

Players' Perceptions on the Concept of the "Good Player" in MMOGs

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we focus on the concept of the "Good Player" in Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs). Through a mixed method research (interviews and survey) we explore the perceptions of the players on the criteria that define a good player. We identified skills and qualities that are relevant not only to the gaming skills of the players but also to their personality, behavior, attitudes, and relations with others. These findings further suggest that MMOGs constitute designed environments and also communities with their own rules and expectations from the players. Expertise in MMOGs seems to require additional traits than efficiency in game tasks.

Keywords

Massively Multiplayer Online Games, expertise, virtual communities, games, social skills, learning.

1. INTRODUCTION

Expertise in Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs) has been linked to the efficiency and effectiveness of the players in the activities and challenges of the environment [1, 2]. Relevant research has indicated that expert players demonstrate different skills and behaviors than novice players; they know the functionalities and the rules of the game, they have developed relevant spatial skills, they spend more time on social activities, and they have developed a social capital [3, 4].

Attempting to explore the concept of expertise and the skills required and practiced in MMOGs, we approach the issue reversely: we examine the concept of the "Good Player" as perceived by the MMOGs players. MMOGs have been described more as communities, virtual worlds, "designed civilizations" and "digital nations", rather than as conventional digital games [5]. This aspect of MMOGs seems to call for a more multi-dimensional approach for the definition of expertise, including more criteria than the skills for the manipulation of the interface alone. Through the exploration of the concept of the "Good Player", as opposed to the concept of the "Expert Player", we

aimed at addressing not only expertise as the efficiency in game tasks, but also any qualities and skills required for participating in the environment and being accepted by the player community.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is part of a broader study on learning in MMOGs (see also [6, 7]) and it emerged through an attempt to explore the skills and knowledge required, as well as the processes through which players learn how to play the game.

Our study is situated within a theoretical framework which addresses learning not only as the acquisition of knowledge, but also as participation in the practices of a community [8]. Research in collaborative learning and collaborative problem-solving, in physical or virtual environments, indicates that it is not only cognitive but also social and interpersonal factors that have an impact on team efficiency and learning outcomes. Such factors are, for instance, the quality of communication among group members, interdependence, psychological safety, group potency, relations and friendship among members, and commitment to the common goal [9, 10].

MMOGs are highly collaborative environments where players have to cooperate in groups in order to achieve their goals. Beyond the knowledge and skills for completing the game tasks, the other players, the community, and the groups seem to play a critical role for the effective engagement with the game environment. MMOG players learn the game and successfully engage in it through the active participation in communities of practice [11, 12]. A well-coordinated team, active participation, commitment to the shared tasks, collaboration and communication skills, humor, formation of strong social relations, respect and empathy for the others, and compliance with the ethos of the game are among the factors that have been linked to a successful MMO gaming experience [13, 14, 15, 16].

In this framework, linking MMOGs with the acquisition of skills and knowledge in a collaborative and social learning context, we attempt to explore, through empirical data, the perceptions of the players on the qualities of a good player.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

In this paper, we focus on the concept of the "Good Player" based on data from interviews and one of the questions of the survey (Q18 *What are, in your opinion, the qualities of a good player?*). We employed a mixed method research approach for exploring the field, identifying phenomena within a meaningful context (through the qualitative approach), and for testing the

generalizability of our findings (through the quantitative approach) [17].

We initially conducted interviews with expert players (N=27) of different MMOGs such as *Lineage II*, *World of Warcraft*, *EVEOnline*, and *Tribal Wars*. Analysis of this data (descriptive, thematic, and pattern coding) [18, 19] gave us a broader perspective on the perceptions of the players on the concept of the “Good Player” and also allowed us to identify specific qualities and skills associated with this concept, which were further grouped, in the framework of the analysis, into broader conceptual categories. Beyond the valuable insights the qualitative data provided, these findings were further implemented in the design of the survey and the development of the questions.

