

MSc Thesis in Interaction Design

# Dereth and its Inhabitants

- A Study of Asheron's Call with a User-Centric Perspective

Marie Eneman

Göteborg, Sweden 2003



IT University  
of Göteborg

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Department of Computing Science





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*For Ludwig, for almost always being patient with his mother when she has work to do!*

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## – A Study of Asheron's Call with a User-Centric Perspective

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### Abstract

There is tendency in our society to dismiss computer games as just games and nothing more. If this is so, why do so many people spend so much time in these game environments? The purpose of this thesis was to gain a deeper understanding of how the users feel about their playing, whether they experience the game environment and its activities as “real” or “fake”. The study also explores to what extent the users feel that the activities they carry out in the virtual environment have an affect on their lives. This work is part of a larger user-centric study carried out in the massively multiplayer online role-playing game called Asheron's call. An effect of this study is to hopefully make a contribution to the marginal academic debate and to improve the general level of understanding of Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games. The approach used in this study was to take a step into the environment that was studied, with the purpose of obtaining the users point of view of the studied phenomenon. This approach resulted in a deeper understanding for the users and how they feel about the activities that take place within the game environment and for the environment itself. There are many prejudices against computer games, this study discuss whether these are based on inadequate understanding and knowledge of the concept of what computer games really are. As this thesis will show, a majority of the users experience the game environment and its activities as a meaningful occupation, which has effects on their lives and they also consider Asheron's Call to be “real” and not “fake”. This thesis will also stress that it is important that designers, who develop these kinds of environments, have adequate knowledge of how the users use the environment and what kind of activities that take place within the environment. Designers must be aware of the power they possess and consider the social consequences that are generated from the developed environments.

**Keywords:** Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games, Social interaction, User-Centric Study, Virtual Environment, Asheron's Call, Design

<b>THESIS OUTLINE .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1. INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 Computer Games.....	2
1.2 Why is it Interesting to Study Computer Games?.....	3
1.3 History of Games .....	4
1.4 History of Computer Games.....	5
1.5 Virtual and Learning Environments .....	6
1.6 MMORPG .....	7
1.7 Social Capital .....	9
1.8 The Economics of Games .....	10
1.9 Technology Performance .....	10
1.10 The Purpose of this Thesis .....	11
<b>2. METHOD .....</b>	<b>12</b>
2.1 Quantitative & Qualitative Approaches.....	13
2.1.1 Quantitative Approach.....	13
2.1.2 Qualitative Approach.....	13
2.2 Evaluation .....	14
2.4 My Methodology.....	15
<b>3. RESULT .....</b>	<b>18</b>
3.1 Surveying Dereth.....	18
3.2 The Inhabitants of Dereth.....	21
Age .....	22
Gender .....	22
Domicile .....	23
Marital Status.....	23
Number of children.....	24
Occupation.....	24
Playing Habits.....	25
Friendship .....	31
Characters .....	36
Characters .....	36
Different gender.....	38
Impression .....	39
Allegiance.....	40
Morals.....	42
Reputation.....	44
Effects.....	46
Fake or not.....	47

Ability to learn.....	48
<b>3.3 Comparison with Two Parameters .....</b>	<b>50</b>
Time as a Parameter.....	50
Allegiance Membership as a Parameter.....	53
<b>3.4 Discussion Group &amp; Interviews.....</b>	<b>56</b>
<b>3.5 Saga’s Experience of Dereth.....</b>	<b>57</b>
3.5.1 Experiencing Darktide .....	64
<b>4. DISCUSSION.....</b>	<b>67</b>
4.1 But, is it real? .....	67
4.2 The Players.....	67
4.3 Playing Habits.....	70
4.4 Social Capital .....	72
4.5 Self Representation.....	74
4.6 Effects & Attitudes .....	76
4.7 Comparison with Two Parameters .....	77
4.7.1 Time as a Parameter.....	78
4.7.2 Allegiance membership as a Parameter .....	78
4.8 Substitute or Complement .....	79
<b>5. DESIGN ASPECTS .....</b>	<b>81</b>
5.1 Why Should Designers Bother?.....	81
5.2 Technical Design is Social Design.....	82
5.3 More Knowledge – “Better” Design.....	82
5.4 Designing MMORPG’s .....	83
5.5 Regulation .....	83
5.6 Who is, and Should be Responsible for This? .....	83
5.7 A Virtual Rape.....	84
<b>6. CONCLUSION.....</b>	<b>85</b>
<b>7. FUTURE WORK.....</b>	<b>87</b>
<b>8. REFERENCES .....</b>	<b>89</b>

## **Thesis Outline**

This thesis begins with a presentation of the research domain and the research question.

The introduction section will give the readers an overview of why this is an interesting area of study and point out the importance of these activities, how this phenomenon has developed and the side effects that they generate.

In the following method section, the approach used in this work will be presented. This section will describe how this study has been carried out and the motivation for the methodological choices will be laid out.

The following section deals with the results generated by the application of the method. The data from this work will be presented both in text and figures.

The collected data is then discussed in the preceding section. The results and other related aspects will be considered.

The following section, design aspects, will deal with the responsibilities the designer faces when developing new technology. This thesis argues that the responsibility is of both technical and social character.

The next section, which is the conclusion section, will try to summarize and point out some implications, and will return to the research questions that were formulated in the beginning of this work.

The thesis ends with some thoughts and reflections for future work.

## **1. Introduction**

Many people are spending a great deal of time in online game environments, despite the fact that many people partake in these gaming activities there have only been minor study of this growing phenomenon.

The purpose of this thesis is to gain a deeper understanding of how players feel about their playing, that is both how they feel about the activities that take place in the game environment and also how they feel about the environment itself. Whether they experience the game to be “real” or “fake” and if their game playing affects their offline lives, and if so, how.

The purpose is also to illuminate the role developers and designers play in the development and creation of massively multi-user online role-playing games (MMORPG) and other virtual environments. This work will show the importance of being aware of the fact that in virtual environments technical design is social design. The social implications of technical decisions are often difficult to predict but are no less important.

## 1.1 Computer Games

There seems to be something inherently negative about computer games. Parents worry about the effects of hours of sitting without moving, staring at a computer screen, they worry about the violence and the negative influence of the content in the games. At first glance this may seem to be a new horrible pastime that has arrived in our homes. But are computer games that different from earlier forms of entertainment? In the days before computer screens parents complained about television. If it was not television corrupting the minds of the young it was comics or books. The one constant is that one generation seems to be concerned about the activities of the next.

Today, if one was to believe the critics, computer games are a bad activity, their sole effect is to make the players less intelligent and due to the time spent with this asocial pastime the computer player must be less socially adept. The typical image is that it is only male teenagers and computer nerds who spend time on these second-rate activities. It is nothing new that computer games have a bad reputation, they are considered a waste of time and money, a pastime for the socially inept and therefore not worthy of a serious person's attention. According to this logic they are also unworthy of academic interest.

This was not true in the past and it is definitely not true today, as this work will show.

People have a tendency to criticise new things and phenomenon that they do not fully understand. One reason for this may be found in the lack of understanding of the actual phenomenon. The lack of understanding can then lead to criticism, hostility and prejudice (Marshall, 1990).

One possible conclusion of why there are prejudices against computer games is based on a large part due to the lack of knowledge of the game culture and a lack of understanding of the technological platform upon which it is based. It is mostly young people who possess the technological knowledge for playing computer games. However, as this study will show, this group is getting older than the media and popular conceptions would have us believe. People who lack in the technological knowledge of this new phenomenon dismiss computer games as a secondary activity. It is nothing new that people tend to take a suspicious and even hostile position towards new and unfamiliar phenomenon in society.

Whether gaming as an activity is bad or not is not the aim of this work to resolve. There are many pastimes which may be considered by a certain group to be good while another may claim it to be bad. The good/evil of a social activity also depends upon the society and culture of those making the judgement. Is watching television a worthy pastime? Is it better or worse to watch documentaries, opera, cartoons or sitcoms? Are all outdoor activities inherently good? Hunting used to be considered a pastime for the wealthy but today a growing opinion in our society is against it.

The answer to all these questions will only lead to a discussion on high or low culture and not provide any interesting material on computer games as such. The point of this work is not to argue the position of the good or bad of computer games. The question whether computer games are bad or not, is not the most interesting or important aspect to discuss. The important issue in this work is that online computer games are a

growing, important social activity which provide for a new form of social interaction independent of time/space constraints. This new interaction is important to understand and therefore important to study.

Here is an illustrative example of the obvious place computer games have in children's lives and how they grow up with these games in a natural way. The event took place in the end of January. My six-year-old son, Ludwig, had three of his classmates with him home after a day at school. After dinner all the children were quite tired and I suggested that we might play a game of "Den Försvarna Diamanten" together. This is a typical board game that families have played with their children over the last several decades. The suggestion was very popular with his friends who all clamoured to be the first to play. It was at this point I realised that they all took it for granted that I was referring to a computer game.

When I explained that this was not a computer game but a board game (in Swedish "sällskapsspel" which literally translates as a company game) one of the boys asked "A board game (sällskapsspel) what is that?" He seemed very sceptical to the whole suggestion. I also noticed that while playing the game the child who was unused to the concept of board games had difficulty in waiting for his turn to play.

This incident made me realise that computer games are changing the way in which home entertainment is perceived and this also changes the way in which we expect to play. It also serves as an illustration of the fact that young children have grown up with computer games as an obvious part of their lives and have a natural relationship towards them. An interesting question to think about under the circumstances is what their attitude towards computer games will be when they are adults and parents.

## **1.2 Why is it Interesting to Study Computer Games?**

The aspect that is interesting and important to explore further is the fact that this is an activity that attracts so many people. What is it with computer games that attract people?

Computer games are today a widespread activity for all sorts of people. Despite the fact that a large number of people devote so much of their time to computer games, our society still has a tendency to dismiss computer games as just games and nothing more (Linderoth, 2002). Whether or not the games are dismissed as a useless activity they are growing from a sub-culture into the mainstream culture. Computer games are not only dismissed as being mere games they are also valued less than other games in society. An example of this is the attitude towards a chess player as compared to a computer games player.

Since computer games are an everyday activity for many people, where they meet, interact with each other and spend a part of their lives they become a subject to be taken seriously and definitely an interesting subject for academic research. Even though computer games have a 40-year-old history, they still do not occupy a significant place in academic research. There is also an economic aspect which should be taken into consideration, according to Herz (2002) computer games are already a bigger industry than Hollywood.

The academic research, which has been carried out thus far in this area, has mainly concerned itself with questions related to the effects generated from these kinds of activities. The criticism of computer games is rather similar to earlier debates concerning other medias, for instance television. These debates have all too often got caught up in a prolonged discussion on whether the actual medium has negative effect on the user and promoted violent behaviour (Blomberg, 2001).

Some may argue that playing computer games stimulates negative and violent behaviour, this is a very important and interesting aspect that should be explored further. However, the fact is that the connection between violence and computer games has not been adequately established. There is a complex of problems involving this issue. We know through studies that it is possible for people to learn in virtual environments, but this approach is not applicable when it comes to the possibility for studying the violence related to computer games. There are several ethical aspects involved in this approach. People cannot just be placed in front of a computer game with violent content and sit there until they show aggressive or violent behaviour. Also the causality between games and violence is extremely hard to establish. Violence is a very sensitive subject to study, and it demands careful consideration and pathos for the people involved (Linderoth, 2002).

Computer games, and in particularly online games where the users interact with other users in real time, have already begin to change many people's relation/socializing habits and this will be extended in the future when more and more people start to play within these environments.

To gain a more nuanced understanding of the importance of computer games today it is important to understand the history of these games, otherwise it is easy to continue dismissing them as just games.

### **1.3 History of Games**

Games are an integral part of society and appear in all cultures in some form or another. While games in general include outdoor pastimes which have developed into sports this history is more interested in the development of the indoor game. Some games have migrated from one culture to become part of a more global game culture. Such games, such as chess and backgammon, are usually held in greater esteem than other games and have achieved a more respectable position in our society. The results of chess games are published in international media and are awarded attention usually reserved for politics or so called high culture.

Humans are by their very nature game-playing animals, cultures in all shapes have been developed through play. Play and games are cultural expressions for the tendencies and characteristics of a society. It is therefore important, when attempting to understand a social group, to understand its game interests. The inclination for playing is a central element in the nature of humans (Huizingas, 1938).

Games and playing are essential cultural activities. Historically, that is to say the games which have left their mark on history, the games have been designed to be suitable for adults and were considered to be an adult activity. While adults have pursued more sedate pastimes children were more commonly reduced to playing with

toys. This however has changed and children now have an array of games designed for them to choose from. These include traditional board games but also computer games. Today games attract a wide audience and can no longer be brushed aside as belonging to the realm of one age group (Parlett, 1999).

Most games are by their very nature social and require some form of interaction with others. This social side of games has led to their being historically closely associated with the development of social relations, social structures and hierarchies. The social aspect of the game has sometimes taken over from the actual game. The actual playing is often a secondary activity compared to the social aspects of games. The experience and the interaction are often more important than the playing (Parlett, 1999).

The important social activity of integrating and socialising with others has often been a legitimizing factor of games. This is why, when we today see the lone player at a computer, the concept of a-sociality quickly springs to mind. This is because we are not ourselves involved in the game. The single player game has an important function since it is a topic of discussion at social gatherings, much in the same way as television, books and plays can be discussed with others. The social aspects of online games should be easily spotted for anyone who has played or observed a player. This will be discussed much further in this work.

## **1.4 History of Computer Games**

The first computer games was “Spacewar” which was developed at MIT in the 1960s. Since then the development of computer games has mirrored the development and proliferation of computers in society. The early games were mostly based in arcades (King, 2002). This is due to the fact that most people did not have computer hardware available to them. Therefore to be able to play computer games it was necessary to go to special games arcades and pay per game.

The first types of computer games in the home were single-user games. The conception single-user means that the user plays a game on a local computer and that there are no other players involved in the game. An example of single-user game is the Arcade game with the Pong game, which is often described as the first successful computer game. Since it was the first game to make the successful transition from the arcade into the home (Haddon, 1993).

The network era made it possible to connect computers in different forms of networks. This was the starting point for so-called Multi User Domains or Multiple User Dungeons (MUD). Internet has raised several new forms of communication and interaction between people. It has made it possible to communicate and interact with people in real time regardless to the physical geographical location. This means that it is now much easier for people to get in contact with other people who actually share interests and valuations instead of just being geographically located near each other. With development of improved computer graphics and communications speed, the possibilities for computer games improved. With better computer graphics the step from text based MUD's to graphical environment was natural (Haddon, 1993).

The next step in the development of computer games came with the development of the so-called massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPG's) which allowed many more people to be online together than ever before. This development represents a new possible way for people to get together via the Internet. Online computer games can be described as geographically unlimited, non-physical spaces, where some kind of interaction takes place.

## **1.5 Virtual and Learning Environments**

Much of the work on virtual environment has its roots in the field of CSCW (computer supported collaborative work). With the advent of the computer network the concept of work and shared knowledge within organisations radically changed and the whole research field has grown up around this topic. It did not take long before the computer networking abilities were used for other purposes than work related tasks and eventually the need arose for research in the world of computer supported cooperative play. While the need is still growing and this area is a budding research field it has still to take its place among the more established areas.

A more accepted subsection of CSCW concerns the use of computer networks in collaborative learning. This field has its roots in the areas of organisational memory, knowledge management and distance or computer mediated learning. One important truth to come from this research area is that the computer in general and the virtual environment in particular can be successfully used for educational purposes (Nuldén, 1999 & Svensson, 2002).

Virtual environments are particularly useful in education since they have the ability to provide simulations of reality. The US Military, for example, use different kinds of virtual environments for simulations of different kinds. The US military has also developed computer games for recruitment and training purposes (Eng, 2002).

Social skills are developed in interaction. People learn and develop their social skills when they interact with other people in their everyday lives, regardless if the environment is online or offline. These activities are often more important than the environment/context. This thesis explores whether the users feel that they learn anything, which is relevant for them in their everyday lives through their game playing. An interesting follow up question is, whether it is important for users of a computer game to feel that they learn anything from their playing?

The virtual environment is becoming increasingly important both in the fields of work and play. Despite its growing importance it has been difficult to define exactly what a virtual environment means. The concept, virtual environment, is not well defined since it is used with different meanings in different contexts. Stolterman and Jakobsson (1999) argue that while there is no accepted definition of what a virtual environment is, it may contain certain characteristics. The most important of these are presence and constancy.

A virtual environment is primarily distinguished by the fact that a certain technology allows people to interact with each other in real time. Graphical representation is often used to enhance the feeling of presence among the users. The users can interact with each other via an avatar, which is a graphical representation of the self which in the

digital world may take any shape – most commonly decided by the technology platform being used. The avatar works as a graphical representation for the user's persona in the virtual environment. (Stolterman & Jakobsson, 1999)

Virtual environments are different from other Internet based technologies since these environments offer the users a constant place and time. The virtual environments are not static, but they are always there. They do not disappear when the users leave them. This is a quality that separates these environments from other Internet based communication systems. The graphical representations are also constant, which means that users can use their avatars over long term. This use over time facilitates the growth of relations between avatars and between users and avatars.

It should be pointed out that virtual environments are not the same thing as virtual reality, even though virtual environments often use virtual reality technology. Even here definitions have not reached a consensus but simply put: virtual reality is a technology which may or may not be used to create a virtual environment.

The knowledge we have about our offline environments and behaviour is not immediately applicable on virtual environments. The knowledge we have of the offline world affects the online environment and our behaviour in them. While our offline environments affect our behaviour, these relatively new environments demand a new set of knowledge more relevant to the environment. It is therefore important to encourage more research in this area.

One of the major strengths with virtual environments is that these environments are available to the users regardless to the user's physical/geographical location. This means that it is easier for people to be organized by shared interests instead of just geographical neighbourhood (Baym, 2001). This fact, coupled with the rise and dissemination of Internet technology has given rise to a new form of community, which brings people together around shared values and interests, and it also provides the ability to establish relations and friendships (Rheingold, 1993).

## **1.6 MMORPG**

The creation of the MMORPG heralded a new era of game interaction. The communications pattern changed – no longer were users dependent upon playing alone or one-against-one. Several players joined forces and played simultaneously in the same environment despite the fact that they could physically be located far away from each other and in different time zones. The fact that several users were able to meet simultaneously online in this manner was not new. Internet chat forums had already been developed and were commonly used. The MMORPG however provided something different.

The MMORPG contained not only the ability of users to interact but it also contained (and they still contain) an internally coherent world. This world either had a history or developed one. The world was not dependent upon a single user. If a user logged off the story continued. At the same time the sum experiences of all the users drove the story onwards. The storyline may be relatively fixed and set up but this does not deter the users from developing a larger story as an appendix to the game. For example in the game Diablo (the original was a MORPG and allowed only four players in each

game but thousands more in the chat areas). A number of guilds sprang up. The guilds could sometimes act as a complement to the game and help the players find friends to play with. The guilds could also develop whole histories outside the game which the members would incorporate into the game itself.

In MMORPG's people interact with each other in a persistent virtual world/environment. Since the environments are persistent, the activities that happen within them have lasting consequences, both narrative and social (Herz, 2002). This enhances the sense of reality within the game. In the game *Ultima Online* (a MMORPG) the users could collect enough wealth to buy houses which would remain in the game even when the users were not logged on. Other users could not enter the houses unless of course they managed to find lockpicks with which to open the door. This meant that the house could be burglarised when the owners were not there. The fact that the games are persistent affects the users partly by enhancing their experience of the environment and partly by tempt the users in a more psychological way through elicit a habit of using and returning to the environment (Herz, 2002).

An important part of MMORPG's is the creation of characters, videlicet avatars. When a character/avatar is created, it is equipped with certain skills and other characteristics, but besides those concrete qualities social reputation, status and social interaction are built into the character. The enjoyment and the success in these environments are often more dependent on the social interaction and ones reputation, rather than fights or combats (Herz, 2002).

Another advantage of the persistence of these environments is the fact that the characters can be developed. The development of characters was a feature originally only available in single player games. This was often due to the fact that the technical problem of saving the character. Once this was possible a new concept in gaming was developed. The advantage of developing characters was that the user could create a greater attachment to her or his avatar. Another advantage was that the social standing of a player could be observed through the level of her or his avatar. All this promoted the allegiance to the game and created a loyalty among the players to continue playing the game.

All these features discussed above are part of the lure and attraction of online computer games but there are more features in which the online games is better than the single player game. In a single player game the opponent is generated and controlled to some level by artificial intelligence (AI). The level of AI in the game often sets the standard of difficulty and enjoyment in a single player game. However AI has serious limitation in computer games since it cannot learn from its mistakes. This means that the single player can eventually learn the weaknesses of her or his computer opponent and become unbeatable – at this point the game loses most of its attraction. When playing with “real” opponents this does not happen since the player can always find a worthy opponent or companion with which to play. The most important aspect is, however, that the users in a MMORPG are never simply a passive audience but they are part of the narrative and can change the whole game by their attitudes towards it.

Many computer games are structured in a way that is directly appealing to the basic behaviour of people and contains different element as for instance interaction,

competition, collaboration, reputation, status, friendship, conflict – or as Herz (2002) puts it “game, and gamers, have more to do with anthropology than code”.

## 1.7 Social Capital

An interesting aspect is what the players get out of their gaming. In our society we believe that time should be spent profitably. Even relaxation should be maximised in some form or another. As we have already shown the computer is respected as a work tool but when it is used for relaxation it is not viewed positively. The main assumption is that the MMORPG player, like his other computer game counterparts are not doing anything productive with their time and therefore they cannot be obtaining anything of real value in there lives.

This work, however, begins with the hypothesis that users are able to obtain different values that have relevance for both their online and offline lives. The amount of time and money spent on computer games and even more so the amount of time spent interacting must provide some form of worthwhile social contribution to the lives of the users. The question is then what form of social advantage can be obtained via the use of an avatar and is this social advantage only limited to the online environment or can it somehow be transported to the offline world.

That the avatar can create a social capital is easily seen and that the users gain a social standing within the game is also something that we can observe. However, without more studies it is difficult to see if the social standing within a virtual environment can affect the offline lives of the users. Notwithstanding this, a speculation that can be allowed is that a feeling of accomplishment in one area of ones life does increase the feeling of worth in the whole of one life.

An important component of social capital is trust. For two or more people to be able to interact successfully with each other it is important that they share a certain level of trust. The level of trust required naturally depends upon the type of interaction (or transaction) to be carried out (Coleman, 1990). The question of trust is an interesting one, especially in virtual environments, since the trust required must be created by using avatars. In face-to-face interaction trust can be developed by the signals we receive in the meeting. Can this trust be replicated in an online environment? The question quickly becomes moot once one spends any time online. The players interact with each other and show feats of trust. The trust of an avatar is developed from their past dealings with the same avatar or in some cases with the avatar from certain guilds. These types of interactions support the concept of trust presented by Baier (1986).

Ågren (2000) writes that the reason for choosing to participate in a certain virtual environments or communities is related to the purpose of the environment. He argues that added value earned from that environment could be seen as a social capital, which the user can use both online and offline. Some activities that take place online can in its extension improve and develop the users personalities in their everyday lives both online and offline. This generated added value can be seen as a social capital, which is of major importance for the user experience of the environment.

As this thesis will show a majority of the users in Asheron's call experience that they can trust other players. So this thesis will argue that virtual environments generate an added value for the users, even though this value/social capital sometimes is difficult to discern and define.

## **1.8 The Economics of Games**

While the more serious will continue to look down their noses at computer games and consider it to be an activity beneath them, very few are able to ignore the economic impact of the industry. The commercial computer game industry is a growing part of the entertainment industry in the United States alone the industry generates \$7 billion (Herz, 2002).

The reason for this impressive growth depends, according to Herz (2002), on the "user-driven innovation in software design and the social ecology driving online multiplayer games". It is difficult to deny that a substantial part of the game economy is derived from the MMORPG and this is despite the fact that these games are still, both technically and economically, in their infancy.

According to the Economist (2002) the global sale of computer games software and hardware will exceed \$31 billion this year. This expansion will continue since the children who grow up playing computer games continue to play, which benefits and expands the market for these games (Anonymous, 2002). Another aspect of the game is the marketing approach. Loyal players provide an excellent source of word of mouth advertising, since players who play the same game for a long time do so because they are pleased with the game and they talk about that with their friends and relatives.

A relatively new marketing revenue resource which has yet to be properly harnessed is the placing of advertisements inside the virtual environments. This type of product placements will provide the companies wishing to market with a method for reaching a large consumer group.

## **1.9 Technology Performance**

The computer game industry is a rapidly developing sector economically but it is also working hard to expand its technological perimeters. The number of players in any one game and on any one server at a single point in time is still a major feature of the technology development. However, the development of the games and servers is only one aspect. With the development of computers in general the ability to run bigger and more complex games is becoming more and more real. Processing speeds are still rising and computer storage space is becoming cheaper and more available.

These developments are coupled with the increasing supply of bandwidth to individual consumers. The lowering of technology prices and the affordability of high bandwidth are serious parameters in the technical realm of computer development.

Online games rely and are dependent on high-speed Internet connections. The spread of broadband has taken much longer to spread than the game industry has hoped. There are not so many people that have broadband only for gaming purpose, therefore

the market for online games is dependent and limited to those who already have it. The problem facing computer game developers is how often they can upgrade and demand that their users have a certain level of technology. Games today require relatively new computers with relatively impressive graphic cards. The MMORPG's of the future may also require broadband. If these developments continue one can ask the legitimate question if certain games may be, technically speaking, ahead of their time.

