

**The win, the worth, and the work of play:
Exploring phenomenal entertainment values in online gaming experiences**

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ABSTRACT: Popular opinion of digital games tends to classify them as toys, diversions and distractions, however this focus on games solely as sources of hedonic pleasure is theoretically, empirically, and phenomenologically myopic – it obscures the full range of affective, emotional, and cognitive experiences that one can have when playing digital games. In this vein, this study explores the phenomenal experience of enjoyment and appreciation in online games, addressed through players’ descriptions of favorite gameplay memories. Through emergent thematic analysis of these descriptions and statistical analysis of individual differences, we demonstrate that elements of online game content can be *both* enjoyed as ego-driven reward and achievement and appreciated relationally with respect to other players, characters, and the gameworld. However, memorable game experiences are not necessarily experienced as having entertainment value, such that games scholars should be more inclusive of what is considered as important to players – potentially the win, the worth, *and* the work of play.

Keywords: *online games, enjoyment, appreciation, achievement, immersion, social play*

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The win, the worth, and the work of play: Entertainment value in online gaming memories

"No one in or out of the field [media critics] has ever been able to cite a game worthy of comparison with the great poets, filmmakers, novelists and poets."

~Roger Ebert, 2010

Outside of “gamer” circles, popular beliefs about video games as an entertainment media tend to align heavily with Ebert’s commentary. Popular opinion of games tends to classify them as toys, diversions and distractions – sources of hedonic pleasure with little redeeming value beyond distraction and short-term pleasure. Unfortunately, this intense focus on enjoyment is theoretically, empirically, and phenomenologically myopic, as it obfuscates the full range of affective, emotional, and cognitive experiences that one can have when playing video games. As such, our understandings of subjective entertainment in gameplay experiences is limited.

In this vein, this study expands upon these understandings of entertainment in gaming by exploring the phenomenal experience of enjoyment and appreciation in player’s memories of massively multiplayer online game (MMO) experiences, and evaluating individual differences therein.

Literature Review

The normative focus on enjoyment in gaming is historically reflected in media research, broadly, until about 20 years ago when Oliver (1993) expressed concerns with the applicability of hedonic enjoyment to all media. Specifically, she questioned the application of hedonic models of enjoyment reactions to ‘sad films’ – those cinema designed to elicit feelings of somberness and empathy likely antithetical to feelings of pleasure. Digital games scholarship is only just beginning to embrace these same considerations.

The academic study of video games has greatly broadened focus regarding the motivations for gameplay to include basic arousal and diversion elements, more contemplative states of immersion and socialization (Sherry, Lucas, Greenberg, & Lachlan, 2001; Yee, 2006a), and non-hedonic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Tamborini, Bowman, Eden, Grizzard & Organ, 2010; Tamborini et al., 2011). However, even these studies tend to focus singularly on the qualitative experience of *enjoyment*: a generally positive, pleasurable, and hedonic emotional reaction to media content that has been the focal point of most media psychology research (cf. Vorderer, Klimmt, & Ritterfeld, 2004).

We argue that games can, and are specifically designed to, elicit many of the same feelings mentioned by Oliver (1993) and later articulated by Oliver and Raney (2011) as notions of *appreciation*, or as part of “a general need to search for and ponder life’s meanings, truths,

and purposes” (p. 985). An example of this experience in video gaming was best expressed by technology critic Winda Benedetti (2010), in writing about her experiences with the critically-acclaimed *Heavy Rain* as one that “peer(s) into the dark reaches of the very real human heart to deliver stories that are thrilling, chilling and utterly absorbing” (para. 6).

Notably, while such an argument might seem moot to an audience of experienced gamers, both popular and scholarly dialogue around games has done little to explore the potential dual phenomena of (hedonic) enjoyment and (eudaimonic) appreciation native to the experience. Oliver et al. (2013) and Bowman, Rogers and Sherrick (2013) explored the role of game mechanics (hedonic) and character attachment (eudaimonic) in eliciting both entertainment reactions. These studies generally found that enjoyable games were those with superior gameplay and a high level of control over in-game avatars (‘pleasures of control’) and meaningful games were those with superior narratives and a high level of felt responsibility over in-game avatars (‘pleasures of cognition’).

However, beyond these two studies, little work has been done to better understand players’ phenomenal experiences of fun and meaningfulness in gaming. In this vein, our study seeks to expand upon extant findings by Oliver et al. (2013) and Bowman et al. (2013) to further explore the phenomenology of enjoyment and appreciation in video game experiences. We ask:

RQ1: What is the nature of gamers’ phenomenal enjoyment and appreciation in their most memorable MMO gaming experiences?

Although previous scholarship (Bowman et al., 2013) importantly examined the types of gameplay experiences articulated as enjoyed or appreciated when prompted to remember a “fun” or “meaningful” game, such inquiry rests on an assumption that gamers *do* find fun or meaning in gameplay. It is important to take a step back and first consider *whether or not* players, unprompted, find entertainment value in gameplay, how prevalent such entertainment value may be among broader gameplay experiences. To this end, we ask:

RQ2: What is the distribution of enjoyment and appreciation among gamers’ most memorable MMO gaming experiences?