The survey was online and was posted on different gaming and academic websites. It included closed (likert-scale, 5-point items) and open questions for the respondents’ comments. The items were constructed based on the issues that emerged from the analysis of the qualitative data and on relevant research on expertise and skills exhibited in MMOGs. We mainly addressed the survey to Greek players of MMOGs over the age of 18 (Valid N=227). The most popular games reported were *The World of Warcraft*, *Lineage II*, *Ikariam*, *Lord of the Rings Online*, *EVE Online*, *Aion*, and *Tribal Wars*. For the analysis of the quantitative data we initially used descriptive statistics. We then extracted, through factor analysis, specific factors which represented groups of player-skills. We further conducted again descriptive statistics of the players’ scores for each of these factors, which allowed us to compare their importance for the players. Finally, we conducted one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) and Mann–Whitney U test for comparing the perceptions on the most important qualities of a “good player”, among players of different age groups and between men and women, respectively. The results of the qualitative and the quantitative analysis are presented in Section 4.

4. THE QUALITIES OF THE GOOD PLAYER

4.1 As Emerged from the Qualitative Analysis

Researcher’s Question: “*What are, in your opinion, the qualities of a good player?*” Participant’s Answer: “*Do you mean as a person or the manipulation of the in-game avatar?*”

As discussed in the introduction, we specifically selected the term “good player” which although vague would let the participants decide on the qualities or skills they prioritized for the assessment of other players. The aforementioned answer came up a few times especially during the interviews, which indicated indeed the link between the player’s real-life personality and the player’s avatar converging in one in-game unit (see also [20]). Qualitative data were gathered from the interviews and an open-ended question in the survey (*Q18 Open: What are, in your opinion, the qualities of a good player?*”).

We initially coded this data thematically, under the general code “*Good Player*”. The descriptive codes that emerged were: *gaming skills* (30 references in 12 interviews), *interpersonal skills* (3 references in 2 interviews), *high level and success in the game tasks* (1 reference in 1 interview), *tactics and techniques* (1 reference in 1 interview), *social skills* (6 references in 5 interviews), and the *personality of the player* (8 references in 6 interviews). These codes were further conceptually grouped in

three main codes/categories which could describe our data – *personality traits*, *social skills*, and *technical gaming skills*– and will be discussed in the next sections.

A second independent coder was also involved in the coding process, for ensuring the consistency and reliability of the codes. For the analysis and coding of the qualitative data the qualitative analysis software *QSR Nvivo 8* was used.

4.1.1 Personality Traits

A clear distinction emerged, from the analysis of the players’ reports, between the real-life personality of the player and the in-game character “[...] *you may have the best personality, as a person, but also be the worst warrior; to help the team, to inspire, but as a fighter, not to be able to do a lot*” (Int., Male, 37y). The personality traits discussed by the participants referred to the real-life personality, attitudes and behaviors of a player. Such traits were, for instance, inspiring respect and respecting others, motivating co-players, being receptive to different viewpoints, having patience with other players and with tedious game tasks, and playing the game for fun and not specifically for winning. Indicative excerpts from the interviews: “*A good player is a player who has managed to inspire respect, loyalty, and discipline to the other members of his/her team; the player who appreciates, respects and provides to his/her team*” (Int., Male, 35y), “*Being a good player has nothing to do with how good of a ‘killer’ you are in the game, but with what kind of a person you are*” (Int., Male, 33y). “[*Good player*] *is the player who doesn’t care if he/she loses; the player who plays for the game itself and not for winning*” (Int., Male, 32y).

Similarly, features of a “bad player” were also linked to the personality and behavior: “*The annoying player is the player who only plays for winning*” (Int., Male, 32y), “*A player may be experienced and useful to the team, but also behave in a bad manner, and use other players for personal gain etc. [...] I personally prefer to be in teams with people that I can discuss with, even if they don’t have that much experience [in the game], than to be in teams with experienced players who are ‘too’ smart and never miss the chance to show off, accuse everyone else of being stupid, and put all the blame for the problems of the team on others*” (Int., Male, 37y).

From these reports, it seemed clear that the personality and behavior of the players in the player community is of critical importance for the gaming experience, even in goal-oriented environments such as games. Specifically in MMOGs behavior and attitudes of the players seem to be relevant to the development of collaborative relations and the cohesion of the team.

4.1.2 Social Skills

Participants also referred to social and interpersonal skills defining a good player, such as the helpful behavior towards team-members, empathy for the needs of others, effective communication, and developing and sustaining relations and friendships. Indicative excerpts from interviews and questionnaire comments: “*For me, a good player is someone who can discuss with others, who considers his/her team and the other players*” (Int., Male, 29y), “*Some things, such as the manipulation of the avatar, you can learn in time [...] But behavior towards the other players, communication, humor, helping others, these things show some basic qualities about the*

person behind the avatar. These qualities I consider more important, regardless of the player's strength" (Qnr., Male, 35-44y), "[...] being a good player doesn't have to do with the score you have; someone may be in a clan and take care and help the clan before leveling up himself" (Int., Male, 26y).