## **1.10 The Purpose of this Thesis**

Taking as a starting point that many people are spending a great deal of time in online game environments and refuting the position that these activities are a waste of time this study works for a greater understanding of the social aspects of MMORGP playing. Outsiders, often uninitiated in online games, have tried to carry out previous attempts to study players and online games. This patronising view perpetuates the games-as-time-waste view. This thesis is based on data from an online survey and from participating within a MMORPG with the ambition to understand the online activities from the users own point of view.

At this stage it is worth repeating the purpose of this thesis. The purpose is to gain a deeper understanding of how players feel about their playing, that is both how they feel about the activities that take place in the game environment and also how they feel about the environment itself. Whether they experience the game as “real” or “fake” and if their game playing affects their offline lives, and if so, how. The purpose is further to illuminate the important role played by developers and designers of these kinds of environments and argues that it is important to understand the social implications generated by the technology choices made in the design process.

## 2. Method

Several methods were combined in the creation of this work. The purpose of this combination of methodological approaches was to obtain both wide and deep data to be analysed and to be able to reach useful conclusions. Another purpose was to struggle to achieve a user-centric perspective throughout the study. The purpose of striving for a more user-centric perspective, was to be able to obtain an insiders perspective of the actual phenomenon instead of studying it from the outside. This approach will hopefully result in a more accurate picture of the user's point of view of the environment and the activities that take place therein.

Methods used in this thesis are a combination of theory overview, data treatment/collection from an online survey (Axelsson & Regan, 2002), online participation and observation, discussion groups and interviews. This means that both quantitative and qualitative methods have been used.

This study has also used the causality theory (Backman, 1998) for the comparison of different variables. The study of causality is an attempt to look for relations between cause and effect. This approach is often used in different experimental methodologies. The purpose for using this approach was to be able to find variables that effect or cause another variable. This is to say, how an independent variable effects or causes a dependent variable. The chosen causality variables for this study were time and allegiance. The purpose was to explore how these two variables affected the users attitude towards the game and the environment.

The reason for this combination of methods was to be able to gain a deeper sense for the area studied instead of only obtaining data. Depending upon the goals of any project there may be a danger embedded within traditional research methodologies. This is especially true when it involves the application of traditional methods to a new field without adjusting them to better suit the area of study. This thesis will present statistical results generated from the online survey. However, while these results are important and interesting they should be seen as one element used to gain a better understanding of the problem domain. The other elements used, can be seen as both opposites and complementary to the statistical data.

The weakness with only working with statistical data is that the result becomes an average or a norm. In this case the result would have been an "average-player" and the non-average player would have been overlooked or marginalized. Since the aim of this work was to reach beyond the stereotype picture of players within MMORPG's, the informal group discussion meeting, the participation within the game and the individual interviews have played an important role for a deep understanding for the variety of people within these environments and their experiences.

By using more than one methodological element, a more fragmentary knowledge of individual players has been obtained. It is very interesting and important to be able to catch the minority views within an area and explore what it is that diversifies them and sets them apart from the majority. This is important since it leads to a greater understanding of what kinds of changes they would like to see within the environment. The trickiest part is always to try to catch the people who are not within

the studied area, because their reasons for not being there tells us much more about the research area (for example, not speaking can say a lot).

The focus of this methodological approach was to gain a user-centric perspective of the phenomenon of computer games in general and of MMORPG's in particular.

## **2.1 Quantitative & Qualitative Approaches**

### **2.1.1 Quantitative Approach**

Since there are a large amount of players in the MMORPG it is very interesting to obtain a large cross section of responses from many users of the game. The quantitative approach in this work is the result of an online survey carried out by Axelsson and Regan (2002). The survey was online during three weeks, from July 19 to August 13, 2001. In total 7364 people participated in the survey that was located online and available via a link from the official AC web page. The people who participated in the survey, automatically also took part in a lottery with the chance of winning a six-month free subscription to AC.

The survey consisted of 56 main questions, some containing sub questions. The survey contained both questions with default answers and free text fields. The purpose of the free text fields was to give the users a possibility to use their own words when describing different phenomena in AC.

The default answers were either designed as typically yes or no questions, or with multiple-choice questions, or with the possibility of rating different statements. For some questions it was also possible to choose more than one default answer.

This thesis is based on the answers of 1000 randomly selected participants. The reason for limiting this study to 1000 respondents was due to time constraints. Obviously limiting the number of respondent presented in this study is a methodological choice. The ideal study would obviously have had included all the respondents, but the use of 1000 respondents was such a large segment that it was able to give an adequate picture of the responses.

This study has treated 47 questions from the online survey, the questions that were considered relevant and important for this study were chosen. The reason for not treating all the 56 questions was that the remaining 9 questions concerned less relevant topics for the purpose of this thesis work.

### **2.1.2 Qualitative Approach**

Besides the analysis of the free text fields in the survey additional qualitative data was collected in different ways.

#### *2.1.2.1 Participation & observation*

Besides working with the data from the survey, participation has been carried out in Dereth, which is the world within Asheron's Call. About 80 hours has been spent in the environment, with the purpose of gaining a deeper understanding of what kind of activities take place in a computer game and the players' attitudes towards their activities and the milieu.

The participation can be seen as a complement to the data from the survey. By spending time in the environment that was studied, a deeper understanding evolved of the actual phenomenon (Hine, 2000).

To be able to knowledgeably discuss these kinds of environments and the social interaction that takes place within them, a good understanding of the phenomenon is required. One way to achieve this understanding is to spend time in the environment, just to obtain a feeling of what takes place within them, and how these environments are structured.

The participation section of the study was carried out by using an avatar, specifically created for this study. Its main purpose was to enable interaction and communication with other players. Hunting and exploring were secondary activities, which were carried out to achieve a more concrete understanding of the environment.

Traditional research approaches to virtual environments tend to attack them with an outsiders perspective. This means that the researcher attempts to explain and describe phenomena without actually experiencing them. By taking the step into the studied environment a greater understanding for both the context and the medium is achieved. (Jakobsson, 2002)

#### *2.1.2.2 Interviews and discussion groups*

To gain a deeper understanding of the long-term game player and the attitudes towards gaming and the game environment interviews and discussions were used to augment the understanding of the online gaming phenomenon.

The discussion group consisted of eleven long-term gamers. They have all played in several different online and offline computer games over a period of many years. A majority of the discussion group also have a long experience with role-playing games both on and offline. This discussion meeting took place in a seminar room at Chalmers and lasted for approximately 3 hours.

In addition to this, three deep interviews were carried out with long-term computer gamers. The interviews were unstructured conversations lasting between 45 – 60 minutes each and all three took place in local cafes.

## **2.2 Evaluation**

At this point it is important to examine the methodological choices and their implications for the results obtained. This thesis does not treat and compare male and female answers separately, even that it would have been interesting to find differences and similarities between the genders.

This study does not present the “No answer” choice. This is based on the fact that the responses within this category were negligible and therefore had little bearing on the results. The decision not to present these results was based upon the desire for additional clarity as opposed to providing too much information. Therefore this thesis is still able to give a fair and accurate picture about the area studied.

This is naturally a methodological choice and it could always be interesting to discuss the level of non-responses within the survey. However this has not been possible to do within the time constraints of this project.

The quantitative data that was generated by the online survey provides a mass of interesting results. These results must however be treated with a certain amount of care. Any questions asked by a survey are understood by the respondent in individual ways depending upon, for instance, the respondents frame of reference. Another factor which must be taken into consideration is the fact that while this thesis uses primary data results, the author did not create the questions which generated these results. This in turn adds another level of complexity.

In the use of qualitative data such as the observation and participation it is important to point out and consider that the communication within the studied environment, between the participating researcher and the players, could have been affected by the fact that when asked about occupation the author revealed the ongoing research. Another factor is that the participation also results in interpretations made by the researcher.

Perhaps the communication could have been somewhat different if the other players had not known that they were being studied, but the reason for being honest to the players is an ethical matter. This is also a methodological choice. But since it is important to obtain an adequate ethical level when studying, especially other people, their right to know that they are being studied as a part of a phenomenon should be the primary issue. The pursuit of pure data must be a secondary issue.

While the data gathering via interview and discussion group provides an important addition to the other data it is very susceptible to the interpretations of the researcher.

By using several parallel methods the author hopes to achieve a relative truth in this thesis. The mix of qualitative and quantitative approaches has been used to avoid the pitfalls of solely quantitative work i.e. a statistical approach to truth and the illusion that there exists an “average” player.

The ambition with this approach has not been to only look for the average player and his or her preferences, instead the ambition has been to gain a deeper understanding for the great variety of players and their preferences. Also to point out that people who play computer games are not a homogenous group, and should therefore not be treated as if they were.

## **2.4 My Methodology**

The work with this thesis began with a theory overview, which consisted of relevant literature for the actual research domain. When an overview over the area was obtained, the research question began to take its form and be clearer.

“Post-It” notes played an important role in formulation of the research question. During the theory overview these little yellow notes were used diligently. As soon as something interesting popped up, it was written down on a post-it, which means that

in the end of the theory overview there were lots of yellow post-its covering the desk. The next step with the notes was to cluster them in some logical way. By doing that a pattern was possible to discern amongst all the notes. The following step was to decide which question that felt most interesting and relevant to study further and if it was realistic to go further within the framework for this study.

When the research question finally was defined, the work of processing and analysing the data acquired from the online survey began. With the basis of the research question, the questions in the online survey were ranked according to priority.

Some questions could be seen as more important for this study than others. However this study has treated almost all questions, i.e. 47 questions of 56.

Since the online survey consisted of different sorts of questions the answers had to be processed in different ways.

The questions that were designed with default answers for the respondents, were processed with a statistical program. While the questions that were designed with free text fields, where the respondents could fill in answers in their own words, have been dealt with manually. This manual process entailed a grouping of answers into different clusters based on the purpose of the questions.

Parallel to the work of processing the data from the online survey active participation within the game has been carried out. The purpose of the participation was to observe and understand the game beyond the statistical data, approximately 80 hours have been spent within the game environment.

For the purpose of participation, two avatars were created for this study. The most frequently used avatar, was called Saga. A secondary avatar called Tallman was created for certain explorations within Darktide. The main purpose was to get an inside, hands-on feel for the game and the activities carried out therein. Saga hunted and killed monsters, but most of her time within the game she interacted with other players.

The participation and observation performed within the environment was also combined with a discussion group meeting and three individual interviews.

The discussion group consisted of eleven online game players that met for an informal discussion about games and gaming. This discussion group meeting was informal and not structured in any particular way. The participants talked about different aspects of their gaming experiences. Almost all the participants could recount some interesting and memorable stories from their playing.

As a complement to survey work the positive effects of group discussions are that the information gained is much richer in detail and is not controlled by the author of a survey, instead thoughts and stories are offered freely uncontrolled by the surveyor. The stories also elicit additional comments from the others within the group and also provoke others to tell their stories.

There are however drawbacks within this method and these are that group discussions can obstruct shy people for instance from speaking and there is a risk that there will be some shy people within the group.

To counteract the drawbacks from the group discussion and to gain a richer understanding of games individual interviews were carried out. Individual interviews are a good complement to discussions group since this is a forum where even shy people feel comfortable to talk.

The participation, group discussion meeting and interviews were carried out with the attempt to elicit a fundamental understanding and feeling for the importance of the game and the gaming for the users, not just information.

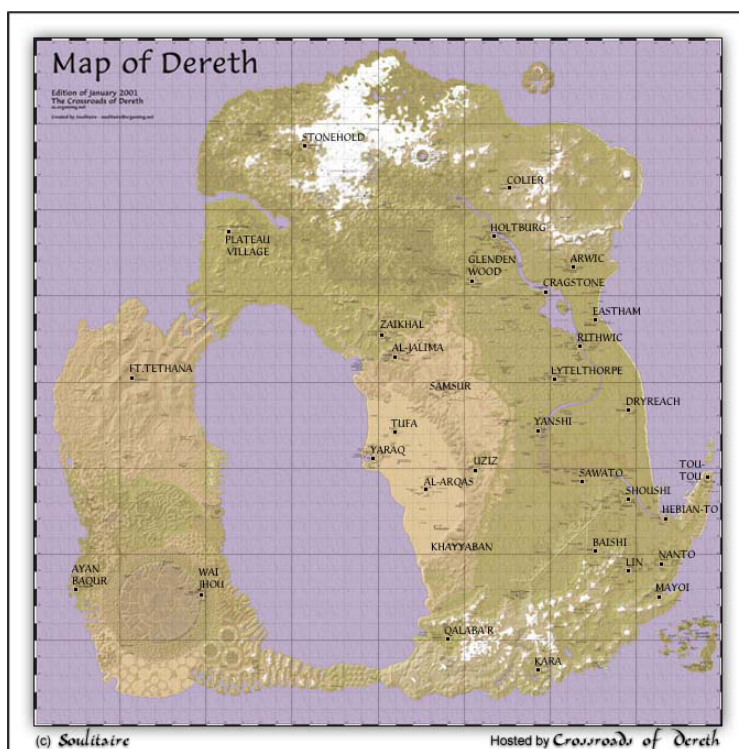
### 3. Result

In this section the results of the data will be presented with minor comments. For a full analysis of the data see the discussion section. This section will however start with a description of the studied game environment, Asheron's Call. The purpose with this approach is to give the reader a picture of the milieu, which will hopefully increase the readers understanding of the studied area and the following data that will be presented in figures.

#### 3.1 Surveying Dereth

The user-centric method used in this study is mainly based on the data generated from an online survey and from the author's own experiences in the MMORPG called Asheron's Call (AC).

Asheron's Call is a graphical MMORPG based on the mythical world of Dereth and is published by the Microsoft Corporation. It was launched in 1999 and has approximately 10,000-15,000 users logged in at any time. Asheron's Call consists of one main world, which is Dereth. Dereth consists of 8 different areas, which in reality are 8 different servers.



Picture 3. A map of Dereth

Asheron's Call offers traditional adventure game components, like hunting and exploring. It also offers several methods of social interaction. AC was designed with the conscious goal of promoting a high level of communication with others. This is

primarily done via the chat function and the addition of a radar function, which helps the user find other players in the game. AC offers two different group structures, allegiances and fellowships which both enhance the sociability among the users (King, 2002).

The major difference between an allegiance and a fellowship is that a fellowship is a temporary group structure that often lasts during a specific hunting or exploration foray, while allegiance lasts over a long-term and has a much more organised structure.

The purpose with the fellowship is that players are able to share experiences and communicate with each other in a facilitated way. The leader of the fellowship can dissolve the fellowship at any time and it is automatically dissolved when the leader leaves the game environment.

Players, who want to belong to an allegiance in AC, have to swear allegiance to a more powerful character within the game. By doing this, the more powerful player becomes the patron for the other player that has just joined the allegiance. The new allegiance member then becomes a vassal to the patron.

Allegiances have a more hierarchical structure than fellowships and the bond of an allegiance lasts indefinitely, until the patron or the vassal breaks it. Allegiances also contain several of different rules for their members.

(<http://www.microsoft.com/games/zone/asheroncall/>, 2003)



Picture 1 & 2. A male and female avatar in Asheron's Call

It is simple and does not take long to create avatars in AC. It is possible to choose many attributes from hairstyle, skin colour and clothes for the avatar. Skill and equipment are other attributes, which can also be easily selected for the avatar.

Another attribute for the avatars within AC is the possibility to use emotes. Emotes can be described as virtual social cues. It is a way to enhance the expression and emotions of the avatar in a specific situation. By using emotes the avatar perform some kind of smaller gesture, for example waving, and a text message will say “Saga waves”. See example of emotes on the picture below.



Picture 4. Saga waving

The environment of Dereth offers more than 500 square miles to explore, this area contains all types of terrain and the human architecture varies according to the towns and cities. As an example of the varied natural environment the earthquake is worth mentioning. It is, however, scheduled to occur at monthly intervals.

The basic structure, movements, and interactions are easily learnt and feel relatively intuitive to the users. When an avatar dies in Dereth it is resurrected immediately at a location pre-selected by the player.

To be able to attack or kill other players within AC the players must do one of two things. The first is to go to a server called Darktide, on this server killing is possible from the moment the players enter the world. The other option is to solve a unique quest within AC. Two players who have solved this quest have the ability to enter into combat with each other if both of them wish to do so. The author’s own experience of Darktide will be described in the result section.



Picture 5. A sunset in Asheron's Call

### 3.2 The Inhabitants of Dereth

This thesis deals with 47 main questions and some sub questions, which will be described in this section. The answers will be presented graphically, with a short text description of the main features of the data. The results will be discussed further in the next section, which is the discussion section.

Each figure will begin with the question from the survey, and then the response possibility. Short description over the response possibilities:

***Free text field*** – this means that the respondent has been allowed to use their own word with a varying maximum of characters.

***Default answers*** – this means that the respondent has a choice between two or more fixed answers.

This section contains also two comparisons. One uses time as a measure and attempts to discern possible relations between time and attitudes toward the game. The other comparison uses allegiance membership as a measure to explore whether the attitude toward the game is affected by this factor.

This section ends with the results that were obtained through the own participating within the game and with the group discussion meeting and the three interviews.

## Age

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*Question: Age?*

*Response possibilities: Free text field*

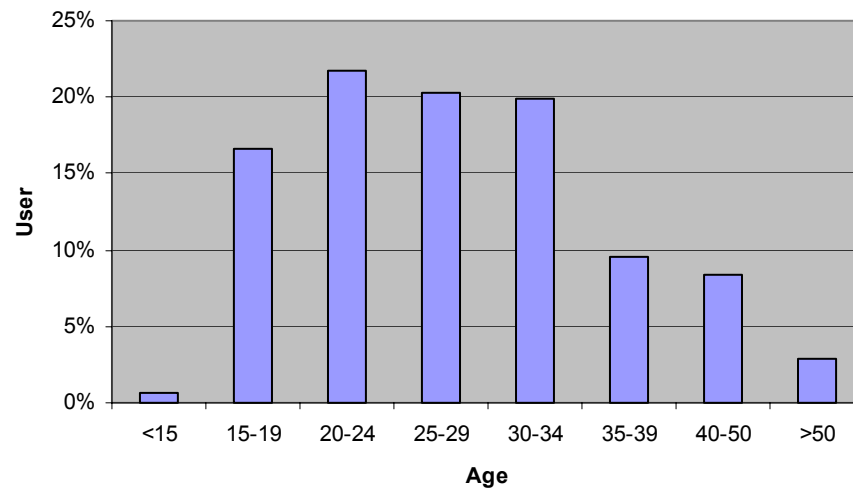


Figure 1. Players' age spread

The responses show that a majority, 78.5%, of the users are between 15-34 years old. The responses also show that the average player in Asheron's Call is 28.5 years old. The youngest player among the respondents is 13 years old, and the oldest is 69 years old.

## Gender

---

*Question: Gender?*

*Response possibilities: Default answers*

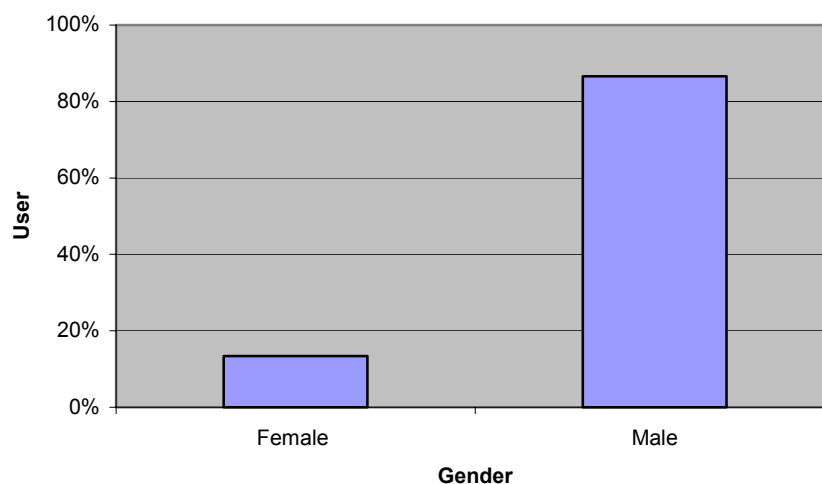


Figure 2. The gender spread

The responses show that 86.6 % of the users are male, while only 13.4 % are female.

## Domicile

---

**Question:** Country \* where you live?

**Response possibilities:** Default answers

(\* = Due to space constraints the countries have been clustered to continents.)

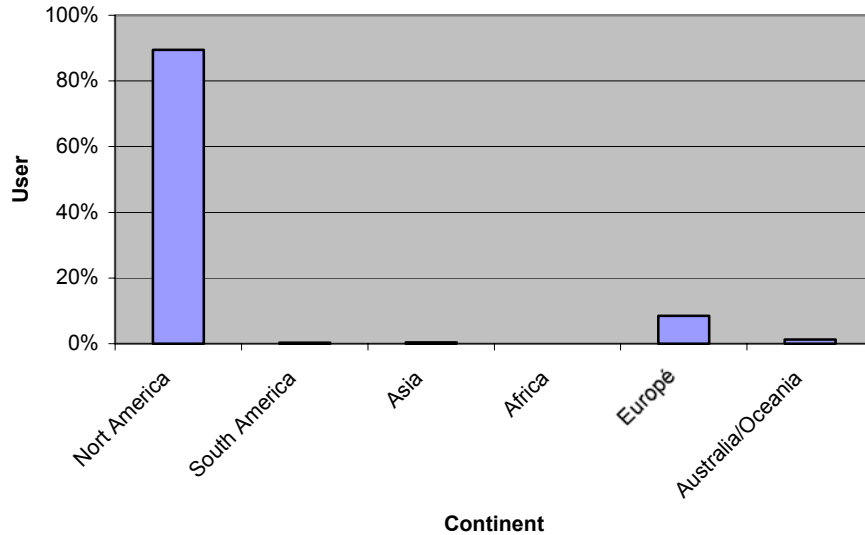


Figure 3. Continent where the player lives

The data shows that more than 80% of the users live in the western society, while there are very few users that live in Asia and none living in Africa.

## Marital Status

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**Question:** Marital status?

**Response possibilities:** Default answers

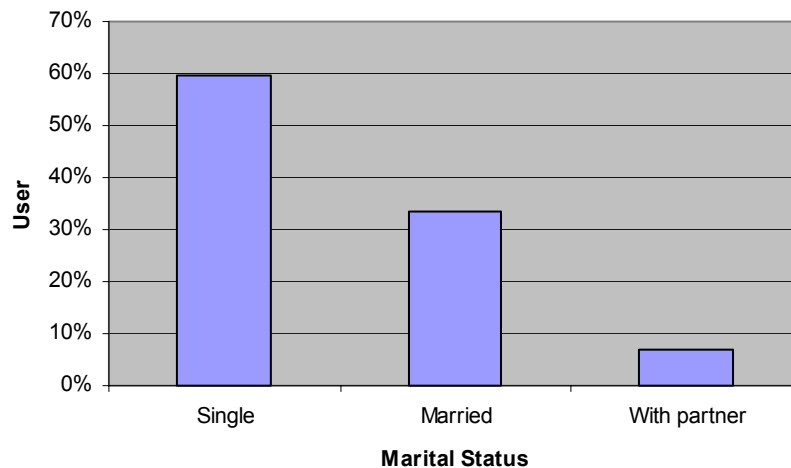


Figure 4. Marital Status

Among the respondents 59.8% are single, which constitute the majority of the respondents, while 33.3% are married and 6.9% have partners.

## Number of children

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**Question:** Number of children?

**Response possibilities:** Default answers

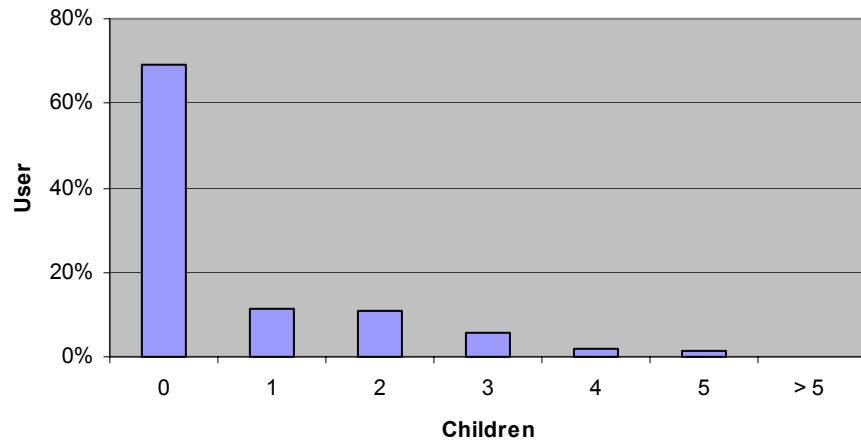


Figure 5. Number of children

The respondents show that the majority, 69%, of the responses have no children, while 27.8% of the respondents have reported that they have between 1-3 children.

