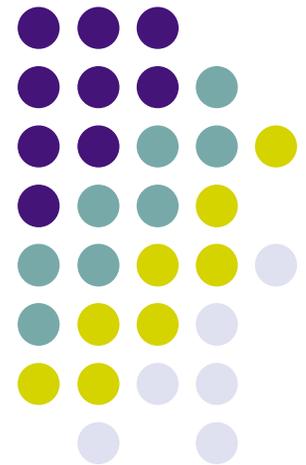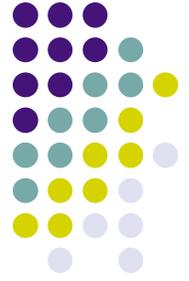# Ethics in Computer Games

John Laird

EECS 494

December 7, 2005
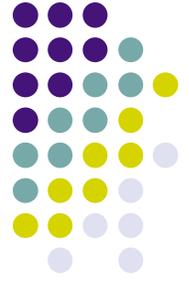
Based on a talk created by Brian Magerko

# Overview

- ## The Business
  - Piracy
  - Ratings / Censorship
- ## Game Content
  - Violence in Gaming
  - Gender & Sexuality
- ## Social Effect
  - Privacy
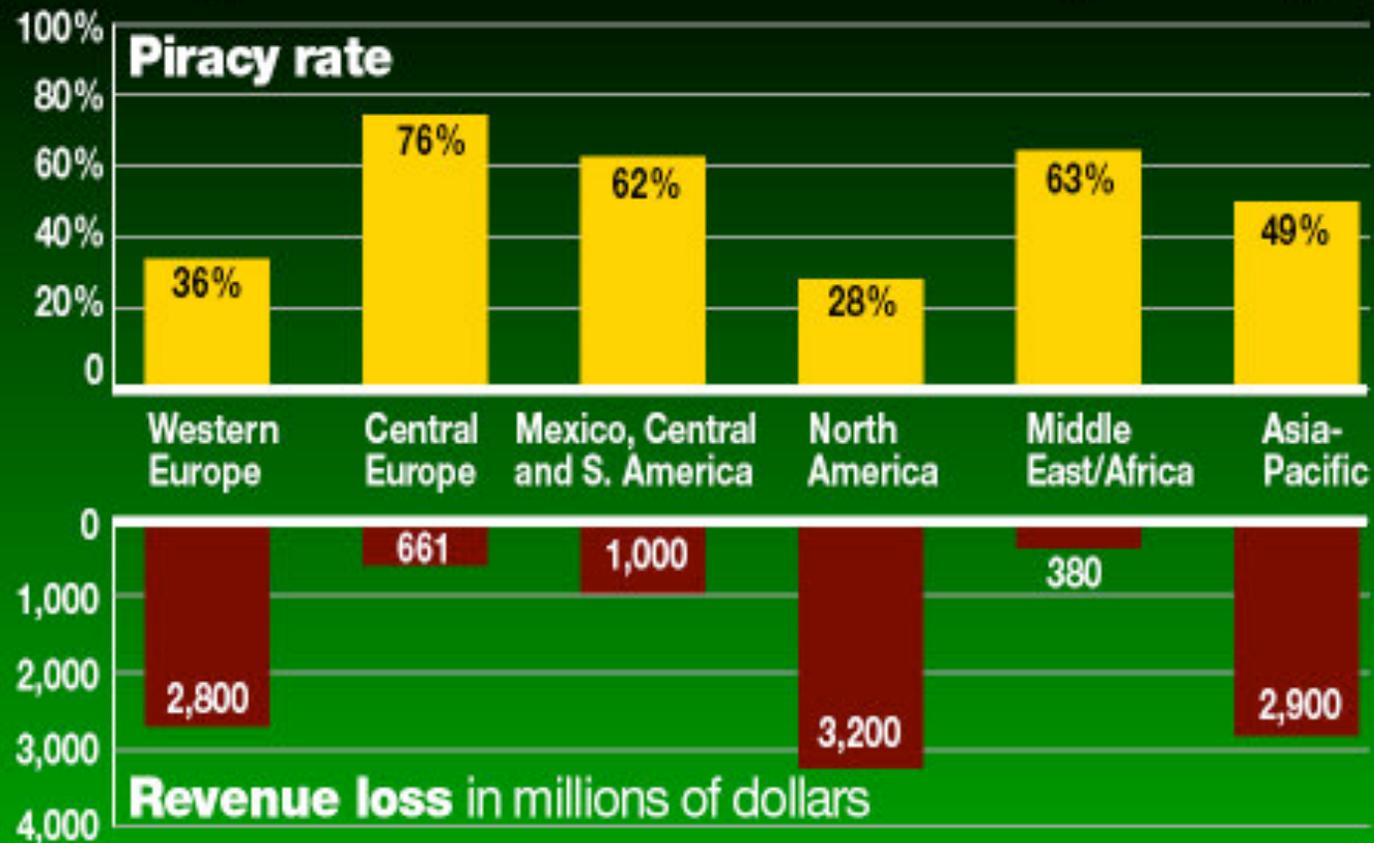  - Computer Game Addiction