Social and interpersonal skills seemed important again for the formation of relations and the cohesion and efficiency of the group. In some cases social skills appeared to be more important than the score, the level and the gaming skills of the players.

4.1.3 Technical Gaming Skills

The technical gaming skills included the knowledge of the rules and functionalities of the game, employment of different strategies, adjustment of the tactics to the different situations of the game, and solving problems. In this case, good players were described as the players with high scores, success in the game activities and in competitive tasks (player versus player), with good perception of the game, being able to effectively assess and tackle situations, planning strategies, having appropriate gear (e.g. resources, avatar weapons and apparel), the ability to effectively manage the resources, and with good reflexes and response time to game stimuli. Indicatively: "A good player is someone who knows how to be efficient in relation to his/her gear" (Int., Male, 29y), "I always thought that the players who are good in PVP are smart, because PVP is not static, something you can practice through repetition" (Int., Male, 29y), "A good player will assess the situation and have the experience to comprehend it and engage in it without getting into a trap" (Int., Male, 37y). Knowledge, experience, and skills are, certainly, important for experiencing the content of the game. The importance of the gaming skills was particularly emphasized, in many cases by participants who had also emphasized the importance of social and interpersonal skills.

It was interesting that in one case, a participant linked the qualities of a "good player" with the character level and the progress in the game: "The answer to this question [i.e. the closed survey question Q18] is different, depending on your level in the game. My answers in the question refer to somebody who has reached a max level (lvl) in the game" (Qnr., Male, 18-24y). In this particular case, the participant had rated features such as "High level/High score", "In-game equipment", "Patience", "Knowledge of the game", and "Sociability" with the highest point of the scale (5=very important), while he had rated with the lower scores (2=of little importance) features such as "Leadership skills", "Teamwork", and "Active participation" in the game tasks. Even though, in this case, no clear pattern emerged in relation to the participant's preference to gaming skills or social skills, and certainly this phenomenon cannot be generalized, the link between the progress and level of the players with their expectations and criteria for assessing the skills and qualities of other players could be an interesting issue for further research. The examination of whether and how the expectations and skills practiced by the players change throughout their progress in the game could provide interesting insights for the design of a personalized and more engaging environment.

4.2 As Emerged from the Quantitative Analysis

Quantitative data were gathered through the survey question Q18 "How important for a good player do you think the following

features are in the game?" consisted of 22 likert-scale, 5-point items (1=unimportant, 5=very important). Through the quantitative analysis of Q18 we attempted to further examine the emphasis the players give to the different qualities of a good player, as these had emerged from the analysis of the qualitative data. Although some of the items referred to rather broad categories of skills or qualities (e.g. communication skills, good behavior), our main purpose was to identify the orientation of the players, while keeping the questionnaire concise, short, and less time-consuming (the complete questionnaire included 43 questions, some of them with multiple items).

4.2.1 Descriptive Analysis

Patience, cooperation with other players and teamwork were among the highest scored answers, each attracting 80% of the players' positive responses. Good behavior towards other players, decision-making, communication skills, self-control, helpful behavior, good knowledge of the game and manipulation of the virtual character attracted 70%-79% of positive responses (very important, important) each. See Figure 1 for the percentages of the players' responses in Q18. Descriptive statistics of Q18 are summarized in Table 1.