## Occupation

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**Question:** Please indicate your occupational category (note that there is a “student” option)

**Response possibilities:** Default answers

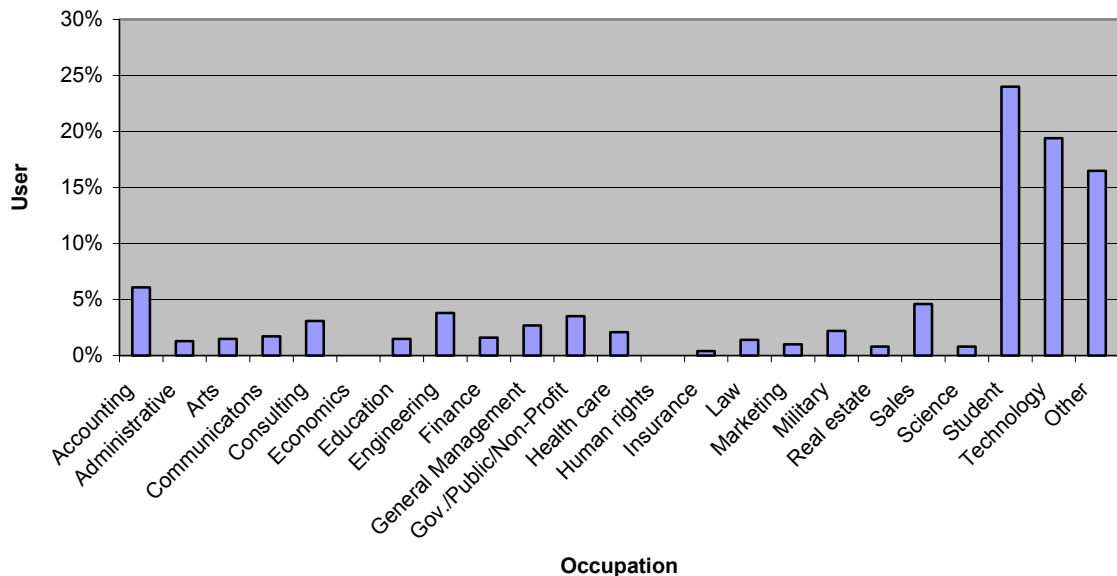


Figure 6. The player's occupations

The student option constitutes the majority of the responses, 24%, with the technology option following closely behind with, 19.4%, and in a third place the “other” option, which constitutes 16.5% of the responses.

## Playing Habits

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**Question:** For how long have you been playing Asheron's call?

**Response possibilities:** Default answers

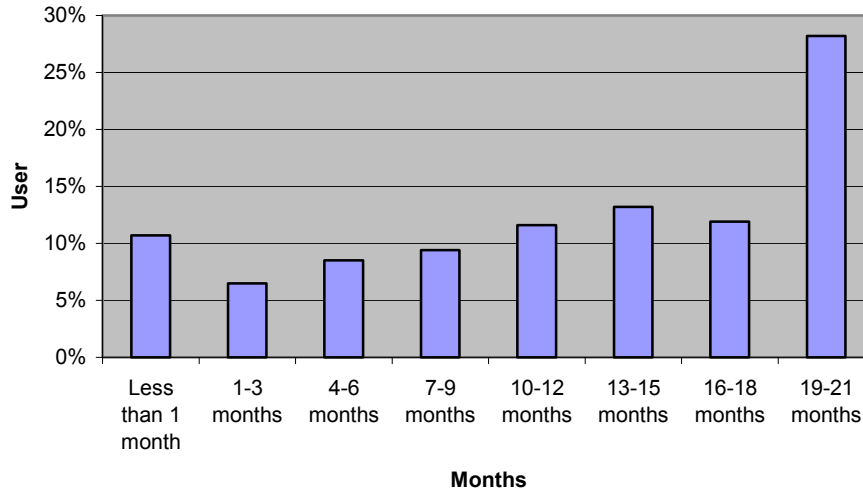


Figure 7. How long the users have played Asheron's call

The responses show that a majority, 64.9 %, of the users have played AC longer than 10 months, and the majority of these have played between 19-21 months. Which is since the game was launched.

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**Question:** How much time do you spend playing AC in a typical week (in hours)?

**Response possibilities:** Free text field

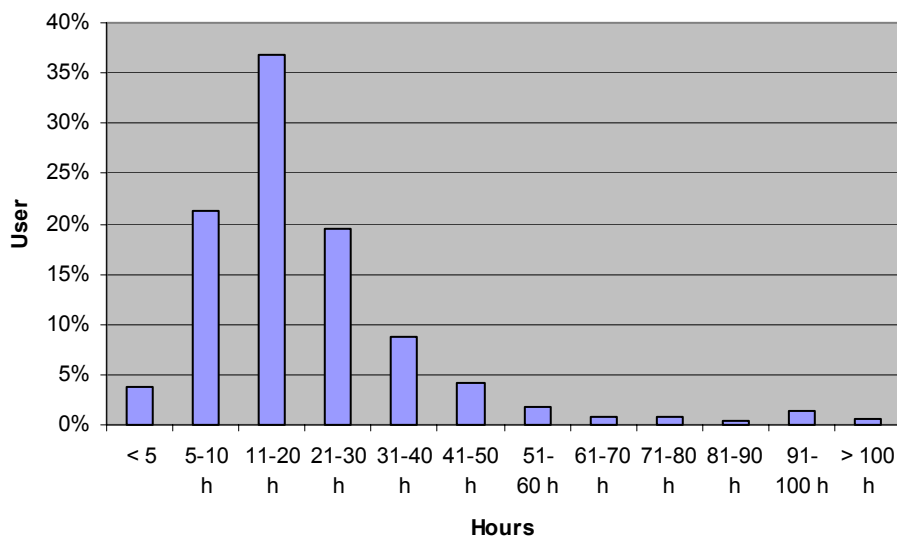


Figure 8. How many hours the users spend playing AC in a week

The responses show that a majority, 77.8%, of the users play 5-30 hours a week and of these 36.9% spend between 11-20 hours a week.

**Question:** How long is your typical AC playing session (in hours)?  
**Response possibilities:** Free text field

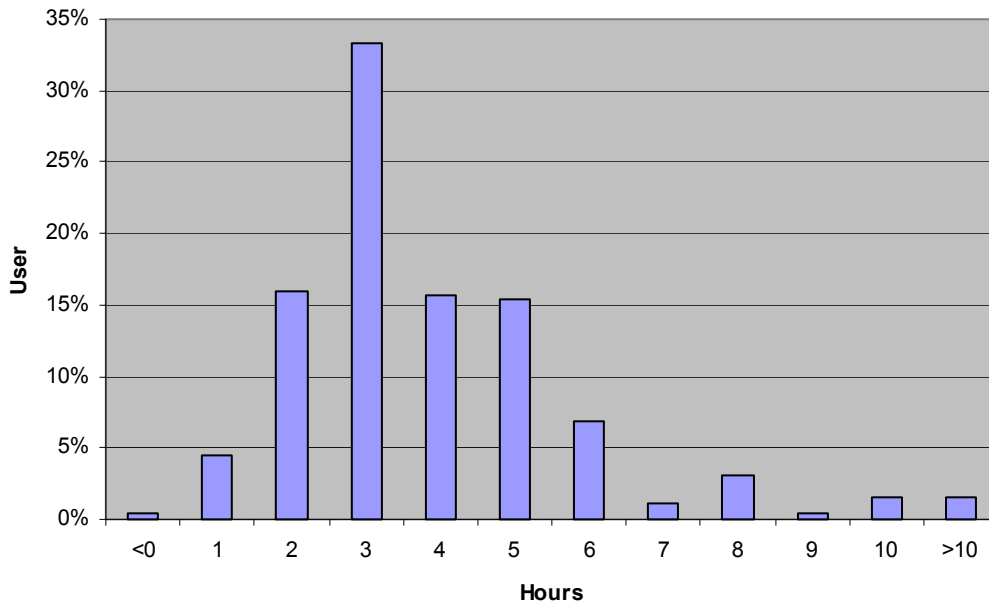


Figure 9. A typical AC playing session in hours

The responses show that for a majority of the users, 80.7%, a typical AC session is 2-5 hours.

**Question:** Why did you start playing AC?  
**Response possibilities:** Default answers

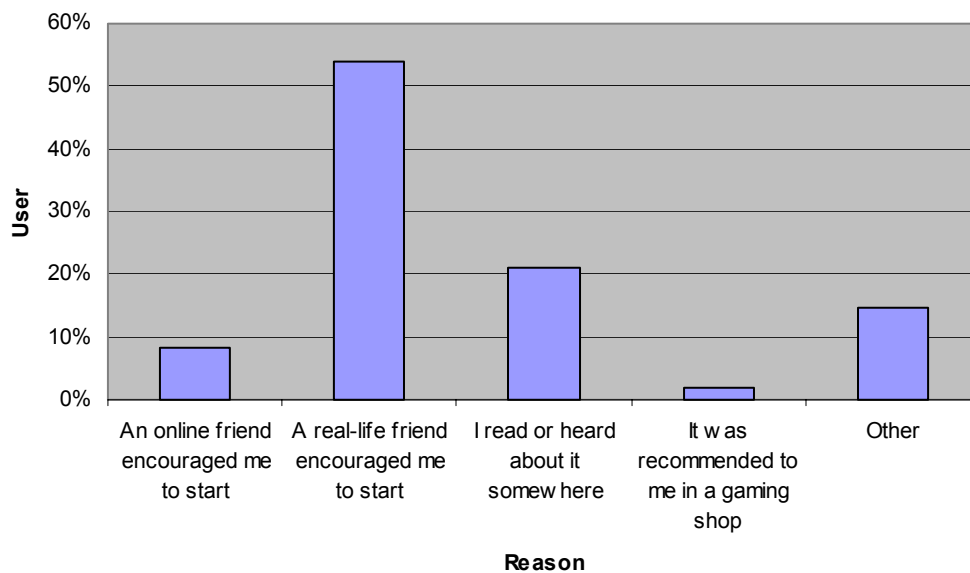


Figure 10. The reason for starting playing AC

The responses show that the majority of the respondents, 54%, report that the reason they started to play AC was due to a friend in real-life who talked about the game.

**Question:** What type of computer games do you typically play?

**Response possibilities:** Default answers

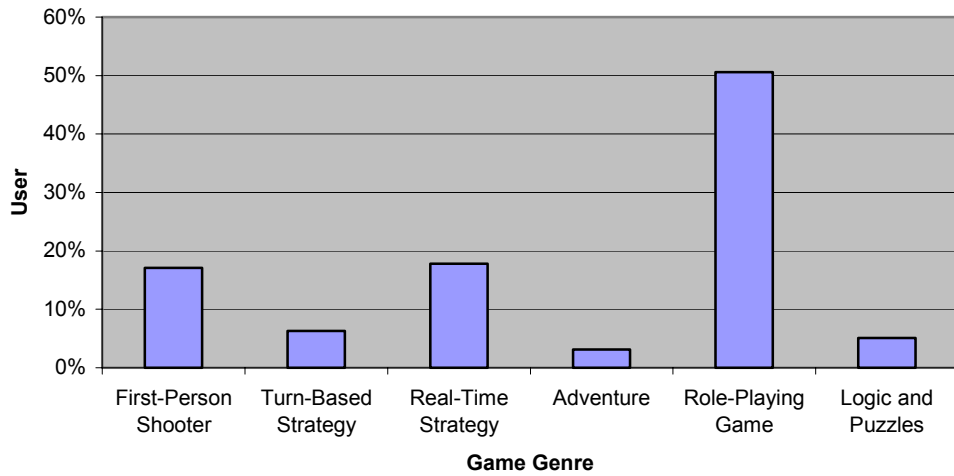


Figure 11. Type of computer games the users typically play

A prominent majority of the respondents, 50.6%, reports that they usually play role-playing game.

**Question:** How long have you been playing Role Playing Games (paper based, table-top or computer-based, including AC)?

**Response possibilities:** Free text field

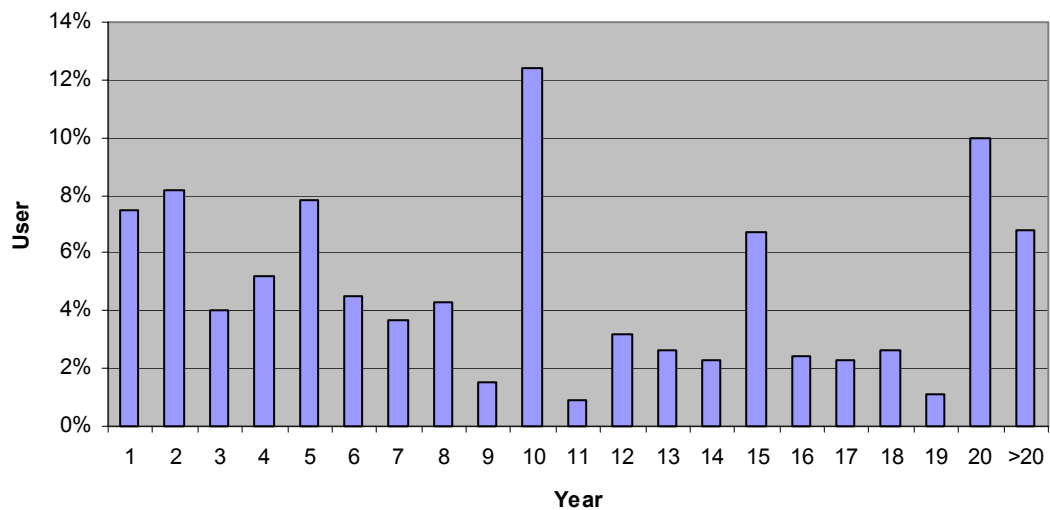


Figure 12. How long the users have played Role-playing games

The responses show a mixed age spread, however the majority of responses, 12.4%, report that they have played role-playing games for 10 years, followed by the respondents, 10%, that reported that they have played these kinds of games for 20 years.

**Question:** *Where do you play AC most often?*

**Response possibilities:** *Default answers*

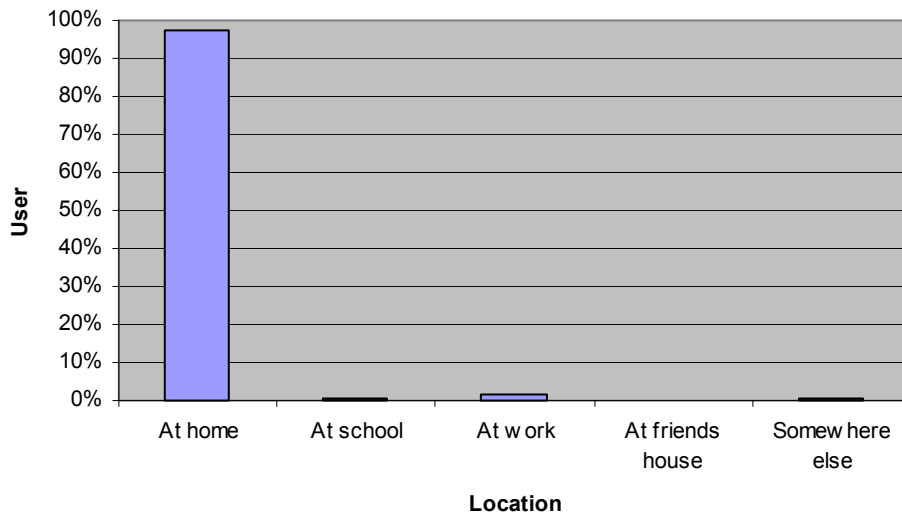


Figure 13. Where the users play AC most often?

The data shows that a significant majority of the respondents, 97.4%, usually play Asheron's Call from their homes.

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**Question:** *When playing AC do you most often?*

**Response possibilities:** *Default answers*

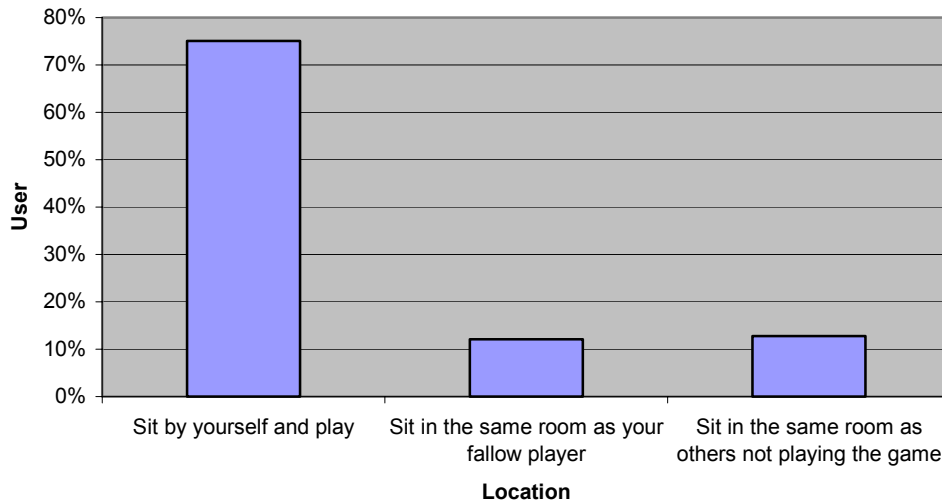


Figure 14. Playing physically with other presence

The majority of the respondents, 75.1%, report that they usually sit by themselves when they play AC.

**Question:** Do you sometimes play AC together with friends that you know from outside AC?

**Response possibilities:** Default answers

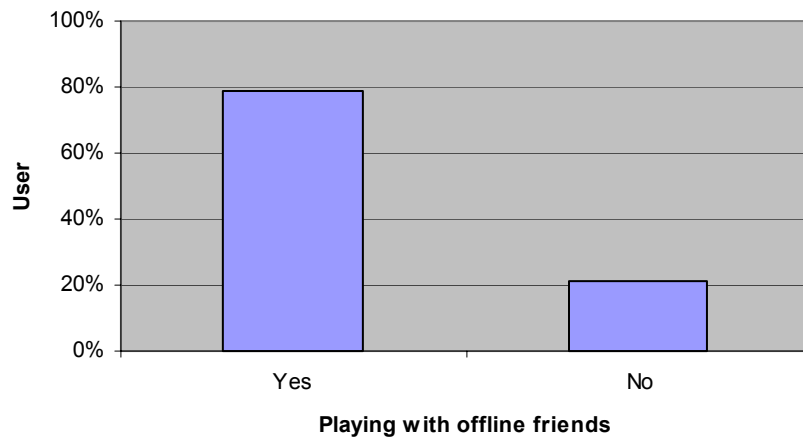


Figure 15. Users who play AC together with friends from outside AC

There are a majority among the respondents, 78.5%, which report that they sometimes play AC together with friends from outside the game, i.e. friends that they first met outside the game context.

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**Question:** Do you sometimes play AC together with your parent or child?

**Response possibilities:** Default answers

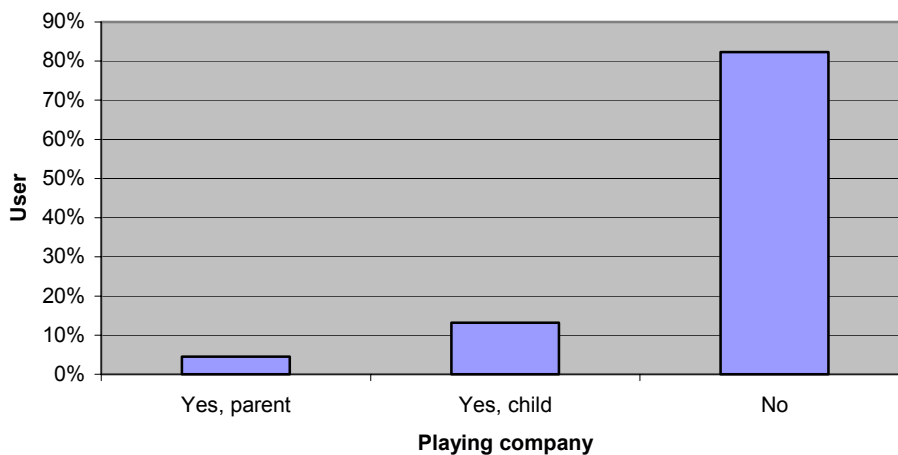


Figure 16. Whether the users play AC with parent or child

The majority of the responses, 82.3%, report that they do not play AC together with their parent or child. There is a minor group of the respondents, 17.7%, that report that they sometimes play together with their parent or child.

**Question:** Do you sometimes play AC together with your spouse, fiancé or boy-/girlfriend?

**Response possibilities:** Default answers

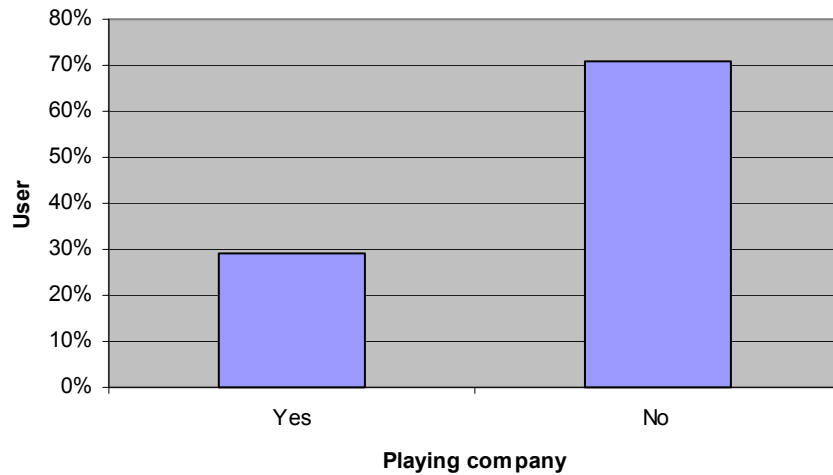


Figure 17. Whether the users play AC with their spouse or similar

The data show that the majority of the respondents, 70.8%, do not play AC together with their spouse, fiancé or boy-/girlfriend, while, 29.2%, report that they sometimes do that.

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**Question:** Which of the following have you used to enhance your AC play sessions?

**Response possibilities:** Default answers

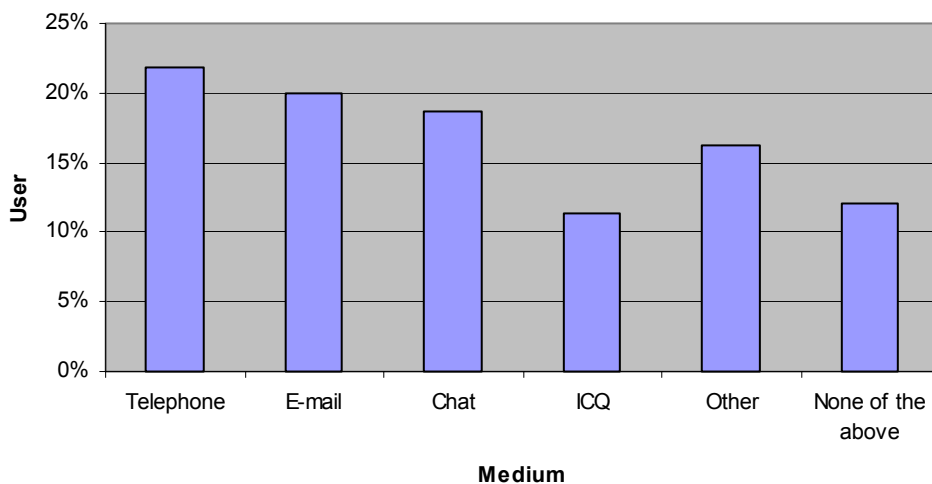


Figure 18. Other media that the users have used to enhance their AC play session

The responses show that a prominent number of the respondents have used other media to enhance their AC play sessions. The media used most are: telephone, 21.8%, closely followed by e-mail, 19.9%, and chat, 18.7%.

## Friendship

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One of the striking differences between MMORPG's and earlier computer games are the level of social interaction the games involves, it is therefore important to better understand the role of this interaction and the role of friendship within the game.

**Question:** *Have you become acquainted with other AC players via the game?*

**Response possibilities:** *Default answers*

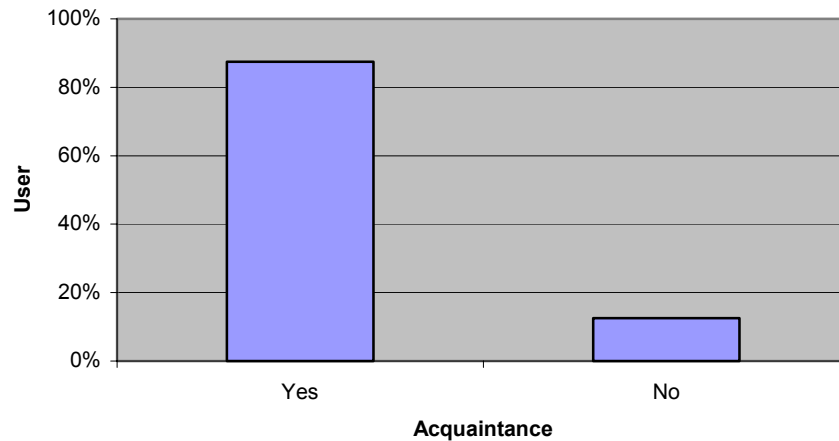


Figure 19. Acquaintances with other AC players via the game

The responses show that 87.5 % have become acquainted with other players in AC, while only 12.5 % have not. The number of people who have become acquainted with other players is very high. This number confirms the importance of social interaction in the game.