# The Law

- Games are protected under copyright for 95 years
- You have the right to make backup copies

# Software Piracy



Piracy rate and revenue loss per region

| Region | Piracy rate | Revenue loss (millions of dollars) |
|---|---|---|
| Western Europe | 36% | 2,800 |
| Central Europe | 76% | 661 |
| Mexico, Central and S. America | 62% | 1,000 |
| North America | 28% | 3,200 |
| Middle East/Africa | 63% | 380 |
| Asia-Pacific | 49% | 2,900 |

SOURCE: SIIA

# Software Piracy



Software piracy distribution by region

Asia-Pacific 15.6%

Western Europe 11.5%

Middle East/Africa 20.1%

Central Europe 24.2%
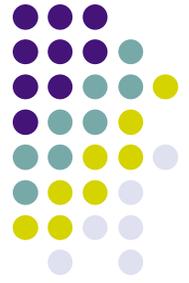
North America 8.9%

Mexico, Central and South America 19.7%

SOURCE: SIIA
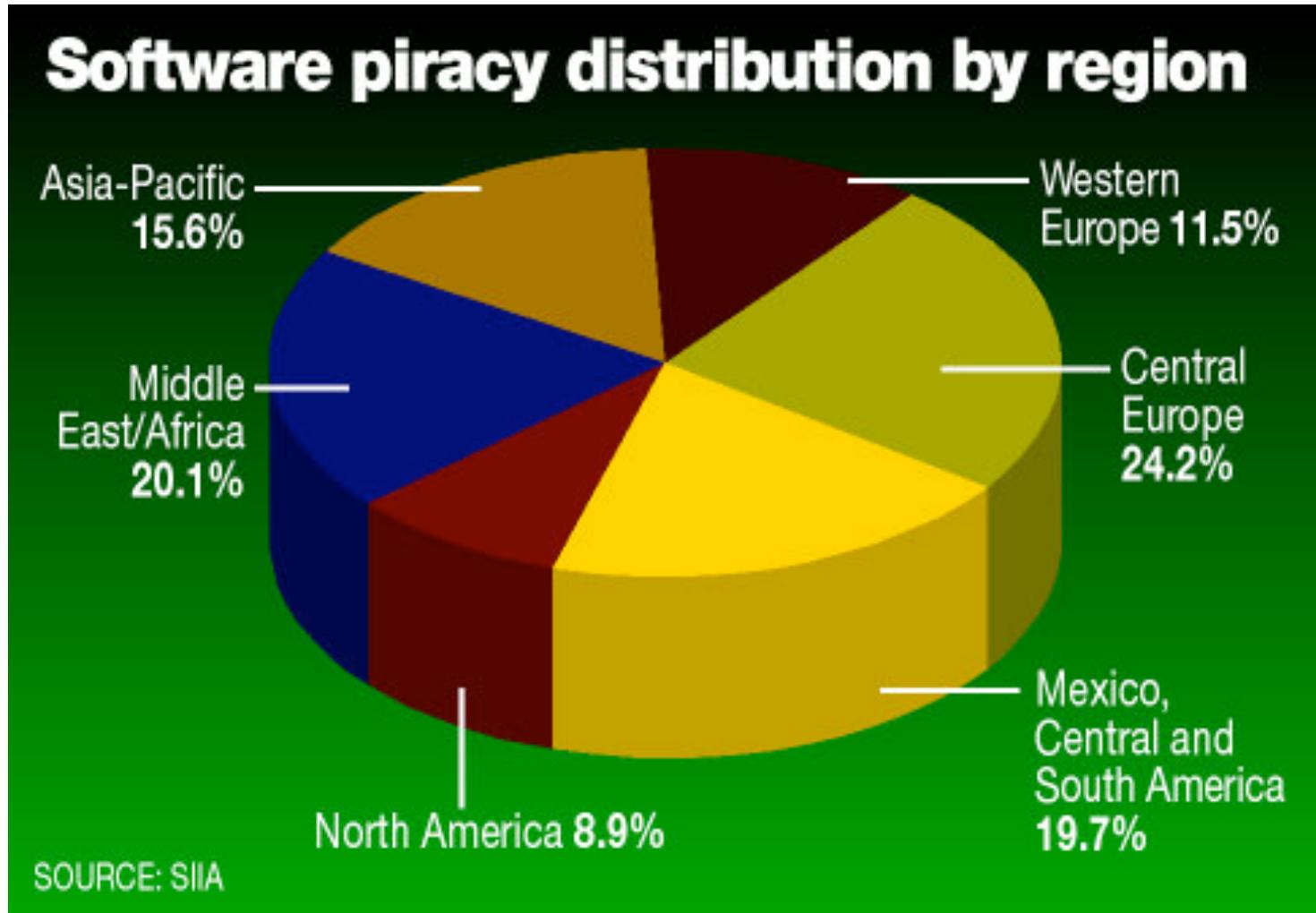
# Nintendo

- "Our losses over the last year were $650 million due to piracy," says Jodi Daugherty, director of anti-piracy for Nintendo of America. "Our focus with anti-piracy has been shutting down the factories and the manufacturing facilities out of China. We have been quite aggressive over the last 18 months."
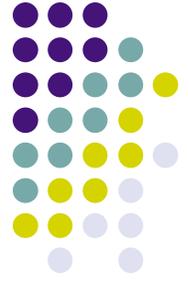
# Piracy Questions

- Is piracy acceptable if the person wouldn't have ever actually bought the item?

- Is pirating / cracking a game ever ok?  What about to replace a lost legal copy?

- Have you ever pirated software, and if so, what is your rationale for breaking the law? Is it any different than shoplifting?
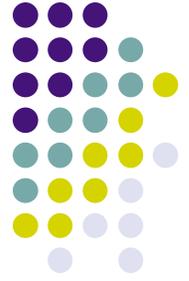