In further analyzing entertainment experiences, past research has identified demographic and game-specific variables that might impact players’ enjoyment and appreciation. Regarding demographic variables, Oliver (2000) wrote broadly on the importance of considering audience traits and tendencies that might be associated with variance in entertainment outcomes. Regarding age, Hofer, Allemand, and Martin (2014) found that older film audiences reported a greater prevalence of eudaimonic (rather than hedonic) reactions when watching both sad and happy meaningful films, suggesting that older audiences might seek out more meaning in their entertainment media. Regarding gender identification, de Weid, Zillmann, and Ordman (1995) found females to report higher emphatic distress of film tragedy than males, suggesting gender constructions around the assumption of empathy as a more feminine construct (cf. Oliver, 1993);

similar data was reported by Oliver, Weaver, and Lee (2000) regarding the link between empathy as a gendered trait and positive evaluations of somber films. Regarding education level, as far back as Shils (1960) we see evidence of distinctions between lowbrow (or popular) culture and highbrow (or intellectual) culture, suggesting that those more educated were of higher capacity to process the more meaningful messages offered in highbrow media fare. (Notably, the term “highbrow” emerge from the pseudoscientific assumptions of phrenology, which claimed that more intelligent individuals possessed a higher brow-line than those of lower intelligence; cf. Hendrickson, 2008.) While many of Shils’ more normative (and negative) views of pop culture as a brutish and worthless pursuit have been challenged, Gans (1974) suggests that taste cultures that tend to cluster around pop and elite media often represent intellectual differences. In general, past work suggests age, gender and educational status can impact entertainment experiences sought and received, and these same variables (specifically, age and gender) have also been found to impact gaming experiences (age, Greenberg, Sherry, Lachlan, Lucas & Holmstrom, 2010; gender, cf. Hartmann & Klimmt, 2006). To this end, our next research question asks:

RQ3a: What is the impact of player demographics on expressions of enjoyment and appreciation of their most memorable MMO gaming experiences?

In addition to these demographic differences, and given exploratory nature of this study regarding entertainment experiences in video games, we also consider the impact of gaming experience. Broadly, we might expect that players who have invested more time into the game are more likely to have had more entertainment experiences, considering that video gaming is often conceptualized as an autotelic (self-motivating) leisure activity in which the experience is the justification for play – a property of video games that makes them particularly well-suited to induce experiential flows states (Sherry, 2006). Time spent investing in one’s avatar is similarly associated with entertainment experiences, as feelings of character control and belief of a character’s digital world can impact enjoyment experiences and feelings of responsibility can impact appreciation experiences (Bowman et al., 2013). At the same time, Banks (2013) has found evidence suggesting that more intense gamers – gamers who have demonstrated longer and more stable patterns of gameplay in terms of their weekly hours spent gaming – often report less on games as entertainment and leisure practices and more on games as second spaces of social and even “physical” work. Specifically, intense players of the game *World of Warcraft* reported that avatars once created for leisure and entertainment purposes had, over time, become tools to conduct the work of gameplay, such as raiding (to fulfil social and tactical obligations to other players) and resource management and crafting (to accumulate enough goods to produce in-game objects - often for use in raiding). For these gamers, the original autotelic motivations of gaming have been replaced with telic (extrinsic) motivations, suggesting that they are less about play and more about duty, notions similarly reported on by Yee (2006b). Thus, we further examine the impact of gaming experience on entertainment experiences:

RQ3b: What is the impact of gameplay experience on expressions of enjoyment and appreciation of their most memorable MMO gaming experiences?

Method

To examine the questions of players' subjective experiences of enjoyment and appreciation in gameplay, we employed an online survey to collect gamers' recollections of their favorite gameplay memories. In particular, players of the massively multiplayer online game (MMO) *World of Warcraft* (WoW) were solicited to complete an online survey. MMOs, broadly, present a useful gaming context in which to examine potentials for meaningful and enjoyable play experiences, given the wide range of gameplay tasks (e.g., completing quests, competitive raiding, collecting items) and gameplay contexts (e.g., player-versus-environment, player-versus-player, and roleplay environments). WoW, in its tenth year of existence, presents a unique opportunity to examine the entertainment value of gameplay across varied lengths of game commitment.

Participant Recruitment

Participants ($N = 391$) were recruited through calls for participation posted online, in multiple venues: public WoW forums, public WoW Facebook groups, and paid Facebook ads. WoW players aged 18 years or older were eligible to participate. These brief announcements directed interested players to click through to a static web page that included informed consent documentation and link to the survey. Advertised compensation for completing the survey was an entry into a drawing for one year's worth of WoW subscription time (a \$180 value). The survey was open for six weeks, garnering 406 responses, 15 of which were removed for incomplete data, resulting in 391 usable responses.

Among all participants, 187 were male, 179 were female, and 25 identified as genderqueer or androgynous. The mean age was 27.9 years ($SD = 7.76$). Most participants had some college education ($n = 181$, 46%) or had completed a bachelor's degree ($n = 89$, 23%). At the time of the survey, 88% had logged in during the previous week ($n = 343$); mean weekly hours played was 21.9 ($SD = 15.1$). Participants reported having an average of 10.3 avatars of at least level 20 ($SD = 7.18$) and an average of 3.85 avatars at the level cap of 85 ($SD = 3.08$).