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**Question:** *If yes, how many players do you consider as your friends?*

**Response possibilities:** *Free text field*

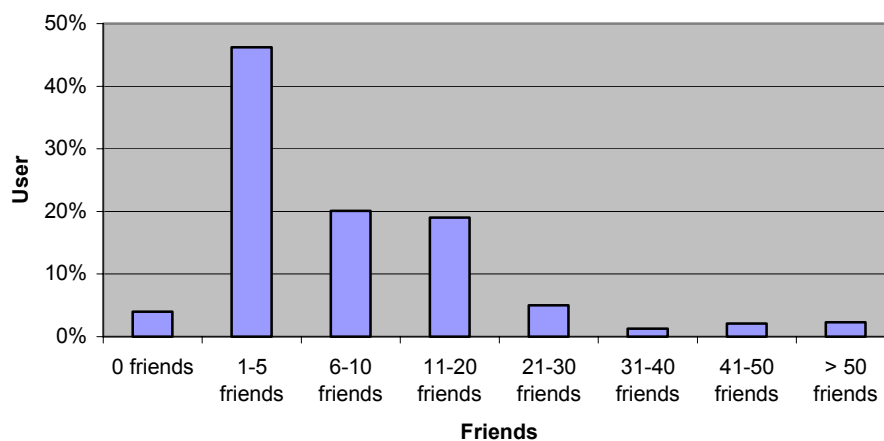


Table 20. Number of players that can be considered as friends

The responses show that a majority of the users, 85.3%, consider 1-20 other users to be their friends. Among these 46.2% consider 1-5 other users to be their friends.

**Question:** How many of these do you consider as close friends?

**Response possibilities:** Free text field

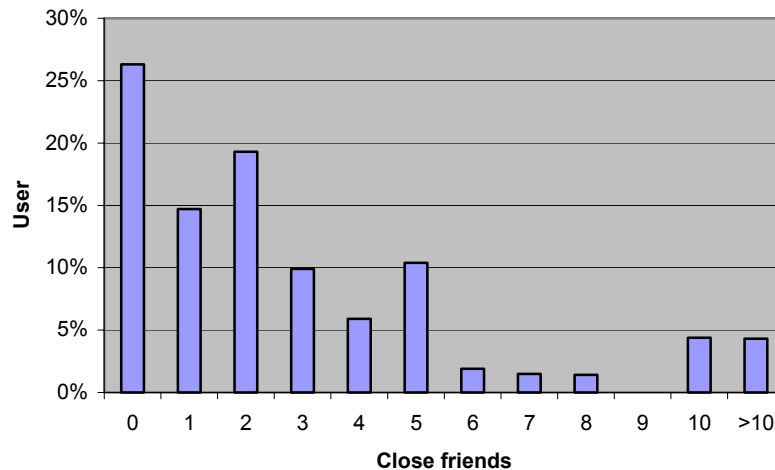


Figure 21. Numbers of players that the users consider as close friends

When asked how many of their friends they consider to be close friends, the responses show that 26.3% of the users do not consider any of their friends as close friends. While 34% of the respondents report they have between 1-2 close friends.

---

An issue, which follows closely to these results, is whether the associations developed within the game are limited to the confines of the environment. This was explored further in the survey by the following question.

**Question:** Have you contacted people you have met in AC outside the game context?

**Response possibilities:** Default answers

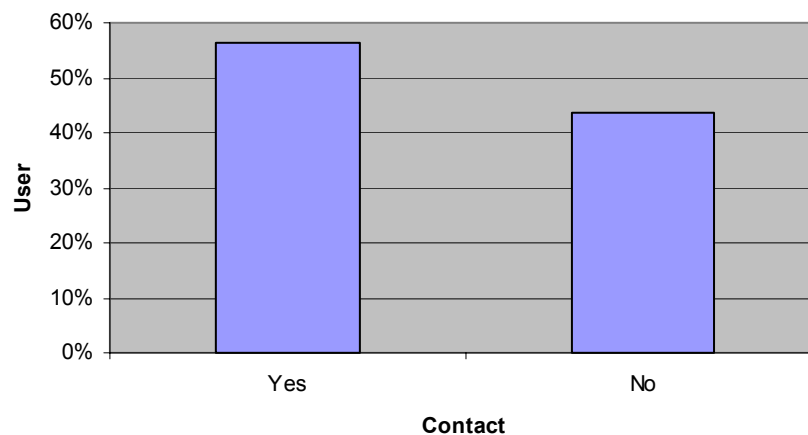


Figure 22. Contact people they met in AC outside the game context

The responses show that 56.3 % of the users have contacted people they first met in AC outside the game, while 43.7 % have not.

**Question:** *If yes, how did you contact them?*

**Response possibilities:** *Default answers*

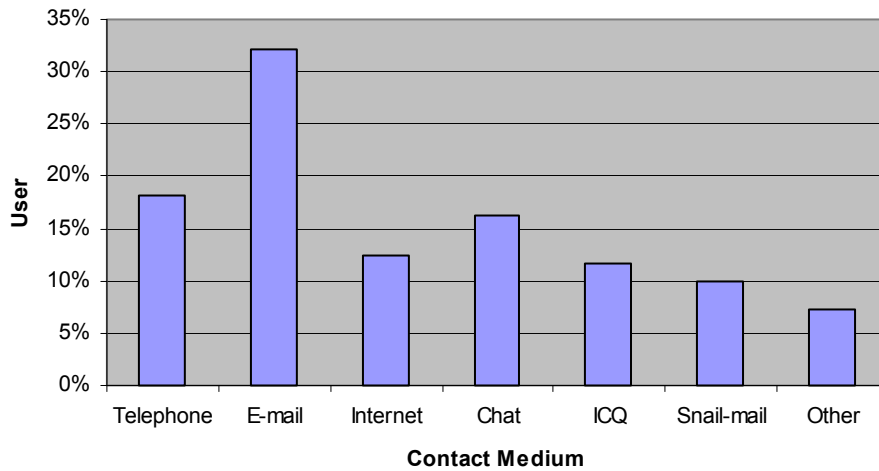


Figure 23. Media used in contact

Among the respondents that have contacted people they first met within the game context, the majority of the users, 32.1%, have used e-mail for the contact, while telephone constitutes 18.2% of the users and 9.9% used snail mail. It would be interesting to know what kind of media the option “Other” constitutes, since 7.2% of the respondents have answered that they used this media.

---

**Question:** *Are you or have you been? (See the figure for the four statements that follow here)*

**Response possibilities:** *Default answers*

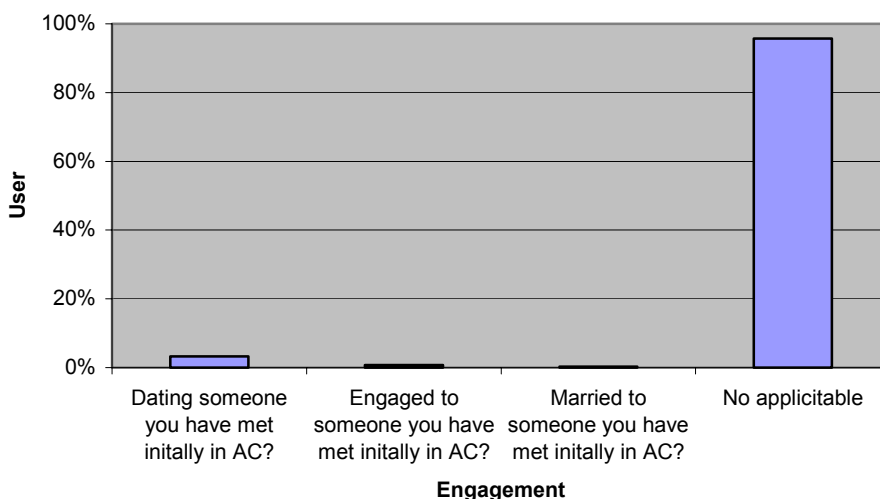


Figure 24. Relation to other users

The majority of the respondents, 95.7%, report that neither of these statements is applicable for the game context. Which means that the majority of the users have not or are not dating, engaged or married to anyone that they first met in AC.

**Question:** *If you have made friends in AC, have you met any of them face-to-face?*  
**Response possibilities:** *Default answers*

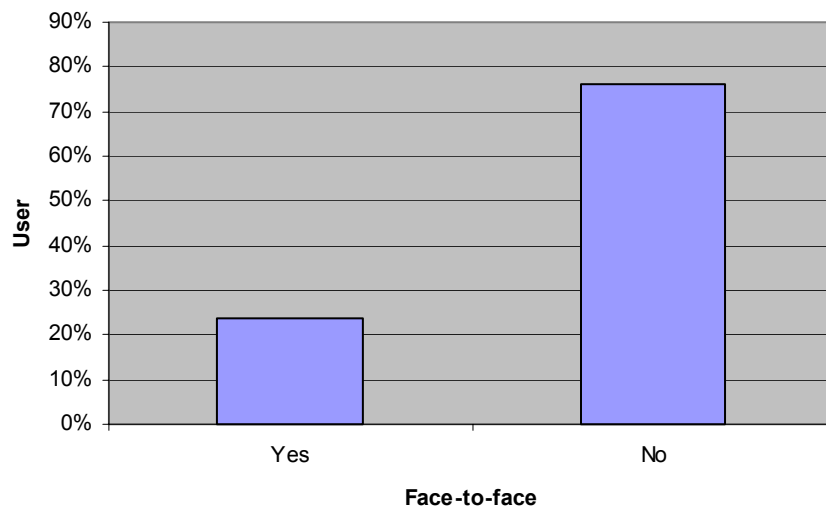


Figure 25. Met any AC friends face-to-face

The responses also show that 23.8 % of the users have met friends they first met in AC later in face-to-face contexts, while 76.2 % of the users have not met any of their friends in AC face-to-face.

---

***If yes, what was the main reason for meeting?***

*“Our monarchy has had 2 reall life meetings, in which about 20 of us got together.”*

*“The main reason to meet was...well, to meet.”*

*“to get to know the person in an out-of-game environment”*

*“To further our friendship in the "real" world.”*

*“I happend to travel to an area where an online friend lived so I called and we went to a club.”*

*“For the lan party and just to get to know clan mambers.”*

*“to meet someone that i consider a friend”*

*“Curiosity”*

*“My life-mage and I had our RL wedding at a Ren Faire in Southern California. Many of our AC friends came for it and we had an incredible time”*

## Trust

---

**Question:** Do you give other players your outside contact information if asked (e.g. your email address or telephone number)?

**Response possibilities:** Default answers

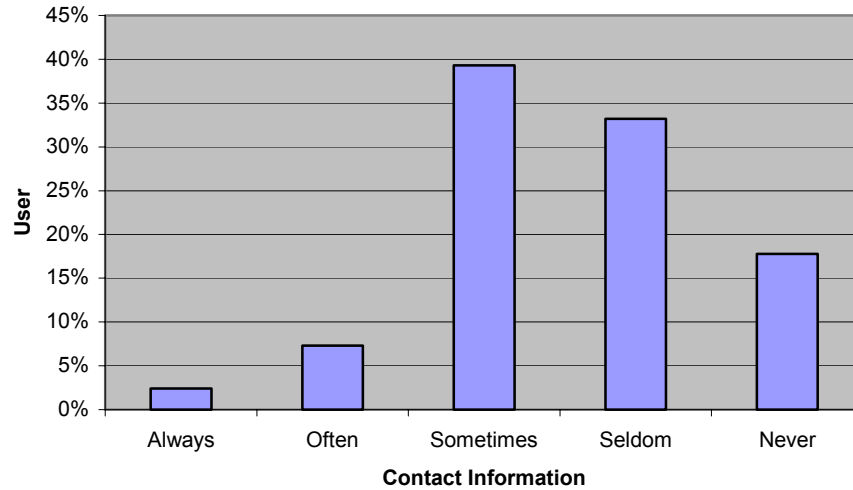


Figure 26. Give contact information to other users

The majority of the respondents, 39.3%, report that they sometimes give other players outside contact information if they are asked, while 33.2% of the respondents report that they seldom does it and 17.8% of the respondents report that they would never do it.

---

**If you answered “seldom” or “never” to the previous question, please describe why you do not.**

*“i will give only to those i consider as close friend.”*

*“Unfortunately i don` t trust people enough to give them that information.”*

*”i don` t want to get emotionally attached to the person”*

*“Privacy, fear of account hacking, maintaining separation between outside identity and game identity”*

*“I know there are some people that can be trusted, but I can` t be sure, so I just play it safe.”*

*”There are Way to many Freaks in the world to give out personal information to somone online.”*

## Characters

---

**Question:** *How many characters do you have in AC?*

**Response possibilities:** *Free text field*

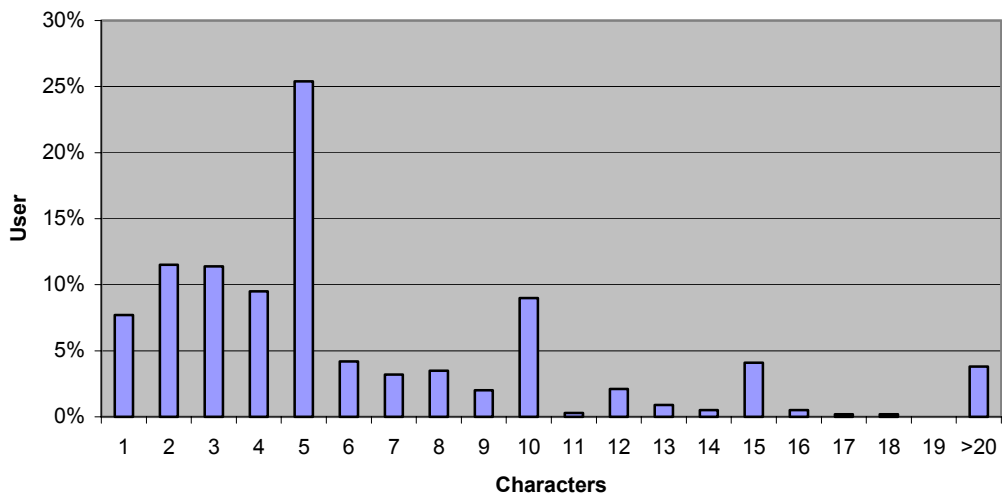


Figure 27. The number of characters

The responses show that the majority, 25,4%, of the respondents have 5 characters in AC. The responses also show that there are many respondents that have reported that they have 1-4 characters and also 10 characters.

**Question:** *When you create a character, what characteristics are most important? (You may check up to two boxes)*

**Response possibilities:** *Default answers*

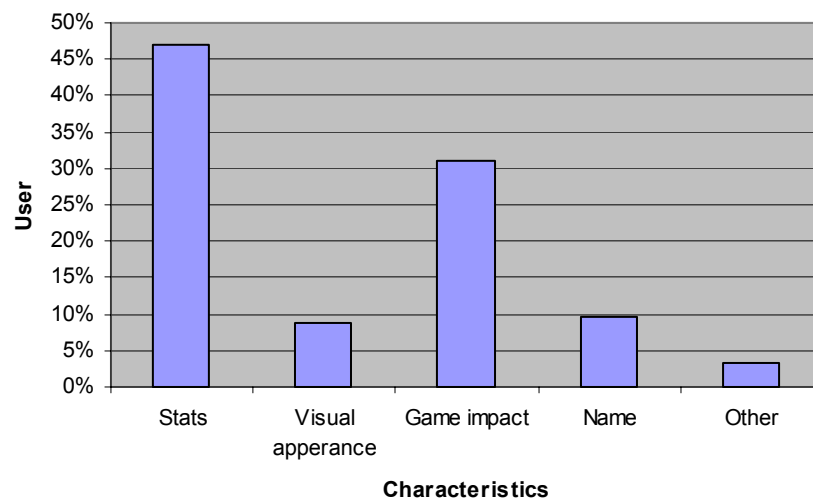


Figure 28. Most important characteristics when creating a character

The responses show that the majority of the respondents, 47.1%, report that stats are the most important characteristics. Stats are short for vital statistics, and include for example strength, stamina, health etc.

**Question:** *If you use one character more than the others, what is the main reason for doing so?*

**Response possibilities:** *Default answers*

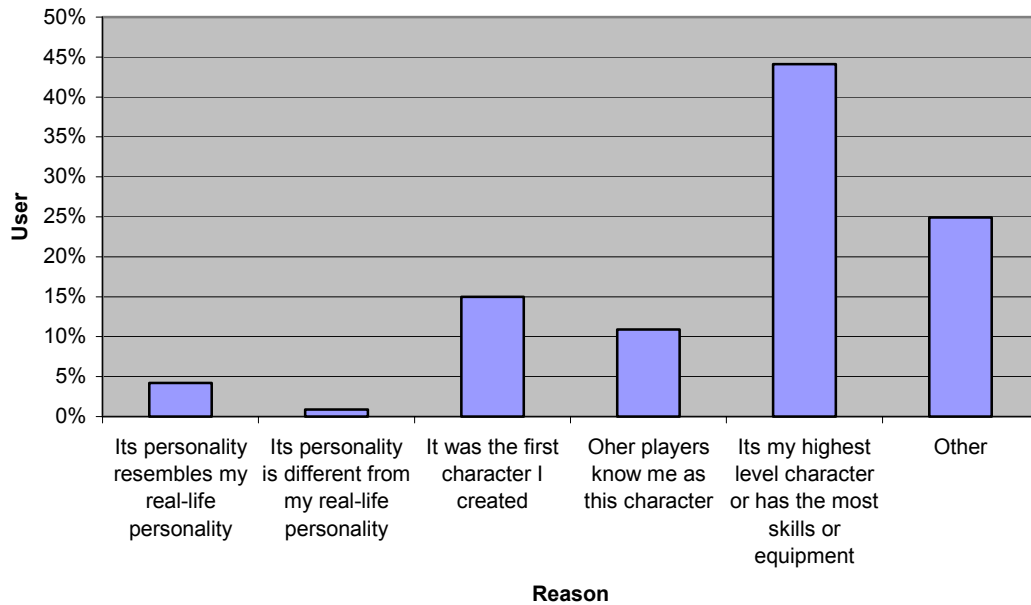


Figure 29. The reason for using one main character more than the others

Among the respondents, there is a majority, 44.1%, which report that the main reason for using one character more than another is that “it is the highest levelled character”. Followed by the option “other”, this would have been interesting to learn more about since 24.9% have chose this option.

## Different gender

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**Question:** Do you have any characters that have a gender different from your real-life gender?

**Response possibilities:** Default answers

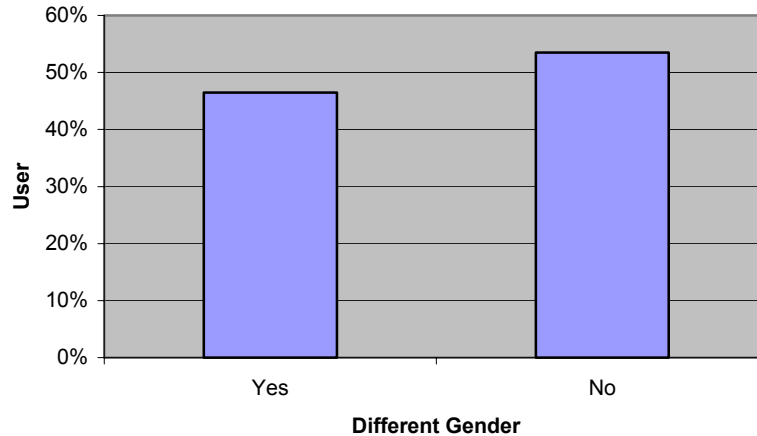


Figure 30. Character with different gender from offline

The majority of the respondents, 53.5%, report that they do not have any characters with a different gender from their offline gender. While, 46.5%, of the respondents report that they have a character with a different gender than offline.

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**Question:** If yes, why?

**Response possibilities:** Default answers

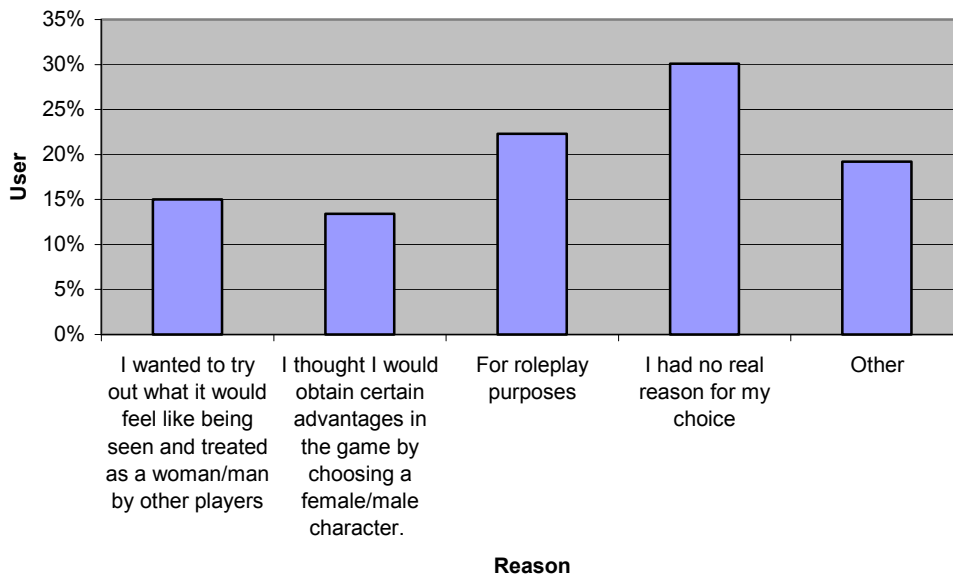


Figure 31. Main reason for different gender than offline

The majority of the respondents, 30.1%, report that they had no real reason for the gender choice, followed by the option “for roleplay purposes”, 22.3%.

## Impression

---

An important factor in developing friendships is the portrayal of oneself and the understanding of how others portray themselves.

**Question:** *Do you think you get an accurate impression of people by interacting with their characters in AC?*

**Response possibilities:** *Default answers*

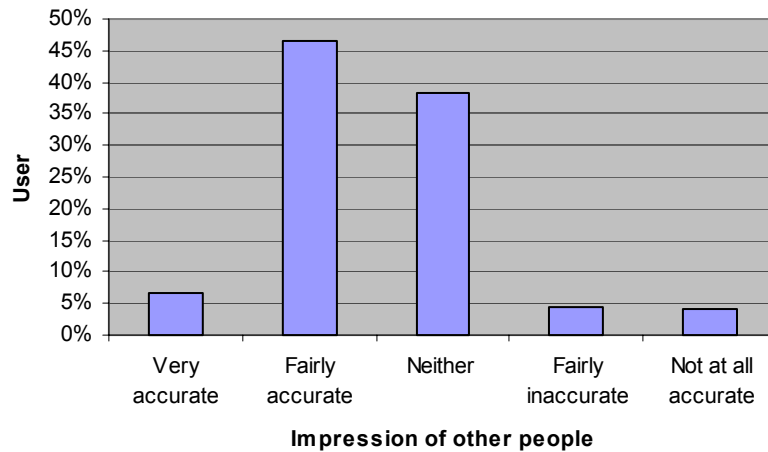


Figure 32. Impression of other people by interacting with their characters in AC

The responses show that the majority of the respondents, 47%, have answered “fairly accurate” on this question, followed by the respondents, 38.3%, which have answered “neither”.

**Question:** *Do you think people get an accurate impression of you by interacting with your characters in AC?*

**Response possibilities:** *Default answers*

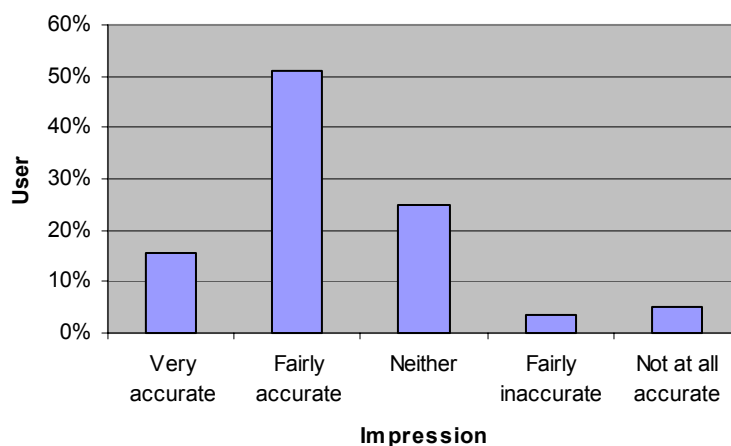


Figure 33. Impression of you by interacting with your characters in AC

The responses to this question show that the majority of the respondents, 51.1%, answered “fairly accurate”, while 25% answered “neither”.

## Allegiance

---

Allegiances are considered to be an important game component among the users. They provide a social structure for the users where they can establish relations with other users and socialize with each other.

**Question:** *Are any of your characters members of an allegiance?*

**Response possibilities:** *Default answers*

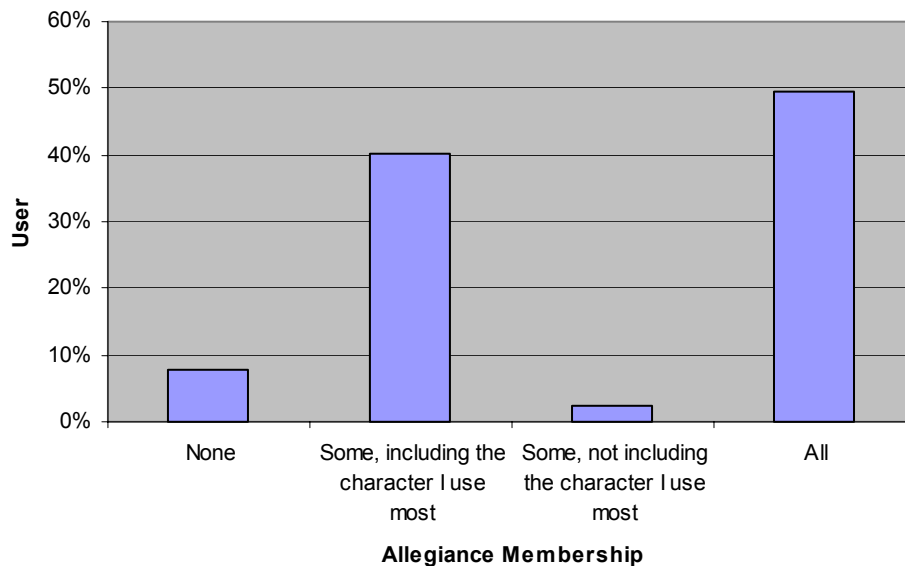


Figure 34. Numbers of characters that are members of an allegiance

The majority of the respondents, 49.6%, answered that “all” of their characters are member of an allegiance. Closely followed by the respondents, 40.1%, that answered that “some, including the character I use most” are member of an allegiance.