# The Law

- Games qualify as a form of expression that is protected under the First Amendment
- In 2003, a law restricting sales of M-rated games to minors was tossed out
    - Law emphasized violence against law-enforcement
    - What about fighting Roman centurions in Age of Empire?
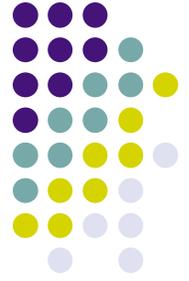
# Quotes

- "Anyone who does something for a mass market has a responsibility. You tread carefully on the lessons that you teach. … If it is obvious this is an artificial world and you can't do these things in real life then that is more acceptable. But if it parades itself as a real world, you have to be careful about that."
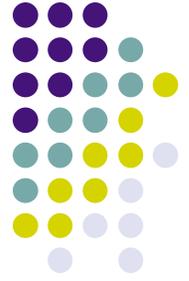
  -- Peter Molyneux

  (Populous, Black and White, Fable)
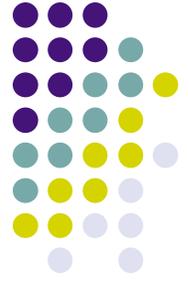
# Case Study – The Sims

- Domestic violence: "When the characters get upset, they can slap each other. … Whenever you have people of the same gender slapping, they use the really hard slap. … But whenever you have a woman slapping a man, they use the polite slap."

# Rating Computer Games

- Game ratings set by Entertainment Software Rating Board

- Started in 1994 by the Interactive Digital Software Association (IDSA)

- Rating is a consensus of at least three independent, trained raters

- Rates over 1,000 games per year
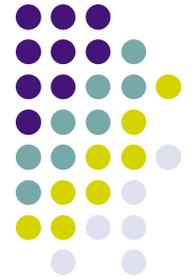
# ESRB Ratings

**EARLY CHILDHOOD**
Titles rated **EC - Early Childhood** have content that may be suitable for ages 3 and older. Contains no material that parents would find inappropriate.