Procedure

Participants were asked to complete an online survey as part of a larger study on MMO players' connections with their avatars; the survey included items measuring demographics, gameplay habits, and the name and server of their favorite avatar. Participants were also asked to provide an open-ended answer to the question: "What is your favorite memory with that avatar? Please tell us that story." Notably, there was no hint to indicate enjoyment or appreciation in that

story, nor that the avatar should be central to that story. The mean length of these open-ended responses was 82.87 words ($SD = 86.1$), with a range of 2 to 773 words, and a median of 57 words. These open-ended responses constitute the primary data analyzed in this study.

Data Analysis

To address RQ1 regarding the natures of enjoyment and appreciation in participants' subjective gameplay experiences, participants' open-ended responses were subjected to two analyses: content analysis for linguistic signifiers of enjoyment and appreciation, thematic analysis for the subjects of those signifiers.

First, responses were content-analyzed for linguistic signifiers of enjoyment and appreciation, according to conceptualizations laid out by Oliver and Raney (2011). One coder identified specific signifying language across all responses and coded them for enjoyment or appreciation; a second coder independently coded the signifiers for the enjoyment or appreciation. Intercoder reliability met acceptable standards ($\alpha = .844$) for the 158 signifiers. Among 12 disagreements, six were resolved and six signifiers that could be interpreted as enjoyment and/or appreciation depending on context and interpretation – such as “It was really sweet.” – were excluded from analysis (see Appendix A for the list of linguistic signifiers and associated enjoyment or appreciation designations).

Second, responses were subjected to interpretive thematic analyses for the subjects of enjoyment or appreciation language by a single coder. Thematic analysis is an interpretive, iterative process of identifying and integrating emergent patterns in data, in five primary steps: engaging the data through multiple readings, generating initial emergent themes guided by relevant theory, evaluate themes for unifying patterns, reduce themes based on these patterns (with consideration for lower- and higher-order concepts), and cross-reference themes with existing literature to name, define, and determine theoretical relevance to the phenomenon of interest (see Braun & Clark, 2006). Emergent themes and theoretical relevance were evaluated for face validity by a second researcher with expertise in gaming and entertainment theory.

To address RQ2 and RQ3 regarding the distribution of enjoyment and appreciation experiences in player memories and the potential importance of demographics and play habits, chi-square analyses were used to compare distribution metrics (RQ2), and hierarchical linear regression models were used to understand the individual and joint impact of demographic and play habits (RQ3).

Results

Characteristics of MMO Enjoyment and Appreciation (RQ1)

Eleven themes emerged as referents of players' enjoyment and appreciation language as they wrote of favorite memories with their avatars. Among these, eight themes were both

enjoyed and appreciated, albeit with qualitatively different phenomenologies. Two themes were exclusively enjoyed and one theme was exclusively meaningful. These patterns are described below, with attention to the prevalence themes for each entertainment value, and summarized in Appendix B.

Referents of enjoyment language. Among themes in players' enjoyment referents, two emerged as most prevalent: achievement ($n = 81$, 33.2%) and social play ($n = 53$, 21.7%).

Achievement, here, is the completion of a gameplay task (set forth either by the game or by the player) resulting in reward, recognition, or personal satisfaction. Among participant memories, these tasks include raid completions, boss kills, rare mounts, PvP kills, novelty achievements, and the resolution of personal vendettas. For example, one player wrote of earning an exclusive title: "As I handed in the final quest I got the achievement and the title and was pretty stoked about it." Most instances of enjoying achievements took the form of superlative completion – finishing the task first or best or most exclusively – or under harsh conditions such as extreme difficulty, narrow margins, disadvantage, or errors. These narratives often took the form of play-by-play war stories, such as: "Heroic Hagara. Tank died. Swapped weapons and went Blood Presence to tank the rest of the fight. From 20% hp or so. Was glorious." Players' personal "firsts" were also key enjoyment language referents, as players recalled their first raid, boss kill, PvP kill, or success in a particular combat role (such as healing or tanking). Although most players emphasized the difficulty or exclusivity of the achievement as key to enjoyment, some players noted that the ease was key – having a particular advantage, escaping a grind, or luck made the achievement more enjoyable. For example, in recounting a PvP one-shot kill a player wrote of being unfairly stronger than the opponent, "BAM! ... drops him dead not 5 feet in front of my mage ... Lol'd so hard."

Another prevalent theme in enjoyment experiences was social play – the experience of playing with other people in which the qualities of both formal gameplay and collegial social interaction intersect. This is distinct from both gameplay and social interaction for their own sakes (as described in other themes). Players frequently expressed enjoyment for playing with friends, guildmates, romantic partners, and strangers; this play was most frequently described either as social raiding (e.g., "I remember how good it felt with all my friends to finally beat [the raid boss] Yogg."), but also included questing, roleplaying, exploring, grinding, and strategizing. Importantly, some players also described enjoyment of failure, so long as it was with friends and trusted guildmates. For example, one player wrote, "It was late at night, 4am my time, and we spent hours in that dungeon, wiping and trying to figure out where to go, but no one got pissed and no one left - it was all fun times." Social play enjoyment also frequently referred to the player's unique, individual contributions to group success (e.g., "Leading my guild to our first [boss] kill ... the thrill of knowing I played a part in making this happen for the members."). Team membership was also an enjoyment referent, with an emphasis on sharing team successes, celebrating those successes, and publicly displaying group achievements. Group dynamics were

also enjoyed in terms of teamwork and synergy among members when working toward achievements.