**Question:** *If the character you use most are in an allegiance, why? (You may check up to two boxes)*

**Response possibilities:** *Default answers*

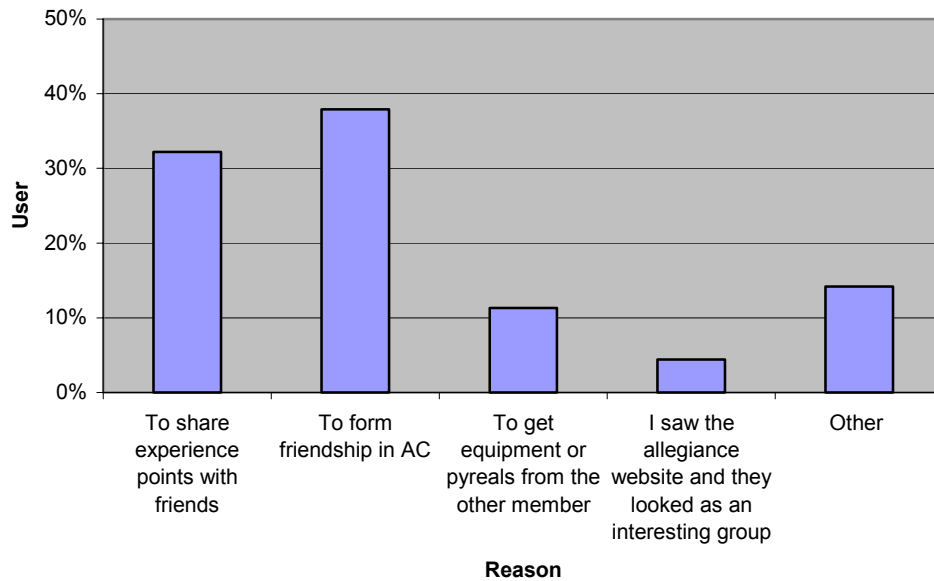


Figure 35. Reason for membership in an allegiance

The responses show that the main reason for the majority of the respondents, 37.9%, to let the character they use most be a member in an allegiance is “to form friendship”, followed by the option “to share experience points with friends”, 32.2%.

---

**Question:** *How important are allegiances to your enjoyment of the game?*

**Response possibilities:** *Default answers*

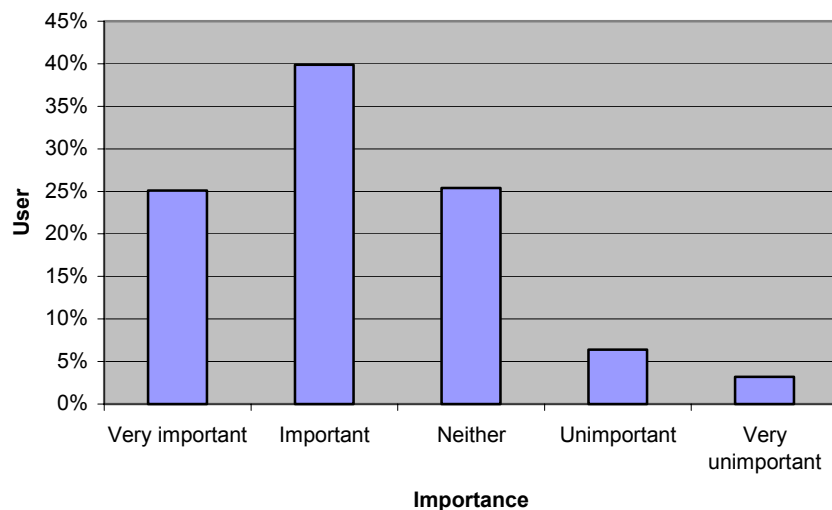


Figure 36. Importance of allegiance membership for the enjoyment of the game

The responses on this question show that the majority of the respondents, 39.9%, have answered that the allegiances are important for their enjoyment of the game, followed by the two options “very important” and “neither”.

## Morals

---

Social structures exist in all kinds of interaction between people, regardless of the medium used for the interaction. These structures are based on different cultural and social norms, morals, and values. It was therefore interesting to explore how the users feel about this matter within the game environment.

**Question:** Consider the following behaviours\* that may occur in AC, and then rate each in terms of how appropriate you feel they are on the following scale.

If you consider the following behaviours that may occur in AC. How would you describe their degree of inappropriateness?

**Response possibilities:** Default answers

\* = See the tables for the specific behaviours

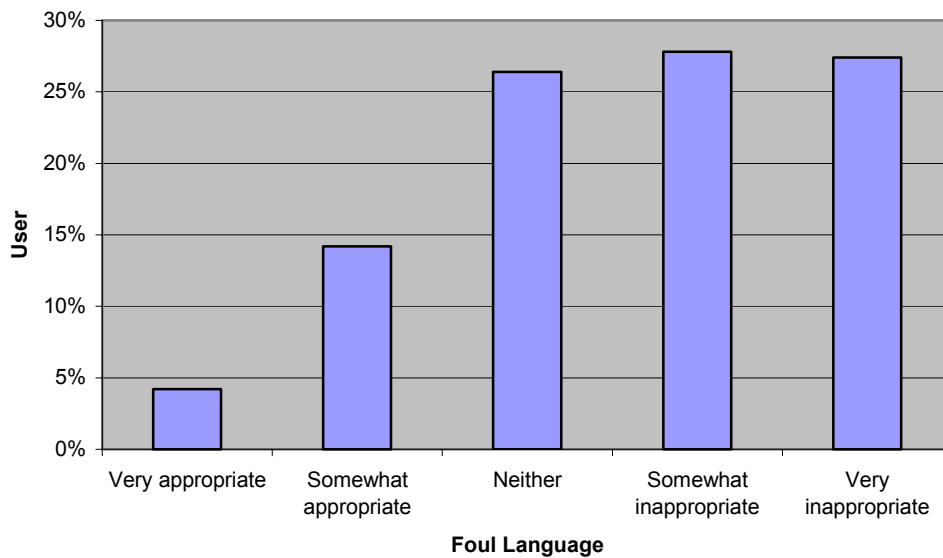


Figure 37. Foul language

The responses on this question show a rather even spread over the three options “somewhat inappropriate”, 27.8%, “very inappropriate”, 27.4% and “neither”, 26.4%.

There is also a minor group of respondents that report that they consider foul language as either “somewhat appropriate”, 14.2%, or “very appropriate”, 4.2%.

These results confirm the importance and valuations of good manner and behaviour amongst the majority of the users within the game environment.

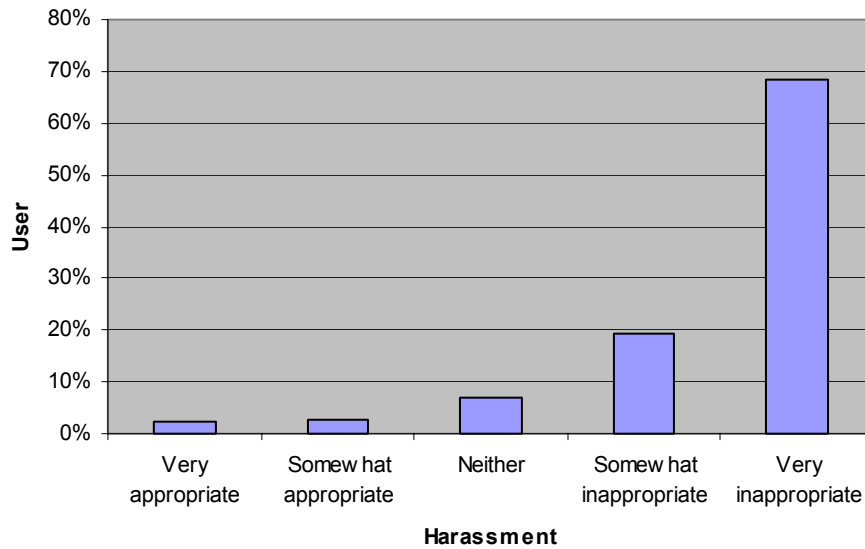


Figure 38. Harassment of other players

There is a significant majority of the respondents, 68.3%, which consider harassment of other players as “very inappropriate”.

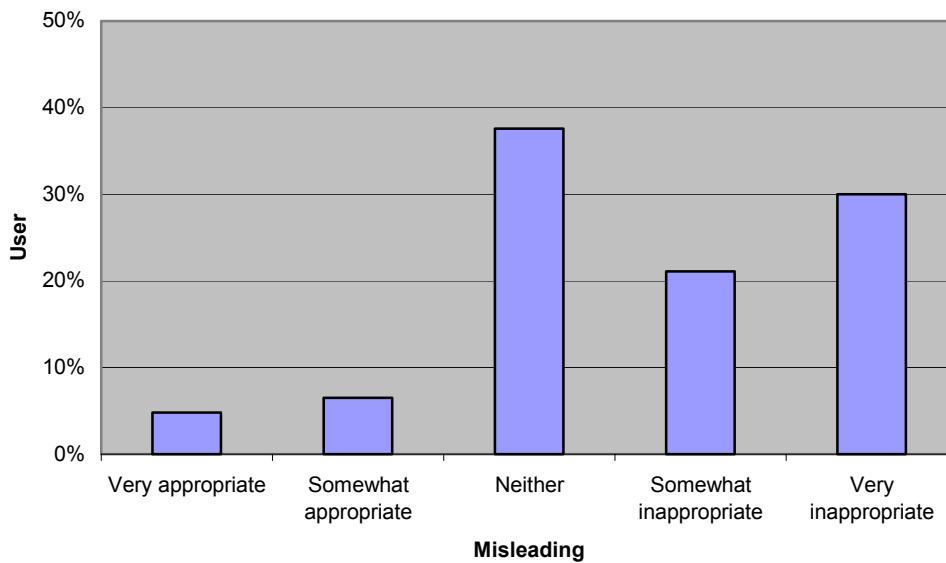


Figure 39. Misleading other players about you.

The majority of the respondents, 37.6%, answered “neither” on this question, followed by the respondents that answered, “very inappropriate”, 30%, and as third they answered “somewhat inappropriate”, 21.1%.

## Reputation

---

Reputation is a highly valued aspect of the social interaction within the game environment. Users create their characters and the way they use their characters gives rise to certain reputations, which are tied to their characters within the game environment. Just as in offline environments the majority of people want their characters and behaviours to be recognised for positive actions.

This study has asked three questions in relation to this vein.

**Question:** *In AC there are a large number of players that are relatively unknown. Then there are a small number of players that are well-known, players that bear a reputation (positive or negative) for some reason.*

*Do you know of any player that bear either a positive or a negative reputation among many other players*

**Response possibilities:** *Default answers*

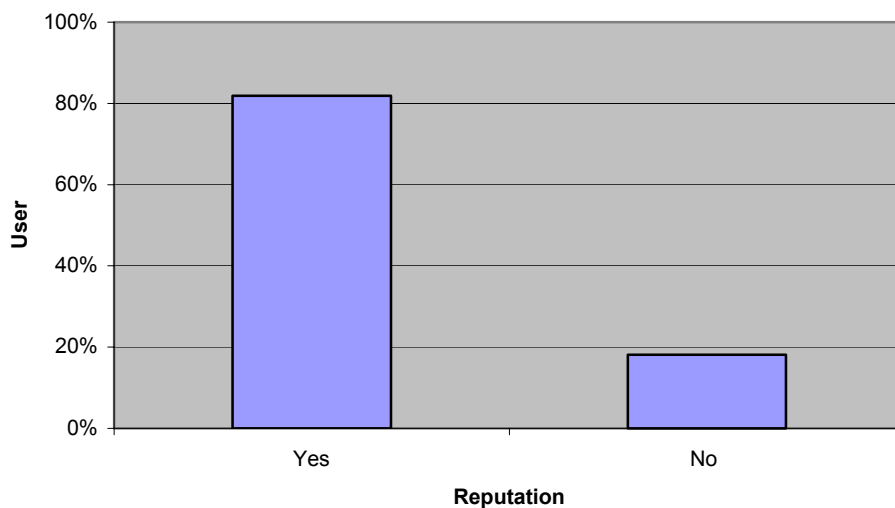


Figure 40. Knowledge of any player that has either a positive or negative reputation among the other players

The responses of this question show that a significant majority of the respondents, 81.9%, know of any other player that has either a positive or negative reputation.

**Question:** *If yes, please think of one particular player and please describe why this player bears this reputation, by choosing one or several options below.*

**Response possibilities:** *Default answers*

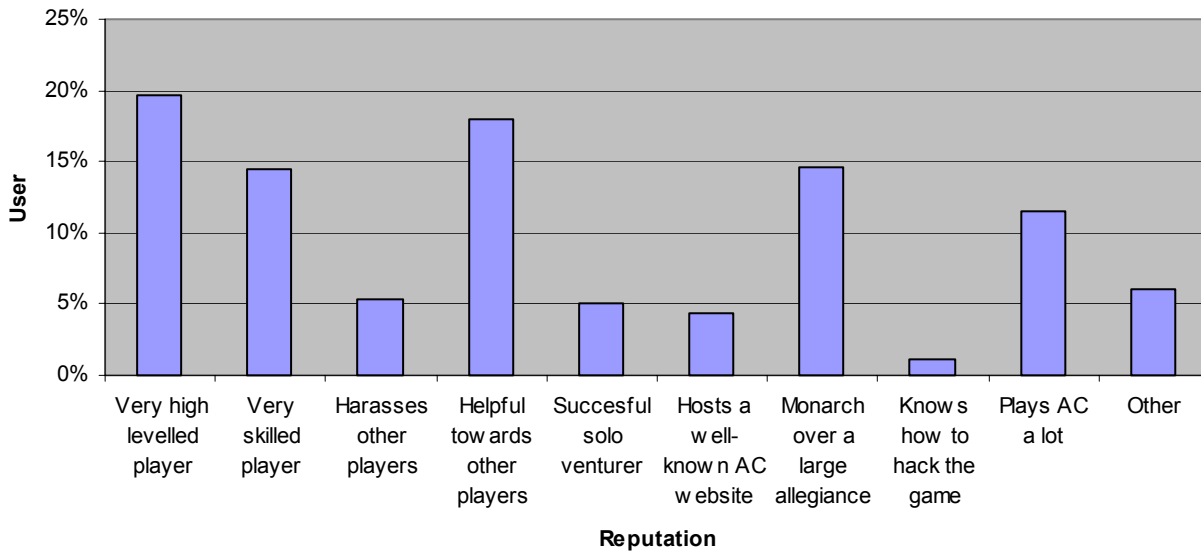


Figure 41. Reason for this reputation

The majority of the respondents, 19.7%, report that the reason for knowing about this particular player’s reputation is that “the player is a very high levelled player”, following closely of the option “the player is helpful towards other player”, 18%, then by the two options “the player is a monarch over a large allegiance”, 14.6%, and “the player is a very skilled player”, 14.4%.

**Question:** *How did you find out about this particular player's reputation?*

**Response possibilities:** *Default answers*

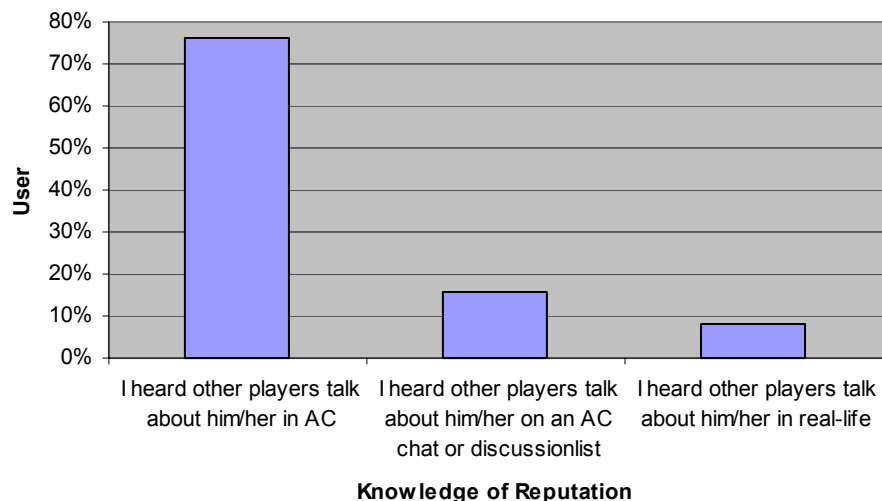


Figure 42. How the reputation was obtained

A significant majority, 76%, have reported that they find out about this particular player’s reputation from other players who talked about the player.

## Effects

---

One of the more important questions in the survey for this study was whether or not AC has a positive or negative effect on the users life.

**Question:** *Has Ac had a positive or negative effect on your life?*

**Response possibilities:** *Default answers*

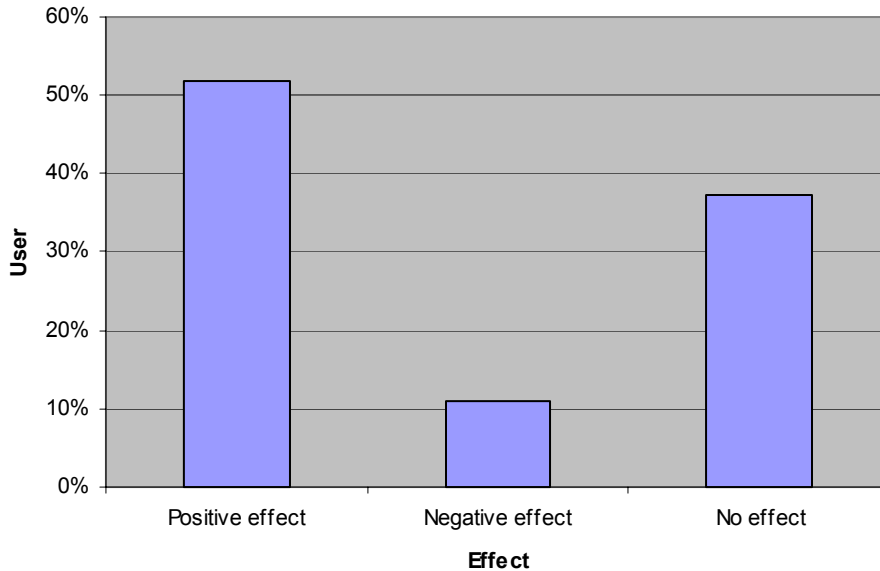


Figure 43. Effects

The responses show that only 11 % felt that AC negatively effected their lives and 37.2 % felt that AC had no effect whatsoever on their lives. While 51.8 % felt that AC has a positive effect on their lives.

***If you answered “Positive effect”, in what way?***

*“Made new friends and quit watching TV!”*

*“its helped me make more friends and given me a good stress release when Ive had a bad day at work”*

*“It has given me the ability to befriend people that I would have never befriended in real life that are all good people. It also give me a way to do something fun with my relatives that are not in close proximity.”*

*“Made 2 good friends...and I enjoy the game.....gets you away from real life for a time.....its like reading a really good book ....”*

*”Hard to describe, but this game ROCKS!!! I`ve had so much fun playing it, and it so fun!!”*

## Fake or not

---

Another important question for this thesis was whether the users experience AC as fake or not.

**Question:** *One argument against virtual worlds like AC is that it is all fake. What do you think?*

**Response possibilities:** *Free text field*

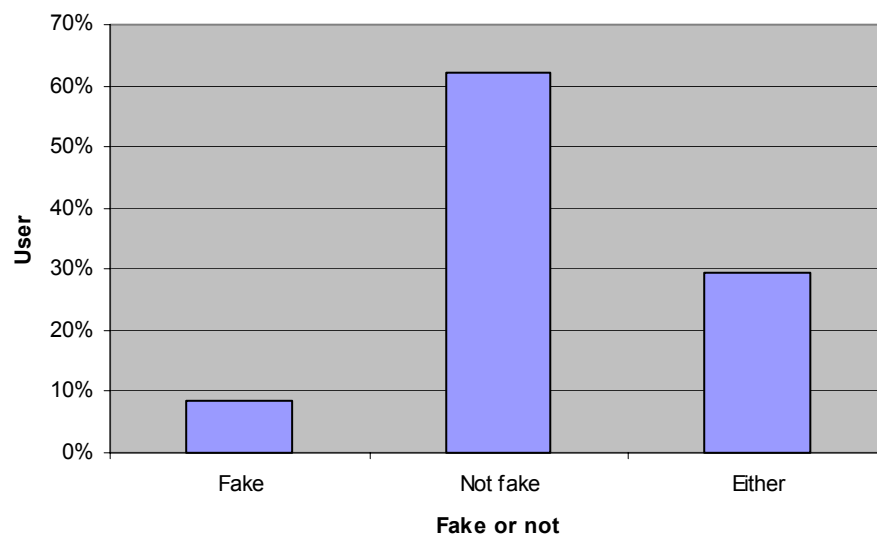


Figure 44. Fake or not

The responses show that only 8.4 % think that AC is fake and 29.4 % think that it is either fake or not fake. While a significant majority of 62.2 % think that AC is not fake.

### ***Some quotations related to this question:***

*“not all fake. the friendships are real”*

*“It`s not fake... the bytes that make up the virtual world are quite real and the feelings of the other people in the world are quite real... It`s no less real than a telephone...”*

*“Like so many things in the real world you get out of it what you put in.”*

*“the world is what we (the users) make of it. If everybody treats it like a game, then it plays like a game. If everybody treats it like a world, then it lives, breathes, and grows like a world. I want Dereth to live, breathe, and grow like a world.”*

*“Of course it`s fake, it`s a game!!!!”*

## Ability to learn

---

This question was also of major importance for this thesis, whether the users experience that they can learn anything from the game environment and its activities that have any relevance for their offline lives.

**Question:** *Another argument against virtual worlds like AC is that nothing can be learned from it that pertains to the real world. What do you think?*

**Response possibilities:** *Free text field*

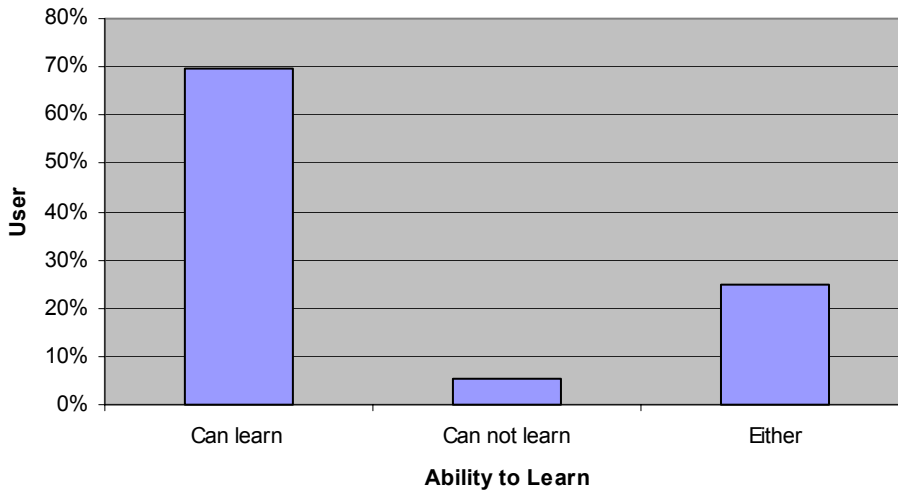


Figure 45. Possibility to learn from virtual worlds like AC

The majority of the respondents, 69.7%, experience that it is possible to learn things within the game context that have relevance for their offline lives. While 25 % of the respondents think that AC either offer any possibilities for learning anything that have any relevance on their offline lives or not. The responses also show that 5.3 % think that AC offer no possibilities for learning anything that have any relevance on their offline lives.

### ***Some quotations related to this question:***

*"human interaction, regardless of the medium can provide many valuable lessons about others and yourself"*

*"nonsense, social skills and how to treat others are important lessons of a MMORPG"*

*"There are lessons to be learned in everything that we do."*

*"One can learn from almost any situation, real or virtual."*

Since it is interesting to explore if the users attitudes differ depending upon whether they experience the game environment as fake or not. The figures below represent each groups (i.e. fake/not fake) opinion on the former question.

