Abstract

The proportion of people aged 60 and over is growing faster than any other age group. Due to shift from career or family focus, loss of long-term companions and increasing likelihood of chronic and debilitating illness, older adults face some key social and psychological challenges such as loneliness, depression and lack of social support. Gerontology researchers have demonstrated that social interaction is an important component of successful aging. Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) can offer older adults many opportunities to maintain current and develop meaningful and supportive relationships. Drawing on the challenges facing older adults and prior theoretical and empirical studies, this research explored the social and emotional impacts of playing MMORPGs on older adults aged 55 and over, primarily analyzing the relationships between older adults’ social interactions in MMORPGs and six social and emotional factors (i.e., bridging and bonding social capital, loneliness, depression, social support and belongingness). To address this question, four research hypotheses were generated.

An online survey was developed and published to eight World of Warcraft (WoW, a popular MMORPG) player forums to gather information about older gamers’ demographic characteristics, play patterns, social interactions in WoW, measurements of six social-emotional dimensions, and challenges facing older adults while playing WoW. Data were collected over a three and a half months period (from May 15th to September 1st, 2014) from a sample including 222 WoW players aged 55 and older. To answer the research questions and test the four hypotheses, hierarchical multiple regression analysis was applied, and Cohen’s $f^2$ was computed to compare effect sizes. Similar to their younger counterparts, older adults’ social interactions in MMORPGs can take place on several different levels, and can be casual or intimate, and even romantic. Social interaction in MMORPGs is an important source for older adults’ social learning. The regression analyses revealed that enjoyment of relationships and quality of guild play has deep impacts on older adults’ social and emotional wellbeing. This study also demonstrated that MMORPGs have the potential to function as a “third place” for older adults to socialize and get entertained like a real-world club or coffee shop.
Keywords: Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games, socio-emotional impacts; older adults; motivation; third place