

## Surprising results: Virtual games players stick close to home

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In the real world, tracking a person's social network -- which could include hundreds of contacts that serve different purposes -- is nearly impossible.

But in online virtual games like EverQuest II, where tens of thousands of people leave digital traces as they chat with one another, perform quests together, form groups and buy and sell goods, researchers have found a gold mine of networking data.

That's where social scientist and engineer Noshir Contractor comes in. Contractor, the Jane S. and William J. White Professor of Behavioral Sciences at the McCormick School of Engineering and Applied Science at Northwestern University, and his collaborators are studying nearly 60 terabytes of data from EverQuest II, a fantasy massive multiplayer online role-playing game where players complete quests and socialize with each other.

The researchers analyzed this data along with a survey of 7,000 players -- making it one of the largest social science research projects ever performed, Contractor said.

Contractor will discuss their surprising results in a presentation titled "Social Drivers for Organizing Networks in Communities," which will be part of the "Analyzing Virtual Worlds: Next Step in the Evolution of Social Science Research" symposium at the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) Annual Meeting in Chicago.

The group has mined the data logs from the game to look for "structural signatures" that indicate different kinds of social network configurations.

"We can see whom these players talked to, whom they played with, and all the other interactions and transactions they had," Contractor said. "In many ways it's a microcosm of our existence in the general social world."

The researchers found that many players underestimate the amount of time they spend playing the games, and the number of players who say they are depressed is disproportionately high. They also found that women don't like to play with other women but are generally the most dedicated and satisfied players. And players aren't just teenagers -- in fact, the average age of a player is substantially higher.

But what most surprised Contractor was that even though players could play the game with anyone, anywhere, most people played with people in their general geographic area.

"People end up playing with people nearby, often with people they already know," Contractor said. "It's not creating new networks. It's reinforcing existing networks. You can talk to anyone anywhere, and yet individuals 10 kilometers away from each other are five times more likely to be partners than those who are 100 kilometers away from each other."

Worldwide, nearly 45 million people play massive multiplayer online role-playing games like EverQuest II, and the amount of real-world money associated with virtual worlds would make it the seventh largest country in the world according to gross domestic product.

"This is not a trivial issue," Contractor said. "Now that we have the

computing power to study these networks, we can explore different theories about social processes on a scale that was never possible before."

Source: Northwestern University

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