Meaningful real-life relationships in Massively Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Games

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Abstract

Massively Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Games are extremely popular with millions and millions of players spending large portions of their free time in these virtual environments. Still the social value and the meaningfulness of the relationships formed within them are questioned by most non-gamers and even some gamers. In the past even academia was mainly concentrating on the negative aspects of gaming but lately the value and meaningfulness of these relatively new social environments have been getting more and more attention.

This thesis presents a phenomenographic study on how the participants experience meaningful real-life relationships in MMORPGs and how they perceive the effect of the game as the channel for those relationships.

The gathered data revealed four qualitatively distinct ways the participants experienced meaningful real-life relationships in MMORPGs: in-game friendships, beyond the game friendships, comparable to real-life friendships and romantic relationships. These levels have a hierarchical relation in the sense that the previous level has the potential to develop to the next.

Likewise, four distinct ways to perceive the effects of MMORPGs as the channel for relationships were identified in the data. The participants expressed views spanning from one end of the spectrum to the other, ranging from highly positive to potentially negative. MMORPGs could be seen to have a highly positive effect by making different aspects of the relationships easier. In other cases MMORPGs could be seen as just another place to meet people, just a means to an end same as any other medium. MMORPGs could also be considered to be limited when compared to the physical world as a channel and as a result the connections were perceived to be less real in purely online setting. Additionally, MMORPGs were noted to have the potential to become harmful to relationships.

The main contribution of this study are the categories; the levels of relationships and the categories of the effects of MMORPGs as a channel. They can provide a fresh approach into the topic for academia. As for practice, they validate the MMORPG developers' efforts of encouraging formation of social relationships.

Keywords

MMORPG, Relationships, Phenomenography

Foreword

Contents

1.   Introduction

Games are one of the largest and most consumed form of entertainment, and especially the popularity of online gaming has been in near constant rise (Entertainment Software Association, 2013). One of the most popular of these online games is Blizzard Entertainment's World of Warcraft (WoW), a Massively Multiplayer Online Role-playing Game (MMORPG) set in the fantasy world of Azeroth (World of Warcraft, n.d.). Even at the doorstep of its 10th anniversary the game still holds 6.8 million active subscribers (players paying monthly fees in order to gain access to the game) which is roughly the equivalent of the population of a small country. At its peak WoW boasted a record-breaking number of over 12 million active subscribers. While the subscriber numbers are a shadow of what they were at the peak days, WoW still holds the title of the biggest subscription based MMORPG. (Yin-Poole, 2014). Despite this popularity and the staggering numbers of people who spend their free time in these virtual worlds, online gaming is still being generally considered as potentially harmful for one's social life (Cole & Griffiths, 2007). Contrary to this popular opinion, studies show that online games actually encourage sociality and can be socially beneficial (Yee, 2006b; Cole & Griffiths, 2007). One instance of this would be the various situations within the game where players are pushed into forming groups to overcome challenges too difficult for an individual player (Ducheneaut & Moore, 2004). These situations may lead to the formation of social relationships, some of which can, in time, evolve into meaningful real-life relationships (Cole & Griffiths, 2007). On the other hand, MMORPGs can also provide a channel for maintaining or even enhancing existing real-life relationships (Herodotou, 2010).

This thesis revolves around these meaningful real-life relationships in MMORPG environments. The main objective of this study is to explore and describe people's experiences on the matter. Main research question therefore is: "How do people experience meaningful real-life relationships in MMORPGs?". Additional area of interest and the second research question is: "How do people perceive the effect of MMORPGs as a channel for relationships?". Despite the wide meaning of the questions this thesis does not attempt to provide wide scale generalizable results. Instead it is a small scale exploration into how a set of players focused mainly around the game World of Warcraft experience meaningful real-life relationships within MMORPG environments. The data is gathered by interviewing participants found through various WoW related forums but the experiences did not have to be from WoW specifically. The interviews were conducted via email.

This study identified four qualitatively distinct ways in which the participants experienced meaningful real-life relationships in MMORPGs. The relationships could be experienced in hierarchical levels starting from in-game friendships to beyond the game friendships to comparable to real-life friendships and finally to romantic relationships. Likewise for the effects of MMORPGs as the channel for those relationships this study identified four different perspectives on the matter. The effects could be perceived to be anything from highly positive to potentially negative. MMORPGs could be seen to have a positive effect, they could be perceived to be just another meeting ground, they could be perceived to be less real than the physical world or they could be seen as potentially harmful if misused.

The thesis is structured as follows: After this introduction the second chapter consists of prior research on the topic, introducing MMORPGs as the environment, sociality in them as the context, and both prior research on relationships and MMORPGs as a channel, as the tools to give better understanding of the phenomena. In the third chapter I present phenomenography as the selected research approach and explain how the study was implemented. This chapter also covers the data collection and analysis in more detail. The fourth chapter concentrates on analyzing the collected data and presenting the results. The fifth chapter presents the answers to the research questions and discusses the results in relation to the prior research. The last chapter is the conclusion, summing up the thesis and highlighting the main points.

2.   Prior Research

In this chapter I present the prior research studied for this thesis. First sub-chapter explains MMORPGs as the context for this study, the second talks about sociality in them as the basis for relationships. The third sub-chapter covers different types of relationships in MMORPGs and how the relationships are formed, maintained or even enhanced through them. The last sub-chapter concentrates on the role of MMORPGs themselves as a channel for previously mentioned aspects of relationships and compares it to the physical world and social media.

2.1 What are MMORPGs?

These days there are so many MMORPGs in so many flavours that it is difficult to provide a definition which would properly explain how they differ from other game genres. One of the definitions, provided by Dictionary.com, is:

> Massively multiplayer online role-playing game: any story-driven online video game in which a player, taking on the persona of a character in a virtual or fantasy world, interacts with a large number of other players (MMORPG, n.d.).

From this dictionary definition, and the name itself, we can see the similarities and therefore defining characteristics of MMORPGs: Massive, Online, Roleplaying game. Hundreds, thousands or even tens of thousands play simultaneously, the games are internet-based and require constant connection to the internet to play in the persistent game world and player takes the role of a fictional character, an avatar.

Just like in any other role-playing game (RPG), MMORPG puts the player into the boots of a fictitious character, an avatar, through which he interacts with the game world and other players. Also similarly to any other RPG, the player's avatar gets progressively more powerful in means of experience, equipment and wealth. However, one thing that differentiates MMORPGs from other RPGs is the lack of a definitive end to the game. Instead of being able to be completed, MMORPGs rely on emergent game-play through interaction between individuals and groups of players. (Janssen, n.d..) This interaction between players, be it collaborative or competitive, plays a big role in MMORPGs (Christou, Lai-Chong Law, Zaphiris & Ang, 2013) since they are generally played by hundreds or thousands of players simultaneously in the same persistent online virtual world. Persistent world means that the world and the game itself do not stop when the player exits the game. When the player logs out the other players and game events keep happening and the player can at any point log back in and continue from where he left off. (Achterbosch, Pierce & Simmons, 2008.)

Against popular belief MMORPGs are actually proven to be highly socially interactive (Cole & Griffiths, 2007). Socialization actually ranks among the top motivations for playing MMORPGs and significant portion of players categorize themselves as "socialisers" whose primary incentive for playing these games is to socialize with people (Bartle, 1996; Yee, 2006a). MMORPGs have also been studied as the new, virtual "third places" where people come together to socialize (Duchneaut, Moore & Nickell, 2007). MMORPGs are for previously mentioned reasons designed with

sociality well in mind but it is not always easy to get right (Christou, et al., 2010). Sociality in MMORPGs is covered in more detail in the next chapter.

2.2 Sociality in MMORPGs

This chapter will cover the social aspects of MMORPGs in more detail. It will cover topics like player types (including socialisers) and motivations to play (including socialisation), different ways to experience sociality in MMORPGs, different types of social groups, and game companies' interest in the sociality of MMORPGs and designing for it.

One of the most significant early works on player types and motivations in Massively Multiplayer Online environments was done in 1996 by Richard Bartle on MUDs (Multi-user Dungeon), the predecessors of MMORPGs. He categorized players into four types based on the primary motivating factor for playing. Bartle's player types are: achievers, explorers, socialisers and killers. To provide an easy way to remember the types he assigned one of the four suits of cards to each. Achievers are the Diamonds; always on the lookout for wealth. Explorers are the Spades; always digging around for information. Socialisers are the Hearts; always empathising with others. Finally, Killers are the Clubs; always looking for people to hit with them. Achievers are mainly interested in advancing in the game and accumulating any kinds of levels, points or scores. Explorers are interested in all kinds of exploring, be it scouting the whole geography of the game world or figuring out the internal mechanics of the game. Socialisers are all about people; the game is only a place where you can meet and hang out with people and to form relationships. Killers on the other hand enjoy imposing themselves on others, proving their superiority one way or the other. These four player types can be positioned around two axes: players versus world and acting versus interacting as can be seen in Figure 1. (Bartle, 1996.)
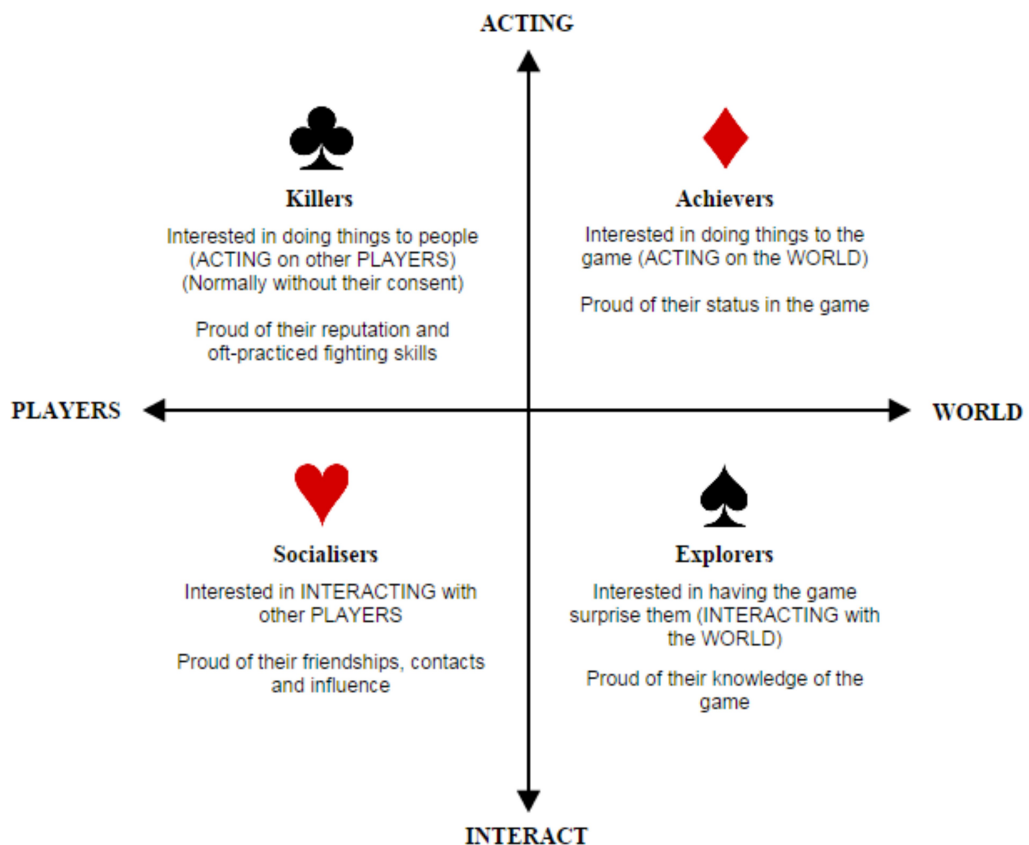

Figure 1. Bartle's player types. Adapted from Bartle, R. (1996). Hearts, clubs, diamonds, spades: Players who suit MUDs. Journal of MUD Research, 1(1), 19.

The types most reliant on inter-player interaction are socialisers who enjoy interacting with players and killers who enjoy acting on other players. The other two types are more interested in the game world than the players: like the achievers who enjoy acting within the game world and explorers interacting with the world. Even for the less player-centered types other players still hold some merit although they're not an essential part of their enjoyment. For example, achievers like having an audience to their achievements and explorers are happy being considered founts of knowledge. Other players also provide the game with more depth and add liveliness to it. (Bartle, 1996.) In a study by Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell and Moore (2006) these indirect social factors are called audience, social presence and spectacle. The study argues that the true sense of achievement comes from being able to show off your avatar and everything it has achieved to an audience of other players. Additionally, with other players bustling around in the game there is always a sense of social presence. Even if you do not feel like directly interacting with others, the background chatter makes the world feel more lively and interesting. On the other hand, other players also often provide entertainment through more or less intended spectacles. The things other players do that are considered humorous by others offer an important contribution to the social atmosphere of the game. (Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell & Moore, 2006.) Based on Bartle's player types another prominent researcher on all things MMORPGs, sociality and relationships, Nick Yee, (2006a) bases his study on motivations for play in MMORPGs. In his study he identifies ten motivations which he divides under three overarching components: achievement, social and immersion. An overview of these main components and their subcomponents can be seen in the Table 1.

Table 1. The components of player motivations (Yee, 2006a)

Achievement	Social	Immersion
Advancement Progress, Power, Accumulation, Status	**Socializing** Casual Chat, Helping Others, Making Friends	**Discovery** Exploration, Lore, Finding Hidden Things
Mechanics Numbers, Optimization, Templating, Analysis	**Relationship** Personal, Self-Disclosure, Find and Give Support	**Role-Playing** Story Line, Character History, Roles, Fantasy
Competition Challenging Others, Provocation, Domination	**Teamwork** Collaboration, Groups, Group Achievements	**Customization** Appearances, Accessories, Style, Color Schemes
		Escapism Relax, Escape from Real Life, Avoid Real-Life Problems

Achievement component includes three subcomponents. Advancement, which corresponds to Bartle's achievers, includes the people who are motivated by growing in power as fast as possible and achieving wealth or status within the game. Mechanics component includes part of Bartle's explorers; these people are interested in figuring out the inner mechanics of the game to optimize their performance. Competition is a broader take on Bartle's killers; people motivated by competition enjoy challenging others but also provoking and dominating them. Social type is also comprised of three subtypes and is therefore a more detailed version of Bartle's socialisers. Socializing is the more casual social component; people motivated by socializing are interested in

casual chatting, helping people and making friends. The relationship component is the deeper social component which includes sharing personal information and social support. People motivated by this component have the desire to form lasting meaningful relationships with other players. The last social subcomponent is teamwork; people motivated by teamwork enjoy working in groups and being part of a team effort. The last main component is Immersion and it has four subcomponents. Discovery includes the other part of Bartle's explorers, the people who are interested in exploring and finding out things that most players do not know about. The role-playing subcomponent includes the people who enjoy role-playing in its original meaning. They are interested in creating a character with a story of its own and interacting with other like-minded players to create an improvised story together. The customization subcomponent is comprised of the people who are motivated by customizing their avatar's appearance. The last subcomponent, the escapism, includes people who play to forget their real-life for the time being. Yee also points out that the components are not mutually exclusive and that scoring high on one component did not necessarily mean scoring low on another. Unlike Bartle's notion of players tending to have a single primary focus, Yee's study suggests that motivational components do not in fact suppress each other. (Yee, 2006a)

Besides being one of the key elements in MMORPGs, sociality is extremely diverse in how it is experienced by player types and even individual players. Not all players are equally interested in socialization and not all players are out looking for meaningful relationships. Some of them might not even want to have much direct social interaction at all, yet in an MMORPG social aspects are somehow present at every step. Despite many players and studies promoting the sociality of MMORPGs, other research suggests that studies emphasizing sociality can be deceiving. This means that in the end large portion of players spend their time alone with minimal interaction with other players. A study by Ducheneaut, et al. (2006) calls this playing "alone together". As mentioned briefly in the previous paragraph, for some, other players are merely an audience to their achievements. It would not be as rewarding to beat the most difficult challenges, to get the strongest pieces of equipment or to find the rarest of treasures if you could not show them off to anyone. The study suggests that for some it is not the people that are addictive, it is the image of oneself that one gets from other people. They compare it to an arcade where an audience might form around the best players to watch them play and maybe even cheer them on. Some players might experience the sociality of these MMORPG environments simply as a social presence. The presence of other real people make the world feel more real, more alive and therefore more interesting. Even if you choose not to directly interact with others there is always the opportunity to do so at your convenience. This social presence was compared to reading a book in a café; you may choose not to interact with anyone but the sense of being in a public social space is enough on its own for people to conduct their individual activities there. The last of the presented indirect forms of sociality is spectacle. Given the chance, players often provide entertainment for each other either intentionally or sometimes unintentionally. These humorous spectacles have a big impact on the social atmosphere of the game. (Ducheneaut, et al., 2006.)

