HYBRID INTERACTIVE RHETORICAL ENGAGEMENTS IN MASSIVELY MULTIPLAYER ONLINE ROLE-PLAYING GAMES (MMORPGs): EXAMINING THE ROLE OF RHETORS AND AUDIENCES IN GENERATIVE RHETORICAL DISCOURSES

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to Taiwan, and the diligent people who live in this island country.

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by

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DISSERTATION

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Overview of Computer and Video Game Applications

A strong economic rationale supports the growing importance of computers and video games in society, warranting growing intellectual interests in this emerging topic. The virtual GNP of the *Norrath* in *EverQuest* is analogous to the world's 77th richest economy (Krotoski qtd. in Kent). The apparent result of such economic and scholarly attention is also due to an exponential growth in the number of gamers in the past few years. Global revenues of digital games were estimated to reach about $20 billion (Raessens and Goldstein). Recent data in "2007 U.S. Video Game and PC Game Sales…," provided by The NPD Group, a leading global provider of retail and consumer marketing information, also found U.S. sales of computer and video games hardware, software, and accessories generated revenues of about $18 billion, a 43 percent increase from $12.5 billion in 2006. According to the same report, in 2007, sales of all computer and video game categories experienced double digit percentage growth from 2006 to 2007: video game console software ($6.6 billion and 153.9 million units sold), PC games ($18.8 billion), console hardware ($5.12 billion in 2007), portable software ($ 2 billion and 77.5 million units sold) and total videogame software ($9.5 billion) (The NPD Group, Inc.).

The latest data released by the Entertainment Software Association in its report, *Video Games in the 21st Century: The 2010 Report*, states computer and video game companies added $4.9 billion to the U.S. Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The total revenues of sales grew from $7.0 billion in 2005 to $10.5 billion in 2009. The industry contributed disproportionally to the overall U.S. economy and GDP in spite of recent economic recession (Entertainment Software Association). Sales of computer and video game units grew from 226.3 million in 2005 to over 273 million units in 2009 (Entertainment Software Association; Siwek). Between 2005 and 2006, the entertainment software industry contributed to the real national GDP growth and exceeded its share of GDP by four times (Entertainment Software

Association). The computer and video game software industry also experienced rapid growth of 10.6% between 2005 and 2009 when the overall U.S. economy grew only about 1.4% during the same period. On the basis of a Pricewaterhouse-Cooper's report, the Entertainment Software Association indicates the trend will continue and global sales of entertainment software are likely to reach $48.8 billion by the year of 2011 (Entertainment Software Association).

Computer and video games impact many other facets of our society and are becoming a popular recreational pastime for many Americans (Bryce and Rutter; Kafai), covering a range of the demographic spectrum (Raessens and Goldstein; The NPD Group, Inc.; Yang, Roskos-Ewoldsen, Dinu, and Arpan). As a result, new online behaviors emerge among gamers. Many gamers practice *grinding* to play basic and entry level avatars to turn them into powerful and skillful avatars for virtual sale later on (Kent). The exchanges of currencies through the transactions of virtual goods and services generate new terms such as "ludocapitalism" and "gold farming" that attest the increasing influence of the virtual world (Dyer-Witherford and de Peuter). In 2004, eMarketer's data report 108 million videogame players and the number is likely to grow to 126 million by 2008 (qtd. in Yang, Roskos-Ewoldsen, Dinu, and Arpan 143). According to *Expanding the Games Market* by The NPD Group, Inc., 63 percent of the U.S. population plays video games in the forms of console and portable games, PC games, or by cell phones or i-Pod devices. Almost 30% of its 5,039 online survey panelists in the study said they spent more time playing games this year than last year, while 40% of them said they spent equal amount of time (The NPD Group, Inc.). Popular MMORPGs are played at a global scale. For example, *World of Warcraft* attracts players around the world with two million subscribers in Europe, two and half million subscribers in North America, and five and half million subscribers in Asia (Blizzard Entertainment, Inc.; Kent).