**TEEN**
Titles rated **T - Teen** have content that may be suitable for persons ages 13 and older. May contain violent content, mild or strong language, and/or suggestive themes.

**ADULTS ONLY**
Titles rated **AO - Adults Only** have content suitable only for adults. Titles in this category may include graphic depictions of sex and/or violence. Adult Only products are not intended for persons under the age of 18.
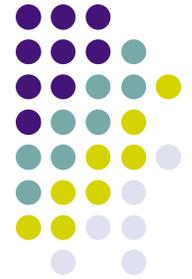
# ESRB Ratings

**EVERYONE**

Titles rated **E** - **Everyone** have content that may be suitable for persons ages 6 and older. Titles in this category may contain minimal violence, some comic mischief and/or mild language.
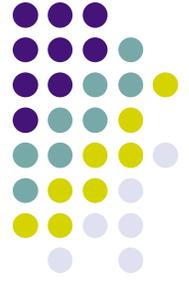
**MATURE**

Titles rated **M** - **Mature** have content that may be suitable for persons ages 17 and older. Titles in this category may contain mature sexual themes, more intense violence and/or strong language.

**RATING PENDING**

Titles listed as **RP** - **Rating Pending** have been submitted to the ESRB and are awaiting final rating.

# Content Descriptors

- **Alcohol Reference** - Reference to and/or images of alcoholic beverages
- **Animated Blood** - Cartoon or pixelated depictions of blood
- **Blood** - Depictions of blood
- **Blood and Gore** - Depictions of blood or the mutilation of body parts
- **Cartoon Violence** - Violent actions involving cartoon-like characters. May include violence where a character is unharmed after the action has been inflicted
- **Comic Mischief** - Scenes depicting slapstick or gross vulgar humor
- **Crude Humor** - Moderately vulgar antics, including bathroom humor
- **Drug Reference** - Reference to and/or images of illegal drugs
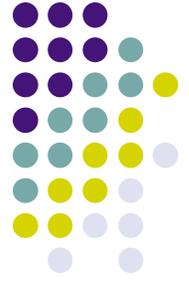
# Content Descriptors

- **Edutainment** - Content of product provides user with specific skills development or reinforcement learning within an entertainment setting. Skill development is an integral part of product
- **Fantasy Violence** - Violent actions of a fantasy nature, involving human or non-human characters in situations easily distinguishable from real life
- **Gambling** - Betting like behavior
- **Informational** - Overall content of product contains data, facts, resource information, reference materials or instructional text
- **Intense Violence** - Graphic and realistic-looking depictions of physical conflict. May involve extreme and/or realistic blood, gore, weapons, and depictions of human injury and death
- **Mature Humor** - Vulgar and/or crude jokes and antics including "bathroom" humor
- **Mature Sexual Themes** - Provocative material, possibly including partial nudity

# Content Descriptors
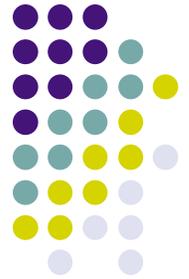
- **Mild Language** - Mild references to profanity, sexuality, violence, alcohol, or drug use
- **Mild Lyrics** - Mild references to profanity, sexuality, violence, alcohol, or drug use in music
- **Mild Violence** - Mild scenes depicting characters in unsafe and/or violent situations
- **Nudity** - Graphic or prolonged depictions of nudity
- **Partial Nudity** - Brief and mild depictions of nudity
- **Sexual Violence** - Depictions of rape or other sexual acts
- **Some Adult Assistance May Be Needed** - Early Childhood Descriptor only
- **Strong Language** - Profanity and explicit references to sexuality, violence, alcohol, or drug use
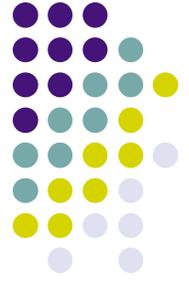
# Content Descriptors

- **Strong Lyrics** - Profanity and explicit references to sex, violence, alcohol, or drug use in music
- **Strong Sexual Content** - Graphic depiction of sexual behavior, possibly including nudity
- **Tobacco Reference** - Reference to and/or images of tobacco products
- **Use of Drugs** - The consumption or use of illegal drugs
- **Use of Alcohol** - The consumption of alcoholic beverages
- **Use of Tobacco** - The consumption of tobacco products
- **Violence** - Scenes involving aggressive conflict

# Possible ESRB Descriptors
# for Super Mario Bros 2?



drug-crazed, violent
psychedelic
or
harmless fantasy?