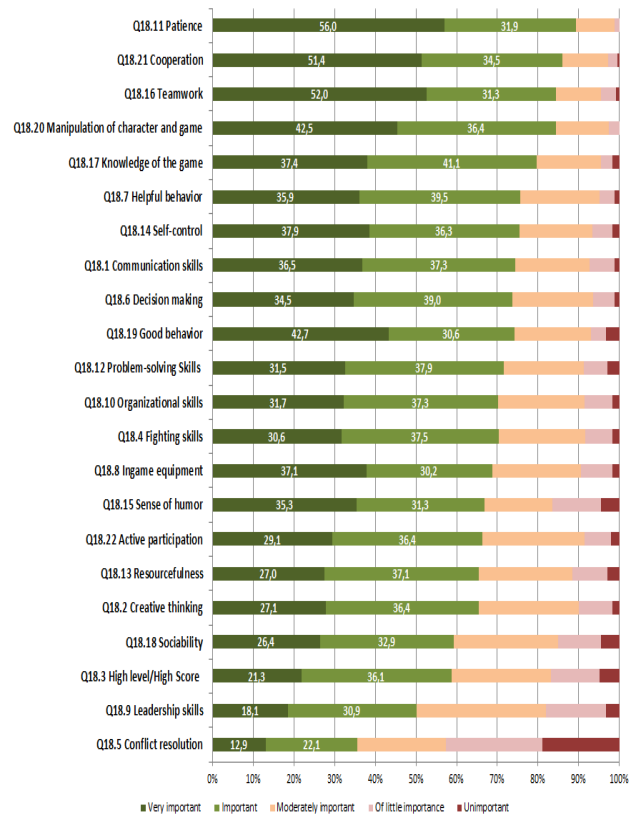


Figure 1. Percent responses of participants in Q18 items "How important for a good player do you think the following features are in the game?"

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Q18 items.

Item	N	Mean	SD
Q18.1 Communication skills	249	4.00	1.014

Item	N	Mean	SD
Q18.2 Creative thinking	247	3.71	1.163
Q18.3 High level/ Score	249	3.50	1.222
Q18.4 In-game fighting skills	248	3.79	1.181
Q18.5 Conflict resolution	249	2.82	1.364
Q18.6 Decision making	249	3.99	0.963
Q18.7 Helpful behavior	248	4.04	0.934
Q18.8 Good in-game equipment in the game	248	3.88	1.161
Q18.9 Leadership skills	249	3.39	1.173
Q18.10 Organizational skills	249	3.86	1.089
Q18.11 Patience	248	4.38	0.905
Q18.12 Problem-solving	248	3.80	1.210
Q18.13 Resourcefulness	248	3.71	1.154
Q18.14 Self-control	248	3.99	1.076
Q18.15 Humor	249	3.80	1.195
Q18.16 Teamwork skills	246	4.26	0.989
Q18.17 In-depth knowledge of the game mechanisms	246	4.05	1.025
Q18.18 Sociability	246	3.66	1.112
Q18.19 Good behavior towards other players	248	4.02	1.116
Q18.20 Good manipulation of the character or the game functions	247	4.00	1.299
Q18.21 Cooperation skills	249	4.34	0.803
Q18.22 Active participation to in-game tasks	247	3.81	1.068

4.2.2 Skills Groups emerged from Factor Analysis

As in the case of the qualitative data, we attempted to summarize the question items into more concise categories for obtaining a clearer view of skills' directions and the orientation of the players with respect to our question. We conducted factor analysis, and after removing the items with low communality (<0.40) and low factor loadings (<0.50)¹ a model of four factors emerged (MSA=0.840>0.83, Bartlett's Test of Sphericity $p<0.05$, KMO=0.840, varimax rotation, Kaiser normalization). These factors represented groups of skills or qualities and were conceptually meaningful. These factors could explain 57.83% of the variance and they are described below. Items' factor loadings are presented in Table 2.

Social Skills (SS): the social skills were relevant to skills of communication and interaction with others such as sociability, teamwork, cooperation, and humor. The items included in this factor were: Q18.15 Humor, Q18.16 Teamwork skills, Q18.7 Helpful behavior, Q18.18 Sociability, and Q18.19 Good behavior

towards other players, Q18.21 Cooperation skills. The internal consistency of the factor was good (Cronbach's $\alpha=0.819$).

Resourcefulness (R): the items included in this factor were relevant to skills on problem solving, resourcefulness, and creative thinking. Items relevant to the relation of the player with others such as communication and self-control were also included, with lower factor loadings. The items in this factor were: Q18.1 Communication skills, Q18.2 Creative thinking, Q18.12 Problem-solving Skills, Q18.13 Resourcefulness, and Q18.14 Self-control. Internal consistency of the factor was good (Cronbach's $\alpha=0.796$).