Even for the more socially inclined players the experiences can be quite different. For some, MMORPGs are just another channel for socializing and meeting new interesting people, a third place like any other real-life café or a club, or the likes (Ducheneaut, Moore & Nickell, 2007). For some, they are just another way to keep in contact with real-life friends and family, or just a shared activity, something to do together (Williams, et al., 2006; Herodotou, 2010). Some players, however, are open for deeper, meaningful real-life relationships (Cole & Griffiths, 2007). A study by Ducheneaut, Moore and Nickell (2007) is exploring whether or not virtual worlds offer third places

similar to the physical world where people can gather for casual socializing. These informal public gathering places, also known as third places, such as cafés and bars are important social hotspots in the physical world and said study is concentrating on the virtual equivalents. These can include taverns, inns or other designed social spaces within the virtual world. The study is based on Oldenburg's original description of ideal third places of the physical world and applied it to the social spaces of MMORPGs. While the study concluded that the examined social spaces, the cantinas of the game Star Wars Galaxies, did not exactly fit the definition of Oldenburg's third places they were, nonetheless, social spaces with their own virtues and problems much like Oldenburg's third places. Some of the problems of these virtual social spaces were attributed to game design issues regarding the social architecture and the games' goals conflicting with the need for places to relax and socialize. On the other hand, the study points out that these MMORPGs themselves could be considered third places as millions of gamers are frequenting these virtual worlds. Younger generations are almost certainly more familiar with these virtual social spaces than the real world equivalents. (Ducheneaut, et al., 2007.) Based on a study by Williams, et al. (2006) on social dynamics of guilds in WoW, this type of social behaviour is the key phenomenon for one third to half of all guilded players. The study states that those people use guilds as casual third places where you mainly generate bridging social capital ("loose connections between relative strangers"). That bridging social capital has the possibility of over time developing into deeper relationships, also known as bonding social capital ("traditional social, emotional and substantive support"). (Williams, et al., 2006.) Aside from making friends and socializing with relative strangers in the game, a vast majority of gamers play with people they know in real-life. More than one study speaks of as many as around 80% of gamers playing with people they know in real-life, be it friends, family or romantic partners (Yee, 2005; Cole & Griffiths, 2007). To some of these people MMORPGs are just another shared activity, something to do together or a way to maintain and reinforce relationships (Williams, et al., 2006; Herodotou, 2010). To some they are an opportunity to explore existing relationships, to shape and influence them in different ways (Yee, 2006c; Herodotou, 2010). In addition to maintenance and enhancement of existing relationships and formation of platonic relationships, romantic relationships also bloom with significant frequency in these environments (Yee, 2006c). Based on numbers presented by Yee in 2001, around 15% of women and 3% of men had physically dated people they met in an MMORPG (Yee, 2001). In a later and larger study the numbers were consistent with the old ones at approximately 16% and 5%, respectively (Yee, 2006b). Cole and Griffiths (2007) reached similar numbers in their own study claiming overall around every tenth player had physically dated another player they met in a game. Furthermore, they note that almost every third participant had been attracted to another player. (Cole & Griffiths, 2007.) All this points to the fact that a significant portion of the playerbase is open to finding love in these virtual worlds. Apart from romantic relationships, a large portion of players also find themselves forming meaningful, long-lasting, real-life friendships that go well above and beyond gaming in general (Cole & Griffiths, 2007). Relationships in MMORPGs are discussed in more detail in chapter 2.3.

As MMORPGs are highly social and are played by massive numbers of players, different types and sizes of communities or social groups are formed in and around the games. In their thesis, Tang, Hansen and Yvind (2005) divide these communities into two categories: micro and macro communities. Macro communities are used to refer to the communities of larger scale, such as all the players of the same class, all the players of a certain realm or a server, all the players from a certain country or even the community of the entire game. While these can also be considered social groups, generally when talking about social groups within MMORPGs we are more concerned with the micro communities. These micro communities are the smaller scale, short or

long term social groups that form during game-play such as parties, guilds or networks of existing friends. (Tang, Hansen & Yvind, 2005.) The most common social groups of MMORPGs can be divided into temporary, or short-term, groups (parties and raid groups) and long-term groups (guilds) (Wilson, n.d.).

The term "party" is likely understood by a player of any given MMORPG. They are generally small (approximately up to 6 players depending on the game) and temporary groups of players with a common goal. Parties being temporary means that they generally last only until the common goals have been reached. (Wilson, n.d..) These goals as well as the duration of the grouping can often vary significantly. Common goals can include things like questing, killing a particularly tough enemy, grouping up to kill other players (called player versus player or PVP for short) or teaming up to conquer more difficult content that is simply impossible for individual players; often called dungeons or instances (from being instanced, separated from the rest of the game world where you cannot run into players outside your party). As an example, party in WoW consists of up to 5 players (Party, n.d.). Often MMORPGs also have the need for bigger than regular parties for more difficult content such as instances meant for larger number of players (approximately from 5 to 40 players). These instances are often called raids and the groups are often called raid groups accordingly. (Raid, n.d.). Parties are, in essence, small temporary social networks consisting of people working together towards a common goal. When you join a party you automatically share a private chat with the other players within the same party. This so called "party chat" can be used for coordination but is often also used as a channel for general conversation. In fact, the concept of a good group is often based not only on how successful or effective the group was in reaching the common goals but also on how pleasant or entertaining the interaction within the group was. Although a party is a temporary and very loose network it still plays a large role in the socialisation process. Parties are the most common way for people to find like-minded players to continue playing with and to form friendships with. (Jakobsson & Taylor, 2003.)

The longer term social groups within MMORPGs are often called guilds, while other names such as clans, corporations or legions can be encountered depending on the game. As with parties, guilds are generally formed around people with similar goals or interests (Wilson, n.d.). Unlike the temporary parties, guilds are longer term social groups; once you join a guild you will be a part of the guild until you leave on your own or are removed by the leader of the guild (Williams, et al., 2006). Guilds come in varying sizes, types and levels of structure. Guild sizes generally range from small to large, from tens to hundreds of players (Jakobsson & Taylor, 2003). Size of the guild also matters when it comes to its social atmosphere. Small guilds are generally leaning more towards social bonds, whereas larger guilds tend to be focused on game goals. While there are more people to interact with in the larger guilds, it becomes impractical to know well or even care about each member of the group. Also with the increase in size the amount and strictness of structure and organization within the guild increases. Regardless of size, there are different types of guilds emphasizing different things. There are four stereotypical guilds: social, PVP, raid and role-playing. In reality most guilds are considered a hybrid of at least two types. A purely social guild emphasizes social interaction and ties over everything else, and the game goals are truly secondary. They can dabble on a bit of everything be it raiding or PVP but rarely on the level of the guilds that specifically focus on either. Social guilds, especially smaller ones, have little to no hierarchy or organization. A PVP guild's primary goal is to battle against other players. In these guilds people often form ad hoc and scheduled groups for PVP, "much like a group of friends heading to the park to play some team sport" (Williams, et al., 2006). Raiding guilds are focused on organizing and scheduling team events of up to 40 players to tackle the most difficult PvE (Player versus Environment) content, often

called "raids". Raids generally require a high degree of management and coordination of players and their roles, therefore the guild forms around a raid group (or groups). As a guild is a more permanent group compared to a random raid group, it is easier to coordinate and manage a raid group when they play together time and time again. As raids are the most demanding team-based task in MMORPGs, requiring a certain level of discipline and a lot of teamwork, raiding guilds are often highly structured with clear hierarchical organization. The last stereotypical guild is the role-playing one which can mix and mash all of the above types while the main purpose is to do everything in character. No matter what the task at hand is you are expected to do what your character would do, to pretend to truly be your character. (Williams, et al., 2006.) While you might expect the social guilds to be the place where complex social systems are found, it is actually the raiding guilds that are the high level formalised social networks in which social values such as reputation, trust and responsibility are the key. (Jakobsson & Taylor, 2003). Regardless of size, type or level of structure, guilds are the environment where most of the direct socialization happens. Besides social activities such as partying or raiding with the guild, guild channels are the place where much of the chatting that goes beyond the game-related topics happens (Nardi & Harris, 2006). A study by Williams, et al.(2006) reports that roughly 70% of the study's participants had regular chats within their guild. The topics for these kinds of chats generally range from impersonal game related topics to real-life personal issues. (Williams, et al., 2006.) Jakobsson and Taylor (2003) also shine the spotlight on guilds as the "most influential mechanism for socialisation" in MMORPGs (Jakobsson & Taylor, 2003). Guilds are a favourable environment for forming relationships as they provide constant and prolonged engagement and shared activities with the same individuals which given the time can lead to development of friendships. (Herodotou, 2010).

MMORPGs are not social by accident. Significant portion of players are playing them to get to socialize with others but players are not the only ones interested in the sociality of these games. Most, if not all, MMORPGs are designed with sociality in mind. It is proven that people who are socially interactive within these games spend more time, and therefore more money thanks to subscription fees, on the game. Game companies thus have an interest to encourage or even push towards social situations and promote formation of social ties as it improves the "stickiness" of the game. (Chen & Lei, 2006.) There are some specific ways MMORPGs try to accomplish this. One study targets game researchers, game designers and game developers to discuss designing for sociability in MMORPGs. One point that arises during the study is that the elements that promote sociability are the same elements that make the game an MMORPG and sociability is therefore an interwoven part of MMORPGs. As a conclusion, the study proposes six design ideas, or requirements, for sociability. The first requirement is the in-game communication. This covers any and all in-game structures that allow or support players' communication such as global chat, private messages, chat channels reserved for short and long term groups (parties & guilds). The second requirement is off-game communication which encompasses all interactions through structures outside the game itself such as wikis, forums or even real-life gatherings. These off-game communication channels take the social aspect of these games a bit further by bringing the community from within the game to the real world. The third requirement is grouping and rewards. This includes the structures and mechanics of grouping together to overcome challenges too difficult for a single player. Grouping itself do not mean that players in these groups would automatically communicate but the act of banding together is a social action which combined with helping others even instrumentally to reach a common goal can be considered social. Rewarding players for teaming up provides an extra incentive for players to engage in such social activities. The fourth requirement is empathy. Game should be designed with a clearly defined enemy as this setting promotes community cohesion with empathy towards allies and shared

animosity against a common enemy. The second to last requirement is world design. The game world should be designed in a way that players with similar experience are concentrated on the same areas for more opportunities to socialize and group together. This is especially important in the beginning of the game where players can then together overcome the initial difficulties of getting to know the game. The last requirement presented in the paper is designed relationships. MMORPGs should, to an extent, encourage dependence on other players. There should be elements of the game that promote interaction between players, such as buying and selling between the players or such. It should, however, be kept in mind that these designed relationships can be overdone and end up harmful. Collaboration should not be designed as the only way to proceed in the game as a portion of players prefer to play on their own and even social players prefer to play alone at times. (Christou, et al., 2013.) In another study they discuss these built-in mechanisms to increase sociability as: player inter-dependencies, importance of space or hubs and downtime. Player inter-dependencies correspond to designed relationships since both talk about being dependent on other players to accomplish something. The study talks about economic (buying & selling) and professional (healing, training) inter-dependencies which give players reasons to interact. Importance of space and hubs refers to places where players gather for specific purposes, like transportation hubs or marketplaces, that offer people opportunities to bump into others and interact with them. This is in line with Christou, et al.'s view of world design to increase the likelihood of bumping into others although from a different viewpoint. Downtime is also a specific design decision meant to increase opportunities for players to interact with each other. There are certain points in game when you have to wait for something; be it a pause between boss fights, waiting for some resource or power to replenish or waiting for transportation. These moments of downtime offer players a chance to stop and chat with people around them and potentially form relationships. (Ducheneaut & Moore, 2004.)

2.3 MMORPGs and relationships

This chapter will present MMORPGs and relationships within and around them in more detail. As already mentioned in the previous chapter, there are different types and depths of relationships forming within these virtual worlds. Everything from instrumental partnerships to casual friendships, to meaningful friendships that go above and beyond the gaming, to the love of your life can be found in MMORPGs provided that you are open for it. Computer-mediated communication (CMC) is said to be one cause for the relative ease of forming meaningful relationships (Walther, 1996; Yee, 2006c) but skepticism towards CMC and its capabilities for forming relationships impedes the development of online relationships (Utz, 2000). MMORPGs are also proposed to have several attributes enhancing formation of relationships (Yee, 2003). Aside from being grounds for formation of new relationships, these virtual worlds are also a channel for maintaining and even enhancing existing real-life relationships (Williams, et al., 2006; Herodotou, 2010). Additionally, even though studies prove that a significant portion of players consider gaming to have a positive effect on relationships, it can also have its downsides and it can be a source of stress and strain (Cole & Griffiths, 2007; Yee, 2006c).

As briefly discussed in the previous chapter, formation of different kinds and depths of relationships in MMORPGs is very common and on top of that the game works as a channel for maintaining and enhancing existing relationships. Therefore "relationships in MMORPGs" as a phenomenon is worthy of attention. Studies show that 80% of gamers play with someone they know in real-life on a regular basis (Yee, 2005; Cole & Griffiths, 2007). Studies also show that approximately the same percentage of gamers have made good friends in an MMORPG (Yee, 2007). In addition to friendships, be it

shallow or deep, MMORPGs are also a favorable environment for romantic relationships to blossom (Yee, 2006c). All these are distinct types of relationships that can appear in MMORPG environments.