Researchers also found similar widespread impacts among children (The NPD Group, Inc., "Amount of Time Kids Spend Playing Video Games is On the Rise"). About one third of children (from

toddlers to tweens to teens) spent more time playing video games than the previous year (The NPD Group, Inc.). The NPD Group's report, *Kids and Gaming*, also found children between ages 2 and 17 spent 39% of the time on online games (as opposed to offline games). Another report by C&R Research also found over 50% of teens aged 9-13 spent time playing videogames alone or with others online (Lane). The increasing usage of computer and video games for entertainment and pleasure among all demographic segments supports the importance of understanding various phenomena related to computer and video games, gaming behavior, and impacts of playing computer and video games.

In order to better understand the popularity of computer and video games, it is revealing to examine longitudinal technological developments influencing the rapid diffusion of this innovation in our society. Historically, one of the most successful games ever developed was created by a Russian mathematician, named Alexey Pazhitnov (Consalvo). The game is called *Tetris*. In 1958, William Higinbotham developed another popular game, called *Tennis for Two* (Kline et al. qtd. in Consalvo 124). The first computer game was developed in 1962 by hackers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The game, *Spacewar*, ran on the world's first minicomputer, DEC PDP-1 (Laurel). The first commercial computer game, *Computer Space*, was developed in 1971 (Wolf and Perron), and *The Magnavox Odyssey* (1972) and *PONG* (1972) represent the first home game systems and commercial hits, respectively. Although, historically, videogame technologies were developed from an academic setting, the technologies have developed so rapidly that they became a phenomenon essential to contemporary human life. The varieties of these early games and the evolution since that time also have transformed themselves to enable gamers to manipulate their digital world.

Since their inception over several decades ago, computer and video games employed various platforms, ranging from console games, arcade games, handheld portable devices, and computer games (Consalvo). Console games are the most profitable segment in the industry and are often sold under the brand names such as Microsoft's Xbox, Sony PlayStation 2, Nintendo's GameCube and Wii (Consalvo).

Rapid advances in networking technologies such as high-speed broadband wired or wireless Internet further transformed the traditional single machine, stand-alone video game into a colossal cyberspace playground that enables gamers to take part in the interactive and synchronous gaming experience from any phone with Internet connectivity (Guins). With the convenience of a global Internet linking all gamers, some of these console gaming devices connect to high-speed and broadband networks to enhance gamer experience (Ye and Cheng).

The subsequent development of the computer and video games as an industry has been influenced not only by a global broadband infrastructure (such as the Internet), but also by fast-evolving gaming platforms which dictate how and where players interact with the games. On the one hand, the advances in broadband infrastructure help enhance the further diffusion of computer and video game players to join the gaming community. On the other hand, the development of computer and video game platforms expands the experience of gamers. Historically, these include personal computer, console, CD-ROM, Internet, and mobile devices. Some of the primary and most recent platforms include HDTV, and mobile gaming devices. Because computer and video gamers continue to demand better and more involved gameplay experiences through enhanced audio and visual stimuli, this trend has led to increased purchase of HDTVs. In 2007, an estimated sale of $73 million in HDTV is due to the popularity of the XBox 360 game console (Entertainment Software Association). The excellent sound and video qualities of HDTV enable gamers to maximize their gameplay experiences. Recent developments in mobile technologies, services, and gaming applications further enable gamers to access computer and video games anywhere and anytime they prefer without the constraints of physically-connected networks.

The following section provides an overview of computer and video game research to help contextualize the background of this dissertation project. I provide an extensive review of literature on computer and video game studies. I also offer an overview of Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) because they are the focus of the present study.

1.2 OVERVIEW OF COMPUTER AND VIDEO GAME RESEARCH

Exponential developments of the digital game industry in recent years have generated enthusiasm among scholars from diverse disciplines to explore this phenomenon (Raessens and Goldstein; Wolf and Perron). Research topics related to rhetoric and writing studies include interactive narratives (Crogan; Frasca; Juul; Mul; Neitzel), identity (Filiciak; Turkle) and learning (Gee; Prensky). However, communication scholars have examined unanticipated media effects of digital gameplay; topics include violent and aggressive behaviors among players (Baldaro, Tuozzi, Codispotic, and Montebarocci; Chambers and Ascione), addiction to digital games (Chuang), gendered gameplay behavior (Hussain and Griffiths), and adoption of new game technologies (Chang, Lee and Kim). Wolf and Perron claim that digital games have become "the hottest and most volatile field of study within new media theory" (1).

