President Bush today acknowledged that U.S. authorities have held suspected terrorists in secret CIA prisons around the world and said information obtained from them "has saved innocent lives."
NEW YORK (Reuters) -- Video games involving multiple players serve as informal gathering places akin to old-time pubs and coffee shops, and can thereby boost the players' social connections, researchers argue in a new study.

In their report, Constance Steinkuehler of the University of Wisconsin-Madison and Dmitri Williams of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign question the perception that kids who play computer games are isolating themselves, at least when they are playing so-called massively multiplayer online games (MMOs).

"By providing spaces for social interaction and relationships beyond the workplace and home, MMOs have the capacity to function as one form of a new 'third space' for informal sociability," Steinkuehler and Williams write.

While such sociability won't offer "deep emotional support," they add, it has the benefit of exposing players to a wide range of viewpoints and a more diverse social environment.

The effects of the Internet on society are still being debated, the researchers note in an article in the Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication. Some claim the Web allows people to build connections and communities, while others say such virtual links are just a poor substitute for the real thing.

The researchers sought to investigate the role of MMOs, in which players inhabit "avatars" or on-screen representations of characters within virtual worlds and chat with other players by text or voice, in players' social lives.

They studied whether one game, "Asheron's Call I and II," built players' "social capital" by dividing 750 people into game-playing and non-playing groups. They also conducted a two-year study of the activities and perceptions of a group of people playing the MMO "Lineage."

Steinkuehler and Williams conclude that the games helped players gather a type of social capital known as "bridging," which involves making informal connections with others, while they didn't generally help people build stronger social bonds.

Such "weaker" social links are important, the researchers say, because they offer players the opportunity to be exposed to diverse worldviews that they may not encounter in the real world.

Players who did become more deeply involved in the games did run the risk of having virtual relationships replace real-life ones, however, the researchers note. However, to see these online communities as an entirely bad thing is short-sighted, they say.

"To argue that MMO game play is isolated and passive media consumption in place of informal social engagement is to ignore the nature of what participants actually do behind the computer screen," they state. "In the case of MMOs, game play is more akin to playing five-person poker in a neighborhood tavern that is accessible from your own living room."

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Some games may enhance sociability - Sep 6, 2006