In addition to achievement and social play, several other important themes emerged in enjoyment referents. Players enjoyed progression, including powering through game content, advancing in levels and statistics, collecting game items, and the process of grinding toward an achievement. Another enjoyment referent was gameplay, including the playstyles of particular character classes or combat roles, and particular qualities of game content such as the “chaos” of raiding or the “hardcore” nature of raiding. Emergent play – spontaneous playful acts not encouraged as part of game design – was described as exclusively enjoyable. This undirected play consisted primarily of trolling and griefing, but also included manipulations of game content, such as hacking the environment for exploration and playing with avatar visuals and gestures for amusement. For example, one player’s guild took advantage of a novelty ‘zombie infection’ mechanic to infect other avatars: “Most of our guild got together and flooded [the major city] as Zombies ... It was a lot of fun.” Another type of enjoyment referent encompasses gameworld immersion experiences, with the player getting caught up in the epicness, storylines, and vastness of the digital environment. Finally, players described enjoying social interactions apart from gameplay, including chatting in public channels, “hanging out” with friends, or talking with romantic partners.

Other themes in enjoyment referents also emerged, although less prevalent. Players described enjoying the aesthetics of environments, avatars, and music. Surprisingly, enjoyment of challenge in gameplay was only a minor theme, including having one’s skills tested and being forced to perfect one’s strategy. Exclusive to enjoyment was the theme of situational absurdity or whim, such as silly errors resulting in avatar death and ironies in social situations.

Referents of appreciation language. Among themes in players’ appreciation referents, two emerged as most prevalent: gameworld immersion ($n = 37$, 25.9%) and social play ($n = 26$, 18.2%).

Gameworld immersion is the state of being caught up in the gameworld environment and its narratives. Most prominent among appreciated narratives were those involving the player’s own avatar, including particular moments, events, or extended storylines. In particular, players expressed appreciation for understanding their own role (or that of the avatar) in a particular narrative. Sometimes, these narratives led to appreciation of the experience of fully embodying that character. Other times, players found the resolution or authenticity of a quest to be meaningful. One player was “struck to the core” by an NPC’s story that unfolded during a quest: “In bringing her pendant to her, I saw a glimpse of what her former glory was like ... Losing all that which connects you ... and finding a new hope ... it was all too much for me to take.” In some cases, narrative appreciation extended to broader themes such as the struggle to survive in a war-torn world, and to notions of “the epic.” Contemplation of the epic was also expressed in players’ appreciation of the digital environment, describing awe of and reflection upon its

vastness and deep sense of place. One player recounted getting caught up in a quest chain storyline: “[The characters] were more or less ‘people’ to me and getting to fight right alongside them was a really heady experience.” In line with authenticity and vastness, appreciation referents also included states of immersion as players “escaped” to the digital space, especially in times of personal hardship.

As a referent of appreciation, social play describes emphasized group dynamics, such as camaraderie, teamwork, cooperation, and synergies among teammates. These dynamics influenced both group accomplishments and players’ individual goals. Players appreciated the unexpected time, resource, or knowledge investments from other players in these personal endeavors (e.g., “At one time I was in the top 100 death knight tanks in the server thanks to those friends who would run chain heroics with me all afternoon.”) In this vein, team membership was also appreciated, and was characterized by senses of sharing successes with others (rather than the enjoyable experience of celebrating and publicizing those successes), suggesting the importance of players’ mutual personal investments as a mechanism for developing appreciation in social play. Indeed, playing with friends, partners, or guildmates was also implicated as meaningful in social play, especially in the sense that players appreciated seeing the world together and commiserating through tedious or difficult tasks. One player found meaningful that she shared an arduous grind: “I was proud because I knew I had earned it ... I did it with my husband on his rogue. It was something we had done together on top of all this.” Interestingly, these notions of mutual investment and sharing in gameplay tasks are paired with appreciation of being able to hold one’s own in those shared tasks, by materially contributing to the work of play (especially despite youth or inexperience) and thusly earning respect from one’s teammates. One young player said, “I was instantly accepted for my excellent work and leadership skills and it’s a moment in my WoW career that I cherish.” That the social groups mentioned in social play appreciation tended to be “guilds” rather than “friends” (as was the focus in social play enjoyment) suggests further that such appreciation may be predicated on notions of guild membership duties and responsibilities rather than the less formal roles and responsibilities associated with friendship.

Players also expressed appreciation for other key gameplay phenomena. Achievement, as a target of appreciation, was most often described as a process or as the completion of something worthwhile. Following, players frequently focused on completion conditions aside from superlatives – success despite discouragement, disadvantage, and lengthy grinds. For example, one player wrote, “The explorer achieve was like a culmination of all of my memories on all of my toons ... completion of a collective experience. -- years of playing and doing things within the wow world.” Social interactions were meaningful principally in senses of bonding or developing friendships, feeling close to or welcomed by other players, or having conversations. One player’s friends, for example, rushed to help introduce the game and instruct on how to play: “It was really cute and kinda magical, to feel so loved and so welcomed.” Aesthetics of digital environments were also described as meaningful, as were NPCs and players’ own avatars.

Indeed, players' avatars were exclusively appreciation referents, as players described avatar names, personalities, features, and abilities as meaningful, particularly in its sameness or difference from the player's own corresponding traits. Further, avatars as whole entities – as well as particular weapons – were appreciated as carriers of memories or archives of accomplishments, or as important presences in players' lives. For one player describing the meaning of a particular PvP victory, the weapon used is a sort of relic: "I still have the weapon I used in that charge in my bank even after nearly five years of having replaced it with better items. I just can not bring myself to part with it."