Although a systematic study of computer and video game research can only be traced back to a few decades ago, confusion and instability of terms are often attributed to rapid technological changes associated with the delivery of gameplay contents and experience. The confusion is caused by the fact that this domain of study is often approached by multi-disciplinary scholars more comfortable with different terms that touch on various aspects of computer and video game research. For one instance, the terminology for digital games is sometimes used interchangeably with "electronic games," "videogames," or "computer games" (Raessens and Goldstein). As Raessens and Goldstein explain:

> 'Electronic games' and 'digital games' are generic terms that include arcade games (stand-alone games played in public locations or arcades), video games played on a dedicated console connected to a TV set or other display, and computer games, those played with a personal computer either off-line or online. (xii)

Furthermore, depending on the aspects of computer and video game researchers, different terms are employed in their studies. For example, Raessens' and Goldstein's conceptualization of games mainly

focuses on the platform and connectivity where gamers can play. The terms "video games" and "computer games" are used interchangeably by many books that provide platform-specific definitions to the entire field of computer games (Kerr). Meanwhile other game scholars (Haddon; Herz; Poole; Wolf) provide more specific distinction about what constitutes games (on arcade machines), video games (on personal computer and console), interactive games (two-way interactivity between game and gamers), or digital games (the digitalization process in which games are designed), On the other hand, Kerr proposes a comprehensive term, digital games, "to refer to the entire field and to embrace arcade, computer, console and mobile games in all their diversity" (3). Kerr captures what "digital game" can mean that "a digital game could refer to a game played on arcade, cabinets, on PC or MAC, on consoles like the Playstation 2, the Game Cube, and the Xbox, on mobile devices like mobile phones or over the internet" (4). Similarly, Consalvo and Dutton also employ the term, digital games, to refer to arcade and handheld games, computer games, console video games, and other gaming devices. In the sections below, I follow these scholars' conceptualization of digital games and use "digital games" when referring to any types of games delivered through online or offline and by a variety of gaming devices from arcades, consoles, personal computer, to mobile devices (Consalvo and Dutton; Kerr).

Raessens' and Goldstein's edited book, *Handbook of Computer Game Studies*, best captures what is considered to be the most important topics in digital game research. This book divides the research of computer games into five areas: design, aesthetic, reception, cultural, and social issues. Under each area, Raessens and Goldstein collect articles that can best study the domain of digital game study: 1) game design (Raynauld; Prensky; Salen and Zimmerman); 2) reception of gamers (Calvert; Holmes and Pellegrini; Gunter; Griffiths); 3) games as a cultural phenomenon (Bryce and Rutter; Edwards; Klabbers; Richard and Zaremba; Turkle); and 4) games as a social phenomenon (Goldstein; Griffiths and Davies; Schleiner; Rushkoff). Despite the comprehensive coverage of Raessens' and Goldstein's book, the study of digital games from a rhetorical theoretical perspective is missing.

