

# EverQuest: Blurring the Lines Between Reality and Fantasy

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## **History Of Video Games**

With enough sweat Lildar knows he can pull down an average of \$3.42 an hour. Doesn't sound like a particularly great deal, but Lildar, an independent craftsman, loves his work. It certainly beats hanging out with his friends, who cover themselves in war paint and trek around snow drifts clad only in kilts. Who cares about hunting wolves and polar bears? He would rather go fishing, a much more satisfying way to end a day spent slaving away in front of a kiln. Then again, maybe tomorrow things will be different. For Lildar, imagination is the only limit, because he lives in an imaginary world.

Lildar exists entirely within the confines of a game called EverQuest, which has grown into the most popular massively multiplayer online role playing game (MMORPG) in the United States. With over 400,000 subscribers, it has nearly twice as many customers as its nearest competitor, Ultima Online. Such runaway success has captured the minds of gaming visionaries. EverQuest's immersive environment is a step forward in interactive fiction, which many developers believe represents the future of gaming.

However, the game is not without its critics. In the past few years, the addictive nature of EverQuest has become the focus of intense media scrutiny. News articles and television shows contain a plethora of



**Lildar posing beside his kiln**

anecdotes describing people sacrificing their jobs, friends, and family to spend upwards

of 80 hours within the virtual world. The immersive gaming experience which makes EverQuest such a great interactive story has proven to be a mixed blessing. To extremely dedicated players it can become an alternate reality more appealing than their ordinary lives. It offers equality, social opportunities, and a feeling of power not available in real life. As EverQuest has pushed gamers closer to true interactive stories it has exposed the dangers of blurring the line between what is real and what is fantasy.

## The Beginning: Inspiration and Unexpected Success

When he was young, John Smedley, the principle designer of EverQuest, would skip his lunch hour to play MUDs in the high school computer lab (Keighley). MUDs, or Multi User Dungeons, are text based fantasy worlds inspired by the pen and paper role playing game Dungeons and Dragons (D&D). However, unlike D&D, MUDs are played over the internet, allowing users to interact with thousands of other individuals simultaneously. The deeply immersive experience of sharing a fantasy world with thousands of other people had Smedley hooked.

Smedley's passion for MUDs is clearly reflected in EverQuest. Both games draw from the elaborate system of fantasy created in D&D. Both focus heavily on identity, with several steps at the beginning of the game dedicated to creating a character which then persist from gaming session to gaming session. Exploration of a world unconstrained by a linear plot line gives MUDers and the players of EverQuest the freedom to create their own stories. Finally, though EverQuest is obviously more technologically advanced than MUDs,



**John Smedley, Creator  
of Everquest**

neither type of game relies on aesthetics to provide players with an interactive experience. Instead, both create an immersive environment by allowing players to explore a fantasy world populated by real people, creating a realism which fancy graphics alone cannot duplicate.

But it was not until Smedley began running up a bill of \$600 per month playing CyberStrike, one of the first graphical internet based action games, that he realized the true potential of multiplayer online play (Keighley). By that point he had taken a full time job with Sony to finance his Cyberstrike addiction. Drawing on his experience with MUDs, Smedley attempted to sell his idea of an immersive online 3D fantasy world to Sony. Three minutes into the presentation, Smedley's boss, who had likely never experienced an addictive online MUD, "just flat out said, 'No'." (Keighley).

However, the situation changed a few months later when Kelly Flock arrived at Sony and became Smedley's new boss. With Flock's approval, Smedley, along with Brad McQuaid and Steve Clover, assembled a team of developers to make their vision become reality. After three years, the project employed 56 developers and had a budget approaching \$5 million, much more than Sony expected. Six months prior to the release, Sony threatened to pull the plug. In order to complete the game, Smedley and his project team left to form Verant Interactive, and by early 1999, EverQuest was ready for release

EverQuest's popularity has far exceeded its developers' expectations. Before EverQuest's launch, they predicted it would take two years to attract the 70,000 subscribers needed to recoup the five million dollar development budget. Six months later, over 150,000 people were already paying the monthly fee, and within a year, the

game's success had convinced Sony to buy Verant for \$32 million (Keighley). Today, over 430,000 subscribers pay Sony \$5 million every month.

## A Step Forward in Interactive Fiction

EverQuest's success stems in part from its effective implementation of interactive narrative. Traditionally, games have attempted to create immersive environments by building worlds displayed with better graphics and populating them with characters controlled by improved artificial intelligence. However, the key to EverQuest's success lies along less traditional lines. EverQuest creates a dynamic universe by powering its story with the human intellect. By allowing thousands of simultaneous users to interact with each other in an unconstrained world, the game allows people to create their own stories.