Although less prevalent than the aforementioned themes, other gameplay phenomena also emerged as appreciation referents. Players described appreciation for progression as a process of strengthening toward achievement, and for challenge as offering personal development value through difficulty. Gameplay was also appreciated in terms of particular class playstyles and stress relief through combat.

Phenomenal divergence among entertainment language referents. Although most themes in entertainment language referents provided some entertainment value for some players, three themes are notable for their high frequencies of both enjoyment and appreciation, and for the phenomenal divergence in how those referents are enjoyed or appreciated. These are: social play, gameworld immersion, and achievement.

Players described similar dimensions of social play across enjoyment and appreciation experiences, but the way those dimensions were experienced was phenomenally different. For both types of entertainment, individual contributions to group success were key, but for enjoyment value players emphasized leading the group and for appreciation value players emphasized holding one's own in order to make material contributions. For the social dimension of playing the game with others, experiences were fun when played with friends and strangers and meaningful when played with a guild. The appreciation of social play also emphasized a sense of sharing experiences with others. Among group dynamics associated with social play, team synergies were key, while camaraderie and cooperation were most meaningful. Team membership – that is, belonging to a combat group or guild – was most enjoyable when the group was, effectively, a tool for successful play, and was meaningful when there was a sense of sharing success with the team members. In short, social play is enjoyed when the player is seen as being at the center of successful play and social play is appreciated when the player makes material contributions to successful play and shares the success with others.

Among gameworld immersion experiences, avatars' unique character narratives were both enjoyed and appreciated; however, getting caught up in the avatar's role in the larger world or quest narratives was only an appreciation referent. In this vein, realizing 'the epic' of gameworld narratives is enjoyed when the player feels personally 'epic' and appreciated when the gameworld is seen as 'epic.' The vastness of the digital gameworld is likewise key to both

types of entertainment, but exploration of this vastness is seen as fun and finding special spaces with a ‘sense of place’ within this vastness is seen as meaningful. Additionally, players expressed appreciation (but not enjoyment) for the potential to escape to or feel transported to the gameworld as a ‘getaway’ from everyday life. This is interpreted to mean that the gameworld is enjoyed as a digital playground for roleplay and exploration, but is appreciated as an authentic and fantastical place that may, in a sense, be inhabited by the player.

For entertainment associated with achievement, players enjoyed completing achievements and obtaining the associated rewards, especially when the player achieved something first, something rare, or was the best at the task. Alternately, achievement was appreciated as the accomplishment of something worthwhile. In remembering their own ‘firsts,’ players enjoyed recollections of their own personal firsts and particularly good performances in those achievements, but tended to appreciate group or team firsts. This suggests that while both enjoyment and appreciation of achievement rest on task completion, enjoyment is centered on the player as the achiever and appreciation is centered on the context of the achievement.

Descriptive Results of Measured Data

While the first research question explored the broad themes associated with enjoyment and appreciation memories as recalled by study participants using thematic analysis, the next research questions used quantitative data analyses to explore the distribution of those memories, as well as demographic and gameplay mechanics associated with each.

Distribution of Enjoyment and Appreciation (RQ2). In looking at the presence of enjoyment or appreciation signifiers, participants on average reported $M = .63$ unique instances of enjoyment ($SD = .858$, $Min = 0$, $Max = 5$) and $M = .37$ instances of appreciation ($SD = .797$, $Min = 0$, $Max = 5$). Regarding enjoyment, over half of participants ($n = 220$, 56 percent) did not have any enjoyment language markers, with an additional 30 percent ($n = 118$) using a single enjoyment marker in their gaming recollections. Regarding appreciation, nearly three-quarters of participants ($n = 296$, 76 percent) had no usage of appreciation-related language markers, with another 16 percent ($n = 63$) using only one. There was no significant correlation between the number of enjoyment indicators used and the number of appreciation indicators used, $r(391) = -.011$, $p = .833$. Given the low instances of multiple references of enjoyment and appreciation in our data, both variables were recoded as a binary (“0” meaning “no mention of enjoyment/appreciation” and “1” meaning “mention of enjoyment/appreciation”). For this binary measures, enjoyment was mentioned at least once by 44 percent of participants ($n = 171$) and appreciation was mentioned at least once by 24 percent of participants ($n = 94$). A paired-samples t-test on these binary measures reports that these two binary means (reported above as percentages, appropriate given the binary codes used) differed significantly from one another, $t(390) = 5.97$, $p \sim .001$.

To specifically address RQ1, we can conclude two things. First, participants specifically reference memories associated with enjoyment nearly twice as much as they do memories of appreciation, and these differences are statistically significant. Second, as many as half of our participants do not recall either experience, suggesting perhaps that their gameplay – or at least, their favorite memories of their play – are related to concepts beyond entertainment.

Gamer Characteristics and Entertainment in Gameplay (RQ3). To further explore potential demographic influences on expressed enjoyment and appreciation in gameplay memories, a secondary analysis was conducted by regressing the binary enjoyment or appreciation scores on to several demographic and gameplay indicators. Both models used three-step hierarchical linear regression models, with the demographic measures of age, gender (male, female, genderqueer), and education level entered in step one, gameplay variables (number of total months spent playing WoW, time since last login, average weekly hours spent gaming, number of level-20 avatars, number of level-85 avatars) entered in step two. In step three, the length (word count) of each participant's answer was entered.