Relationships forming in MMORPG environments can be separated roughly into two distinct levels: friendships and romantic relationships. Within these levels there is a wide variety of depths to the relationships, some of them more meaningful than others. Friendships can range from instrumental friendships between a group of people who enjoy playing together but are not interested in anything deeper, to people who decide to take the friendship to the physical world and meet up in person. Between these extremes you can still distinguish at least people who play together and also discuss real-life matters but the game is their only means of communication and people who take the friendship outside the game to other communication mediums like Skype or phone. Romantic relationships also vary in depth; on one hand some of the relationships never get further than online but on the other hand some end up with a life-long partnerships. There are arguments both for and against forming relationships and especially romantic relationships online and more specifically in MMORPGs. The more skeptical side of players argue that other people are not in real-life what they seem to be in the game and the anonymity allows them to present themselves as whatever they want. This in turn is said to make people feel more superficial as they would likely be embellishing themselves. In the end it boils down to trust and honesty. (Yee, 2003b) Not too surprisingly, the people who are skeptical towards forming relationships in virtual worlds are also less likely to form them (Utz, 2000.) The other side of the argument claims that anonymity helps with the formation of relationships as it is easier to get off the ground, it is easier to talk to someone and be open and honest about things to a person you might initially think you will never meet. After all, there is little reason to lie to relative strangers and besides people are also pretending to be something they are not in real life as well. All in all, those who speak for online relationships claim that MMORPGs are a safe low pressure environment to socialize and form relationships. Shy people get a chance to form relationships they would be too timid to attempt in real life. On top of that, in most cases, relationships online just sort of happen; majority of the respondents were not actively looking for a relationship so the usual pressures of forming one or even dating did not apply. Apart from that, the anonymity also reduces the relevance and the pressure one might take from superficial factors such as looks and places more emphasis on personality and other inner qualities. For the superficiality of online relationships, a significant portion of players actually feel they can be more themselves in virtual world than they could in real life due to some social pressure or another. The lack of physical cues such as looks allows you to interact with less impact from prejudices or stereotypes. (Yee, 2003a; Yee, 2006d.) But in the end MMORPG relationships are what, and as meaningful as, you make them to be just like any other relationships (Yee, 2003b).

In his study regarding friendships within virtual worlds, Nicholas Munn argues that there is no difference between the physical world and MMORPGs when it comes to the capacity to develop the kinds of bonds that lead to friendships (Munn, 2012). The study is concentrated on the deepest of the Aristotle's three kinds of friendships called perfect friendships of virtue. Unlike in the imperfect friendships of utility or pleasure, the perfect friendship is based on caring instead of gain. (Aristotle, 1998.) The perfect friendships are the focus because unlike imperfect friendships which are generally accepted to be a common occurrence, some question whether perfect friendships can develop online. Additionally, imperfect friendships do not share the same strong positive outcomes that perfect friendships do (Munn, 2012.) Other characteristics of friendships are affection and well-wishing as per Cocking & Kennett (Cocking & Kennett, 1998) and mutual caring, intimacy and shared activity (Helm, 2010). From

these, shared activity, especially, is foundational as it is often, if not always, shared activity that helps build mutual caring and intimacy (Munn, 2012).

Already in 1996 it was proposed that computer-mediated communication (CMC) could in some instances reach a level of affection and emotion higher than that of face-to-face communication. Games were one of the mediums in which this hyperpersonal communication could be achieved. (Walther, 1996.) When the components Walther proposed for hyperpersonal communication were compared against MMORPGs all of the components could be found. The lack of physical cues and not having to reply in real-time allows the sender to take some time to present themselves in a favourable way. Additionally by being able to forsake the attention on non-verbal aspects of the interaction one can concentrate completely on the structure and content of what they want to say and thus come off as more personal. The receiver builds an idealized impression of the sender by inflating what small social and personal cues that can be gleaned from the message alone. As these personal messages are met with similarly personal messages the communication gets into a loop where these idealized perceptions and more personal messages intensify and the interaction becomes more intimate and positive. (Yee, 2006c.)

Along with the help of shared activity and computer-mediated communication, MMORPGs are argued to also have factors unique to this kind of virtual environments to further facilitate formation of relationships. Yee (2006c) lists these as trust-building crises, compatibility and idealization, and together they constitute the fact that in a sense relationships form in reverse compared to the physical world. Many MMORPGs often have players enter frequent combat situations all of which do not end up being a walk in the park. As these games promote teamwork, many of these situations are tackled collaboratively. Especially with the degree of emotional and time investment players have in the game and their avatar, charging into battle with a group of other people presents unique opportunities for trust-building and bonding. The stressful crisis situations that sometimes follow seem to bring out the best and the worst in people. Other players' actions in these situations offer a glimpse of the personality of whoever is on the other side of that monitor. Although it would seem logical to consider it nearly impossible to find someone you "click" with in a game that is a common playground for millions of players, it is argued that MMORPGs are actually a highly specific type of entertainment and therefore tend to attract people with a certain amount of similarity in interests. This in turn brings Yee (2006c) to argue that "people who play MMORPGs are probably similar in more ways than not". The interest in the game is specific enough that other shared attitudes are highly likely which means most people you bump into in an MMORPG are already likely to be more compatible than a random person you might meet in real life; at the very least there is already something you have in common. (Yee, 2006c.) On top of the already higher chance of compatibility, MMORPGs also otherwise artificially boost the sense of compatibility. Yee (2003a) cites the "Law of Attraction" from psychology, stating people tend to like those with shared attitudes, values or beliefs, as long as there are not too many things they disagree on. Online communication is great at hiding differences because of the reduced amount of cues. The focus is directed towards the things you do agree on and thus the sense of compatibility is further increased. All in all, MMORPG relationships happen almost in reverse compared to real-life relationships. The things that take long in real-life relationships often happen very quickly and very early in MMORPGs. It usually takes a longer while for people to form relationships, be it friendships or romantic relationships, where you openly share secrets, whereas, as previously mentioned, in an MMORPG people are more open and willing to share secrets. MMORPGs also offer people a chance to see how someone reacts under pressure and how they treat others in a time of need, situations which are much more scarce in real life. The environment also lets you

see how they treat others in a wide variety of situations, which again is much more difficult to experience in real-life. All in all, in real-life you tend to first judge people by their outward traits before you get to know them better and get to judge their character and values, while in an MMORPG the opposite is generally true. In an MMORPG environment you first get a sense of their personality and likely that is the reason you even develop a relationship to begin with. You get to know them better first without the prejudices formed based on their physical traits and then later, when there already is a relationship of some sort, you may meet them and judge them based on the outward traits. If you consider the real world a way of getting to know a person from the "outside-in," the way you form a relationship in an MMORPG could be considered meeting someone from the "inside-out". (Yee, 2003a.)

Yee (2006d) also maps out common stages in which relationships, mainly romantic ones, develop within MMORPGs. He calls these stages: first contact, incubation period, moment of truth, cascade of communication mediums, meeting face-to-face and ever after. The first contact, the meeting, is often described by players as some random and commonplace interaction. Grouping up with people and starting talking is one such common interaction. The other highly common way of meeting was through the guild; both parties of the eventual romantic relationship were part of the same guild and it provided them with the initial meeting place and sustained contact. The next stage, incubation period, is when the relationship very gradually develops from a casual friendship to something much more. This stage is said to typically last anywhere from three months to a year. After the relationship and the associated feelings have developed to a point it is time for the next stage, the moment of truth, when either party is ready to express their feelings towards the other. After the feelings are out in the open and the relationship gets deeper, the relationship goes through a cascade of communication mediums. At this stage, as the relationship progresses, the communication mediums are likely to get more synchronous and more intimate such as phone or webcam. The next stage, meeting face-to-face, is the time to finally meet in person. Not one of the couples participating in the study initially lived in the same state, most not even in the same country so in many cases this stage is likely to be a significant investment of emotions, time and money. The last stage, ever after, refers to a happy ending (or in a way the beginning) for the relationships as many of the participants had moved in together thus eliminating the geographical barriers and many mentioned incoming marriage and even children. Obviously not all stories have a happy ending and relationships can fall apart at any stage. One of the reasons MMORPG relationships came to an early end were the issues with geographical distance. Other reasons were similar to those that could be the end of any more traditional physical world relationship, such as gradually discovered problems with "chemistry" or conflicts in personalities. (Yee, 2006d.)

As was mentioned earlier, a significant majority of players, amounting up to 80%, play regularly with people they know in real life. This number signifies that not only are MMORPGs a good place to form new relationships, they are also a channel for exercising existing ones (Yee, 2005; Williams, et al., 2006, Cole & Griffiths, 2007; Herodotou, 2010). People consider playing with someone they know to enhance their enjoyment and or their gameplay (Yee, 2001; Yee, 2005). On the other hand, be it friends, family members or significant others, playing with people you know can also be just another activity to do together. Existing relationships can be exercised in these virtual environments for a multitude of reasons; MMORPGs can be, for example, just another relatively cheap form of entertainment to share with your significant other and to spend time on together (Yee, 2006c) or to keep in touch and spend time with geographically separated friends (Herodotou, 2010). Be it friends, family or a partner, distant or co-located, a vast majority of players use the environment also as a way to maintain, shape and enhance real-life relationships. It is said that instead of replacing

real-life relationships, playing MMORPGs seems to enhance them (Schiano, Nardi, Debeauvais, Ducheneaut, & Yee, 2011). Yee did a study on Everquest in 2001 and found out that 25% of players played the game with a romantic partner, out of which a third had bought the game specifically as something to do together. Same study shows that around 8% played with a parent or a child and around 16% played with a sibling (Yee, 2001). A later and bigger study conducted on multiple MMORPGs gives similar numbers with again 25% playing with romantic partner and overall 19% playing with a family member. Additionally, the latter study also shows that 70% play with a real-life friend. This all totalled to 80%, every four out of five players, playing with someone they know in real life on a regular basis. (Yee, 2005.) The numbers are consistent with the ones presented by Cole and Griffiths (Cole & Griffiths, 2007). Another finding highlighting the prevalence of playing with someone they know in real-life was done by Chen & Lei (2006), and present that 85% of the 1389 studied groups were "duos". This is said to reflect the fact that some players play primarily with one other person in real life. (Chen & Lei, 2006.) The study on guilds and guild players by Williams, et al. (2006) poses MMORPGs as one more communication tool on the internet in a sense that they are "an extension of pre-existing offline interactions". At least a third of all guild players maintain relationships with geographically dispersed friends and relatives through an MMORPG. In addition to maintaining existing relationships, shared activity in these virtual worlds can even reinforce them. One respondent is talking about becoming closer with some of his real-life friends thanks to WoW providing them with shared experiences and more to talk about. Additionally, he mentions that going the extra mile for someone in the game gives you the benefit of increased respect outside the game as well. (Williams, et al, 2006.) Williams, et al. are not the only ones talking about the fact that playing MMORPGs is enhancing existing relationships. Cole and Griffiths (2007) report significant positive effects on relationships when playing with close friends or partners (Cole & Griffiths, 2007). A study by Yee (2006c) also reports players' online relationships to shape, influence and allow exploration of material world relationships. Many couples that play together commented on the environment highlighting the individual differences in their personalities and worldviews. One respondent says that rather than it teaching something new about your partner it was more like emphasizing the differences that were already known to exist. In addition to highlighting the differences, other players who play with a romantic partner speak of being brought closer through exercises in trust that transcend the game. The game enhances relationships also by being an arena where you can learn to work better together and learn to communicate better. Another perspective of MMORPGs' effect on existing relationships is provided by parents playing with their children. Games provide parents with a window into part of their children's social life often invisible in the more traditional material world setting. It allows parents to see how their children interact with others in various situations, giving them a peek on how they behave outside of the house. Aside from shaping existing relationships, these environments also allow restructuring them by transcending the roles of the material world. The game setting allows parents and children to approach things on an equal footing making it easier to talk to each other. One respondent says the game helped her learn more about her daughter's personality as in the game she treats her as a friend instead of a parent. This provides a unique perspective to the relationship outside the boundaries of a strict parent-child relationship. (Yee, 2006c.)

While a big portion of players successfully use these environments to maintain or even enhance their real-life relationships it is not the only possible outcome. While studies speak of two thirds of gamers considering MMORPGs to have a positive effect on their relationships with the people they play the game with, approximately 20% of gamers believe MMORPGs have a negative effect on the relationships with they people they did not play the game with. Only a handful of gamers believe that MMORPGs had a

negative effect on the relationships with people who they play the game with (Cole & Griffiths, 2007.) Another study speaks of about a third of Everquest players feeling their real-life relationships had suffered because of the game. 44% felt their real-life relationships had not suffered and 23% neither agreed nor disagreed. (Yee, 2001.) While it was mentioned previously that the game provided a setting where one can learn communication and teamwork, the good things are not the only ones to carry over to the real life. Whereas the game can highlight the individual differences in a good light, it can also do so in a negative way by amplifying existing tensions or conflicts. Sometimes playing the game can in itself be the cause of stress in a relationship. Different play styles, different goals within the game, different amounts of time spent on the game and jealousy over in-game power or wealth or relationships can all cause clashes that spill over from the game to the real world. (Yee, 2001; Yee, 2005; Cole & Griffiths, 2007.) One of the typical responses regarding negative effect on relationships is too much time spent on the game. When all the time is spent playing the game, there is little to no time left to take care of any relationships. Sometimes this goes so far that the word "addiction" is used (Yee, 2001; Cole & Griffiths, 2007.) However, Cole and Griffiths remind that MMORPGs can be as serious or as casual as the player chooses, and while the possible negative effects cannot be completely disregarded they should not be blown out of proportion either (Cole & Griffiths, 2007).

2.4 MMORPGs as a channel

Multiple studies speak of MMORPGs as a channel for maintaining and enhancing existing real-life relationships (Yee, 2006c; Williams, et al., 2006; Cole & Griffiths, 2007; Herodotou, 2010). Furthermore, typical patterns of MMORPG play seem to be enhancing real-life relationships instead of replacing them (Schiano, et al., 2011). Apart from being a channel for exercising existing relationships, MMORPGs as a medium, are argued to be fertile soil for the formation of new relationships (Walther, 1996; Yee, 2006c; Munn, 2012). Additionally, MMORPGs can provide an alternative third place where you can come to casually socialize with relative strangers instead of, or in addition to, physical world equivalents such as bars or cafes (Ducheneaut, Moore & Nickell, 2007).

Munn (2012) studies immersive virtual worlds such as MMORPGs as a channel for formation of friendships. His study pits MMORPGs against earlier forms of online communication (such as email, instant messaging, chat rooms, etc), social media and the physical world. He determined that one of the cornerstones for the capacity to develop friendships is shared activity. Repeated and prolonged shared activity could then eventually lead to intimacy and mutual caring required for friendship. In this light he argues that neither earlier forms of online communication nor social media can provide the necessary shared activity to be able to be grounds for developing friendships. Primary function of both is communication while you can share ideas and past experiences or even arrange or organize activities, all the shared activity itself would have to break outside these means of communication into the physical world. The physical world can be replaced with an immersive virtual world, which he argues to be indistinguishable when it comes to the capacity for developing friendships. Be it physical or virtual world, it is the shared activity that is often, if not always, the basis of a relationship. The content of the activity nor the medium through which the shared activity is performed do not matter, it is simply the engagement in a shared activity where all sides enjoy the activity and doing it with the people involved. Despite earlier forms of online communication and social media being unable to be a forum for the formation of new friendships, all four mediums of interaction are capable of reinforcing existing bonds of friendship. (Munn, 2012.)