- **Cartoon Violence**
- **Drug Reference**
- **Gambling**
- **Mild Violence**
- **Use of Drugs**
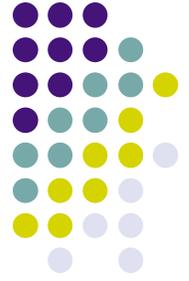
# Ratings Questions

- Is rating computer games a form of censorship?

- How do computer game ratings compare to movie ratings?  To book ratings?

- Should there be a difference?

- Would you as a parent take advantage of such ratings?  Why or not?
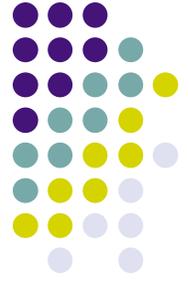
# Violence in Video Games

- Anderson & Bushman: Exposure to violent games…
  - … increases physiological arousal
  - … increases aggressive thoughts
  - … increases aggressive emotions
  - … increases aggressive actions
  - … decreases positive prosocial actions
  - *… trains our youth in combat tactics needed for the revolution*

# Aggression Experiments
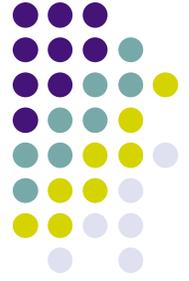
- College student experiment
  - Group A: played a non-violent game
  - Group B: played a violent game
  - Competitive reaction test afterwards
    - Winner of each 'round' delivers a loud "noise blast" at opponent, with a choice of volume and duration
    - Group B delivered longer blasts than Group A
- Exposure to violent video games increases *hostile attribution bias*
  - Those who interpret ambiguous social cues as being of hostile intent are more aggressive
  - Children who play more violent video games are more likely to have a hostile attribution bias

# Other Results

- Games do not have a "cathartic effect", which would make them less inclined to violence (getting it out of your system).
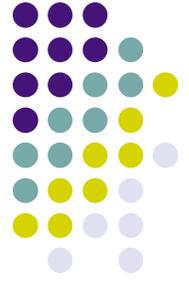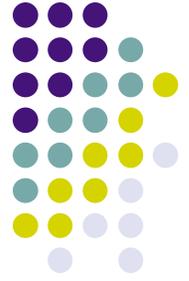
# **Violence Questions**

- What social responsibilities do game designers have to the users of their products?

- Should violence in video games even be an issue, since we can see it often in other, more popular mass media?

- Have you personally observed a change in a friend due to videogame usage, violent or otherwise?

- Do you notice any changes in your own attitude after playing a violent video game?
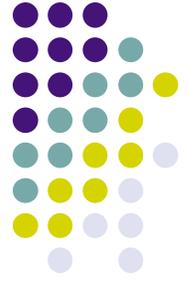
# Gender & Sexuality in Games
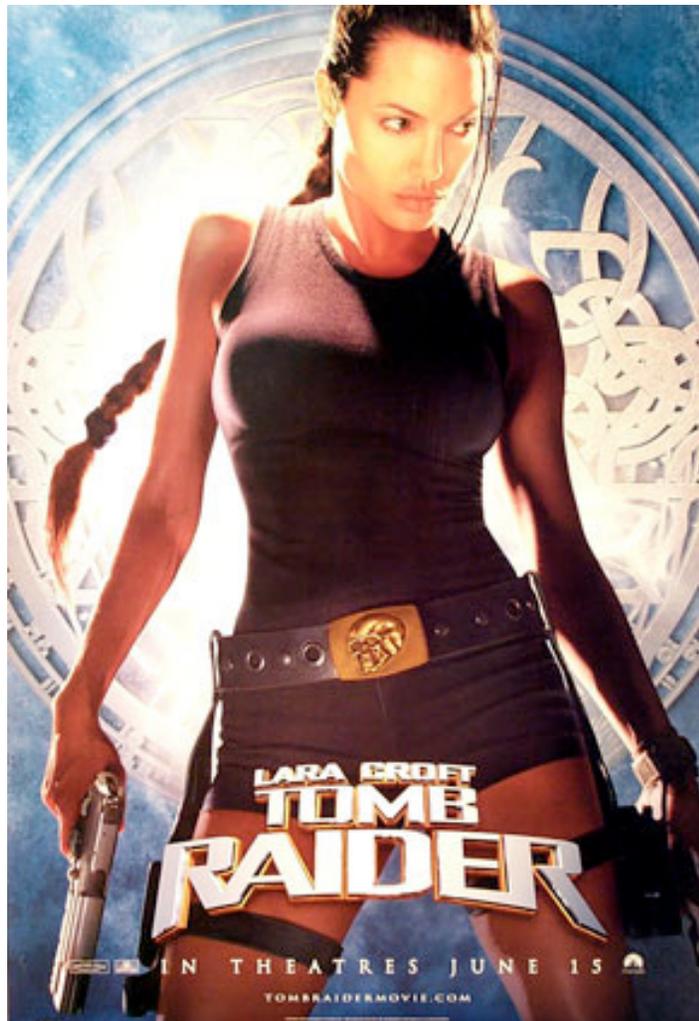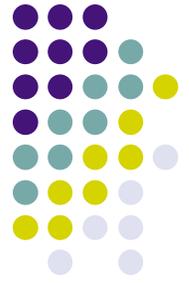