For enjoyment, the overall three-step regression model was not significant, $F(9,364) = 1.57, p = .122$, Durbin-Watson = .138, $R^2 = .037$. The only significant predictor of enjoyment mentions was the length of one's response, Step 3 $\beta = .172, p \sim .001, \Delta R^2 = .027, F(1,364) = 10.36, p \sim .001$. This data suggests that those demographic and gameplay variables considered in our model had no significant impact on enjoyment mentions.

For appreciation, the overall three-step regression model was significant, $F(9,364) = 7.20, p \sim .001$, Durbin-Watson = .361, $R^2 = .160$. The number of months one has been playing the game was a slightly negative indicator of appreciation indicators ($\beta = -.100, p = .046$) and the length of one's answer was a positive predictor of appreciation indicators ($\beta = .392, p \sim .001$), with Step 3 explaining the brunt of the model's variance, $\Delta R^2 = .142, F(1,364) = 61.7, p \sim .001$. Moreover, while there was no correlation between these two predictors, $r(381) = .030, p = .561$, an interaction term entered as Step 4 of a revised regression equation returned a significant interaction term ($\beta = -.121, p = .014$) that explained another one percent of variance, $\Delta R^2 = .014, F(1,363) = 6.06, p = .014$. This data suggests that mentions of appreciation seem to be most related to how long one elaborated on their favorite memory, although participants who had played WoW the longest were somewhat less likely to mention appreciation-related memories.

Follow-up analyses on the impact of word count on entertainment recollections found that while significant correlations between length of memory recollection and enjoyment references, $r(391) = .21, p \sim .001$) and appreciation, $r(391) = .387, p \sim .001$, were both significant, these correlations differed significantly from each other, using Steiger's (1980) comparison test for dependent correlations, $z = -2.77, p = .005$). Combined, these results suggest that players with longer responses were nearly twice as more likely to elaborate on appreciation than enjoyment experiences.

Discussion

Taken as a whole, this study's findings suggest that (a) highly engaged MMO players enjoy ego-driven play experiences but appreciate interdependence and gameworld authenticity, (b) enjoyment is more prevalent than appreciation, but many recollections are not entertainment-based, and (c) that meaningful experiences are the most vividly expressed, but this appreciation may reduce over time.

Enjoying the Win, but Appreciating the Worth

In this examination of the players' descriptions of favorite gameplay memories, enjoyment and appreciation were expressed, unprompted, as derived from a range of gameplay experiences. Most frequently enjoyed were achievement and social play, and most frequently appreciated were gameworld immersion, social play, and achievement. Particularly important to recall is that, although some gameplay experiences were both enjoyed and appreciated among players' memory descriptions, the particular phenomenology of those fun and meaningful experiences was materially different. Broadly, enjoyment focused on what we interpret to be ego-driven experiences: earning an exclusive achievement, being first or best at a gameplay task, playing a central leadership role in group gameplay, getting revenge, feeling "epic," and feeling successful through such play practices as powering through game content or benefiting from unfair advantages. Conversely, appreciation focused on finishing tasks seen as intrinsically worthwhile, the journey and value of difficult game tasks, materially contributing to group successes and to gameworld events, getting caught up in the world as a real place with real consequences, and sharing, collaborating, and developing friendships with other players. In other words, players tend to enjoy gameplay when they are at the center of play, and appreciate social or functional interdependency among players and/or the authenticity of the gameworld and its inhabitants.

Understanding these dual experiences of self-directed enjoyment and other-directed appreciation provide insight into a broader set of gaming outcomes that might be captured with theoretical models focused solely on enjoyment. For example, we might think of enjoyable gaming experiences as those that "elevate the self" while we think of meaningful experiences as those that "situate the self" in relation to those around us. In this way, our work both replicates classic understandings of enjoyment – such as the pleasure of personal achievement and reward (cf. Yee, 2006a; Tamborini et al., 2010, 2011) – while also expanding our understanding of the potential for games to provide relationally eudaimonic experiences; that is, the player coming to appreciate the relationships between themselves, their avatar, the other players, and other avatars as existing in experientially "real" spaces with "real" social dynamics. The notion of "real" here is an integral one, as it speaks to a suspension of disbelief as prerequisite for the experience of appreciation in video games – for these players, video game are legitimate digital spaces comprised of social actors, in a social world, with social consequences for their daily deliberations.

The Mundane is Still Memorable

As could be expected (cf. Oliver et al., 2013), enjoyment was twice as prevalent as appreciation. However, unexpectedly, a slight majority of players didn't explicitly mention any entertainment value at all. A brief evaluation of responses without entertainment language markers suggests that players are primarily recounting experiences of formal gameplay (e.g., raiding, boss kills, leveling) and "maintenance" (e.g., transferring servers, reputation grinding, fulfilling required combat roles required). We interpret this to mean that for many players, their most memorable experiences in gameplay are not always the particularly entertaining ones; rather, the mundane experiences of being involved in an immersive and perpetual game could be equally as memorable as the epic fun and the moving meaningful experiences (cf. Yee, 2006b; Banks, 2013). Indeed, given that the vast majority of gaming research tends to assume by definition that games are play (autotelic) experiences (cf. Sherry, 2006), the notion of gaming transferring to a more telic "work-like" experience merits further investigation. To this end, our data suggest that experienced WoW players are at least as likely to engage the game world as a task as they are as social or play activity. Put simply, researchers are cautioned in assuming that what is most memorable and valuable in gameplay is necessarily a game's entertainment value (enjoyment or appreciation).