MMORPGs are an exceptional channel for forming relationships. It is argued that not only do they make "impossible" relationships possible but they can also end up providing the relationships with stronger foundations than you might typically encounter in a physical world relationship. Two types of impossible-made-possible relationships are identified, relationships that, even excluding the geographical distance issues, in all likelihood would never happen if occurred fully in the physical world. First type of these suddenly possible relationships has to do with either party, or even both, being too shy and reserved in real life to either meet in the first place, to get to know each other well enough or in the end reveal the extent of their affection. In this sense the confidence boost provided by the degree of anonymity in MMORPGs makes it possible for those shy and reserved people to meet and eventually find each other in the romantic sense. The other type of impossible-made-possible relationships revolves around the way MMORPGs enable you to meet people "inside-out". The way meeting through an MMORPG de-emphasizes external qualities and emphasizes internal qualities is seen as the reason why the love and the relationship sparks in the first place as you really get to know your partner first. On the other hand, meeting like this gives some people the chance to get to find out how compatible they actually are. In real life they would never get the chance to find out due to external factors; not being each other's type, age difference or other such factors play a part. Meeting inside-out like that is also the reason why some felt that their relationship is built on a stronger foundation. MMORPGs as a low pressure environment allow you to get to know the person first and to become good friends before becoming romantic partners. (Yee, 2006d.)

This chapter introduced MMORPGs as the environment for relationships and presented different ways to experience sociality in MMORPGs in order to better understand how it works as the basis for relationships. Additionally, prior research regarding relationships in these games was explored to provide tools to better analyse the gathered empirical data. Some previous research was also examined to find more information about MMORPGs as a channel so it could be used to aid in the analysis of the data in order to answer the second research question.

3.   Research method

In this chapter I will first present the current study, then a qualitative research approach called phenomenography which I followed in this study. Next I will elaborate on how I used the phenomenographic approach to realize the study and finally I will explain my data collection and analysis in more detail.

3.1 Current study

The objective of this study was to explore and describe the ways in which the participants experience relationships in MMORPG environments and what the participants perceive to be the effect of MMORPGs themselves in those relationships. As a qualitative and quite small scale study I did not attempt to produce generalizable results, rather I aimed to provide descriptions of the similarities and differences in how relationships can be experienced in this setting. More specifically, this thesis describes the qualitatively different ways in which the participants of this study experienced and perceived the researched phenomena.

Prior studies have shown us that MMORPGs are indeed highly social environments and that a number of different types of relationships thrive in said environments. In this study I collected data from a number of players who have experienced relationships within the realm of MMORPGs. I analysed said data to identify the qualitatively distinct ways people experience meaningful real-life relationships in these environments. Second topic of interest was seeing how those people perceived the effect of MMORPGs themselves as the channels for those relationships. Therefore the main research question for this study and this thesis was "How do people experience meaningful real-life relationships in MMORPGs?". The second, very much interconnected, area of interest and research question was "How do people perceive the effect of MMORPGs as a channel for relationships?". Armed with these two research questions I chose to target my data collection on forums related to the one of the most popular MMORPGs, World of Warcraft. I was not targeting experiences within WoW specifically, instead the choice of posting on these forums and not, for example, posting on any and all MMORPG related forums was made simply because I did not have the resources to process huge amounts of data. At the time of starting this study I was playing WoW myself. With the number of people playing that single MMORPG and the number of forums devoted to that game I considered it to be sizeable enough yet also contained enough a pool of potential participants. I was hoping to reach a sample size substantial enough but still manageable with the resources of a lone student. More information about the actual implementation of the study can be found in chapter 3.3 after the presentation of the chosen research approach.

3.2 Phenomenography

Phenomenography is a relatively recent empirical qualitative research approach, which focuses on describing how different individuals experience a phenomenon in the world around them. The approach was developed by Ference Marton and his colleagues starting from 1970s but the name phenomenography was coined by Marton in 1981. Unlike the deceivingly similarly named phenomenology, phenomenography is not focused on the phenomenon itself but rather on how different people experience said

phenomenon. Therefore, in contrast to phenomenology being a first-order perspective and seeking to describe the world, phenomenography is second-order perspective seeking to describe people's experience of the world (Larsson & Holmström, 2006). In Marton's own words phenomenography is about "different ways in which people experience, interpret, understand, apprehend, perceive or conceptualize various aspects of reality" (Marton, 1981). Phenomenography is interested in the collective meaning and not the individual experiences. In fact it is the differences in people's experiences, the variance in the conceptions, that phenomenography tries to capture and describe. The qualitatively distinct ways to experience a phenomenon that Marton calls "categories of description" is what you are looking to identify from your data. All the categories of description you identify will together form the "outcome space", the end result of a phenomenographic study. Phenomenography is a non-dualistic ontological approach meaning that the object and subject cannot be separated; there is no object in itself, only the object as perceived, understood or experienced by the subject. (Ornek, 2008.) In other words, "the only world that we can communicate about is the world as experienced" (Sjöström & Dahlgren, 2002).

As phenomenography focuses on how other people experience given phenomenon, the researcher must approach both the data collection and the analysis from a neutral standpoint without input from his or her own perspectives (Ornek, 2008). The preferred data collection method is said to be semi-structured individual interviews with open ended questions. In semi-structured interviews there should be a list of base questions to be asked and the rest of the dialogue should be based on the responses. (Sjöström & Dahlgren, 2002.) Sjöstrom & Dahlgren (2002) also noticed and pointed out the similarity with in-depth interviewing as defined by Taylor & Bogan (1984):

> By in-depth qualitative interviewing we mean repeated face-to-face encounters between the researcher and informants directed toward understanding informants' perspectives on their lives, experiences, or situations as expressed in their own words. (Taylor & Bogan, 1984; Sjöström & Dahlgren, 2002).

The researcher should place emphasis on making sure the interview stays open and the interviewee feels free to think aloud and also to be doubtful. The main interest of the interviewer should be to get the participants to express themselves as clearly and expansively as possible. (Sjöström & Dahlgren, 2002).

The results of the study, the categories, should emerge from the collected data alone unlike in traditional content analysis where the categories are pre-defined and then imposed on the data. Phenomenography loans the term "bracketing" from phenomenology which means that the researcher brackets, or holds in check, his own preconceptions based on his own experiences. This is a similar concept to the one which can also be found in grounded theory. Grounded theory also "grounds" the theory directly in qualitative data and the results are derived by iteratively and interactively analysing the data. In fact, the striking similarity between accounts of phenomenography's and grounded theory's way of analysing the data and the lack of published guidance on how to conduct phenomenographic analysis has lead some researchers to simply adopt grounded theory's techniques of analysing the data for their phenomenographic studies. (Richardson, 1999.)

Sjöström & Dahlgren (2002) cite Dahlgren & Fallsberg (1991) when offering a list of steps on conducting phenomenographic analysis on the interview transcripts. The list is comprised of seven steps which lead to the outcome space as the result of the phenomenographic research:

1. Familiarization
2. Compilation
3. Condensation
4. Grouping
5. Comparison
6. Naming
7. Contrastive comparison

Familiarization is the first step of the analysis and includes getting to know the empirical material by reading through the interview transcripts. This step is also essential for correcting any errors in the transcripts. The next step consists of compiling the answers to specific questions from all respondents. The main objective of this step is to identify the most significant elements in answer given by each participant. Condensation, or reduction, is a step where everything irrelevant is stripped from the individual answers in order to find the central parts of long answers. As the name suggests, grouping, or classification, is a step where you form your preliminary groups from similar answers. When you have your preliminary groups you then perform a preliminary comparison on them in attempt to establish borders between the categories. This step sometimes leads to revising the preliminary groups. In the sixth step you proceed to name the groups to further emphasize their essence. The last step is the contrastive comparison of categories. In this step you produce a description of the unique characteristics of all categories and also a description of the similarities between categories. These descriptions of the distinctly different ways of experiencing a phenomenon and the connections between them are the outcome space, the end result of a phenomenographic study. (Dahlgren & Fallsberg,1991; Sjöström & Dahlgren, 2002.)

One major concern regarding credibility of a phenomenographic study is the relationship between the empirical data and the categories of description showcasing the different ways of experiencing a certain phenomenon (Sjöström & Dahlgren, 2002). The researcher has to find a way to link the proposed categories to the actual empirical data and show it to the reader to promote credibility. This can be done by providing excerpts from the interview transcripts to support the choice of categories and also giving the reader a chance to assess the relevance of your categories. (Ornek, 2008; Sjöstrjöm & Dahlgren, 2002.)

3.3 Implementation of the study

In this study I chose to follow the phenomenographic research approach as it felt like the most suitable approach for my research problem. From the beginning the objective was to map the experiences that people have with meaningful real-life relationships in MMORPGs. The research was to be done by interviewing players about their experiences, describing them and explore their differences and similarities. This happens to be almost exactly what phenomenographic research is all about therefore I feel it is a near perfect fit for this kind of research and the best approach for me to follow. Although most of the phenomenographic studies seem to revolve around healthcare or education and learning, I feel the approach fits well in the setting of this study as well.

While the suggested method of data collection in phenomenographic studies is face-to-face interviews, I decided instead to conduct the semi-structured interviews via e-mail in order to better support the diversity of the experiences in the given setting. MMORPGs are by default melting-pots of a variety of cultures, personalities and most importantly, experiences. I attempted to better tap into that variety by conducting the study via e-mail. Additionally, it afforded my small scale study the chance to try and

reach a wider variety of responses by reducing the workload of having to transcribe all the interviews. The obvious potential downside of e-mail interview is losing some of the richness of the discussion. I am hoping that instead of losing in richness, e-mail as a medium allowed the participants more time and a more relaxed environment to share their experiences and articulate them clearly and expansively. As per the reported advantages of computer-mediated communication discussed earlier, approaching the subject via e-mail could also make it easier to talk about personal experiences. All these pros and cons have also been identified in previous research regarding the use of e-mail as a medium for collecting qualitative data with interviews. Study by Meho (2006) concluded that deploying qualitative semi-structured interviews via e-mail is a valid approach with its advantages and challenges. Among the advantages was cost and effectiveness. The cost of using e-mail to distribute the interviews is negligible while allowing access to large and geographically distributed samples of people. In addition, e-mail interviewing allows conducting multiple interviews simultaneously as the interview process is asynchronous. More so, the data received is already in electronic form and in essence already transcribed thus it requires little effort to prepare for analysis. Mentioned challenges include issues such as high non-delivery rates and loss of contact between interviews, as well as loss of media richness. Not all the potential participants will take the time to reply and even those who do on the initial interview are not guaranteed to reply to the follow-up parts of the semi-structured interview. E-mail as a written and asynchronous communication also loses some of the media richness compared to any oral interviews, be it face-to-face or over the phone; the lack of visual cues from the face-to-face or the tones of voice over the phone. On the other hand it is suggested that e-mail facilitates greater self-disclosure which in turn may lead to richer data. One additional challenge is the lack of immediate discussion which in turn places emphasis on the careful wording of the questions to reduce misintepretations but without constraining their responses too much. All in all, the study argues that conducting the interviews via e-mail does not lead to loss of data quality and e-mail interviewing can lead to as good quality data as by more traditional methods such as face-to-face interviews. (Meho, 2006.)

I started off the research by posting a simple question on the official World of Warcraft EU forums regarding what kind of meaningful real-life relationships people had experienced within the MMORPG environment. This yielded some valuable comments and stories which helped me form the interview questions. I then piloted the interview on the forum of the WoW guild I was part of. I received valuable data but also some ideas on how to further refine my interview questions. The refined questions are listed on the next page in Table 3. After refining the questions I attempted to reach a wider pool of participants by posting a thread about my study, followed by the interview questions, on several WoW related forums. Despite my efforts the total number of participants in the end was as low as eight. Demographic information of the participants can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2. Demographic information of the participants.

Participant	Gender	Age	Location
1	M	42	UK
2	F	20	UK
3	F	35	Netherlands
4	M	31	Romania
5	M	35	Israel
6	F	24	Romania
7	M	30	UK
8	M	23	US

Table 3.   The refined questions for the initial interview

1.) What do you consider as being a meaningful relationship? (in general)
2.) What do you consider as being a meaningful real-life relationship in MMORPGs?
3.) Could you describe your experiences with meaningful real-life relationships in MMORPGs? (For example: How it began? What happened?) If you have more than one type of experience, please describe as many as possible.
4.) How would you compare these (meaningful real-life) MMORPG relationships to other real-life relationships?
5.) What do you think of MMORPGs as a channel for the formation, maintenance or even enhancement of relationships?
6.) How do MMORPGs compare to real world as a channel for the formation, maintenance or even enhancement of relationships?
7.) How do MMORPGs compare to other online channels such as social media?
8.) Do you consider MMORPGs to be harmful to relationships? Please elaborate.

As with any interviews, some people had more to say than the others and thus the lengths of the answers varied quite a bit. Most of the questions did not require or even expect long answers. The main variance in the lengths of the interviews was depending on how forthcoming they were with sharing their personal experiences in the third question. In total the lengths of the interviews went from approximately half a page of text to one and a half pages. Half of the interviews were on the lower end of that scale, one had approximately a page's worth and the remaining three were all on the high end of the scale. For the most part the shorter answers were as important as the longer ones and gave equally valuable data. Only the third question actually gained extra benefit from the longer answers but not enough to affect the results of the study. In fact, the shorter answers were easier to work with as all the answers were condensed in the end anyway.

Some of the participants answered the initial questions so expansively that I could not come up with any follow-up questions and some were patient enough to reply to all follow-up questions (with maximum of two additional back-and-forth sets of emails) but some I could no longer get in contact with after the initial interview. One of the participants answered the questions from the point of view of romantic relationships only and when followed up with a question whether he considered only romantic relationships to be meaningful real-life relationships in this setting, he could not be reached. His answers were therefore considered as such, for him only romantic relationships were meaningful real-life relationships in this setting, while I doubt that it was his original intent. Completely accurate or not, that was what was identifiable from his data and that is how it was accounted. Follow-up questions were mainly aimed at clarifying some parts of the responses to eliminate potential misintepretations or to further probe about some interesting points the participant raised in his or her answers for the initial interview questions. In most cases the replies I got for the follow-up questions showed short and quick responses which did not seem to add significant value to what was gained from the initial interview questions. This in mind, while not receiving responses to all follow-up e-mails is unfortunate, I do not consider it detrimental to the quality of the data collected or the analysis conducted on said data. The categories extracted were, in almost all cases, clearly identifiable from multiple participants' data from the initial interviews alone. Additionally, as this was a

phenomenographic study, I was more interested in the collective, the ways in which the relationships can be experienced and that was gained even if some of the individual experiences could not be completely elicited and clarified due to not receiving the answers to the follow-up questions.

As the objective was to explore people's experiences or perceptions regarding meaningful real-life relationships in MMORPGs, I started off by letting the participants explain what they perceive as a meaningful relationship in general, followed by defining a meaningful real-life relationship in an MMORPG context. The third question was aimed at letting the participants recount their experiences regarding real-life relationships in an MMORPG setting. With this I attempted to get the participants to start telling the story of their experiences and I expected the majority of the follow-up questions to revolve around the answer to this question. Most stories however were very expansive and quite detailed and did not necessitate nor even leave room for further questions. The fourth question was meant to further emphasize the MMORPG aspect, to see if those experiences of meaningful relationships differed from any other real-life relationships and if so, how did they differ. The rest of the questions were directed at exploring participants' experiences or perceptions of the MMORPGs themselves as the medium through which the relationships transpired.

The analysis of the results was done in line with the presented seven steps of phenomenographic studies. I started by familiarizing myself with all the interview data I managed to gather. Some degree of familiarization already happened in going through the responses and coming up with follow-up questions when the responses first came in but at this stage I gathered up all the correspondence in one place and carefully read through them again. I did this in order to make sure there were no previously missed problems, no newly raised questions and that I was adequately familiar with the material I was working with. Next step was to condense the results, to pick out the most important parts of the discussion from the longer responses. After having the answers in a concise form, I divided them into preliminary groups based on similarities and differences. The preliminary groups were not an attempt to form the final categories but rather to first group the similarities and differences within the answers to a specific question. After the preliminary groups were ready I split the questions and the corresponding preliminary groups according to the overarching research question they were aiming to answer. Within these two new groups I compared and revised the previous groups in order to establish categories. Next step was to name the categories in order to "emphasize their essence". As a last step I formed the outcome space by writing the descriptions of the qualitatively distinct categories of description and adding the excerpts from the interviews to support the categorization. The categories of description were reported as encountered in a phenomenographic study by Sayyad Abdi, Partridge and Bruce (2013).

