player. Having played games for roughly eighteen years, he now plays EverQuest exclusively when he plays PC games. He got into EverQuest because he knew one of his friends liked the game, so he tried it. The longest he has played in one sitting is eighteen hours. "The gameplay really sucks, but I had to play it. I don't know why. I've given up dates, I've ignored my friends… neglected sleep and food and hygiene. I've done it all. 18 hours in a row."

James is 26, a part-time student, and employed part-time. He seems to be the most dedicated EverQuest player out of the three informants. Though his time in one sitting does not exceed twelve hours, he used to play twelve hours a day and outplay the other two informants in hours amassed per week. He currently plays six hours a day, starting in the evenings when he gets home from either work or school. "It was such a huge world, and it was the social interaction. You'd have to talk to people all over the world, which I found was pretty amazing."

What makes games like EverQuest in particular so compelling? The player informants touched upon a number of different points in their interviews, but three very interesting themes emerged that were not previously highlighted in other studies. First, all highlighted development of the player-driven economy as a particular determinant of the governance of Norrath. Second, participation in guilds and raids was a key component in developing a feeling of obligation to the community. Third, the status and sense of accomplishment obtained through one's character was a compelling factor in one's decision to play the game for prolonged periods of time.

When EQ first started in 1999, the economy was largely controlled by computer-controlled merchants, known as Non-Player Characters (NPCs). Players, who were all relatively low-level at the time had to rely on NPCs to buy and sell goods. As the game evolved, players increasingly wrested control of the economy from the game NPCs and turned it into the current

[4] Pseudonyms have been used for all informants to provide confidentiality.

barter system. The developers of the game responded and created a common area called the Bazaar where players meet at scheduled times. Consequently, a freer market came into existence, and with the added experience of increased freedom and self-determination, the community continued to flourish.

Another theme was the need to join a group in order to be as successful as possible in the game. One night, Edward's phone rang at 0300. He picked up the phone, and the EverQuest player in charge of the phone list told him that the target they had been stalking had finally spawned. "So I get up and boot my computer, log on, and park in the right area, and we killed the creature and went back to bed. <laughs>" While "soloing" is possible with certain classes like the Druid, many players find "Grouping" ultimately fulfilling and an essential part of the greater EQ culture, as players could only get so far alone. Their complementary strengths serve in being able to accomplish the most for one's group in a given amount of time. There are many facets that make finding a group attractive, such as the continuous rapport building amongst guildmates, companionship during raids of 30 or more players, and getting the most loot and experience by taking down a larger target. Grouping and the social element is by far the key determinant of what players talked most about as "fun."

However, by far the most important element of reward brought up by informants was that of status and sense of accomplishment, which was achieved in a number of ways. Increasing a character's level allows the player to do more and see more, therefore lending more status to the character. Having the best weapons and skills also help a player participate in more group events and be seen as a more valued member. Hence, the more time one spends online nurturing their character, the more prominent that player becomes as a member of the community. James noted, "… if I get to level 45 I can cast all these cool spells. That was the motivating factor back in the early days… [now it's] 5 more alternate experience points and I can get a horse."

Derek summarized what keeps many players from logging off: "…it was the idea that if you're in a very good group, and you're gaining a lot of experience points… you enjoy the feeling of achievement." Griffiths (2003) indicates that players found the difficulty of advancing for casual players to be the least fulfilling aspect of the game [19]. This finding is consistent with our detailed informant reports and observation, that there is indeed a significant difference in rewards for players who spend more time online, socially and logistically. On the other hand, players reported that their favourite activities were leveling and building up their character, grouping and interacting with other people, and chatting. Derek pointed out that there is very little reward in logging on for a short time. The game takes roughly ten minutes to log onto. His experience coincided with the researcher's in that he found that he needed about three hours to fully get into the game and find it rewarding. This was an interesting coincidence, though understandable. There are numerous everyday little 'errands' to do while waiting for something "exciting" to happen. James describes his experience as, "you can go from sheer boredom to sheer terror in one moment." It is

our assertion that the game provides common goals that are fulfilling for the individual as well as the group, and that this is what facilitates the rich socially interactive environment that is so attractive to many players. Similarly, the Griffiths indicates that one of the most consistent points regarded the significance of the social milieu in determining the level of enjoyment one attained from gameplay.

As Alexander notes, "Membership in something seen as destructive is far more endurable than no identity at all [20]." Our interview with a psychiatrist who specializes in troubled youth was especially enlightening with regards to the implications of calling EverQuest an addiction. In his experience, despite the obsessive-compulsive nature of addiction, those who came to him as "EverQuest addicts" did not respond to the obsessive-compulsive medications that he administered. So far, he and his colleagues have been unable to find an EverQuest "antidote", but we found it thought provoking that the only successful "treatment" for his EverQuest players was for the therapist and parents to work together in getting their offspring interested in other, non-electronic activities. Ironically, all of these drug free solutions centred upon finding alternate communities, such as horseback riding or swimming.

Through discussion and exploration of addiction and community through the lens of EverQuest, it is apparent that EverQuest is a valid community, and that labeling EverQuest as addictive is a fundamentally incorrect course of action. The experience of EverQuest does not seem to be an addiction from which one needs to be dissociated, but rather a community with which one chooses to identify. A discussion of perspectives regarding the social causes of addiction such as the basic human need for community will be addressed in future reports.

CONCLUSION – IS POLICY HEADED IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION?

In this study, we examined how online games, like the Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game (MMORPG) EverQuest, are represented and controlled through media rhetoric. We looked at international attempts to regulate their use through policy, and unearthed some of the ways in which media reports have constructed public opinion of online games. We then contrasted those reports with an ethnographic study of the EverQuest environment. Around the world, people are dealing with online game usage by doing things like suing game developers, calling for warning labels to be put on games, implementing curfews to curb game usage, prescribing medications and sending kids to therapy. On one hand, businesses like game manufacturers and Internet café owners are blamed, but at the same time game players are encouraged to realize they have a problem that could be all their own. The evidence is complex, and often conflicting. Our informants likened their participation in EverQuest as a hobby that lent status and identity. Is it right to label an online community addictive? Are curfews necessary? Are stricter laws working to curb game addiction? Our analysis of game experience and informant testimony shows that regulation and control of games is ultimately not a correct course of action in order to heal social dysfunction, of which

excessive participation in electronic communities is only a symptom. It seems as though energies that are spent searching for

To address the implications of addiction policy as it pertains to online games, we approached this study with three primary concerns. First, we looked at the phenomenon of online video games and problems that resulted from behaviour associated with that activity. Second, we addressed currently existing public and private attempts to control these problems by briefly describing international game-related 'addiction' cases. Thirdly, we highlighted our primary case study, which was an ethnography we conducted on EverQuest. Lastly, we related addiction, and control of online games and looked at the implications for future policy.

We believe EQ is a very attractive community of which to be a part. We were curious to see if the researcher's participation in the game would have adverse effects similar to that of other reported worst-case scenarios. We can safely say that aside from a few nights of staying up late to group or chat, there was no harm done.

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stricter rules and better treatments should indeed be spent on addressing gaps in the context of people's lives.

precious informants and community members… you create richness where you contribute.

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