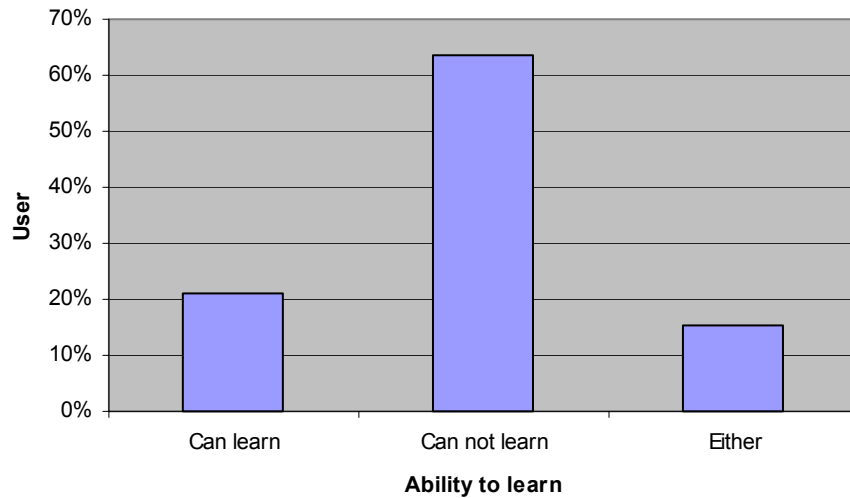


Figure 46. The possibility for learning among those who think AC is fake

Among the users that think that AC is fake, the responses show that the majority, 63.4%, of the respondents think that it is not possible to learn things that have relevance for their offline lives and 21.1% think that it is possible to learn things within AC that have relevance for their offline lives. While 15.5 % thinks that it is either possible or not to learn things within AC that have relevance for their offline lives.

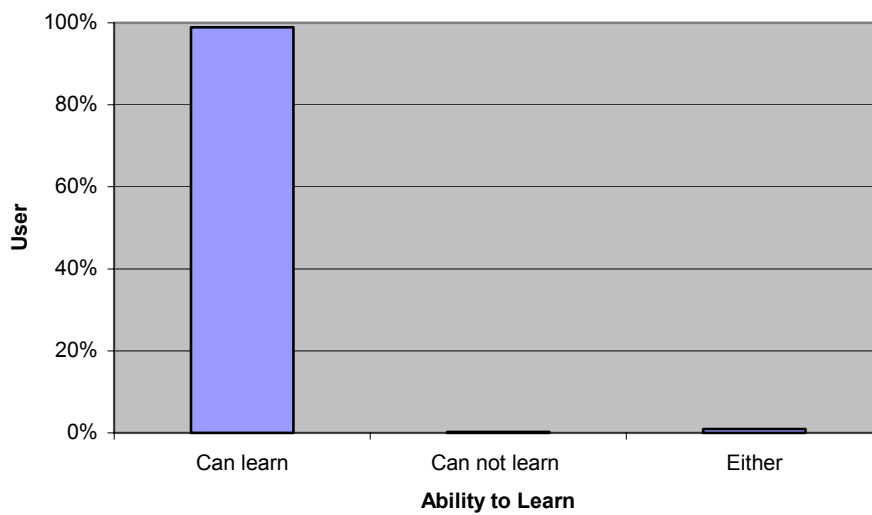


Figure 47. The possibility for learning among them who think AC is not fake

The responses among the users who think that AC is not fake show that 98.9 % thinks that it is possible to learn things within AC that has relevance for their offline lives and 0.9 % thinks that AC either offer the possibility to learn anything. While 0.2 % think that it is not possible to learn things within AC that has relevance on their offline lives.

### 3.3 Comparison with Two Parameters

#### Time as a Parameter

---

Above in this section the generated data has been presented as the respondents have answered in the online survey, without no condition or variable to compare the answers with. It is however interesting to explore whether the users attitudes toward the game and its activities depend on other factors.

It would be very interesting to find out more specific what factors it is that make people positive or negative towards the game. However that goes beyond the limits of this thesis.

Therefore this thesis will focus on two variables for measuring the experience of the users and explore how these variables affects the users experience towards the game. It is for example interesting to explore whether time as a variable influence the players experience and attitudes toward the game environment and the activities within it. The comparison below was carried out with the purpose of exploring if it is possible to discern a pattern in the player's experiences of the environment, which is related to the time spent in the milieu?

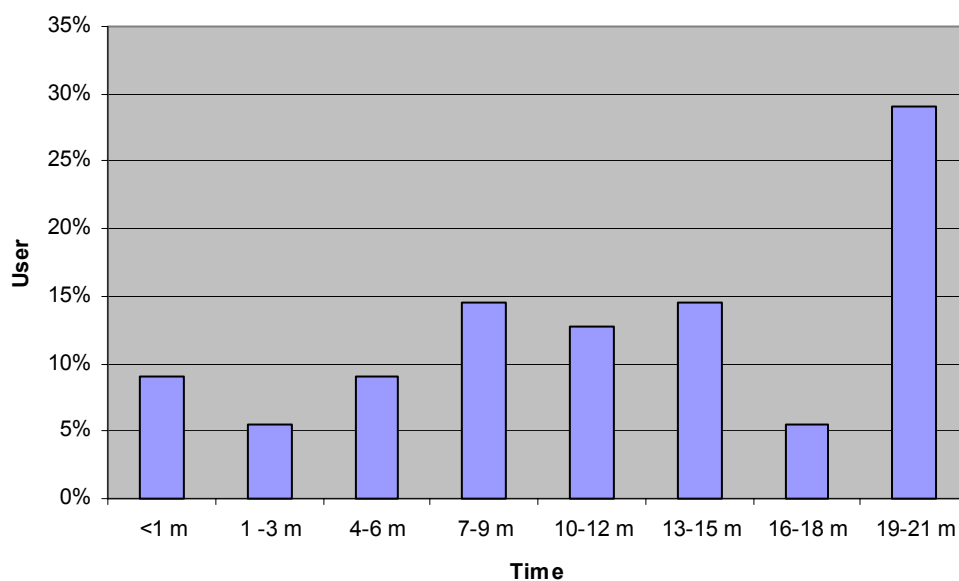


Figure 48. Time spent in AC among those who think AC is fake

This figure illustrates how long the players, that think that AC is fake, have played the game. The responses show that the majority of the respondents, 29.1%, have played AC 19-21 months. Which is since the game was launched. There is also a large group of respondents, 41.7%, which have played the game between 7-15 months.

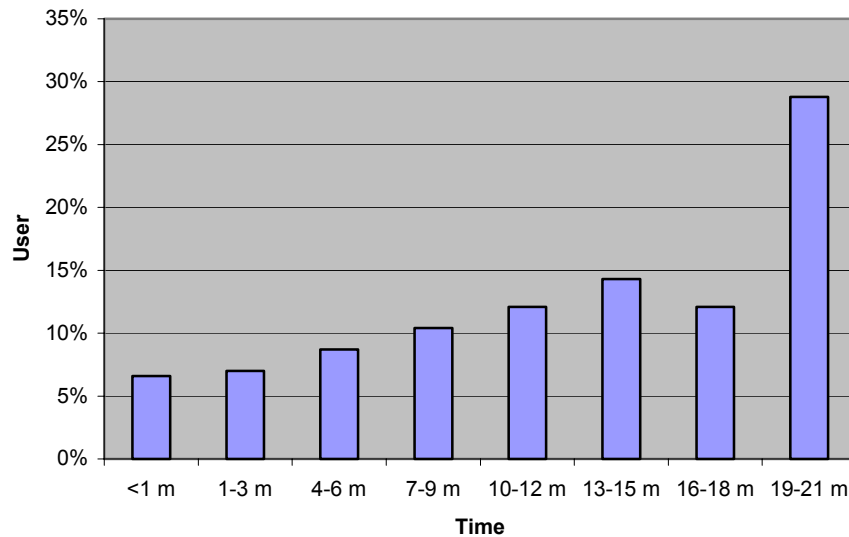


Figure 49. Time spent in AC among those who think AC is not fake

This figure illustrates how long the players, that think that AC is not fake, have played the game. The responses show that the majority of the respondents, 28.8%, have played AC 19-21 months. Which is since the game was launched. There is also a large group of respondents that have played the game between 7-18 months, 48.9%.

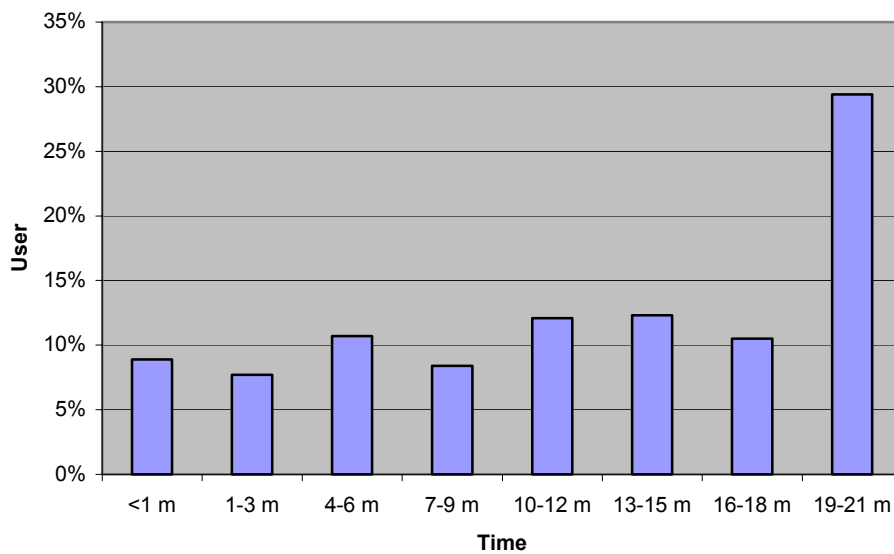


Figure 50. Time spent in AC among those who think AC has had a negative effect on their lives

This figure illustrates how long the players, that think that AC has affected them negatively, have played the game. The responses show that the majority of the respondents, 29.4%, have played AC 19-21 months. Which is since the game was launched. The other respondents are rather even spread over the other options.

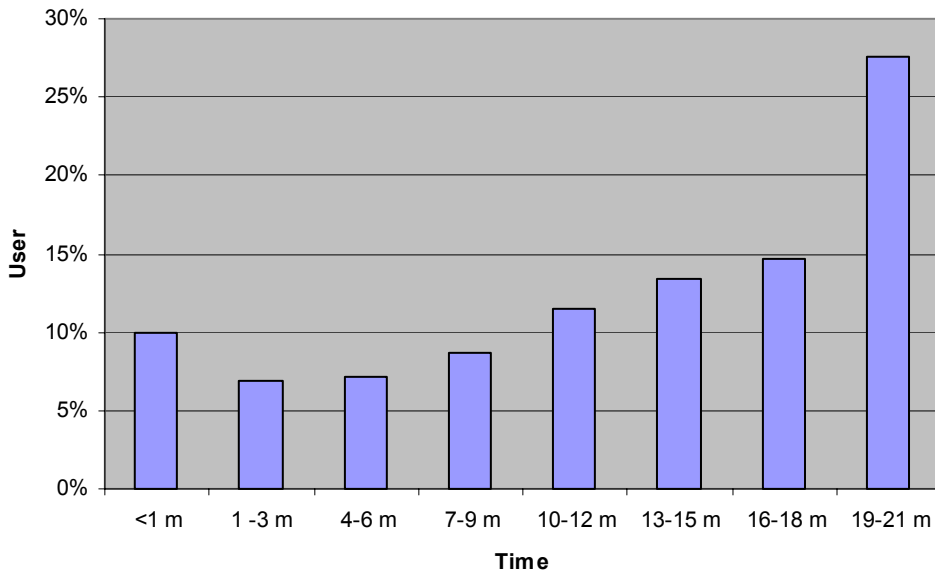


Figure 51. Time spent in AC among those who think AC has had a positive effect on their lives

This figure illustrates how long the players, that think that AC has affected them positively, have played the game. The responses show that the majority of the respondents, 27.6%, have played AC 19-21 months. Which is since the game was launched. There are also a large group of respondents that have played the game between 10-18 months, 39.6%.

## Allegiance Membership as a Parameter

---

This section will explore whether it is possible to find any connections between how the users experience the game and its activities in relation to membership in allegiances.

The purpose with using allegiance membership as a measure variable is to explore whether users who are members in allegiance are more likely to experience that the game affects them positive due to their allegiance membership or vice versa, and the same with the fake experience?

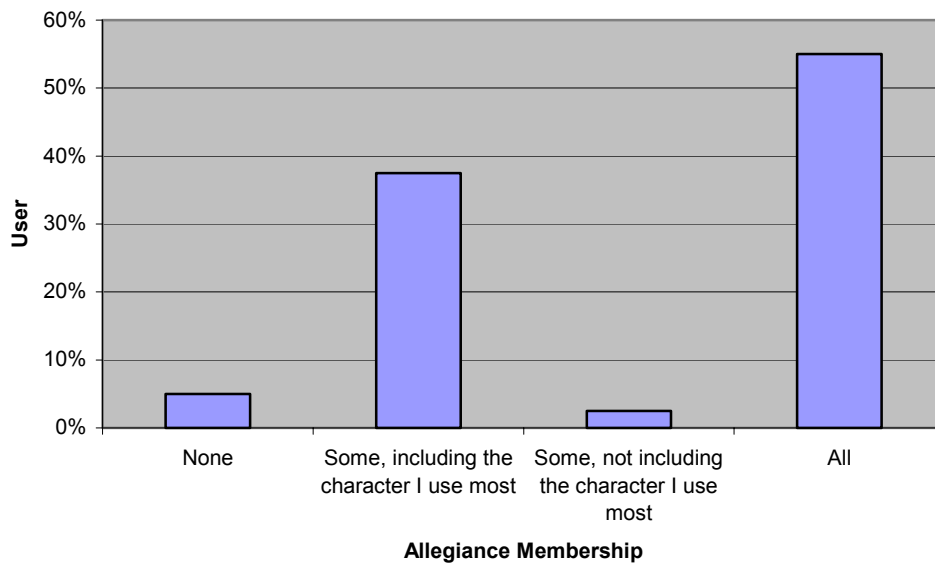


Figure 52. Allegiance membership among those who think AC is fake

This figure illustrates how many of the users that think that AC is fake, that have any of their characters as a member in an allegiance. The responses show that the majority of the respondents, 55%, have all their characters as members of an allegiance. Followed by the option “some, including the character I use most”, 37.5%.

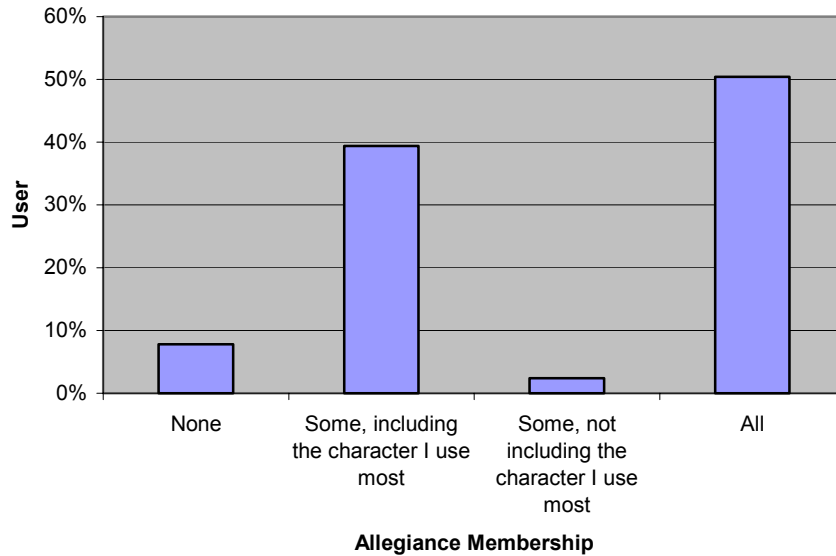


Figure 53. Allegiance membership among those who think AC is not fake

This figure illustrates how many of the users that think that AC is not fake, that have any of their characters as a member in an allegiance. The responses show that the majority of the respondents, 50.4%, have all their characters as members of an allegiance. Closely followed by the option “some, including the character I use most”, 39.4%.

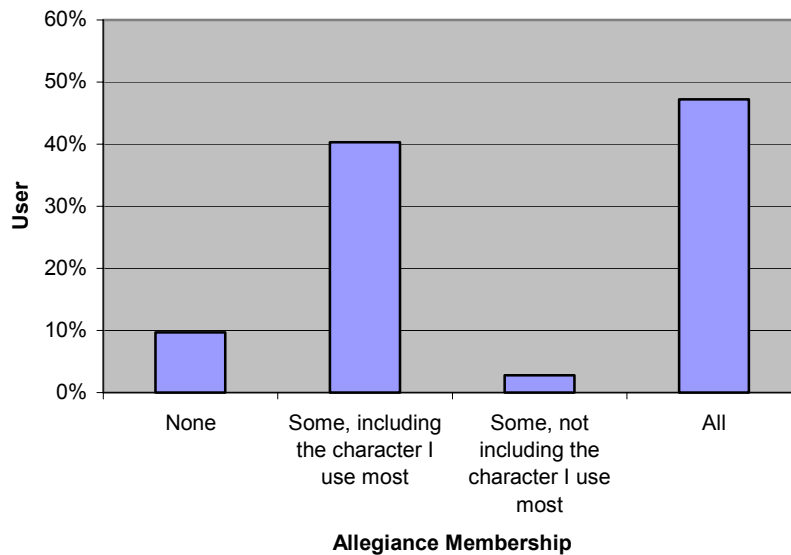


Figure 54. Allegiance membership among those who think AC has had a negative effect on their lives

This figure illustrates how many of the users that think that AC has affected them negatively, that have any of their characters as a member in an allegiance. The responses show that the majority of the respondents, 47.2%, have all their characters as members of an allegiance. Closely followed by the option “some, including the character I use most”, 40.3%.

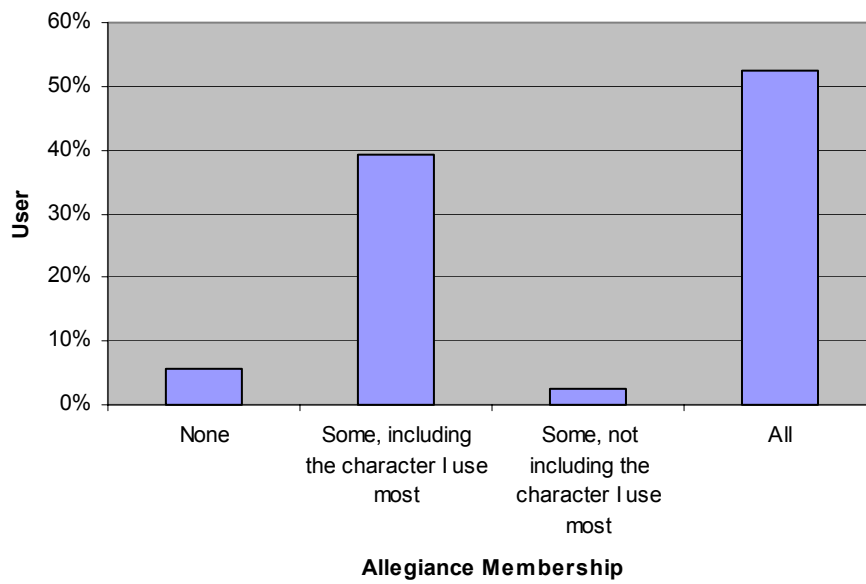


Figure 55. Alliance membership among those who think AC has had an positive effect on their lives

This figure illustrates how many of the users that think that AC has affected them positively, that have any of their characters as a member in an allegiance. The responses show that the majority of the respondents, 52.5%, have all their characters as members of an allegiance. Followed by the option “some, including the character I use most”, 39.4%.

### 3.4 Discussion Group & Interviews

The interviews and discussion group provided a rich source of information, which has been used through the selection and processing of the data and the writing of this work. The meeting was not structured in any particular way, instead the participants were able to discuss whatever they wanted to in relation to computer games. The same can be said of the interviews which were carried out in open conversational forms.

The outcome from the meetings with the informal discussion group and the interviews gave important and valuable indications about what kind of values that are considered important for the users.

There was a consensus among the participants that the social aspects of the games, such as friendship, are considered more important than the actual playing. Therefore social interaction was seen as a priority over actual gaming.

A common denominator amongst all the participants in the discussion group and the interviews was the fact that they all had memories of unforgettable moments within a game. Interestingly, in retrospect these memories of meetings with others in online worlds do not seem to differ from stories of meetings in offline worlds. They are told with the same enthusiasm.

The majority of the participants played online games most of their gaming time. Their reason for this, were that they prefer to play against other people. Since real people provide a greater level of interaction than computer generated AI players.

Among the aspects of online gaming that the user group and interviewees valued the most were: Interacting and communicating with other player, helping other players and reputation (theirs and others).

They also were in agreement about the fact that they saw their game playing as a substitute for watching television, an activity they described as too passive.

### 3.5 Saga's Experience of Dereth

The participation, with the female avatar called Saga, increased the feeling and understanding for the studied phenomenon. Saga has explored the world called Thistle down in Asheron's Call. The reason for choosing that particular world was randomly made.

It was easy to create an avatar within AC and it did not take long time. It was possible to choose among many attributes, from skin colour to clothes for the avatar.



Picture 5 & 6. Saga with some of her equipment in a snowy landscape and posing in front of a monster statue

There was no deeper motivation behind the gender choice for Saga, more than since I am a female it felt natural to choose the own gender. One factor that may have increased this choice, was to explore the prejudices and misconceptions that females are treated badly in game environments and therefore I really wanted to have my own female gender and explore whether these prejudices are just prejudices or if they do have a point.

During the creation it felt important that the chosen attributes in some way represented sides of oneself. This was a rather surprising feeling, that the choice in the game environment felt so important and that it was carried out under serious consideration.

When Saga started to play the game, she was equipped with the skills and weapons of a magician. The reason for this choice of skills and equipment was that I thought that a magician felt a little bit less violent.

It did not take long within the game before other users commented this choice of skills and equipment and told me that those skills were not so easily managed for a beginner.

An illustrative example of this is a communication between Saga and another player in Asheron's Call. This communication shows how helpful the other player was to Saga in the guiding of what kind of skills and weapons that are good to start with. This was the first communication that Saga had with another player in Asheron's Call and it took place just a few minutes after she had entered into Dereth.



Picture 7. Saga interacting with other players within AC

Since it is important to respect and maintain the integrity and privacy for the other players within the game, the name of the player that Saga is communicating with in the example down below is replaced with "OP" which stands for the "other player". The OP avatar in this communication is of male gender.

*Saga says, "hi"*

*OP says, "hello"*

*Saga says, "sorry newbie"*

*OP says, "what?"*

*Saga, "I still dont know how all the buttons work"*

*OP says, "oh well in that case follow me"*

*OP says, "is that a mage?"*

*OP says, "i wouldnt start with a mage"*

*Saga, "not so strong?"*

*OP says, "usually sword guys i think are the best newbie chars"*

*Saga says, "what is the best to start with?"*

*OP says, "oh yeah they are really string"*

*OP says, "strong"*

*OP says, "but they are really hard"*

*OP says, "id start with a melee"*  
*OP says, "prob sword"*  
*Saga says, "thanks -"*  
*OP says, "they are easiest i think"*  
*OP says, "or axe"*  
*OP says, "yeah id start axe"*  
*Saga says, "axe sounds cool"*  
*OP says, "do you want me to give you a good axe temp"*  
*OP says, "here write this down"*  
*Saga says, "ok"*  
*OP says, "do these in the order i give them"*  
*Saga says, "ok"*  
*OP says, "100,40,100,10,40,40 (those are the stats just go down the list with them 1st one is strength,second is stamina, etc)"*  
*Saga say, "hol on a second please"*  
*OP tells you, "you got that"*  
*OP tells you, "ok"*  
*OP tells you, "do you understand what im saying?"*  
*Saga says, "sorry - real world - be right back"*  
*OP tells you, "like having those in order"*  
*OP tells you, "ok i got it right this down"*  
*OP tells you, "100 strength,40 endurance,100 condination,10 quickness,40 focus,40self,"*  
*OP says, "Malar Ozael"*  
*OP tried and failed to cast a spell at Saga!*  
*OP says, "Malar Ozael"*  
*OP tried and failed to cast a spell at Saga!*  
*Saga says, "Sorry gotta go! thanks for the stats :)"*  
*OP tells Saga, "wait"*  
*OP tells Saga, "one sec"*  
*Saga says, "yes?"*  
*OP tells Saga, "let me tell you what to train"*  
*Saga says, "yes please"*  
*OP tells Saga, "specialize axe and creature magic, and train melee defense, mana conversion, and healing"*  
*OP tells Saga, "got that?"*  
*Saga says, "yes thanks"*  
*OP gives Saga 2,640 Pyreals.*  
*OP says, "bye"*  
*OP says, "follow this road to town"*  
*OP says, "that way"*  
*Saga say, "ok bye"*  
*OP says, "bye"*  
*Saga says, "thanks for all the help"*  
*OP says, "Malar Ozael"*  
*OP cast Invulnerability Other I on Saga*  
*OP says, "you're welcome"*  
*OP :)*  
*OP says, "bye"*  
*OP bows deeply.*  
*Saga says, "hope to see you again"*

*OP says, "wait"*  
*Saga says, "ok"*  
*OP says, "ill add you to my freinds list"*  
*Saga say, "me too"*  
*OP says, "ok ill call you when your on "*  
*OP says, "bye"*  
*Saga says, "bye"*  
*OP gives you Academy Coat.*  
*OP gives you Armoredillo Hide Amuli Leggings.*  
*OP gives you Leather Steel Toed Boots.*  
*OP gives you Copper Necklace.*  
*OP gives you 10,000 Pyreals.*  
*OP gives you Academy Mana Potion.*  
*OP gives you 25 Prismatic Tapers.*  
*OP gives you 6 Lead Scarabs.*  
*OP says, "bye"*  
*Saga says, "thanks for everything - bye "*  
*OP says, "bye"*

This communication is a very illustrative example of the kindness, helpfulness and politeness that exists within the game environment. This was something that was striking all through the time spent in the environment, that other players always were helpful, kind and polite.

Another illustrative communication, which took place on the second day within the game environment, shows once again the willingness to help among the players and how they value friendship within the game environment.