"**Nudity, sex and all adult subject matter is justified if (and only if) the setting, story or logical consequences justify it,**"
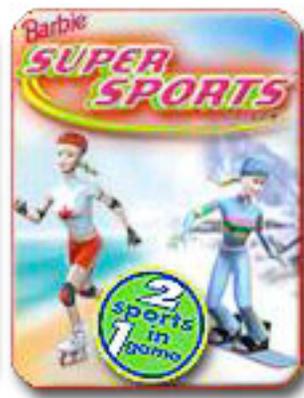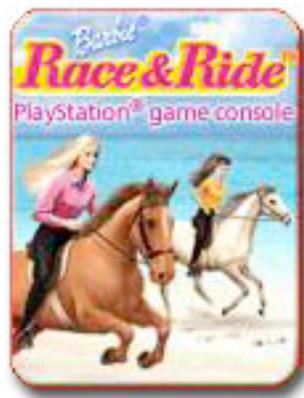
*Nexus on*

*www.womengamers.com*

# Gender & Sexuality in Games

- 43% of people who play *interactive games* are women

  - *Interactive game* should be taken as a broad term

- 53% of people who purchase computer games are women

- 46% of people who purchase console games are women

# Gender & Sexuality in Games

# Gender & Sexuality Questions

- What are the gender stereotypes used in different gaming genres? What is negative / positive about them?

- How can game designers change the way they approach game content and design to counter the prevalent gender bias in present games?

- What are some examples of sexuality in games being appropriate in your eyes? Some examples of when it's been inappropriate?

- Should games be rated according to their sexual content? What about references to alternative lifestyles?