Resources Management Skills (RM): this factor was relevant to management, leadership, and decision-making skills. Active participation in game tasks as a variable was also included, with a lower factor loading. The items included in this factor were: Q18.6 Decision making skills, Q18.9 Leadership skills, Q18.10 Organizational skills, Q18.22 Active participation in in-game tasks. The internal consistency was acceptable (Cronbach's $\alpha=0.743$).

Technical Gaming Skills (TG): skills relevant to the efficiency and the effectiveness in game tasks were included in this factor. Such skills were, for instance, the manipulation and the in-game virtual equipment of the avatar (e.g. apparel, weapons), the in-game level or score, and knowledge of the game mechanics. The items included in this factor were: Q18.3 High level/High Score, Q18.8 Good in-game equipment in the game, Q18.17 In-depth knowledge of the game mechanisms, Q18.20 Good manipulation of the character or the game functions. The internal consistency of the factor was acceptable (Cronbach's $\alpha=0.712$).

Table 2. Factor Loadings of Q18 Variables.

Variables	SS	R	RM	TG
Q18.18 Sociability	0.793	-	-	-
Q18.15 Sense of humor	0.725	-	-	-
Q18.16 Teamwork	0.717	-	-	-
Q18.19 Good behavior	0.712	-	-	-
Q18.21 Cooperation	0.682	-	-	-
Q18.7 Helpful	0.56	-	-	-
Q18.13 Resourcefulness	-	0.79	-	-
Q18.2 Creative thinking	-	0.728	-	-
Q18.12 Problem-solving Skills	-	0.707	-	-
Q18.1 Good communication skills	-	0.568	-	-
Q18.14 Self-control	-	0.502	-	-
Q18.10 Organizational skills	-	-	0.787	-
Q18.9 Leadership	-	-	0.755	-
Q18.6 Decision making skills	-	-	0.69	-
Q18.22 Active participation	-	-	0.53	-
Q18.8 Good in-game	-	-	-	0.771

¹ The items removed were: Q18.4, Q18.5, and Q18.11

Variables	SS	R	RM	TG
equipment				
Q18.20 Good manipulation of the character or the game functions	-	-	-	0.708
Q18.3 High level/High Score	-	-	-	0.700
Q18.17 In-depth knowledge of the game mechanisms	-	-	-	0.632

Factor loadings of < 0.5 have not been included. The four factors account for 57.83% of the total variance.

4.2.3 Ranking of the Skills Groups

Further analysis indicated that the highest ranked factor (group of skills), as rated by the players, was the “Social Skills” factor. Based on the four factors that emerged from the factor analysis described, we created four new variables and calculated the mean of the players’ scores for each of the items included in each factor. The means and mean ranks of the four factors gave us a clearer perspective of the participants’ preferences for each factor. As also summarized in the descriptive statistics in Table 3, players seemed to emphasize more the social skills as a quality of a good player (Mean=4.03). Resourcefulness and Technical Gaming Skills followed, both rated equally by the participants (Mean=3.84). Finally, Resources Management Skills was the lowest rated factor (Mean=3.76). Mean differences in our sample were statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). This conclusion was further confirmed through the application of the Kendall’s Coefficient of Concordance test standard ($W = 0.026$, $df = 3$, $p = 0.001 < 0.05$).

Table 3. Good Player Qualities as Summarized through Factor Analysis of Q18 items, and Participants’ Ranking.

Qualities	N	Mean	SD	Mean Rank
Social Skills	242	4.03	0.74	2.78
Resourcefulness	244	3.84	0.83	2.46
Technical Gaming Skills	243	3.84	0.86	2.46
Resources Management Skills	247	3.76	0.80	2.30
Valid N (listwise)	229			

4.3 Gender, Age and the Perceptions of a Good Player

4.3.1 Comparing the Perceptions of Different Age Groups

Analysis of the qualitative data provided indications that the qualities of a good player emphasized by the participants would differ depending on the age: players older than 30 years would emphasize skills and behaviors relevant to the personality, the communication and collaboration among players, while younger players would refer more to technical gaming skills, knowledge of the game, high score or level, success, and good in-game equipment, as qualities of a good player. For exploring the

significance and generalizability of this pattern, we further examined it through the quantitative data.

