

The family that plays together stays together?

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The most popular massively multiplayer online game (MMO) in terms of subscriptions is World of Warcraft.

(PhysOrg.com) -- “Get off the computer and go play outside.” So go the words heard in homes around the country as parents and children clash over the social benefits of video games.

But parents needn’t worry so much, according to Dr. Cuihua (Cindy) Shen, an assistant professor of Emerging Media and Communication at UT Dallas. Her recent research article in the *Communication Research* journal argues that online games can actually bolster family communication.

“Even though most people think that spending large amounts of time playing online games can be harmful to one's social life, if people play online games with their existing friends and family, [game](#) play could actually enhance their social experiences,” Shen said. “An online game thus becomes an additional venue, albeit virtual, for socialization.”

Shen surveyed more than 5,000 gamers about how they use the Internet, their specific activities in the virtual world and their psychosocial well-being for the article, “Unpacking Time Online: Connecting Internet and Massively Multiplayer Online Game Use With Psychosocial Well-Being,” co-written by Dmitri Williams.

According to the study, online games engage 76 percent of all teens and 23 percent of all adults in the United States. Of these games, networked games known as massively multiplayer online games (MMOs) are growing in popularity. The content of these games is based largely on social interactions, which supports the argument that new technologies create social augmentation, as opposed to displacement: “Not only could the Internet enhance one’s everyday communication with family and friends locally and over a distance,” wrote Shen, “it could also enlarge one’s existing social network by bringing together people with shared interest and values in virtual communities.”

However, there are many who feel video games create time displacement, causing users to spend more time in virtual worlds and thus becoming physically and socially disengaged. But MMOs can also “foster informal sociability and cultivate virtual communities,” according to Shen, and her article illustrates more and more gamers are playing with family and friends they already know online, as opposed to playing with new acquaintances in the game. This helps strengthen the sense of [family](#) community, which many didn’t believe possible from the Internet.

Shen addressed this dichotomy thusly: “Whether Internet and MMO use

were associated with negative or positive outcomes was largely dependent on the purposes, contexts and individual characteristics of users. The Internet is a comprehensive technology that affords a wide range of functionalities. MMOs also offer extensive opportunities for exploration, socialization and achievement. To a certain extent, both the Internet and MMOs are what you make of them.”

More information: crx.sagepub.com/content/38/1/123.abstract

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