# Game Addiction
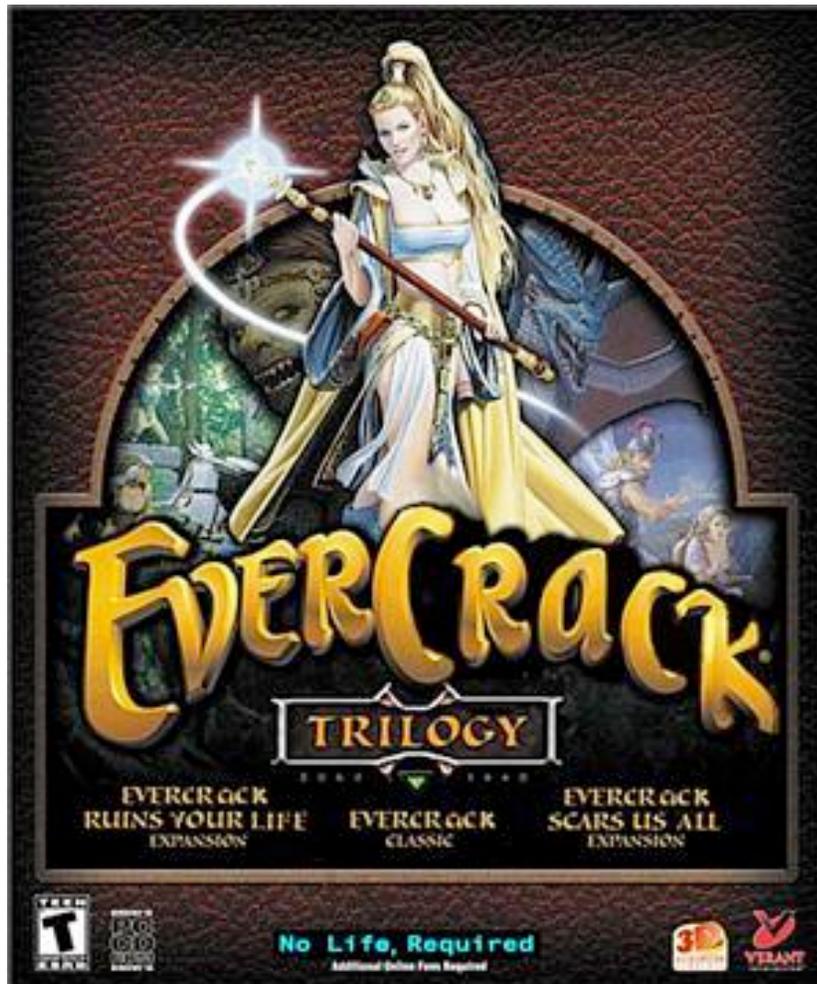


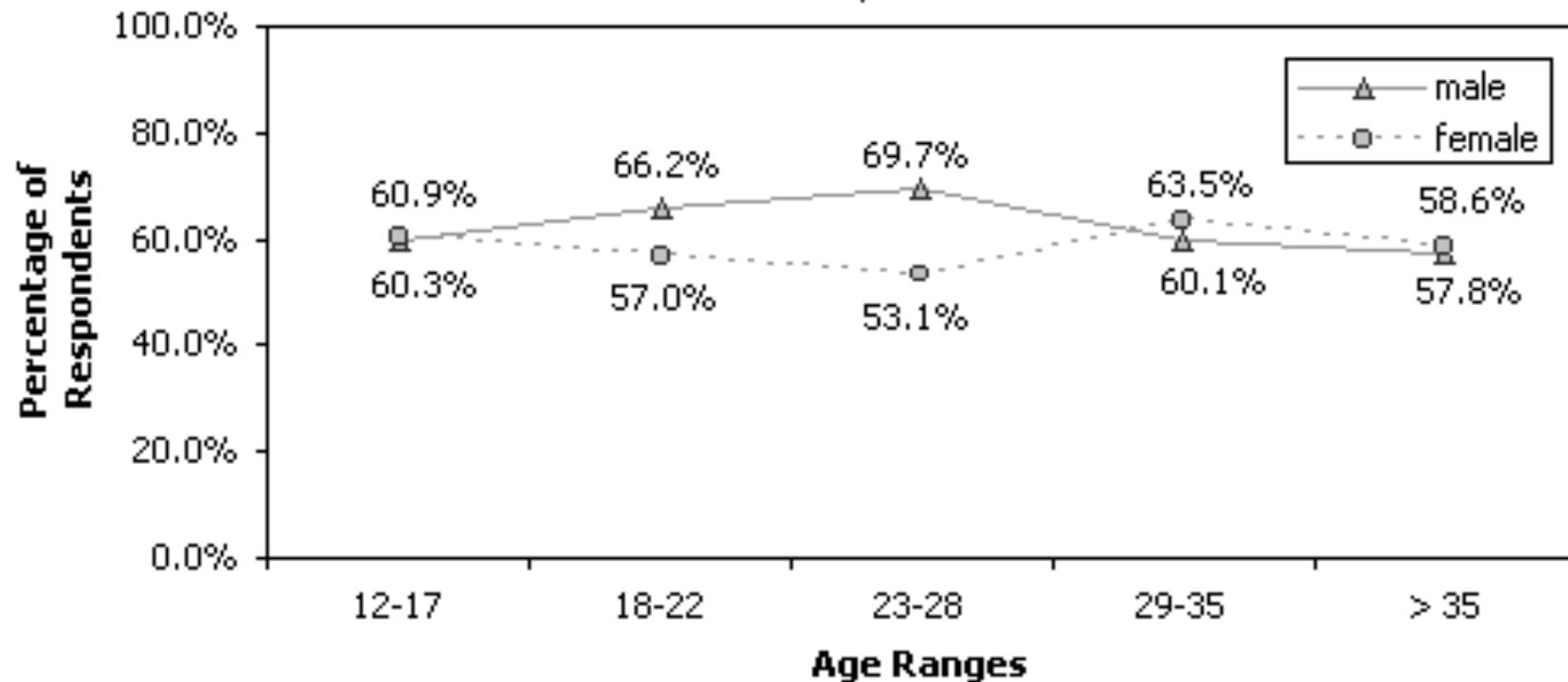"He even left Thanksgiving dinner *before pie was served* to come home and play…."
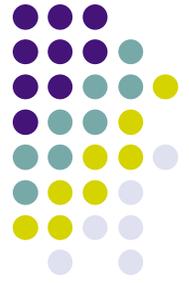
a post on EverQuest-Widows