4.   Results

In this chapter I present the results of the study. I start by going through the analysis of the interviews question by question, follow by explaining the transition from individual questions to the preliminary groups and finish by presenting the outcome space uncovered from the data.

4.1 Analysis of the interview data

The first question of the interview, "What do you consider as being a meaningful relationship? (in general)", was asked in order to get a baseline, to make explicit how different participants defined meaningful relationships. In order to study people's experiences regarding meaningful real-life relationships in MMORPG environments, one must first learn how different people perceive meaningful relationships in said environment. In order to get a better idea of the differences in these perceptions one could benefit from knowing how their perceptions of meaningful relationships differ in general. The participants of this study defined meaningful relationships as something that consists of a varying mix of mutuality and equality in combination with trust and sharing. Mutual trust is undeniably a building block of any meaningful relationship, as is a degree of self-disclosure, sharing of personal information. The relationship has to be mutual and in many ways equal; both parties of a meaningful relationship have to be committed to it, to have care and consideration for each other, to be willing to invest time in it, to be willing to give and receive support when needed and both have to be happy with the state of the relationship. None of the participants explicitly mentioned all the uncovered elements of a meaningful relationship. The differences in the responses showed emphasis on different elements of the relationship and differing opinions on at which stage can a relationship be considered meaningful. The least strict interpretation of a meaningful relationship encountered required only the time and interest to break the barrier of instrumental relationship.

> A relationship that exceed the boundaries of the original interaction, for example, keeping in touch with a work colleague outside the work hours + on stuff not related to work. (Participant 5)

The more expansive responses, however, covered most of the elements.

> A meaningful relationship is supposed to be based on mutual understanding and a certain degree of trust. From then on it has the possibility to evolve into anything. If both sides participate in the creation and eventually enhancement of said relationship, equally, there is no reason why it couldn't be called "meaningful". To me, a meaningful relationship is with someone who takes the time to invest in it, who trusts me and l trust them, and who one way or the other shares one or more interests with me. (Participant 6)

As we can see, the interpretations of meaningful relationships can be quite different. Upon looking at all the answers collectively, three distinct groups of elements could be identified. One way of looking at meaningful relationships was that anything that goes *beyond the instrumental* interaction(s) can be considered meaningful. If the relationship carries on after the initial interaction has served its purpose, the relationship can be

considered meaningful. Keeping in touch with a work colleague outside of work, schoolmate after graduation or a sparring partner from the gym after either party stopped going, are likely to be meaningful relationships in some way. The next pair of elements that kept repeating in the data was *trust and self-disclosure*. For a relationship to be considered meaningful there has to be a degree of trust and self-disclosure. Relationship can hardly be called meaningful if it is completely impersonal. Requirements for a meaningful relationship therefore include enough trust in each other to feel safe to share personal information about oneself. The last pair that together form the third group is *mutuality and equality*. In varying degrees and combinations those two were the most common elements in the answers to the first question of the interview. A meaningful relationship cannot be one-sided. Both parties of a relationship have to be committed to it. This includes both parties committing time and effort on the maintenance of the relationship, having care and consideration for each other, and mutual understanding and acceptance of the state of the relationship. If the relationship is not mutual and in many ways equal, it is highly likely not a meaningful one.

The second interview question, "What do you consider as being a meaningful real-life relationship in MMORPGs?", was rather straightforward compared to the first. The majority of the participants seemed to consider MMORPG relationships to be meaningful as soon as the relationship one way or the other *broke out of the boundaries of the game*. For one participant it was enough for any in-game chat to breach the boundary between the game and real life in a meaningful way.

> Any meaningful chat that goes into the area of Real Life, and not just blunt conversation like "yeah bro, that's hard" or "good for you, you got a job". It would have to be a meaningful discussion in which either both players share knowledge or understanding unrelated to the game, or each side helps the other to cope with real life issues. (Participant 5)

While the others who followed that line of thought said that there should be interaction outside the game as well.

> One where you also interact in a meaningful way ... with each other outside of the game. (Participant 3)

> Someone who I would have contact with outside the wow environment on a regular basis. (Participant 1)

Upon a follow-up question to one of the participants in order to confirm that, while not mentioned explicitly, he did indeed mean that anything beyond the game, even purely online, was enough for an MMORPG relationship to be regarded as meaningful he confirmed the assessment to be true.

> Definitely. I have, what I would consider, meaningful relationships with people I am unlikely to ever meet. (Participant 1)

This could be anything from keeping in touch via social media such as Facebook, chatting in a messaging software such as Skype, talking on the phone, or any other means of communication outside the realm of the MMORPG.

Two of the participants, however, felt that they c*ould not make a distinction* between the meaningful relationships in general and in MMORPGs.

l can't properly make a distinction between the two. Whoever is my friend in real-life could be my friend online and vice versa. So l guess same as above. (Participant 6)

One of the participants felt that if you only know the person virtually it *cannot be considered real life* relationship, although it can still be meaningful.

I think if you only know the person through the internet and MMO game, it is not real life, but can still be meaningful.(Participant 8)

Three distinct points of view could be identified within the answers to the second question: relationships that carry *beyond the game*, *no distinction* between meaningful relationships in general and those in MMORPGs, and the lone but quite distinct notion of MMORPG relationships being considered *not real-life* although they can still be considered meaningful.

The third question of the interview was the one that was meant to elicit the most valuable insights on how the participants experienced relationships within the MMORPG environment. "Could you describe your experiences with meaningful real-life relationships in MMORPGs? (For example: How it began? What happened?) If you have more than one type of experience, please describe as many as possible.". This question, as was the intention, got the participants to share their stories regarding MMORPG relationships in varying amounts of details. While the shortest, to the point, answers were only several lines worth of text, the more extensive answers covered multiple paragraphs and in the couple most detailed cases a whole page's worth. Most of the participants recounted experiences of more than just one type. In the end, the analysis of the experiences revealed four distinct levels of meaningful relationships in MMORPGs: *In-game friendships, beyond the game friendships, comparable to real-life friendships* and r*omantic relationships*. The first level, *in-game friendships*, only fits the description of one participant's experiences as most of the participants considered it a requirement for a meaningful relationship to extend beyond the game.

Ingame friendship - people whom I keep in touch in-game, but our conversations go beyond the boundaries of the game. Could be job related, IT knowledge or small talk stuff like politics. It started of course through doing instances or raids together, and usually playing roles that are more likely to interact. For example, because I was a melee dps most of my friends ingame were also melee dps (or required to interact alot with the melee dpsers). (Participant 5)

Beyond the game friendships were considered the first meaningful relationships by the majority of participants. These were the relationships that broke out of the boundaries of the game to some other mediums of interaction. The main modes of interaction outside the game seemed to be chatting in Skype and contact through Facebook.

Well, I've met quite a few people who I also got to know offline, so to speak, who have become friends. I've never met them in person (that's kinda hard, considering one friend lives in the UK and the other lives in another part of the country that's a three-hour-drive), but I interact with them on FB regularly and we have talks about other things than WoW. (Participant 3)

Over the last 6 years of playing wow i have made friend and built relationships (non romantic). some of them do not play wow anymore but i still keep up with them on facebook and other social outlets. (Participant 8)

The third level of meaningful relationships are the relationships that are either *comparable to* any other *real-life friendship* or no distinction is made between real-life friends and MMORPG friends in the first place. These are the relationships that are gladly compared to any other real-life friendship in nearly any sense or are even flat out considered just another real-life friendship in line with other physical world friendships. These are the friendships that have gained enough momentum to carry on well over and beyond the games and persist even after they are done with. From the given set of experiences this level seemed to be the first that got people to go out of their way to meet face-to-face in the physical realm, although that was by no means a requirement.

> We met a group of players in game, and befriended them. We spoke daily on skype, and formed a great friendship. I even met up with two of them in real-life which was a first for me. To this day, I still speak to them all. One of these friends is now my best friend. Even though I've never met him yet because he lives in a different country, we've remained best friends for about three years now. ... My friendship with him is the strongest friendship I've ever had. (Participant 2)

> About 9-10 years ago, a friend of mine used to host Lineage 2 servers on his machines and asked me to fit the role of Game Master for his players. It's then when I've met my friend … . Since we both had similar interests and opinions about games and such, a tight friendship quickly formed and it's still going on even today. In all my years gaming online, this might be the only friend I made that is still part of my life. Everyone else faded. (Participant 4)

> Good virtual friends - these are the people I would consider good friends and would treat them the same way as I would my best RL friends. They are people I would trust with personal matters and would gladly hear their wisdom and act upon it. I would ask these people for advice if I think they posses unique knowledge that my RL friends do not. This type of relationship is usually sparked by a conversation is nothing short then inspiring, when it doesn't only an intellectual conversation but also has emotional layer to it, usually revolve around personal matters like problems at home, health issue, sexuality, ethnicity. (Participant 5)

> Let's take for example my friend ..., from Serbia. I met him when he applied to my guild on a private server about 3 years ago. He wasn't very noticeable or loud but we eventually started talking about game-related things. In time, those changed or real life got added on top of them and Rob went from member to officer and to a very good real-life friend whom l still talk to to this day. We haven't met in real life but that does not mean that he isn't very much real to me. I will like to add that playing together definitely was a medium through which we got closer as well.. not just discussing real life. He proved to be a loyal ally and friend in trying times both in-game and in real life. I have a few more close friends whom l've met in the same circumstances so there is no point in repeating the story. I was and still am very close to quite a few of my old guild mates. They're amazing people who l would've never had the chance to meet otherwise. (Participant 6)

These are the friendships, the very meaningful and very real relationships, that are highly valued by all involved parties. They are the relationships that persist through the tests of time. These stories are even more proof that truly meaningful real-life

relationships can be found in the realm of MMORPGs. On top of these *comparable to real-life friendships* there is still one more level of relationships.

The last level contains the relationships that cross over from friendship to the world of romance. *Romantic relationships* can also be experienced within MMORPGs. There were high variances in the depth and the length of the relationships, as is the case with any other romantic relationship that might be encountered in the physical world. Some of the participants had encountered multiple instances of romantic relationships within this medium with varying level of success.

> I started playing World of Warcraft because of my interest in my school friend, … . Because of the game we were able to bond more than we did in real-life, which lead to us dating. … After two years of being with ..., we sadly broke up. The game had a slight effect on the relationship due to the fact that we spent all the time in real-life together and also in game, so we had no time to ourselves. We also had the same friends, which made it more difficult. After awhile, I started speaking to someone who was in my guild (in WoW) and became more interested in him every day. In the end, we started speaking on skype and eventually started online dating. That carried on for about a year until we decided to end it because of the distance and how difficult it would be to meet.

> Thankfully due to all of these relationships/interactions, I gained a lot more confidence with speaking to people in game. That's how I met ..., and was confident enough to get to know him more. We'd speak every night and most days, and after a couple of months, we started dating. My relationship with ... was very important to me and I completely fell in love with him. We decided to meet up, and enjoyed our time in real-life more than in game. We enjoyed playing World of Warcraft together, but it caused issues due to the fact that it can be very competitive and stressful. My relationship with him had turned from an online relationship to a very important real-life relationship. I was very serious about it, and was thinking of a future with him. Due to the fact that his life was very different from mine and how difficult it was to keep visiting each other, the relationship deteriorated until we broke up.

> … Regarding all of these relationships, World of Warcraft has a lot to do with them. If I hadn't started playing WoW, I'd never have met all of these people who have had such a huge effect on my life. (Participant 2)

As can be seen from this participant's experiences, while the relationships did not necessarily last as long as would have been desirable, they were valuable experiences and played a significant role in the participant's life. Even though the relationships in these stories did not reach happily ever after, the effects they had were ultimately seen as positive. Not all romantic relationships that blossom in an MMORPG environment end well but there are cases in which they change one's life in a good way.

> My most precious relationship that started in an MMORPG dates back to 2006. Back before any of the others... which is one of the reasons why it always was the most special. He was my first real contact with the outside of my own country and that maybe helped create a unique bond. Story starts on the 17th of May 2006 in a game called MU Online. It was big back then and it had a considerable amount of players. A friend of my brother's, a few weeks prior to meeting my new friend, decided to open his own MU server.

It never had more than a few players online though. However, it was enough for me to meet a very special kid (back then :p). In time he turned into my friend and then my best friend, by far. Almost a year ago we managed to meet and we fell in love instantly.. it was like the feelings have been there all along, waiting for the chance to happen. Now he's my boyfriend of almost 7 months and hopefully soon even more than that. (Participant 6)

Well, about 10-11 years ago I was playing an MMO called Dark Age of Camelot, I met my wife after I joined her guild (Bounty Hunters). We talked a lot at first and over time we got closer and closer until one day we admitted our feelings to one another, at first it seemed problematic as she lived in Belgium and I lived in the UK, she offered to come and visit me however and about 3 months later we met up in real life.. from this point on our relationship just grew in strength with every minute we with each other, ultimately she moved to the UK eventually as we both agreed it would be easier for her to move to the UK than it would for me to move to Belgium due to the language barrier (she spoke fluent English and I didn't speak a word of Dutch)

I think our relationship was so successful because we had similar interests, gaming played a huge role in our relationship, were it not for online gaming we'd never have met, we'd never have been married and we wouldn't have 2 wonderful kids. (Participant 7)

These stories speak in favor of MMORPGs as a potential grounds for relationships to develop and blossom into life-changing experiences.

The fourth question is the last one directly involved with how the participants experience relationships within the MMORPG environment, namely "How would you compare these MMORPG relationships to other real-life relationships?". This question was meant to get the participants to, again, consider MMORPGs as the background for the relationships and to make explicit how does that differ from any other real-life relationships. Some people already partially addressed this question in their stories when mentioning how the game as a medium played a significant role in the relationships. However, the answers to this particular question were what was expected and provided a clear overview of the distinctly different perceptions. Most of the answers could be divided into two very clear groups with an additional third outlier group containing one lone distinctly separate point of view. The first group of perceptions revolved around there being almost none to *no difference* between the relationships that started within an MMORPG as compared to those that started in the physical world.

I don't distinguish between the 2. both sets are friends are treated equally. (Participant 1)

Much the same for the most part, apart from the way they started. I know quite a few people who I almost never see IRL, but who I interact with in a meaningful way through FB for instance. (Participant 3)

The other point of view that was clearly identifiable in the answers was the perception of *enhanced MMORPG relationships*. One way or the other the game as a medium brought some kind of a benefit, be it acting as a safe-net for the shy, being something you have in common or just being a shared activity that could be used to strengthen a relationship.

> I've always been shy, so I don't tend to meet people in real life. I've always gotten to know people better through internet communication rather than face to face because I find it an easier way of communicating confidently. My purely online relationship with my best friend is the strongest friendship I have. (Participant 2)

> Hard to say really! I don't really think there is much difference, I just think its easier to form a relationship in an MMO as you already have something pretty big in common, gaming... gaming alone won't form a relationship but given the time people generally invest in gaming I'd say it certainly helps a lot being with someone who understands the ins and outs of gaming. (Participant 7)

The last group with one lone viewpoint into the differences between MMORPGs and other real-life relationships was the tough one to classify. The answer was stating the obvious difference but the perception was unique at least within this set of participants. While the wording of the answer itself was quite neutral, with the help of context from the whole interview I classified the last group as *MMORPG relationships are lacking*.