*OP says, "Wilde it's me "name"*  
*Saga says, "hi"*  
*OP says, "This is my other character"*  
*Saga says, "Ok, how many do you have?"*  
*OP says, "5 but "name" and "name" here are my main characters"*  
*OP says, "you will need that shield"*  
*Saga says, "Ok, do you want anything in return?"*  
*OP says, "Not a thing"*  
*Saga says, "thanks"*  
*Saga says, "do you play AC everyday?"*  
*OP says, "How did you like those buffs I put on yor sword?"*  
*OP says, "Everyday!!!! :o))"*  
*Saga says, "It worked very well"*  
*OP says, "I'll find some armor for you ok."*  
*Saga says, "Have you played AC long?"*  
*OP says, "Do you know how to put the shield in your hand?"*  
*Saga says, "No"*  
*OP says, "Since April"*  
*Saga says, "ok"*  
*Saga says, "Do you have many friends in AC?"*  
*OP says, "yes, many"*  
*Saga says, "is it wise to have a patron immediately?"*

*OP says, "Only if you want a patron Wilde. It help because I will help you however I can."*

*OP says, "I will help you anyway! :o)"*

*Saga says, "You seems to be a very nice person! Thank you!"*

*OP says, "Yes I have friends in RL that play AC."*

*Saga says, "I must say bye now, because I'm going out for lunch! See you!"*

*OP says, "We have a nice mansion in our allegiance. All of which you would have acces to."*

*OP says, Ok. Keep n touch."*

The conversation above confirms some aspects of the game that earlier have been shown by the data from the online survey. For example the fact that OP says that he have five characters within the game, and that two of them are his main character. Once again he wants to help Saga with her equipment, he gives her a shield for protection.

Other aspects that are confirmed by this conversation are: The fact that OP seems to play AC every day and that he considers that he has many friends within the game. The fact that he invites Saga to his allegiance shows that this is something that is important for him within the game. However Saga did not join that allegiance, nor any other allegiance. This was a conscious choice since I knew from the beginning of my playing that my activity within this game was time limited and therefore it did not seem fair or honest to join any allegiance. This is sad, in some ways, because it would have brought a deeper understanding for the milieu and the structure within it. But that was a choice that I made, with its advantages and disadvantages.

Another enjoyable conversation memory that took place in connection to the former conversation, with the same player as above, follows here:

*OP says, "I will give you a shield"*

*Saga says, "Thanks"*

*OP says, "Put it on"*

*Saga says, "How shall I do with the shield?"*

*OP says, ""Put it on"*

*OP says, "just double click on it"*

*Saga says, "But I cant see it!"*

*OP says, "Look in your main pack. Its' round and it's red."*

*OP says, "Take your time"*

*Saga says, "The only thing red in there is a cheese!!"*

*OP says, "lol"*

*OP says, "scoll up and down on your pack"*

*OP says, "still laughing....."*

*OP says, "there you go!!"*

*Saga says, "Laughing at me?"*

*Saga says, "I am glad that I can give some happiness :)"*

*OP says, "No, I was laughing at the cheese in your pack."*

*Saga says, "Thanks for the shield!"*

*OP says, "Your very welcome!!"*

This conversation resulted in a good laugh on both sides of the network.

This section will end with a summary of Sagas participation within Asheron's Call, and the reflections that she gained within the milieu:

One striking aspect within the environment was that everybody was very helpful and polite to each other and especially to Saga as a "newbie", i.e. a beginner. This fact was rather surprising. With a quick comparison between the behaviour offline and online, I must say that all the players that Saga interacted with were very kind and polite and that is usually not the case in offline. Therefore the misconceptions about these environments, where people behave badly in a way they do not do in offline, do not hold.

The interaction with other players within the game also gave me an understanding of the importance of the game for the other users. The players discussed almost everything with each other. All things from game related to personal matters. This is another indicator that they behave towards, and consider, the other players as their friends. Many of the other users that I communicated with play AC everyday, they even look forward to come home and switching the computer on, to log in and see if any of their friends are there.

Off course Saga also experienced hunting within the game, sometimes as a member of a fellowship and sometimes by herself. To travel in the milieu of Dereth you almost have to kill some kind of monsters. I personally must say that I surprised myself with really enjoyed the hunting part of the game.

I have only good experiences of the time spent in Asheron's Call, Saga was never exposed to any bad manners from anyone else within the game. I never had to "suffer" for my gender choice, there was no one that treated me differently in a negatively way because of my female avatar. I never heard any sexual comments whatsoever within the game.

I found the possibility to use emotes within the game as a positive "amplifier". All the social cues that we use when we interact in offline are lost in virtual environments, just a simple thing that the people we talk to nod when following the conversation really make it easier. Therefore emotes are a nice complement to the communication and interaction within the game. It makes the communication and the interaction more alive.

A typical playing session among the users within AC can be described as follows:

They log on to the game, check who is online and say hi and talk to their friends that are online. Usually they also check with their monarch (the highest rank within an allegiance) within the allegiance if there is anything new that has happened within the game worth knowing. After this they check and control their character and its equipment, to see if the character needs anything.

When these first steps are finished, some begin to chat with friends within the game environment and also with other players that they meet. It is possible to discern a clear pattern in the way they interact with the other players within the game. They check out their friend-list first and talk to the friends that they already know before they start to talk to "strangers" within the game. The conversations almost always begin with an overview of possible news within the game, both game related and personal.

Then some of the users may team up and go hunting together. The hunt together since the experience is more enjoyable than doing it alone, and they also want to gain experience points (XP's) and pyreals (the currency in Dereth) for their allegiance. Some just want to look for something new to explore in Dereth or be able to learn more skills.

While some go off hunting or exploring around Dereth, there are others who spend all their logged-on time just communicating with other players. All players that I have talked to said that they value and enjoy being able to help other players with different things within the game.

The players also think that it is important and well mannered to say "hi" and "bye" to the other players, when entering or leaving Dereth.

Here follows some quotations from users in AC, regarding what they do when they enter Dereth:

*"I talk to people most of the time and hunt occasionally"*

*"often communicate with friends can take up most of the time"*

*"I start off in home town see who is about chat and help my online friends see if anyone is hunting join them or go it alone"*

*"Well, being a mage, the first thing i do when i log on is say "hi" to my buds and see if anything is going on that i want to be involved in (i.e. quest). Then, I go to the mayoi mage tower to fillcomps, after which i usually join up with some real-life friends where we hang out or try and do a quest or two."*



Picture 8. Saga ordering a beer in an inn

### 3.5.1 Experiencing Darktide

To be able to gain a more holistic picture and understanding of the world of Dereth, it was desirable to also spend some time in the area called Darktide. Darktide is a part of Dereth where players are allowed to attack each other and also kill each other. The purpose with spending time in Darktide was to experience the environment and the atmosphere there.

When I entered Darktide, with another avatar created for this study called Tallman, I had a mental picture that this world was supposed to be rather different than the other areas that I had visited earlier within Dereth. This means that I entered Darktide with a different set of expectations compared to the other areas within Dereth.

It is always hard to distinguish what it is generated from the expectations that one have when being confronted with something new and what it is that is actually a product from this new phenomenon. Expectations are very influencing of the things that are to be experienced.

Expectations can be seen as a part of a human's framework of references, which also consists of both social, individual, cultural norms and values. These are all very strong factors that have a strong impact on how we experience new phenomena.



Picture 9. Tallman with his crossbow in Darktide

Darktide, was something of a disappointment for me and this may have been due to my high expectations of something total different compared to the other parts of AC. The world was not particularly ominous. My avatar was not killed the moment I entered the world. Quite often the other players ignored me. It is difficult to say anything concrete about being ignored except that this may have depended upon my low character level or on the fact that I did not attempt to challenge other players.

A good example of Darktide players and their views on this special arena can be found in the guild charter of a clan called “the Regulators” whose guild charter begins with the statement: “The Darktide Regulators are a like-minded group of Honor players on the Asheron's Call world of Darktide. We don't claim towns, we don't own people, and we don't Random Player Kill (RPK).” (<http://www.theregs.org>)

Within Darktide the actual killing of other players is also surrounded by social rules and codes of conduct. Randomly killing everything that moves is not seen as an honourable activity. An illustrative example of prevailing social rules and codes can be found in the ethical rules of the Regulators.

#### “Guild Code of Ethics

We are a guild Based on Honor, it is our base, our foundation, our point of stability, it defines who we are.

#### What is Honor?

Honor is a code of integrity, dignity, and pride. It is a truth of character, expressed through ones interactions with others. Honor is something which rightfully attracts esteem, respect, or consideration from others. Honor gives oneself a feeling of self-respect; dignity; courage; excellence of character; nobleness

This is my definition, this is who we are, what we strive for. If this does not hold true for you please leave, you will not fit in here.

- We do not tolerate whiners, beggars, thieves, kill-stealers, grief players, etc.
- We do not tolerate "sore losers" or "quitters". Be gracious in victory as well as in defeat.
- Trash talk or Shit talk WILL NEVER BE ACCEPTABLE. see above point.
- Abnormal amounts of foul language, or lude behavior will not be tolerated. Some of us have (or are) kids and don't want to be exposed to that type of behavior.
- We do not and will not tolerate sexism, or racism; Prejudice of any kind do not belong in our Clan.
- Any member bad-mouthing another member in a public forum may suffer disciplinary actions. If you have a problem with another member please resolve it privately via email. Or come to your Leaders for Mediation.

- The clan comes before the individual. A member must be willing to put Clan needs ahead of his own. That said the Clan will try to provide for it's members in everything it does.”

These ethical rules shows that social norms and values exist and are considered important in this environment just like in the other areas in AC. The interesting thing about Darktide therefore, is that there seems to be certain other customs which are different to the other areas within AC. Darktide appeals to those who seek a greater level of adventure and the clans which spend time in this area view themselves and there time very seriously which is the same as in other parts of AC.

## 4. Discussion

In this section the results will be discussed. The references in the texts refer to the relevant graph representing the collected data. All the graphs are discussed in this section but they do not necessarily follow the same order as in the result section. This is to facilitate and create a more coherent discussion.

### 4.1 But, is it real?

There are prejudices against computer games. One of the main arguments against these environments is that they are not “real”. It is important to consider here what this “real” implies. Real, compared to what? Are they considered less real only because they are games? Or is it the medium that makes them less real to some people?

This prejudice is a common opinion, among people that are inexperienced with computer games or lack an adequate understanding of the phenomenon, is that it does not matter what happens in these environments because they are, after all, just games. The results of this study and the whole survey show the opposite. The environment and the activities that take place therein are experienced as very real for the majority of the users. Another prejudice against computer games is that it has negative social impact on people. People who play computer games are too often considered to be less socially talented. This study shows that this does not hold true since social skills are important in computer games, so are good manners and well-mannered behaviour.

It is an unfortunate approach to ignore the reality and significance of computer games. Activities that take place in these environments affect offline life and vice versa. It is important to understand the relation between online and offline, because they affect each other and it is impossible to understand one side without understanding the other. To this must be added the fact that these games are rapidly expanding and involving more and more people in their worlds.

### 4.2 The Players

There is a common misconception about the people who inhabit these worlds and this is that they are usually young adolescent males with high computer skills and low social graces.

This study has shown that this caricature of the computer playing nerd is not true in all aspects. However, on one point this thesis has confirmed the general idea of computer gamers and that is the gender issue. Most players are male (Figure 2).

This is despite the fact that Asheron’s Call is not a particularly sexist game. It has not been designed to exploit females in a way that makes them uncomfortable. Naturally this does not prevent a feminist interpretation of the game arriving at a different conclusion to the one above. Can it be that females by tradition do not play games, regardless if it is traditional board games or online computer games, to that extent that males does?

Could it be that the reason why there are so few female computer gamers is part of a wider vicious circle? Male developers design the majority of these environments.

They may be unconsciously reinforcing the traditionally male dominated social systems within the virtual environment instead of liberating these environments from the gender traps we experience in everyday life.

The reason why Asheron's Call can be considered attractive to female players and a non-sexist environment is in the comparison with other computer games. Many computer games do not consider the preferences female players may have. Female avatars in these environments are often designed stereotypically with big breasts, thin waists and big red lips. This does not apply to all games and AC is a notable exception where gender choice is not relevant in the game narrative.

Results from studies of computer games have shown that they are an activity that is to a large extent a male activity (Jessen & Holm-Sorensen, 1999; Johansson, 2000). Other studies have shown that male and female play computer game in a rather different ways and point out the different preferences in gaming activity (Kafai, 1996; Sanger et al, 1997; Alexandersson et al, 2001). The design in AC attempts to create a world where gender is not an issue. This could be done for noble reasons, such as creating an egalitarian society but there are also easier reasons for this work. The MMORPG has the possibility of incredible growth and to attain its potential the games really also need to attract players irrespective of gender.

The gender problem in computer games is complex. One way to solve the problem with so few female players could be to design the games more attractive to females. But this is not an uncomplicated task to carry out, because there is a big danger that the design will end up with a stereotype picture of what females want in games (Linderoth, 2002).

Instead of asking females that play computer games, what they think about their gaming and why they think that there are so few female players, it would be much more interesting to gain responses from females who do not play computer games what they think about computer games as a phenomenon and what the reasons are for them to not play.

Another myth that this work negates is the fact that all computer game players are either children or teenagers. As we have seen the age spread is very large, between 13-69 year, and the average age, 28.5 year, is higher than often argued (Figure 1).

One aspect that drives the ages upwards can be the method of payment involved. MMORPG require not only that the software is originally purchased but also requires a monthly subscription, often via a credit card. This mechanism would create an entry barrier to those who are too young to have credit cards. There is an alternative payment mechanism which is better suited for those who cannot, or do not want, to use their credit cards. This system is based on pre-purchased time coupons which can be purchased in the local software or game store. Naturally this system requires a bit more planning on the part of the player.

There is a tendency to view computer games as a "new" phenomenon and something which we have recently discovered. However, this is not so, as shown earlier computer games have been around for approximately 40 years. This means that there are generations of children who have grown up playing computer games. These children have grown up playing computer games, and many have continued playing

these kinds of games, which means that computer games have become an activity that also involves adults (Blomberg, 2001).

Despite the fact that there are older users it is not common for elderly people to have a high level of computer literacy. This knowledge divide also affects the participation of the elderly users. This aspect would be interesting to look deeper into in the future when generations with greater computer skills get elder.

The fact that the average age in AC is rather high, compared to many other computer games, indicates that the game has features built in that attract both young people and older people. It would be interesting to closer explore exactly what kind of game components that attract younger player compared to older players.

Despite the fact that all the players meet and interact in Dereth it is interesting for this work to understand where they live and spend their offline lives. The data shows that more than 80 percent of the users live in western society, while there are very few users that live in Asia and none living in Africa (Figure 3). This thesis will not deeply discuss the problems involved with digital divides, but it is important to observe and point out the fact. Since this stand in strong contrast to a continent ranking based by the population (Worldatlas.com, 2002), which is:

1. Asia
2. Africa
3. Europe
4. North America
5. South America
6. Australia/Oceania
7. Antarctica (0)

Antarctica and Africa can be removed from this discussion, the former due to lack of population and the latter due largely to lack of technical infrastructure. Language could be another factor that limits the accessibility to the game, but this argument does not hold for Australia, which also has very few respondents. So there seems to be other factors involved in the popularity or lack of popularity of a game.

If language is not the main cause of game successes or lack of success in different continents it would be very interesting to study the role of factors such as culture, society, cultural norms and values and regulation. MMORPG's have reached a point where they are now part of the a-national system but are forced to consider national norms and values.

Another aspect of the "myth" of the computer gamer is the fact that he is single. This is usually explained in two ways. Firstly, he must be asocial since he spends his time playing computer games and secondly, he is still young and has not formed a relationship.

One aspect that was confirmed by this study was the fact that the users have a higher representation among singles (Figure 4). This is not a surprising result since they have more time to spend on computer related pastimes, than for instance people who have families. The level of players who were married was probably higher than expected.

This should be seen in the light of the fact that many respondents explained that they sometimes play together with their spouse or children.

As one user put it:

*“my husband and I spend much more time together now- and I feel he respects me more since others in the game do (respect me)” and another “our whole family plays together. It is nice to have a “hobby” that the entire family enjoys”.*

In connection with this the study also showed that for the most part the respondents did not have any children (Figure 5). People who do not have family and children to take care of have naturally more free time for their own activities. The responses here therefore seem natural.

This study confirms the preconceived conception that there are mostly people with computer and technical skills that play these kinds of games (Figure 6). In the study the second largest group were people working in technical occupations. The largest single group consisted of students who also have a certain level of computer literacy. Time can be another factor that increases the number of students in the game, since they often have more time available.

Therefore the concept of the typical player, as understood by society, is flawed. The study has shown thus far that the concept of the typical player does not exactly match the stereotype.

### **4.3 Playing Habits**

Another factor, which goes against the negative image of the MMORPG user, is the fact that they are very loyal. Evidence of their loyalty can be found both in the fact that they play many hours but also the fact that the majority of the players have been active in AC since its release in 1999 (Figure 7). The participants spend many hours each week cultivating and maintaining the social relationships acquired within the world (Figure 8). Evidence of this can be found in player statements such as this:

*“I have never played a game this long. Most games tend to get boring after a while. They get dusted of occasionally and played, but often once beaten, they retire for good. Ash (AC) has a ever changing environment and social interaction that has kept me intrested for well over a year. Only Diablo and Hero`s of Might and Magic have done that as well. It`s a positive because it is something my finacee and I do together as a hobby.”*

The game requires a certain amount of dedication and most respondents explained that the typical playing session lasts for three hours (Figure 9). A typical playing session can be summed up by two of the user's responses when asked to briefly comment on their usual activities when entering Dereth. The answers showed a focus on social interaction as illustrated below:

*“I log on then I check out whose are online and greets and talk to friends. Then I catch up with news, both game related and personal related.”*

*“Well I check out whose online and say hi to my friends then I go off hunting trying to gain xp`s and pyreal. I communicate and talk with friends as I can and help whoever needs it that I can, but that is just me. Then before I log out I say goodbye or goodnight to my online friends and leave.”*

The majority of the respondents report that the main reason for starting to play AC, was due to a offline friend telling them about the game (Figure 10). This verifies the argument that loyal players are the best advertisement for the game companies, since players often talk about their gaming and the games they have played. The responses also show that there are not many respondents that report that they started to play AC, due to recommendations by salespersons in a gaming shop. This data verifies that other information channels about games are more important to the players and effective as a marketing channel.

It is not surprising that a majority of the users typically play role-playing computer games (Figure 11). It seems natural for players who like one genre of game to explore new games within the area. Also, as mentioned above, the social aspect of the role playing game provides an opportunity for the players to talk about new and coming releases. A large group of the players have played different role-playing games, both computer games and other non-computer role playing games, for many years (Figure 12).

The majority of the users most often play AC while they are at home (Figure 13). It is also an activity which they carry out sitting by themselves most of the time (Figure 14). There is a majority among the respondents that report that they sometimes play AC together with friends from outside the game (Figure 15). That is a friend that they first met outside the game context. This verifies the argument that many users use the game environment for other purposes besides just the game playing aspect, for example to stay in contact with established friends.

Despite the fact that most users say that they play while sitting alone there are some who play together with their children, parents, fiancé, girlfriend or boyfriend (Figure 16 & 17). Another aspect of the game is that alternative technology is used to enhance the game playing experience. Most stated that they spoke to each other on the telephone, emailed or chatted to each other via Internet relay chat (Figure 18). A large group of respondents reported that they used other media. It would be interesting to know what kind of media that would be.

The fact that the players commonly sit alone creates the illusion of both loneliness and a-sociality. However Asheron’s Call is a highly social game and offers advantages for players when they join allegiances. Membership in allegiances and fellowships attract many users. They experience that these kinds of alliances enhances their gaming in a positive way and increase the opportunities for friendship and social interaction (Figures 34-36).

Most players who partake in allegiances have the majority of their avatars in allegiances or the character they use the most. This strengthens the importance of friendships since the main reason for joining an allegiance is to find friends or to share experience points with friends. The joining of allegiances is not a strange behaviour. Humans are by nature a social animal, and are usually most comfortable with other humans around them and to interact with. By playing with members of an

allegiance the players gain trustworthy companions with which to share their gaming experiences.

The playing of the MMORPG is carried out via the mediation of an avatar. The majority of users have 5 avatars in AC (Figure 27). There are also many users that have 1-4 avatars. It is interesting to note that 10 avatars is also a common number. According to the respondents the main reason for using one character more than the others is because that character is the highest levelled character (Figure 29). The connection here seems very natural since, the more you use a character the more points will it obtain. The users consider stats to be the most important characteristic when they create a character. In second place is the game impact characteristic (Figure 28).

The avatar is also the carrier of the user's social position within the game. Other players can immediately see the user's level within the game and also, through the clothes, some of the items the user has managed to collect. As in real life the self is an important factor in deciding a person's position in society.

The characters also have a reputation within the game. Certain players have reputations among other players. Reputation is an important asset which affects the way in which a character is interacted with. As in the offline world we treat people with bad reputations with a greater degree of suspicion and vice versa.

In the survey many of the respondents replied that they knew of players with a good or bad reputation which shows the impact and importance of reputation, even in virtual environments. The results also show that the reputation of other players is information that players consider to be worth remembering and sharing (Figure 40 & 42). The reputation aspect also adds to both the narrative and social aspects of the game since reputations "live" within the collective memories of the other users even when the player with the reputation is not online.

The reputation aspect confirms the importance of behaviour and manners within the game context. Since reputation is fundamentally based upon these aspects. Some of the reasons for gaining reputation within the game are for example: high-level player, helpful players & monarch over a large allegiance (Figure 41). These three replies demonstrate the importance of skilled players, helpful players and politically influential players.

#### **4.4 Social Capital**

A focus of the MMORPG is on the role-playing part of the game. Since it also depends upon other characters, the game has a heavy focus on user interaction. Due to this focus on interaction and the social aspects of the game it is possible to also observe the focus on social structures. While everyone is aware that the MMORPG is a game, the players do not see the others in the game as simply players in the same manner as computer generated players in single-player games. The player's value the social infrastructure the game facilitates. If they were only to view the others within the world as merely players it would not matter which level of social interaction they had with others. But, as is easily observed, this is not so. Friendships are created on

different levels. Users do not consider all their acquaintances to be a homogenous group.

The social networks in AC consist of different kinds of friendships and different levels of social interaction. This shows that interaction between people with the mediation of avatars does allow for complex developments of social structures. The social interaction available to the players varies greatly. Strangers can exchange simple social greeting gestures or even strike up conversations and perform more complex trades.

An important aspect of gaming is whether you can trust the other players or not. The players within AC value trust highly. All social interaction and friendship is based on certain levels of trust. There is a majority of the users that report that they sometimes give away outside contact information to other users, but this answer is closely followed by a group of layers that report that they seldom give away outside contact information (Figure 26).

Friends or acquaintances can meet online and continue their interaction in a formless manner or they can join different social groups which have their own social rules and interaction both within and outside the game.

Social interaction is therefore possible in computer-mediated environments. The level of social interaction facilitated by the avatar can vary from the simple to the complex and makes the virtual environment as socially real as any other.

Asheron's Call has some built-in features, the purpose of which is to stimulate and facilitate the social interaction within the game. The communication form with the text message can be directed to specific players. For example for the players within an allegiance or only to the monarch and so on. Another function within the game that facilitates the communication with the other players is the friend list. The friend list will let you know whom of your friends (whom you have added to this list) are playing and you will also receive a message whenever some of your friends are entering the game.

The players have an opportunity to comment in the survey on the importance of social interaction in Asheron's Call. These illustrative comments from the users show the importance of the social interaction aspect within the milieu.

*"I have found a place where people can't judge me on first appearance."*

*"allows me to chat and interact with other people across the world."*

*"helped me to meet interesting people in a unique way, helps with socialization, lets me meet people I never would be able to in real life"*

A significant number of users feel that they have become acquainted with other people with the help of the game (Figure 19). Among these acquaintances, there is a large group of users that consider one or more of their game acquaintances to be friends (Figure 20). Among these friends, there is a large group that consider some of the friends to be close friends (Figure 21).

Therefore, this thesis confirms that there are social structures in online environments similar in complexity to the relationships in offline environments. All friendships are not experienced in the same way. People value some people more than others even in this kind of environment.

Social interaction at some level is expected in MMORPG since the narratives are based upon the concept of many players entering into the spirit of the role-playing environment. While the online interaction is to be expected in AC it is interesting to note that over half the respondents have made contact with other players outside the game (Figure 22).

This means that there is a spill over from in-game friendships. They are carried over to friendships outside the game. One-fifth of those who have carried an online friendship developed within the virtual environment of Asheron's Call outside the game have even met each other face-to-face (Figure 25).

Among the users that have contact people they first met in AC, the most commonly used media for this contact was e-mail, followed by telephone, chat, Internet, ICQ and so on (Figure 23). There is however surprising and remarkably that a small group of users have answered that they used snail-mail for the contact.

AC seems not to give rise for so many romances, according to the responses. A significant majority have answered that they have not been dating, engaged or married to someone within the game (Figure 24). This can perhaps be explained by the genre of the game.

Should the face-to-face communication be the measure of success to be applied to the MMORPG? This is doubtful. The fact that many friendships are made and sustained within the game and require no out-of-game support should be the true indication of the strength of social ties within these environments.