In *Flawed Methods of Interactive Storytelling*, Chris Crawford identifies choice as the fundamental element of interactive fiction. However, he acknowledges there is a problem with choice. To make an average length story reasonably interactive, Crawford conservatively estimates it will need to contain around 100 branches. If two alternatives exist at each branch, there need to be around  $2^{100}$  possible endings, which would take a billion people well over a trillion years to create (Crawford).

Computers are procedural, a fact Janet Murray identifies as one of the four fundamental properties of digital environments. Crawford's system runs into problems because it attempts create a dynamic environment with a static, procedural medium. Though clever procedural algorithms can create simulations of dynamic environments, the result will always be an inexact approximation. EverQuest circumvents this problem by eliminating the need to hard wire choices into the story. Rather than attempting to

predict ways in which the player will interact with the computer, EverQuest instead allows the players to interact with a much more dynamic engine: the human mind. The game is literally brought to life by thousands of human players.

This technique was perhaps first employed in a graphical system called Habitat, created by Lucasfilms. After Habitat's developers spent hundreds of hours designing and building a treasure hunt called D'nalsi Island Adventure, the puzzle was solved in 8 hours. Instead of trying to control the story, they soon adopted a new paradigm: "let the players themselves drive the direction of the design." The new methodology "proved far more effective," a lesson which has been adopted by its successors, including EverQuest (Morningstar and Farmer).

These ideas have been employed by EverQuest in a more successful manner than any other US game in history. It has the largest virtual population in the United States, which in a sense makes it the most alive. EverQuest popularity has helped validate interactive fiction by demonstrating its mass appeal. However, EverQuest is also an example of the flaws of dynamic fiction. It has done such a convincing job of creating an immersive, dynamic environment that for some users, their online lives have become better than their offline lives. EverQuest has proven to be a 'virtual' recipe for addiction.

### Addiction: The Darker Side of Interactive Fiction

In recent years, EverQuest has been the subject of intense media scrutiny stemming from its incredibly addictive game play. David Becker, a journalist for ZDNet, sums up the controversy with the title of his article: *Games Junkies - Hooked on Heroinware?* The article relates the story of an EverQuest player named Dennis Bennet,

who's grades and family suffered on account of his year long obsession with EverQuest. Becker is not the only one to have drawn a parallel between substance abuse and long hours spent playing EverQuest, which has earned the nickname EverCrack. "It can be...as compulsive as a drug", surmises Dominic Utton, in an article written for The Express. Like much of America, he is convinced that "the virtual world can be every bit as dangerous as real life" (Utton).

The most severe critics of the game are often found amongst its most dedicated players. In an article posted on Slashdot, David Sanftenburg hypothesized that one thing which all players of EverQuest have in common is a hatred of Sony. The game demands players slave away for hours to beat horrendously long quests in order to advance in the game. After completing these quests, David believes most players have long since ceased enjoying the game. However, they are unable to quit "because they are addicted. They are addicted to the mobs, to the loot, to the social atmosphere with other people in their guilds" (Sanftenburg).

Though David's article was very controversial, and was rebuffed by a number of avid gamers who claimed that EverQuest was simply a game which could be quit at will, there have been an equal number of testimonials which affirm his theory. Over 60% of the EverQuest players who responded to a survey conducted by Nicholas Yee admitted they suffered from an addiction. Some of those surveyed claimed to love the game despite their inability to quit, but others told chilling stories of crumbling lives:

Yes, I am now officially a hermit. I had problems keeping in touch with old friends to begin with. Now it's rare I see anyone other than the two people I live with. Both of which also play EQ, constantly. My girlfriend, and my roommate. Neither of them have jobs, and both of them play EQ 95% of their time awake...I don't have a phone plugged in anymore, I just check messages now and then. I don't answer my door. I barely talk to any friends or family. We have fun, I love EQ... but it -IS- without a doubt, an addiction. When your sitting there, knowing you have important things to do, but keep playing

anyway... when your two closest loved ones can't pry themselves from "the game" to get themselves lives... when there is no food or clean clothes... etc... etc... (Nicholas Yee)

The controversy has become especially heated following the Nov 28, 2001 suicide of Shawn Woolley. Obsessed with the game, Woolley played until minutes before taking his own life. Elizabeth Woolley, who blames her son's death on EverQuest, has sued Sony in an attempt to force them to put warning labels on the game boxes. She believes that EverQuest is "...like any other addiction. Either you die, go insane, or you quit. My son died" (Utton). So far, Sony has denied responsibility for Sean Woolley's death, blaming the suicide on mental illness.

