

Level up: Study reveals keys to gamer loyalty

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Online role-playing game developers can get ahead of the competition by giving gamers more opportunities to get social, collaborate and take control of their online personas, according to a study from the University at Buffalo School of Management.

The study, forthcoming in the *International Journal of Electronic Commerce*, considers why some massive multiplayer online role-playing games, or MMORPGs, like "[World of Warcraft](#)" or "Star Wars Galaxies," command legions of loyal [players](#) while others struggle to gain a following.

The question is important to developers because gameplay styles that keep players coming back are key to building a successful MMORPG and to increasing business profit. Online gaming is part of daily life for players of all ages and backgrounds; revenues from games on Facebook and other social networking platforms are expected to reach \$2 billion in 2012, according to the study.

"The graphics and technology behind the games have improved over the years, but developers haven't made much effort to understand what makes MMORPG players really commit to one game over another," explains study co-author Lawrence Sanders, PhD, professor of management science and systems in the UB School of Management.

"Most prior research has focused on the addictive nature of these games. Our study looked at how to make them more competitive in the marketplace," says Sanders.

The study followed a group of 173 players who were part of a large MMORPG community. It examined whether two different game-playing strategies were successful in producing loyal players.

One strategy found that giving players more control and ownership of their character increased loyalty. The second strategy showed that gamers who played cooperatively and worked with other gamers in "guilds" built loyalty and social identity.

"To build a player's feeling of ownership towards its character, [game makers](#) should provide equal opportunities for any character to win a battle," says Sanders. "They should also build more selective or elaborate chat rooms and guild features to help players socialize."

In an MMORPG, players share experiences, earn rewards and interact with others in an online world that is ever-present. It's known as a "persistent-state-world" because even when a gamer is not playing, millions of others around the globe are.

Some MMORPGs operate on a subscription model where gamers pay a monthly fee to access the game world, while others use the free-to-play model where access to the game is free but may feature advertising, additional content through a paid subscription or optional purchases of in-game items or currency.

The average MMORPG gamer spends 22 hours per week playing.

Research on loyalty has found that increasing customer retention by as little as 5 percent can increase profits by 25 to 95 percent, Sanders points out.

So for the developers who create these games, finding gameplay styles that keep players coming back is key to building a successful

MMORPG—and business.

Provided by University at Buffalo

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