> if its strictly just on online relationship vs and real life in person relationship, the obvious difference is no physical contact or interaction, whether it is romantic or not. that can make or break a relationship. (Participant 8)

Having the answers to the first four questions analyzed, the ones specifically meant to answer the main research question of "How do people experience meaningful real-life relationships in MMORPGs?", it is time to move on to the preliminary analysis of the remaining four questions. The following questions were asked in order to find the answer to the second research question: "How do people perceive the effect of MMORPGs as a channel for relationships?". While some of the answers to the previous questions already lent some insight on the second research question, the answers to the following questions are what really painted the picture.

The fifth question, "What do you think of MMORPGs as a channel for the formation, maintenance or even enhancement of relationships?", was a blunt starter to get the participants to contemplate on the effect that the MMORPG had as the channel through which the relationships played out. Within the answers three distinct types could be identified. On one hand, some of the participants perceived MMORPGs as *just another meeting ground*, simply a means to an end. MMORPGs just happen to be another medium through which relationships were formed, maintained or enhanced.

> I's just a place where people meet - same as any other venue, club or medium. (Participant 1)

> I think as much of them as any other means of formation, maintenance and even enhancement of relationships. It's a means to an end and I think that relationships that start in any MMORPG have the option to become as meaningful as bumping into someone in a bar and striking up a conversation. (Participant 3)

On the other hand, a number of participants saw *MMORPGs as enhancers*. MMORPGs are a relatively easy and safe way to meet and get to know people but it also gives you something to do together as a way to maintain or even strengthen existing relationships.

I find it much easier to meet people on MMORPGs rather than real-life. For instance, I'd rather talk to random people in game, than in real-life. For me it's much easier to get to know the person online than talking face to face, because of my lack of confidence. To be able to play a game with my friends etc. is a shared interest and gives us something to talk about and encourages us to spend time with each other. (Participant 2)

I am an avid fan and supporter of the online and the game world when it comes to finding people you can start relationships with.. when looking for friends or whatever else, basically. It's easier to find people with similar interests and strike a conversation out of nothing that can lead to god knows what. (Participant 6)

I think they're great, I really do. I'd recommend MMO's in a heartbeat to anyone out there looking for love, I've formed a relationship myself within an MMO, it grew into marriage and ultimately a family, I've seen numerous other relationships blossom over the years in MMO's as well, my friend also met his wife in an MMO - now married with a son of his own. (Participant 7)

While the previous groups were neutral and positive there was one participant who, in addition to, experiencing the positive side, also had experiences on the negative side which presents *MMORPGs as a problem*.

However, in the past it has lead to me spending all of my time with someone which lead to arguments and problems in real-life. It's about finding the balance of it all. (Participant 2)

All in all, the answers revealed three distinct ways MMORPGs can be perceived to affect a relationship: as *just another meeting ground*, an *enhancer* or potentially a *problem*.

The sixth question, "How do MMORPGs compare to real world as a channel for the formation, maintenance or even enhancement of relationships?", asked the participants to compare the game and physical world as channels. Many of the participants already included a comparison to the physical world in their answers to the previous question, therefore, this question had some participants referring back to their previous answers. This means fewer new perspectives and unique differences but the questions got their answers and they could be classified so in the end no harm was done; especially given that the answers to all these questions aim at answering the same overarching research question in the end. The two first groups from the previous question also repeat here as they both had participants referring to their previous answers. As MMORPGs were considered just another meeting ground much like any physical world bar or any other place where you bump into people and strike a conversation, the group was classified more fitting to this question as *no difference* between MMORPGs and the physical world. While *MMORPGs as enhancers* had some references to the previous answers it also had some new answers which were saying largely the same thing in different words.

Online, I am more confident and able to socialize with people, where as in real-life I am shy and reserved. This makes it near impossible for me to go out and make friends. (Participant 2)

It may be even easier than in the real world for some people and maybe even for myself. Easier to find people and easier to take the time to catch up. Again, in my case. (Participant 6)

A new perspective into the channels for relationships comes from the two participants who, in essence, argue that *real world trumps MMORPGs*. While the two points of view do not align perfectly and approach the subject from a different angle, they both consider that the real world offers something MMORPGs do not. It is just not the same.

From my experience in the past years with friendships online, I can safely say that they last only untill they serve their purpose. Some real-life relationships are like that, but online friendships tend to have this as a built in feature. (Participant 4)

An MMO can be another form of initiation to starting a relationship but i do not feel it is the same as meeting the person in real life. if you see meet them in person, you can watch mannerisms and be turned on or off. maybe they chew with their mouth open. maybe they smoke(can be a turn on or off). maybe their disgusting and dont shower. maybe their are extremely well groomed. you wont know that for sure unless you meet them in person, which is the difference i think. (Participant 8)

So for this question we have: Just another means to an end or *no difference* between the two, *MMORPGs as enhancers* making it easier to find like-minded people and take the time to keep in touch and *real world trumps MMORPGs* when it comes to relationships; you cannot know for sure who you are dealing with unless you actually meet face-to-face with the said person and most of the relationships born in-game tend to fail in surpassing the instrumental and fade when they have served their purpose.

The second to last question, "How do MMORPGs compare to other online channels such as social media?", tried to further emphasize what it is that makes MMORPGs stand out as a channel for relationships. This was done by having the participants compare MMORPGs as a channel to other online channels such as social media which seems to be the go-to medium for maintaining relationships these days. The question brought forth strong opinions about social media but also some views on what the difference is between MMORPGs and social media when it comes to acting as channels for relationships. A surprising find was that half of the participants seemed to believe that *social media is bad*, while the rest perceived the difference between the channels being that *social media is more personal* in some way. The strong opinions regarding social media being bad are probably best presented by letting the participants speak for themselves.

They're fake and just engines for advertising (Participant 1)

Social media can at times be detrimental to relationships, because people don't bother to ask for clarification of negative-sounding statements or don't bother to be concise in their statements. (Participant 3)

Social media makes people shallow. Real friendships are hard to come by in today's world. (Participant 4)

I'm not a fan of social media, I think social media is actually making relationships harder to form, take Facebook for example, its like a pit of

vipers rather than somewhere you'd expect a relationship to blossom. (Participant 7)

The other half of the participants did not share quite that strong opinions regarding social media as a channel for relationships. The combining factor for the rest of the answers was that compared to MMORPGs *social media is more personal* one way or the other. The differences within the group were about social media being more personal since there is nothing else going on in the background so the topics are likely more personal and having to do with real life but also that while in-game, you enjoy the ease of communication afforded by the desired degree of anonymity unlike in social media where much of your personal information is visible to the other parties of the relationship. Additionally, as social media is more personal, it can be used to get to know your in-game buddies better; to see a picture, to learn something more about them or just to have a way to contact them should the need arise. One of the participants also noted the more personal level of social media or other online channels by noting that while by playing together you know you have that one thing in common, other online channels such as dating websites can offer more personal information, so higher accuracy with more levels of compatibility.

> There's more pressure to carry on a conversation on other social media because there's nothing else going on in the background. If you speak on facebook, it is on a much more personal level because it's to do with your real-life rather than the game. (Participant 2)

> I think people on MMORPG still enjoy much anonymity which makes it easier to communicate. Other social media like facebook, twitter, LinkedIn show so much personal information about you that it makes it harder to be regarded objectively. For example, it is recommended to people who are applying for jobs to cleanup their facebook or search themselves, to make sure their is no information that can tarnish their application. No one yet has gone to search the chat logs of an MMORPG or eavesdrop on teamspeak :) (Participant 5)

In the end, the answers to this question did not provide too many fresh insights as to how the effect of MMORPGs as the channel is perceived. Some of the answers did, however, bring back to focus some of the previously mentioned positive elements of MMORPGs as the channel, namely the shared activity going on in the background and the degree of anonymity which allows easier communication.

The last question of the interview, "Do you consider MMORPGs to be harmful to relationships? Please elaborate.", was included in order to shake the participants to consider the potential harm that MMORPGs might pose to relationships. Up until this question most participants did not mention negative effects to relationships at all, in fact, only one participant mentioned the game to have lead the couple to spend too much time together that caused problems in the relationships. The purpose of this question was, therefore, to explicitly ask if the participants thought MMORPGs to be harmful to relationships. The answers divided into two halves: Those who believed that *MMOPRGs are not to blame* and those who believe *MMORPGs can be harmful if you let them*. The half of the participants who considered there to be no inherent harm for relationships in MMORPGs themselves were on the same line with their answers.

> No more or less harmful than any other hobby/passtime. (Participant 1)

> No, blaming MMORPG of being harmful to relationships outside the game or that virtual relationships are bad, is like saying work is bad because people who become workoholic. Any social syndrome that occurs in MMORPG - can occur outside the game. (Participant 5)

Within the other half the consensus was that *MMORPGs can be harmful* to relationships but only if you let them. Even when describing the potential troubles that MMORPGs could bring, the participants often compared it to other things that could be harmful to a relationships. As with anything else that can be harmful to a relationship, so can MMORPGs, if you let them. While this is distinct from the first group, the answers belonging to this group also often hinted at the game itself not being the one to blame but rather the misuse of the game. Also the expression "depends" came up multiple times; depends on the couple, depends from person to person and so on, which further hints towards the game itself not being the problem. There were some differences in the answers regarding what the actual problem is, ranging from spending too much time together to not enough. The term "addictive" also came up in multiple answers.

> They can be, if you allow the game to control your relationship with that person. As with anything that causes you to spend a lot of time with a person, it can lead to tension and relationship stress. Like anything else, if you can find the balance between them both, it can be something positive. (Participant 2)

> Depends from person to person. MMORPGs are addictive. It's the whole point of the genre to get you online 10-20 hours / day just to be part of "something". In reality it's a drug with a different label. The secret is to keep things balanced. I used to work with a guy that got married and started a family. Things ware looking great for him. New house, new promotion at work,the whole package. The second he got talked into playing MMORPGs with the colleagues at work he started to lose himself into it. By the time he woke up it was too late as his life went down losing everything in the process. My point is : games are fun but with moderation. Knowing when to stop or quit is a no brainer. (Participant 4)

> Depends on the couple, if your partner thinks you spend too much time gaming, then sure, it can absolutely be harmful to a relationship.. if your partner is a like minded gamer or simply doesn't mind you gaming however I see no problem or harm arising from it. (Participant 7)

With all the interview questions analyzed and the preliminary groups within the questions sorted, it was time to move on to the comparison and revision of the groups. After moving the groups from the individual questions to under the two research questions the new categories were formed. As was previously mentioned, interview questions from one to four were aiming to answer the research question about the experiences and the last four were aiming to answer the one about effects of the game as a channel. Applicable answers or parts of them were also taken into consideration even if outside the questions specifically targeting a certain research question. The categories were named to further emphasize their essence and the descriptions and excerpts were added to form the categories of description. The final categories of description together form the outcome space.

4.2 How do people experience meaningful real-life relationships in MMORPGs?

For the main research question, "How do people experience meaningful real-life relationships in MMORPGs?", the preliminary groups from the first four interview questions, as seen in the Table 4, were further analysed and compared to form the final categories of description.

Table 4. Preliminary groups from the first four interview questions.

Beyond the instrumental	Beyond the game	In-game friendships	No difference
Trust and self-disclosure	No distinction	Beyond the game friendships	Enhanced mmorpg relationships
Mutuality and equality	Not real-life	Comparable to real-life friendships	MMORPGs are lacking
		Romantic relationships	

Four categories could be identified that encompassed all the preliminary groups and their elements. The groups, types of relationships, identified from the third question were good descriptors for the distinct types of meaningful relationships encountered within MMORPGs. From the beginning, the third question was meant to provide the bulk of the data with the other three providing support to back that up and that is what could be seen from the data. In-game friendships, beyond the game friendships, comparable to real-life friendships and romantic relationships are the distinctly different ways the participants experienced meaningful real-life relationships in MMORPGs. Most had experienced more than one type. In fact these types of relationships can actually be considered different levels starting from the first and potentially developing to further levels. The groups from the other questions all corresponded to a certain level of relationship. The new grouping of the categories and how the preliminary groups are divided under them can be seen in the Table 5.

As can be seen in Table 5, below, the categories could be considered levels of relationships. Each of them has the potential to reach the next level which can be regarded as a further developed version of the previous one. Most friendships that go beyond the game likely started from having a chat within the game and then it moved on from game-related topics to real-life and a friendship formed. To keep in touch better, and when not in the game, you might add each other in Skype and/or Facebook. From there if you both keep in touch, continue talking and possibly still playing together, there is a very real possibility for the friendship to get gradually stronger and deeper. With the increasing trust you are likely to share more personal details and that increasing level of self-disclosure could further strengthen the relationship. Should you find yourself developing feelings that go beyond those of friendship and should you be fortunate enough for the other party of the relationship to feel the same, there is always the possibility to take the next step in the relationship and move on to the world of romance.

Table 5. Categories of relationships

In-game friendships	Beyond the game friendships	Comparable to real-life friendships	Romantic relationships
Beyond the instrumental	Beyond the game	No distinction	No distinction
	Not real-life	No difference	No difference
	MMORPGs are lacking	Trust and self-disclosure	Trust and self-disclosure
		Mutuality and equality	Mutuality and equality
		Enhanced MMORPG relationships	Enhanced MMORPG relationships

4.2.1 Categories of description

The four qualitatively distinct ways of experiencing meaningful real-life relationships in MMORPGs could be identified from the data. The categories of description are as follows:

- Category 1: In-game friendships
- Category 2: Beyond the game friendships
- Category 3: Comparable to real-life friendships
- Category 4: Romantic relationships

These categories are presented separately below. The meaning and the focus of each category is given and followed by a description of the category. Additionally, excerpts from the interviews are added to support the categorization.

Category 1: In-game friendships

Meaning: Players experience meaningful real-life relationships in MMORPGs as in-game friendships.

Focus: Any interaction that goes beyond the instrumental can lead to a meaningful friendship

This category features the simplest of meaningful real-life relationships in MMORPGs experienced by the participants. Every interaction within the game has the chance to spark a conversation that lifts the relationship from a completely instrumental and likely temporary partnership into a meaningful friendship.

> Any meaningful chat that goes into the area of Real Life, and not just blunt conversation like "yeah bro, that's hard" or "good for you, you got a job". It would have to be a meaningful discussion in which either both players share

knowledge or understanding unrelated to the game, or each side helps the other to cope with real life issues. (Participant 5)

These types of friendships can be considered as meaningful as any other relationships that go beyond their original interaction. The game just happens to be the channel through which these friendships are exercised. A game is just as much a shared activity with friends as is having a friend from exercising any hobby or even from work. It could be a teammate from soccer who you do not see outside the practices or a work colleague who you do not see outside work but who you share a friendship with and discuss meaningful topics beyond the original interaction.

People whom I keep in touch in-game, but our conversations go beyond the boundaries of the game. Could be job related, IT knowledge or small talk stuff like politics. It started of course through doing instances or raids together, and usually playing roles that are more likely to interact. For example, because I was a melee dps most of my friends ingame were also melee dps (or required to interact alot with the melee dpsers). (Participant 5)

Category 2: Beyond the game friendships

Meaning: Players experience meaningful real-life relationships in MMORPGs as friendships that go beyond the game and onto other mediums of interaction.