For comparing the responses of the different age-groups (18-24, 25-34, >35) in relation to the four factors described (Social Skills, Resourcefulness, Technical Gaming Skills, Resources Management Skills) we conducted one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA). The analysis indicated significant differences among age-groups only in the case of the Technical Gaming Skills ($F = 3.08$, $df = 2$, 227 , $p = 0.024 < 0.05$). Post hoc comparisons using the Bonferroni test indicated that the statistically significant difference in the case of the Technical Skills was mainly between the age groups 18-24 and >35 (Mean Difference=0.46385, $SE = 0.16918$, $p = 0.02 < 0.05$). Players in the age range of 18-24 years seemed to emphasize more the Technical Skills than the players above the age of 35. This result seemed to be consistent with the findings of the qualitative analysis.

4.3.2 Comparing the Perceptions of Men and Women

The women sample in our interviews was too small for identifying a pattern ($N = 3$). The women in our interviews reported sociability and relations among players, as well as technical gaming skills and knowledge of the game, with respect to the definition of a good player: “*It is the one who wins in battles [...] has a high [avatar] level and good weapons*” (Int., Female, 18-24y). Findings from the analysis of the survey data, though, gave us a clearer view of the perceptions of our women sample.

The women sample in our survey was, again, small ($N = 19 < 30$). For comparing the responses of men and women in relation to the aforementioned four factors, we therefore had to use a non-parametric test (Mann-Whitney). As it emerged, there was no differentiation between men and women on the criteria for the characterization of a good player (Social Skills: $U = 1569$, $p = 0.136 > 0.05$, Resourcefulness: $U = 1911$, $p = 0.786 > 0.05$, Resources Management Skills: $U = 1721.5$, $p = 0.292 > 0.05$) except of the case of the Technical Gaming Skills. The differentiation between the two genders concerning this criterion was statistically significant ($U = 1442.5$, $p = 0.05$). More specifically, women agreed more than men that gaming technical skills were an important quality of a good player.

5. CONCLUSIONS

In this study we explored the perceptions of MMOGs players on the features that define a “Good Player”. We cannot describe an archetype of the “Good Player” since each player may have different perceptions and preferences, but our results linked this concept with technical gaming skills, such as mastery of the game, assessment of situations and planning, and also with social and interpersonal skills, and traits of the personality and the behavior of the player. There are indications that the emphasis each player gives to each of these criteria is related to gender and age. These findings are consistent with previous studies linking progress in the game and expertise with sociability, communication and collaboration skills [2, 13, 21, 22].

The highly social and collaborative aspect of MMOGs requires that players communicate, coordinate, and form relations with others for exchanging information and advancing in the game. Social skills were, in fact, the highest ranked –the most appreciated– group of skills in our study. It could be argued that social, communication and interpersonal skills factor into the

acquisition of expertise in MMOGs. The significance the players of MMOGs attribute to not only technical skills but also to social skills, behaviors and attitudes is a critical aspect of the gaming experience to be considered in the design of MMOGs and in MMOGs research on expertise, skills, and learning.

The question, of course, remains on whether these skills and traits can be learned, acquired or enhanced through the participation in the virtual environment and the players' community. Nevertheless, this study could contribute to the discussion on the definition of expertise in MMOGs and further provide some input to the development of instruments for the assessment and possibly the prediction of the players' progress within the designed and the social environment of the game.

The significance of the identification of the qualities the players attribute to a "good player" is three-fold: a) the preferences and expectations of the player could be an indication for the network of relations this player is going to develop in the game, b) the expectations and requirements of the players underlie the rules and the ethos of the player community, and c) the player's mental models, the interpretation of the game environment, define the meaning and the impact of the game on the player [23].

The players view MMOGs not only as games they have to progress in, but also as communities where people interact and form social networks. These interactions seem to add to the "fun" component of the game. The importance the players attribute to the personality and the social skills, though, seems to be relevant not only to the enjoyment but also to the necessity to cooperate with others and form groups. A cohesive and effective team is important for attaining the individual player goals, and the players prefer to cooperate and be in the same team with people they trust and they like. It is, possibly, at this point that the personality and the social and interpersonal skills emerge as critical values for the definition of the "Good Player". Such shared values could shape and regulate the ethos of the player community.

From the perspective of the design, an issue that seems to emerge is the importance of the role of collaboration and of an effective team in the game –or the learning– environment. Shared values such as good and helpful behavior, social and interpersonal skills may possibly emerge, when personal relations, communication, collaboration, and effective teams are placed at the center of the gaming experience, with further implications to the rules and standards of the player community.

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