Within any social context internal rules of behaviour are developed, this is also true of the social context of Asheron's Call. The survey looked at three different types of behaviour that may or could occur within the environment. The behaviour that is considered the most inappropriate is the harassment of other player (Figure 38). Foul language (Figure 37) and misleading other players (Figure 39) are two types of behaviour which, while not considered appropriate, is not something which resulted in strong reactions from the respondents.

## **4.5 Self Representation**

Since friendship within these environments is built upon interaction between representations of the self via avatars it is important to more fully understand the representation of the self and the way in which others perceive this representation. In the survey many believed that they presented a true image of themselves via their avatars and their online interaction. The numbers were however slightly less when users were asked if they believed that others gave a true representation of their real personas via their choice of avatar.

It is interesting to note that there are more users who think that other people are able to obtain a more accurate impression of them from their avatar and behaviour than the other way around (Figures 32 & 33). By tradition identity has been strongly connected to our physical body. In graphical online environments people can choose how they want to present themselves visually for others, through their choice of avatars and attributes (Jakobsson and Popdan 1999). The responses show that users tend to believe that they are showing more accurate information about themselves than they can gain from others.

That people interact within different roles depending upon, amongst other things, the context and company is nothing new (Goffman, 1971). People enter into different roles in their everyday lives, this is often motivated by a need to adapt to the context and to obtain social advantages from ones behaviour.

The Austrian psychoanalyst Jakob Moreno, began using role-play as a method of treatment during 1920s. Role-playing has been an established therapeutic method, dealing with individual personal development and practice in social interaction. By the end of the 1970s role-playing had developed and became part of social interaction and entertainment. The most well known commercial example of this development was the game "Dungeons and Dragons", which with its fantasy content inspired the massive development of a new popular genre and became trendsetter in the gaming community (Blatner, 1994).

Turkle (1997) argues that at the same time as we take the step into virtual environments we reshape our identities. This is, from my point of view, an exaggerated statement, people continue to be people even when they enter virtual environments. They enter these environments and bring with them their social conventions and morals. They are also required to adopt a new social structure with its own norms and values which are more appropriate to the new context. However, this adoption does not mean that virtual environments automatically make people into something that they were not before.

A study, which reinforces the fact that people strive to maintain consistency between their offline and online personas, can be found in the work of Nancy Baym (2001). She has studied behaviours of users within virtual environments, based on her ethnographical survey of r.a.t.s. (A news group which discusses soap operas), claims that a majority of the users of computer mediated communication create net identities that are consistent with their identity outside the net. This study (Baym, 2001) shows that most people consider their online identity to be important and they want it to reflect their offline identity and they spend much time in building a reputation around this identity, since the reputation is just as important for their social status and context online such as offline.

This conception of online identities is also supported by the study made by Schiano and White (1998), which shows that people do not take completely new roles when entering into virtual environments but they prefer to be themselves. The majority of the participants in their study reported that they have only one character in the virtual environment. In the cases where people had more than one character, almost everyone considered that their main character portrayed themselves.

It has been argued (Turkle, 1997) that people swap genders frequently in virtual environments. The results from this study show that the majority of the users do not have any characters with a different gender than their offline gender (Figures 30 & 31).

There is however a group of users that have characters with a different gender than offline, but they are not in majority. The results in this study shows that the main purpose for having a different gender than offline are for role-play purposes and other purposes like obtaining more features within a game when being a female for instance.

In certain games (for example Diablo I) the choice of gender was not necessarily based upon the interest in gender experimentation but rather in the fact that different characters with different skills could only be found in certain genders. Take for example Diablo I, where the archer was a female. Thus any male player wishing to test the different bows in the game was “forced” to change gender.

Off course there are also some users that experiment with the gender swapping for other purposes, sometimes sexual. But my opinion of this matter is that the gender debate in virtual environments is often much exaggerated especially in the context of MMORPG where the whole point is to role-play.

#### **4.6 Effects & Attitudes**

The level of activity devoted to AC must obviously impact the lives of those involved and as such this was an interesting line of questioning. It might not be surprising to discover that people who spend so much time in Dereth believe it to have a positive effect on the whole of their lives. But what is interesting to note is the high level of participants who believe that their activities have no effect on their lives as a whole. The comments of the participants show the effects of the game on their lives:

*“Keeps me from over drinking”*

*“My grades have dropped because I play too much AC and neglect my studies.”*

Despite the fact that the majority of users spend between 11-20 hours playing AC each week (Figure 8), it is interesting to note that a large group of the respondents feel that AC does not affect their lives at all (Figure 43). This leads to very interesting areas for future study and this is the question of why so many people devote so many hours each week if they feel that it does not affect their lives positively in some way.

Probably the most persistent complaint against computer games is the fact that they are fake. While it would be interesting to develop this further in a discussion on what is fake and what is real this study will limit itself to the player point of view on this topic. A very significant majority of those involved in AC feel that it is real and not fake (Figure 44). To understand a social phenomenon it is important to understand it from the perspective of those involved and therefore AC should be seen in the light of this answer. Not only do the users feel that the game is real many also think that the game has relevance to their lives as a whole in a positive manner.

When asked if the users think whether it is possible to learn anything within virtual environments that have any relevance for their offline lives. A significant majority replied that they believed that they could learn from online environments, such as AC (Figure 45).

Computer games have long been described as irrelevant and therefore it was interesting to understand how the users of AC felt about the environment and whether they experienced that it was possible to learn something of relevance to their offline lives. Among the users who think that AC is not fake it is a very strong experience that AC has any relevance to their offline lives (Figure 47). It is also worth mentioning that a rather large number of the respondents think that AC is fake but still believe it to be relevant to their offline lives (Figure 46).

Once again we can see that AC has an effect on the users' offline lives and that they can bring with them lessons learned online and use them in the offline environment. Some of these lessons may be better than others but the trend is clear that the two environments (offline/online) are deeply intertwined for the user. It would be a very interesting topic for future work to see how these two environments interact and affect the user who effectively moves back and forth from one to the other.

*“My passive TV watching time has been replaced by interactive gaming time. It also encourages teamwork and building of morals”.*

*“I feel that AC tests my quick thinking and decision making abilities”.*

Among the things that the users believe that they are able to learn in AC are improved social skills. This is something which they appreciate learning the most in the game. Examples of the social skills, which the users mention, are: interaction, communication, loyalty and good manners. Other things users consider that they have learned or improved are: their English language skills and increased knowledge about other cultures.

Wilhelmsson (2002) claims that people can become smarter by playing computer games. He has studied the cognitive aspects of computer games, i.e. what happens with peoples consciousness when they play these kinds of games and how the users identify themselves with their characters within the game. The users within a computer game experience a form of “cerebral physical presence” (Wilhelmsson, 2002) when they play. Many computer games stimulate the users to think and to find solutions for different problems and tasks within the game. According to Wilhelmsson people who play computer games are able to develop skills to be effective problem solvers.

#### **4.7 Comparison with Two Parameters**

Some of the more interesting issues in this study are the question of whether the users believe that the environment is fake or not and also if they experience that Asheron's Call has affected their lives positively or negatively.

The purpose of this comparison is to compare the results using different parameters to be able to find relations that affect the user's attitudes toward the game. The reason for choosing the parameters below is that they were expected to generate interesting data.

#### **4.7.1 Time as a Parameter**

An obvious parameter of measurement in this situation is time. Time is important since the users over time learn more about the environment and also gain familiarity with the activities therein. Time is also an important factor in the creation of relations within the game. The idea here is to compare whether or not AC is believed to be more or less fake over a longer time period.

There are no major differences when comparing if the experience of fake or not could be connected and explained by how long time the users have played AC (Figure 48 & 49). The same can be said of whether or not the AC environment has positively or negatively affected the user's offline lives (Figure 50 & 51).

The similarity in the responses is striking. This indicates that this has not been a fair and indicative parameter of reference. According to the similarity of the answers, these parameters do not seem to be important and do not seem to play any decisive role on how the users feel about the environment and the activities therein.

To the user the discussion about whether the environments are fake or not, seem to be of little interest. The users spend many hours in the environment and carry out activities within, regardless if they experience it as fake or not.

These results are unexpected and surprising. As a parameter of measurement time is very revealing. Time often affects the way in which people feel about different things. Often people become more positive towards things the more they become acquainted with them. In a virtual environment, for example, some knowledge is required of the environment to be able to use it in the best way. People tend to be more positive about things when they have had the time to get used to them.

Perhaps one major difference in the experience, is that the user have been able to make a conscious choice of their own whether or not to enter into these environments and therefore time does not affect the values the users brought with them.

#### **4.7.2 Allegiance membership as a Parameter**

A major part of the game design is based upon different allegiances and fellowships. Since this plays a major part in the development and the playing of the game allegiance membership is an interesting parameter of comparison.

Whether the users experience the environment to be fake or not, the majority of the users have characters that belong to an allegiance. The experience of fake or not seems not to affect the users playing or behaviour, engagement and involvement within the game. They seem to behave in a rather similar way regardless (Figure 52 & 53). The same can be said of whether or not the AC environment has positively or negatively affected the user's offline lives (Figure 54 & 55).

It would be very interesting to explore further what affects the user's in their belief that AC is fake or not. It seems apparent from our comparisons that neither time nor

social interaction via allegiance membership affects the users profoundly in this question. It would be very interesting in the future to explore further what this means and can tell us about the game and its design.

In conclusion the users seem to have an opinion when entering the game and they maintain this opinion despite a long period of playing or membership in allegiances. This therefore is an illustrative example of the way in which the frames of references the users have obtained in their offline lives are not easily changed by online life.

#### **4.8 Substitute or Complement**

Computer games and especially MMORPG's can be seen as a complement or a substitute for certain aspects of offline life. Naturally it is impossible to find an answer to this question which could be applied as a general truth. However, the information gathered provides interesting information on the role of MMORPG's in society today.

One level of consensus in the discussion group was that they prefer to play computer games instead of watching television, which they claim that they would do if they were not playing computer games. This is a situation where computer games can be seen as a substitute for watching television. The main reason for choosing computer games instead of watching television is that computer games involve some kind of interaction and that watching television is experienced to be a very passive activity.

There are some indications that use of Internet under certain circumstances acts as substitute for other social activities (Castells, 2001). Whether Castells observations can be fully applicable to MMORPG's must remain an open question. Computer games seem to be both substitute and complement for its users.

Some users report that they play computer game with the main purpose to interact with other people and keep in touch with friends that have moved away in the physical world. This shows that computer games also uses as a complement for their lives. Many users feel that they learn things and skills within the game that they have use for and that is relevant for their everyday lives offline. This is also an example of the fact that it can work as a complement.

Claude Fishers (1992) social history of the telephone in USA showed how this technology enhanced already existing relation patterns. People used the phone for keeping contact with their families and friends, people they already knew. This is an example of when the technology is used as a complemented tool to communicate with already established relations. Anderson and Tracey's (2001) studies, of the use of Internet in British household, shows that people tend to adjust Internet to their lives rather than adjust their lives and behaviours to the technology.

An illustrative example of the complexity of these questions can be found in the game "The Sims". A middle-aged female Sims player, whose husband recently passed away, used the game environment to create an avatar representing herself and an avatar representing her late husband. She used the game environment partake in the interaction of the husband and wife avatars as part of her grieving process. To discuss

this in the terms of complement or substitute diminishes the complexity of the issues involved.

## 5. Design Aspects

*“The way the technology is designed affects the form of the social interaction, but often in ways not predicted by the designer.” (Jakobsson & Popdan)*

One of the more important purposes with this work, and in particular this section, is to discuss the importance of the role of design in technology. While design has both been a fashion and an area of praise it has in virtual environments reached a new and important level. This is especially true of interaction design.

The designer of an interactive or virtual environment does not only create an artefact, which is to be used, or a game that is to be taken lightly. The designer creates a whole, internally coherent, milieu. Therefore the designer has a serious responsibility towards the users of the milieu. However, as we shall see below, there are times when the designer’s responsibilities go beyond the users and she or he is faced with a social responsibility.

To be able to understand and to meet the social responsibilities, facing the designer of virtual environments, great care must be taken when dealing with the social and technical aspects of the technology involved. The creation of any technology automatically generates social consequences and the designer must be aware of the results of the design choices made. Too often the focus is upon the technological effects of design choices and very little effort is spent on the social effects. While this may be bad in traditional industrial design it is much more serious in the design of interaction in virtual environments.

### 5.1 Why Should Designers Bother?

In the creation of virtual online worlds the design choices made by the designer have an incredibly important role. Their choice set the limitations on what is physically possible or impossible to do within a world. Therefore the designer is more than a simple technical creator and more a social engineer. Since the designer also makes the choices in setting the boundaries what is physically possible/impossible within a world then the choices made are greater than only social design.

The power of the designer reaches of the very limits of virtual human existence. Within the virtual environment the designer decides what life and death entail within the world. In the beginning of a game an avatar is created. The user is given several choices and it may appear that the choices upon which the appearance of the avatar depends are limitless. But in reality they are based upon the parameters set by the designer. Once the character is spawned, it is the designer that has pre-set the parameters of what this birth entails. This situation is also applicable on the death of a character. Within many online games the avatar is often tested in different ways, very often the character is exposed to life-threatening situations. It is the designer who decides at which point a life force is extinguished. It is also the designer who decides what death entails, for example, if the avatar can be re-spawned and, if so, at what cost.

It is this kind of power that the designer must wield. The question, which naturally arises from this, is whether or not the designer is prepared for the responsibility. Designers usually possess adequate knowledge of the technology, but all too often they lack knowledge of social sciences. It is not defensible that social aspects are placed in the shadow of technology. The reverse situation would not be acceptable, i.e. that the social aspects were given greater consideration than the technical.

Our society has a tendency to rank technical skills higher than social skills. If we are to accept the fact that the designers of virtual environments are developing something other than unimportant pastimes for adolescents then we must also accept the fact that designers must become more nuanced and sensitive to the social worlds they are creating.

## **5.2 Technical Design is Social Design**

It is very important to be aware that when some kind of technology is developed it creates social consequences. There has been a long debate between those who would see technology as being a-political and neutral. They meant that technology had no social implications. This point-of-view has since been overturned. With the works of writers such as Heidegger, Ellul and Winner the idea of technology as a neutral factor has been abandoned by the majority. With the explosion of information and communications technology (ICT) the concept of technology as not affecting society has finally been overthrown.

Technology can never be developed in a society without any effects on the milieu. Therefore it is important to have the knowledge to be able to deal with the consequences generated. Not all consequences can be foreseen but it is important to be aware of what may happen. Developers of information technology do not only have a technical responsibility, but also a social responsibility for what they develop.

## **5.3 More Knowledge – “Better” Design**

More and better knowledge in this area will also improve the development of these environments. If the knowledge of these environments increases it could lead to better design implications of the environments in the future. Design implications should be based on an adequate and deep understanding for the actual phenomenon. To obtain an adequate understanding it is important to explore what the users think about the environments and what they actually do within them. Because, too often, users behave differently in these environments than the developers thought they would when they first designed them.

Players are an important, one could even say, essential part of the design process and therefore it is important to obtain knowledge from the players point of view. Players have a fundamental role in the infrastructure of the game, because the infrastructure does not only consist of technical aspects but also social and cultural. A great part of these games depends upon the interaction of the players for their success and therefore the social aspects, especially those experienced by the users must be

ingrained in the design process. To be able to reach a good design level it is important to evaluate how the developed design actually works, and how the users use it.

## **5.4 Designing MMORPG's**

Virtual environments as MMORPG's are complex and unpredictable. The state of the environment and the story within it are not static, very much in these environments is dependent on the users and their behaviour. The primary activity in these environments is social interaction between players.

Developers should, for their own interest, carefully explore what the users experience in the developed environment and the activities that takes place within it. The users feedback should be treated as an important part of the design process.

All too often when it comes to development of technology, the only interesting measure aspect seems to be performance or capacity and so on. The social aspects are too often overlooked, which stands in strong contrast since they often are decisive whether the environment will attract users or not.

The method choice for developing MMORPG's is a critical and important factor in the design process. There should be space for provoking innovative ideas in combination with gaining an adequate and deep understanding for the environment seen from the users perspective. It is also desirable to have a proper understanding for the culture within the environment, so that the forthcoming design implications do not seem irrelevant or inappropriate.

The users, or at least some of the users, will try to do what ever is allowed within an environment. It is the designer who sets up the rules for what is possible within virtual environments. The design of virtual environments affects the user and their actions.

## **5.5 Regulation**

There are still those who attempt to argue that virtual environments are unimportant and that ultimately the user has the freedom to choose whether she or he wants to enter the environment or not. Environments which are too extreme and that evoke dramatic responses are often defended by the fact that if the user is offended then the user should not have entered into the environment. While this is a libertarian argument and seems at first glance to mirror the concept of freedom – it is not a valid argument. There are certain rules which we believe to be universal and therefore cannot be set aside. All people cannot like all environments, but they shall be able to visit them without, for example, experiencing serious insults or humiliation.

## **5.6 Who is, and Should be Responsible for This?**

The virtual environment is not only affected by the internal limitations and social values of the milieu. The general social debate and the laws and morals prevailing in the offline world naturally interact with the virtual environment.

The responsibility of the designer is not only limited to the virtual environment. There have been discussions on the effects of computer games and virtual environments on the minds of the users. Media often attempts to connect violent games with offline violence. In a recent gruesome murder in Sweden the media immediately connected the fact that the decapitated victim was interested in role-playing games despite the fact that this had nothing to do with the murder.

The question of whether media is right or wrong in these cases or the effects of violent computer games on the minds of the users is not the focus of this thesis but they are important questions which the designer must take a stance upon. In the recent American Supreme Court case of *Ashcroft v. The Free Speech Coalition*, the court pondered the question of whether the creation of a “virtual child” for the use of child pornography could be permitted under the concept of free speech.

The American position on free speech is very strong. They believe that free speech should not be limited and this position is protected in the constitution which states that no law shall be made which limits this right to speech. However there has been progress in the area of child pornography. Child pornography is not protected as free speech. In 1996 the Child Pornography Prevention Act (CPPA) was enacted. This legislation was very broad in its definitions and included computer generated children and morphed photographs in its definitions of what could be considered to be child pornography. The question in *Ashcroft v. The Free Speech Coalition* was whether or not the CPPA was too broad and encroached to a much too great extent on free speech. The courts found that it did.

The problem of virtual child pornography is a very significant and illustrative example, to show the complex of problem with social and technical aspects of design of virtual environments. This is not a game example, but it shows the complexity with virtual environments, when it comes to the social and ethical aspects.

How is it possible for people to neglect the social and ethical aspects and consequences in the case of virtual child pornography? If such an environment can be defended and defined as allowed under freedom of speech, how come we do not have inflatable child dolls? The answer to that question is that a majority of people do not consider it to be ethically right and defensible to sell a child doll for sexual purposes. Who has and should have the responsibility to see to that the same ethical thinking also exists in virtual environment?

## **5.7 A Virtual Rape**

Another illustrative example of the social consequences of technology is portrayed in “A rape in Cyberspace” by Julian Dibbell (1998). Dibbell describes a rape committed in a virtual environment. The environment itself was a text based MUD called LambdaMOO. In this environment a user with an avatar named Mr Bungle manages to manipulate the source code of the environment and grant himself powers beyond what was intended by the designers and other users of the milieu. Mr Bungle uses his newfound powers to force other players to perform sexual activities against their will.

All this takes place in the virtual environment. There are no physical bodies present, no one is physically hurt, but the involved people are present in the environment with their senses and emotions. The degradation and humiliation they felt does not depend upon the fact that they were not physically present. The example of LambdaMOO is interesting because it shows that the users in online environments are not to be ignored simply because they are not present. The fact that they are partaking in a computer mediated world with the help of an avatar does not make the pain they feel less real and the importance of the protection of human dignity less important.

## 6. Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis has been to gain an understanding of how the users experience their activities and the environment within Asheron's call. The reason for this has been to achieve a more nuance understanding of a rapidly growing important complex social phenomenon. The MMORPG has not been available for so many years and it has already become a force to be reckoned with since it attracts large amounts of users. The future of this genre of computer games is strong indeed with not only new games and worlds being developed but also new platforms – such as the experimental mobile MMORPGS. One thing is certain we have only scratched the surface of this new, new thing.

An important starting point for this work has been that the study has been user-centric. Since the growth of the number of users makes this the most serious and fair method of study for this phenomenon.

The results presented in this thesis are a good starting point for increasing the level of understanding of the new generation of computer games and the way in which the players feel about them. As this study has shown the players are serious about their attitude towards the virtual environment and its activities, and consider it to be a real and important part of their lives.

One striking and unexpected result in this study was that time does not affect the users experience whether the game environment and its activities are considered as fake or not, nor if it has affected the users positively or negatively in their lives. This result indicates that the frame of reference, norms and values that the users bring with them into the new environment are resistant over the long-term.

Computer games should not be dismissed as just games. The majority of the users feel that the activities they carry out within the game have relevance for them in their everyday life. Their everyday life consists of both online and offline environments, and these environments should both be seen as important parts of their lives.

Game environments like Asheron's Call contain their own social ordering and structure. Sometimes the traditional norms and values are totally replaced by new norms and values, which are created within the milieu to fit the context and sometimes the traditional norms and values are just modified to fit to the new environment. The users behaviour is not less moral online than offline. The majority of the users keep their values and norms even online, sometimes the values and norms are transformed in the new environment and with the new group.

Virtual worlds are different than the physical world. But just because they are different it does not automatically mean that they are considered less real for the users. The results from this study show that the majority of the user experience and consider the game environment and its activities as “real”. Even that they experience the game environment as something different from the physical world, they still experience it as a “real” part of their everyday lives.

The results from this study show, that there are two major aspects that are considered more attractive and important for the users and that these are social interaction and friendship. For the majority of users playing Asheron’s Call the social interaction is more important than the actual playing. The users consider their gaming as a valuable occupation. The fact that a majority of the users also believe that they are able to learn skills which they have use for both in their on and offline lives enhances their positive experience toward the game.

As this study has discussed it is important to understand that technical design is social design and that developers and designers should have an adequate understanding for the social consequences that is generated from their creations. This aspect will continue to grow in importance as MMORPG continue to develop and attract larger numbers of users.

It is time to change the conception that our physical world is the right measure of all things true or false. When something differs from the physical world it is too easily dismissed as just a second-rate copy of the physical world. If we have learned one thing from the development of digital technology it is that copies do not deteriorate from the original. The original-copy discussion is irrelevant in this context since the virtual environment does not attempt to be the world as it is but creates a different world.

A final reflection on the main vein of this work, which is the real-fake discussion: Who is to judge what is real or what is not real? An important question in this context is: Real – compared to what? Or as Einstein once said “Reality is merely an illusion, albeit a very persistent one.”

## 7. Future Work

It would be interesting to study the development of computer games and MMORPG's further in the future, since this is such a rapidly growing area.

Much has now been done within this area, but there is still much left to do. At the same time as the technology improves, the computer games also improve.

Since typing, as a mode of communication, has its limits there will probably be more games developed that offers voice communication and voice controlled commands as a method of increasing playability.

It will also be possible to access these game environments from different media. Gaming on mobile phones is in progress on the market, mobile phones today have often a few simple games built into them. The mobile phones are developing and today there are phones available with colour screens, and the capacity to download software. One thing that is remarkable in this context is that even that people in general tend to be reluctant to pay for other content and attributes to their mobile phones, they are happily willing to pay money for games. (Ben Wood/Gartner) (The Economist)

The market for mobile games is different from the market for console games for instance. The prices are lower than for other computer games, but the spread and use of mobile phones is expected to compensate for this. If the visions of using mobile phones for online games reach its penetration, the device maybe will be the worlds most spread gaming device ever. (The Economist)

Another important aspect for the developers is how they are going to design these game environments to keep their players loyal to the game and to ensure that they continue playing it. One aspect that makes players more involved within a game is to offer them the possibility to create their own objects within the game. Users tend to feel more committed to the game when they build and create within it. Therefore there will probably be more games designed in such a way as to allow users to be part of the creation.

A successful game that has focused both of the social interaction, which attracts many users and offers the users the possibility, to create and build within the game environment is "The Sims". The Sims concept can shortly be described as a game where people spend their time living an everyday life with all its contents. The success of the game is that it is very similar everyday life, and that it allows and encourage the users to build and create objects within it. The game offers the users familiar environments and situations, compared to many other games with adventure fantasy environments. The purpose of the game is to take care of your created Sims character in the environment. There is no formal end of the game. The users can spend time and interact with others for as long time, as they want. One Sims player describes the attitude to Sims like this: "To many of us, it is more than just a game. We don't just play The Sims; we express ourselves and our lives with real emotions, situations and interactions".

Is this concept perhaps the beginning to a new era within the development of computer games?

It is also important to attract the group of users that do not have so much time available to spend on computer games. This is also an important aspect to consider, how to design games that makes people with less time available for computer games, still feeling that they are involved with the game.

The generations that have grown up playing computer games are getting older, which will probably lead to a wider range of more mature adult games. The awareness of the absence of females playing computer games, will encourage game manufacturers to probably open the door for more game components that attracts both female and male players.

The question whether the users should be the owner of what he or she creates within the game environments, will become an issue of focus. Many users spend a great deal of time in these games, creating their characters and so on, would it not be natural that the user would be allowed to own his or hers creation.

Since more and more people play this kind of games, there has to be some kind of regulation within the game environment and also some kind of regulation concerning the developers and the companies behind the games.

Another important aspect that will develop in the future is the game environments own economy, this is another reason that there has to be more control and regulation of these environments. It is interesting to speculate what all this will end up with, today there are real economies within some game environments. Will we be able to see virtual governments in the future?

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