Elaborating on Player Appreciation

In understanding the role of player characteristics in gameplay entertainment experiences, demographic variables were not significantly associated with expressions of enjoyment or appreciation. This suggests that – at least among highly engaged gamers such as those sampled in this study – gamers have more in common than they are different when it comes to experiencing entertainment value. This is in contrast to audiences of other entertainment media such as film, in which age, gender, and education are important differentiators in finding media content fun or meaningful (as demonstrated in the literature review). In a similar vein, while there were no gameplay variables related to expressions of enjoyment, longer tenure in the game was significantly and negatively correlated with descriptions of meaningful experiences. It is possible that, given our findings for RQ2 elaborated in the preceding section, that this decrease in meaningful gaming associated with longer gameplay tenures may be a function of play becoming "work" as gameplay intensity increases (Banks, 2013). Moreover, given the lack of association between most all of the measured individual differences and entertainment experiences in our sample of experienced gamers, our findings suggest that online gamers, as a group, might share more similar reactions to gaming content than members of other entertainment media audiences.

In fact, the most important (significant) individual difference variable associated with both enjoyment and appreciation expressions was the length of one's memory response (the word count of their entry). Although both entertainment values were associated with longer responses, the correlation between word count and appreciation expressions was twice the

correlation between word count and enjoyment responses. This finding suggests that more vivid memories (that is, those with greater expressed detail) may be experienced as particularly entertaining, with meaningful experiences being perhaps more vivid than fun experiences. Alternately, it may be that players were simply more motivated to elaborate on particularly meaningful and fun experiences, given that appreciation is often conceptualized as a more cognitively taxing experience (Oliver & Raney, 2011).

Limitations and Future Research

One of the primary limitations of the current study is that the target question asked of participants was to recall a favorite memory associated with a particular, favorite game avatar (as part of a larger study on player-avatar relationships). Framing the question as such might have shunted their focus on a particular avatar experience rather than broader gaming experiences. Of course, in WoW (as in most MMOs) avatars are key vehicles by which players experience the gameworld. Moreover, a brief analysis of player's responses revealed that over half of participants ($n = 202$, 52%) made no specific reference to an avatar. At the same time, while the distribution of avatar mentions did not differ as a function of enjoyment mentions, $\chi^2(1) = .103$, $p = .749$, there was evidence that participants recalling appreciation experiences were more likely than chance to recall their avatar as a central figure in these experiences, $\chi^2(1) = 12.1$, $p = .001$ – in fact, they were nearly twice as likely to mention an avatar when recalling a meaningful gaming experience. While this data is not elaborated on further in the current manuscript (it was outside the scope of the current study and as result, the coding of avatar descriptions was not subject to the same rigor as the thematic analyses reported herein), future work should consider perhaps the mediating impact of player-avatar relationships on entertainment and non-entertainment experiences in video games (cf. Bowman, Banks, & Downs, in press).

A second limitation of note in this study concerns the homogenous and fairly engaged nature of our respondents, which might have constrained our ability to find statistically and theoretically meaningful associations between individual differences and entertainment experiences. As a result, it is perhaps more accurate to suggest that our results provide a good deal of insight into the entertainment and non-entertainment experiences of seasons WoW players, but they might not generalize to novice or casual players. Given prior work on the potential “work of play” styles of senior gamers, future work should more carefully and purposefully analyze a more heterogeneous set of gamers – both in terms of demographic and play experience. Related to this, respondents in our study were all veterans on a particular MMO (WoW), which might have unique attributes that foster the sort entertainment and non-entertainment play styles reported on in the current manuscript.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates, in line with recent evolutions in media research, that online games can be objects of both enjoyment and appreciation. Specifically, gamers enjoy ego-driven

experiences of reward and achievement, but appreciate relational experiences of the self as associated with other players and the gameworld. Although appreciation occurs less frequently than enjoyment, players elaborate more richly on those deep, meaningful experiences. Further, a significant portion of gameplay memories are not related to explicit entertainment experiences. As such, games scholars should be more inclusive of what is considered as memorable or important to players – potentially the win, the worth, *and* the work of play.

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Appendix A: Linguistic signifiers of enjoyment/appreciation