A multitude of critics agree with Elizabeth Woolley's analogy between EverQuest and drugs, though they are hesitant to isolate Sony as the sole perpetrator of the problem. Jay Parker, a chemical dependency counselor, admits that EverQuest "could be created in a less addictive way," but such a difference would be analogous to the "difference between powdered cocaine and crack cocaine" (Miller). Many experts believe the fascination with EverQuest is no more detrimental than the compulsive behavior people have shown towards other aspects of the internet. People have become just as addicted to downloading pornography and online gambling. Furthermore, EverQuest is only one of many addictive MMORPGS. Other MMORPGs such as Electronic Art's Ultima Online and Microsoft's Asheron's Call have created similar complaints and are equally responsible for the problem. But regardless of where the blame may lie, few deny that EverQuest has the potential to create obsessive, damaging addictions.

**The Source of the Addiction: When Fantasy is Better Than Reality**

The EverQuest box promises adventurers a “living, breathing fantasy world which continually evolves,” a promise remarkably well delivered. The game’s completely immersive environment, created through open ended game play and a population of thousands of human controlled characters, is its most innovative and attractive feature. However, EverQuest makes the fantasy world so real that for many players their virtual lives seem more attractive than their actual lives. Norrath, EverQuest’s artificial planet, offers players social opportunities, prestige, a sense of accomplishment, and equality which they often lack in the real world. When combined with a game that lasts forever, these elements can create an addictive experience from which many players have trouble escaping.

The design of EverQuest makes socializing an important and rewarding part of the game. There is a chat system which allows conversations between individuals,

groups, or across entire virtual nations.



**Forming Groups is Essential to Beating Large Monsters**

Commands called emotes create gestures to make characters more expressive. Combat is structured such that forming a group with other people makes winning battles much easier. Finally, to help give structure to the

virtual society, EverQuest allows the formation of social clubs called guilds,

which serve as a focal point for interaction. Scott McDaniels, vice president of marketing for Sony Online Entertainment, emphasizes the social element of his company’s game.

He claims it is “the community aspect of it” which draws people into EverQuest. “You are in this virtual world interacting and talking with other people” (Fisher).

In game socializing is particularly attractive to women. In *Complete Freedom of Movement: Video Games as Gendered Play Spaces*, Henry Jenkins theorizes that the play of boys, which exhibits “energy, self-assertion, noise, and a frequent resort to violence”, stands in stark contrast to the sphere of women, which is defined by “kindness, morality, nurture and a gentle spirit” (Jenkins, 7). Starting from early childhood, males seem drawn towards games emphasizing competition and aggression, while women tend to focus on socializing and character development. These differences are reflected in the preferences of players of EverQuest. Nicholas Yee found that women tend to “find the social interaction in the game significantly more appealing than male players” and “while female players play EverQuest to build relationships, male players play EverQuest [to] achieve goals” (Nicholas Yee). EverQuest has cracked the female market by offering an alternative to the narrowly focused hack and slash violence which dominates most modern games.



An Everquest Chat Window

Unfortunately, socializing on EverQuest can easily get out of control. The anonymity and lack of responsibility in the online world often serves as an addictive social crutch to people who are otherwise socially awkward. Liz O' Donnell, who is admittedly shy, points out that in EverQuest "a lot of the barriers that keep people from making friends in real life are not there" (Avatars Offline). Though this is not inherently bad, it can create a dependence on the game. "I'm afraid that I would be fairly lonely without it", says O' Donnell (Avatars Offline). Psychological studies of MUDs, which offer a similar social environment, have proven that players tend to be more introverted than the average person (Sempsey and Johnston). Similar data from the Norrathian Scrolls shows that people who score in the bottom quartile of Openness tests play significantly more hours than those who score in the top quartile. Many players admit that they have had better social experiences online than offline. In light of these facts, it is not surprising that people are willing to sacrifice their friends in order to play EverQuest, since they often find their relationships inside the game more fulfilling than those in real life.

Another attractive element of EverQuest is a continual system of rewards. After killing monsters, crafting items, and dying an unknown number of times, players are eventually rewarded with a new experience level. Nicholas Yee compares the pseudo random reward system in EverQuest to a skinner box. B.F Skinner was a psychologist who claimed "the frequency of a given behavior is directly linked to whether it is rewarded or punished (Nicholas Yee). In Skinner Boxes, mice are trained through a process known as Operant Conditioning, which in its most effective form involves giving random food pellet rewards for doing certain tasks (Nicholas Yee). In EverQuest, the

food pellets are better trade skills, magic, and melee attacks, but the idea is the same.