Focus: There should be interaction outside the game as it is more about the person and the friendship than it is about the game.

This category features the level of relationships in MMORPGs most commonly considered to be the first level of meaningful relationships. These are the friendships that are in some way more than being limited to interaction within the game.

To want some sort of interaction outside of the game, because you are more interested in the person than the game. (Participant 2)

One where you also interact in a meaningful way with each other outside of the game. (Participant 3)

While these friendships did start within the game world, they became more than that and outgrew the game itself. While you might, and likely would, still be playing together that would not be the only means of communication or interaction anymore. Other means of communication often mentioned in the answers were Skype, Facebook and phone. One could compare these types of friendships to those that started somewhere specific and went beyond that. One might think of a friendship that started within school, hobby or work and went beyond that; maybe go out for coffee, call them over for a barbeque or moved to another city and just call each other over the phone to keep in touch.

Well, I've met quite a few people who I also got to know offline, so to speak, who have become friends. I've never met them in person (that's kinda hard, considering one friend lives in the UK and the other lives in another part of the country that's a three-hour-drive), but I interact with them on FB regularly and we have talks about other things than WoW. (Participant 3)

Over the last 6 years of playing wow i have made friend and built relationships (non romantic). some of them do not play wow anymore but i still keep up with them on facebook and other social outlets. (Participant 8)

It is true that these relationships lack the physical aspects of similar ones playing out in the physical world but it does not seem to make them feel any less real or meaningful.

> Definitely. I have, what I would consider, meaningful relationships with people I am unlikely to ever meet. (Participant 1)

> My purely online relationship with my best friend is the strongest friendship I have. (Participant 2)

There are also real world counterparts to these types of relationships. Most people probably have experienced friendships that began in real life and ended up being maintained over some other medium with minimal to no physical contact. These kinds of friendships could be, for example, colleagues from school or work who moved to another city or even another country but the friendship is still maintained through other means such as Skype, Facebook or phone. In fact, when asked about how you would compare MMORPG and other real-life relationships one participant said the following:

> Much the same for the most part, apart from the way they started. I know quite a few people who I almost never see IRL [In Real Life], but who I interact with in a meaningful way through FB [Facebook] for instance. (Participant 3)

Category 3: Comparable to real-life friendships

Meaning: Players experience meaningful real-life relationships in MMORPGs as friendships that are comparable to any other real-life friendships or no distinction is made between real-life and MMORPG.

Focus: There is no distinction between meaningful real-life relationships in general and those in MMORPGs.

This category features the friendships that are compared to any other good real-life friendships or in some cases no such distinction can even be made between the two. These are the friendships that go well beyond the game itself, where the friendship got its start, and stand the tests of time even long after the game is done with.

> A friendship that persists in real-life long after mmorpg's are done with. (Participant 4)

> l can't properly make a distinction between the two. Whoever is my friend in real-life could my friend online and vice versa. (Participant 6)

These are the friendships that got to this point and will last even longer because of the trust and sharing between the parties of the relationship. It also lasts and prospers because both parties are mutually, and in many ways equally, responsible for maintaining and enhancing the relationship.

> A meaningful relationship to me would be one where we'd both have genuine care and consideration for each other. To be able to give time to that relationship, and to prioritize it in certain situations. Equality is necessary - neither one believes they are more important. To be able to embrace each other's differences, and still see them in a positive light. For both parties to be equally devoted to the relationship; it shouldn't be maintained by one or the other. (Participant 2)

A meaningful relationship is supposed to be based on mutual understanding and a certain degree of trust. From then on it has the possibility to evolve into anything. If both sides participate in the creation and eventually enhancement of said relationship, equally, there is no reason why it couldn't be called "meaningful". To me, a meaningful relationship is with someone who takes the time to invest in it, who trusts me and l trust them, and who one way or the other shares one or more interests with me. (Participant 6)

This category of relationships seemed to be the first level where the parties decided to also meet in person. This, however, is not in any way a necessity for it to be comparable to any other real-life relationship.

We met a group of players in game, and befriended them. We spoke daily on skype, and formed a great friendship. I even met up with two of them in real-life which was a first for me. To this day, I still speak to them all. One of these friends is now my best friend. Even though I've never met him yet because he lives in a different country, we've remained best friends for about three years now. ... My friendship with him is the strongest friendship I've ever had. (Participant 2)

MMORPGs can be, and are, environments where you can find people with whom deep, very real and extremely meaningful relationships can be experienced. Whether the parties met face-to-face or not, these friendships are at least as real and as meaningful as any other significant friendship in physical world.

About 9-10 years ago, a friend of mine used to host Lineage 2 servers on his machines and asked me to fit the role of Game Master for his players. It's then when I've met my friend … . Since we both had similar interests and opinions about games and such, a tight friendship quickly formed and it's still going on even today. In all my years gaming online, this might be the only friend I made that is still part of my life. Everyone else faded. (Participant 4)

Good virtual friends - these are the people I would consider good friends and would treat them the same way as I would my best RL [Real Life] friends. They are people I would trust with personal matters and would gladly hear their wisdom and act upon it. I would ask these people for advice if I think they posses unique knowledge that my RL friends do not. This type of relationship is usually sparked by a conversation is nothing short then inspiring, when it doesn't only an intellectual conversation but also has emotional layer to it, usually revolve around personal matters like problems at home, health issue, sexuality, ethnicity. (Participant 5)

While more to do with the MMORPG as a channel, when asked to compare MMORPG relationships to other real-life relationships, participants mentioned MMORPGs to have, in some way, enhanced some aspect of the relationship. The game relationships could be seen to have gotten more easily to this level or gaming together helped enhance the relationship further.

I've always been shy, so I don't tend to meet people in real life. I've always gotten to know people better through internet communication rather than face to face because I find it an easier way of communicating confidently. My purely online relationship with my best friend is the strongest friendship I have. (Participant 2)

In my case the gaming friendship enhanced the real-life friendship. (Participant 4)

Hard to say really! I don't really think there is much difference, I just think its easier to form a relationship in an MMO as you already have something pretty big in common, gaming... gaming alone won't form a relationship but given the time people generally invest in gaming I'd say it certainly helps a lot being with someone who understands the ins and outs of gaming. (Participant 7)

Category 4: Romantic relationships

Meaning: Players experience meaningful real-life relationships in MMORPGs as romantic relationships.

Focus: You talk, you get to know each other and feelings that go beyond friendship may arise.

This category contains the relationships in MMORPGs that go beyond friendship and in to the world of romance. There were no new unique preliminary groups to fit only under romantic relationships as in most cases romantic relationships could be seen to be a further developed version of a comparable to real-life friendship. All the same aspects seemed to be present just further emphasized. You cannot have a romantic relationship without both parties being committed to it nor can it develop that far without self-disclosure. Trust was one thing that was specifically pointed out by a participant as being highly important.

If its a long distance relationship you need to trust your partner 110%, going day by day with trust issues when your partner could potentially live hundreds of miles away will test any relationship. (Participant 7)

Romantic relationships experienced within the MMORPG environment, or more correctly those that started within that environment, were experienced with varying levels of success and with varying depth. The participants did not explicitly raise any issues in differences between romantic relationships in MMORPGs and those in the physical world but the relationships that did begin in an MMORPG seemed to have at least one specific challenge. Romantic relationships between geographically separated people happen in the physical world as well although in MMORPGs that is the case more often than not. Some romantic relationships met an early end due to the difficulties caused by geographic separation.

I started speaking to someone who was in my guild (in WoW) and became more interested in him every day. In the end, we started speaking on skype and eventually started online dating. That carried on for about a year until we decided to end it because of the distance and how difficult it would be to meet.

Thankfully due to all of these relationships/interactions, I gained a lot more confidence with speaking to people in game. That's how I met ..., and was confident enough to get to know him more. We'd speak every night and most days, and after a couple of months, we started dating. My relationship with ... was very important to me and I completely fell in love with him. We decided to meet up, and enjoyed our time in real-life more than in game. We enjoyed playing World of Warcraft together, but it caused issues due to the fact that it can be very competitive and stressful.

> My relationship with him had turned from an online relationship to a very important real-life relationship. I was very serious about it, and was thinking of a future with him. Due to the fact that his life was very different from mine and how difficult it was to keep visiting each other, the relationship deteriorated until we broke up.
>
> … Regarding all of these relationships, World of Warcraft has a lot to do with them. If I hadn't started playing WoW, I'd never have met all of these people who have had such a huge effect on my life. (Participant 2)

Although these relationships did not last the effect they had on the participant's life was considered to be ultimately positive. While distance can be a problem, not all romantic MMORPG relationships occur only across long distances.

> I started playing World of Warcraft because of my interest in my school friend, … . Because of the game we were able to bond more than we did in real-life, which lead to us dating. … After two years of being with ..., we sadly broke up. The game had a slight effect on the relationship due to the fact that we spent all the time in real-life together and also in game, so we had no time to ourselves. We also had the same friends, which made it more difficult. (Participant 2)

Not all romantic relationships work out long-term even in the fantasy realm of online gaming. This, however, is hardly a feature unique to relationships that begin in MMORPGs. As is the case with relationships in the physical world, some come to an early end while some end up changing our lives in the most significant ways. Same applies to MMORPGs where some of the participants had met their significant other and conquered the difficulties in building a life together.

> My most precious relationship that started in an MMORPG dates back to 2006. Back before any of the others... which is one of the reasons why it always was the most special. He was my first real contact with the outside of my own country and that maybe helped create a unique bond. Story starts on the 17th of May 2006 in a game called MU Online. It was big back then and it had a considerable amount of players. A friend of my brother's, a few weeks prior to meeting my new friend, decided to open his own MU server. It never had more than a few players online though. However, it was enough for me to meet a very special kid (back then :p). In time he turned into my friend and then my best friend, by far. Almost a year ago we managed to meet and we fell in love instantly.. it was like the feelings have been there all along, waiting for the chance to happen. Now he's my boyfriend of almost 7 months and hopefully soon even more than that. (Participant 6)
>
> Well, about 10-11 years ago I was playing an MMO called Dark Age of Camelot, I met my wife after I joined her guild (Bounty Hunters). We talked a lot at first and over time we got closer and closer until one day we admitted our feelings to one another, at first it seemed problematic as she lived in Belgium and I lived in the UK, she offered to come and visit me however and about 3 months later we met up in real life.. from this point on our relationship just grew in strength with every minute we with each other, ultimately she moved to the UK eventually as we both agreed it would be easier for her to move to the UK than it would for me to move to Belgium due to the language barrier (she spoke fluent English and I didn't speak a word of Dutch)

> I think our relationship was so successful because we had similar interests, gaming played a huge role in our relationship, were it not for online gaming we'd never have met, we'd never have been married and we wouldn't have 2 wonderful kids. (Participant 7)

Romantic relationships of different depths can be experienced within MMORPG environments. They have their ups and downs as do any romantic relationships and sometimes they work out, sometimes they do not. The romantic relationships that begin in MMORPGs have the potential to be as real and as meaningful as any other more traditional ones. After all, you could not call a relationship that leads to marriage and the start of a new family any less real or meaningful just because the couple happened to meet in a virtual environment.

As was briefly discussed in the subchapter 4.2, these four categories of description have a hierarchical relationship, with the next one being a further developed version of the current. For example, having a friend in-game who you can talk to, spend time with and maybe at some point you decide you want to keep in touch outside the game as well so you become friends that go beyond the game. If the friendship is maintained and enhanced further, it has the potential to eventually become as important and meaningful as any other significant real-life friendship. Sometimes the relationships can even evolve past friendships into romantic relationships. This is supported by the excerpts regarding successful romantic relationships as both participants recounted the development of their relationships. From meeting within the game to talking, getting to know each other and becoming friends first, over time getting closer and closer as friends before getting to the point when the feelings surpassed those of friendship and the relationship became romantic.

4.3 How do people perceive the effect of MMORPGs as a channel for relationships?

For the second research question, "How do people perceive the effect of MMORPGs as a channel for relationships", the preliminary groups from the last four questions of the interview were put together, compared and analysed further. The original groups can be seen in Table 6.

Table 6. Preliminary groups from the last four interview questions.

Just another meeting ground	No difference	Social media is bad	MMORPGs are not to blame
MMORPGs as enhancers	MMORPGs as enhancers	Social media is more personal	MMORPGs can be harmful if you let them.
MMORPGs as a problem	Real world trumps MMORPGs		

Four distinct categories showing the effects of MMORPGs as a channel for relationships could be identified in the data, as can be seen in Table 7. The first category was composed of the perceptions according to which MMORPGs have a positive effect. MMORPGs are a channel through which it is easier to meet people, to talk to people

and to get to know Them. The second category contains the neutral responses; MMORPGs were seen as just another place to meet new people and form relationships. Therefore, they were just another means to an end. In the third category, while not directly negative, the point of view was that MMORPGs as a channel cannot offer everything the physical world can, so the MMORPGs were not considered as real. In the fourth category, however, MMORPGs' effect could also be seen as potentially negative. The negative effects seemed to be mostly related to the misuse of the game so MMORPGs could be seen as potentially harmful to relationships.

While the answers to the seventh interview question, comparing MMORPGs to the social media, brought forth many interesting thoughts, they were mostly about social media itself. Due to this, both groups related to that question were quite specifically about social media and its effects and did not directly fit into any category. Both of these two groups were, therefore, omitted from the new table. The new categories and their relation to the preliminary groups can be seen below in Table 7.

Table 7. Categories of perceptions regarding MMORPGs as a channel

MMORPGs have a positive effect	Just another meeting ground	MMORPGs not as real	MMORPGs can be harmful
MMORPGs as enhancers (Q5)	Just another meeting ground	Real world trumps MMORPGs	MMORPGs as a problem
MMORPGs as enhancers (Q6)	No difference		MMORPGs can be harmful if you let them
	MMORPGs are not to blame		

4.3.1 Categories of description

Four qualitatively distinct ways of perceiving the effect of MMORPGs as the channel for relationships could be identified from the data. The categories of description are listed below.

- Category 1: MMORPGs have a positive effect
- Category 2: MMORPGs are just another meeting ground
- Category 3: MMORPGs not as real
- Category 4: MMORPGs can be harmful

These categories are presented separately below. The meaning and the focus of each category is given, followed by a description of the category. Additionally, excerpts from the interviews are added to support the categorization.

Category 1: MMORPGs have a positive effect

Meaning: Players perceive MMORPGs as a channel to have a positive effect on relationships.

Focus: Relationships are easier in MMORPGs.

This category includes the perceptions according to which MMORPGs have a positive effect. Many participants mentioned how relationships were somehow easier in the MMORPG environment. It was easier to meet people, easier to get to know them as you already have a shared interest and something to do together.

> I find it much easier to meet people on MMORPGs rather than real-life. For instance, I'd rather talk to random people in game, than in real-life. For me it's much easier to get to know the person online than talking face to face, because of my lack of confidence. To be able to play a game with my friends etc. is a shared interest and gives us something to talk about and encourages us to spend time with each other. (Participant 2)

> If it hadn't been for the game we probably would have never met..same with all the others. I am an avid fan and supporter of the online and the game world when it comes to finding people you can start relationships with.. when looking for friends or whatever else, basically. It's easier to find people with similar interests and strike a conversation out of nothing that can lead to god knows what ... l would know:) (Participant 6)

One of the participants was leaning mainly towards the other category of MMORPGs as just a means to an end but also pointed out that MMORPGs might have a bit of an edge with the one existing shared interest.