Enjoyment Language Markers	Appreciation Language Markers
<p>Terrifying but really fun Awwww yeahhhh! Cheering and screaming on Vent Enjoying the X Good times I am still happiest doing X I felt a sense of adventure I felt pleased I gave her a silly answer: X I had the biggest grin I hit my knees and screamed I laughed so hard I look back and laugh at it I loved the feeling of X I remember how crazy awesome it felt I was absolutely hooked I was ecstatic I was jubilant I was like 'Wheeee!' I was on top of the world I was pretty stoked I was so giddy I was so pleased It amuses me It felt so good It made me feel great It made me very happy It rocked It still makes me happy It was a bit of happy It was a bunch of shenanigans It was a good night full of good feelings It was absolutely intense It was all fun times It was an adrenaline rush It was an amusing climax It was an awesome moment It was as fun as it was frustrating It was awesome. It was complete elation It was crazy fun It was epic It was exhilarating It was fun It was most amusing It was pretty damn cool It was purely awesome It was so awesome and I was so happy</p>	<p>A change came over me ... Because of X, I fell so much in love with Y Brought things to life in a new way I am loyal in my heart to X ... I came to the realization that X I can't bear to part with X I cherish X I don't prize him for X, I prize him for Y I felt blessed I felt like I was part of something bigger I have my avatar to thank in a very direct way I know it's just [diminutive], but it was [superlative] I miss the days when X I realized that X I relish it I remember it with fondness I remember the awe of X I saw it as the culmination of X I see my avatars as X I thought about it and realized X I was in awe of X I was so happy to help I was very interested to see how all of that worked out I was very proud I welled up with emotion I will never change it I wonder if X means Y I won't ever shake the feeling that X I wouldn't trade it for anything It brought me to tears It drives me to continue to X It felt so very pivotal It gave me goosebumps It impacted me in a way I'll never forget It inspired me to go after X It is a fond memory because X It made it meaningful It makes me think of X It took a long time to work through X It was a big deal for us It was a dark moment with long-lasting effects It was a great accomplishment It was a heartbreaking reunion It was a monumental accomplishment It was a pat on the back for us It was a really heady experience It was a significant time ... It was a sweet, memorable moment</p>

<p> It was so cheesy and amazing It was such a silly break It was too funny for anyone to be mad It was very gratifying It's a thrill It's fabulous I've never laughed so much Just being silly Just for Fun No reason except I just like it Not taking the game too seriously Silly little moments keep me loving the game Still hilarious to me That sort of fun stuff That was an awesome memory The crappy night was totally washed away The feeling was amazing The joy and laughter Ton of fun Vent lit up with screams of excitement Very pleasant memories We laughed our asses off X was glorious </p>	<p> It was a war-fuzzy moment for me It was a wonderful bonding time ... It was an experience to cherish It was as if X It was beautifully dark It was cathartic It was fun and memorable It was glorious It was intriguing to me It was like watching a sad movie but the main character is you It was magical It was one of the only times I've ever felt X It was priceless! It was so big and confusing back then it was the absolute peak of my raiding experience It was the completion of a series of experiences It was the experience I was hoping for It was the first time I felt truly capable It was the most emotionally involving moment It was vast and overwhelming It would even melt the heart of a Frost DK My favorite memory is also my saddest That event gave me even more confidence to do X The irony of it was X The thing that really struck me to the core was X We engaged in a long, large discussion about X We made great memories We struggled through X We thought it might be interesting to X When I play her, I can remember X When we finally realized what we had accomplished X led to feelings of Y X led to Y X made it a very fond memory I was amazed at X It was an exceptional experience </p>
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Appendix B: Targets of enjoyment and appreciation in gaming

Theme	Enjoyment (N = 244)	Appreciation (N = 43)
Achievement	<p>N = 81 (33.2%)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Task completion (first, best, rarest, most difficult, with vengeance) *Personal firsts, emphasis on raiding and individual roles *High performance (skill, statistics) 	<p>N = 26 (18.1%)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Accomplishing something worthwhile *Task completion (first, exclusivity, difficulty) *Personal, group firsts
Immersion	<p>N = 18 (7.4%)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Character narratives (RP moments, storylines) *Vastness of the world, exploration *Realizing 'the epic' 	<p>N = 37 (25.9%)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Character narratives (RP moments, role in world/quests) *Game narrative (survival, heroism) *Vastness of the world, sense of place *Escape, transporation
Social Play	<p>N = 53 (21.7%)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Individual contributions to group success, emphasis on leading *Playing with friends, strangers *Group dynamics (synergy, teamwork) *Team membership (success, celebrating success) 	<p>N = 26 (18.2%)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Holding one's own to materially contribute to group success *Playing with others (sharing experiences) *Group dynamics (camaraderie, teamwork, cooperation) *Team membership (sharing success)
Avatar	<p>N = 0 (0.0%)</p>	<p>N = 18 (12.6%)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *As entities (carrying meaning, having presence in life, sameness/difference) *Traits (class, race, gender, name) *Gear, items
Emergent Play	<p>N = 21 (8.6%)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Hacking/manipulating game content *Griefing, trolling 	<p>N = 0 (0.0%)</p>
Socializing	<p>N = 16 (6.6%)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Chatting, hanging out with friends or in public channels *Romantic rendezvous 	<p>N = 12 (8.4%)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Chatting, hanging out, bonding *Experiencing close friendships
Aesthetics	<p>N = 10 (4.1%)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Characters, environment, music 	<p>N = 12 (8.4%)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Characters, environment
Absurdity/Whim	<p>N = 17 (7.0%)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Errors, leading to death *Poor skill or ignorance *Whim or irony in a situation 	<p>N = 0 (0%)</p>
Gameplay	<p>N = 14 (5.4%)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Playstyle (class, spec, role, mechanics) *Game content (raiding, dungeons) 	<p>N = 5 (3.5%)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Playstyle (class, spec, role, mechanics) *Combat as expression
Progression	<p>N = 11 (4.5%)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Power-progression *Grinding (length, difficulty, rarity) 	<p>N = 4 (2.8%)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Strengthening characters or skill *Process of earning or achieving
Challenge	<p>N = 3 (1.5%)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Testing abilities *Perfecting strategy 	<p>N = 3 (2.1%)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Difficulty of tasks