The desire to achieve the next level can often drive people online compulsively. A

twenty seven year old women's story relates just such a problem:

Yes, I consider myself addicted to EQ. I haven't tried quitting yet, but I will have to in a few months. I don't spend enough time with my 2 1/2 year old daughter. I'm a full-time mom, and my daughter watches TV all day while I play the game. In September, I will start home schooling her, so I'll have to cut down on my EQ time. I'd like to stop now so I would have time to take her to the park during the week, or even let her play in the backyard, but leveling, getting new spells and new skills is all I think about. (Norrathian Scrolls)

When asked what they find appealing about EverQuest, most players surveyed agreed that they enjoyed the feeling of accomplishment. (Nicholas Yee). For some, such as Mike Cherry, who plays the game 25-30 hours per week, the attraction can be as simple as the pump of adrenaline which accompanies the sense of achievement, something that can occur in any game (Fisher). However, players often begin to prefer the power and prestige earned online to their less impressive status offline. David Bennet, who admits the game nearly ruined his life, believes that for him "the most addictive part...was definitely the gain of power and status. The way in which you progressively gain power [makes] you become more [of] an object of awe [to] the other players...each new skill isn't enough" (Becker). For people who are unsatisfied by their accomplishments in real life, EverQuest creates an alternate reality where they can remake themselves. Many players openly admit they find their online characters more impressive than who they are in real life. "It is easier to succeed in EQ," said one EverQuest player. "I can be beautiful, fit and healthy in EQ - in real life I am chronically ill and there isn't much fun or achievement to be had" (Nicholas Yee). If it is accepted that an online life can outshine real life, it becomes understandable how a player can sacrifice the latter for the former.

A distinctive feature of EverQuest is its emphasis on equality, which makes it appealing in a culture divided by age and gender. Adolescents cannot vote till they are twenty-one or drink till they are eighteen. But in EverQuest, the lack of age distinctions makes a child in grade school no different than a middle aged lawyer. Traditional social hierarchies where the young are subservient to the old not only do not exist, but at times are entirely reversed. Players who are usually leaders of questing groups tend to be significantly younger than those who are accustomed to playing non-leadership roles (Nicholas Yee).

While few would claim that women and men are treated equally in EverQuest, women are in positions of authority more often than their male peers. Over 45% of women are officers in their guild compared to less than 34% of males, and around 10.1% of female players are guild leaders compared to only 6.8% of males (Nicholas Yee). Though a leadership position in the context of a video game may seem trivial, guild officers play a significant role in EverQuest. Approximately 81.8% of EverQuest players participate in guilds, which act as social clubs through which players can organize quests or simply hang out (Nicholas Yee).

No matter how enthralling a reader might find a book, they can put it down when they reach the end. But in EverQuest there is no end; no way to win. The servers run 24 hours per day. The only reason to leave the fantasy is a personal desire to return to the ordinary world. But for some people, the game offers them things they don't have in their own life, and therefore they lack the will to leave. For the addict, EverQuest becomes a substitute for reality.

## Conclusion

EverQuest's incredibly immersive environment puts it at the frontier of interactive fiction. Its tremendous popularity has demonstrated the immense potential of immersive story telling. However, the advancement of interactive fiction has not been without consequence. The world of EverQuest is not only immersive, but also incredibly addicting. It creates an alternate reality so engaging that players begin to prefer the digital world over the physical world. People sacrifice their friends, jobs, and education for a virtual reality that offers prestige, social opportunity, and equality not available to them in real life.

This paper is not meant to be a condemnation of interactive fiction. Spending time in the world of EverQuest offers many positive benefits beyond simple entertainment. Studies show that players of interactive fantasy games show "heightened degrees of friendliness" (Sempsey and Johnston). Many respondents to Nicholas Yee's study believed EverQuest improved their ability to interact with other people in real life, and helped them learn to behave appropriately in groups. The game presents leadership opportunities to people who might otherwise be reclusive. Finally, on a somewhat unrelated note, it is important to remember that most people choose to play EverQuest because they enjoy it, and it is unfair as an outsider to claim to know better what they should do with their time.

Instead, this paper is meant to shed some light on the possible negative side effects of creating more immersive worlds. EverQuest has demonstrated that people will sacrifice their quality of life, sometimes uncontrollably, if they are given the opportunity to live in a more appealing virtual world. One survey found that over 20% of the players

of EverQuest would spend all their time in Norrath if they had a choice, a chilling statistic (Keighly). EverQuest has demonstrated a new and disturbing addiction: the addiction to an alternate reality. Janet Murray describes the Holodeck from Star Trek as the ultimate form of interactive story telling. The Holodeck has the ability to create fictional scenes which can be talked to, touched, and tasted. Though this sounds appealing, the example of EverQuest makes one question how such an invention would affect society. If someone could choose to live in any world they wished, would anyone choose our flawed reality over a perfect fantasy?

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