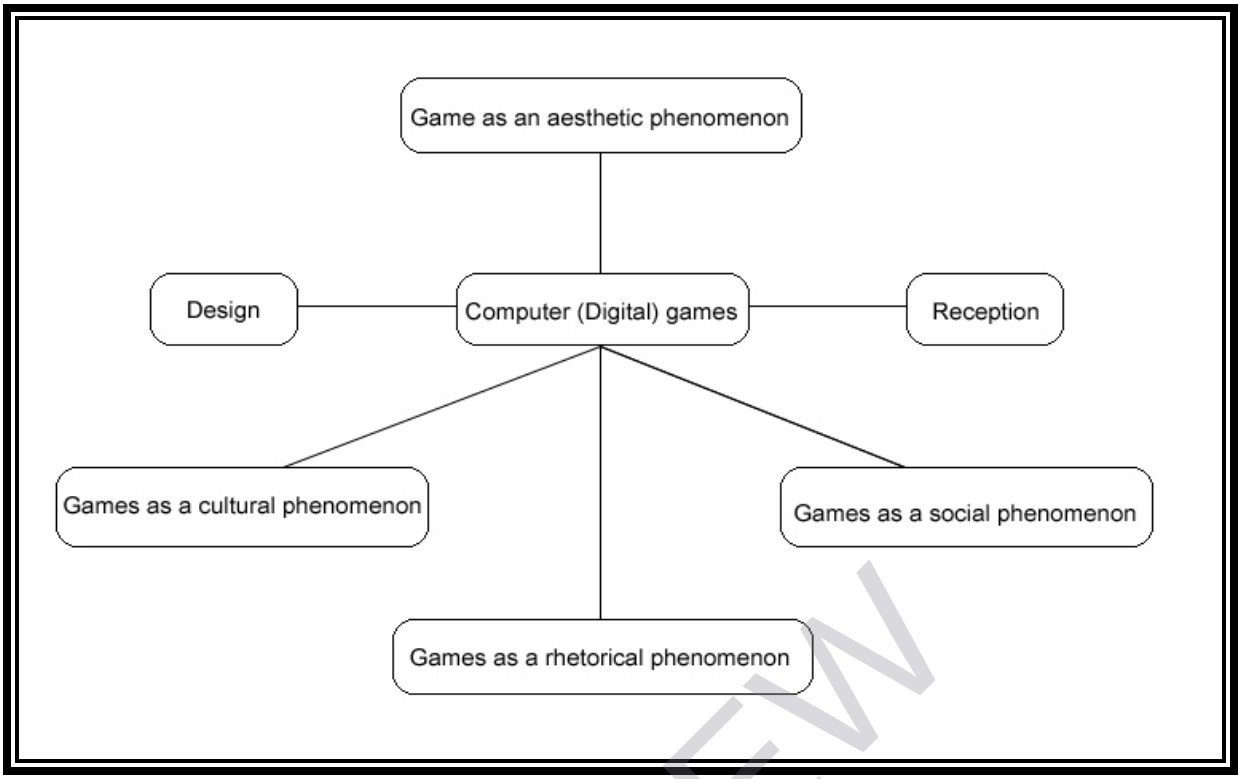

Figure 1.1: Dimensions of Digital Game Studies. (modified from Raessens, Joost, and Jeffrey Goldstein. "Introduction." *Handbook of Computer Game Studies*. Eds. Joost Raessens and Jeffrey Goldstein. Cambridge, M.A.: The MIT Press, 2005. xi-xvii.)

Therefore, I propose the addition of computer games as a rhetorical phenomenon as shown in the revised figure above (Figure 1.1) to address the critical role of rhetorical theories to better study games as an emerging research domain. I argue, even though other dimensions proposed by Raessens and Goldstein address these important aspects of computer games, computer games should be conceptualized as a rhetorical phenomenon to address the relationships among rhetoric, aesthetic, persuasion (reception), interface design, and social change agents. Playing digital games is a rhetorical act that involves the manipulations of symbols to persuade participants during gameplay. Therefore, the study of digital games as rhetorical acts helps understand the intensive rhetorical manipulations during gameplay.

As Bizzell and Herzberg claim that "the study of rhetoric generated not only an elaborate system for investigating language practices but also a set of far-reaching theoretical questions about the relationship of language to knowledge" (2). If digital games are not treated as a rhetorical phenomenon, it is less likely for game scholars to understand the persuasive practices and expressions that computer games generate. Similar to traditional and classical rhetoric that seeks to delight, entertain, educate, and persuade, the study of digital games and gameplay experiences will enable game scholars to uncover what creates positive gamer experience, which can be used to design better game systems, to understand the aesthetic experience that gamers feel, and to examine the social and cultural consequences associated with digital games and gameplay.