> I even think that they have a bigger chance of succeeding, because you know you already share one thing: the game. (Participant 3)

Another participant was even promoting MMORPGs as an environment where love blossoms and life-altering romantic relationships are abundant.

> I think they're great, I really do. I'd recommend MMO's in a heartbeat to anyone out there looking for love, I've formed a relationship myself within an MMO, it grew into marriage and ultimately a family, I've seen numerous other relationships blossom over the years in MMO's as well, my friend also met his wife in an MMO - now married with a son of his own. (Participant 7)

Category 2: MMORPGs are just another meeting ground

Meaning: Players perceive MMORPGs as a channel to be just another meeting ground.

Focus: MMORPGs are just means to an end.

This category pertains to those perceptions of MMORPGs as a channel that were largely neutral. When asked what they thought of MMORPGs as a channel for relationships, a number of participants had a short, to-the-point answers on how it was basically just the same as any other medium.

> I's just a place where people meet - same as any other venue, club or medium. (Participant 1)

> I think as much of them as any other means of formation, maintenance and even enhancement of relationships. It's a means to an end and I think that relationships that start in any MMORPG have the option to become as meaningful as bumping into someone in a bar and striking up a conversation. (Participant 3)

MMORPGs can therefore be seen as just another meeting ground. They are a means to an end, same as any other medium, venue or channel when it comes to relationships.

Category 3: MMORPGs not as real

Meaning: Players perceive MMORPGs as a channel as lacking opposed to the physical world.

Focus: Meeting in MMORPGs is just not the same as meeting in the physical world.

This category was built upon the view that MMORPGs as a channel did not quite match up to the physical world. One way or the other physical world offers something that MMORPGs cannot. In the physical world what you see is what you get, if you meet in the game you cannot know what the other is like until you meet in person. Therefore, if you only know the person online, you lack the complete picture.

> An MMO can be another form of initiation to starting a relationship but i do not feel it is the same as meeting the person in real life. if you see meet them in person, you can watch mannerisms and be turned on or off. maybe they chew with their mouth open. maybe they smoke(can be a turn on or off). maybe their disgusting and dont shower. maybe their are extremely well groomed. you wont know that for sure unless you meet them in person, which is the difference i think. (Participant 8)

Other lacking part was a real connection. Relationships that begin within the game are usually first built upon the shared activity of gaming. As such they have a strong instrumental component, especially in the beginning, and if the relationship fails to develop by the time the instrumental part is over there is a high chance the relationship ends with it.

> From my experience in the past years with friendships online, I can safely say that they last only untill they serve their purpose. Some real-life relationships are like that, but online friendships tend to have this as a built in feature. (Participant 4)

In the initial interview a participant mentioned potential romantic interest that had not, so far, gone further than the game and when probed further regarding MMORPG as a medium for romantic relationships, another perspective was found. When asked about the chances of success of romantic relationships that begin in MMORPGs, the possibility of relationships lacking a real basis was uncovered.

> The Game is an escape for many people, as well as an enjoyable hobby. For some it is actually a sanctuary from real life. This means bonds people form are sometimes stronger than those in real life but there are blurred lines between character, online persona and real life persona. Most people aren't what they appear to be - which is the reason they play the game. Any relationship is unlikely as both parties met in a fantasy world. that's a poor basis for a strong real life relationship ! It is, however, no worse than online dating in my experience ! (Participant 1)

While the effect of the games as a channel was not exactly perceived as negative, they cannot compete toe-to-toe with the physical world.

Category 4: MMORPGs can be harmful

Meaning: Players perceive MMORPGs as a channel to have a potential of becoming harmful to relationships.

Focus: MMORPGs can be harmful to relationships if you let them.

This category represents the perceptions acknowledging that MMORPGs have a potential to become harmful to relationships if you let them. One of the points was that MMORPGs are, by design, addictive and can therefore cause you to neglect your relationships.

> Depends from person to person. MMORPGs are addictive. It's the whole point of the genre to get you online 10-20 hours / day just to be part of "something". In reality it's a drug with a different label. The secret is to keep things balanced. I used to work with a guy that got married and started a family. Things ware looking great for him. New house, new promotion at work,the whole package. The second he got talked into playing MMORPGs with the colleagues at work he started to lose himself into it. By the time he woke up it was too late as his life went down losing everything in the process. My point is : games are fun but with moderation. Knowing when to stop or quit is a no brainer. (Participant 4)

On one hand, MMORPGs can cause you to spend more time within the game than participating in maintaining those relationships.

> They can be harmful to a RL relationship that someone already has if they don't take into account that the significant other would like to spend time with them at times as well. (Participant 3)

> Depends on the couple, if your partner thinks you spend too much time gaming, then sure, it can absolutely be harmful to a relationship.. if your partner is a like minded gamer or simply doesn't mind you gaming however I see no problem or harm arising from it. (Participant 7)

On the other hand, gaming together might also cause you to spend too much time together and cause stress and tension in the relationship that way.

> They can be, if you allow the game to control your relationship with that person. As with anything that causes you to spend a lot of time with a person, it can lead to tension and relationship stress. Like anything else, if you can find the balance between them both, it can be something positive. (Participant 2)

MMORPGs as a channel, therefore, have the potential to become harmful upon their misuse. Many, if not all, participants pointed out that there has to be balance. Games and gaming in themselves are not inherently harmful but if you let them take over everything then they have all the potential to become highly destructive, as was pointed out by one of the participants earlier.

With all the categories presented, we can conclude that the effects of MMORPGs as the channel for relationships vary from one end of the spectrum to the other. The effects could be seen to be anything from highly positive, to neutral, to potentially highly negative.

5.   Discussion

This study set out to answer two questions: How do people experience meaningful real-life relationships in MMORPGs? And how do people perceive the effect of MMORPGs as a channel for relationships? As a result of a phenomenographic study, four qualitatively distinct categories were identified in the data for both questions.

When it comes to the first research question, participants experienced meaningful real-life relationships in MMORPGs on four different levels: in-game friendships, beyond the game friendships, comparable to real-life friendships and romantic relationships. At first, in the early stages of the relationship it could manifest itself as an in-game friendship. In these types of friendships the only communication medium is the game but the topics discussed are meaningful and cross over from the game to real-life issues. From there the relationship has the potential to get deeper and turn into a friendship that goes beyond the game. At this stage the relationship is likely to get more personal as it moves to other means of communication and interaction outside the game, such as Skype and/or Facebook. This stage of the friendships could be compared to common real-life friendships with people you rarely or never get to see in real-life but which are maintained through some online channel, often social media. From there some relationships have the potential to develop into highly meaningful friendships that are comparable to any significant friendships in the physical world. By this stage there is a significant amount of mutual trust between the parties of the relationship and you can feel safe in sharing any and all personal issues with each other. In most cases, at this stage there are no distinctions between online or real-life friends, they are considered one and the same even if you had never met in person. Purely online friendships can be as, or even more, meaningful and real than any physical world friendship. These friendships could be compared to any real-life best friends who you can count on to have your back when the times get rough. In some cases there is still one more level the relationship can evolve into, crossing beyond friendship and into the world of romance. Romantic relationships are not unique to the physical world and they can, and do, spark in MMOPRG environments as well. These romantic relationships, despite beginning in a virtual world, have the potential to go just as far as any more traditional relationship that began in the physical world. These findings are in line with what we have seen in previous research. MMORPGs are a social arena in which you can meet new people and form relationships. These relationships generally start from doing something instrumental together, start talking and eventually form a friendship within the game. (Herodotou, 2010.) Williams, et al., (2006) call this phenomenon "generating bridging social capital". Bridging social capital has the chance to gradually develop into bonding social capital, meaning deeper relationships. Additionally, Yee also spoke of different depths of relationships occurring in MMOPRGs in his numerous articles on the matter as was presented in the prior research. Yee (2006d) also covers the stages of relationship development in his article The "Impossible" Romance, also presented earlier in this thesis. These stages of relationship development can also be seen in some of the experiences which the participants shared for this study especially in the excerpts regarding successful romantic relationships. This is further support for the hierarchical relationship between the categories, as the way these relationships are said to be formed is in line with how the categories progress. One difference could be seen in the order of the stages, however. Yee (2006d) argues that the moment of truth comes before the cascade of communication mediums but what could be seen from this study speaks of

the cascade starting already in the early stages of the friendship. A high number of participants considered an MMORPG relationship to become meaningful only after it breaks out of the boundaries of the game, meaning into other medium of communication and/or interaction. These mediums could be anything from VoIP (Voice Over IP), to messaging software such as Skype, to social media such as Facebook or even phone. All this points out to the communication mediums moving beyond the game already in the early stages of the friendship. This could be due to the emergence of social media making people more lax in sharing personal information earlier. Additionally, although outside the scope of results of this study, it was also interesting to see participants mention parties and guilds as ways of initiation for their relationships. This is in line with the prior research pointing out groups and guilds as the primary mechanisms for socialization. (Jakobsson & Taylor, 2003).

As for the second research question, four distinct ways to perceive the effects of MMORPGs as the channel for relationships could be identified in the data. The categories spanned from one end of the spectrum to the other, from positive to negative. The four categories of description found in this study were: MMORPGs have a positive effect, MMORPGs are just another meeting ground, MMORPGs not as real and MMORPGs can be harmful. The effect could be seen to be highly positive where the game helped make easier the different stages of the relationships. The game made it easier to meet new people from all walks of life and it also made it easier to start talking and get to know each other. Playing the game together also helped maintain the relationship as it gave an activity to perform together and encouraged spending time with each other. The effects could also be considered largely neutral in two different ways. The first neutral view was that MMORPGs are just another place to meet new people. While this was a rather neutral take, just another means to an end, this kind of comparison of MMORPGs with any other real-life venue is quite the positive development for online gaming. In the not-so-distant past online relationships of any kind were frowned upon. A slightly more negative take on MMORPGs considered that they lack something when compared to the physical world as a channel for relationships. The limitations of MMORPGs as a channel might cause relationships in that medium to feel less real. While MMORPGs did not have a negative effect on relationships, they were not necessarily enough, as the only channel, to form strong meaningful relationships. The effects of MMORPGs could also be perceived to be potentially harmful to relationships. In this line of thought, addiction was mentioned multiple times. MMORPGs themselves were not inherently harmful but they had the potential to become harmful if misused. For example, should one party of the relationship spend too much time within the game and neglect participating in maintaining relationships. All of these perceptions are visible in the prior reserach as well. Cole and Griffiths (2007) talk about the potential harm MMORPGs can pose to relationships. They also mention addiction as a threat same as the participants in this study. Multiple studies speak for the enhancing effect of MMORPGs, especially in the formative stages of the relationships. Walther (1996) discusses the hyperpersonal effect of computer-mediated communication already in his paper from 1996 and more recently Yee (2006c), among others, speaks for MMORPGs and the elements which enhance relationship formation. The neutral takes have also been present in previous studies. Williams, et al. (2006) speak about the guilds in MMORPGs as meeting grounds just as you would of any physical world's third places. The skeptical approach towards MMORPGs as a channel is not new either. For example, Yee (2006d) cites players claiming the anonymity inherent to the environment allows you to be whoever you want and, therefore, you cannot truly know people through this channel only. A study by Utz (2000) also notes skepticism towards the capability of online environments to form meaningful friendships and argues that: "The more skeptical about CMC's friendly capacities a person is, the less s/he develops friendships." (Utz, 2000) Additionally, in

the beginning of a relationship in a game setting, the connection is mainly revolving around common game goals and is thus easily disrupted (Herodotou, 2010). If the relationship fails, for one reason or the other, to develop meaningful emotional bonds by the time the instrumental partnership is over the friendship will not get the chance to become meaningful and will fade.

Participants recounted experiences revolving mainly around the formation of relationships in MMORPGs. In retrospect, it would have been a good idea to ask about existing real-life relationships being exercised in MMORPGs as well. Another unfortunate factor was the low number of respondents, I would have liked to have more data to analyze. Additionally, the lack of negative experiences limited the perspective somewhat. Discussion sparked on some of the forums from which I gathered participants and a number of those posts seemed to indicate, at the very least, highly skeptical attitudes towards the possibility of meaningful real-life relationships in MMORPGs. Some even seemed to have had negative experiences with relationships in MMORPGs but unfortunately none of the ones who spoke out took the time to take the interview.

6.   Conclusion

In the beginning of this study I posed two questions: "How do people experience meaningful real-life relationships in MMORPGs?" and "How do people perceive the effect of MMORPGs as a channel for relationships?". As the result of a phenomenographic research I uncovered four categories of description as an answer to each question. Participants experienced meaningful real-life relationships in MMORPGs on four distinct levels: in-game friendships, beyond the game friendships, comparable to real-life friendships and romantic relationships. The effects of MMORPGs as a channel for relationships were perceived in four distinct ways across the spectrum from positive to negative. The four categories of description found in this study were: MMORPGs have a positive effect, MMORPGs are just another meeting ground, MMORPGs not as real and MMORPGs can be harmful.

While this study and the paper do not offer any groundbreaking implications, they do contribute to the existing body of knowledge. This is done by compiling prior research through a small literature review and offering a fresh phenomenographic take on how players experience meaningful real-life relationships in MMORPGs and also how they perceive the effects of the MMORPGs themselves as the channel for said relationships. The main contribution of this thesis is in the categorization of meaningful relationships in MMORPGs and the perceived effects of MMORPGs for relationships. While existing literature provides bits and pieces here and there, the studied prior research did not offer clear categories. The implications of this study for academia also lie in the categories. This new kind of categorization may offer researchers a new window, a fresh approach, into the topic. In practice, MMORPG development already takes into account the social aspects and works towards enabling and encouraging the formation of social relationships, so, in a sense, this study can be considered as a validation of their efforts.

This study did not aim to provide generalizable results of any and all ways of experiencing meaningful real-life relationships in MMORPGs and/or perceptions of the effects of MMORPGs as the channel but the low number of participants limited the expansiveness of the study. Even with only eight participants the data provided a great wealth of information and I would have liked to have more data to analyze. Additionally the lack of participants with negative experiences limited the perspective to just positive ways of experiencing meaningful real-life relationships in MMORPGs. While not using the demographic information of the participants might be considered a limitation, phenomenographic study concentrates on the collective instead of the individual experience. As such demographic information is more of an interesting opportunity for further research. The relatively narrow literature review could also be considered a limitation. The literature review was by no means a systematic literature review of everything to do with this topic but rather a small scale exploration into previous research regarding the topic at hand in order to better be able to analyse the collected data.

Some interesting topics for future research were uncovered during this study. As the participants in this study concentrated mainly on relationships that started in MMORPGs, it would be interesting to study further how relationships that begin in real life and then move to be maintained within the virtual realm are experienced. It would be interesting to see how such relationships that started from the physical and moved to the virtual compare against relationships that are purely virtual or potentially turn from

virtual to physical at some point. Another interesting topic would be to see what the effect of the "player type" is to how players experience meaningful real-life relationships within these environments. In previous existing research we have seen that different types of players experience sociality differently in these environments, what effect does that have on the way meaningful relationships are experienced? Other intriguing questions for further research could be whether factors such as age, culture or how much does one play have an effect on how they experience relationships in these virtual environments or not? Additionally, the levels of relationships could benefit from a quantitative approach as well. How common are different levels of relationships? Do most players exercise multiple types of relationships simultaneously with different people?

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