# Data from Everquest



I have played the game for 10 hours continuously or more.
N male = 2760, N female = 406

# Everquest

"My husband was doing an adventure when one of the players asked how much longer the adventure would take since his wife was in labor."

"When I came back home I asked my EQA to come to bed with me because I needed some comfort and to process what had happened, especially since I just started my 8th month of pregnancy. You know what his answer was? 'I can't just leave my group, it's rude.'"

# Computer Game Addiction
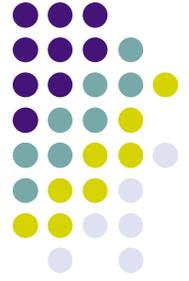
"Symptoms of game addiction include falling behind in school and work and basically deferring everything else in your life so you can play," she said.

"Compulsive playing tends to mask underlying problems such as depression, anger and low self-esteem," said the director of the [Computer Addiction Studies Center](#), who said she was once hooked on computer solitaire.

# Signs of Addiction
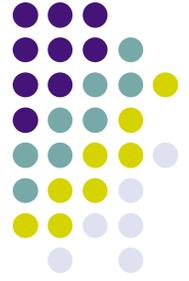
- Would you rather log into your online game than spend time with friends in person?
- Are the majority of your friends gamers as well, who mostly get together for LAN parties to play games such as Counterstrike, Unreal Tournament, or Diablo?
- Do you try to find ways of playing your online game when you're not at home?
- Do you skip appointments, miss classes, or miss days of work because you're at a critical point in your online character's advancement or adventures?
- Are you finding yourself flirting with those of the opposite sex in the game, to build a relationship, rather than in person?
- Do you deny addiction to an MMORPG, but somehow still feel the need to play, or just keep your character and possessions updated (you may be masking it by pretending you're having fun)?
- Do you feel your heart racing as you control your character in a flee from danger? ...to save his or her virtual life? ...when stumbling upon some serious loot?
- Do you feel a sudden rush of intense joy and relaxation after you safely manage to steal, pickpocket, or murder another character?
- Do you experience stronger emotions while in your online game than you do in real life? (this is very dangerous)
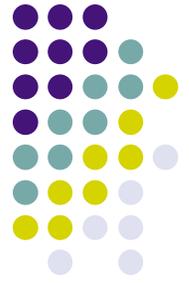
# Game Addiction Questions

- Where is the line drawn between an "avid gamer" and someone who is unhealthily addicted to gaming?

- Is being addicted to computer games really that bad inherently?

- Is being drawn into video games a possible symptom of problems the person has in dealing with reality, or is that more of a myth?

- What social responsibilities do game designers have to the users of their products?

- Should games known to be highly addictive come with warning labels?

# Privacy and Corporations
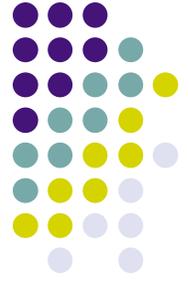
- MMPORG's, Web-based games, and even games requiring online registration all have access to your machine and any information you choose to offer.

# Privacy and Corporations Questions
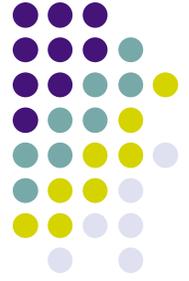
- What data is ethical to collect without the user's knowledge? To collect with consent?

- If the user's gaming experience can be improved by collecting personal information, how much is harmless?

- What are future privacy issues that gamers may have to deal with?

- Would you work for a company that has performed poorly on social issues you deemed important? Would you / have you buy / bought games from such a company?