Modified from Raessens' and Goldstein's framework, Figure 1.1 includes a new component indicating game studies should examine the rhetorical aspects of digital games. Aesthetic, cultural, social phenomena, design, and reception have long been the important areas in rhetorical study. In "The Rhetorician as an Agent of Social Change," Ellen Cushman discusses the social aspects of rhetoric in motivating civic participation in communities. Rhetorical scholars (e.g., Barry Brummett and Michael Leff) examine how rhetoric generates knowledge and how knowledge is created. The long-standing tradition of studying rhetoric as how to create and deliver persuasive discourses has been thoroughly studied by contemporary rhetorical scholars (e.g., Ann E. Berthoff; Kenneth Burke; Karen LeFevre). In spite of overlapping topics of interest, I reason, without conceptualizing rhetoric as an important component of contemporary game studies, game scholars are less likely to unveil the richness of computer games as a field of rigorous academic study. Furthermore, emphasizing the study of digital games as a rhetorical phenomenon is critical to establish a clear domain of this emerging field of study.

Past studies of digital games have often centered on the classification and explanation of game genres (Consalvo and Dutton; Frasca; Herz; Kafai; Kerr; Poole; Subrahmanyam and Greenfield). However, normative and descriptive approaches have their limitations. For example, Kerr categorizes

games by examining what characters, plots, and actions are created or what actions, simulations, and strategies are required for gameplay. Other game scholars (e.g., Herz; Kerr; Poole; Lindley) develop similar typologies for analyzing different game genres. These typologies of game genres provide game researchers with useful parameters to compare different games in their analysis. Despite these attempts to categorize computer games, problems and criticism arise because of many difficulties in accurately categorizing games (Kerr). Scholars have nevertheless continued to develop a typology for game genres to guide their study of a variety of digital games.

In order to respond to criticisms, game scholars have introduced elaborate and non-game-related parameters to characterize and categorize games. For example, in 2007, Elverdam and Aarseth develop an elaborate typology (see Figure 1.2 below) as an analytical framework to cover all digital games. The typology develops from time-space, virtual-physical, player composition-relation, struggle-game state parameters to categorize all digital games into eight broad dimensions to characterize digital games. Because a full-length discussion of Elverdam's and Aarseth's typology cannot be justified, I employ some components of Elverdam's and Aarseth's typology to examine *World of Warcraft*, a Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG) that will be discussed more extensively in Chapter 2. The application of Elverdam and Aarseth's framework enables game researchers to examine the spatial (i.e., virtual vs. physical space), temporal (i.e., external vs. internal time), interpersonal (i.e., player composition and relation), and task-oriented (i.e., struggle and game state) dimensions of digital games. This approach helps researchers to go one step further to mainly compare platform variations in digital game research.

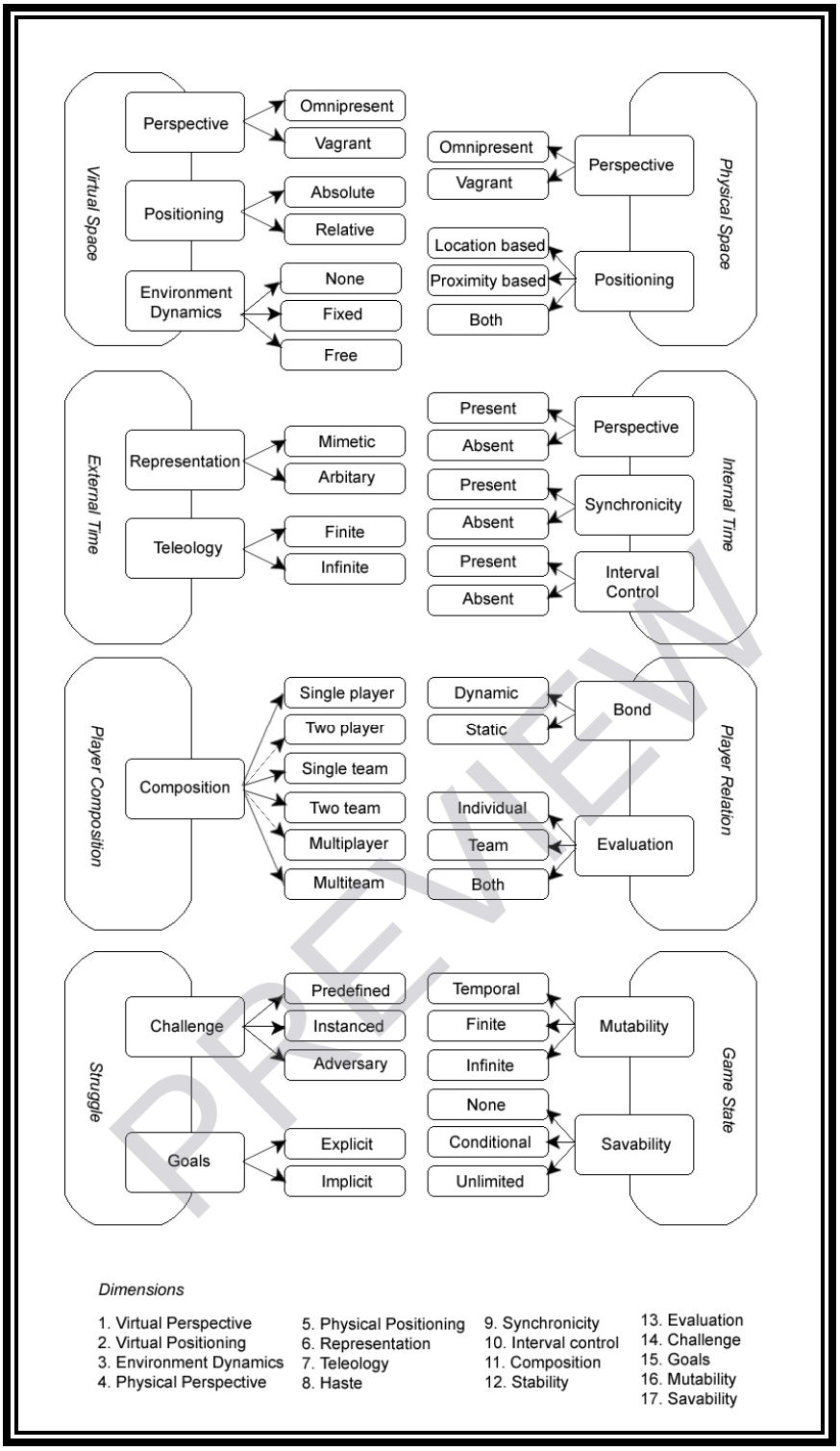

Figure 1.2: Overview of Game Typology Model. (from Elverdam, Christian, and Espen Aarseth. "Game Classification and Game Design: Construction through Critical Analysis." *Games and Culture* 2.1 (2007, January): 3-22, p. 21.)

Among these advances in digital game applications, Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs), MMOs, MMOGs have attracted much attention from game researchers (Chuang; Steinkuehler and Williams). In the following section, I will discuss the history of MMORPGs and its salient features. Furthermore, I argue why scholars should examine MMORPGs as an emerging rhetorical domain of study.

1.3 Overview of Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs)

MMORPGs refer to any computer network-mediated games where thousands of gamers are role-playing simultaneously in a graphical and 3-D environment (Filiciak; Hussain and Griffiths). Popular MMORPGs include *Ultima Online*, *EverQuest*, *World of Warcarft*, and *Second Life*. With the advent of the Internet, MMORPGs increasingly depend on networking technologies to link global gamers to collaborate with others to complete some tasks. Steinkuehler and Williams define technical and collaborative features of MMORPGs as "graphically two-dimensional (2D) or three-dimensional (3D) videogames played online, allowing individuals, through their self-created digital characters or 'avatar,' to interact not only with the gaming software but with other players" (886).

Historically, MMORPGs are evolved from text-based and non-graphical multiuser domains (dungeons, or MUDs) or object-oriented MUDs (or MOOs) popular in the late 1990s (Bartle; Mortensen;Ye and Cheng). By definition, a MUD is "a multi-user domain, multi-user dungeon, or multi-user dimension, all of which are referring to the same thing, an environment where multiple people may be logged on and interacting with one another" (Mortensen). MOOs are developed from MUDs with a distinctive feature to allow users to perform object-oriented programming to alter how the serve will interact with players (Bartle). As a more modern and technologically-advanced multi-user game, MMORPGs have been in existence since 1997 when *Ultima Online* was introduced by Electronic Arts (Burrill). The digital game is based on *Ultima*, a game released in 1997. *Ultima Online* allows gamers to choose and develop their own identity in